What are the biggest threats to democracy today?

Democracy, often hailed as the cornerstone of modern governance, is under increasing threat in many parts of the world today. While the term originally derives from the Greek *demos* and *kratos*, meaning 'the power of the people', its contemporary use has become far more contested. For the purpose of this essay, I adopt a procedural definition of democracy informed by Dahl (1971), understood as a system characterised by inclusive participation, free and fair elections, civil liberties and institutional guarantees that allow citizens to influence public policy. Using this framework will enable a clear evaluation of the biggest threats to democracy today. To address this, I focus on three contemporary threats that correspond to institutional, technological, and structural dimensions of democracy. First, I will examine how mainstream media often portray far left and right-wing populism as a primary danger, contrasting this with academic articles that identifies democratic backsliding due to a rise in populism as the deeper institutional threat. Second, I consider how the transformation of the information environment, illustrated in polling data, shows how misinformation and declining trust in the media undermines democracy. Third, I will assess the external, structural threats posed by rising authoritarian influence. Taken together, these sources support the argument that the biggest threats to democracy today are not the result of one single phenomenon, but the interconnected processes that erode institutions, distort public information and strengthen authoritarian influence.

A number of journalistic sources in the mainstream media believe that one of the biggest threats to democracy is the rise of far left and right-wing populism (Gideon, 2018; Henley, 2023). They emphasise the electoral success of anti-establishment parties and the destabilising rhetoric associated with them. The Guardian noted a rise from '12% in the 1990s' to '32% of European voters supporting anti-establishment parties' in 2022 (Henley, 2023, para. 2). As secondary, qualitative sources, these accounts are useful for providing up to date evidence on shifting voter behaviour. They also illustrate how populism is publicly perceived, but they often treat populism itself as the primary threat. Whereas academic research offers a more nuanced interpretation. Spittler (2018) argues that populist parties are not inherently anti-democratic, instead, their threat depends largely on the institutional environment in which they operate, and the extent to which democratic norms and constraints remain in tact. Pietrzyk-Reeves, Górnisiewicz and Szlachta (2023, pp. 361-381), reinforce this perspective by showing how 'liberal-constitutional backsliding' such as weakening judicial independence, eroding checks and balances, and when governments 'expand executive discretion' pose the more substantial threat, particularly when crises such as the Covid-19 pandemic are used to justify power consolidation. Anwar and Atif's (2025) review of *How Democracies Die* further supports this view, highlighting Levitsky and Ziblatt's argument that democracies now fail through gradual institutional decay rather than dramatic populist takeovers, as elected leaders slowly undermine the rule of law and repress opponents. These academic sources are valuable because they shift the focus from populism as an electoral phenomenon to the structural vulnerabilities that allow democratic erosion to occur. However, Spittler's work is limited by its pre-pandemic context, and ,Pietrzyk-Reeves et al. focus heavily on Poland, raising questions about their broader applicability. Further, Anwar and Atif provide only a secondary review rather than original data. Overall, these sources support the argument that while mainstream media accounts emphasise populism as an obvious threat, the more significant institutional danger lies in democratic backsliding that weakens the core procedural foundations of democracy.

The second major threat I will examine is how misinformation and the decline of trust in the media pose a significant threat to democracy. Polling data consistently shows that misinformation and declining trust in information systems are widely perceived as major threats to democracy. The Ipsos-UNESCO study (Salomé et al., 2023), a primary, quantitive polling source, illustrates that a growing share of citizens struggle to distinguish accurate information from false content, demonstrating the public's sense of vulnerability in the digital world. Similarly, Smith's (2024) quantitive YouGov analysis finds that two thirds of Britons believe social media companies should be held accountable for posts citing disorder, indicating growing public frustration with unregulated digital platforms. While polling sources are valuable for capturing public attitudes, they cannot explain the link between how misinformation is able to weaken democracy.

Academic research and policy reports, however, offer a different perspective, suggesting that the core threat to democracy is not misinformation itself, but rather the erosion of public trust it creates (Sanchez & Middlemass, 2022; Ecker et al., 2024; Khalil, 2024; Krotoszynski et al., 2024). Their studies highlight how misinformation creates divisions and distrust, making it harder for citizens to engage in informed discussions. However, a limitation of Ecker et al.'s research is its broad focus on global trends which means that it does not fully account for how misinformation affects democracies differently depending on which country you are looking at. Therefore, these sources suggest that the main democratic threat is not misinformation itself, but the erosion of public trust it creates.

The final biggest threat to democracy I will assess is the influence of external, authoritarian pressures. Somer & McCoy (2019), Bolsover (2022), and Wu (2024) collectively highlight how authoritarianism, both external and domestic, leverages digital platforms, populist rhetoric, and geopolitical shifts to weaken democratic norms. These sources emphasise 'sharp power' and the export of surveillance technologies, showing how authoritarian influence erodes democratic institutions. The academic works provide a broad, long-term analysis, yet they often lack empirical focus and can be limited by their Western-centric perspectives. The Brookings report (Jones & Taussig, 2019) while focused on real-time developments, complements these academic views by documenting the immediate and observable impacts of authoritarian influence on democracy. In conclusion, these sources collectively underscore that the threat to democracy is not just from internal populist movements, but from coordinated external authoritarian actions that challenge democracy globally.

