

Socio-Political Issues Facing the United States: Democracy, Polarization, Inequality, Institutional Trust, and the Politicization of the Supreme Court

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How to cite this paper: Mukhopadhyay, S. (2026). Socio-Political Issues Facing the United States: Democracy, Polarization, Inequality, Institutional Trust, and the Politicization of the Supreme Court. *Open Journal of Social Sciences*, 14, 346-355. <https://doi.org/10.4236/jss.2026.149021>

Received: June 21, 2026

Accepted: September 12, 2026

Published: September 15, 2026

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Abstract

The United States faces a convergence of socio-political challenges that threaten democratic stability, economic cohesion, and social trust. This paper examines the most pressing issues confronting the nation, including political polarization, democratic backsliding, economic inequality, racial and social fragmentation, immigration disputes, misinformation, declining public confidence in institutions, and the growing politicization of the Supreme Court. Recent judicial decisions involving abortion rights, presidential immunity, voting rights, affirmative action, and executive authority have intensified perceptions of ideological bias within the judiciary and contributed to declining institutional legitimacy. Drawing from analyses produced by major think tanks such as the Brookings Institution, Center for Strategic and International Studies, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, and Chicago Council on Global Affairs, this essay argues that democratic resilience depends on institutional reform, civic education, economic inclusion, judicial accountability, and renewed bipartisan cooperation. The paper concludes that these socio-political pressures are interconnected structural challenges requiring comprehensive long-term national strategies.

Keywords

Political Polarization, Supreme Court, Democracy, Institutional Trust, Inequality, Governance, United States, Socio-Political Issues

1. Introduction

The United States has historically portrayed itself as a model liberal democracy

characterized by constitutional governance, separation of powers, political pluralism, and economic opportunity. However, the contemporary American political environment demonstrates increasing instability, ideological fragmentation, and declining public trust in democratic institutions (Carrier & Carothers, 2025; Galston & Kamarck, 2022). Political polarization has intensified over the past two decades, weakening bipartisan cooperation and undermining institutional legitimacy (Huang et al., 2022; Falkenberg et al., 2025). Simultaneously, rising economic inequality, racial tensions, immigration disputes, misinformation, and concerns about democratic erosion have reshaped the nation's socio-political landscape (Eisen & Katz, 2025; Williams et al., 2025).

An increasingly significant dimension of this instability involves the growing perception that the Supreme Court of the United States has become politically polarized rather than institutionally neutral. Although the judiciary is constitutionally designed to function independently from partisan politics, recent Supreme Court decisions have generated substantial controversy and intensified ideological divisions across American society. Critics argue that the Court's conservative majority has increasingly advanced partisan objectives through judicial interpretation, while supporters contend that the Court is restoring constitutional originalism and limiting federal overreach.

Several landmark rulings have amplified perceptions of judicial politicization. In *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization* (2022), the Supreme Court overturned *Roe v. Wade*, eliminating federal constitutional protection for abortion rights and returning authority to individual states. The ruling triggered nationwide protests and intensified divisions regarding reproductive rights, federalism, and religious influence in politics. Similarly, *Students for Fair Admissions v. Harvard* (2023), the Court concluded that race-conscious admissions policies violated the Equal Protection Clause. Supporters characterize the decision as reinforcing equal treatment under the law, whereas critics argue that it limits efforts to address longstanding structural inequalities.

In **Trump v. United States** (2024), the Supreme Court held that presidents possess presumptive immunity for official acts undertaken while in office. Constitutional scholars have differed in their interpretation of the decision. Some argue that it strengthens executive independence and preserves separation of powers, whereas others contend that it may reduce mechanisms of executive accountability. These competing interpretations reflect broader debates within constitutional law rather than settled legal consensus.

Additional controversies involving ethics concerns, ideological voting patterns, and politically divisive appointments have further weakened public confidence in the judiciary. Public opinion surveys conducted by institutions such as the Pew Research Center and Gallup indicate that trust in the Supreme Court has declined substantially in recent years (Pew Research Center, 2024), particularly among younger and politically liberal Americans. Consequently, the Court itself has become a central actor in America's broader crisis of institutional trust and demo-

cratic legitimacy (Toobin, 2023).

