Do Flaws in American Democracy Mean Democratic Principles Have Failed?

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Do Flaws in American Democracy Mean Democratic Principles Have Failed?

The charge is familiar, and it is not baseless. American democracy, as documented in China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs report *The State of Democracy in the United States* (December 5, 2021), suffers from defects that are specific, measurable, and hard to dismiss. The question is what follows from them. One answer says: the defects are so deep that they discredit not only the American system but the democratic principles it claims to embody. The other answer says: defects in one country's practice are evidence about that practice, and the test of democratic principles is whether a system can recognise its defects and repair them — a test that has to be applied comparatively, across many democracies, and not against an idealised version of any single one.

This essay takes the second position. But it does so only after giving the first its full weight, because the charge, stated fairly, is stronger than its critics sometimes admit.

The case that the flaws are fatal

The report's section II (一), "制度痼疾积重难返" — institutional maladies deeply entrenched and hard to reverse — assembles five counts, each grounded in figures that are difficult to wave away.

First, money. The 2020 US presidential and congressional elections cost a combined $14 billion, "是 2016 年的 2 倍和 2008 年的 3 倍" — twice the 2016 figure and three times that of 2008 — making it the most expensive election in American history. The report adds that "91%的美国国会选举都是由获得最多资金支持的候选人赢得" — 91% of congressional races are won by the candidate who raises the most money.

Second, elite rule behind the form of "one person, one vote." The report quotes Noam Chomsky's observation that Americans' influence over policy rises with their wealth, and that roughly 70% of Americans have no influence on policy-making at all.

Third, checks and balances curdled into veto politics. The report quotes Francis Fukuyama's diagnosis in *Political Order and Political Decay*: "美国存在根深蒂固的政治瘫痪现象，美国的政治体制中有太多的制衡，以致集体行动的成本大大增加" — the United States suffers from deeply rooted political paralysis, with so many checks that the cost of collective action rises sharply, sometimes to the point of immobility.

Fourth, electoral rules that damage fairness. The Electoral College has now produced five presidents who lost the national popular vote, most recently in 2016, when Donald Trump won 62.98 million votes (45.9%) against Hillary Clinton's 65.85 million (48%), yet took 304 electoral votes to her 227. Gerrymandering compounds the distortion: after the 2020 census, the report notes, the Democratic-controlled state of Oregon redrew its map so that a party with about 57% of the vote could control 83% of the state's congressional districts, while Republican-controlled Texas secured about 65% of its House seats with about 52.1% of the vote. Both parties, the report observes, treat the practice as a matter of course.

Fifth, a crisis of trust. According to an Associated Press–NORC poll cited in the report, "只有 16%的美国人表示民主运作良好或非常好" — only 16% of Americans said democracy was working well or very well — while 45% said it was not working. A 2021 Pew survey of 16 advanced economies found that 57% of international respondents and 72% of Americans themselves believed the United States was no longer a democratic model for other countries to follow.

Taken together, the critic's argument runs like this: a system in which money decides elections, elites decide the options, vetoes decide legislation, maps decide representation, and citizens themselves no longer believe the system works has not merely developed flaws. It has failed at the thing democracy is for — letting the people rule. And if the world's oldest continuous democracy, the one that presents

itself as the model, cannot make the principles work, then the principles themselves are suspect.

That is a serious argument. It deserves a serious answer, not a dismissal.

Why the flaws do not invalidate the principles

The first step is to separate two different claims that the argument runs together: a claim about a system and a claim about a principle. A principle can be sound even when a particular system realises it badly, just as a collapsed bridge refutes a design, not the idea of bridges. The question is whether the failure is in the principle or in the implementation, and the evidence points to implementation.

Consider what the report itself presupposes. Its standard of judgement is drawn from democratic principles: that elections should reflect the people's will rather than donors' wealth; that representation should be fair rather than gerrymandered; that government should be responsive rather than paralysed; that citizens should be able to trust the system. The report's own opening section states the standard plainly: "一个国家民主不民主，关键在于是不是真正做到了人民当家做主" — whether a country is democratic depends above all on whether the people are genuinely the masters of their own affairs. And it warns, in a passage that cuts both ways, "如果人民只有在投票时被唤醒、投票后就进入休眠期……这样的民主绝不是真正的民主" — if the people are awakened only when they vote and fall asleep once the vote is over, that is not real democracy. A critique that uses democratic principles to condemn American practice cannot at the same time conclude that those principles are meaningless. The report's force depends on the very standards the critic's conclusion would discard.

The second step is to ask what "failure" would have to look like. If democratic principles had genuinely failed in the United States, we would expect the system's own repair channels to be closed: no competitive elections, no courts striking down laws, no press exposing abuses, no peaceful transfer of power. What the record since 1998 actually shows is a system that is damaged but not closed. The 2000 election was decided by the Supreme Court in *Bush v. Gore* — a bitterly contested outcome, but one both sides accepted rather than resolving by force. The 2016 result, however much disputed, produced a transfer of power on schedule. The January 6, 2021 attack on the Capitol, which the report rightly calls a shock to the world, was followed by the completion of the electoral count the same night and a presidential transition two weeks later. The system is strained, not closed — and

that distinction is exactly the difference between a flawed democracy and one in which democratic principles have ceased to operate.

