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## 20 of America's top political scientists gathered to discuss our democracy. They're scared.

“If current trends continue for another 20 or 30 years, democracy will be toast.”

Is American democracy in decline? Should we be worried?

On October 6, some of America’s top political scientists gathered at Yale University to answer these questions. And nearly everyone agreed: American democracy is eroding on multiple fronts — socially, culturally, and economically.

The scholars pointed to breakdowns in social cohesion (meaning citizens are more fragmented than ever), the rise of tribalism, the erosion of democratic norms such as a commitment to rule of law, and a loss of faith in the electoral and economic systems as clear signs of democratic erosion.

No one believed the end is nigh, or that it’s too late to solve America’s many problems. Scholars said that America’s institutions are where democracy has proven most resilient. So far at least, our system of checks and balances is working — the courts are checking the executive branch, the press remains free and vibrant, and Congress is (mostly) fulfilling its role as an equal branch.

But there was a sense that the alarm bells are ringing.

Yascha Mounk, a lecturer in government at Harvard University, summed it up well: “If current trends continue for another 20 or 30 years, democracy will be toast.”

## “Democracies don’t fall apart — they’re taken apart”

Nancy Bermeo, a politics professor at Princeton and Harvard, began her talk with a jarring reminder: Democracies don’t merely collapse, as that “implies a process devoid of will.” Democracies die because of deliberate decisions made by human beings.

Usually, it’s because the people in power take democratic institutions for granted. They become disconnected from the citizenry. They develop interests separate and apart from the voters. They push policies that benefit themselves and harm the broader population. Do that long enough, Bermeo says, and you’ll cultivate an angry, divided society that pulls apart at the seams.

So how might this look in America?

Adam Przeworski, a democratic theorist at New York University, suggested that democratic erosion in America begins with a breakdown in what he calls the “class compromise.” His point is that democracies thrive so long as people believe they can improve their lot in life. This basic belief has been “an essential ingredient of Western civilization during the past 200 years,” he said.

But fewer and fewer Americans believe this is true. Due to wage stagnation, growing inequalities, automation, and a shrinking labor market, millions of Americans are deeply pessimistic about the future: 64 percent of people in Europe believe their children will be worse off than they were; the number is 60 percent in America.

That pessimism is grounded in economic reality. In 1970, 90 percent of 30-year-olds in America were better off than their parents at the same age. In 2010, only 50 percent were. Numbers like this cause people to lose faith in the system. What you get is a spike in extremism and a retreat from the political center. That leads to declines in voter turnout and, consequently, more opportunities for fringe parties and candidates.

Political polarization is an obvious problem, but researchers like Przeworski suggest something more profound is going on. Political theorists like to talk about the “social compact,” which is basically an

implicit agreement among members of society to participate in a system that benefits everyone.

Well, that only works if the system actually delivers on its promises. If it fails to do so, if it leads enough people to conclude that the alternative is less scary than the status quo, the system will implode from within.

Is that happening here? Neither Przeworski nor anyone else went quite that far. But we know there's a growing disconnect between productivity (how hard people work) and compensation (how much they're paid for that work). At the same time, we've seen a spike in racial animus, particularly on the right. It seems likely there's a connection here.

Przeworski believes that American democracy isn't collapsing so much as deteriorating. "Our divisions are not merely political but have deep roots in society," he argues. The system has become too rigged and too unfair, and most people have no real faith in it.

Where does that leave us? Nowhere good, Przeworski says. The best he could say is that "our current crisis will continue for the foreseeable future."

### **"The soft guardrails of democracy" are eroding**

We've heard a lot of chatter recently about the importance of democratic norms. These are the unwritten rules and the conventions that undergird a democracy — things like commitment to rule of law, to a free press, to the separation of powers, to the basic liberties of speech, assembly, religion, and property.

Daniel Ziblatt, a politics professor at Harvard, called these norms "the soft guardrails of democracy." Dying democracies, he argued, are always preceded by the breaking of these unwritten rules.

Research conducted by Bright Line Watch, the group that organized the Yale conference, shows that Americans are not as committed to these norms as you might expect.

It's not that Americans don't believe in democratic ideals or principles; it's that our beliefs scale with our partisan loyalties. [Vox's Ezra Klein](#) explained it well in a recent column:

People's opinions on democracy lie downstream from their partisan identity. If it had been Trump's voters who had seen the Electoral College, gerrymandering, and Russia turn against them, then it would be Trump's voters vibrating with outrage over the violation of key principles of American democracy.

Hypocrisy aside, the reaction of nearly half the country to Russia's meddling says a lot about our attachment to core democratic values like free and fair elections.

Another [startling finding](#) is that many Americans are open to "alternatives" to democracy. In 1995, for example, one in 16 Americans supported Army rule; in 2014, that number increased to one in six. According to another survey cited at the conference, 18 percent of Americans think a military-led government is a "fairly good" idea.

But there's more.

Ziblatt identified what he calls two "master norms." The first is mutual toleration — whether we "accept the basic legitimacy of our opponents." The second is institutional forbearance — whether politicians responsibly wield the power of the institutions they're elected to control.

As for mutual toleration, America is failing abysmally (more on this below). We're hardly better on the institutional forbearance front.

Most obviously, there's Donald Trump, who has dispensed with one democratic norm after another. He's fired an FBI director in order to undercut an investigation into his campaign's possible collusion with Moscow; staffed his White House with family members; regularly attacked the free press; and refused to divest himself of his business interests.

The Republican Party, with few exceptions, has tolerated these violations in the hope that they might advance their agenda. But it's about a lot more than Republicans capitulating to Trump.