Think tanks and policy institutions increasingly warn that these trends are interconnected rather than isolated. Analysts from the Brookings Institution argue that democratic decline threatens economic stability and governance effectiveness (Galston & Kamarck, 2022), while the Center for Strategic and International Studies has highlighted the dangers of political extremism, institutional distrust, and social fragmentation (Williams et al., 2025). This paper explores the most important socio-political issues facing the United States today and evaluates their implications for democratic governance, national cohesion, and constitutional stability.

Selection Framework. The issues examined in this paper were selected according to three analytical criteria: 1) Their demonstrated influence on the functioning and legitimacy of democratic institutions; 2) Their broad societal impact on political stability, economic opportunity, and social cohesion; 3) The consistency with which they are identified as national priorities across recent scholarship, public opinion surveys, and policy analyses produced by major research organizations. Although other important issues—including climate change, public health, education, crime, and foreign policy—also merit careful examination, the present essay focuses on challenges that most directly affect democratic legitimacy and constitutional governance.

Source Selection. This paper is an interpretive review based primarily on secondary sources. References were selected from peer-reviewed academic literature, reports published by nationally recognized policy institutes (including Brookings Institution, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, CSIS, and the Chicago Council on Global Affairs), nationally representative survey organizations such as Pew Research Center and Gallup, landmark Supreme Court decisions, and widely cited legal scholarship. Sources were chosen on the basis of scholarly credibility, policy relevance, recency, and their contribution to understanding contemporary democratic governance in the United States.

For the purposes of this paper, **democratic backsliding** refers to the gradual erosion of democratic institutions, norms, and checks on executive authority within an otherwise democratic political system. **Institutional trust** refers to the degree of public confidence that governmental institutions—including Congress, the judiciary, executive agencies, elections, and the media—operate fairly, effectively, and in accordance with constitutional principles. **Politicization of the Supreme Court** is used to describe the widespread public perception that judicial decisions or appointments are increasingly influenced by partisan political considerations rather than solely by constitutional interpretation. This definition recognizes that perceptions of politicization may differ from legal arguments concerning judicial philosophy or originalism.

2. Political Polarization and Democratic Erosion

Political polarization is arguably the most significant socio-political issue con-

fronting the United States (Huang et al., 2022; Falkenberg et al., 2025). The ideological divide between Democrats and Republicans has deepened substantially, producing legislative gridlock, hostile political rhetoric, and declining social trust (Huang et al., 2022). Contemporary polarization extends beyond policy disagreements into cultural and identity-based conflicts.

Research from the Brookings Institution identifies weakening democratic norms, attacks on electoral legitimacy, and erosion of the rule of law as major threats to American democracy (Eisen & Katz, 2025). The *Democracy Playbook 2025* emphasizes the need to protect elections, counter corruption, and strengthen institutional accountability (Eisen & Katz, 2025).

The Supreme Court has increasingly become embedded within this polarized political environment. Judicial nominations now function as highly partisan political battles, with Senate confirmation processes reflecting broader ideological warfare between political parties. The refusal to hold hearings for Merrick Garland in 2016, followed by the rapid confirmation of Amy Coney Barrett shortly before the 2020 presidential election, intensified perceptions that judicial appointments are driven primarily by partisan strategy rather than constitutional impartiality.

The Chicago Council on Global Affairs found that nearly two-thirds of Americans perceive weakening democracy as a critical threat to the nation's future (El Baz & Jin, 2025). Public skepticism regarding elections, courts, Congress, and media institutions has intensified, contributing to political cynicism and distrust (El Baz & Jin, 2025).

Scholars also argue that polarization reduces electoral competitiveness and encourages gerrymandering. Recent academic research demonstrates that geographic and partisan polarization have significantly reduced competitive congressional districts (Jasny et al., 2025), thereby reinforcing ideological extremism.

The consequences of polarization are profound. Legislative compromise becomes increasingly difficult, governance slows, and political violence becomes more likely. According to analyses from the Center for Strategic and International Studies, although the United States is unlikely to experience civil war, rising sporadic political violence and extremist rhetoric pose substantial risks to social stability (Jensen & Young, 2025).

3. Economic Inequality and Social Mobility

Economic inequality remains another defining socio-political issue in the United States (Galston & Kamarck, 2022). While the nation possesses one of the world's largest economies, wealth concentration has increased dramatically. Income disparities between the wealthy and middle or working classes have widened, reducing social mobility and fueling public frustration.

