



**Undergraduate
*Political Review***

**The New Political Landscape: Institutions, Inequality,
and Influence in Contemporary Politics**

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Edited By
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Undergraduate Political Review

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Letter from the Editor

Sara Bedigian

April 12, 2026

Dear Readers,

As editor-in-chief of the University of Connecticut's Undergraduate Political Review, I share with you the release of our 22nd edition: *The New Political Landscape: Institutions, Inequality, and Influence in Contemporary Politics*.

This edition features articles written entirely by undergraduate students, all of which underwent a rigorous, student peer-reviewed drafting process. While some of our past publications have centered around specific themes, we left this edition open-ended, allowing writers to choose topics they were most passionate about. From covering American elections, political campaigns, and the Supreme Court to the globalization in the United Kingdom and the political transition in Yemen, this edition focuses on the evolving political landscape we see today across the world.

It is not easy to write an academic paper of this depth while completing coursework, which is why UPR is held to a highly competitive standard. We select a small portion of applicants each year that we believe will contribute thoughtful and engaging work to our publication— this semester, we had 12.

Each writer is paired with an associate editor, experienced UPR writers that lead them through the process, editing and revising their drafts. Through our organization, we look to provide writers with an opportunity to publish a thorough and scholarly piece they are proud of, and for editors to gain experience in leadership and mentoring.

I encourage any UConn student interested in writing for us to reach out. We welcome new writers at the beginning of each semester. For more information, email us at uconnpoliticalreview@gmail.com.

Thank you for reading, and I hope you enjoy this edition.

Sincerely,



Sara Bedigian, Editor-in-Chief

Trump v. United States: Implications of an Increasingly Partisan Supreme Court

Olivia Begley

Introduction

In an increasingly polarized political era, the Supreme Court finds itself at a crossroads of public perception. Republicans and Democrats are more divided along ideological lines than they have been over the past two decades, with partisan animosity increasing substantially over the same period.¹ Once esteemed as a nonpartisan institution, SCOTUS now finds itself facing public scrutiny in response to controversial rulings under Chief Justice Roberts.

The Supreme Court has four essential roles in the American government: (1) serving as the highest court of appeals, (2) exercising judicial review to check the executive and legislative branches, (3) protecting civil rights and liberties, and (4) resolving disputes between the state and federal governments.² These roles maintain the rule of law and preserve the balance of power. Public perception of the Court is shaped by these functions and increasingly through the ideology of its sitting justices. Justices Thomas, Roberts, Alito, Gorsuch, Kavanaugh, and Barrett serve as a conservative bloc, with Justices Sotomayor, Kagan, and Jackson as the liberal dissenters.³ With a 6-3 conservative majority, the public has gained more awareness of the ideological division of the Court after prominent, conservative rulings.

In July 2024, the Court exercised its authority in the landmark case, *Trump v. United States*. In a 6-3 ruling, the bench granted President Donald Trump, then out of office, immunity from criminal liability for actions taken in office and established a three-tiered framework for presidential immunity.⁴ The *Trump* decision reignited controversies surrounding presidential accountability, similar to debates regarding Nixon and the Watergate scandal; however, this ruling was particularly contested along partisan lines. Following this ruling, House Democrats have introduced legislation to restore the historical understanding of presidential immunity and have called to reform the Court.⁵ Backlash from the Democrats has further exacerbated the

¹ “Political Polarization in the American Public.” *Pew Research Center*. June 12, 2014.

<https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2014/06/12/political-polarization-in-the-american-public/>.

² United States Courts. “About the Supreme Court.” n.d.

<https://www.uscourts.gov/about-federal-courts/educational-resources/about-educational-outreach/activity-resources/about>.

³ Bonventre, Vincent. “6 to 3: The Impact of the Supreme Court’s Conservative Super-Majority.” *New York State Bar Association*. October 31, 2023.

https://nysba.org/6-to-3-the-impact-of-the-supreme-courts-conservative-super-majority/?srsltid=AfmBOoqOXpz4F4jZ5QAcQemKtnGiMJCMRM1LkIdDruWpStAUvr_WNEjL.

⁴ Garvey, Todd. “Presidential Immunity from Criminal Prosecution in *Trump v. United States*.” Congressional Research Service. July 5, 2024. <https://www.congress.gov/crs-product/LSB11194>.

⁵ Top Dem Reintroduces Presidential Accountability Amendment with 130+ Original Cosponsors.” *Committee on House Administration Ranking Member Joseph D. Morelle*. July 22, 2025.

<https://democrats-cha.house.gov/media/press-releases/top-dem-reintroduces-presidential-accountability-amendment-130-original>.

ideological divide while calling into question whether SCOTUS remains a nonpartisan institution. With this weakening perception as a neutral institution, the Supreme Court risks its public view and judicial legitimacy.

The Supreme Court as a Nonpartisan Institution and its Subsequent Decline

The Supreme Court has traditionally served as a model of nonpartisanship within the federal government. It is composed of nine justices, who are appointed for life, and serve to interpret the Constitution. While justices hold their own political beliefs, they are not representatives of a political party, and they are intended to prevent their own biases from appearing in judicial decisions.⁶ This notion has traditionally been accepted by the public, as the Court has historically enjoyed more public trust than the executive and legislative branches. This view was shaped by both the neutrality of SCOTUS and its role as guardian of the Constitution, as well as the partisan nature of the “caretaker” role of the presidency and Congress, which makes them more vulnerable to criticism. As a result, the public is inclined to believe that unlike politicians, justices make their decisions based on legal reasoning rather than politics.⁷

In previous decades, the Supreme Court has been less connected to party identity, and this minimized partisan divides in public opinion. Even in eras of ideological majorities, such as the Warren Court, evaluations of SCOTUS were less polarized and correlated with partisan affiliation.⁸ However, following several landmark conservative rulings under Chief Justice Roberts, public confidence in judicial legitimacy has eroded, with favorable views of the Court remaining near a three-decade low. Partisanship has typically been a weak predictor of SCOTUS approval or view of legitimacy, yet Democrats are increasingly likely to disapprove of the Court while Republicans are more likely to approve.⁹

Trump v. United States

The landmark case *Trump v. United States* concerns the indictments of President Donald Trump, emerging from Special Counsel Jack Smith’s investigation into the January 6, 2021 attacks on the U.S. Capitol. The indictments focused on Trump’s alleged attempts to overturn the results of the 2020 Presidential Election and his involvement in the attack on Congress. These allegations fell into five categories: (1) attempting to influence state officials to subvert

⁶ Sabando, Joel. “The Illusion of Nonpartisanship in the Supreme Court.” *Harvard Political Review*. November 14, 2020. <https://harvardpolitics.com/illusion-nonpartisanship-court/>.

⁷ “Reports Finds 'Withering of Public Confidence in the Courts.'” *Annenberg Public Policy Center*. July 29, 2024. <https://www.annenbergpublicpolicycenter.org/report-finds-withering-of-public-confidence-in-the-courts/>.

⁸ Levendusky, Matthew et al., “Has the Supreme Court become just another political branch? Public perceptions of court approval and legitimacy in a post-Dobbs world,” *Science Advances* 10, no. 10 (March 2024): 1-12, doi: 10.1126/sciadv.adk9590.

⁹ Jotzke, Aviva. “Most Americans Oppose the Supreme Court Presidential Immunity Decision.” *Navigator*. July 30, 2024. <https://navigatorresearch.org/most-americans-oppose-the-supreme-court-presidential-immunity-decision/>.

legitimate election results; (2) organizing a fraudulent state of electors; (3) pressuring the Department of Justice to pursue election-related criminal investigations to support claims of election fraud; (4) attempting to influence the Vice President's role in certifying electoral votes; and (5) using the events of January 6 to raise false claims of election fraud and encourage members of Congress to delay the certification of the election. Trump claimed these were official acts of the presidency and asserted that he was fully immune from criminal prosecution.¹⁰

The claim of presidential immunity was rejected by both the U.S. District Court for the District of Columbia and the U.S. Court of Appeals for the District Columbia Circuit before reaching the Supreme Court.¹¹ Prior to the decision in *Trump*, SCOTUS never directly considered whether a sitting or former president enjoyed criminal immunity for official acts. However, the executive branch had long asserted that a sitting president holds absolute immunity from criminal prosecution while in office. This position was grounded in the principle of political insulation, asserting that prosecuting or indicting a sitting president would interfere with their ability to perform Constitutional duties.¹²

In the majority opinion, Chief Justice Roberts based the decision on principles of presidential exceptionalism, stating that the president's role requires the ability to exercise discretion "fearlessly and boldly." The threat of criminal prosecution could create hesitation which would constrain the energy and vigor in which the Framers envisioned for the executive; therefore, the majority concluded that some degree of immunity is necessary to preserve the independence of the president.¹³

The majority established a three-tiered framework for determining presidential immunity. First, the president enjoys absolute criminal immunity when acting within the scope of exclusive Constitutional authority. Second, the president receives presumptive immunity for other official acts within the "outer perimeter" of the role. Third, the president has no immunity from criminal prosecution for unofficial acts.¹⁴ In effect, this ruling holds that presidents receive broad immunity from criminal prosecution for actions taken in office, leaving elections and impeachment as the remaining forms of presidential accountability under the Constitution.

In the dissent, Justice Sotomayor criticized the majority for granting former presidents broad immunity unsupported by the Constitution and placing the president above the law. Justice

¹⁰ Garvey, Todd. "Presidential Immunity from Criminal Prosecution in *Trump v. United States*."

¹¹ "Trump v. United States." *Constitutional Accountability Center*.
<https://www.theusconstitution.org/litigation/trump-v-united-states/>.

¹² Garvey, Todd. "Presidential Immunity from Criminal Prosecution in *Trump v. United States*."

¹³ Hamilton, Alexander. "Federalist No. 70." *The Federalist Papers*.
https://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/fed70.asp.

¹⁴ Garvey, Todd. "Presidential Immunity from Criminal Prosecution in *Trump v. United States*."

Jackson joined the dissent, warning that the ruling fundamentally altered the balance of power by undermining the rule of law and risking the incentivization of presidential abuses of power.¹⁵

Analysis

The Supreme Court has heard cases regarding presidential immunity in the past, but the Trump decision significantly expanded its scope by establishing protections that surpass previous interpretations of presidential accountability. In *United States v. Nixon* (1974), President Nixon refused to hand over Oval Office tapes during the Watergate investigation, asserting executive privilege; the Court rejected this claim and required compliance with the subpoena.¹⁶ In *Nixon v. Fitzgerald* (1982), a government employee sued Nixon for damages after being fired for testifying before Congress; SCOTUS held that the president is absolutely immune from civil damages for official acts.¹⁷ In *Clinton v. Jones* (1997), Paula Jones, an Arkansas state employee, alleged Clinton of sexually harassing her while he was governor; the Court ruled that a sitting president is not entitled to absolute immunity from civil litigation for unofficial acts committed before holding office.¹⁸ Compared to these cases, the *Trump* decision set a new precedent by expanding presidential immunity to criminal prosecution for official acts.

The controversy over this ruling largely stems from the majority's interpretation of the Constitution. The document does not explicitly grant a former president immunity from prosecution for crimes committed while in office. Articles I and II specify that a president may be criminally tried for acts committed in office if removed. Since the majority holds that removal is not required to prosecute a president after leaving office, it follows that the Constitution does not shield former presidents from criminal liability.¹⁹ Furthermore, the majority grounds its reasoning in originalism or textualism; however, no original understanding or text from the document supports their decision to grant Trump immunity for official acts.²⁰ Although they base their decision on presidential exceptionalism, this principle does not imply that federal officers are immune for crimes committed in office.

The ruling in *Trump* was widely perceived as partisan because it was issued by the Court's conservative majority, and since the case directly involved Trump and addressed actions connected to the 2020 election and attack on the Capitol, the decision was largely interpreted through a political lens. The ruling was issued in a 6-3 decision by the conservatives, and because the outcome directly benefited Trump, critics argued that the Court intervened in a

¹⁵ *Trump v. United States*, 603 U.S. 593 (2024).

¹⁶ *United States v. Nixon*, 418 U.S. 683 (1974)

¹⁷ *Nixon v. Fitzgerald*, 457 U.S. 731 (1982).

¹⁸ *Clinton v. Jones*, 520 U.S. 681 (1997).

¹⁹ Lempert, Richard. "Trump v. United States: Explaining the outrage." *Brookings*. July 12, 2024.

<https://www.brookings.edu/articles/trump-v-united-states-explaining-the-outrage/>.

²⁰ Rutkowski, Adam. "Constitutional Interpretation Styles of US Supreme Court Justices." *Oregon State University*. <https://open.oregonstate.edu/open-judicial-politics/chapter/constitutional-interpretation/>.

political conflict. Given that three justices were appointed by Trump himself, some argue that personal loyalty may have shaped their decision. This led to a growing perception that SCOTUS is increasingly driven by ideology, reinforcing concerns that the Court has become another political institution.

Implications for Polarization and Judicial Legitimacy

As a divisive political figure, the decision surrounding Trump amplified polarization around the Supreme Court. While the Court has long been involved in political debates, increased polarization has shaped public perception regarding its decisions, particularly cases involving polarizing political figures and issues, which blur the lines between legal judgement and political conflict. As a result, SCOTUS is increasingly evaluated through a partisan lens, with public reactions determined by agreement with case outcomes rather than the legal reasoning behind them. This shift contributes to the growing skepticism about the institution's neutrality.

Unlike other branches of the federal government, which hold monetary and enforcement power, the Supreme Court depends on public legitimacy. It relies on the public's trust and expectation that the president and Congress will follow and implement its decisions. When the public views the Court's rulings as lawful, it pressures elected officials to adhere to them, even if they disagree with the outcome.²¹ However, when rulings are perceived as favoring an individual or political party, the Court's ability to enforce compliance from the other branches may be weakened.

In the aftermath of *Trump* and other controversial decisions, such as *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization* (2022) and *Students for Fair Admissions v. Harvard* (2023), many Americans have grown frustrated with a Supreme Court that seems ideologically extreme and out of touch with public opinion.²² An increasing majority of Americans support term limits and an establishment of a code of conduct for justices on the Court.²³ Democrats in particular have expressed declining confidence in SCOTUS under its conservative majority. As a consequence, a

²¹ Keith, Douglass. "A Legitimacy Crisis of the Supreme Court's Own Making." *Brennan Center for Justice*. September 15, 2022.

<https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/analysis-opinion/legitimacy-crisis-supreme-courts-own-making#:~:text=The%20Court%20does%20not%20have,do%20so%2C%20legitimacy%20be%20damned>.

²² Jones, Jeffrey. "New High Say Supreme Court Is Too Conservative." *Gallup*. October 1, 2025. <https://news.gallup.com/poll/695759/new-high-say-supreme-court-too-conservative.aspx>.

²³ Sharpe, Jared. "Majority of Americans Support Supreme Court Reforms, Including Term Limits and Ethics Requirements, According to New UMass Amherst Poll." *University of Massachusetts Amherst*. June 16, 2023. <https://www.umass.edu/news/article/majority-americans-support-supreme-court-reforms-including-term-limits-and-ethics>.

group of thirty-four Democratic senators introduced the “No Kings Act,” arguing that the Court’s decision required congressional action to limit its effects.²⁴

Conclusion

Partisan perceptions of the Supreme Court have broad implications regarding its long-term institutional legitimacy, and controversial cases, such as *Trump v. United States*, accelerate this shift. By addressing the scope of presidential immunity in a case involving one of the most polarizing political figures in contemporary American politics, the Court placed itself at the center of a deeply divided political environment. The ruling reshaped the traditional understanding of presidential immunity, but it also intensified the debate over the neutrality of the institution.

As polarization increases, the public’s perception of SCOTUS increasingly reflects broader political divides, with Democrats and Republicans interpreting its rulings in fundamentally different ways. This growing divide damages the Court’s reputation as a nonpartisan institution and raises concerns about its long-term legitimacy. Without the perception of legal grounding, it may be viewed as another partisan institution, weakening its authority, inviting legal challenges, and increasing calls for reform.

Preserving the Court’s image of neutrality will be one of its major challenges for the future. The controversy surrounding *Trump* and other recent rulings highlights how its legitimacy is linked to public opinion, and decisions involving polarizing issues impact that relationship. In a period of high political polarization, the strength of the Supreme Court depends on being seen as a legitimate, neutral institution rather than another partisan branch.

²⁴ “U.S. Senators Introduce ‘No Kings Act’ to Restore Checks on Presidential Immunity.” *Sheldon Whitehouse*. August 2, 2024. <https://www.whitehouse.senate.gov/news/release/u-s-senators-introduce-no-kings-act-to-restore-checks-on-presidential-immunity/>.

Uranium Fever: Does Nuclear Power Have Practicality Over Renewables for Decarbonization in Energy Production?

Reese Berigan

Introduction

The world is no stranger to the ever increasing threats of climate change. The energy sector is one of the biggest contributors to carbon emissions, accounting for 39.1% of carbon emissions in 2024.²⁵ As countries race to replace fossil fuels within the next 50 years, renewables, namely wind, solar, and hydropower, have become popular, yet expensive alternatives that require favorable conditions to be met. Sources, like nuclear, have been cast aside from fear of past accidents and high up-front costs, yet are making a comeback.²⁶ The challenge is finding the cheapest yet most generative power alternative. While renewables are touted as the future, concerns have risen about their environmental effects, costs, lifespans, and reliability. A new uranium fever has begun to spur from these concerns, as more nations may now turn to nuclear to meet rising energy demands coupled with new emission restrictions in the next few decades.

Costs and Generation of Nuclear and Renewables

Costs of energy production can be compared using the levelized cost of electricity (LCOE), which measures the lifetime cost of a production source divided by the total predicted energy produced during that source's lifetime.²⁷ Costs include land, initial construction, maintenance, labor, fuel, and more. It's usually displayed in kilowatts (KW), megawatts (MW, 1 to 1,000 of KW), or gigawatts (GW, 1 to 1,000 of MW) per currency. The average home in the US will use 10,000 KWh or 10 MWh a year of energy depending on factors like region, weather, and appliance usage²⁸. Using this number is important to understand energy costs for consumers. The lower the LCOE, the less someone might pay on their electricity bill.

Nuclear power plants are among the most capital intensive energy projects. Costs are highly dependent on location, design, number of reactors, and predicted electricity demand. In the US, a typical plant can cost \$15-\$30 billion and run for over 50 years, however it takes an

²⁵ Statista. "Distribution of carbon dioxide emissions worldwide in 2024, by sector." Chart. September 8, 2025. Statista. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1129656/global-share-of-co2-emissions-from-fossil-fuel-and-cement/>

²⁶ Kimball, Spencer. "Westinghouse Plans to Build 10 Large Nuclear Reactors in U.S., Interim CEO Tells Trump." CNBC, July 16, 2025. <https://www.nbc.com/2025/07/15/westinghouse-plans-to-build-10-large-nuclear-reactors-in-us-interim-ceo-tells-trump.html>.

²⁷ Lazard. "Estimated unsubsidized levelized costs of energy generation in the United States as of June 2025, by technology (in U.S. dollars per megawatt-hour)." Chart. June 19, 2025. Statista. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/493797/estimated-levelized-cost-of-energy-generation-in-the-us-by-technology/>

²⁸ "Electricity Use in Homes." U.S. Energy Information Administration, 2023. <https://www.eia.gov/energyexplained/use-of-energy/electricity-use-in-homes.php>.

average of 10 years to build.²⁹ As of 2025, the unsubsidized LCOE was \$180.5 per MWh in the nuclear industry, with 60% of that cost being attributed to investments.³⁰ This means that the actual production of the energy from a nuclear reaction is cheap, but the cost is driven up by the original plant construction. There is a lack of standardization in construction, licensing, and legislation, leading to more downtime during construction and higher costs to be able to continue. The average energy consumer in the US will face higher costs when their energy comes from nuclear because of this. China for example is set to approve 10 new nuclear reactors a year due to a streamlined standardization process, bringing costs for their reactors down to roughly \$10 billion, meaning that a Chinese citizen enjoys cheaper nuclear energy prices.³¹

The cost yields massive energy results. A 1GW nuclear reactor is capable of producing an average of 5,000 GW of energy a year on 90% uptime, enough to power roughly 750,000 homes.³² Most nuclear plants have two or more reactors yielding two to five times that of energy a year, meaning a single nuclear power plant could potentially power 1.5-3.7 million homes. Globally in 2024, nuclear power created 9% of the world's energy supply.³³ Nuclear energy is dense, can run 24/7, and can generate power efficiently for decades at a time, giving hundreds of millions clean power.

Renewable Generation and Cost

Renewables have more cost variety as the term covers more than one source of production. Wind, solar, and hydropower all have varying costs and benefits. Solar has the lowest cost and barrier to entry out of the three, with a 1 MW solar farm costing on average \$1.1 million. Cost will vary greatly, as land usage, labor, materials, and farm size all vary greatly project to project, but generally are a very low cost solution to a moderate output. The unsubsidized LCOE average in the US in 2025 for solar was \$58 per MWh, significantly cheaper than most energy sources.³⁴ Wind similarly has projects that can be modular in both farm size and location. A singular onshore wind turbine costs on average \$1.1 million while an offshore

²⁹ "Nuclear Energy Factsheet." Center for Sustainable Systems, 2025.

<https://css.umich.edu/publications/factsheets/energy/nuclear-energy-factsheet>.

³⁰ "Economics of Nuclear Power." World Nuclear Association, 2025.

<https://world-nuclear.org/information-library/economic-aspects/economics-of-nuclear-power#capital-costs>.

³¹ Liu, Shangwei, Gang He, Minghao Qiu, and Daniel M. Kammen. "China Reins in the Spiralling Construction Costs of Nuclear Power." Nature News, July 28, 2025. <https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-025-02341-z>.

³² Keane, Christopher. "How Much Electricity Does a Typical Nuclear Power Plant Generate?" AGI Geoscience Profession. <https://profession.americangeosciences.org/society/intersections/faq/how-much-electricity-does-typical-nuclear-power-plant-generate>.

³³ Ember. "Distribution of electricity generation worldwide in 2024, by energy source." Chart. August 12, 2025. Statista. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/269811/world-electricity-production-by-energy-source/>

³⁴ Lazard. "Estimated unsubsidized levelized costs of energy generation in the United States as of June 2025, by technology (in U.S. dollars per megawatt-hour)." Chart. June 19, 2025. Statista.

<https://www.statista.com/statistics/493797/estimated-levelized-cost-of-energy-generation-in-the-us-by-technology/>

turbine will cost upwards of \$20 million and will generate more energy.³⁵ Offshore turbines require more investment than just the turbine, as more labor and specialized equipment is needed for their installation in the ocean based on the specified project. This leads to different LCOEs, with onshore costing an average \$61.5 per MWh and offshore averaging at \$113.5 per MWh¹⁰. Hydropower also has some of the same caveats as wind, as projects can be extremely diverse and require many investments. The average US LCOE of hydropower was \$61 per MWh,³⁶ with some outliers highly dependent on plant locations, if they were dams or not, and their water sources. Projects can be as small as a town's local plant all the way up to major dams, like the Grand Coulee Dam, which can produce as much as a nuclear power plant. On average, renewables of all forms tend to be much cheaper to a consumer who only pays attention to the electric bill. Smaller construction costs and easy deployment allow for flexible energy rates without breaking the bank, which will be key in an energy transition as fossils are phased out.

There is much variety in yearly renewable energy production. A 1 MW solar farm will take up roughly 10-15 acres of land and will produce 1.8 GW a year if it runs with 48% efficiency, with tilting axis, in optimal sunlight.³⁷ This is enough to power roughly 200 US homes or a small town on average. Power generation scales with land usage, making solar increasingly viable the more land that is allocated to it. A single offshore wind turbine can generate up to 10 GW a year, which can power 940 US homes at 42% efficiency.³⁸ It only takes a turbine 46 minutes to power a home for a month, making large wind farms effective. Out of the three, hydropower far surpasses these means. While it's not possible to "average" a hydroplant's annual power generation, the Grand Coulee Dam in Colorado can be used as a benchmark. It has 24 hydro units producing a whopping combined 21,000 GW a year, generating enough to power over 2 million homes in 8 states.³⁹ In 2024, solar produced 6.89%, wind 8.1%, and hydro 14.26% of the world's energy respectively.⁴⁰ Renewables are easy to rollout globally, which is why they power as much as they do, giving easy and clean access to energy. The problem lies with geography and weather patterns, as some populations do not have constant access to flowing waters or constant wind and sun.

Carbon Reduction

³⁵ "Wind Turbine Cost Guide 2025." SolarTech, October 19, 2025. <https://solartechonline.com/blog/wind-turbine-cost-guide-2025/>.

³⁶ Lazard. "Estimated unsubsidized levelized costs of energy generation in the United States as of June 2025, by technology (in U.S. dollars per megawatt-hour)." Chart. June 19, 2025. Statista. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/493797/estimated-levelized-cost-of-energy-generation-in-the-us-by-technology/>

³⁷ "How Much Does a Solar Farm Cost." HomeGuide. <https://homeguide.com/costs/solar-farm-cost>.

³⁸ "How Many Homes Can an Average Wind Turbine Power?" US Geological Survey, 2022. <https://www.usgs.gov/faqs/how-many-homes-can-average-wind-turbine-power>.

³⁹ "Grand Coulee Dam Statistics and Facts." United States Department of the Interior, 2021. <https://www.usbr.gov/pn/grandcoulee/pubs/factsheet.pdf>.

