

Limitations and Drawbacks of American Democracy

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Democracy is the outcome as mankind works to liberate itself and pursue freedom. For millennia, governments and nationalities worldwide have worked painstakingly to develop democratic practices that are distinct from one another, adding diversity to mankind's political achievements and democratic lineage. Democracy can take many forms, and there is no one-size-fits-all approach to democracy. Although the U.S. extols the virtues of its democratic model, its numerous limitations and drawbacks have been laid bare, and it is far from being an ideal system for modern democracy.

I. The “illusionary sense of confidence” in American democracy

Since the beginning of modern times, the intellectual heritage of the Enlightenment period has been diffused in

foreign countries in the wake of the expansion of European colonialists. Finally, a democratic system, in which social contract theory and the thought of natural rights are the theoretical foundation and the “separation of the three powers” and the checks and balances are the core content, has been established on the North American continent. For over two hundred years, some in the West, especially some politicians and scholars, have gradually developed an illusionary sense of confidence in American democracy. Since the end of the Cold War, this confidence has been taken to the extreme. Japanese-American scholar Francis Fukuyama asserted that liberal democracy (represented by American democracy) stands for the ultimate form of government. While the poor performance of the U.S. in fighting the COVID-19 pandemic has abundantly illustrated that American democracy is not as effective as people think, we still have to ask: Can American democracy stand up to theoretical scrutiny and become the ultimate truth of modern democracy? Can American democracy become a one-size-fits-all prescriptive political model? The answer is obviously no.

In terms of political traits and ideology, American democracy is a kind of capitalist democracy. Charles Austin Beard held that the U.S. Constitution is an “economic document.” This actually implies that the American democracy based on the U.S. Constitution is the product when capitalism reaches a certain stage and only represents and serves the interests of minority capitalists. This is fundamentally different from socialist democracy, which serves and represents the interests of the overwhelming majority of the people. In terms of manifestation and mode of operation, American democracy is a voting democracy featuring competitive elections. In American politics, undue importance is attached to regular elections by the people which have become the whole story of American democracy. However, in fact, democratic politics in its complete sense should also encompass democratic consultation, decision-making, management, oversight, etc. in addition to democratic elections. The American voting democracy centered on elections can hardly sustain democratic politics in a complete sense. Therefore, American democracy should not and cannot be the sole and

ultimate system for modern democracy.

II. The historical limitations of American democracy

With the rise of the U.S. as the world's dominant power since World War II, the political system operated on the North American continent attracted a great deal of attention, and American democracy seems to be enveloped in glory. However, when some American politicians claim the moral high ground and try to monopolize the right to define and interpret democracy, why not rethink the tortuous process of democratization in the U.S.? It must be noted that American democracy is by no means an overnight outcome but the result of self-renewal that is influenced by factors such as the level of economic development, history and traditions, and geopolitical relationships. Although the framework of American democracy is established under the U.S. Constitution, there have long been numerous systems and practices inconsistent with requirements of democracy in American politics. American democracy has been fraught with historical limitations from the outset.

The U.S. has long deprived people of color of the right to participate in democracy. The *Declaration of*

Independence states that “everyone is born equal,” but even former President Barack Obama admitted: “Racial discrimination affects almost every system governing our lives. It exerts a profound impact and is part of our DNA.” This shows that racism has been in the “DNA” of American democracy since the founding of the country and continues to this day. Although the U.S. proclaims itself a beacon of democracy, some of the provisions of the U.S. Constitution of 1787 are awash with racial prejudice, and eligibility for election was limited to white adults for a long time. The 14th Amendment to the Constitution in 1866 recognized for the first time the right to vote for black men over the age of twenty-one. The 15th Amendment to the Constitution ratified in 1870 began to endow people of all colors with right to vote. Although the black people have the right to vote in name, the right to vote existed in name only due to restrictions such as literacy tests in some states. It was not until the adoption of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 that the black people truly enjoyed the right to vote. Nevertheless, it is difficult for people of color to really enjoy democratic rights on an equal footing even today. On November 22,

2021, Fernand de Varennes, United Nations Special Rapporteur on Minority Issues, gave a speech at the end of his two-week visit to the U.S. He condemned a law in Texas, saying that the law caused the gerrymandering that works to the favor of whites while weakening the voting rights of minority groups. Fernand de Varennes pointed out that the electoral laws adopted in some regions of the U.S., including Texas, would deprive millions of minority citizens of the equal right to vote and potentially undermine “democracy.”

