**What Threatens Democracy in the United States Today?**

The United States was founded on ideals of representative government, individual liberty, and the rule of law. Yet, in recent years, observers have warned that **American democracy is under strain**. While the U.S. remains a functioning constitutional republic, multiple overlapping challenges are testing the strength of its institutions, the resilience of its norms, and the civic habits of its citizens.

Key concerns include **partisan polarization**, **voter suppression**, **disinformation**, **election subversion**, **declining trust in institutions**, and **the erosion of democratic norms** such as peaceful transfers of power and respect for judicial independence. Economic inequality, racial injustice, and threats of political violence also raise questions about who fully enjoys the promises of democracy—and who remains excluded.

Democracy is not self-sustaining. It depends on **public participation**, **transparent institutions**, **constitutional protections**, and **a shared commitment to democratic values**. By understanding the current threats and studying how democracies erode elsewhere, citizens can better protect the American system from decay and dysfunction.

**Key Terms and Definitions**

| **Term** | **Definition** |
| --- | --- |
| Democratic Norms | Unwritten rules and expectations that sustain democratic government, such as respect for elections and rule of law. |
| Partisan Polarization | The growing divide between political parties and their supporters, often leading to gridlock and distrust. |
| Voter Suppression | Efforts—legal or illegal—that discourage or prevent certain groups from voting. |
| Disinformation | False or misleading information spread to influence public opinion or sow confusion. |
| Election Subversion | Attempts to overturn or manipulate election outcomes outside legal and democratic processes. |
| Institutional Trust | Citizens’ confidence in public institutions like Congress, the courts, or the media. |
| Political Violence | The use or threat of violence to achieve political goals, including intimidation of public officials or voters. |
| Democratic Backsliding | The gradual decline in the quality of democracy, often through legal and institutional means rather than coups. |

**Orienting Question**

**What are the biggest threats to democracy in the United States today, and how can they be addressed through civic engagement and institutional reform?**

**Active Learning Exercises**

**Exercise 1: Case Study Analysis – Threats to Democracy**

**Prompt:**  
Choose one of the following real-world case studies and write a 500–700 word analysis explaining:

* What democratic principle was challenged?
* What actors or institutions were involved?
* What legal, institutional, or civic responses occurred?
* How could the threat be prevented in the future?

**Case Study Options:**

* The January 6th Capitol Riot and efforts to overturn the 2020 election
* The spread of disinformation during the COVID-19 pandemic
* Laws limiting ballot access in Georgia and other states post-2020
* Declining trust in the Supreme Court and concerns over judicial legitimacy
* The role of partisan gerrymandering in undermining fair representation

**Objective:**  
To identify and evaluate specific challenges to American democracy using real events and political analysis.

**Exercise 2: Constitutional Discussion – Safeguards and Gaps**

**Prompt:**  
In small groups, examine the U.S. Constitution and discuss:

* What protections exist for democratic processes (e.g., separation of powers, elections)?
* What *isn’t* clearly addressed—such as political norms, misinformation, or partisan abuse of power?
* Should the Constitution be amended to protect democracy more explicitly? Why or why not?

After discussion, each group presents one suggested reform or civic solution (e.g., expanding the Voting Rights Act, electoral reform, public media investment).

**Objective:**  
To engage students in a close reading of the Constitution and its role in safeguarding democracy—and explore reforms for modern challenges.

**Exercise 3: Civic Action Simulation – Defending Democracy**

**Prompt:**  
Students will design a civic engagement campaign addressing a current threat to democracy. Each group will choose an issue (e.g., misinformation, political polarization, voter access) and create:

* A campaign slogan and core message
* A one-page informational flyer for the public
* A 2-minute presentation on how to increase awareness or civic action
* A short reflection on what makes civic education difficult—and essential

**Objective:**  
To promote civic literacy and empower students to imagine real-world strategies for democratic renewal.

**Review Questions**

1. What are the most pressing challenges facing American democracy today?
2. How do disinformation and media fragmentation impact public trust and informed citizenship?
3. In what ways can democratic backsliding happen even under a functioning constitution?
4. What roles do citizens, elected officials, and institutions play in protecting democracy?
5. What reforms or civic actions could strengthen democracy in the 21st century?