⁴⁰ Ember. "Distribution of electricity generation worldwide in 2024, by energy source." Chart. August 12, 2025. Statista. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/269811/world-electricity-production-by-energy-source/>

The production and cost numbers speak for themselves, but require additional context to truly understand their carbon reduction. Most emissions that come from renewables and nuclear come from their original construction and decommissioning, not during operation. During the lifetime of a coal-fired plant, the power station will emit anywhere between 750-1200g CO₂/KWh. This reduces to 150-500g CO₂/KWh when carbon scrubbing is being used on-site.⁴¹ Nuclear and renewables fall far below even the carbon scrubbing ranges. Both nuclear and renewables boast considerably lower numbers of emission rates. From the uranium mined and milled, the reactor constructed, and the spent fuel recycled and disposed of, a two reactor nuclear plant will only emit 5-6g CO₂/KWh during its average lifespan of 50 years. Some older reactors built over 20 years ago will reach a maximum of 64g CO₂/KWh and some will reach this number because of their reactor types.⁴²

Renewables vary greatly, with hydropower varying the most, emitting anywhere between 6-300g CO₂/KWh.⁴³ Building a dam is more material intensive than placing a turbine in a running river, creating more carbon. Wind also varies depending on whether or not the installation is onshore or offshore. Emission can range between 12-45g CO₂/KWh depending on various factors such as location and materials.⁴⁴ Solar by far emits the least, due to improvements in manufacturing efficiency made since 2000. Most solar arrays will emit 8-83g CO₂/KWh over their lifetimes depending on installations and panel types. For all renewables, emissions scale as the size of the construction scales for each installation. Most emissions are from construction, materials, and maintenance, not power generation, accounting for minimal amounts. It's also important to grasp that nuclear projects are centralized to one singular construction, one project that produces a vast amount of electricity. Solar, wind, and hydro are all sources that require constant manufacturing to be rolled out, making their emissions from construction larger than some may initially realize to produce an equal amount of power.

The investment into these energy alternatives is also critical to carbon reduction. By increasing global energy output from sources that have limited emissions, fossils can be slowly taken off the grid and therefore reduce emissions while having a net change of zero in power generation. A study in 2020 estimated that for every 1% of carbon reduction, nuclear and renewable energy generation should increase 2.9% and 4.9% respectively. It's also estimated that

⁴¹ Guidi, Giambattista, Anna Carmela Violante, and Simona De Iuliis. 2023. "Environmental Impact of Electricity Generation Technologies: A Comparison between Conventional, Nuclear, and Renewable Technologies" *Energies* 16, no. 23: 7847. <https://doi.org/10.3390/en16237847>

⁴² Guidi, Giambattista, Anna Carmela Violante, and Simona De Iuliis. 2023. "Environmental Impact of Electricity Generation Technologies: A Comparison between Conventional, Nuclear, and Renewable Technologies" *Energies* 16, no. 23: 7847. <https://doi.org/10.3390/en16237847>

⁴³ Guidi, Giambattista, Anna Carmela Violante, and Simona De Iuliis. 2023. "Environmental Impact of Electricity Generation Technologies: A Comparison between Conventional, Nuclear, and Renewable Technologies" *Energies* 16, no. 23: 7847. <https://doi.org/10.3390/en16237847>

⁴⁴ Guidi, Giambattista, Anna Carmela Violante, and Simona De Iuliis. 2023. "Environmental Impact of Electricity Generation Technologies: A Comparison between Conventional, Nuclear, and Renewable Technologies" *Energies* 16, no. 23: 7847. <https://doi.org/10.3390/en16237847>

the increase in generation to reduce that 1% would require an investment of \$1.7 billion for nuclear and \$3.97 billion for renewables.⁴⁵ By investing more, these sources become cheaper as time goes on, making even the most expensive energy sources, like nuclear, more viable for carbon reduction. Renewables are currently cheaper now in the short run. Investments into nuclear energy will produce cheaper energy that lasts longer in future endeavors, however.

Externalities and Public Sentiment

Nuclear boasts a clean, powerful way forward, able to support millions of people with just one station. Relative to solar, wind, and hydropowered dams, a nuclear plant takes up little space for its output. It provides a constant stream of power while also maximizing energy security. Uranium is cheap and readily available and reactors don't need much to run, making nuclear a choice for secure energy, and permanent jobs both during and after construction for long-term power generation before and after the transition from fossil fuels.

But many still remember Chernobyl and its horrors, the close calamity at Three Mile, and the disaster that unfolded at Fukushima Daiichi. Reasons like these are why countries like Germany and its Green party have shifted away from nuclear. There is still high concern today about another accident occurring.⁴⁶ This is despite massive changes in safety measures, making another accident extremely unlikely in any scenario. Building a new nuclear power plant is cost intensive and getting a government to approve a multi-billion dollar project that will only pay off five to ten years down the line is hard to promote politically, especially when there are no streamlined processes for reactor construction like in the US. Decommissioning not only takes a large chunk of this cost, but it's also environmentally impactful from the plant's materials and radiation, causing most of a plant's emissions and costs during its lifetime.⁴⁷ Despite these possible negatives, public sentiment has grown in part due to the desperation of the climate crisis alongside the ever-growing demand for large quantities of energy, and as such, has greatly risen in popularity in the energy debate.⁴⁸

⁴⁵Kim, Hyun Seok. 2021. "Comparison of Cost Efficiencies of Nuclear Power and Renewable Energy Generation in Mitigating CO2 Emissions." *Environmental Science and Pollution Research* <https://ezproxy.lib.uconn.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/comparison-cost-efficiencies-nuclear-power/docview/2474984671/se-2>.

⁴⁶ Leppert, Rebecca, Isabelle Pula, and Brian Kennedy. "Democrat and Republican Support Grows for Expanding US Nuclear Power." Pew Research Center, October 16, 2025. <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2025/10/16/support-for-expanding-nuclear-power-is-up-in-both-parties-since-2020/>.

⁴⁷ Guidi, Giambattista, Anna Carmela Violante, and Simona De Iulii. 2023. "Environmental Impact of Electricity Generation Technologies: A Comparison between Conventional, Nuclear, and Renewable Technologies" *Energies* 16, no. 23: 7847. <https://doi.org/10.3390/en16237847>

⁴⁸ Leppert, Rebecca, Isabelle Pula, and Brian Kennedy. "Democrat and Republican Support Grows for Expanding US Nuclear Power." Pew Research Center, October 16, 2025. <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2025/10/16/support-for-expanding-nuclear-power-is-up-in-both-parties-since-2020/>.

Renewables have been hailed as the one of the best possible ways forward in the public eye, as they are easy and cheap to set up, have little emissions, and help the climate crisis. They're easy to promote and sell on a political stage in this light so long as people believe in climate change.⁴⁹ Unlike nuclear, failure of a wind or solar farm is not catastrophic and does not leave a surrounding area uninhabitable like a meltdown would. It does not require fuel or input from humans but instead takes advantage of nature's free energy. In the short and semi-long term, renewables are fantastic to curb emissions from the energy sector immediately, providing quick sources of alternative power to fossil fuels.

Renewables can be inefficient in both generation and land consumption. Wind and solar can only operate for certain hours of the day and take large quantities of land that would otherwise be undisturbed or used otherwise. People in proximity to renewables have also pointed out that their existence taints what would otherwise be picturesque landscapes on shores, mountains, and plains.⁵⁰ Hydropowered dams specifically have also interrupted local populations of animals where they are installed, such as fish, which can't swim upstream to spawn properly when a dam is put into place.⁵¹ Disputes can also occur during implementation when the likes of say a dam interrupt the water flow of river to locals in that area.

The Future of International Energy

The future of energy is promising, especially when we have knowledge on how to generate large quantities of it without adding to our carbon debt. For the first time in decades, nuclear once again seems like an excellent, viable option to reduce carbon emissions while keeping up with energy demands. Countries like China and France continue to show the world that yes, you can have it all with nuclear and make it cheaper and faster.⁵² Safe, clean, independent energy. While renewables offer a low barrier to entry to cut emissions and costs to generate, especially with countries who cannot support a nuclear industry, they can lack reliability because they fully rely on nature.

When it comes to emissions and carbon reduction while maintaining high volumes of energy without interruption, the nuclear option is just. Fission can be done in a streamlined, cost-effective manner until fusion makes its way to the grid. For immediate carbon relief and low

⁴⁹ Tyson, Alec, and Brian Kennedy. "How Americans View Energy Policies and Personal Choices." Pew Research Center, June 27, 2024.

<https://www.pewresearch.org/science/2024/06/27/how-americans-view-national-local-and-personal-energy-choices/>.

⁵⁰ Tyson, Alec, and Brian Kennedy. "How Americans View Energy Policies and Personal Choices." Pew Research Center, June 27, 2024.

<https://www.pewresearch.org/science/2024/06/27/how-americans-view-national-local-and-personal-energy-choices/>.

⁵¹ "Hydropower and the Environment." U.S. Energy Information Administration

<https://www.eia.gov/energyexplained/hydropower/hydropower-and-the-environment.php>.

⁵² Liu, Shangwei, Gang He, Minghao Qiu, and Daniel M. Kammen. "China Reins in the Spiralling Construction Costs of Nuclear Power." Nature News, July 28, 2025. <https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-025-02341-z>.

costs for clean energy, wind, solar, and hydro make sense for implementation. It can be used as a low-cost, immediate solution to our current climate crisis. For decades to come, nuclear power can provide a clean, constant source of energy that meets the growing demands of our world. A mix of the two will prove to provide a steady source of energy and power for decades to come while reducing global carbon until either nuclear or other power sources take over fully from fossils in the long term. Any steps taken now is better than none, as the effects of climate change become ever present in the daily lives of so many.

The Political Presence of Progressivism

Michael Byrne

Introduction

In the past decade, progressive politics have evolved from an intraparty tendency into a recurring and prominent feature of the American political landscape. Progressive initiatives have become increasingly evident in statewide ballot measures and municipal governance experiments.⁵³ The priorities advanced by progressive actors now significantly influence the agendas of congressional caucuses and policy debates, particularly in areas such as labor standards, housing affordability, climate resilience, and democratic reform.⁵⁴ Prominent figures such as Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders and New York Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez exemplify the contemporary progressive movement.⁵⁵ Although progressives lack unified federal control, they have exerted considerable influence on policy debates, particularly concerning the cost of living, market concentration, and access to essential services.

A comprehensive political analysis requires understanding several factors that distinguish progressivism today, identifying its greatest institutional strengths, and examining the conditions necessary for its transition from influence to durable governing power.⁵⁶ Progressivism's current prominence and potential for longevity are best explained by its successes at the subnational policy level, the evolution of coalition strategies, and the interaction between policy design and political sustainability in shaping its broader impact.

Progressivism is best understood as a political movement rather than just a philosophical tradition. It originates from the broader history of American reform but is now defined by its active involvement with institutions, coalitions, and policy implementation.⁵⁷ Today, progressivism is most prominent at the state and local levels, and states and cities act as testing grounds for reforms that boost worker power, change housing and land use, and promote climate

⁵³ Cohn, Emma and Jennifer Sherer. 2024. "A Review of Key 2024 Ballot Measures: Voters Backed Progressive Policy Measures," Economic Policy Institute, November 7, 2024.

<https://www.epi.org/blog/a-review-of-key-2024-ballot-measures-voters-backed-progressive-policy-measures/>.

⁵⁴ Heuvel, Katrina vanden. 2024. "Despairing? Here's a Bold, Populist, Popular, and Progressive Domestic Agenda for 2025 and Beyond." *The Nation*, April 29, 2024.

<https://www.thenation.com/article/politics/democrats-progressives-election-congress/>.

⁵⁵ Cooper, Jonathan J. 2025. "Bernie Sanders and AOC Are Popular with Democrats. Here's a Timeline of Their Alliance." *AP News*. May 17, 2025.

<https://apnews.com/article/bernie-sanders-ocasio-cortez-democrats-alliance-aoc-35a0bf5255182cf19a61473abec1d336>.

⁵⁶ Amenta, Edwin, and Thomas Alan Elliott. 2019. "What Drives Progressive Policy? Institutional Politics, Political Mediation, Policy Feedbacks, and Early U.S. Old-Age Policy." *Sociological Forum* 34, no. 3 (2019): 553–71.

<https://www.jstor.org/stable/48558557>.

⁵⁷ Maureen A. Flanagan. 2016. "Progressives and Progressivism in an Era of Reform | Oxford Research Encyclopedia of American History," Oxford Academic. August 5, 2016.

<https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780199329175.013.84>.

and energy initiatives.⁵⁸ These policy areas serve as both places for experimentation and tools for building coalitions and maintaining political strength. The movement’s potential to grow nationally depends on how these local successes influence federal institutions, public opinion, issue framing, and structural barriers. Overall, these factors show where progressivism produces real results, where institutional obstacles limit its progress, and how policy design impacts its political sustainability.

Historical Background: A Recurring Reform Tradition

American progressivism is best understood as a recurring reform tradition that emerges during periods of perceived imbalance.⁵⁹ Typically, these instances occur when market shocks, governance failures, or periods of social change create demand for new rules that either correct market excesses, expand opportunity, or modernize public institutions. The Progressive Era introduced reforms such as direct primaries, initiatives, and referenda, expanded civil service, regulatory bodies, and consumer and workplace protections. Although not ideologically uniform, it crystallized a political repertoire focused on concrete harms, proposing institutional fixes beyond single elections, and building coalition-based, incremental enforcement.

Subsequent reform waves, especially the New Deal in the 1930s and the Great Society in the 1960s, demonstrated how a crisis can widen the aperture for policy innovation.⁶⁰ Simultaneously, it also illustrated how implementation, judicial review, and administrative capacity determine the lifespan of those innovations. For example, while the Social Security Act of 1935 established a durable federal safety net, its initial exclusion of agricultural and domestic workers due to political compromise revealed how the scope of policy innovation can be limited by practical implementation challenges and court decisions.⁶¹ Contemporary progressivism inherits both lessons. It attempts to connect visible economic stresses (income stagnation, housing scarcity, volatile healthcare costs, climate-related disruptions) to practical measures that voters can feel.⁶² At the same time, in today’s political environment, it operates within more polarized parties, a fragmented media environment, and a constitutional architecture that multiplies veto points. The result is a network in which subnational policy often moves fastest at

⁵⁸ Kamarck, Elaine Miranda. 2026. “A Patchwork Republic: Polarization and the Laboratories of Democracy.” Brookings. February 26, 2026.

<https://www.brookings.edu/articles/a-patchwork-republic-polarization-and-the-laboratories-of-democracy/>.

⁵⁹ Holzer, Harry J. 2020. “Is Another Progressive Era Coming? Thoughts on The Upswing by Putnam and Garrett.” Brookings Institution. November 10, 2020. <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/is-another-progressive-era-coming/>.

⁶⁰ Groot, Kristen de. 2020. “The Great Depression, the New Deal, and How Disasters Change Politics.” Penn Today. March 31, 2020. <https://penntoday.upenn.edu/news/great-depression-new-deal-and-how-disasters-change-politics>.

⁶¹ Rader, Katherine. 2023. “Delineating Agriculture and Industry: Reexamining the Exclusion of Agricultural Workers from the New Deal.” *Studies in American Political Development* 37, no. 2 (2023): 146–63. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0898588X23000020>.

⁶² Pancotti, Elizabeth, and Alex Jacquez. 2025. “Breathing Room for All: Tackling the Cost-of-Living Crisis with Progressive Policy Solutions.” Roosevelt Institute. April 29, 2025. <https://rooseveltinstitute.org/blog/breathing-room-for-all/>.

the local and state levels. Federal policy, even when ambitious, tends to be partial, layered, or time-limited, and governing credibility depends just as much on execution as on vision.

Local and State Arenas: Where Progressive Politics Is Most Visible

If the federal government is a gate with many locks, cities and states are the keys that turn more readily. At the local level, progressive coalitions have pursued tenant protections, minimum wage increases, and public health investments. These policies mirror local conditions such as budget capacity and housing demand. The degree of state preemption similarly shapes local approaches.⁶³

They share two attributes that make them politically instructive. First, they are tangible. Constituents can see paid sick leave accrual on a pay-slip, a new bus-only lane, or a right to counsel in eviction proceedings.⁶⁴ Second, they are iterative. Municipalities can pilot and adjust without waiting for the national level. Several states have increased minimum wages, expanded Medicaid, or implemented paid leave requirements.⁶⁵ Others have imposed limitations on noncompete agreements or legislated protections for specific occupational groups. In the housing domain, some states have undertaken efforts to address restrictive zoning ordinances; in the environmental arena, several have adopted clean electricity standards.⁶⁶ The capacity of states to control revenue streams and exercise preemption enables them to mobilize, facilitate, or constrain municipal progressivism.

Accordingly, policy strategy involves codifying local achievements at the state statutory level when interests align. This may look like resorting to ballot initiatives under preemption constraints and invoking litigation to safeguard municipal autonomy when necessary. Subnational governance does not offer a universal solution. Local budgets frequently rely on regressive revenue sources, state politics are susceptible to national trends, and ballot initiatives may be reversed or narrowed over time. Nevertheless, the rapid pace of subnational policy change and the political experience it provides to organizers, administrators, and elected officials have made these arenas the most reliable proof of concept for the progressive movement.⁶⁷

⁶³ Gerken, Heather K., and Joshua Revesz. 2017. "Progressive Federalism: A User's Guide." *Democracy Journal*, 2017. <https://democracyjournal.org/magazine/44/progressive-federalism-a-users-guide/>.

⁶⁴ Kriner, Michael, and Christopher Way. 2025. "The Adoption of Paid Sick Leave in US States." *State Politics & Policy Quarterly* 25, no. 2 (2025): 190–211. <https://doi.org/10.1017/spq.2024.33>.

⁶⁵ Lieb, David A. 2025. "Missouri Court Upholds Voter Approval of Minimum Wage and Paid Sick Leave Initiative." *AP News*. April 29, 2025. <https://apnews.com/article/minimum-wage-paid-sick-leave-missouri-a46a003b64c5667bc148b8fdceb46091>.

⁶⁶ Flint, Anthony. 2022. "A State-by-State Guide to Zoning Reform." *Lincoln Institute of Land Policy*. December 23, 2022. <https://www.lincolnst.edu/publications/articles/2022-12-state-by-state-guide-to-zoning-reform>.

⁶⁷ Weissert, Will, and Sara Burnett. 2023. "Progressives Focus on Local-Level Wins to Reshape Democratic Party from the Bottom Up." *PBS NewsHour / Associated Press*. April 17, 2023. <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/world/progressives-focus-on-local-level-wins-to-reshape-democratic-party-from-the-bottom-up>.

Progressivism at the Federal Level: Agenda Influence Without Dominance

At the national level, progressive influence most notably manifests in agenda-setting, problem definition, and the elevation of issue salience, rather than through systematic legislative dominance. For instance, the advocacy for Medicare for All significantly shaped healthcare discourse; nevertheless, the federal legislation ultimately enacted was considerably narrow. The Congressional Progressive Caucus in the House of Representatives advances initiatives related to drug pricing, voting rights, labor protections, and climate change policy.⁶⁸

When aligned with the executive branch, some of these aims become statutory change or administrative action. When they do not, the national debate still orbits around progressive framings: "Who pays?" "Who benefits?" "How do we measure fairness?" The federal context forces tradeoffs. Coalition maintenance, Senate procedures, and the need to attract pivotal moderate or regionally distinct Democratic votes usually compress the ambition of proposals. Given the enduring nature of federal policy once enacted, progressives often pursue provisions that can be expanded incrementally. For instance, limited drug price negotiation authority or pilot federal leave programs, such as the Affordable Care Act's (ACA) state-based Medicaid expansion provision, may be broadened over time. The ACA's Medicaid expansion initially began as a limited program in some states, then grew as more states opted in, offering a clear example of incremental federal program growth.^{69,70} The central question is whether early policy victories can be structured so that stakeholders are incentivized to defend and expand them. Programs that are visible, easily accessible, and associated with widely valued benefits are more likely to be sustained than those that are opaque or complex.⁷¹

Public Opinion and Issue Framing

A defining feature of contemporary progressivism is its emphasis on concrete policy delivery over abstract ideological branching. Research and polling show that support for policies like paid family leave or increased minimum wages remains higher than for abstract ideological

⁶⁸ Kapur, Sahil. 2024. "House Progressives Release an Agenda for 2025, with Ideas for Biden to Excite the Base." NBC News. April 18, 2024. <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/congress/house-progressives-release-agenda-2025-ideas-biden-excite-base-rcna147843>.

⁶⁹ Ollstein, Alice Miranda, and Robert King. 2023. "Why an Expanded Obamacare Is Even Harder to Repeal Today" Politico. December 2, 2023. <https://www.politico.com/news/2023/12/02/obamacare-expansion-repeal-00129705>.

⁷⁰ Galewitz, Phil. 2024. "Amid Medicaid 'Unwinding,' Many States Wind Up Expanding." KFF Health News. September 24, 2024. <https://kffhealthnews.org/news/article/medicaid-unwinding-state-expansions/>.

⁷¹ Béland, Daniel, Andrea Louise Campbell, and R. Kent Weaver. 2022. "Policy Feedback: How Policies Shape Politics." Cambridge Core. June 6, 2022. <https://www.cambridge.org/core/books/policy-feedback/3231877106C458D0CF766173080B0409>.

labels or platforms.⁷² “Paid sick leave for every worker,” “legalize apartments near transit,” or “cut energy bills with efficient homes” are more durable frames than appeals to “structural revolution.” While the public may split along ideological lines, discrete policy measures that lower household risk, such as predictable pay, stable rent, decreased utility bills, and reliable transit, often enjoy broader support, regardless of political affiliation.

Framing also matters for coalition breadth. For housing, a “both-and” message, build more homes *and* defend tenants, keeps YIMBY groups and tenant unions at the same table, while excluding one side narrows support.⁷³ For labor, pairing wage floors with small business compliance support and grant funding for worker training reduces employer opposition and makes standards feel practical rather than punitive. For climate and energy, leading with health and savings (lower asthma rates, lower bills) rather than carbon metrics invites participation from households that may not favor environmental identity.⁷⁴

Messenger diversity increases legitimacy. Labor leaders can explain contracting standards. Builders can explain permitting reforms. Tenants and seniors can explain housing stability. Nurses can explain paid leave. Local contractors can explain how climate work can become a career. The more voters see their neighbors as beneficiaries and implementers, not distant experts or politically divided, the less ideological the issue feels. This way, the community is more connected, less polarized.

Conditions Crafting Future Growth

Although high housing costs, medical debt exposure, and income volatility vary across regions, these challenges are widely experienced. When affordability pressures intensify, voters are more likely to support policy experimentation that provides direct relief. Conversely, during periods of strong real wage growth and low unemployment, the demand for large-scale restructuring may diminish. The future trajectory of progressivism depends not on adverse conditions, but on the credible delivery of effective programs in any macroeconomic environment. Programs must function effectively during both favorable and unfavorable conditions, providing stability and support to households. Durable influence requires robust institutions at the local and state levels, including offices of labor standards, housing departments capable of efficient permitting and enforcement, and climate offices equipped to manage

⁷² Glass, Aurelia, and David Madland. 2025. “Working-Class and College-Educated Voters Want New Progressive Economic Policies.” Center for American Progress Action. June 3, 2025. <https://www.americanprogressaction.org/article/working-class-and-college-educated-voters-want-new-progressive-economic-policies/>.

⁷³ Reid, Carolina, Zack Subin, and Jon McCall. 2024. “Housing + Climate Policy: Building Equitable Pathways to Sustainability and Affordability.” Terner Center. March 6, 2024. <https://ternercenter.berkeley.edu/research-and-policy/climate-housing-overview/>.

⁷⁴ Dias, Ana, and Sandrina Antunes. 2024. “The Climate Regime after Paris: An Opportunity for Regional Leadership beyond the State?” *Nature*. February 13, 2024. <https://www.nature.com/articles/s44168-023-00092-z>.

complex procurements and grid upgrades.⁷⁵ Additionally, building a pipeline of trained staff and future leaders is essential. The movement's growth will depend on its capacity to retain talent, measure outcomes, and make transparent course corrections.

Polarization is a defining characteristic of contemporary American political culture. However, not all policy issues are subject to polarization. The progressive advantage stems from the flexibility inherent in federalism: when national action is stalled, states and cities can advance, experiment, and demonstrate new approaches. When opportunities arise at the national level, these subnational models offer ready-made policy designs and experienced implementers. An example can be seen in Massachusetts' 2006 health care reform, which served as the policy and administrative model for the Affordable Care Act.⁷⁶ Strategically, the United States should be viewed as a portfolio of policy experiments rather than as a single referendum on ideology.

Conclusion

Progressive politics today is less a singular ideology than a problem-solving posture, in which pragmatic attention is given to concrete social and economic problems, institutional feasibility, and policy feedback rather than doctrinal purity. Progressive policies have become institutionally visible through state and local policy initiatives, administrative reforms, and governing offices across the American federal system. Subnational governance continues to serve as the primary testing ground for progressive policy, offering the greatest opportunities for innovation and demonstration. Its most sustained advances are in local and state arenas. Here, tangible programs in labor, housing, and climate have provided evidence that public action can improve daily life. These efforts range from raising wage floors and labor standards to accommodate small employers, to legalizing a wider mix of homes while protecting tenants, to cutting power bills through clean-energy investments. At the federal level, progressives have been most effective as agenda-setters and institutional innovators, designing new policy structures and administrative pathways, and using footholds to expand programs over time rather than insisting on all-or-nothing victories.

The movement's trajectory depends on execution, institutionalization, and the breadth of the coalition. Durable governing power requires policies that deliver visible benefits, institutions that can withstand electoral turnover and change, and coalitions capable of linking diverse communities together. If the next decade produces visibly healthier air, more stable household budgets, and more attainable housing, delivered through competent public institutions, progressivism's contemporary presence could shift from influence to durable governance. If,

⁷⁵ Sewerin, Sebastian, Daniel Béland, and Benjamin Cashore. 2020. "Designing Policy for the Long Term: Agency, Policy Feedback and Policy Change." SpringerLink. May 26, 2020. <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11077-020-09391-2>.

⁷⁶ Zinner, Michael J., and Edward H. Livingston. 2012. "The Massachusetts Health Care Reform Experiment: A Success." JAMA Network. October 31, 2012. <https://jamanetwork.com/channels/health-forum/fullarticle/2760316>.

instead, programs remain hard to access, slow to deliver, or unclear in their benefits, the movement will continue to set the agenda but struggle to turn salience into long-term power.