The U.S. has systemically expelled, excluded, and assimilated Indians for a long time. The Constitution of 1787 did not recognize the citizenship of Indians. Driven by profits, the whites have long robbed Indians of their resources and expelled them out of their homeland, dealing a hammer blow to their ethnic culture. The U.S. expelled and massacred Indians for a long time, causing their population to plunge from about 5 million at the end of the 15th century to about 250,000 in the early 20th century. Beginning in the 1850s, the U.S. administration operated a “reservation” system restricting Indians to designated areas. Between 1887 and 1933, some 90

million acres of land were looted from American Indians. Moreover, the U.S. administration also promoted “Americanization” education, setting up “reservation” boarding schools, skill training schools, etc., for Indians. Young Indians could be admitted to public schools run by whites, but they must give up Indian traditions upon enrollment. Over the years, the traditional culture of Indian tribes gradually fell apart.

The U.S. had long restricted women’s right to suffrage on an equal footing. After the promulgation of the Constitution of 1787, women’s right to participate in politics was not recognized for a long time. For this reason, a campaign for women’s right to participate in politics had been in full swing since the middle of the 19th century. It was not until the adoption of the 19th Amendment that equal voting rights were recognized for women and men.

Abraham Lincoln described the ideal vista of a democratic government being one “of the people, by the people, for the people.” However, the lower classes and vulnerable groups in the U.S. did not really enjoy the fruits of democracy at the beginning and had been

marginalized in politics for a long time. American democracy did not achieve perfection with the passage of the U.S. Constitution. The gradual development of American democracy is inseparable from the tireless struggles of vulnerable groups such as the blacks and women in the U.S.

III. Real drawbacks of American democracy

(I) The polarization of American democracy

Since the 1970s, obvious polarization has been taking place in American politics. Political polarization means that: First, external differences become increasingly pronounced. The policy preferences of different political forces pull in opposite directions. Second, the internal homogeneity gradually intensifies. Different political forces defend the values they pursue, and it isn't easy to show reconciliation with one another. For nearly half a century, economic globalization has caused the constant transfer of American manufacturing overseas, and wealth is concentrated among a few people due to the rapidly growing virtual economy. The gap between the rich and the poor in the U.S. is widening, and the contradiction between the lower classes and the upper-class elites has

become increasingly entrenched. Multiculturalism is upheld in the U.S., where racial conflicts are intensifying. These differences are manifested in the deepening opposition between political elites. Specifically, in recent years, the Democratic Party has tended to be more liberal, while the Republican Party has become increasingly conservative. The middle ground between the two parties gradually vanishes. Internally, the two parties have become more united and homogenized. As the two parties gradually pull in opposite directions in terms of concepts and perception, American society is losing its cohesive force.

Due to factors such as ruling pressure, conflict of values, and internal party pressure, it is often the case that American Democratic and Republican members of Congress can not enter into rational discussions with other parties, but instead put the interests of the party above those of the people. Members of Congress of the two parties counteract each other's efforts now and again. The U.S. Congress, which was regarded as a forum for discussing public opinions, has degenerated into an arena where the two parties fight against each other. The

speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives, Nancy Pelosi, as a representative of the left-wing Democrats, promoted the process of impeachment against Donald Trump twice. In fact, many people find the impeachment of Trump ridiculous party politics, however high-sounding the Democrats' grounds seem.

