

Why So Many Democracies Are Floundering

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Mr. Pildes has spent his career as a legal scholar analyzing the [intersection](#) of politics and law and how they affect our democracy.

We pay too little attention to delivering effective government as a critical democratic value. We are familiar with the threats posed by democratic backsliding and the rise of illiberal forces in several democracies, including the United States. But the most pervasive and perhaps deepest challenge facing virtually all Western democracies today is the political fragmentation of democratic politics.

[Political fragmentation](#) is the dispersion of political power into so many different hands and centers of power that it becomes difficult for democratic governments to function effectively.

President Biden has recognized this historic challenge, calling the defining mission of his presidency to be [winning](#) the “battle between the utility of democracies in the 21st century and autocracies.”

Yet even with unified control of government, the internal divisions of the Democratic Party postponed passage of his bipartisan infrastructure bill for several months and have made it uncertain which parts, if any, of the Build Back Better proposal will be enacted.

When democratic governments seem [incapable](#) of delivering on their promises, this failure can lead to alienation, resignation, distrust and withdrawal among many citizens. It can also trigger demands for authoritarian leaders who promise to cut through messy politics. At an even greater extreme, it can lead people to question democracy itself and become open to anti-democratic systems of government.

The struggle of the Biden administration to deliver on its policy agenda offers a good example of the political fragmentation of politics taking place throughout Western democracies. It takes different forms in the multiparty systems of Europe and the two-party system of the United States. The European democracies are experiencing the unraveling of the traditionally dominant center-left and center-right major parties and coalitions that have governed since World War II. Support for these parties has splintered into new parties of the right and left, along with others with less-easily defined ideological elements. From 2015 to 2017, [over 30 new political parties](#) entered European parliaments. Across European democracies, the percentage of people who identify strongly with a political party or are members of one has declined precipitously.

The effects on the ability to govern have been dramatic. In Germany, the stable anchor of Europe since the 1950s, the two major parties regularly used to receive over 90 percent of the vote combined; in this fall’s elections, that plummeted to [less than 50 percent](#). Support has hemorrhaged to green, anti-immigrant, free-market and other parties. After its 2017 elections, with support fragmented among many parties, it took Germany six months to cobble together a governing coalition, the longest time in the country’s history. The Netherlands, after its 2017 elections, needed a record 225 days to form a government.

The coalitional governments assembled amid this cacophony of parties are also more fragile. Spain, for example, was forced to hold four national elections between 2015 and 2019 to find a stable governing coalition. Spain had effectively been a two-party democracy until 2015, but mass protest movements spawned a proliferation of new parties that made forging stable governments difficult. In Sweden, the prime minister lost a vote of no confidence this summer — a first in the country's modern political history. Digital pop-up parties, including anti-party parties, arise out of nowhere and radically disrupt politics, as the Brexit Party did in Britain and the Five Star Movement did in Italy.

The same forces driving fragmentation in other democracies are also roiling the United States, though our election structures make effective third parties highly unlikely. Here the forces of fragmentation get channeled within the two major parties. The most dramatic example on the Republican side is that when the party controlled the House from 2011 to 2019, it devoured two of its own speakers, John Boehner and Paul Ryan. Mr. Boehner's memoir portrays a party caucus so internally fragmented as to be ungovernable.

Similarly, the central story of the Biden administration is whether the Democratic Party can overcome its internal conflicts to deliver effective policies. Remarkably, Speaker Nancy Pelosi scheduled floor votes on the infrastructure bill, only to pull it because she could not deliver enough Democratic votes — extraordinary evidence of how difficult it is for a speaker to unite her caucus amid the forces of fragmentation. It took a disastrous election night for progressives to bury their concerns and support the bill — and several now regret having done so.

The recent collapse of Build Back Better, at least for now, led to a remarkable public bloodletting between different elements within the party.

Large structural forces have driven the fragmentation of politics throughout the West. On the economic front, the forces include globalization's contribution to the stagnation of middle- and working-class incomes, rising inequality and outrage over the 2008 financial crisis. On the cultural side: conflicts over immigration, nationalism and other issues.

Since the New Deal in the United States and World War II in Europe, the parties of the left had represented less affluent, less educated voters. Now those voters are becoming the base of parties on the right, with more affluent, more educated voters shifting to parties on the left. Major parties are struggling to figure out how to patch together winning coalitions in the midst of this shattering transformation.

The communications revolution is also a major force generating the disabling fragmentation of politics. Across Europe, it has given rise to loosely organized, leaderless protest movements that disrupt politics and give birth to other parties — but make effective government harder to achieve.

In the United States, the new communications era has enabled the rise of free-agent politicians. A Congress with more free agents is [more difficult to govern](#). Even in their first years in office, individual members of Congress (like Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez or Ted Cruz) no longer need to work their way up through the party or serve on major committees to attract national visibility and influence.

Through cable television and social media, they can find and construct their own national constituencies. Through internet fund-raising (particularly small donations), politicians (particularly

from the extremes) can become effective fund-raising machines on their own. In this era, party leaders lack the leverage they once had to force party members to accept the party line. That is why speakers of the House resign or reschedule votes on which they cannot deliver.

The political fragmentation that now characterizes nearly all Western democracies reflects deep dissatisfaction with the ability of traditional parties and governments to deliver effective policies. Yet perversely, this fragmentation makes it all the more difficult for governments to do so. Mr. Biden is right: Democracies must figure out how to overcome the forces of fragmentation to show they once again can deliver effective government.

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