Regardless of national developments, the primary locus for progressive policy innovation and leadership development remains at the subnational level. It is within these arenas that voters will assess, through direct experience rather than opinion surveys, whether progressive policies fulfill their promises regarding wages, housing costs, and utility expenses. Consequently, the most significant political contests in the coming years will occur not in national media but in the routine and consequential processes of budgeting, permitting, inspections, contracting, and project management. If progressivism demonstrates competence and effectiveness in these domains, policy outcomes will tell of its ultimate value.

The Myth of Meritocracy: The Implications of Colorblind Admissions Following *Students for Fair Admissions, Inc. v. President and Fellows of Harvard College*

Ava Cunningham

Introduction

On May 17, 1954, the United States Supreme Court rendered a unanimous decision in the case of *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*. They ruled that the “separate but equal” doctrine that had been previously implemented in the country’s education systems per the precedent set in *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) was inherently unequal. In his majority opinion, Chief Justice Earl Warren expressed the importance of fair access to education, writing “It is doubtful that any child may reasonably be expected to succeed in life if he is denied the opportunity of an education.”⁷⁷ In the decades that would follow, a slew of cases would come before the court in which the justices would continue to reaffirm the importance of prioritizing diversity in schools and ensuring equal opportunities to access a quality education.

Yet, two years shy of the 70th anniversary of the landmark Brown decision, the Supreme Court heard the case of *Students for Fair Admissions, Inc. v. President and Fellows of Harvard College*. It was in this new opinion that the first regression of racial equality in education occurred. The Court held that affirmative action policies used in the college admissions process are unconstitutional, and prohibited the consideration of race in the admittance process.⁷⁸ In the four years since this case, the modern day education system has been altered, with admission being granted on merit alone. While some consideration is given to an applicant’s experiences through personal statements, the primary factors for admission are meritocratic measures like standardized testing scores and GPA. At surface level, the idea of meritocracy may seem fair. But this Supreme Court case necessitates a look at the bigger picture. Without affirmative action policies that level the playing field, is the United States doomed to inevitably revert back to a time of the pre-*Brown* education system? One in which higher education institutions are largely segregated because of a lack of consideration for the systemic inequalities that provide substantial obstacles to equal education access for largely minority communities?

Guiding cases for the *SFFA v. Harvard* decision

In 1978, the case of *Regents of the University of California v. Bakke* came before the court. Mr. Bakke was a thirty-five year old white man who had been denied admission two consecutive years to the University of California Medical School despite having the necessary qualifications. Upon his second rejection from the university, Mr. Bakke sued the medical school, believing that the school’s affirmative action program, which reserved sixteen seats in the

⁷⁷ *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*, 347 U.S. 483 (1954).

⁷⁸ *Students for Fair Admissions, Inc. v. President and Fellows of Harvard College*, 600 U.S. 181 (2023).

one hundred student class for “qualified” minorities, to be the reason for his rejection. The Supreme Court was tasked with determining if the school’s admittance policy was in violation of the Fourteenth Amendment’s Equal Protection Clause and the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Ultimately, the Court ruled that the affirmative action policy was not unconstitutional,⁷⁹ providing legitimacy to affirmative action policies for the first time. Despite this holding, there was far from a clear consensus on the Court. Notably, Justice Powell, on the majority, advocated for the use of a ‘compelling governmental interest’ standard to justify the use of race in the admissions process. This standard states that the use of race must “further compelling governmental interests”⁸⁰ and the use of race must be “narrowly tailored” and “necessary” to achieve that compelling interest. In the case of *Bakke*, Justice Powell found that the “educational benefits that flow from a racially diverse student body” met that standard. He writes, “[the] nation’s future depends upon leaders trained through wide exposure to the ideas and mores of students as diverse as this nation.” However, it was not until a later case that his compelling interest standard was adopted in a full court majority opinion.

In 2003, twenty five years later, another major affirmative action case came before the Supreme Court, the case of *Grutter v. Bollinger*. In 1997, Barbara Grutter, a white Michigan resident, was rejected from the University of Michigan Law School. The law school, like the University of California, had an admissions policy that used race as a factor of consideration with the goal of achieving a diverse student body.⁸¹ The Supreme Court would affirm the constitutionality of the law school’s policy. This time, the Court justified their opinion by using the ‘compelling interest’ standard that Justice Powell had advocated for in the earlier *Bakke* case. *Grutter* became the first opinion to legitimate “the educational benefits that flow from a diverse student body” as a compelling governmental interest that satisfies the requirements of the standard’s test.⁸² Together, the landmark *Grutter* and *Bakke* opinions laid the foundation for universities across the nation to curate admissions processes present for the next two decades.

An Analysis of *Students for Fair Admissions v. President and Fellows of Harvard College*

The case of *SFFA v. Harvard* was argued before the Supreme Court in October 2022. In this case, Students for Fair Admissions, Inc. brought two separate suits against both the University of North Carolina and Harvard alleging that their affirmative action admissions policies were in violation of the Fourteenth Amendment and Civil Rights Act. Contrary to the earlier precedents of *Bakke* and *Grutter*, the majority opinion of the Court held that the use of affirmative action policies were unconstitutional and failed to pass strict scrutiny. The Court criticized Harvard’s admission policy as “lack[ing] sufficiently focused and measurable objectives warranting the use of race,” therefore failing to narrowly tailor its policy to its

⁷⁹ *Regents of the University of California v. Bakke*, 438 U.S. 265 (1978).

⁸⁰ *Grutter v. Bollinger*, 539 U.S. 306 (2003).

⁸¹ *Grutter v. Bollinger*, 539 U.S. 306 (2003).

⁸² *Grutter v. Bollinger*, 539 U.S. 306 (2003).

compelling interest. Another concern of the majority was the potential of affirmative action policies to minimize the individuality of applicants in regards to their experience with race. The Court found the creation of an “illegitimate stereotyp[ing]” that assumes students of the same race claim the same perspectives and experiences because of their shared race.⁸³ In addition, the Court believed these policies had the affinity for reverse racism, effectively discriminating against students of “racial groups that were not the beneficiaries of the race-based preference...unduly harm[ing] nonminority applicants.”⁸⁴

The Court thoroughly analyzed this case in the context of the *Bakke* and *Grutter* precedents. Despite the historic prominence of Justice Powell’s concurring opinion in *Bakke*, the *Bakke* majority had found that the only permitted use of race in admissions to be for the purpose of “remedying the effects of past societal discrimination.” The majority wrote of a clear understanding that the Constitution “required a colorblind standard on the part of government.” With the lack of clear consensus in the *Bakke* majority opinions, the Roberts Court found little precedential value in the *Bakke* holding and overturned the case.

In the case of *Grutter*, the majority had hoped to see the end of racial preferences being used in higher education institutions within twenty five years. Yet Justice Roberts writes for the *SFFA* majority, “Twenty years later, no end is in sight.” The flaw identified by the court in the college admissions processes of Harvard and UNC was the absence of a definitive date when racial equality would be fully achieved, making affirmative action policies unnecessary altogether. Because the universities failed to do so, Justice Roberts and the majority deemed their affirmative action policies to be too broad in scope to withstand strict scrutiny. This court opinion, however, minimizes the cause of why these policies are necessary in the first place. They are not only intended to “remedy the effects of past societal discrimination,”⁸⁵ but to address ongoing societal discrimination. Roberts’ opinion ignores the systemic disparities that necessitate the creation of an even playing field through affirmative action policies. He instead calls the goals of the two institutions – a robust exchange of ideas, an improved educational experience through diversity, and the fostering of productive student leaders through mutual respect and “cross-racial understanding” – to be of an “elusive nature.”⁸⁶ He writes that, “Courts may not license separating students on the basis of race without an exceedingly persuasive justification that is measurable and concrete enough to permit judicial review...The programs at issue here do not satisfy that standard.”⁸⁷ While he views race distinctions in college admissions processes to lack persuasive justification, the separation of applicants by his preferred objective measures of GPA, standardized test scores, and extracurricular activities, rests on the assumption that all racial groups have equal access to resources that would transfer to success in those

⁸³ *Students for Fair Admissions*, 600 U.S. 181.

⁸⁴ *Students for Fair Admissions*, 600 U.S. 181.

⁸⁵ *Regents of the University of California v. Bakke*, 438 U.S. 265 (1978).

⁸⁶ *Students for Fair Admissions*, 600 U.S. 181.

⁸⁷ *Students for Fair Admissions*, 600 U.S. 181.

measures. Roberts writes, “One of the principal reasons race is treated as a forbidden classification is that it demeans the dignity and worth of a person to be judged by ancestry instead of by his or her own merit and essential qualities.”⁸⁸ But can one truly be judged based on his own merits if certain classifications of people are routinely denied quality education, educational resources, and the ability to excel in academic settings and showcase their ‘essential qualities?’

The concurring opinion of Justice Thomas also makes a compelling point. He argues that affirmative action policies may not be the most effective means to achieve the form of racial equality that the universities purport to enact through their use. Furthermore, he writes that these policies will have inherent harms for some individuals, saying, “It should be obvious that every racial classification helps, in a narrow sense, some races, and hurts others.” This is a moot point. The history of university admissions has demonstrated that without these policies, primarily white applicants gain admittance over others. In fact, one study found that after a ban on affirmative action policies took place in the late 1990s in California, the University of California Berkeley saw a drop from 6.32% of Black students admitted, to 3.37% two years later. Similarly, the number of Hispanic students dropped from 15% to 7% in the same time period.⁸⁹ There is a curious dichotomy in his originalist opinion. He has historically opposed any affirmative action policies at bar⁹⁰ and continues to do so in the *SFFA* opinion, writing, “Under our Constitution, race is irrelevant, as the Court acknowledges.” Yet Justice Thomas himself was a benefactor of early affirmative action policies.⁹¹ He does acknowledge that “...our society is not, and has never been, colorblind”,⁹² but nevertheless suggests that the prohibition of affirmative action policies is a viable remedy towards creating a more equal society. The goal of equal opportunity that underlies these admissions policies is the lost perspective in the *SFFA* majority opinion. Justice Sotomayor explains, “It made clear that indifference to race “is not an end in itself” under [Brown]. The ultimate goal is racial equality of opportunity.”⁹³

The Myth of Meritocracy in College Admissions

There is a widely held belief when it comes to the college admissions process – that success should be determined solely based on an individual’s own merits. It is closely tied to ideas of the American Dream, that with enough hard work, anyone can achieve upward social mobility. This idea minimizes the underlying factors that contribute to someone’s success: family

⁸⁸ *Students for Fair Admissions*, 600 U.S. at 29.

⁸⁹ Fernanda Arana Dupont, “‘Fair Admissions?’: The Impact of the Supreme Court of the United States Overturn of Affirmative Action in College and University Admissions,” *Tulips: The Gender, Sexuality, and Women’s Studies Undergraduate Journal*, April 17, 2024, <https://ojs.lib.uwo.ca/index.php/tulips/article/view/18540>.

⁹⁰ Julia Ingram, “Clarence Thomas’ Long Battle Against Affirmative Action,” PBS Frontline, May 9, 2023, updated June 29, 2023, <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/article/clarence-thomas-long-battle-against-affirmative-action/>

⁹¹ Ingram, “Clarence Thomas’ Long Battle Against Affirmative Action.”

⁹² *Students for Fair Admissions*, 600 U.S. 181 at 49 (Thomas, J., concurring).

⁹³ *Students for Fair Admissions*, 600 U.S. at 13 (Sotomayor, J., dissenting).

status, inherited wealth, and various systemic advantages. The myth of meritocracy masks the uneven playing field that is the reality in America. There are tangible disparities between minority and nonminority upbringings that can impact the perceived “merits” of an individual in the college admissions process including “less qualified teachers, less challenging curricula, lower standardized test scores, fewer extracurricular activities and advanced placement courses.”⁹⁴ In 2015, 44% of white eighth grade students in American schools scored at or above a proficient level in reading.⁹⁵ Comparatively, only 14% of Black students and 15% of Hispanic students achieved an at or above proficient score. In 2012, 41.1% of white *13-year olds* were able to adequately perform reasoning and problem solving compared with 33.8% of Black and 43.4% of Hispanic *17-year old* students.⁹⁶ The incredible disparity between younger white and older minority students is largely due to a history of redlining practices, in which students from minority communities are funneled into largely-minority schools that typically receive less government funding and resources.⁹⁷ As of 2018, school districts composed of largely Black and Hispanic students received approximately 16% less funding than primarily white schools.⁹⁸ Without appropriate resources and learning materials, the schools in minority communities lack the quality of academic rigor white schools receive. Nearly 50% of Black children in the United States attend schools ranked “below the 30th percentile in achievement” compared with only 15% of white students attending schools below the 30th percentile,⁹⁹ and there are notable gaps in standardized test scores between white and minority students.¹⁰⁰ Outside the school walls, systemic inequalities exist that often bar minorities from closing the resource gap themselves. Studies have shown that Black people are often found to have higher levels of debt and lower salaries, as well as an overrepresentation in the criminal justice system. They also live in poorer neighborhoods in comparison to their white counterparts.¹⁰¹ Research has shown that there is not a single major social institution in the United States that is not in some way impacted by the structural racism embedded in the fabric of our nation.¹⁰²

Conversely, Asian Americans stand apart from other minority groups, with many receiving national merit scholarships, possessing higher standardized testing scores and being

⁹⁴ *Students for Fair Admissions*, 600 U.S. at 19 (Sotomayor, J., dissenting).

⁹⁵ David M. Merolla and Omari Jackson, “Structural Racism as the Fundamental Cause of the Academic Achievement Gap,” *Sociology Compass* 13, no. 6 (2019): 3, <https://doi.org/10.1111/soc4.12696>.

⁹⁶ Merolla and Jackson, “Structural Racism,” 3.

⁹⁷ Lindsey M. Burke and Jude Schwalbach, *Housing Redlining and Its Lingering Effects on Education Opportunity*, Backgrounder No. 3594 (Washington, DC: The Heritage Foundation, March 11, 2021), <https://www.heritage.org/education/report/housing-redlining-and-its-lingering-effects-education-opportunity>.

⁹⁸ Emily Rauscher and Jeremy E. Fiel, “Slow Progress: School Finance Reforms and Racial Disparities in Funding,” *Sociology of Education* 94, no. 1 (2021): 1.

⁹⁹ Merolla and Jackson, “Structural Racism,” 6.

¹⁰⁰ Sigal Alon and Marta Tienda, “Diversity, Opportunity, and the Shifting Meritocracy in Higher Education,” *American Sociological Review* 72, no. 4 (2007): 504, <https://doi.org/10.1177/000312240707200402>.

¹⁰¹ Dupont, “Fair Admissions?,” 14.

¹⁰² Merolla and Jackson, “Structural Racism,” 2.

generally more competitive in college admissions.¹⁰³ About 50% of the top SAT scores sent to selective institutions are from Asian students, who outperform white students by an average of 140 points.¹⁰⁴ However, despite the elevated performance of Asian American applicants in various measures of merit-based admissions, they actually show the lowest acceptance rates of all racial groups.¹⁰⁵ The case of *SFFA* was brought forth on behalf of Asian American students who were believed to be experiencing discrimination in the Harvard admissions process.¹⁰⁶ SFFA believed that if affirmative action programs were disallowed, admissions rates of Asian Americans would increase.¹⁰⁷ Since the Supreme Court ruled in their favor, there has been no change in the percentage of Asian American students admitted to Harvard.¹⁰⁸ Data has shown that there has actually been a decrease in admitted Asian American students at other selective universities including Princeton, Yale, Dartmouth, Duke, and UVA.¹⁰⁹ Some universities have seen increases but ultimately data suggests that ending affirmative action programs has not had any meaningful impact on improving admission outcomes for Asian American students.¹¹⁰

The Implications of a Shift to Merit-Based College Admissions

As Justice Sotomayor’s dissent notes, historically, after bans of affirmative action policies, the most selective colleges in the country have seen up to 50% drops in the number of racialized individuals admitted.¹¹¹ Nine states have already terminated their affirmative action admissions processes¹¹² and early efforts for the achievement of a more diverse student body at American universities will be disrupted by this decision. Though at the most foundational level, the abandonment of consideration for racial classifications in the admissions process will only lead to a perpetuation of racial hierarchies as white students continue to obtain the educational requirements needed for higher paying jobs.¹¹³ Educational disparities privilege those who already have access to greater resources and deny those who don’t. The harm to the American nation will be evident too: admitting students to colleges based on flawed meritocratic measures will only cast aside the potential of American citizens with productive talents and abilities simply because of the color of their skin. The new precedent set by the *SFFA* majority risks returning the country to times of segregated education systems. In the words of Justice Sotomayor,

¹⁰³ “The Harvard Plan that Failed Asian Americans,” *Harvard Law Review*, December, 2017, <https://harvardlawreview.org/blog/2018/10/the-harvard-plan-that-failed-asian-americans/>.

¹⁰⁴ Ron Unz, “The Myth of American Meritocracy: How Corrupt Are Ivy League Admissions?,” *The American Conservative*, November 28, 2012, <https://theamericanconservative.com/articles/the-myth-of-american-meritocracy/>.

¹⁰⁵ “The Harvard Plan that Failed Asian Americans,” *Harvard Law Review*.

¹⁰⁶ *Students for Fair Admissions*, 600 U.S. 181.

¹⁰⁷ Jerry Kang, “Asians Used, Asians Lose: Strict Scrutiny from Internment to SFFA,” *California Law Review* 113 (June 2025), <https://www.californialawreview.org/print/asians-strict-scrutiny>

¹⁰⁸ Kang, “Asians Used, Asians Lose.”

¹⁰⁹ Kang, “Asians Used, Asians Lose.”

¹¹⁰ Kang, “Asians Used, Asians Lose.”

¹¹¹ *Students for Fair Admissions*, 600 U.S. 181.

¹¹² Dupont, ““Fair Admissions?””, 12.

¹¹³ Dupont, ““Fair Admissions?””, 13.

“Entrenched racial inequality remains a reality today ... Ignoring race will not equalize a society that is racially unequal”.¹¹⁴

¹¹⁴ *Students for Fair Admissions*, 600 U.S. at 17 (Sotomayor, J., dissenting).

PAC-Man Politics: Corporate Consumption in U.S. Elections

Madelyn Engstrom

Introduction

On February 16, 2026, James Talarico, the Democratic U.S. Senate nominee for Texas, sat down with Stephen Colbert on *The Late Show* and declared that his campaign has not taken a dime from corporate PACs.¹¹⁵ This breakthrough interview challenged the influence of corporate money in campaign funding and raised Talarico's campaign to national significance just weeks before the Texas primary. On March 3, 2026, the "rising star" and current state representative subsequently defeated Rep. Jasmine Crockett for the Democratic nomination.¹¹⁶ This denouncement of corporate PAC money follows Talarico's campaign commitment, with his team reporting that 0% of their funding has come from corporate PACs and 98% has been in small donations of \$100 or less.¹¹⁷ His firm stance for grassroots fundraising and his "people-powered movement" reflects his mission to reform political accountability and fight corruption.

This interview not only propelled Talarico's campaign to the forefront in an aggressive midterm season, but it also raised a question about the current state of American democracy: how has the rise of super PACs shifted political power away from individual voters and towards corporate interests?

Background

Talarico is not the first to make this grassroots promise. His predecessors in the movement against corporate influences in federal elections include many prominent Democrats and progressives like Bernie Sanders,¹¹⁸ Cory Booker,¹¹⁹ and Elizabeth Warren,¹²⁰ all of whom vowed not to take funding from corporate PACs. Talarico's campaign stands in particularly stark contrast to the political landscape in 2026, increasingly controlled by wealthy outside influences rather than ordinary voters.

¹¹⁵ *The Late Show with Stephen Colbert*. 2026. "Rep. James Talarico on Confronting Christian Nationalism, and Strange Days in the Texas Legislature." YouTube. February 16, 2026.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oiTJ7Pz_59A.

¹¹⁶ Mueller, Julia. 2026. "Talarico Beats Crockett in Texas Democratic Senate Primary." *The Hill*. March 4, 2026. <https://thehill.com/homenews/senate/5757060-talarico-wins-texas-democratic-senate-primary/>.

¹¹⁷ Vakil, Caroline. 2026. "Talarico Brings in Nearly \$7M with Latest Haul for Texas Senate Race." *The Hill*. January 2, 2026. <https://thehill.com/homenews/campaign/5669726-talarico-crockett-senate-race/>.

¹¹⁸ "The Rise of the Anti-PAC Democrat." *PBS News*, 5 Apr. 2018, <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/politics/the-rise-of-the-anti-pac-democrat>.

¹¹⁹ "The Rise of the Anti-PAC Democrat." *PBS News*, 5 Apr. 2018.

¹²⁰ *Getting Big Money Out of Politics* | Elizabeth Warren.

<https://elizabethwarren.com/plans/campaign-finance-reform>.

These financial influences can come from corporate PACs and superPACs, both of which stem from political action committees (PACs), a kind of organization created to raise and spend funds to support or defeat candidates, typically representing businesses, labor organizations, or ideological causes.¹²¹ PACs are traditionally nonconnected, meaning they are not affiliated with a specific party, authorized group of a specific candidate, or funded by a corporation or labor organization.¹²² Per restrictions by the Federal Election Commission (FEC), these committees operate under financial restrictions and limit spending at \$5000 per candidate per election.⁶

Traditional PACs differ from superPACs, also referred to as independent expenditure only political committees.¹²³ While traditional PACs have many limits, superPACs are allowed to receive unlimited resources from many groups, including individuals, corporations, and PACs to finance their independent spending and other independent political activity. The only caveat is that the independent expenditures must be made without coordination.¹²⁴ This limitless corporate influence in superPACs comes from decades of national discussions and rulings around democratic free speech.

The Legal Framework for the Development of SuperPACs

In 1971, the Federal Election Campaign Act (FECA) was enacted, promoting fair conduct in federal campaigns¹²⁵ by mandating that funds—anything of value given to influence the campaign—must be explicit and accurately recorded.¹²⁶ Later amended in 1974, FECA then established the FEC as an independent agency to enforce the contribution limits in the era of post-Watergate clarity; Congress monitored political transparency with vigilance, leading to national discussions of campaign limitations as discussed in the landmark case *Buckley v. Valeo* (1976). Senator James Buckley took issue with amended donor spending caps, stating that to limit the amount a person can donate to a candidate is an infringement of free speech.¹²⁷ As a result, the Supreme Court ruled that the FEC can restrict individual contribution to campaigns and candidates, but they cannot restrict a candidate's expenditures.¹²⁸ This means that a candidate and outside groups may spend an unlimited amount of resources as long as they are not coordinated with the campaign itself.

¹²¹ “Trackable, Traceable, Transparent: Explaining PACs and Campaign Finance - Center Forward.” 2023. Center Forward. September 19, 2023.

<https://center-forward.org/basic/trackable-traceable-transparent-explaining-pacs-and-campaign-finance/>.

¹²² “Understanding Nonconnected PACs.” n.d. FEC.gov.

<https://www.fec.gov/help-candidates-and-committees/registering-pac/understanding-nonconnected-pacs/>.

¹²³ Federal Election Commission. n.d. “Political Action Committees (PACs).” FEC.gov.

<https://www.fec.gov/press/resources-journalists/political-action-committees-pacs/>.

¹²⁴ “PACs and Super PACs in Federal Election Campaigns: Legal Framework.” 2025. Congress.gov. 2025.

<https://www.congress.gov/crs-product/IF12691>.

¹²⁵ Nixon, Richard. 1972. “Begun and Held at the City of Washington on Tuesday.”

<https://www.congress.gov/92/statute/STATUTE-86/STATUTE-86-Pg3.pdf>.

¹²⁶ “The Rise of the Anti-PAC Democrat.” PBS News, 5 Apr. 2018.

¹²⁷ Oyez. 2020. “Buckley v. Valeo.” Oyez. 2020. <https://www.oyez.org/cases/1975/75-436>.

¹²⁸ Oyez. 2020. “Buckley v. Valeo.” Oyez. 2020.

In 2010, *Citizens United v. FEC* delivered a ruling that not only upheld the decision in *Buckley v. Valeo* but further empowered outside groups and corporations to spend unlimited resources on campaigns,¹²⁹ paving a path for corporate PACs and superPACs. Citizens United, a conservative nonprofit corporation, challenged FECA in 2007 on its prohibitions of corporations using funds to explicitly advocate or publicly distribute broadcast communication directly in opposition of a candidate, known as electioneering communications.¹³⁰ The court ruled in a 5-4 decision to uphold the precedent set in *Buckley*, delivering a majority opinion stating that “the government may not suppress political speech based on the speaker’s corporate identity.”¹³¹ However, *Citizens United* pushed further, striking down previous limits on corporate independent expenditures —those that do not go directly to a candidate— and subsequently allowing for superPACs to operate with almost no restrictions¹³² The Court did not find that independent corporate spending posed a sufficient risk of corruption to uphold limitations.¹³³

In the years since *Citizens United*, superPACs now hold an outsized influence in federal elections, shifting who exactly holds power in American elections. Per the Supreme Court, these committees remain technically independent, but the lack of guardrails has allowed for candidate affiliation and legal loopholes to flourish – they keep funding high and transparency low.

Electoral Transformation in the Age of SuperPACs

With no limitations on donors in superPACs, corporate influence has permeated federal election campaigns. Candidates need campaign financing; it’s the only way to create outreach opportunities with voters.¹³⁴ With money in politics increasing each year, many candidates turn to superPACs for their fundraising.¹³⁵ However, superPACs cannot directly coordinate with a campaign, so loopholes have developed to align corporate donors without technically going against the FEC. One key loophole is red boxing, a tactic where a candidate posts public

¹²⁹ Lau, Tim, and Daniel Weiner. 2025. “Citizens United Explained.” Brennan Center for Justice. January 29, 2025. <https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/research-reports/citizens-united-explained>.