Political polarization has aggravated the conflict and antagonism between different powers, causing disputes between Congress and the White House and between the ruling party and the opposition. As a result, it undermines the running of the American political system. To reduce the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on re-election, Trump tried to downplay the threat of the pandemic to people's lives and forcibly promoted the resumption of work and production. However, while criticizing the Trump administration for its ineffective fight against the pandemic, most Democrats encouraged to force people in some states to wear masks. This game of tit for tat politicizes the simple anti-epidemic measure of mask-wearing. State governments ran by different parties tend to adopt an anti-pandemic policy with "distinct characteristics" based on their own party stand. Given

the lack of full coordination at the federal level, the state governments are often at odds with one another in terms of anti-pandemic policies, making it hard to check the rapid spread of the pandemic. Due to the political polarization coupled with the system of checks and balances, “scattered U.S.” lacks the capacity to effectively deal with the pandemic. This undermines the basic rights of ordinary people and also worsens the already hard-pressed global efforts to fight the pandemic. The antagonism between the two parties and political polarization give rise to the “pendulum democracy” and the “pancake tossing” for domestic and foreign policies in the U.S. After being installed as president, Trump revoked and even abolished many policies and acts adopted by the Obama administration. He announced withdrawal from international organizations such as the United Nations Human Rights Council and many international conventions such as the Paris Agreement. On the economic front, Trump operated U.S.-centered unilateralism, acted against the prevailing trend of economic globalization, and launched trade wars with trading partners such as China. In contrast, after taking

office, Biden declared that the U.S. would pursue multilateralism, rejoin the United Nations Human Rights Council, and suspend withdrawal from the World Health Organization, in an effort to repair diplomatic relations with Western allies. The “pendulum democracy” indicates that the U.S. makes capricious domestic and foreign policies, and the national finances are being depleted at the great expense of ordinary people. Under the “pendulum democracy,” the domestic and foreign policies of the U.S. are “turned over like a pancake.” The ruling party always settles scores over its predecessor’s political legacy or vetoes the policies made by its political opponents. As a result, the U.S. lacks a clear and consistent policy orientation, and the people, therefore, cannot make stable and long-term expectations of action, and many countries and international organizations are full of misgivings when dealing with the U.S.

Based on the party interests, the two parties in the U.S. veto each other’s policies, and as a result, American democracy falls into the trap of a “veto-type system.” Someone pointed out that the political polarization in the U.S. means the emergence of “two Americas” with the

Democratic and Republican parties serving as the dividing line and the red and blue states as the geographic boundaries.

(II) Double standards of American democracy

The U.S. flaunts the values such as human rights, freedom, and democracy and creates an image of a democracy defender, but the image of the U.S. as a defender of democracy is hypocritical in the extreme. If the so-called democratic movement compromises the interests of the U.S., the U.S. will act in opposition to democracy without hesitation. The double standards under American democracy are clearly manifested in its treatment of street politics and the freedom of the press.

First, the U.S. operates double standards for street politics. For a long time, the advocates of American democracy have always assumed that American voters will exercise rational judgment when casting a vote and that the elected will comply with the election rules and accept the outcomes of the elections. However, those who uphold American democracy were dumbfounded by the farce that occurred in the 2020 U.S. presidential election. It turned out that their rational hypothesis about

“orderly election” was turned upside down by reality. Refusing to concede defeat in the election, Trump claimed that the Democrats cheated in counting votes and exploited social media to incite people to launch street campaigns. Trump followers stormed the Congress with an utterly wretched mood, interrupting the Congress’ meeting to certify the election results. American democracy, which has seemed to be gentle and rational, emerged as violent street politics. Is the U.S. that supports street politics part of modern democracy? I am afraid it is difficult to give a definite answer.