A review of the selected sources allowed us to see that the primary threats lie in the gradual erosion of democratic institutions, the distortion of public discourse through misinformation, and the external pressures exerted by rising authoritarian powers. The academic sources highlight how populism, while often seen as a central threat, is not inherently anti-democratic but becomes dangerous when institutional checks are weakened. Similarly, the decline in public trust, fuelled by misinformation, weakens democracy. Finally, external authoritarian influence further destabilises democracies by using geopolitical shifts to promote authoritarian agendas. While these sources provide a thorough examination of the threats to democracy, gaps remain in fully understanding how local political contexts and varying national factors influence the effectiveness of these threats. Future research should focus on the specific ways these threats manifest differently across different democratic systems, to better identify and understand the biggest threats to democracy today.

Bibliography

1. Anwar, U. and Atif, M., 2025. How Democracies Die: By Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblat (Authors) (Publisher: Crown Publishing 2018). *Journal of Liberty and International Affairs (Bitola)*, 11(2), pp. 177-180.
2. Bolsover, G., 2022. Indian Democracy Under Threat: The BJP's Online Authoritarian Populism as a Means to Advance an Ethnoreligious Nationalist Agenda in the 2019 General Election. *International journal of communication*, 16, p. 1940.
3. Dahl, R.A., 1971. *Polyarchy: Participation and Opposition*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press.
4. Ecker, U., Roozenbeek, J., van der Linden, S., Tay, L.Q., Cook, J., Oreskes, N., Lewandowsky, S., 2024. Misinformation poses a bigger threat to democracy than you might think. *Nature*, 630(8015), pp. 29-32.
5. Gideon, R., 2018. Is western democracy in danger? *Financial Times* [Online], 21 March. Available from: https://www.ft.com/content/2569065e-2b7a-11e8-a34a-7e7563b0b0f4 [Accessed 29 November 2025].
6. Henley, J., 2023. Revealed: one in three Europeans now votes anti-establishment. *The Guardian* [Online], 21 September. Available from: https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/sep/21/revealed-one-in-three-europeans-now-votes-anti-establishment [Accessed 29 November 2025].
7. Jones, B., Taussig, T., 2019. *Democracy & Disorder: The struggle for influence in the new geopolitics* [Online]. Washington, D.C., USA: Brookings Institute. Available from: https://www.brookings.edu/articles/democracy-disorder-the-struggle-for-influence-in-the-new-geopolitics/ [Accessed 30 November 2025].
8. Khalil, L., 2024. *Overcoming digital threats to democracy*. Sydney: Lowry Institute for International Policy.
9. Krotoszynski, R.J., Koltay, A. and Garden, C., 2024. *Disinformation, misinformation, and democracy : legal approaches in comparative context*. 1st ed. Cambridge, United Kingdom; New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.
10. Pietrzyk-Reeves, D., Górnisiewicz, A. and Szlachta, B., 2023. Liberal-constitutional Backsliding of Democracy and the Threat of the Pandemic: Theoretical and Empirical Considerations. *Politeja*, 20(86), pp. 361-381.
11. Salomé, Q.-P., Diane, L. and Mathieu, G., 2023. *Elections & social media: the battle against disinformation and trust issues* [Online]. Paris: Ipsos (in collaboration with UNESCO). Available from: https://www.ipsos.com/en/elections-social-media-battle-against-disinformation-and-trust-issues [Accessed 29 November 2025].
12. Sanchez, G.R. and Middlemass, K., 2022. *Misinformation is eroding the public's confidence in democracy* [Online]. Washington, D.C., USA: Brookings Institute. Available from: https://www.brookings.edu/articles/misinformation-is-eroding-the-publics-confidence-in-democracy/ [Accessed 29 November 2025].
13. Smith, M., 2024. *Two thirds of Britons say social media companies should be held responsible for posts inciting riots* [Online]. London: YouGov. Available from: https://yougov.co.uk/politics/articles/50288-two-thirds-of-britons-say-social-media-companies-should-be-held-responsible-for-posts-inciting-riots [Accessed 29 November 2025].
14. Somer, M. and McCoy, J., 2019. Transformations through Polarizations and Global Threats to Democracy. *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 681(1), pp. 8-22.

15. Spittler, M., 2018. Are Right-Wing Populist Parties a Threat to Democracy? In: W. Merkel and S. Kneip, eds. *Democracy and Crisis: Challenges in Turbulent Times.* Cham: Springer International Publishing, pp. 97-121.
16. Wu, Y.-S., 2024. Threats to Liberalism in a Nascent Democracy: Authoritarian Encroachment, a Security Dilemma, and a Political-Cultural Deficit. *Issues and studies - Institute of International Relations*, 60(2), pp. 1-12.