¹³⁰ “SUPREME COURT of the UNITED STATES Syllabus CITIZENS UNITED v. FEDERAL ELECTION COMMISSION APPEAL from the UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT for the DISTRICT of COLUMBIA.” 2009. https://www.fec.gov/resources/legal-resources/litigation/cu_sc08_opinion.pdf.

¹³¹ “SUPREME COURT of the UNITED STATES Syllabus CITIZENS UNITED v. FEDERAL ELECTION COMMISSION APPEAL from the UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT for the DISTRICT of COLUMBIA.” 2009.

¹³² “SUPREME COURT of the UNITED STATES Syllabus CITIZENS UNITED v. FEDERAL ELECTION COMMISSION APPEAL from the UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT for the DISTRICT of COLUMBIA.” 2009.

¹³³ “SUPREME COURT of the UNITED STATES Syllabus CITIZENS UNITED v. FEDERAL ELECTION COMMISSION APPEAL from the UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT for the DISTRICT of COLUMBIA.” 2009.

¹³⁴ Bustillo, Ximena. 2023. “It Takes Lots of Money to Win Elections. Here’s What You Need to Know.” NPR. November 1, 2023. <https://www.npr.org/2023/11/01/1205728664/campaign-finance-donations-election-fec-fundraising-ad-spending>.

¹³⁵ Bustillo, Ximena. 2023. “It Takes Lots of Money to Win Elections. Here’s What You Need to Know.” NPR.

messages to share campaign material with superPACs. It's disguised as voter information when it is actually content for super PACs to utilize to fund the campaign.¹³⁶

Another common loophole is super PAC fundraisers. The candidate that the group intends to fund is invited to appear as a guest, and as long as they ask donors for money after the candidate has left, it is perfectly legal.¹³⁷ When candidates are simply seen with the super PAC or a lead donor, they can inspire other donors to align themselves too.¹³⁸ This can be seen in Elon Musk's personal alignment with Donald Trump. In January, Musk and Trump had dinner together. Afterwards, Musk took to X and advocated for Trump's proposals like the SAVE Act.¹³⁹ This all followed his donation of \$10 million into Republican super PACs at the end of 2025. With \$5 million each to the Congressional Leadership Fund and the Senate Leadership Fund, Musk's oversized corporate power is key funding to control and keep the GOP's majority in Congress.¹⁴⁰

As the richest person in the world, Musk holds unwavering influence, especially in the tech industry.¹⁴¹ He started America PAC, a super PAC which gave \$75 million to Trump's reelection in 2024.¹⁴² Joined by prominent tech investors like Marc Andreessen and Ben Horowitz, the founders of Andreessen Horowitz, Musk's donations to Trump's campaign via America PAC reflect the outsized power that wealth and corporate donors hold.¹⁴³ Leading the Future, another AI-backed super PAC, is following Musk's movement by backing candidates who push for low regulation AI policies, including Chris Gober, a former Attorney for America PAC. Leading the future is also supported by Andreessen Horowitz as well as Greg Brockman, the co-founder of Open AI, and Joe Lonsdale, the co-founder of Palantir.¹⁴⁴ With the support of the richest, most powerful people in the tech and AI industry, candidates like Trump have shaped their policies to support their donors. In late March, Trump announced a White House science and technology panel with tech executives including Andreessen.¹⁴⁵ That is no coincidence; these

¹³⁶ "Why Super PACs Have More Power than Ever in Elections: Throughline." 2026. NPR. February 26, 2026. <https://www.npr.org/transcripts/nx-s1-5726302>.

¹³⁷ "Why Super PACs Have More Power than Ever in Elections: Throughline." 2026. NPR.

¹³⁸ "Why Super PACs Have More Power than Ever in Elections: Throughline." 2026. NPR.

¹³⁹ Piper, Jessica. 2026. "Elon Musk Pours Millions More into Helping Republicans Keep Congress." POLITICO. Politico. February 2026. <https://www.politico.com/news/2026/01/31/elon-musk-2026-election-donations-00758992>.

¹⁴⁰ Piper, Jessica. 2026. "Elon Musk Pours Millions More into Helping Republicans Keep Congress." POLITICO. Politico. February 2026.

¹⁴¹ "Real Time Billionaires." n.d. Forbes. <https://www.forbes.com/real-time-billionaires/>.

¹⁴² McDaniel, Eric. 2024. "Elon Musk Has given \$75 Million, so Far, to Put Donald Trump Back in the White House." NPR. October 16, 2024. <https://www.npr.org/2024/10/16/g-s1-28591/elon-musk-donald-trump-america-pac-fec>.

¹⁴³ "Billionaire Elon Musk Aims to Sway Voters in Key States." 2024. NPR. October 23, 2024.

<https://www.npr.org/2024/10/23/nx-s1-5161074/billionaire-elon-musk-aims-to-sway-voters-in-key-states>.

¹⁴⁴ Wilkins, Emily. 2026. "AI Industry Super PAC Raises \$125 Million in 2025." CNBC. January 30, 2026.

<https://www.cnbc.com/2026/01/30/ai-industry-super-pac-raises-campaign-money.html>.

¹⁴⁵ Bordelon, Brendan. 2026. "Jensen Huang and Mark Zuckerberg among Tech Leaders Appointed to White House Advisory Council." POLITICO. Politico. March 25, 2026.

AI-powered donors are just one example of how super PACs use wealth to control federal campaigns.

Conclusion

The 2026 midterms are “already shaping up to be the most costly in American history.”¹⁴⁶ Flourishing in the fight for funding, super PACS foster corporatized consumption and influence in federal elections; they do so through loopholes and deception.¹⁴⁷ By empowering ultra-wealthy donors and protecting the interests of the top one percent, these unlimited and unsupervised committees have bought control of election outcomes over the last two decades. It is this lack of transparency in American politics that made James Talarico’s pledge to not accept any corporate PAC money stand out. Talarico’s YouTube interview had 85 million views in 72 hours,¹⁴⁸ indicating that Americans are energized by candidates who stand against corporatization. As long as super PACs remain unregulated, the power of the individual voter will continue to decrease, drowned out by corporate donors who buy their influence.

<https://www.politico.com/news/2026/03/25/ellison-zuckerberg-among-tech-leaders-given-new-white-house-advisory-role-00843881>.

¹⁴⁶ “Why Super PACs Have More Power than Ever in Elections: Throughline.” 2026. NPR. February 26, 2026.

¹⁴⁷ “Why Super PACs Have More Power than Ever in Elections: Throughline.” 2026. NPR. February 26, 2026.

¹⁴⁸ Hayes, Dade. 2026. “After Colbert-CBS Rift, James Talarico Interview Draws 85M Views across YouTube & Social.” Deadline. February 19, 2026.

<https://deadline.com/2026/02/stephen-colbert-cbs-james-talarico-interview-views-youtube-social-1236729257/>.

Cambodia: How it Challenges Dominant Genocide Paradigms

Kayla (Kai) Febus

Introduction

Critical Genocide Studies observes genocide as not just isolated events of mass killings and ethnic hatred, but also as a historical, social, political, and structural process shaped by power, colonialism, ideology, state institutions, and international systems.¹⁴⁹ Critical Genocide Studies challenge traditional genocide approaches that mainly focus on who was killed and why. It also ask how genocide transpires, what structures enabled it, and how it connects to global systems of power.¹⁵⁰ Utilizing Cambodia as an example, it highlights challenges of narrow definitions of genocide by showing that it should not be solely demeaned to be only driven or limited to ethnic hatred or mass killings, interpreted as a process enacted by ideological radicalization, international political complicity, and normalized bureaucratic violence.¹⁵¹ The traditional definition of genocide states that it is the intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnic, racial, or religious group through infliction of serious harm, killing, or life destructive conditions (including torture, rape, and forced displacement).¹⁵²

Khmer Rouge Regime

The Khmer Rouge regime was a complex system dynamic that challenged general genocide definitions. The regime, a communist movement-turned party created and developed in France and brought to Cambodia, sought to create a classless, agrarian utopian society. This society eliminated urban life, capitalism, religion, and foreign influence by committing violence largely motivated by radical ideology and class-based targeting.¹⁵³ This was done through forced labor, bureaucratic institutions, and deliberate starvation and disease.¹⁵⁴ Most of the victims under the Khmer Rouge were ethnic Khmer, rather than a distinct ethnic minority,¹⁵⁵ further demonstrates that genocide can target political and social groups that are not necessarily of a

¹⁴⁹ Irvin-Erickson, Douglas. *Raphael Lemkin and the Concept of Genocide*. University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv2t4ds5>.

¹⁵⁰ Irvin-Erickson, Douglas. *Raphael Lemkin and the Concept of Genocide*. University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv2t4ds5>.

¹⁵¹ Sainati, Tatiana E. "TOWARD A COMPARATIVE APPROACH TO THE CRIME OF GENOCIDE." *Duke Law Journal* 62, no. 1 (2012): 161–202. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23268983>.

¹⁵² "Definitions of Genocide and Related Crimes." United Nations. Accessed April 5, 2026. <https://www.un.org/en/genocide-prevention/definition>.

¹⁵³ "Pol Pot - The Khmer Rouge and the Killing Fields Documentary." YouTube, October 8, 2021. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KMLz0eIihcY&t=1324s>.

¹⁵⁴ "Pol Pot - The Khmer Rouge and the Killing Fields Documentary." YouTube, October 8, 2021. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KMLz0eIihcY&t=1324s>.

¹⁵⁵ "'Smashing' Internal Enemies." United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. Accessed March 25, 2026. <https://www.ushmm.org/genocide-prevention/countries/cambodia/smashing-internal-enemies>.

different ethnicity or nationality, (as the genocide definition states).¹⁵⁶ Thus, the genocide case of Cambodia illustrates the role of international politics in legitimizing and enabling genocide, pushing researchers to view it as a global and structural process rather than a purely domestic outbreak of targeted hatred.¹⁵⁷

Genocide Beyond Ethnicity & Bureaucratic Process

The actions of the Khmer Rouge regime complicate the traditional definitions of genocide by demonstrating that victims of a genocide can be targeted due to a variety of factors, other than race or ethnicity.¹⁵⁸ While the regime targeted Muslim Cham, Chinese, and Vietnamese ethnicities; they also purged intellectuals, former officials, and educated Cambodians. These individuals placed them in constructed prisons.¹⁵⁹ The Khmer Rouge's internal purges, which killed even their own members, complicate traditional ideas of genocide. Carried out through a strict top-down hierarchy, these purges turned genocide into a systematic, bureaucratic process rather than random violence.¹⁶⁰

The S-21 Prison, otherwise now known as the Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum, was an institution that functioned as a highly organized interrogation, torture, and execution center where prisoners were cataloged via given identification numbers,¹⁶¹ and processed in a strict, self-targeting natured system via each prisoner getting photographed.¹⁶² Very few inmates of the prisons survived, as most were sent to execution sites like the Killing Fields or Choeung Ek.¹⁶³ All interrogations that occurred within the prison network (S-21, M-13, etc.) were documented via forced confessions on accusations that were real and/or fabricated, extracted often under extreme torture¹⁶⁴. These were all meticulously documented and kept, highlighting how the documentation and tracking within the prisons enabled justification of the mass killings that

¹⁵⁶ “‘Smashing’ Internal Enemies.” United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. Accessed March 25, 2026.

<https://www.ushmm.org/genocide-prevention/countries/cambodia/smashing-internal-enemies>.

¹⁵⁷ CLA Staff. “Cambodia.” College of Liberal Arts. Accessed April 10, 2026.

<https://cla.umn.edu/chgs/holocaust-genocide-education/resource-guides/cambodia#:~:text=The%20Cambodians%20kept%20methodical%20records,consensus%20being%20approximately%202%20million>.

¹⁵⁸ CLA Staff. “Cambodia.” College of Liberal Arts. Accessed April 10, 2026.

<https://cla.umn.edu/chgs/holocaust-genocide-education/resource-guides/cambodia#:~:text=The%20Cambodians%20kept%20methodical%20records,consensus%20being%20approximately%202%20million>.

¹⁵⁹ “S-21, Tuol Sleng.” United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. Accessed February 23, 2026.

<https://www.ushmm.org/genocide-prevention/countries/cambodia/s-21>.

¹⁶⁰ “‘Smashing’ Internal Enemies.” United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. Accessed March 25, 2026.

<https://www.ushmm.org/genocide-prevention/countries/cambodia/smashing-internal-enemies>.

¹⁶¹ Brewer, Kirstie. “How Two Men Survived a Prison Where 12,000 Were Killed.” BBC News, June 11, 2015.

<https://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-33096971>.

¹⁶² “S-21, Tuol Sleng.” United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. Accessed February 23, 2026.

<https://www.ushmm.org/genocide-prevention/countries/cambodia/s-21>.

¹⁶³ “S-21, Tuol Sleng.” United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. Accessed February 23, 2026.

<https://www.ushmm.org/genocide-prevention/countries/cambodia/s-21>.

¹⁶⁴ Heuveline, Patrick. “‘Between One and Three Million’: Towards the Demographic Reconstruction of a Decade of Cambodian History (1970-79).” *Population Studies* 52, no. 1 (1998): 49–65. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2584763>.

occurred.¹⁶⁵ The orders that completely went down from the Cambodian dictator Pol Pot to the local militias illustrated the reinforcement that all policies of violence given via the Khmer Rouge were consistently implemented throughout Cambodia. Such bureaucratic routines (documentation, transportation, execution) desensitized and normalized killings, justifying genocidal behavior.

Genocide as an Ideological Project

Genocide can be an ideological project when it is not driven just by spontaneous violence or hatred, but rather by a set of beliefs, visions, and goals for how the society should be organized and run.¹⁶⁶ Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge followed a radical Maoist-inspired ideology that was influenced by the Chinese Leader Mao Zedong,¹⁶⁷ aiming to reshape Cambodian society into a self-sufficient agricultural utopia. Intellectualism, industrialization, and urban life were rejected in favor of rural farming, as the regime believed that peasantry represented the “purest” class.¹⁶⁸ This ideology resulted in an attempt to create a “Year Zero” society, where the regime declared that all pre-1975 society was “corrupted” and had to be erased.¹⁶⁹ People lost their names, which were replaced with new peasant names or with numbers, families, where many were split away from their spouses and children, along with losing their jobs, religion, money, property, education - stripped completely of their identities and recreated with new ones that were deemed “uncorrupt”.¹⁷⁰ By destroying identities and breaking family ties, it redefined violence as moral, imperative with the purpose of reshaping society, embedding routine killing and violence into everyday life.¹⁷¹

Raming individuals as “germs” or “parasites” allowed for killings to be justified as just “cleansing society,” allowing individuals to feel like protectors rather than war criminals.¹⁷² This illustrated that ordinary people could view themselves as protectors of the revolution rather than war criminals. Violence became bureaucratic as ordinary people trained in militias under the

¹⁶⁵ Visual History Archive. Accessed January 29, 2026. <https://vha.usc.edu/search?context=GKOP&event=3>.

¹⁶⁶ Galway, Matt. “From the Claws of the Tiger to the Jaws of the Crocodile: Pol Pot, Maoism, and Ultra-Nationalist Genocide in Cambodia, 1975-1979.” University of Ottawa, January 1, 1970. <https://ruor.uottawa.ca/items/e72f3353-0678-4e90-9084-02093997d7d1>.

¹⁶⁷ Galway, Matt. “From the Claws of the Tiger to the Jaws of the Crocodile: Pol Pot, Maoism, and Ultra-Nationalist Genocide in Cambodia, 1975-1979.” University of Ottawa, January 1, 1970. <https://ruor.uottawa.ca/items/e72f3353-0678-4e90-9084-02093997d7d1>.

¹⁶⁸ HMDT Staff. “Khmer Rouge Ideology.” Holocaust Memorial Day Trust, December 15, 2023. <https://hmd.org.uk/learn-about-the-holocaust-and-genocides/cambodia/khmer-rouge-ideology/>.

¹⁶⁹ “Cambodian Genocide.” Illinois Holocaust Museum, March 15, 2021. <https://www.ilholocaustmuseum.org/cambodian-genocide/>.

¹⁷⁰ Hinton, Alexander Laban. “Why Did You Kill?: The Cambodian Genocide and the Dark Side of Face and Honor.” *The Journal of Asian Studies* 57, no. 1 (1998): 93–122. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2659025>.

¹⁷¹ HMDT Staff. “Khmer Rouge Ideology.” Holocaust Memorial Day Trust, December 15, 2023. <https://hmd.org.uk/learn-about-the-holocaust-and-genocides/cambodia/khmer-rouge-ideology/>.

¹⁷² Hinton, Alexander Laban. “Why Did You Kill?: The Cambodian Genocide and the Dark Side of Face and Honor.” *The Journal of Asian Studies* 57, no. 1 (1998): 93–122. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2659025>.

misconception that it was just like any other job or duty.¹⁷³ Such casual framing of genocide psychologically justified the murder of innocent individuals. The Cambodian genocide was an ideological project that envisioned a “pure” classless society, identified enemies as ideological threats (intellectuals, ethnic minorities, religious figures), and systemically implemented violence, aiming to achieve complete social transformation.¹⁷⁴

Genocide in an International Context

The global politics surrounding the Cold War heavily influenced Cambodia’s outcome regarding the genocide due to the rivalry, which limited international attention and responses toward the atrocities.¹⁷⁵ China’s Communist Party (CCP) supported the Khmer Rouge both politically and economically via materials, which in turn strengthened the regime.¹⁷⁶ Cambodia, despite receiving support from China, destabilized due to the Vietnam War, disrupting rural life, causing displacement, economic collapse, and contributing to radicalization and chaos.¹⁷⁷ The international community ultimately failed Cambodia by failing to intervene when the genocide occurred. Human rights concerns were second to the Cold War priorities.¹⁷⁸ Many governments were hesitant to act without clear intelligence due to limited information and restricted access to Cambodia making verification of events difficult.¹⁷⁹ Reports from refugees, reporters, and journalists were met initially with skepticism, as the closed nature of the genocide prevented any immediate investigation from external sources from happening. Only then after the Khmer Rouge regime collapsed, did the genocide get some acknowledgement. Efforts to hold Khmer Rouge leaders accountable were limited, slowed, and almost nonexistent. Many perpetrators died before facing justice for their crimes, including key leaders like the dictator Pol Pot, due to trials

¹⁷³ “Enemies of the People.” PBS, July 12, 2011. <https://www.pbs.org/pov/films/enemies/>.

¹⁷⁴ “Cambodian Genocide Program.” MacMillan Center for International and Area Studies at Yale. Accessed April 5, 2026.

<https://macmillan.yale.edu/gsp/cambodian-genocide-program#:~:text=The%20CGP%2C%201994%2D2019,held%20power%20during%201975%2D1979>.

¹⁷⁵ “Cambodian Genocide Program.” MacMillan Center for International and Area Studies at Yale. Accessed April 5, 2026.

<https://macmillan.yale.edu/gsp/cambodian-genocide-program#:~:text=The%20CGP%2C%201994%2D2019,held%20power%20during%201975%2D1979>.

¹⁷⁶ Wang, Chenyi, Filip Kovacevic, and Guy Laron. “The Chinese Communist Party’s Relationship with the Khmer Rouge in the 1970s: An Ideological Victory and a Strategic Failure.” Wilson Center, March 10, 2025.

<https://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/the-chinese-communist-partys-relationship-the-khmer-rouge-the-1970s-ideological-victory>.

¹⁷⁷ “Cambodian Genocide Program.” MacMillan Center for International and Area Studies at Yale. Accessed April 5, 2026.

<https://macmillan.yale.edu/gsp/cambodian-genocide-program#:~:text=The%20CGP%2C%201994%2D2019,held%20power%20during%201975%2D1979>.

¹⁷⁸ USHMM Staff. “International Responses to Khmer Rouge Rule.” United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. Accessed April 5, 2026. <https://www.ushmm.org/genocide-prevention/countries/cambodia/international-response>.

¹⁷⁹ USHMM Staff. “International Responses to Khmer Rouge Rule.” United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. Accessed April 5, 2026. <https://www.ushmm.org/genocide-prevention/countries/cambodia/international-response>.

by the ECCC¹⁸⁰ occurring decades later.¹⁸¹ The lack of political interference and international pressure curbed and weakened the effectiveness of accountability efforts, ultimately giving the victims of the genocide limited justice.¹⁸²

Conclusion

The Cambodian case continues to expand genocide studies to include political motivation and class-based targeting violence, which in turn emphasizes the need to lean away from traditional definitions of genocide and create a more inclusive framework when analyzing such war crimes.¹⁸³ Understanding the history of different genocides, notably the Cambodian genocide, is crucial for the significance of early recognition of genocide signs in modern contexts, starting with the development of extremist ideologies, coupled with the extreme lack of international reaction and trust (to combat skepticism), where similar patterns of dehumanization may emerge.¹⁸⁴ Studying Cambodia's experience with genocide reinforces the urgency of strengthening international processes and mechanisms for prevention, response, and justice to reduce not only the likelihood of future atrocities from occurring, but from history repeating itself.¹⁸⁵

¹⁸⁰ "International or Hybrid Tribunal: Case 002/02." CJA. Accessed February 10, 2026.

<https://cja.org/what-we-do/litigation/khmer-rouge-trials/international-hybrid-tribunal-002-02/>.

¹⁸¹ *Case 002/02: Sentencing the Accused, Nuon Chea and Khieu Samphan to Life Imprisonment.* YouTube. Accessed February 5, 2026. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=03mD9JUfj9E>.

¹⁸² "International or Hybrid Tribunal: Case 002/02." CJA. Accessed February 10, 2026.

<https://cja.org/what-we-do/litigation/khmer-rouge-trials/international-hybrid-tribunal-002-02/>.

¹⁸³ Irvin-Erickson, Douglas. *Raphael Lemkin and the Concept of Genocide*. University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv2t4ds5>.

¹⁸⁴ Irvin-Erickson, Douglas. *Raphael Lemkin and the Concept of Genocide*. University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv2t4ds5>.

¹⁸⁵ Irvin-Erickson, Douglas. *Raphael Lemkin and the Concept of Genocide*. University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv2t4ds5>.

The Arab Spring: Yemen's Political Transition and its Effects on Democratization

Layan Jahaf

Introduction

Fifteen years after the Arab Spring, Yemen's struggle with democratization has significantly influenced the country's political upheaval. Specifically exploring its effects upon democratization, this revolutionary movement has led to a spiral into protracted civil war amidst such political turmoil. Mohamed Bouazizi, in the midst of rising political tensions, faced harassment by Tunisian municipal officers - his fruit cart confiscated. In December 2010, this street vendor had set himself on fire in an act of protest outside of a Tunisian government office in Sidi Bouzid.¹⁸⁶ This event, known as the Jasmine Revolution, had quickly triggered a revolutionary movement across both the Middle East and North Africa commonly referred to as the Arab Spring. The Arab Spring served as a political event able to improve countries in certain ways, yet also destabilize others. This event's hot spots consisted of; Yemen, Bahrain, Egypt, Libya, Syria, and Tunisia. While this was able to topple some long-standing authoritarian regimes, it also gave way for additional conflict to occur— especially within the now increasingly sectarian country of Yemen. As a result of weakening state institutions, political fragmentation, economic decline, and divided military factions, Yemen's major structural issues explain the country's failure to transition into a democratic state.

Historical Background

Yemen, serving as one of the first countries experiencing these Arab Spring protests, had also become most affected. This uprising resulted in a devastating civil war involving harmful foreign intervention and one of the worst humanitarian crises in history.¹⁸⁷ With economic hardship and political corruption existing throughout the country, Yemeni civilians grew increasingly against the governmental systems in place at this time. Saleh served as a Yemeni military officer and politician acting as the first president of the Republic of Yemen. Despite beginning his reign in 1990, his presidency came to an end in 2012. During January of 2011, thousands of protestors gathered in Sana'a, the capital of Yemen, and several other cities in an attempt to have Saleh step down from his presidency. Yemeni protestors were chanting pro-democracy slogans, condemning the poverty and official corruption that was affecting much of the nation. Unlike the Egyptian and Tunisian protests, Yemen's protests appeared to be well-organized and directed by a coalition of Yemeni opposition groups— aspiring for democracy. The initial Yemeni demonstrations showed little acts of violence between both the protests and security forces that were present. Peaceful protests did not translate into democratic

¹⁸⁶ Kali Robinson and Will Mellow, "The Arab Spring at Ten Years: What's the Legacy of the Uprisings?" *Council on Foreign Relations*, December 3, 2020, <https://www.cfr.org/article/arab-spring-ten-years-whats-legacy-uprisings>.

¹⁸⁷ Burrowes, R., Wenner, M.W. "Yemen." *Encyclopedia Britannica*, April 2, 2026. <https://www.britannica.com/place/Yemen>.

reform as a result of Saleh's strong power networks, enabling him to remain in power. Even despite wide public opposition to Saleh's rule, he was able to continue as President for quite some time because of his influential hold on the government.

As a result of these demonstrations significantly growing in size and power, Saleh agreed to make several economic concessions. This included a reduction in income taxes for Yemeni civilians, as well as an increase in salaries for government employees. Additionally, Saleh made the political promise to not run for reelection, vowing that his son would not serve as his successor in office. However, these promises did not appease the majority of these protestors, citing the fact that Saleh failed to honor his previous promise of not seeking his own reelection back in 2006. Yemeni protestors continued to hold daily rallies, frequently clashing with Saleh supporters that resorted to attacks through the utilization of stones, sticks, and occasionally firearms. Even despite many large-scale protests within the country, Saleh refused to step down, claiming chaos would resultantly emerge across the country. This clear display of authoritarian resistance limited the effect that public opinion had on changing the political landscape of the country. Public opinion is extremely important in a democracy as it allows a government to respond to, and ultimately represent, their voters. This led to Yemeni civilians failing to translate such popular opinion into change as a result of Saleh's sharp hold on power. Maintaining strong power dynamics, Saleh was able to continue his reign at the expense of the Yemeni civilians' public interests.