From the Jasmine Revolution that broke out in Tunisia, the “Arab Spring” that swept the Middle East, to even the political crisis in Ukraine, it can be seen that American politicians are “highly concerned” about the democratization of later modern countries. In China’s Hong Kong, aided by external forces, separatists launched a slew of riots, including storming the Legislative Council, attacking the police and innocent people, and besieging the building of the Liaison Office of the Central People’s Government in the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR). They blatantly

challenged the bottom line of “one country, two systems”... Some American politicians danced for joy for this and even called it “a beautiful sight to behold.” U.S. Congress specially introduced a bill to endorse the actions of the rioters in defiance of the dissatisfaction of the Chinese people and the strong representations lodged by the Chinese diplomatic authorities. The U.S. Congress even flagrantly invited the heads of disorderly elements in Hong Kong to the hearings on Hong Kong-related issues in an effort to defend the radical and barbarian street politics in Hong Kong. The words and deeds of American politicians regarding street politics overseas seem to indicate that the U.S. encourages street politics and is inclined to regard street politics as what democratic theory and practice entail.

However, ironically, the U.S. has forcefully put down the street politics movements that took place in the U.S. in recent years. Due to the impact of the financial crisis, the unprivileged American populace launched a strong outcry against social injustice and uneven distribution of wealth and initiated the Occupy Wall Street (OWS) movement. In response, American politicians vilified the

protesters as rabble, and the American police suppressed them by employing methods such as violent dispersal. George Floyd, an American black man, was violently killed by white police officers for using forged bills worth twenty dollars. The American people took the streets to condemn the social ills of racism. In response, American politicians “righteously” denounced it as a “riot.” When some members of the populace dissatisfied with Trump’s defeat occupied the Capitol, politicians such as Pelosi labeled it as a “violent campaign” and “rebellion” without hesitation.

In terms of street politics, the U.S. operates double standards: On the one hand, the U.S. connives with and exploits the opposition in other countries to launch campaigns of street politics and even violent protests. On the other hand, it forcibly suppresses the protests of its citizens at every turn. That the U.S. adopts diametrically opposite attitudes towards street politics at home and abroad abundantly illustrates the double standards of American democracy.

Second, the manipulation of the freedom of the press in the U.S. also exposes the double standards of American

democracy. The media should report social events objectively and neutrally to promote politics in a healthy manner. However, under the guise of press freedom, the American media operates double standards to block information that is unfavorable to the U.S. selectively and deliberately mislead public opinion. Although the advocates of American democracy strive to stress the value of press freedom and parade the neutrality and objectivity of the American media, the American media adopts totally different approaches based on their preferences when covering issues of the same nature. For example, American media would give coverage for many days in a row in the case of the disappearance of white people while hardly giving due attention to the disappearance of the people of minority groups. When riots broke out in Hong Kong in 2019, the American media deliberately turned the camera to the police while turning a blind eye to the egregious acts of Hong Kong rioters of attacking the police and citizens in an attempt to deliberately create a negative image of the Hong Kong police “violently suppressing the democratic movement.” When the COVID-19 pandemic broke out in 2020, the

U.S. media deliberately labeled it the “Chinese virus” and provoked a deluge of hateful words and deeds against Chinese Americans. Disregarding the U.S. poor performance in anti-pandemic efforts, Bloomberg released the so-called “COVID Resilience Ranking”, in which the U.S. ranked top in the world in the anti-pandemic measures. Such double standards on press freedom run counter to the basic common sense and code of conduct for a modern democratic society. This shows that the American media, which is driven by political manipulation and interests, is far from being as neutral and objective as it proclaims.

(III) Money-dominated American democracy

The followers of American democracy usually regard free election campaigns as the pride and joy of American democracy. They hold that an election campaign helps the people independently choose their own political representatives and ensures the people’s equal right to hold public office. Candidates who want to win the election must demonstrate their competence and express their views to the people as comprehensively as possible so that voters learn about the candidates’ competence and

governance pledges.

However, free election rings hollow under the money-dominated American democracy. In the U.S. general election, financial support is indispensable for both pre-election preparations and the follow-up period. Candidates have to bear the costs for media promotion, staff salary, and campaign organization. These costs increase as the campaign time is extended. For example, the U.S. general election cost nearly US\$4 billion in 2004, about US\$5 billion in 2008, about US\$6 billion in 2012, about US\$7 billion in 2016, and up to US\$14 billion in 2020. The above data illustrate that contemporary American democracy is intimately linked to capital, and the free election campaign hinges on capital support. This profoundly shapes the logic behind the running of American politics.