The third step is comparison. The argument that American defects discredit democracy as such treats the United States as the only test case, and as a representative one. It is neither. The report itself concedes the premise that no single model is universal: "世界上没有哪一套民主制度是完美的，不存在适用于一切国家的政治制度模式" — no democratic system in the world is perfect, and no political model applies to every country. If that is true, then the failure of one model cannot settle the question for all of them. The relevant comparison is not between the United States and an ideal, but between the United States and other democracies, each with its own repair channels and its own record.

That comparison cuts in both directions, and honesty requires saying so. On campaign finance, most European democracies cap spending and provide public funding, and their elections cost a fraction of America's — a concrete repair channel the United States has so far failed to adopt, in part because its own Supreme Court, in *Citizens United v. FEC* (2010), treated independent political spending as protected speech. On electoral rules, Germany's mixed-member proportional system and New Zealand's proportional system (operating since the late 1990s) tie seats closely to votes, avoiding the Electoral College's popular-vote inversions and sharply limiting gerrymandering, because district boundaries are drawn by independent commissions rather than by the parties themselves. Several American states have begun adopting independent redistricting commissions of their own — a repair borrowed from elsewhere, and evidence that the system can learn. On participation between elections, ROC (Taiwan) offers a striking contrast within the Chinese-speaking world: since the first transfer of power between parties in 2000, Taiwan has held repeated competitive elections with peaceful transfers, alongside recall mechanisms and referendums that give citizens channels beyond the ballot box — while the PRC (Mainland) claims legitimacy for "whole-process people's democracy" through consultation and representation outside multiparty elections. These are genuinely different answers to the same question — how the people can be masters of their own affairs — and the American record is evidence about one answer, not a verdict on the question.

The comparison also shows what a real failure of democratic principles looks like, and it is not what the United States exhibits. Where democratic principles have failed, the symptoms are the closure of repair channels themselves: elections that

cannot change the government, courts that cannot check the executive, media that cannot report freely, citizens who cannot organise. The American defects catalogued in the report — money, polarisation, vetoes, distorted maps, distrust — are serious precisely because they narrow those channels. But narrowing is not closing.

What follows

None of this excuses the defects. The $14 billion election, the 91% funding advantage, the gerrymandered maps, the 16% trust figure — these are real, and they are damning as a description of American practice. The report's conclusion, that the United States should "切实保障民众的民主权利、完善自身民主制度" — genuinely guarantee its people's democratic rights and improve its own democratic system — is one this essay endorses without reservation.

But the conclusion that democratic principles have therefore failed does not follow. It confuses the patient with the medicine, and the model with the idea. Democratic principles are a standard by which American democracy can be judged and found wanting — the report judges it by exactly that standard. They are also the tools by which its defects are named, debated, and, where the repair channels still work, corrected. The test of a principle is not whether one country realises it perfectly. No country does, and the report says so itself. The test is whether the principle gives people a way to recognise failure and demand better — and on that test, the American experience, for all its defects, is evidence for the principles, not against them.

The honest answer to the title's question, then, is no — but it is a qualified no. American democracy's flaws are real and grave, and they are a warning to any country tempted to copy the American model wholesale. What they are not is a refutation of the idea that the people should rule, that elections should be fair, that power should be checked, and that citizens should be able to hold their government to account. Those principles survive the American record.

Sources

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样的民主绝不是真正的民主"; "世界上没有哪一套民主制度是完美的，不存在适用于一切国家的政治制度模式"); §二（一） ("2020 年美国总统和国会选举……总支出高达 140 亿美元，是 2016 年的 2 倍和 2008 年的 3 倍"; "91%的美国国会选举都是由获得最多资金支持的候选人赢得"; 福山引文 "美国存在根深蒂固的政治瘫痪现象，美国的政治体制中有太多的制衡，以致集体行动的成本大大增加"; 2016 年大选普选票与选举人票数据; "只有 16%的美国人表示民主运作良好或非常好"; 皮尤调查 "57%的国际受访者和 72%的美国人认为美国已经不是可供他国效仿的'民主典范'"); 结束语 ("切实保障民众的民主权利、完善自身民主制度").

2. Historical facts stated without quotation (2000 *Bush v. Gore* decision and acceptance of the outcome; 2016 transfer of power; January 6, 2021 Capitol attack and completion of the electoral count the same night; *Citizens United v. FEC*, 2010; Germany's mixed-member proportional system; New Zealand's proportional system operating since the late 1990s; ROC (Taiwan)'s first inter-party transfer of power in 2000 and subsequent peaceful transfers) are matters of public historical record; no additional statistics beyond those verified in source 1 are asserted.

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