Government Repression

As the protests in Yemen continued to emerge, the Yemeni government grew to use increasingly violent tactics against protests in an attempt to protect Saleh's ongoing presidency. However, this significantly weakened Saleh's attempt to hold onto power amidst such civilian distrust. In that same year of 2011, Saleh loyalists dressed in civilian clothing had actively opened fire on protestors in Sana'a, killing a minimum of fifty people. Demonstrating weak democratic institutions, this shows how violence and intimidation tactics were used to prevent political change, limiting pro-democracy mobilization. This resulted in dozens of Yemeni officials, diplomats, cabinet ministers, and members of parliament to resign in defiance of such acts. General Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar, viewed as the most powerful military officer in Yemen, was a prime example of a powerful national defection. Serving as the commander of the Yemeni army's 1st Armoured Division, he strongly announced his support for Saleh's opposition and vowed to use his troops in protection of the protestors. Divided militaries significantly impact democratization in the sense that it prevents a stable democratic transition. Rather than one unified military accepting a primary authority, this only intensified tensions between groups in their battle for power. Many quickly followed al-Ahmar's remarks, with several other senior officers announcing similar ideas.

With defections only further heightening the tensions surrounding Sana'a, defected military units and units under Saleh's control at the time deployed tanks and vehicles to prime locations across the city. Once again, Saleh refused to immediately step down from his presidency— even amidst a significant amount of protest from civilians and other government officials. The lack of institutional pressure Saleh faced served as an active threat towards Yemeni civilians' and their hopes for a democratic government. By refusing to follow public opinion, Saleh reinforced his authoritarian power through his dismissive view upon his opposition. However, Saleh did offer to step down from his seat after parliamentary elections, yet that had been rejected by his opposition viewing it as an insufficient transfer of power. As a result, Saleh began to enter negotiations with different military officers, political leaders, and tribal representatives in order to determine the exact terms of his political departure. Saleh only furthered the idea that he would step down from presidency, stating in a political speech he gave to the public that he would only transfer power into “safe hands” in hopes of preventing the country from turning into chaos. Yet within that very same month, Saleh continued appearing defiant, stating he would no longer compromise with the opposition. In one interview with BBC Arabic, Saleh insisted, “I will not accept being overthrown in a coup,”— only worsening an attempted peaceful transition to power.¹⁸⁸

Violence and Political Defections

Saleh's security forces continued to withdraw from Yemeni outlying provinces in an attempt to respond to much of the disorderly conduct occurring in the capital. The Houthis, a Shia political and militant movement in Yemen, emerged during the 1990s, the same decade in which the Republic of Yemen was united. The core mission of the Houthis at this time was to promote Zaydi Shia traditions primarily in the north of Yemen. After forcefully taking over the capital city Sana'a in 2014, their power significantly strengthened. In the north of Yemen, the effects of the Houthi rebellion slowly began to increase in power. Fighters pertaining to al-Qaeda, an Islamist terrorist group located in the Arabian Peninsula, took control of a multitude of cities within the southern province, Abyan. The presence of multiple armed groups undermined democratization by creating conflicting power dynamics. Saleh yet again seemed to seem finally ready to cede his power as president to his opposition. Saleh nearly accepted a plan that had been initially proposed by the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), attempting to remove him from power and transition into a new government. In exchange, both Saleh and his political counterparts were intended to receive immunity from prosecution. Even despite these attempts, Saleh refused to consent to such an agreement, with violence between loyalist and opposition forces only intensifying in Yemen.

¹⁸⁸ Ian Black, “Yemen Leader Ali Abdullah Saleh Says He Will Stand Down – in His Own Time,” *The Guardian*, April 24, 2011, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/apr/24/yemen-ali-abdullah-saleh-stand-down>.

Due to Yemen's significant political defections, Saleh was found a week later to be directly injured and attacked by his opposition forces. A total of seven guards were killed as a result of a bomb being planted, and exploding, within Saleh's presidential palace. Just a few hours after the incident, Saleh released an audio statement claiming that he was in good health and directly condemned the al-Ahmar fighters as outlaws to the state. The following day, Saleh was immediately transported to Saudi Arabia for medical treatment, and did not return to Yemen until several months after. Official reports suggested that Yemeni officials had noticeably understated the severity of Saleh's injuries, which was said to include severe burns and several shrapnel wounds. During Saleh's absence due to him receiving medical attention abroad, his Vice President acted as President during this time. This drastic example of violence being used actively undermines attempts for a stable democratic transition. Such violence undermined the fundamental principles of a democracy, failing to recognize the public's ability to engage in political participation.

Unsteady Transitions of Power

Vice President Abdullah Rabbuh Mansur Hadi immediately took the position of acting president as a result of Saleh's medical absence. Only about two months into returning to Yemen, Saleh agreed to a deal that would grant him immunity from prosecution if he decided to cede some of his political power to Hadi. Furthermore, Saleh was to step down after the Yemeni presidential election set for February of 2012. Despite such strong calls requesting Saleh to step down, both from the public and important political figures, little change was made. Once the election had been held, Hadi served as the only candidate running, being sworn in several days later. Because a democracy requires political competition, the presence of only one candidate demonstrated Yemen's struggle to democratically transition. Without political figures actively challenging the powers maintaining such a strong hold over the Yemeni government, this only prevented democracy from spreading throughout the country. However, even without Saleh acting as the President of Yemen, Yemen remained to be a deeply divided political state.

Economic conditions across the nation were poor, affecting many of the local civilians residing in Yemen as a whole. With poverty fueling conflict, this only weakens state institutions and Yemeni civilians' interests in establishing a democracy. After a year of Hadi serving as president, the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of Yemen had remained significantly below its pre-2011 level - with unemployment levels unfortunately soaring. A large number of Yemeni civilians faced devastating shortages related to food, water, and basic goods. Houthi rebels and opposing tribal militants had actively used such distress to grow their bases of support throughout such times of hardship. The southern areas of Yemen allowed high levels of dissatisfaction to lead to a resurgence of secessionist sentiment in the country. In 2013, a constitutional dialogue intended to create a government representing all Yemeni society was

expected to occur. However, this was boycotted by the secessionists, with attempts to formally declare a new constitution failing after violence soared in 2014.

A Shifting Sectarian Divide

Sectarian divisions that emerged as a result of the Arab Spring significantly undermined democratic governance within Yemen. While this event was able to implement political, social, and economic benefits for many Middle Eastern and North African civilians, it led to widespread violence and mass displacement in Yemen. This increased politically-led repressory acts throughout Yemen. Since this revolutionary movement began just a decade ago, Yemen has greatly been affected since. Major sectarian divisions emerged in Yemen, Bahrain, and Syria. With the majority of protestors primarily rebelling in search of dignity and human rights, many Yemeni civilians took part in these acts of protests in hopes of improving the nation's quality of life. With deep sectarian division being given rise to the anti-government movements taking place in Yemen, a lasting shift to democracy was simply unable to be achieved. Instead, Yemen had spiraled into practiced civil wars that continue to negatively impact millions of Yemeni civilians to this day.

The UN Development Program implemented the Human Development Index (HDI) displaying a variety of different information referring to Yemeni individuals and their impact as a result of civil distrust, hardship, and war. The HDI takes into account several dimensions, ranging from long and healthy lives, knowledge, and a decent standard of living for reference. Similarly to both Libya and Syria, Yemen's standard of living also fell following the Arab Spring. During 2023, the standard of living in Yemen had dropped to just 0.470 out of 1.0 - consisting of less than half of its highest standards.¹⁸⁹ This places Yemen as "low" within the human development category. In comparison, Tunisia falls at 0.745, a significantly higher rate than that of Yemen. Millions of Yemenis have also been displaced by its conflict. Refugees, asylum seekers, and internally displaced people at the start of the Arab Spring was 223,680. However, in 2019, a total of 3,696,546 people were reported displaced. Government corruption scores in Yemen had also only worsened since 2010, contradicting the anti-corruption agencies and new laws implemented protecting whistleblowers in Tunisia. Ultimately, this reinforces the idea that the aftermath of the Arab Spring failed to implement democratization amidst such hardship.

The Inflation of Food Prices

The events of the Arab Spring and the following political leadership background relating to Yemen had led to a significant increase in the country's food prices. One study providing

¹⁸⁹ United Nations Development Programme, "Human Development Index (HDI)," accessed March 4, 2026, <https://hdr.undp.org/data-center/human-development-index>.

empirical evidence about the devastating impact of the Arab Spring showed how food prices were severely impacted as a result of the aftermath of conflicts triggered by this event in Yemen.¹⁹⁰ Food inflation is believed to dramatically reduce the welfare of citizens, consequently increasing the poverty rate and indirectly reducing welfare in the nation. Such food inflation can be attributed to the social, economic, and political changes that had emerged as a result of the Arab Spring. The Arab Spring resulted in a long-term conflict, which ultimately destabilized the political situation in Yemen by weakening its federal government. Rather than improving political change occurring as a result of the Arab Spring, increasing conflict, political instability, and weakening government emerged instead. This fueled Houthi recruitment, and ultimately it allowed for the erosion of state legitimacy.

A major source of food inflation was because of low productivity in the agricultural sector of Yemen. Food inflation can be credited to local supply shocks that emerged from the Arab Spring uprisings. This suggests that an extreme dependence on imports for food supply only led to an acceleration of the food inflation and global good price for Yemeni civilians. The revolution in Yemen had led to currency devaluation, with the Yemeni rial's import increasing its cost quite greatly. The Saudi-led blockade following the Arab Spring is a key factor that has contributed to such currency devaluation. This indicates that Yemen's dependence on dollar-denominated transactions acts as a key factor of food inflation throughout the country. With the Arab Spring disrupting acts and the overall progression of trade, the food inflation crisis in the nation has only worsened. Ultimately, the Arab Spring was found to have significantly reduced GDP, Foreign Direct Investment (FDI), and tourism. This study demonstrates how the Arab Spring dramatically hindered Yemen's growth and development as a whole, directly worsening Yemen's political legitimacy.

Contemporary Developments

In early 2020, southern secessionists referred to as the Southern Transitional Council (STC) declared self-rule and governance. Taking control of the island of Socotra, the STC directly ousted local officials belonging to the previous Hadi-led government. Attacks across the broader Middle East region have hindered the country's efforts towards democratization as well, with state actors such as the United States, in coalition with the United Kingdom, launching dozens of strikes against the Houthi rebels in 2024. These key developments strongly weakened the chances of a unified, democratic federal government to form within Yemen. State sovereignty has been severely put at risk, with multiple groups attempting to divide the country into various sections of political power. Rather than prioritizing political cohesion and unison across the nation, this strongly reinforces illegitimate attempts of forming a government - placing the country at even greater risk.

¹⁹⁰ Md Abdul Bari, Mohammad Ajmal Khuram, Ghulam Dastgir Khan, and Md K. Bin Kamal, "From Revolution to Inflation: The Economic Consequences of the Arab Spring on Yemen's Food Prices," *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications* 12, no. 1518 (2025), <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-025-05777-w>.

Conclusion

Although the Arab Spring was able to contribute towards the democratization of several states across the Middle East and North Africa, Yemen faced significant struggle instead. Topics such as governmental repression, violence, political defections, and the inflation of food prices, the country has wrestled with the aftermaths of this revolution. Even amidst the Arab Spring's initial intentions to support democratization, Yemen continues to endure unsteady transitions of power to this day. It is essential that in order to move forward with successful attempts of democratization, Yemen reduces secessionist pressures to promote national unity. With democracy at threat, secession only endangers the country's attempts to increase the quality of life for the majority of Yemeni civilians suffering. This case study displays the fact that the Arab Spring did not guarantee the democratization of other Arab-identifying countries, requiring both state capacity and unity to occur.

Modern Janus: The Influence of Artificial Intelligence in American Political Campaigns

Marko Katra

Introduction

On February 5, 2026, President Donald Trump posted a since-deleted AI-generated video on Truth Social, which depicted former President Barack Obama and former First Lady Michelle Obama as monkeys.¹⁹¹ The post swiftly received backlash, with opponents to the president, such as the office of Democratic Governor Gavin Newsom, writing on X, “Disgusting behavior by the President. Every single Republican must denounce this.”¹⁹² Even Trump supporters, such as South Carolina Republican Tim Scott, the only black Republican in the Senate, wrote, “Praying [the post] was fake because it’s the most racist thing I’ve seen out of this White House. The President should remove it.”¹⁹³ This wouldn’t be the first time the Trump Administration landed in hot water for the use of AI-generated content in posts. In October, the President posted to Truth Social an AI-generated video of himself in a fighter jet labeled “King Trump” dumping feces on protestors attending the October No Kings Protests, a move which also sparked pushback.¹⁹⁴ Regardless of the controversy, it is clear that artificial intelligence has entrenched itself in our nation’s political system and that its influence will only continue to grow. As the 2026 Midterm Election cycle approaches, the proliferation of AI raises questions about how it will shape political campaigns across the country.

AI and the 2024 Election

The 2024 election occurred after the rapid advancement of generative AI models such as ChatGPT. With this came many fears of a “death of truth,” in which deepfakes and AI-generated disinformation would overwhelm democratic processes.¹⁹⁵ In fact, a Pew Research survey in fall 2024 showed that eight times as many Americans expected AI to be used for bad instead of good purposes in the election.¹⁹⁶ Instances of malicious AI use have justified such pessimism. Robocalls to primary voters in New Hampshire featured an AI-generated impersonation of

¹⁹¹ Liptak, Kevin, Adam Cancryn, Alayna Treene, Alejandra Jaramillo, and Betsy Klein. “Trump Won’t Apologize for Sharing since-Deleted Racist Video Depicting Obamas as Apes on Truth Social | CNN Politics.” CNN, February 6, 2026. <https://www.cnn.com/2026/02/06/politics/donald-trump-obamas-apes-truth-social>.

¹⁹² Liptak, Kevin, Adam Cancryn, Alayna Treene, Alejandra Jaramillo, and Betsy Klein. “Trump Won’t Apologize for Sharing since-Deleted Racist Video Depicting Obamas as Apes on Truth Social.”

¹⁹³ Liptak, Kevin, Adam Cancryn, Alayna Treene, Alejandra Jaramillo, and Betsy Klein. “Trump Won’t Apologize for Sharing since-Deleted Racist Video Depicting Obamas as Apes on Truth Social.”

¹⁹⁴ Schneider, Rebecca, and Andrew R. Chow. “How Trump’s Use of Ai Videos Is Changing His Political Playbook.” Time, October 21, 2025. <https://time.com/7327317/trump-ai-video-political-weapon/>.

¹⁹⁵ Schneider, Bruce, and Nathan Sanders. “The Apocalypse That Wasn’t: Ai Was Everywhere in 2024’s Elections, but Deepfakes and Misinformation Were Only Part of the Picture.” Ash Center, December 4, 2025. <https://ash.harvard.edu/articles/the-apocalypse-that-wasnt-ai-was-everywhere-in-2024s-elections-but-deepfakes-and-misinformation-were-only-part-of-the-picture/>.

¹⁹⁶ Schneier, Bruce, and Nathan Sanders. “The Apocalypse That Wasn’t: Ai Was Everywhere in 2024’s Elections, but Deepfakes and Misinformation Were Only Part of the Picture.”

President Joe Biden urging them not to vote, while a Russian-backed social media campaign used AI software Meliorator to create fake online personas that appeared like US citizens to spread misinformation.^{197, 198} Russian operatives also generated AI deepfakes of Vice President Kamala Harris, which included her making inflammatory remarks.¹⁹⁹

However, not all AI use has had negative consequences. New York City Mayor Eric Adams used AI to help translate meetings and speeches into different languages to better reach his constituents.²⁰⁰ Others, like former Arkansas Governor Asa Hutchinson and former Miami Mayor Francis Suarez, created AI chatbots of themselves to help connect with potential voters and better answer questions.²⁰¹ AI was also used to help draft fundraising emails, reach out to donors, generate ads, and develop political strategy in campaigns, demonstrating the wide application of AI as a tool for political campaigns.²⁰²

Benefits of AI Usage in Campaigns

AI can be used positively to help candidates in their election bids by advancing campaign strategies. At a panel for the Harvard Kennedy School's Ash Center for Democratic Governance and Innovation, multiple leaders of AI companies explained how their services could help assist candidates in their races. Jordan Berger, the co-founder and CTO of DonorAtlas, explained how their tool can help fundraisers find donors more quickly, explaining that "Our system is like 1,000 researchers working for you."²⁰³ Such services can be instrumental in helping candidates find support for their campaigns, especially when they have fewer resources or manpower to dedicate to their cause. Hilary Lehr, the CEO of Quiller, detailed how their tool could be used to create materials for campaign platforming, such as op-eds, fundraising emails, and volunteer scripts.²⁰⁴ This can once again be helpful for candidates lacking the manpower or platform to hire people to perform these tasks, as the AI tool can help reduce both the cost of labor and the time required for these tasks to be performed.²⁰⁵

¹⁹⁷ Hasan, Shanze, and Abdiaziz Ahmed. "Gauging the AI Threat to Free and Fair Elections." Brennan Center for Justice, March 6, 2025.

<https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/analysis-opinion/gauging-ai-threat-free-and-fair-elections>.

¹⁹⁸ Romanishyn, Alexander, Olena Malytska, and Vitaliy Goncharuk. "AI-Driven Disinformation: Policy Recommendations for Democratic Resilience." *Frontiers in artificial intelligence*, July 31, 2025.

<https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC12351547/#sec19>.

¹⁹⁹ Hasan, Shanze, and Abdiaziz Ahmed. "Gauging the AI Threat to Free and Fair Elections."

²⁰⁰ Schneier, Bruce, and Nathan Sanders. "The Apocalypse That Wasn't: AI Was Everywhere in 2024's Elections, but Deepfakes and Misinformation Were Only Part of the Picture."

²⁰¹ Schneier, Bruce, and Nathan Sanders. "The Apocalypse That Wasn't: AI Was Everywhere in 2024's Elections, but Deepfakes and Misinformation Were Only Part of the Picture."

²⁰² Schneier, Bruce, and Nathan Sanders. "The Apocalypse That Wasn't: AI Was Everywhere in 2024's Elections, but Deepfakes and Misinformation Were Only Part of the Picture."

²⁰³ Guterman, Dana. "AI on the Ballot: How Artificial Intelligence Is Already Changing Politics." Ash Center, April 10, 2025. <https://ash.harvard.edu/articles/ai-on-the-ballot-how-artificial-intelligence-is-already-changing-politics/>.

²⁰⁴ Guterman, Dana. "AI on the Ballot: How Artificial Intelligence Is Already Changing Politics."

²⁰⁵ Guterman, Dana. "AI on the Ballot: How Artificial Intelligence Is Already Changing Politics."

Another facet of campaigning that can potentially be improved by AI is polling and data analysis. Researchers are using AI for everything from gauging voter sentiment from social media to creating thousands of synthetic voters that can answer questions and mimic the sentiments of real people.²⁰⁶ AI can also be used to help better streamline large databases of information on goals, fundraising, and voter information. This, when combined with the generative features of AI models, can help candidates create tailored messaging to more effectively target certain audiences on various issues.²⁰⁷

Dangers of AI Usage in Campaigns

Despite its benefits, AI still poses significant risks to democracy, especially regarding misinformation and public trust in government. Research found that false news diffused “significantly farther, faster, deeper, and more broadly” than true news.²⁰⁸ This spread of misinformation is further amplified by social media bot accounts, with a study finding that bots had a disproportionate impact on misinformation during the 2016 Presidential election.²⁰⁹ AI can and will continue to further amplify these damages, as the rise of deepfakes, chatbots, and AI-generated fake news will only continue to make it more difficult to distinguish reality from fiction. In fact, evaluations have shown that some AI-generated election disinformation was completely indistinguishable from human-written journalism.²¹⁰ This problem is further exacerbated by the fact that large language models (LLMs) have also been shown to be able to mimic and imitate political figures with greater perceived authenticity than the person’s actual statements. This, when combined with improving deepfake audio and video, can lead to the creation of convincing fake videos en masse.²¹¹

The growth in fake content creation has led to concerns over the potential for foreign interference in elections or the rise of “digital authoritarianism.”²¹² Authoritarian countries like China are currently advancing their generative AI tools in tandem with digital infrastructure that

²⁰⁶ Schneier, Bruce, and Nathan Sanders. “The Apocalypse That Wasn’t: Ai Was Everywhere in 2024’s Elections, but Deepfakes and Misinformation Were Only Part of the Picture.”

²⁰⁷ LaChapelle, Christina, and Catherine Tucker. “Generative AI in Political Advertising.” Brennan Center for Justice, November 28, 2023.

<https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/research-reports/generative-ai-political-advertising>.

²⁰⁸ Romanishyn, Alexander, Olena Malytska, and Vitaliy Goncharuk. “Ai-Driven Disinformation: Policy Recommendations for Democratic Resilience.”

²⁰⁹ Romanishyn, Alexander, Olena Malytska, and Vitaliy Goncharuk. “Ai-Driven Disinformation: Policy Recommendations for Democratic Resilience.”

²¹⁰ Romanishyn, Alexander, Olena Malytska, and Vitaliy Goncharuk. “Ai-Driven Disinformation: Policy Recommendations for Democratic Resilience.”

²¹¹ Romanishyn, Alexander, Olena Malytska, and Vitaliy Goncharuk. “Ai-Driven Disinformation: Policy Recommendations for Democratic Resilience.”

²¹² Romanishyn, Alexander, Olena Malytska, and Vitaliy Goncharuk. “Ai-Driven Disinformation: Policy Recommendations for Democratic Resilience.”

they use for actions like surveillance or personal data gathering.²¹³ In fact, the Chinese have already leveraged this technology in an attempt to interfere in elections, with their state-sponsored “Spamouflage” campaign.²¹⁴ This campaign saw the creation of AI-generated news anchors for a fake outlet, *Wolf News*, which delivered pro-China messaging.²¹⁵ It also saw attempted interference in Taiwan’s 2024 election by deepfaking videos of candidates, and the spread of anti-American and Japanese messaging via AI-manipulated memes and images.²¹⁶

This surge of disinformation and potential interference can lead to an erosion of trust from the public. Known as the “liar’s dividend,” researchers worry that even genuine true content may be questioned or put down under the pretense that it could be AI-generated and false.²¹⁷ In fact, a report by UNESCO and Ipsos in 2024 found that a majority of internet users worldwide feel unsure about whether what they see on social media is real or manipulated.²¹⁸ This inability to distinguish between truth and falsehood is concerning because it provides leeway for politicians to avoid potential consequences and cast doubt on legitimate criticism or evidence levied against them. This distrust can weaken democratic institutions and make societies more vulnerable to manipulation over time.²¹⁹

The use of AI in campaigns also risks suffering from the blind spots of current LLMs. For example, AI-models have been known to “hallucinate” and make up facts about individuals or events to make up for knowledge it doesn’t have.²²⁰ There are also biases that LLMs will sometimes adopt. ChatGPT has been found to echo left-wing libertarian views while Meta’s LLaMA leans more right-wing.²²¹ Not only this, but some models can even generate negative messages. For example, AIs trained on data from the internet have been found to sometimes generate racist and sexist messages.²²²

Potential Solutions

Change is evidently needed to help mitigate some of the negative effects of AI usage in political campaigning. Some suggest the establishment of ethical guidelines for AI developers

²¹³ Romanishyn, Alexander, Olena Malytska, and Vitaliy Goncharuk. “Ai-Driven Disinformation: Policy Recommendations for Democratic Resilience.”

²¹⁴ Romanishyn, Alexander, Olena Malytska, and Vitaliy Goncharuk. “Ai-Driven Disinformation: Policy Recommendations for Democratic Resilience.”

²¹⁵ Romanishyn, Alexander, Olena Malytska, and Vitaliy Goncharuk. “Ai-Driven Disinformation: Policy Recommendations for Democratic Resilience.”

²¹⁶ Romanishyn, Alexander, Olena Malytska, and Vitaliy Goncharuk. “Ai-Driven Disinformation: Policy Recommendations for Democratic Resilience.”

²¹⁷ Hasan, Shanze, and Abdiaziz Ahmed. “Gauging the AI Threat to Free and Fair Elections.”

²¹⁸ Romanishyn, Alexander, Olena Malytska, and Vitaliy Goncharuk. “Ai-Driven Disinformation: Policy Recommendations for Democratic Resilience.”

²¹⁹ Hasan, Shanze, and Abdiaziz Ahmed. “Gauging the AI Threat to Free and Fair Elections.”

²²⁰ LaChapelle, Christina, and Catherine Tucker. “Generative AI in Political Advertising.”

²²¹ LaChapelle, Christina, and Catherine Tucker. “Generative AI in Political Advertising.”

²²² LaChapelle, Christina, and Catherine Tucker. “Generative AI in Political Advertising.”

based on those found in the finance or healthcare industries.²²³ These frameworks would include protocols that prioritize user safety while also creating platforms for accountability and harm reduction. For example, AI companies could be required to label or watermark AI-generated ads or deepfakes to rebuild transparency and trust.²²⁴ In fact, some legislators have already taken action, with the EU's AI Bill requiring obligations from AI companies to trace and detect AI-generated material, and California's Digital Content Provenance Standards bill requiring watermarks for AI-content.²²⁵ Due to the constant and rapid progression of AI, some also suggest creating built-in review cycles (i.e. 18-24 months) in legislation to ensure laws and regulations don't become obsolete.²²⁶

Other theorists suggest creating international organizations to monitor global AI usage.²²⁷ These networks could help create support systems to recognize AI threats and deal with them before they cause widespread disruption. Furthermore, joint cyber exercises or simulations could help better prepare countries against misinformation attacks and bolster joint communication.²²⁸ Also, international agreements on AI alignment and compliance via auditing and certification could help reduce the risks of an "AI arms race," promoting instead the safe use and development of the technology.²²⁹

With regards to inaccuracies or oversaturation in AI advertising, some believe that market forces will naturally force ads to stay relevant and interesting. They argue that ads are required to compete for the "attention platform," in which platforms compete for users' attention by showing them advertisements that don't bore or annoy them.²³⁰ In other words, the current system rewards ads that are the most engaging, regardless of how they are produced. As such, there could be a natural move away from generic, mass-produced, and sometimes inaccurate purely AI-generated ads to those that include more human control and direction from the campaign itself.²³¹

Conclusion

²²³ Hasan, Shanze, and Abdiyaz Ahmed. "Gauging the AI Threat to Free and Fair Elections."