Ziblatt points to the GOP's unprecedented blocking of President Obama's Supreme Court nominee, Judge Merrick Garland, in 2016 as an example of institutional recklessness. In 2013, Senate Democrats took a similarly dramatic step by eliminating filibusters for most presidential nominations. That same year, House Republicans endangered the nation's credit rating and shut down the government over Obamacare.

There are countless other encroachments one could cite, but the point is clear enough: American democracy is increasingly less anchored by norms and traditions — and history suggests that's a sign of democratic decay.

### **“We don't trust each other”**

Timur Kuran, a professor of economics and politics at Duke University, argued that the real danger we face isn't that we no longer trust the government but that we no longer trust each other.

Kuran calls it the problem of “intolerant communities,” and he says there are two such communities in America today: “identitarian” activists concerned with issues like racial/gender equality, and the “nativist” coalition, people suspicious of immigration and cultural change.

Each of these communities defines itself in terms of its opposition to the other. They live in different worlds, desire different things, and share almost nothing in common. There is no real basis for agreement and thus no reason to communicate.

The practical consequence of this is a politics marred by tribalism. Worse, because the fault lines run so deep, every political contest becomes an intractable existential drama, with each side convinced the other is not just wrong but a mortal enemy.

**Consider this stat:** In 1960, 5 percent of Republicans and 4 percent of Democrats objected to the idea of their children marrying across political lines. In 2010, those numbers jumped to 46 percent and 33 percent respectively. Divides like this are eating away at the American social fabric.

A 2014 **Pew Research Center study** reached a similar conclusion: "In both political parties, most of those who view the other party very unfavorably say that the other side's policies 'are so misguided that they threaten the nation's well-being,'" Pew reports. "Overall, 36% of Republicans and Republican leaners say that Democratic policies threaten the nation, while 27% of Democrats and Democratic leaners view GOP policies in equally stark terms."

So it's not merely that we disagree about issues; it's that we believe the other side is a grievous threat to the republic. According to Pew, the numbers above have more than doubled since 1994.

Kuran warns that autocrats tend to exploit these divisions by pushing "policies that may seem responsive to grievances but are ultimately counterproductive." Think of Donald Trump's "Muslim ban" or his insistence on building a giant wall on the southern border. Neither of these policies is likely to make a significant difference in the lives of Trump's voters, but that's not really the point.

By pandering to fears and resentments, Trump both deepens the prejudices and satisfies his base.

## **Donald Trump and "the politics of eternity"**

Timothy Snyder, a Yale historian and author of the book **On Tyranny**, gave one of the more fascinating talks of the conference.

Strangely enough, Snyder talked about time as a kind of political construct. (I know that sounds weird, but bear with me.) His thesis was that you can tell a lot about the health of a democracy based on how its leaders — and citizens — orient themselves in time.

Take Trump's "Make America Great Again" slogan. The slogan itself invokes a nostalgia for a bygone era that Trump voters believe was

better than today and better than their imagined future. By speaking in this way, Snyder says, Trump is rejecting conventional politics in a subtle but significant way.

Why, after all, do we strive for better policies today? Presumably it's so that our lives can be improved tomorrow. But Trump reverses this. He anchors his discourse to a mythological past, so that voters are thinking less about the future and more about what they *think* they lost.

“Trump isn't after success — he's after failure,” Snyder argued. By that, he means that Trump isn't after what we'd typically consider success — passing good legislation that improves the lives of voters. Instead, Trump has defined the problems in such a way that they can't be solved. We can't be young again. We can't go backward in time. We can't relive some lost golden age. So these voters are condemned to perpetual disappointment.

The counterargument is that Trump's idealization of the past is, in its own way, an expression of a desire for a better future. If you're a Trump voter, restoring some lost version of America or revamping trade policies or rebuilding the military is a way to create a better tomorrow based on a model from the past.

For Snyder, though, that's not really the point. The point is that Trump's nostalgia is a tactic designed to distract voters from the absence of serious solutions. Trump may not be an authoritarian, Snyder warns, but this is something authoritarians typically do. They need the public to be angry, resentful, and focused on problems that can't be remedied.

Snyder calls this approach “the politics of eternity,” and he believes it's a common sign of democratic backsliding because it tends to work only after society has fallen into disorder.

### **My (depressing) takeaway**

Back in June, I interviewed political scientists Christopher Achen and Larry Bartels, authors of *[Democracy for Realists](#)*. They had a sobering thesis about democracy in America: Most people pay little

attention to politics; when they vote, if they vote at all, they do so irrationally and for contradictory reasons.

One of the recurring themes of this conference was that Americans are becoming less committed to liberal democratic norms. But were they ever *really* committed to those norms? I'm not so sure. If Achen and Bartels are to be believed, most voters don't hold fixed principles. They have vague feelings about undefined issues, and they surrender their votes on mostly tribal grounds.

So I look at the declining faith in democratic norms and think: Most people probably never cared about abstract principles like freedom of the press or the rule of law. (We stopped teaching civics to our children long ago.) But they more or less affirmed those principles as long as they felt invested in American life.

But for all the reasons discussed above, people have gradually disengaged from the status quo. Something has cracked. Citizens have lost faith in the system. The social compact is broken. So now we're left to stew in our racial and cultural resentments, which paved the way for a demagogue like Trump.

Bottom line: I was already pretty cynical about the trajectory of American democracy when I arrived at the conference, and I left feeling justified in that cynicism. Our problems are deep and broad and stretch back decades, and the people who study democracy closest can only tell us what's wrong. They can't tell us what ought to be done.

No one can, it seems.