The removal of the cap on political contributions has sped up the integration of American politics with money. Initially, the U.S. adopted a strict attitude towards governing the source and use of political contributions. Some politicians were aware that the involvement of interest groups in elections might undermine democracy,

and therefore the political contributions made by private entities must be strictly controlled. Back in 1907, the U.S. adopted the *Tillman Act of 1907* to restrict legal persons from making direct political contributions to candidates for federal elections. Following the Watergate scandal, the *Federal Election Campaign Act* of 1974 included several stipulations. First, individual donations to each candidate shall not exceed US\$1,000, and the total annual contribution to candidates, political parties and political action committees shall not exceed US\$25,000. Second, groups such as companies can set up political action committees to raise campaign funds. The Bipartisan Campaign Reform Act of 2002 (BCRA) stipulates that the upper limit of individual donations to each candidate in the primary and general elections is US\$2,000, and the upper limit of donations to the national committee of each political party is US\$25,000. In recent years, however, the U.S. has relaxed restrictions on political contributions on the grounds that limiting political contributions is tantamount to restricting freedom of speech. For example, in 2010, the Supreme Court ruled that companies and trade unions were

allowed to make donations to political action committees without restrictions. In 2014, the Supreme Court abolished the restriction over the highest donations made by individuals to federal candidates and political parties that they support in election campaigns. The continuous relaxation of the restrictions over political contributions facilitates the connection of capital and politics, and interest groups can intervene in the democratic election process lawfully.

The money-dominated American democracy damages the interests of voters. As a Chinese saying goes, “If you accept bribes, you have to relieve the giver of misfortune.” In order to safeguard the “political tacit agreement” established with interest groups, the elected candidates often give back to the interest groups, explicitly or implicitly. This is mirrored in the following aspects: First, reward according to merits. The elected can reward representatives of interest groups through personnel appointments, etc. For example, after taking office, Obama designated those who raised funds for his election as ambassadors as a reward. Second, benefit transfer. The elected will implement policies in favor of

the interest groups after taking office. Amendments to the U.S. Constitution stipulate the right of citizens to possess and carry firearms. The U.S. has also become the country with the largest gun ownership in the world due to its loose policy governing gun control. Successive presidents of the U.S. have done nothing in response to shooting incidents that have occurred from time to time except expressing “deep sorrow.” As the National Rifle Association of America provided US\$30 million in support to Trump in his running for the president, the reason for the abortive introduction of the gun control bill is self-evident. It can be seen that the legalization of political contributions paves the way for capitalists to “blatantly” intervene in policy formulation. Capitalists often attach extra political conditions to contributions. While the elected are elected by the people, their behavior logic is, in fact, deeply driven by interest groups. In the event of a conflict between interest groups and the voters, the elected with dual identities may be caught in a dilemma and will invariably betray the interests of the voters.

Money kidnaps politics, and capital distorts public

opinion. American democratic elections degenerate into an arena where capitalists compete for power, and American democratic politics gradually becomes politics in which “money talks.”

(IV) Formalized nature of American Democracy

The fulfillment of democracy requires complicated systems. Once the system causes the substance of democracy to fail, it is inevitable that democracy becomes formalized. Regardless of its merits, the system of American democracy has defects that make democracy formalized.

On the one hand, the Electoral College system has made the practice of democratic elections in the U.S. formalized in the long term. The Electoral College system is implemented for the U.S. presidential election. This system was the product of compromise between the large states and small states when the U.S. Constitution was enacted. Whether a candidate wins the support of the majority of voters in a state will directly affect whether such candidate can win the votes of the electors represented by that state in Congress. Essentially, the Electoral College system can be summarized as “winner

takes all.”