²²⁴ Hasan, Shanze, and Abdiyaz Ahmed. "Gauging the AI Threat to Free and Fair Elections."

²²⁵ Csernaton, Raluca. "Can Democracy Survive the Disruptive Power of Ai?" Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, December 18, 2024.

<https://carnegieendowment.org/russia-eurasia/research/2024/12/can-democracy-survive-the-disruptive-power-of-ai>.

²²⁶ Romanishyn, Alexander, Olena Malytska, and Vitaliy Goncharuk. "Ai-Driven Disinformation: Policy Recommendations for Democratic Resilience."

²²⁷ Romanishyn, Alexander, Olena Malytska, and Vitaliy Goncharuk. "Ai-Driven Disinformation: Policy Recommendations for Democratic Resilience."

²²⁸ Romanishyn, Alexander, Olena Malytska, and Vitaliy Goncharuk. "Ai-Driven Disinformation: Policy Recommendations for Democratic Resilience."

²²⁹ Romanishyn, Alexander, Olena Malytska, and Vitaliy Goncharuk. "Ai-Driven Disinformation: Policy Recommendations for Democratic Resilience."

²³⁰ LaChapelle, Christina, and Catherine Tucker. "Generative AI in Political Advertising."

²³¹ LaChapelle, Christina, and Catherine Tucker. "Generative AI in Political Advertising."

It should surprise nobody that AI is here to stay, and in the political arena, any perceived advantage is guaranteed to gain traction. As this election season approaches, it will be interesting to see how both major parties make use of artificial intelligence in their campaigns— for better or worse. As such, we as Americans must stay wary of the misinformation and bias that has and will continue to flood our phones and computer screens, as no matter how convincing that video you see of a senator shaking hands with George Washington is, it is, unfortunately, still fake— even if reality is often stranger than fiction.

The Impact of the ‘America First’ Movement on the Dismantling of U.S. Foreign Aid Institutions

Patrick Le Febvre

Introduction

There have been two conflicting narratives the United States has conveyed to the world over the course of its history. One of which reflects a willingness to cooperate with foreign powers for global progress; the other of which reflects the prioritization of America and self-interested policies on the global stage. For most of its history, the U.S. has oscillated between the two, struggling to grasp its role in the world. On the progressive side of U.S. history, Former Massachusetts Governor John Winthrop described America as having the capacity to be a “shining city upon a hill,” one that stands as a symbol of progress and opportunity to the world.²³² Likewise, in his influential epistolary, *Letters from an American Farmer*, de Crèvecoeur referred to America as a modern society of which will guide the world into a new light of progress.²³³

On the contrasting side of the spectrum, the ideas of American isolationism have remained equally if not more dominant over the course of U.S. history. In Washington’s farewell, he addressed the nation to remain wary of foreign powers and to concentrate on preserving and developing the newly formed Union as its own entity existing on the fringes of the world.²³⁴ Over the course of U.S. history, many administrations have sought to prioritize a conservative, pro-America approach to governance, often repealing and rejecting the work of more progressive periods. As the U.S. grapples with its own identity, these shifts of the political pendulum have held drastic impacts on the world abroad, particularly as it relates to U.S. foreign policy.

Background

Since the end of the Second World War, the U.S. has played a central role in the global development system. Through humanitarian assistance, economic development programs, and international partnerships, the U.S. has attempted to promote stability and economic growth across the developing world. A key instrument of this effort has been the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), which had served for decades as the primary agency responsible for implementing American development policy abroad.²³⁵ Beyond providing aid, the

²³² John Winthrop, *A Modell of Christian Charity* (1630), in *Collections of the Massachusetts Historical Society*, 3rd series, vol. 7 (Boston, 1838), 31–48.

²³³ J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur, *Letters from an American Farmer*, first published 1782 (New York: Fox, Duffield & Company, 1904). The relevant passages appear in Letter III, “What Is an American?”

²³⁴ George Washington, “Farewell Address,” first published in *Claypoole’s American Daily Advertiser*, September 19, 1796.

²³⁵ Foreign Assistance Act of 1961, Pub. L. 87-195, 75 Stat. 424 (September 4, 1961); Executive Order 10973, “Administration of Foreign Assistance and Related Functions,” November 3, 1961.

agency also functioned as a tool of diplomacy and soft power, reinforcing the U.S.' position as a global leader in international development.²³⁶ However, the emergence of the “America First” political movement in the twenty-first century introduced a significant challenge to this traditional framework. Popularized during the first Trump administration, the America First doctrine emphasized nationalism, economic protectionism, preference of unilateral policy, and skepticism toward international commitments.²³⁷ Within this ideological framework, foreign aid programs were often portrayed as unnecessary expenditures that diverted resources away from domestic priorities.²³⁸

This shift in political ideology had significant implications for U.S. foreign aid institutions. The America First movement has challenged both the scale of foreign assistance and the institutional structures responsible for delivering that assistance. In particular, efforts to reduce funding, reorganize development institutions, and shift development policy priorities were used to dismantle the institutional capacity of USAID.²³⁹ Although many of these efforts faced pushback,²⁴⁰ particularly within the first administration, the work of the current administration has seen unilateral changes to development programs and has raised important questions about the future of American leadership in global development.²⁴¹

Policy Changes Under the Current Administration

Published in 2023 by The Heritage Foundation, *Mandate for Leadership: The Conservative Promise* (Project 2025) outlined a comprehensive policy guide for the next conservative administration.²⁴² Within the section on USAID, the outlined agenda consisted of three fundamental policy shifts from humanitarian to ideological, multilateral to unilateral, and development-oriented to strategic based aid.²⁴³ Following the second inauguration of President Trump, these proposed policies became official policies.²⁴⁴ The remainder of this section will examine these policy shifts in detail and analyze the challenges they pose to the legitimacy of U.S. backed development assistance.

²³⁶ Joseph S. Nye Jr., *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2004).

²³⁷ Max Primorac, "Agency for International Development," in *Mandate for Leadership: The Conservative Promise*, eds. Paul Dans and Steven Groves (Washington, D.C.: The Heritage Foundation, 2023), [p. 253-254].

²³⁸ Paul Dans and Steven Groves (Washington, D.C.: The Heritage Foundation, 2023), 254.

²³⁹ Executive Order 14169 (January 20, 2025); Marco Rubio, announcement of USAID contract terminations, March 10, 2025, as reported in: "Rubio Announces That 83% of USAID Contracts Will Be Canceled," NPR, March 10, 2025.

²⁴⁰ AIDS Vaccine Advocacy Coalition v. U.S. Department of State (2025)

²⁴¹ Executive Order 14169 (January 20, 2025); KFF, "U.S. Foreign Aid Freeze & Dissolution of USAID: Timeline of Events," updated October 24, 2025, available at [kff.org](https://www.kff.org).

²⁴² Max Primorac, "Agency for International Development," in *Mandate for Leadership: The Conservative Promise* [p. 254-279].

²⁴³ Max Primorac, "Agency for International Development," in *Mandate for Leadership: The Conservative Promise*.

²⁴⁴ Executive Order 14169, "Reevaluating and Realigning United States Foreign Aid" (January 20, 2025); Executive Order 14155, "Withdrawing the United States from the World Health Organization" (January 20, 2025); Executive Order 14162, "Putting America First in International Environmental Agreements" (January 20, 2025).

In line with the traditional conservative preference of smaller government, the largest critique of the agency has been of its growth into a multilateral organization in its own right. USAID was established in 1961 under President John F. Kennedy as part of a broader effort to reorganize U.S. foreign assistance programs during the Cold War.²⁴⁵ The agency was utilized to counter Communist expansion through U.S. backed economic, social, and political reforms in the developing world.²⁴⁶ Since the Cold War, the agency has grown into the largest U.S. international development and disaster assistance program.²⁴⁷ USAID's expansion in scale and scope of its missions is critiqued as a wasteful overextension of U.S. resources.²⁴⁸ The first Trump administration sought to reorganize the agency in two ways: to scale back direct funding, instead focusing on propping states up to support themselves; and to prioritize religious initiatives and "pro-life and family-friendly policies."²⁴⁹ The subsequent Biden administration once again reorganized the agency, expanding development operations and supporting more progressive development.²⁵⁰ With the sharp swing back to the political right, the modern political pendulum of the twenty-first century has held dramatic impacts on the stability and continuity of global development efforts.

The first major shift was from independent humanitarian aid and initiatives to conditioning aid on ideological alignment. Notably, the administration sought to upend development programs associated with gender equality, reproductive health, and diversity initiatives, instead restructuring related offices to focus on women, children, and families; that is, eliminating programs that promote sexual and reproductive health and rights on the premise that these programs inhibit the formation of traditional families and subsequently harm their societies.^{251, 252, 253} This shift to ideological based assistance weakens the humanitarian system as U.S. support is essential.²⁵⁴

This shift challenges the legitimacy of U.S. foreign aid as development assistance has historically justified itself through universal development goals such as poverty reduction, global

²⁴⁵ Foreign Assistance Act of 1961, Pub. L. 87-195; Executive Order 10973 (November 3, 1961).

²⁴⁶ Office of the Historian, U.S. Department of State, "Milestones: 1961–1968, The Presidencies of Kennedy and Johnson," available at history.state.gov.

²⁴⁷ Oxfam America, "What USAID Did, and the Effects of Trump's Cuts on Lifesaving Aid," 2025, available at oxfamamerica.org. ("The agency that was overseeing much of U.S. foreign aid was USAID, which had a budget of \$63 billion in 2023.")

²⁴⁸ Primorac, "Agency for International Development," in *Mandate for Leadership*, [p. 254].

²⁴⁹ Primorac, "Agency for International Development," in *Mandate for Leadership*, [p. 254].

²⁵⁰ KFF, "The Trump Administration's Foreign Aid Review: Reorganization of U.S. Global Health Programs," updated October 2025, available at kff.org; see introductory historical section.

²⁵¹ Executive Order 14169 (January 20, 2025); KFF, "U.S. Foreign Aid Freeze & Dissolution of USAID: Timeline of Events," available at kff.org.

²⁵² Primorac, "Agency for International Development," in *Mandate for Leadership*, [pp. 258-260].

²⁵³ Primorac, "Agency for International Development," in *Mandate for Leadership*, [pp. 258-260].

²⁵⁴ Pew Research Center, "What the Data Says About U.S. Foreign Aid," February 6, 2025, available at pewresearch.org. (The U.S. accounted for more than 40% of all humanitarian aid tracked by the UN in 2024.)

health, gender equality, and growing climate protection initiatives.²⁵⁵ Conditioning aid on ideological compliance politicizes development norms and makes assistance appear as a means for exporting domestic political values.²⁵⁶ This specifically undermines the legitimacy of aid as sharp political shifts with each recent U.S. election creates distrust in the continuity of support for varying projects on both sides of the political spectrum. Likewise, new policy has encouraged expanding the role of faith-based organizations in delivering development programs which risks introducing religious or ideological bias into development assistance.²⁵⁷ Combined, these shifts can weaken partnerships with international NGOs and recipient governments that view aid as ideologically coercive rather than development oriented.

Regarding the shift from multilateral assistance to unilateral, new policy has sought to eliminate or reduce funding to several UN-linked development institutions and multilateral aid mechanisms. Since the prominence of international aid institutions came to be in the post-war era, they have provided legitimacy and coordination for development assistance. However, a large critique of USAID by the administration was its financial commitment to large-scale organizations such as the UN and INGOs, of which were criticized as being self-serving and unproductive.²⁵⁸ Instead, the current administration has sought to focus on specified and localized support.²⁵⁹ This shift toward unilateral aid policy reflects the shift in ideological priorities wherein the U.S. has moved away from prior commitments to pursue current ideological interests instead. Instead of engaging in large international organizations, the U.S. now holds more flexibility in aid commitments, but the same aid challenges described in the previous paragraphs remain pertinent. Given the state of the ever-shifting climate of the U.S. political system, focusing solely on individual localized initiatives leaves their continued support subject to the following administration which strains trust and stability. Commitment to large, trusted and unbiased organizations ensures continued support and an ability to adapt to developments systematically without prejudice. The withdrawal of U.S. support weakens global governance structures that support coordinated development efforts.

Two notable motions the U.S. has made following this shift have been its withdrawal from the World Health Organization (WHO) and its decommitment from the Paris Climate Agreement. The U.S.'s recent move away from the WHO demonstrates a shift towards a preference of unilateral action, suspending all active projects and ongoing commitments through the WHO in favor of pursuing direct, bilateral health engagements with other countries.²⁶⁰

²⁵⁵ United Nations, *Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*, Resolution A/RES/70/1 (New York: United Nations, 2015).

²⁵⁶ Nye, *Soft Power*, 2004; for conditionality specifically, see also: Peter Uvin, *Aiding Violence: The Development Enterprise in Rwanda* (West Hartford, CT: Kumarian Press, 1998)

²⁵⁷ Primorac, "Agency for International Development," in *Mandate for Leadership*, [pp. 261-262]

²⁵⁸ Primorac, "Agency for International Development," in *Mandate for Leadership*, [p. 254]

²⁵⁹ Executive Order 14169 (January 20, 2025); KFF Timeline, kff.org.

²⁶⁰ Donald J. Trump, "Withdrawing the United States from the World Health Organization," Executive Order 14155 (January 20, 2025), available at [whitehouse.gov](https://www.whitehouse.gov). The U.S. formally left the WHO on January 22, 2026.

Similarly, the current administration's position on climate change and climate initiatives has led to the U.S. withdrawal from the Paris Climate Agreement.²⁶¹ Outside the bounds of collective action and commitment, the U.S. has deregulated its domestic greenhouse emissions and has now moved to redirecting support toward fossil fuel development in partner countries.²⁶² The departure from these programs reflects a retreat from collective development commitments in favor of national priorities undermining the perception of development assistance as part of a cooperative international effort.

The last and arguably most significant shift has been from development-oriented aid to strategic-based aid and the complete dismantling of USAID. Following the guidelines of Project 2025, the current Trump administration dissolved the agency, suspending 83% of its programs and moving the rest under the State Department.²⁶³ The intended purpose of this move was to align development policy more closely with diplomatic strategy. As global conflict and aid is often complex, development agencies have historically maintained a large degree of institutional independence to preserve credibility and technical expertise, ensuring the most appropriate response to the matter.²⁶⁴ Opposed to big government, a key issue of the current administration was addressing what it interpreted as wasteful and disconnected practices. It has sought to instead align foreign aid with foreign policy, consolidating aid decisions to fall under a single Director of Foreign Assistance (DFA) role.²⁶⁵ This poses an oversimplification of a highly complex matter in adequately allocating aid. By placing development assistance fully under diplomatic control, it reinforces the perception that aid is now primarily a bargaining tool within foreign policy.

Functioning now as a tactical piece of influence and the exportation of domestic ideals, it also frames development assistance as a mechanism for geopolitical competition. If development aid is openly framed as an instrument of great-power competition, it risks losing credibility as humanitarian assistance.²⁶⁶ By altering the scope and purpose of aid, it rather becomes a source of diplomatic leverage rather than a source of collective progress and development. The subsequent sections will explore the immediate consequences of U.S. foreign aid decisions and what potential ramifications lay ahead.

²⁶¹ Donald J. Trump, "Putting America First in International Environmental Agreements," Executive Order 14162 (January 20, 2025), available at [whitehouse.gov](https://www.whitehouse.gov)

²⁶² Executive Order 14162 (January 20, 2025); NPR, "Trump Orders U.S. Withdrawal from Paris Agreement, Revokes Biden Climate Actions," January 21, 2025, available at [npr.org](https://www.npr.org)

²⁶³ Marco Rubio, announcement of USAID contract terminations, March 10, 2025, as reported by NPR; KFF, "The Trump Administration's Foreign Aid Review," available at [kff.org](https://www.kff.org); Foley Hoag LLP, "U.S. Policy Shift on Foreign Aid," December 2025, available at [foleyhoag.com](https://www.foleyhoag.com)

²⁶⁴ Shepard Forman and Stewart Patrick, eds., *Good Intentions: Pledges of Aid for Postconflict Recovery* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2000)

²⁶⁵ Primorac, "Agency for International Development," in *Mandate for Leadership*, [pp. 254-255]

²⁶⁶ Nye, *Soft Power*, 2004; Council on Foreign Relations, "The Great Aid Recession: 2025's Humanitarian Crash in Nine Charts," December 2025, available at [cfr.org](https://www.cfr.org)

Impact on Global Development Programs

The restructuring of U.S. foreign assistance through the dissolution of USAID has had strong, immediate impacts on global development programs. As one of the largest bilateral donors in the world, USAID supported programs in approximately 130 countries, spanning public health, climate resilience, sanitation, education, and governance initiatives.²⁶⁷ The sudden suspension and reduction of funding disrupted development programs across multiple sectors, with particularly severe consequences in fragile and conflict-affected states.²⁶⁸ To understand these impacts more concretely, this paper will analyze two case studies on how development programs have been affected.

USAID played a major role in climate resilience and development efforts in the Lower Mekong Basin, including Cambodia. One of the most significant initiatives, the Mekong Adaptation and Resilience to Climate Change (ARCC) program, aimed to strengthen regional capacity to respond to climate risks affecting agriculture, fisheries, and water management.²⁶⁹ The \$9.4 million project focused on building institutional capacity, developing climate adaptation strategies, and supporting sustainable ecosystem management across Cambodia and neighboring countries.²⁷⁰ Programs such as these are particularly critical in this region, where millions rely on the Mekong River for agriculture, fishing, and economic activity. Climate variability, dam construction, and environmental degradation have increased the vulnerability of communities dependent on the river.²⁷¹ USAID-funded initiatives provided technical expertise, policy coordination, and community-based adaptation strategies designed to mitigate these risks.

The suspension of USAID funding has threatened the continuation of such initiatives. According to Zeb Hogan, the co-lead for the Wonders of Mekong Sustainable Development Project, "...work was just stopped overnight. And the way it was done was impossible to plan for and very difficult to recover from."²⁷² Without sustained support, local governments and civil society organizations face difficulties maintaining climate adaptation programs and monitoring environmental changes. The withdrawal of funding also disrupts regional cooperation mechanisms that USAID helped establish, weakening cross-border development coordination in Southeast Asia. Climate resilience programs are typically multi-year efforts requiring sustained

²⁶⁷ Oxfam America, "What USAID Did, and the Effects of Trump's Cuts on Lifesaving Aid," 2025, available at oxfamamerica.org

²⁶⁸ Pew Research Center, "What the Data Says About U.S. Foreign Aid," February 6, 2025, available at pewresearch.org

²⁶⁹ USAID, "Mekong Adaptation and Resilience to Climate Change (Mekong ARCC)," USAID Regional Development Mission for Asia (archived), available at 2017-2020.usaid.gov

²⁷⁰ USAID, "Mekong Adaptation and Resilience to Climate Change (Mekong ARCC)" (archived USAID fact sheet), available at 2017-2020.usaid.gov

²⁷¹ USAID Mekong ARCC fact sheet states the Mekong is "the lifeblood for more than 60 million people." Cite: USAID, "Mekong Adaptation and Resilience to Climate Change," available at 2017-2020.usaid.gov

²⁷² Zeb Hogan, quoted in: "Trump Administration's Shutdown of USAID Devastates Global Conservation Efforts," *The Daily Climate*, May 2, 2025, available at dailyclimate.org

investment. When funding is withdrawn, progress in agricultural adaptation, flood mitigation, and fisheries' sustainability can stall, leaving communities more vulnerable to environmental shocks. In Cambodia, where agriculture accounts for over 33% of employment, disruptions to climate resilience programs threaten both livelihoods and food security.²⁷³

The impact of USAID cuts has also been particularly severe in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo, especially within the capital city of Goma, where ongoing conflict has created urgent humanitarian needs. USAID has historically been one of the largest donors to humanitarian operations in the country, providing funding for food aid, sanitation services, and public health programs.²⁷⁴ In 2024 alone, USAID provided over \$838 million in assistance to the Democratic Republic of Congo, including substantial funding for humanitarian operations in eastern regions affected by displacement and violence.²⁷⁵

Following funding cuts, an essential water sanitation project by Mercy Corps providing the only source of water to 250,000 displaced people in Goma refugee camps was terminated.²⁷⁶ The suspension of dire infrastructure projects forced people to use untreated water from Lake Kivu, resulting in a mass influx of diseases such as cholera, measles, and mpox.²⁷⁷ Cholera related deaths increased by 361% from the year prior as a direct result of cut funding.²⁷⁸ The suspension of USAID funding to these programs has placed 4.6 million displaced people at risk across the North and South Kivu provinces.²⁷⁹ The suspension affected several humanitarian groups in the region with severely disrupted emergency services in responding during the ongoing M23 conflict. These programs provided clean water infrastructure, hygiene kits, and sanitation services to internally displaced populations and conflict-affected communities.

Goma is not an isolated case. Following the funding cuts, there is a projected preventable death toll of 3 million people per year.²⁸⁰ 95 million people risk losing basic health care, and 23

²⁷³ U.S. International Trade Administration, "Cambodia — Agriculture," *Country Commercial Guides*, last published November 14, 2025, available at [trade.gov](https://www.trade.gov)

²⁷⁴ U.S. Embassy in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, "The United States Announces \$424 Million in Additional Assistance for the Democratic Republic of the Congo," August 19, 2024, available at cd.usembassy.gov

²⁷⁵ U.S. Embassy in the DRC, "The United States Announces \$424 Million in Additional Assistance," August 2024, available at cd.usembassy.gov

²⁷⁶ Think Global Health, "DRC in Crisis: The Human Cost of U.S. Aid Cuts Amid the M23 Rebellion," available at thinkglobalhealth.org

²⁷⁷ Oxfam America, "What USAID Did, and the Effects of Trump's Cuts on Lifesaving Aid," 2025, available at oxfamamerica.org

²⁷⁸ Oxfam America, "What USAID Did, and the Effects of Trump's Cuts on Lifesaving Aid," 2025, available at oxfamamerica.org. (The Oxfam report documents a 361% increase in cholera deaths, from 409 in 2024 to 1,888 in 2025, citing WHO data.)

²⁷⁹ Center on International Cooperation, New York University, "USAID Suspension's Impact on Critical Sector Funding in the DRC," March 2025, available at cic.nyu.edu, citing UN OCHA data.

²⁸⁰ Oxfam America, "What USAID Did, and the Effects of Trump's Cuts on Lifesaving Aid," 2025, available at oxfamamerica.org

million children are at threat of losing access to education.²⁸¹ Along with immediate human toll, the sudden nature of the cuts also created operational challenges. A 2025 Urban Institute report documented that stop-work orders and funding freezes left programs without transition plans, resulting in immediate and pro-longed service disruptions.²⁸² Health and sanitation programs were particularly vulnerable to abrupt termination. In cities like Goma, sanitation systems and clean water access are often funded through international aid rather than domestic resources. The suspension of foreign aid to the region led to abrupt deterioration, increasing humanitarian risks and destabilizing already fragile communities.

What's Next for International Development

As U.S. involvement in development assistance abruptly halted, other countries and institutions are expected to play larger roles in global development financing. The European Union, Japan, and multilateral institutions such as the World Bank have already increased development funding in response to global crises.²⁸³ However, replacing U.S. funding remains difficult. The U.S. has historically accounted for a significant portion of global humanitarian assistance with between 40% to 43% of global humanitarian aid being funded by the U.S. in Fiscal Year 2023.²⁸⁴ The sudden withdrawal of funding creates gaps that are difficult to fill in the short-term. Additionally, development programs often depend on long-standing partnerships and technical expertise that cannot be easily replicated.

Future Implications for U.S. Foreign Aid

The restructuring of USAID and reduction in development assistance poses a significant shift in U.S. foreign policy priorities. Historically, development assistance has functioned as a tool of soft power, strengthening diplomatic relationships, and promoting stability. Reduced involvement may weaken U.S. influence abroad, particularly in regions where development assistance formed a key component of diplomatic engagement. Furthermore, development assistance often contributes to long-term stability, reducing migration pressures, conflict risks, and humanitarian crises. Development assistance has long been viewed as a cost-effective tool of foreign policy, and its reduction could shift U.S. engagement toward more reactive approaches, including humanitarian intervention and security assistance.²⁸⁵

²⁸¹ Oxfam America, "What USAID Did, and the Effects of Trump's Cuts on Lifesaving Aid," 2025, available at oxfamamerica.org

²⁸² Urban Institute, *How Government Funding Disruptions Affected Nonprofits in Early 2025* (Washington, D.C.: Urban Institute, 2025), available at urban.org

²⁸³ Council on Foreign Relations, "The Great Aid Recession: 2025's Humanitarian Crash in Nine Charts," December 2025, available at cfr.org; ALNAP, *Global Humanitarian Assistance Report 2025*, available at alnap.org

²⁸⁴ Pew Research Center, "What the Data Says About U.S. Foreign Aid," February 6, 2025, available at pewresearch.org

²⁸⁵ Council on Foreign Relations, "The Great Aid Recession," December 2025, available at cfr.org; Nye, *Soft Power*, 2004

Conclusion

The dismantling and restructuring of USAID represent a major shift in U.S. foreign policy and international development. The impact has affected over 5,300 humanitarian programs such as the climate resilience efforts in Cambodia and sanitation services in Goma where funding cuts have disrupted critical development initiatives.²⁸⁶ These examples are just two instances of thousands but illustrate how development assistance functions not only as humanitarian support but also as a tool of stability, cooperation, and influence. As U.S. involvement declines, other actors may fill the gap, but the transition is likely to create instability and uncertainty in global development efforts. Ultimately, the future of development assistance will depend on whether the U.S. returns to viewing foreign aid as a central component of foreign policy or commits fully toward a more limited role in global development.

²⁸⁶ Human Rights Watch, "US: Trump Administration Guts Foreign Aid," February 28, 2025 (citing 5,800 USAID contract awards and 4,100 State Department grants terminated), available at [hrw.org](https://www.hrw.org)

From Markets to Microtargeting: How Algorithms Shape Politics and Society

Branagh Morton

Overview

In the 18th century, labor markets evolved from mercantilism and the belief in finite wealth to a free-market system, which initiated from the onset of the Industrial Revolution.²⁸⁷ English philosopher Adam Smith outlined the concept of capitalism and free markets, as individuals who produce efficient markets creating a complex system that cannot be understood or manipulated.²⁸⁸ However, technological advancements in the digital economy created a fundamental shift that signaled the start of a new era – the age of surveillance capitalism. Surveillance capitalism differs from traditional capitalism because digital platforms no longer participate in markets; they actively monitor and analyze user behavior to predict and control future actions. Major surveillance capitalists, such as Meta, Google, and TikTok, are now in a competition to gather data that contains information on consumers to track and predict behavior.²⁸⁹ This has led markets to become what is known as “behavioral future markets,” where advertisers now pay to access predictions on what a consumer is likely to buy based on data from surveillance capitalists rather than to gain their attention.²⁹⁰ Ultimately, this shift marks the redesign of capitalism, where digital platforms go beyond facilitating markets as they actively shape behavior and decision-making through using data-led systems .

These rapidly occurring changes suggest that online platforms have an increased role in shaping informational channels that individuals use to make decisions. Research on Gen Z consumption patterns shows that algorithmically curated content encourages impulsive purchases, leading this generation to be deemed as the most materialistic generation yet.²⁹¹ However, these implications have extended beyond consumer behavior. Since algorithms determine what content users view, they also serve as a form of algorithmic governance, influencing visibility and behavioral norms across social media. Instagram’s AI-driven algorithms show how social media platforms function as private regulators of digital information

²⁸⁷Folsom, Burton W. 1996. *The Industrial Revolution and Free Trade*. Irvington-On-Hudson, Ny: Foundation For Economic Education.

²⁸⁸ Zuboff, Shoshana. 2019. *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for the Future at the New Frontier of Power*. London: Profile Books.

²⁸⁹ Zuboff, Shoshana. 2019. *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for the Future at the New Frontier of Power*. London: Profile Books.

²⁹⁰ Zuboff, Shoshana. 2019. *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for the Future at the New Frontier of Power*. London: Profile Books.

²⁹¹ Djafarova, Elmira, and Tamar Bowes. 2021. “‘Instagram Made Me Buy It’: Generation Z Impulse Purchases in Fashion Industry.” *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services* 59 (102345). <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jretconser.2020.102345>.

environments.²⁹² By controlling content visibility and influencing behavioral norms, particularly among young users, these systems demonstrate the increased political power of technology companies and the threat they pose to democratic accountability and regulatory oversight.

Evolution of Recommender Systems to Algorithmic Ranking

Although recommender systems are often thought of as a technologically complex innovation, the basic concept of recommendations has existed long before the age of surveillance.²⁹³ For instance, early civilizations relied on recommendations such as agricultural advice for successful crop cultivation and ritual instructions regarding religion, making them essential for survival and showing the continuity of using social information to shape behavior. The first ever recommender system, “Tapestry,” was created in the mid 1970s, intended to distinguish unnecessary from important incoming emails through active filtering.²⁹⁴ By the mid 1990s, recommender systems expanded into digital marketplaces and were used to help identify the most suitable products for an individual based on a wide range of options and large quantities of information.

Today, these systems have been implemented into popular sites such as Amazon, Netflix, social networking sites, and more.²⁹⁵ Recommender systems didn’t develop on their own, as integrating AI, information retrieval, and human-computer interaction has helped increase both their efficiency and popularity.²⁹⁶ One of the earliest platforms to begin using EdgeRank, an algorithm that structures “the flow of information and communication on [the] News Feed”, was Facebook.²⁹⁷ This changed posts from being shown in chronological order to being prioritized based on their predicted relevance. This has evolved into social networking sites today, manipulating visibility through their software and control over the algorithm,²⁹⁸ meaning that what individuals see is not content getting neutrally distributed, but rather a feed shaped by the platform’s architecture.

²⁹² Djafarova, Elmira, and Tamar Bowes. 2021. “Instagram Made Me Buy It’: Generation Z Impulse Purchases in Fashion Industry.” *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services* 59 (102345). <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jretconser.2020.102345>.

²⁹³ Sharma, Richa, and Rahul Singh. 2016. “Evolution of Recommender Systems from Ancient Times to Modern Era: A Survey.” *Indian Journal of Science and Technology* 9 (20). <https://doi.org/10.17485/ijst/2016/v9i20/88005>.

²⁹⁴ Sharma, Richa, and Rahul Singh. 2016. “Evolution of Recommender Systems from Ancient Times to Modern Era: A Survey.” *Indian Journal of Science and Technology* 9 (20). <https://doi.org/10.17485/ijst/2016/v9i20/88005>.

²⁹⁵ Sharma, Richa, and Rahul Singh. 2016. “Evolution of Recommender Systems from Ancient Times to Modern Era: A Survey.” *Indian Journal of Science and Technology* 9 (20). <https://doi.org/10.17485/ijst/2016/v9i20/88005>.

²⁹⁶ Bucher, Taina. 2012. “Want to Be on the Top? Algorithmic Power and the Threat of Invisibility on Facebook.” *New Media & Society* 14 (7): 1164–80.

²⁹⁷ Bucher, Taina. 2012. “Want to Be on the Top? Algorithmic Power and the Threat of Invisibility on Facebook.” *New Media & Society* 14 (7): 1164–80.

²⁹⁸ Bucher, Taina. 2012. “Want to Be on the Top? Algorithmic Power and the Threat of Invisibility on Facebook.” *New Media & Society* 14 (7): 1164–80.

The recent shift to algorithm ranking has significant implications for how information is processed through digital. As platforms further turn to AI-driven personalization, information is no longer presented neutrally but instead based on engagement. This has led certain forms of content to be amplified to users while suppressing others, effectively leading algorithms to operate as gatekeepers that influence what information users see.

Algorithmic Governance

The increase in algorithms has led to a growing debate among policymakers regarding the political power that this has led technology companies to hold, especially over moderating news and current event coverage. Researchers studying social media platforms have noted that the algorithmic ranking systems used on sites such as Instagram, Facebook, etc., structure the flow of information, significantly affecting what users are encountering in their media environments on a daily basis.²⁹⁹

A consequence of algorithmic governance is that private technology is now more concentrated and has increased gatekeeping power. In the past, media companies such as newspapers and broadcasters had the main roles in shaping the flow of information. However, the central gatekeepers today are now algorithmic platforms, determining which messages gain exposure and which ones stay hidden—essentially functioning as “custodians of the Internet.”³⁰⁰ In 2026, *The Guardian* reported results from an investigation in England showing that children had been “bombarded” with ads recommending harmful products, including “weight-loss drugs, steroids, and skin-whitening chemicals.”³⁰¹ This is not incidental, but rather a result of social networking sites and apps choosing to prioritize engagement and revenue from advertising. One in five children either bought or consumed weight-loss food products, and 8% of the same group additionally bought or tried weight-loss pills without a prescription.³⁰² Their findings show the need for governments to create and enforce stronger regulations, especially when it comes to more vulnerable population groups such as children.

In order to respond to these changes, governments at a global level have begun to debate and implement policies to increase oversight over platforms using AI-driven algorithms.

²⁹⁹ Gillespie, Tarleton. 2018. *Custodians of the Internet : Platforms, Content Moderation, and the Hidden Decisions That Shape Soci.* New Haven Yale University Press.

³⁰⁰ Gillespie, Tarleton. 2018. *Custodians of the Internet : Platforms, Content Moderation, and the Hidden Decisions That Shape Soci.* New Haven Yale University Press.

³⁰¹ Bawden, Anna. 2026. “Children in England ‘Bombarded’ with Online Ads for Harmful Products.” *The Guardian*. *The Guardian*. February 10, 2026.

<https://www.theguardian.com/media/2026/feb/10/children-promotion-weight-loss-drugs-steroids-skin-whitening-creams-social-media>.

³⁰² Bawden, Anna. 2026. “Children in England ‘Bombarded’ with Online Ads for Harmful Products.” *The Guardian*. *The Guardian*. February 10, 2026.

<https://www.theguardian.com/media/2026/feb/10/children-promotion-weight-loss-drugs-steroids-skin-whitening-creams-social-media>.

Initiatives such as the Digital Service Act, created by the European Union, have introduced transparency and accountability standards for digital platforms when it comes to recommendation systems and the use of content moderation.³⁰³ In the U.S. specifically, legislative proposals and legal cases have focused on how social media algorithms influence users.

A current U.S. court case involving the head of Instagram, Adam Mosseri, is investigating whether the design of Instagram is causing a mental health crisis amongst the youth.³⁰⁴ Due to young children having the ability to easily access social media and Instagram's limited accountability in moderating content pushed out, several parents of deceased children have additionally spoken out that the methods used to maximize engagement ultimately led to their deaths. In this case as well, the key issue is not exposure to advertisements, but the AI-personalized content that causes appearance-based material to be surfaced on their feeds. The plaintiff's side argues that the app's features, such as the endless scroll, led her to become addicted and spend copious amounts of time consuming content that promoted unrealistic beauty standards. This resulted in increased levels of depression and body dysmorphia as the proclaimed "social media addiction" normalized extreme behaviors such as plastic surgery and other cosmetic procedures.³⁰⁵ Although social media platforms have an economic incentive to gain revenue from ads, the main force resulting in consequences to its users are shown to be the algorithm-based recommendation system that controls what content its users see. In the case of Instagram, their use of AI algorithms has curated content through engagement prediction and behavioral tracking, determining their feeds without relying on paid advertisements.³⁰⁶ Understanding the use of algorithmic governance has become essential to act on the overall power dynamics that exist in modern-day digital platforms.

Microtargeting and Civic Participation

Since the start of the digital era in campaigning, political communication is now significantly more precise than when mass broadcasting was the only available option. User data, such as one's demographic, geographic location, and gender, allows campaigns to microtarget specific groups and create more specific messages, increasing the effectiveness of their

³⁰³ "Digital Services Act | Shaping Europe's Digital Future." 2024. Europa.eu. 2024. <https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/policies/digital-services-act>.

³⁰⁴ Reuters Staff. 2026. "Instagram's Leader to Testify in Court on App Design, Youth Mental Health." *Reuters*, February 11, 2026. <https://www.reuters.com/legal/litigation/instagrams-leader-testify-court-app-design-youth-mental-health-2026-02-11>

³⁰⁵ Reuters Staff. 2026. "Instagram's Leader to Testify in Court on App Design, Youth Mental Health." *Reuters*, February 11, 2026.

<https://www.reuters.com/legal/litigation/instagrams-leader-testify-court-app-design-youth-mental-health-2026-02-11>

³⁰⁶ Cotter, Kelley. 2019. "Playing the Visibility Game: How Digital Influencers and Algorithms Negotiate Influence on Instagram." *New Media & Society* 21 (4): 895–913. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444818815684>.

messaging.³⁰⁷ The ability for organizations to target political messages has raised concerns about transparency, as not all messages seen by individuals are visible to the general public.³⁰⁸ Consequently, monitoring messaging accuracy or equality becomes increasingly difficult.

Conforming to trends, political or not, also influences individual ideology.³⁰⁹ The way media-based subcultures and trends operate on social networking sites has further developed due to algorithms, as well as how users conform and participate in online trends or movements that are pushed out on their feeds. As microtrends evolve and more posts under specific hashtags are created, research findings consistently reflect that posts belonging to a specific microtrend were highly consistent with one another, and that users put a strong emphasis on adhering to the “correct” display of a microtrend, and policing was common.³¹⁰ Results also indicated that users may attempt to create new microtrends based on elements of their own identity.³¹¹ Overall, this suggests that platform-driven incentives become integrated into how individuals post or choose an aesthetic to partake in.

Based on these dynamics, when microtargeting and trend conformity intersect, broader implications for civic participation become evident. Different versions of political reality emerge when messages are highly specific to particular audiences, which are influenced by campaign strategy and algorithms amplifying particular information. While this may not mean that users are misinformed, it suggests polarization among public opinion may increase when they are not viewing the same messages. Similarly, trends pushed out by the algorithm influence political expression on digital platforms.³¹² When users are influenced to conform to certain formats, aesthetics, or narratives to increase their reach, political participation may become influenced by norms instead of individual beliefs. In turn, users are potentially encouraged to present information in ways that seek out maximum engagement instead.

Democratic & Political Implications:

³⁰⁷ Tappin, Ben M., Chloe Wittenberg, Luke B. Hewitt, Adam J. Berinsky, and David G. Rand. 2023. “Quantifying the Potential Persuasive Returns to Political Microtargeting.” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America* 120 (25): e2216261120. <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2216261120>.

³⁰⁸ Kreiss, Daniel, and SHANNON C. MCGREGOR. 2017. “Technology Firms Shape Political Communication: The Work of Microsoft, Facebook, Twitter, and Google with Campaigns during the 2016 U.S. Presidential Cycle.” *Political Communication* 35 (2): 155–77. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10584609.2017.1364814>.

³⁰⁹ Bimo, Sara, and Aparajita Bhandari. 2023. “ALGORITHMS, AESTHETICS and the CHANGING NATURE of CULTURAL CONSUMPTION ONLINE.” *AoIR Selected Papers of Internet Research*, December. <https://doi.org/10.5210/spir.v2023i0.13397>.

³¹⁰ Bimo, Sara, and Aparajita Bhandari. 2023. “ALGORITHMS, AESTHETICS and the CHANGING NATURE of CULTURAL CONSUMPTION ONLINE.” *AoIR Selected Papers of Internet Research*, December. <https://doi.org/10.5210/spir.v2023i0.13397>.

³¹¹ Bimo, Sara, and Aparajita Bhandari. 2023. “ALGORITHMS, AESTHETICS and the CHANGING NATURE of CULTURAL CONSUMPTION ONLINE.” *AoIR Selected Papers of Internet Research*, December. <https://doi.org/10.5210/spir.v2023i0.13397>.

³¹² Bimo, Sara, and Aparajita Bhandari. 2023. “ALGORITHMS, AESTHETICS and the CHANGING NATURE of CULTURAL CONSUMPTION ONLINE.” *AoIR Selected Papers of Internet Research*, December. <https://doi.org/10.5210/spir.v2023i0.13397>.

Further research currently shows that algorithmically curated information intersects with democratic processes. Depending on how AI is designed and regulated, its systems have both positive and negative implications. A concern that many have is the extent to which algorithmic curation limits the amount of information that an individual may be exposed to. These “filter bubbles”³¹³ reinforce existing beliefs since the content a user previously engages with influences what they will continue to see. As a result, ideological segregation on online platforms remains more prevalent, and users gain decreased exposure to diverse viewpoints.³¹⁴ Empirical findings, however, show mixed results. Actively consuming content on social media platforms may instead increase incidental exposure to alternate viewpoints, especially when individuals consume content shared by those they have weak ties with (acquaintances, mutual friends, etc).³¹⁵ These findings imply that recommender systems may not form echo chambers, but potentially change the way that users come across information that opposes their original perspective.³¹⁶ Ultimately, while algorithms do not entirely limit information from multiple perspectives, it restructures the conditions that lead users to encounter differing viewpoints.

Conclusion

The developments in social networking sites and the introduction of AI recommender systems in the 21st century demonstrate how digital environments have reconstructed social norms and political power. Information distributed in the media is becoming increasingly filtered at the individual level instead of equal output through shared, observable channels. While this does not prevent access to diverse perspectives and content, it alters the systems and structure through which information is distributed. Consequently, the relationship between individual users, political institutions, and markets becomes increasingly mediated by the design of social media platforms and less transparent. This shift has redefined the conditions under which political participation and public discourse take place, shaping the conditions under which opinions are formed and expressed. As new technology continues to change social media, holding these sites with algorithmic systems accountable will become increasingly necessary to preserve democratic processes and informed civic participation.

³¹³ Samuels, Mark Gregory. 2012. “Review: The Filter Bubble: What the Internet Is Hiding from You by Eli Pariser.” *InterActions: UCLA Journal of Education and Information Studies* 8 (2). <https://doi.org/10.5070/d482011835>.

³¹⁴ Samuels, Mark Gregory. 2012. “Review: The Filter Bubble: What the Internet Is Hiding from You by Eli Pariser.” *InterActions: UCLA Journal of Education and Information Studies* 8 (2). <https://doi.org/10.5070/d482011835>.

³¹⁵ Bakshy, Eytan, Solomon Messing, and Lada Adamic. 2015. “Exposure to Ideologically Diverse News and Opinion on Facebook.” *Science* 348 (6239): 1130–32. <https://doi.org/10.1126/science.aaa1160>.

³¹⁶ Bakshy, Eytan, Solomon Messing, and Lada Adamic. 2015. “Exposure to Ideologically Diverse News and Opinion on Facebook.” *Science* 348 (6239): 1130–32. <https://doi.org/10.1126/science.aaa1160>.

One Country, Two Economies: London, Brexit, and the Divide Within

Olivia Ray

Introduction

In an era defined by globalization, economic distinctions between countries are often blurred, creating the idea of a borderless world. Yet, in the United Kingdom (UK), the same process has had the opposite effect, fracturing national identity from within rather than dissolving it. This concept is particularly prevalent in London, as the city's economic and cultural ties extend beyond Britain itself. London serves as an attractive hub for international trade and global finance, positioning itself as a key node in the global economy.³¹⁷ However, the 2016 referendum on the British Exit or Brexit unveiled a stark divide between London and the rest of the country.³¹⁸ While globalization is credited with fostering a cohesive global society, it appears to have turned London into a globally oriented hub, exacerbating the existing political and cultural divisions within Britain.

The capital city of England stands as one of the clearest beneficiaries of globalization, as it has developed into one of the world's leading financial centers. With institutions clustered in areas like the City of London, facilitating trade, investment, and international banking, the city plays a pivotal role in global finance. The City of London, also known as the square mile, is London's financial district.³¹⁹ Originally founded by the Romans and home to Britain's oldest government, it serves a crucial role in the development of the rest of modern London today.³²⁰ In fact, it is the central hub for global finance, driving economic growth across the wider city. However, it is important to note that not all have shared the same prosperity as London. Rather, the uneven gains of globalization have deepened regional divides and heightened tensions over sovereignty and identity.

The Brexit Breaking Point

After several years of debate over the UK's relationship with Europe and concerns over immigration and sovereignty, the impacts of globalization finally reached a tipping point. On June 23, 2016, the United Kingdom held a landmark referendum on a decision regarding its membership of the European Union (EU).³²¹ Voters were faced with the question of deciding

³¹⁷ Greater London Authority. Draft Economic Evidence Base 2016. London, 2016.

³¹⁸ Greater London Authority. Draft Economic Evidence Base 2016. London, 2016.

³¹⁹ City of London Corporation. "Our Role in London." *City of London*, 17 Apr. 2023, www.cityoflondon.gov.uk/about-us/about-the-city-of-london-corporation/our-role-in-london .

³²⁰ Editors, Britannica . "City of London | Borough, London, United Kingdom." *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 12 Feb. 2026, www.britannica.com/place/City-of-London .

³²¹ Zaken, Ministerie van Algemene. "What Is Brexit?" *Www.government.nl*, 30 Aug. 2018, www.government.nl/topics/european-union/question-and-answer/what-is-brexit .

whether the UK should remain a member of the EU or leave it. The discussion to exit the EU was not something triggered by a mere moment, but rather emerged from a convergence of longstanding concerns regarding national sovereignty and the costs of unchecked globalization.

This referendum revealed a clear geographic divide within Britain. London voted decisively to remain within the EU, with almost 60% of its voters in favor.³²² This made it the only region in all of England where a majority were in support of membership.³²³ The voting outcome in London reflected its position as a global city whose economy appears to be deeply interconnected with international markets and the free movement of labor. Hence, for many London residents, remaining within the EU represented not only economic stability but also continued access to global networks that sustain the city's economic prosperity. Additionally, London's workforce, characterized by high levels of education and international mobility, benefited from the free movement of people, enabling businesses to attract talent from across Europe.³²⁴ As a result, remaining in the EU was widely perceived within London as essential to maintaining economic dynamism and global competitiveness.

In contrast, many regions outside of London also experienced globalization and, by extension, EU membership through a different lens. In regions with particularly older populations, weaker ties to international migration, and greater skepticism toward globalization were more receptive to the "leave" message.³²⁵ These areas often prioritized national sovereignty and control over borders, viewing EU membership as a constraint on Britain's ability to make decisions independent of EU institutions.³²⁶ The aftermath of the referendum further entrenched these divisions. In addition to geographic differences, other factors like age, education, and attitudes toward immigration shaped voting patterns. It was evident that the younger and more cosmopolitan voters opted to "remain" within the EU, and the older or more nationalistically oriented voters were more likely to support "leaving" the EU.³²⁷ Ultimately, the vote fueled ongoing discussions over Britain's identity and governance by exposing and widening gaps between cosmopolitan metropolis and locally focused regions.

³²² News, ITV. "At a Glance: How London Voted in the EU Referendum." *ITV News*, 24 June 2016, www.itv.com/news/london/2016-06-24/at-a-glance-how-london-voted-in-the-eu-referendum?utm_source .

³²³ "London's Global and European Future: A Response to the Brexit Paper." *London City Hall*, 15 Mar. 2017, www.london.gov.uk/who-we-are/what-mayor-does/londons-global-and-european-future-response-brexit-paper

³²⁴ "London's Global and European Future: A Response to the Brexit Paper." *London City Hall*, 15 Mar. 2017, www.london.gov.uk/who-we-are/what-mayor-does/londons-global-and-european-future-response-brexit-paper

³²⁵ Igwe, Paul Agu. 2022. "The Paradox of Brexit and the Consequences of Taking Back Control" *Societies* 12, no. 2: 69. <https://doi.org/10.3390/soc12020069> .

³²⁶ Igwe, Paul Agu. 2022. "The Paradox of Brexit and the Consequences of Taking Back Control" *Societies* 12, no. 2: 69. <https://doi.org/10.3390/soc12020069> .

³²⁷ Igwe, Paul Agu. 2022. "The Paradox of Brexit and the Consequences of Taking Back Control" *Societies* 12, no. 2: 69. <https://doi.org/10.3390/soc12020069> .

Although in 2016, the majority of those who voted in the UK chose to leave the EU, Brexit was not immediate.³²⁸ The process officially began in 2017 after the government triggered Article 50 of the EU treaty (which sets how states who are members may withdraw from the EU), prompting the two-year countdown of the UK formally leaving the EU.³²⁹ After several years of parliamentary conflicts and extensions, the UK finally left the EU on December 31, 2020.³³⁰

Political Leadership and the Brexit Divide

Not only was the divide between London and the rest of the UK reflected in voting patterns, but it was also quite visible in political leadership. Serving as The Prime Minister until 2016, David Cameron, strongly supported remaining within the EU. In a speech where he pleaded his case for Britain to stay, he emphasized, “being a member of the European Union also gives us strength in the world.”³³¹ This reflected the views of many economically globalized regions, including London. Following the majority “leave” vote, Prime Minister Theresa May, serving from 2016 to 2019, despite having personally supported the cause to “remain” in the past, declared her famous “Brexit means Brexit” slogan, supporting the country’s exit.³³² This ushered in a significant shift toward prioritizing national sovereignty and implementing the UK’s departure from the EU.³³³ The simmering tensions in the country became even more pronounced under Boris Johnson, a prominent figure in the campaign to leave the EU. Johnson’s popular slogan, “Get Brexit Done,” appealed strongly to voters in smaller towns and previously industrial areas, many of whom felt excluded from the benefits of a globalized country.³³⁴ His political success in the 2019 election cycle was especially visible in traditional Labour-Party supporting areas in Northern England, demonstrating how deeply Brexit had reshaped political alignments.³³⁵ On the other hand, current Mayor of London, Sadiq Khan has openly criticized Brexit and repeatedly emphasized the economic risks that have followed for London, even

³²⁸ Walker, Nigel. “Brexit Timeline: Events Leading to the UK’s Exit from the European Union.” UK Parliament, no. 7960, 6 Jan. 2021, commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-7960/.

³²⁹ Walker, Nigel. “Brexit Timeline: Events Leading to the UK’s Exit from the European, the Labour Party Union.” UK Parliament, no. 7960, 6 Jan. 2021, commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-7960/.

³³⁰ Walker, Nigel. “Brexit Timeline: Events Leading to the UK’s Exit from the European Union.” UK Parliament, no. 7960, 6 Jan. 2021, commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-7960 identities/

³³¹ Stone, Jon. “EU Referendum: Full Transcript of David Cameron’s Last-Ditch Plea for Britain to Remain.” *The Independent*, 21 June 2016, www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/eu-referendum-brexit-latest-live-david-cameron-full-speech-remain-leave-a7093426.html.

³³² Trust, Federal. “Taking Back Control? The EU Referendum, Parliament and the “May Doctrine” - the Federal Trust.” The Federal Trust, 17 Oct. 2016, fedtrust.co.uk/taking-back-control/.

³³³ Trust, Federal. “Taking Back Control? The EU Referendum, Parliament and the “May Doctrine” - the Federal Trust.” The Federal Trust, 17 Oct. 2016, fedtrust.co.uk/taking-back-control/.

³³⁴ Perrigo, Billy. ““Get Brexit Done.” the Slogan That Won Britain’s Election.” *Time*, 13 Dec. 2019, time.com/5749478/get-brexit-done-slogan-uk-election/.

³³⁵ Perrigo, Billy. ““Get Brexit Done.” the Slogan That Won Britain’s Election.” *Time*, 13 Dec. 2019, time.com/5749478/get-brexit-done-slogan-uk-election/.

recently calling for a second referendum.³³⁶ These diverging perspectives among British leadership illustrate how the impacts of globalization have not only divided voters but also reshaped political agendas and identities across the nation.