Due to the Electoral College system, there are many cases in the U.S. in which the candidates lost a majority vote in universal suffrage but eventually won the election in the presidential elections. In 1860, Abraham Lincoln won the votes of less than half of the voters, but he was finally elected president thanks to his dominant voting at the Electoral College. In 1912, Woodrow Wilson was finally elected president of the U.S. despite the fact that he lagged behind his opponent by about 1 million votes. In 2000, although Albert Gore received 530,000 more votes than George W. Bush, Bush won the presidential election thanks to the voting results in the key swing states. In 2016, Hillary Clinton received 2.9 million more votes than Trump, but still failed the presidential election. The voting results in key swing states determine whether candidates can win the electoral votes of these states, and the key swing states directly determine whether a candidate receives more than 270 electoral votes. Therefore, candidates of the two parties usually concentrate most of their energy on the key swing states that affect the final outcome.

The most fundamental requirement for democracy is democracy and equality, but the operation of the Electoral College system actually violates the basic principle of democracy and equality for a long time. On the one hand, the effectiveness of elections varies according to different states. The Electoral College system is designated to maintain the federal system. The Electoral College system works in favor of small states as a whole and constitutes reverse discrimination against some large states. On the other hand, there are differences in the effectiveness of voting by voters in different states, and this also constitutes discrimination against some voters. People eligible to vote should be treated equally, and every vote they cast has the same effect on the election result. Although the U.S. has universal suffrage, does the effectiveness of votes really comply with the democratic principles of “one person, one vote” and “the minority subordinate to the majority” under the Electoral College system? The electoral votes in different states symbolize the will of voters of varying numbers, and it is difficult to realistically reflect the collective will of the people nationwide by relying on

electoral votes alone. Under this circumstance, does the election winner really enjoy popular support? The answer is obviously no.

On the other hand, American politics controlled by a small number of elites in the long term also exposes the formalized nature of American democracy. Advocates of American democracy are often proud of universal suffrage implemented in the U.S. They believe that standardized election procedures ensure that election results conform to the requirements of formal justice and that everyone has an equal opportunity to an election. Although the universal suffrage system presupposes the possibility of the people independently choosing representatives and running for public office, ordinary people can not afford the exorbitant costs of a long campaign due to limited funding. Involvement in democratic elections requires a great deal of funds, an invisible hurdle for ordinary people. Except for making regular votes, it is difficult for the majority of ordinary people to get involved in American democracy. Only a few political elites supported by the consortia can be nominated by their party. As a result, American politics

has long been dominated by a few political families, such as the Roosevelt family and the Bush family. American democracy is nothing more than a power game for a few political elites. As time passes, ordinary people have dwindling enthusiasm for elections because they know that their votes can hardly change the dominance of American politics by the elites.

IV. Conclusion

In today's world, democracy has become a common human value. However, value commensurability does not mean that value can be realized by a single method. The models of democracy in various countries, including American democracy, are essential for brilliant political achievements. For the progress of democracy in any country, it is necessary to draw on the benefits of foreign civilizations and all the more to combine general principles with national realities. Therefore, no country should point fingers at other countries' democracy, nor has the right to export democracy. However, the U.S. has an illusionary sense of confidence in its democratic system, thinking that American democracy is a one-size-fits-all system truth. The U.S. gives

sanctimonious preaching on democracy all over the world and forcibly promotes its democratic model. Such an attempt will, of course, be boycotted by other countries because if we assert that there is only one democratic model in the world, it is in itself anti-democratic.

Past experience fully illustrates that the U.S. export of democracy to some regions caused new humanitarian disasters instead of bringing prosperity and development to the local areas. For this, the U.S. remains impenitent and even brings the domestic two-party internal power struggle to the international community by gathering some vassal states and regions in the so-called summit for democracy. The U.S. organizes the summit for democracy in an attempt to monopolize the right to define democracy and act as a judge, form a clique in the name of democracy, and establish a world system based on the standard of American interests and ideology. In fact, the so-called summit for democracy is doomed to failure because the limitations and practical ills of American democracy have been exposed, and it gradually loses its persuasiveness and appeal. More and

more countries and people become aware that American democracy does not represent the development direction of democracy. The people of all countries should and can independently pursue democratic development with their own traits and contribute their wisdom and power to the diversity of political achievements.