Economic Inequality and Regional Disparities

It is clear that London has flourished under globalization, but its prosperity has not been evenly distributed across the United Kingdom. Since 2008, financial markets have increasingly treated the UK as two distinct economies, creating a stark divide between London and its surrounding areas and the rest of the country.³³⁷ The city's economic success is largely driven by finance and international investment, widening the gap between London and other regions of the nation, particularly in areas such as the North of England and former industrial areas.³³⁸ Although only a decade ago the gap between the regions was modest, with the recent surge in London wages, as of 2025, the city has greatly surpassed the North's more tempered rise.³³⁹

This uneven development has fostered a sense of economic marginalization outside the capital. For many voters in these regions, globalization became synonymous not with opportunity, but with displacement and neglect. Monetary policies that have been implemented with the intention of stimulating the UK economy have disproportionately benefited London, leaving other regions to be forced into a long-term "junk bond territory."³⁴⁰ Essentially, this implies that areas outside of London are frequently viewed as financially risky, leading investors to avoid these places altogether, deepening the inequality.³⁴¹ The divergence is fueled by "agglomeration effects," which is when high-value, knowledge-intensive firms in finance and creative sectors cluster together to increase productivity.³⁴² For instance, a major global institution such as JPMorgan Chase is preparing to build a multibillion pound tower in Canary Wharf, attracting highly skilled workers from across the UK and beyond.³⁴³ This clustering effect

³³⁶ Maddox, David. "Sadiq Khan Calls on Labour to Reverse Brexit and Rejoin EU at next Election." *The Independent*, 19 Mar. 2026, www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/brexit-sadiq-khan-labour-eu-b2941564.html .

³³⁷ Daams, Michiel, et al. "New Research Reveals Deep Financial Divide between London and the Rest of the UK - the Productivity Institute." *The Productivity Institute*, 15 July 2025,

www.productivity.ac.uk/news/new-research-reveals-deep-financial-divide-between-london-and-the-rest-of-the-uk/ .

³³⁸ Daams, Michiel, et al. "New Research Reveals Deep Financial Divide between London and the Rest of the UK - the Productivity Institute." *The Productivity Institute*, 15 July 2025,

www.productivity.ac.uk/news/new-research-reveals-deep-financial-divide-between-london-and-the-rest-of-the-uk/ .

³³⁹ Petch, Gabe. "The Cost of Living Divide - the North vs London." *Mag-North.com*, MagNorth Magazine, 11 Mar. 2025, www.mag-north.com/posts/the-cost-of-living-divide-the-north-vs-london---a-decade-of-data .

³⁴⁰ Daams, Michiel, et al. "New Research Reveals Deep Financial Divide between London and the Rest of the UK - the Productivity Institute." *The Productivity Institute*, 15 July 2025,

www.productivity.ac.uk/news/new-research-reveals-deep-financial-divide-between-london-and-the-rest-of-the-uk/ .

³⁴¹ Daams, Michiel, et al. "New Research Reveals Deep Financial Divide between London and the Rest of the UK - the Productivity Institute." *The Productivity Institute*, 15 July 2025,

www.productivity.ac.uk/news/new-research-reveals-deep-financial-divide-between-london-and-the-rest-of-the-uk/ .

³⁴² Brown, Richard, and Nicolas Bosetti. "Open City: London after Brexit." *Centre for London*, Mar. 2017.

³⁴³ Kaye, John E. "JPMorgan Plans Multibillion-Pound Tower in Canary Wharf." *The European*, CP Media Global Limited, 1 Dec. 2025, the-european.eu/story-53614/jpmorgan-plans-multibillion-pound-tower-in-canary-wharf.html

enables London-based industries to generate greater productivity and offer a substantial wage premium, attracting even more talent and investment into the capital, simultaneously depriving other parts of the country of the same opportunities.³⁴⁴

Although the benefits of open markets and international trade were factors that seemed distant, elements such as job insecurity and wage stagnation were felt more immediately by the people outside of London. Through this lens, the Brexit referendum functioned as a vessel through which these grievances could be expressed. The communities in more rural, less well-off areas felt the impact of the long-term industrial decline, and weak labor markets experienced a “double disadvantage,” essentially.³⁴⁵ This is due to the fact that not only did the individuals seriously impacted lack the skills needed to compete in a globalized economy, but they also resided in areas with fewer opportunities for advancement.

Global City and its Divided Nation

Beyond economics, globalization has also contributed to deepening cultural and political divisions within Britain. London’s identity as a global city is reflected not only in its economy but also in its demographic composition. The city is one of the most diverse in the world, shaped by decades of immigration and cultural exchange.³⁴⁶ According to a 2021 census, London was labeled as the most ethnically diverse region in England and Wales.³⁴⁷ Although 86% of the population in England identifies as white, only 54% appears to do so in London.³⁴⁸ 41% of London’s population was born outside of the UK. As many consider London a vibrant and lively city, much of this diversity can be attributed to its robust job market, which is constantly drawing in young professionals, as well as world-class universities attracting large student populations.³⁴⁹ It is safe to assume that London’s global orientation and livelihood continue to attract a younger, more diverse population, distinguishing it from the rest of England.

In contrast, many areas outside London have maintained a stronger attachment to traditional notions of British identity, often emphasizing national sovereignty, cultural continuity and local community. These differing perspectives have translated into contrasting political

³⁴⁴ Brown, Richard, and Nicolas Bosetti. “Open City: London after Brexit.” *Centre for London*, Mar. 2017.

³⁴⁵ Brown, Richard, and Nicolas Bosetti. “Open City: London after Brexit.” *Centre for London*, Mar. 2017

³⁴⁶ Office for National Statistics. “Regional Ethnic Diversity.” www.ethnicity-Facts-Figures.service.gov.uk, GOV.UK, 22 Dec. 2022, www.ethnicity-facts-figures.service.gov.uk/uk-population-by-ethnicity/national-and-regional-populations/regional-ethnic-diversity/latest/.

³⁴⁷ Office for National Statistics. “Regional Ethnic Diversity.” www.ethnicity-Facts-Figures.service.gov.uk, GOV.UK, 22 Dec. 2022, www.ethnicity-facts-figures.service.gov.uk/uk-population-by-ethnicity/national-and-regional-populations/regional-ethnic-diversity/latest/.

³⁴⁸ Ohumu, Stephanie. “How Different Is London from the Rest of the UK? - Point Sigma.” *Point-Sigma.com*, 2024, www.point-sigma.com/blog/how-different-is-london-from-the-rest-of-the-uk/.

³⁴⁹ Ohumu, Stephanie. “How Different Is London from the Rest of the UK? - Point Sigma.” *Point-Sigma.com*, 2024, www.point-sigma.com/blog/how-different-is-london-from-the-rest-of-the-uk/.

attitudes, particularly on issues such as immigration and the role of the EU. Surveys have indicated that individuals who supported leaving the EU were significantly more likely to favor restrictions on immigration and express concerns regarding the country's authentic culture.³⁵⁰ Scholars such as UCL's Professor Tak Wing Chan argue that support for Brexit was driven not solely by economic hardship but also by more nationalistic views about Britain's place in Europe.³⁵¹ This furthers the notion that the British referendum exposed not only an economic divide but also a deeply rooted cultural one. London is more globally integrated with a diverse population and a more open outlook on issues such as immigration. In contrast, many other regions in the country expressed a desire for greater national control and the preservation of traditional social and cultural norms. London's global orientation continues to place it at odds with parts of the country that view globalization with skepticism, creating an ongoing tension between competing national narratives.

Broader Implications

The case of London and Brexit offers important insights into the broader consequences of globalization in advanced economies. While globalization has undoubtedly generated wealth and innovation, it has also produced uneven outcomes that can destabilize national cohesion. Brexit highlights the growing tension between global economic integration and democratic accountability. More specifically, decision-making increasingly falls in the hands of institutions such as the EU, and many citizens feel disconnected from the processes that shape their economic futures. Political economist Dani Rodrik has described this dynamic as a fundamental "trilemma," in which deep globalization, national sovereignty, and democratic politics cannot be fully reconciled simultaneously.³⁵² Essentially, the sense of distance felt by impacted individuals can erode trust in political institutions and fuel demands for greater national control. The Brexit vote can thus be understood not only as a rejection of the European Union, but as part of a broader struggle to reassert democratic agency in the face of global economic forces.

Similar patterns can be observed in other countries where global cities thrive while peripheral regions struggle. For example, in the United States, cities such as New York City and San Francisco have emerged as dominant wealth generators while many former industrial regions in the Midwest continue to face economic decline and job displacement.³⁵³ Research

³⁵⁰ Schumacher, Shannon. "Brexit Divides the UK, but so Do Partisanship and Ideology | Pew Research Center." *Pew Research Center*, 28 Oct. 2019, www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2019/10/28/brexit-divides-the-uk-but-partisanship-and-ideology-are-still-key-factors/?utm

³⁵¹ Office for National Statistics. "Regional Ethnic Diversity." *Www.ethnicity-Facts-Figures.service.gov.uk*, GOV.UK, 22 Dec. 2022, www.ethnicity-facts-figures.service.gov.uk/uk-population-by-ethnicity/national-and-regional-populations/regional-ethnic-diversity/latest/.

³⁵² Rodrik, Dani. *The Globalization Paradox*.

³⁵³ Muro, Mark, and Yang You. "Superstars, Rising Stars, and the Rest: Pandemic Trends and Shifts in the Geography of Tech." *Brookings*, 8 Mar. 2022.

conducted by the Brookings Institution highlights how economic growth has become increasingly concentrated in a small number of “superstar cities,” intensifying regional inequality.³⁵⁴ This reinforces the idea that the UK’s experience is not unique, but part of a broader global pattern that further highlights the need for policies that will more equitably distribute the gains of globalization and address the concerns of those who feel left behind. Without such efforts, the divisions exposed by Brexit are likely to persist and potentially intensify.

Conclusion

Globalization has transformed London into a powerful global hub, elevating its status as a center of finance, culture, and international connectivity. However, this transformation has come at a cost. Rather than uniting the UK within a shared global framework, globalization has accentuated internal divisions, separating London from much of the rest of the country economically, culturally and politically. The Brexit referendum brought these divisions into sharp focus, revealing a nation divided between those who benefit from global integration and those who feel marginalized by it. London’s overwhelming support for remaining in the European Union reflects its dependence on and alignment with global networks, while the broader national vote to leave signals a desire to reclaim control and address longstanding inequalities.

Ultimately, the story of London and Brexit challenges the notion that globalization inherently fosters unity. Instead, it demonstrates that without careful management and inclusive policies, globalization can fracture national identity and deepen existing divides. As Britain continues to navigate its post-Brexit future, the tension between its global city and the rest of the nation remains a defining feature of its political and economic landscape.

www.brookings.edu/articles/superstars-rising-stars-and-the-rest-pandemic-trends-and-shifts-in-the-geography-of-tech/

³⁵⁴ Atkinson, Robert D., et al. “The Case for Growth Centers: How to Spread Tech Innovation across America.” *Brookings*, 9 Dec. 2019, www.brookings.edu/articles/growth-centers-how-to-spread-tech-innovation-across-america/

The Chancay Port Dispute: China, Peru, and Geopolitics in Latin American Infrastructure

Ashley Soto

Introduction

Rich in history and culture, Peru's political landscape has long been shaped by cycles of instability and upheaval, revealing deep structural challenges within its government. Peru's location along the Pacific coast positions it as a critical hub for trans-Pacific trade, linking South America to global markets, particularly in Asia. Consequently, it has become a focal point of international economic interest, especially from China, which has expanded its presence through infrastructure investment and trade partnerships. Historically, Peru relied primarily on the Port of Callao, which handles 75% to 80% of the nation's container traffic, making it one of the top ports in Latin America.³⁵⁵ To expand its trading capabilities, Peru has actively sought to strengthen relations with other foreign nations, supporting the growth of its developing economy and enhancing its connections to markets across the Americas, Asia, and Europe.³⁵⁶ Peru also maintains strong economic ties with the United States, reinforced by the 2009 Trade Promotion Agreement, which has significantly increased bilateral trade.³⁵⁷ While Peru has maintained relations with China for decades, recent developments in economic collaboration have heightened scrutiny within Peru, raising concerns about sovereignty and regulatory oversight.³⁵⁸

Established ports like Callao near Lima have long functioned as central trade hubs, but the emergence of new deep-water facilities such as the Chancay Port signal a major transformation in regional supply chain infrastructure.³⁵⁹ With its extensive coastline and strategic access to key shipping routes demonstrated by the success of Callao, Peru is strongly positioned for continued port development. The project is financed and operated primarily by COSCO Shipping Ports, China's state-owned shipping conglomerate.³⁶⁰ Opened in late 2024 as a

³⁵⁵ "Peru." 2024. United States Trade Representative. 2024.
https://ustr.gov/countries-regions/western-hemisphere/peru?utm_

³⁵⁶ "Peru." 2024. United States Trade Representative. 2024.
https://ustr.gov/countries-regions/western-hemisphere/peru?utm_

³⁵⁷ Office of the United States Trade Representative. n.d. "Peru Trade Promotion Agreement | United States Trade Representative." Ustr.gov. <https://ustr.gov/trade-agreements/free-trade-agreements/peru-tpa>.

³⁵⁸ 关晓萌. 2024. "China-Peru Ties Rooted in Common Aspirations." [Chinadaily.com.cn](https://global.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202406/25/WS6679f696a31095c51c50a90c.html). 2024. <https://global.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202406/25/WS6679f696a31095c51c50a90c.html>; "Callao, Peru | Major International Seaport of Peru." 2026. UNIS - Smarter Supply Chain. 2026. https://www.unisco.com/international-ports/callao-peru?utm_source.

³⁵⁹ "Callao Port | Port Operations | DP World." 2022. [Dpworld.com](https://www.dpworld.com/en/ports-terminals/peru/callao). DP World. 2022. <https://www.dpworld.com/en/ports-terminals/peru/callao>; "With Peru Port Project, China Gains a Foothold in America's Backyard." 2023. NBC News. November 15, 2023. <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/china-peru-chancay-port-rcna124564>.

³⁶⁰ 孙美真. 2024. "China, Peru Ready to Build New Land-Sea Corridor Connecting Latin America with Asia." [Www.gov.cn](https://english.www.gov.cn/english.www.gov.cn/news/202411/16/content_WS67383f28c6d0868f4e8ed0cd.html). 2024. https://english.www.gov.cn/english.www.gov.cn/news/202411/16/content_WS67383f28c6d0868f4e8ed0cd.html

flagship project of Beijing's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the port was intended to transform Peru into a major logistics hub connecting South America directly with Asia.³⁶¹ However, what began as a high-profile infrastructure collaboration has evolved into a political, economic, and regulatory dispute, raising concerns about national sovereignty, regulatory oversight, local impact, and geopolitical influence.³⁶² This paper examines the origins of this conflict, key disputes, and broader implications for Peru and the region.

Peru Government History

Peru has experienced persistent political instability in recent decades, including corruption scandals, frequent changes in leadership, and challenges to effective governance.³⁶³ These issues have shaped the country's capacity to manage foreign investment and maintain control over strategic national assets. At the same time, Peru's geographic location, abundant natural resources, and emerging economy have made it a target for foreign investment, particularly from countries seeking to expand trade and logistical networks in Latin America. Since the early 2000s, the country has faced multiple presidential impeachments, corruption investigations, and social unrest, which have weakened institutional oversight in key sectors, including infrastructure.³⁶⁴

Corruption continues to undermine Peru's public institutions, weaken public services, and contribute to environmental harm. Multiple former presidents have faced corruption charges, highlighting the issue's prevalence at the highest levels of government. The recently impeached President Dina Boluarte is also under investigation for allegedly receiving illegal campaign contributions and luxury gifts.³⁶⁵ As of May 2024, 51% of the members of Congress were reportedly under investigation for corruption and other crimes.³⁶⁶ Political instability persists, as interim leadership under Jose Jerí Ore has been overshadowed by additional allegations of

³⁶¹ "China's Massive Belt and Road Initiative | Council on Foreign Relations." 2019. Cfr.org. February 21, 2019. <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounders/chinas-massive-belt-and-road-initiative>.

³⁶² Rochabrun, Marcelo. 2026. "Trump Administration Warns Peru That a Chinese Port Is Costing Its Sovereignty." Bloomberg.com. Bloomberg. February 11, 2026. <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2026-02-11/trump-administration-warns-peru-that-a-chinese-port-is-costing-its-sovereignty?>

³⁶³ John Preston Moore, and Thomas M Davies. 2018. "Peru - Government and Society." In *Encyclopædia Britannica*. <https://www.britannica.com/place/Peru/Government-and-society>.

³⁶⁴ John Preston Moore, and Thomas M Davies. 2018. "Peru - Government and Society." In *Encyclopædia Britannica*. <https://www.britannica.com/place/Peru/Government-and-society>.

³⁶⁵ *World Report 2025: Rights Trends in Peru*. (2024, December 8). Human Rights Watch. <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2025/country-chapters/peru?>

³⁶⁶ *World Report 2025: Rights Trends in Peru*. (2024, December 8). Human Rights Watch. <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2025/country-chapters/peru?>

corruption and sexual assault, which he denies.³⁶⁷ Since the 2021 elections, Peru has had four different presidents; this continues to illustrate the country's ongoing political instability.³⁶⁸

In June, Congress's Constitutional Committee moved forward with a proposal to change the constitution and eliminate the National Board of Justice (JNJ).³⁶⁹ If this change is approved, lawmakers would gain the authority to appoint and remove electoral officials and other important public figures. At the time of reporting, the proposal had not yet been finalized. Removing the JNJ raises concerns because it could weaken judicial independence, giving politicians more influence over judges and prosecutors. It could also give Congress too much power by allowing it to control multiple parts of the government. Overall, getting rid of independent oversight institutions may weaken checks and balances and make it more difficult to hold government officials accountable.

Chancay Port and Sovereignty Concerns Amid Chinese

The Chancay Port is one of the busiest ports in South America outside of Brazil and is strategically located south of the Rímac River. It is naturally protected by the nearby San Lorenzo Island, as well as man-made breakwaters, making it well-suited for large-scale shipping.³⁷⁰ Peru's trade activity has also shown strong growth in recent years. In December 2025, the country recorded a positive trade balance, with exports exceeding imports, a trade balance of \$4.19 billion reflecting continued expansion in international commerce.³⁷¹ Overall, Peru's economic indicators highlight its role as a mid-sized global economy, with rankings in the top 50 worldwide for total GDP and exports, though its GDP per capita remains relatively low compared to more developed nations.³⁷²

China has expanded its economic influence globally and in Latin America over the past two decades through trade agreements, investment, and infrastructure projects under the Belt and Road Initiative.³⁷³ Beijing frames these investments as mutually beneficial, offering financial and

³⁶⁷ *World Report 2025: Rights Trends in Peru*. (2024, December 8). Human Rights Watch.

<https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2025/country-chapters/peru?>

³⁶⁸ Buschschlüter, Vanessa. 2026. "Peru Names New Interim President after Removal of José Jerí," February 19, 2026. <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cvgkp84mmmvo>.

³⁶⁹ Buschschlüter, Vanessa. 2026. "Peru Names New Interim President after Removal of José Jerí," February 19, 2026. <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cvgkp84mmmvo>.

³⁷⁰ Reuters. 2026. "New Port Lifts Peru's Exports to Record High in 2025." Baird Maritime / Work Boat World. February 4, 2026.

<https://www.bairdmaritime.com/shipping/ports/new-port-lifts-perus-exports-to-record-high-in-2025>.

³⁷¹ "Peru (PER) and China (CHN) Trade | the Observatory of Economic Complexity." 2022. The Observatory of Economic Complexity. <https://oec.world/en/profile/bilateral-country/per/partner/chn>.

³⁷² "Peru (PER) and China (CHN) Trade | the Observatory of Economic Complexity." 2022. The Observatory of Economic Complexity. 2022. <https://oec.world/en/profile/bilateral-country/per/partner/chn>.

³⁷³ "Peru (PER) and China (CHN) Trade | the Observatory of Economic Complexity." 2022. The Observatory of Economic Complexity. 2022. <https://oec.world/en/profile/bilateral-country/per/partner/chn>.

technical support to partner countries while strengthening long-term trade ties.³⁷⁴ Peru has emerged as a key partner in China's strategy to connect Asia with Latin America through maritime and logistical networks. The facility of the Port is designed to handle containerized cargo, bulk goods, and industrial materials. The port has facilitated the export of Peruvian minerals. Interestingly, Peru is a *major supplier* of copper ore to China, one of the world's biggest importers of the metal. In 2024, China imported about \$17.09 billion worth of copper ores and concentrates from Peru, making up a large share of Peru's copper exports to that country.³⁷⁵ China relies heavily on imported copper ore because its own domestic supplies are not enough to meet demand, especially for its large refining and manufacturing sectors.³⁷⁶ It also facilitates the export of agricultural products and other commodities to China and global markets, reducing freight costs and transit times.

However, the project has also generated controversy. A Peruvian court recently ruled that a national regulator does not have supervisory authority over the Chancay port, effectively limiting the government's oversight over a critical infrastructure asset.³⁷⁷ This decision has sparked domestic debate and international attention, with concerns about the potential erosion of Peruvian sovereignty over strategic economic facilities. The United States has expressed concern over Chinese ownership and limited Peruvian oversight of the Chancay Port. Former U.S. administration officials warned that the lack of regulatory control could compromise national security and strategic interests in the region.³⁷⁸ At the start of the twenty-first century, the United States accounted for roughly 24% of Peru's trade, while China represented less than 5%. By 2023, this balance had shifted dramatically: China's share had risen to 31%, whereas the United States' share had fallen to 17%.³⁷⁹ These interventions and statistics illustrate the growing geopolitical dimension of infrastructure investments in Latin America, where economic development projects intersect with global strategic competition.⁵ The Trump administration warned that Peru may be losing sovereignty over the Chinese-owned Chancay Port near Lima after a local judge ruled that the Port is exempt from some regulatory oversight. The U.S. State Department argued that Peru could become unable to properly supervise the port and criticized

³⁷⁴ "Peru (PER) and China (CHN) Trade | the Observatory of Economic Complexity." 2022. The Observatory of Economic Complexity. 2022. <https://oec.world/en/profile/bilateral-country/per/partner/chn>.

³⁷⁵ USGS. 2025. "MINERAL COMMODITY SUMMARIES 2025." <https://pubs.usgs.gov/periodicals/mcs2025/mcs2025.pdf>.

³⁷⁶ IUSGS. 2025. "MINERAL COMMODITY SUMMARIES 2025." <https://pubs.usgs.gov/periodicals/mcs2025/mcs2025.pdf>.

³⁷⁷ USGS. 2025. "MINERAL COMMODITY SUMMARIES 2025." <https://pubs.usgs.gov/periodicals/mcs2025/mcs2025.pdf>.

³⁷⁸ USGS. 2025. "MINERAL COMMODITY SUMMARIES 2025." <https://pubs.usgs.gov/periodicals/mcs2025/mcs2025.pdf>.

³⁷⁹ <https://www.facebook.com/bbcnews>. 2026. "Cuál Es La Presencia de China En Perú (Y La Ofensiva Del Gobierno de Trump Para Revertirla) - BBC News Mundo." BBC News Mundo. February 27, 2026. <https://www.bbc.com/mundo/articles/cn4gw9q23qvo>.

Chinese investment as a potential threat to national sovereignty, calling it a “cautionary tale” for the region.³⁸⁰

The Chancay port, which cost about \$1.3 billion and was inaugurated by Chinese President Xi Jinping in 2024, is operated by China’s Cosco Shipping Ports and is an important hub for trade between South America and China.³⁸¹ U.S. officials’ comments represent their strongest criticism of Peru’s close economic ties with China, its largest trading partner. Meanwhile, Peru’s infrastructure regulator, Ositrán, has opposed the court decision, warning that removing oversight could leave port users without adequate protection, especially since Chancay operates as a privately owned port rather than a public concession. In response, China has defended its investments, emphasizing the benefits for Peru’s trade and infrastructure development. Complementary projects, such as rail links connecting inland mining areas to the coast, further integrate the port into Peru’s logistical network.³⁸²

Conclusion

The dispute over the Chancay port shows the difficult balance Peru has to manage between foreign investment and national sovereignty. China presents the infrastructure project as an economic opportunity that benefits both sides. There are still concerns in Peru over regulation, transparency, and state control that highlight the challenges of ensuring that development does not come at the expense of national oversight. The reports mentioned also point to disagreements over how the port should be managed and who ultimately has decision-making power, which reflects broader fears about losing control over strategic infrastructure.

At the same time, the project shows how Peru’s economic relationships are shifting, with China playing a much larger role in trade and investment than in previous decades. This growing influence raises questions about dependency and how much leverage foreign actors may gain through projects like the Chancay Port. It also draws attention from other global powers, especially the United States, which sees China’s presence in Latin America as part of a larger competition for influence, prompting stronger strategic responses from Washington.

Overall, the Chancay port dispute highlights that major infrastructure projects are not just economic decisions, but also political ones. It shows why strong and effective government

³⁸⁰ <https://www.facebook.com/bbcnews>. 2026. “Cuál Es La Presencia de China En Perú (Y La Ofensiva Del Gobierno de Trump Para Revertirla) - BBC News Mundo.” BBC News Mundo. February 27, 2026. <https://www.bbc.com/mundo/articles/cn4gw9q23qvo>.

³⁸¹ Bloomberg. (2026, February 11). *U.S. Warns Peru is “Losing Sovereignty” Over Chinese-Owned Chancay Port*. GCaptain. <https://gcaptain.com/u-s-warns-peru-is-losing-sovereignty-over-chinese-owned-chancay-port/>

³⁸² Young, Andrew. 2026. “Peru Awards \$US 420m Freight Line Construction Contract.” *International Railway Journal*. March 3, 2026. <https://www.railjournal.com/regions/central-south-america/peru-awards-us-420m-freight-line-construction-contract/>

oversight is important so Peru can benefit from foreign investment while still protecting its own national interests and maintaining control over important assets.