Economic insecurity often intensifies political radicalization. Citizens who feel excluded from economic opportunity may lose confidence in democratic institutions and become susceptible to populist rhetoric (Galston & Kamarck, 2022). An-

alysts from the Brookings Institution contend that democratic decline and economic instability are mutually reinforcing phenomena (Galston & Kamarck, 2022).

Rising housing costs, healthcare expenses, student debt, and inflation have placed significant pressure on middle-income Americans. Many younger citizens increasingly doubt whether they will achieve the economic prosperity enjoyed by previous generations. Such concerns contribute to declining trust in both government and capitalism itself.

Economic inequality also intersects with judicial politics. Critics argue that Supreme Court decisions involving campaign finance, labor regulations, and corporate power have disproportionately benefited wealthy individuals and large corporations (Tushnet, 2020). The Court's decision in *Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission* (2010), which expanded protections for corporate political spending under the First Amendment, remains one of the most controversial examples. Opponents contend that the ruling increased the political influence of wealthy donors and intensified perceptions that American democracy favors economic elites.

4. Race, Identity Politics, and Social Cohesion

Race continues to shape American socio-political dynamics. Despite major civil rights advancements, systemic inequalities remain evident in education, criminal justice, healthcare, and employment (Tushnet, 2020). Incidents involving police violence, voting rights disputes, and racial discrimination continue to generate nationwide political debate.

Identity politics has become increasingly influential within American political discourse. Political mobilization around race, ethnicity, gender, religion, and sexuality has strengthened representation for marginalized communities but has also intensified ideological conflict. Critics argue that identity-centered politics sometimes undermines national unity by emphasizing group divisions over shared civic identity.

The Supreme Court has become central to these debates. In *Students for Fair Admissions v. Harvard* (2023), the Court ruled against affirmative action in college admissions, arguing that race-conscious admissions policies violated equal protection principles. Supporters viewed the decision as promoting merit-based equality, while critics argued that it ignored historical and structural inequalities affecting minority communities. The ruling intensified national debates regarding racial justice, educational access, and systemic discrimination.

Similarly, voting rights decisions such as *Shelby County v. Holder* (2013), which invalidated portions of the Voting Rights Act, generated concerns regarding minority voter suppression and democratic participation. Critics argue that such rulings weakened federal oversight protections designed to prevent racial discrimination in elections.

The rise of social media has amplified these tensions. Online platforms fre-

quently reward emotionally charged and divisive content, encouraging political tribalism and reducing constructive dialogue. Researchers studying political polarization note that digital ecosystems accelerate ideological sorting and increase hostility toward political opponents (Falkenberg et al., 2025; Huang et al., 2022)..

5. Immigration and Border Security

Immigration remains one of the most politically divisive issues in American society. Debates concerning border security, undocumented migration, refugee policies, and asylum systems continue to polarize political parties and voters.

Supporters of stricter immigration policies emphasize national security, labor market protection, and border enforcement. Others argue for humanitarian reforms, pathways to citizenship, and protections for asylum seekers. These competing perspectives often reflect broader ideological disagreements regarding national identity and globalization.

Recent studies indicate that immigration enforcement policies have had significant social consequences for immigrant families and communities. Brookings research estimated that large numbers of U.S.-citizen children have experienced parental detention or deportation-related disruptions (Galston & Kamarck, 2022).

The judiciary also plays a significant role in immigration politics. Supreme Court rulings regarding executive immigration authority, asylum procedures, and state immigration enforcement have repeatedly intensified political conflict. Judicial intervention in immigration disputes often places the Court at the center of debates over national sovereignty, executive power, and human rights.

6. Misinformation, Media Fragmentation, and Technology

The spread of misinformation represents a major challenge to democratic governance (Williams et al., 2025). Digital media platforms have transformed political communication, enabling rapid dissemination of false or misleading information. Social media algorithms frequently prioritize sensationalism and ideological reinforcement over factual accuracy.

Media fragmentation has produced separate informational realities for different political groups (Falkenberg et al., 2025). Americans increasingly consume news through partisan sources aligned with preexisting beliefs. Consequently, consensus regarding basic facts and democratic norms has weakened.

Foreign and domestic actors alike exploit digital platforms to manipulate public opinion and intensify political conflict. Think tanks such as the Center for Strategic and International Studies emphasize that information warfare and online radicalization pose long-term risks to democratic resilience and national security (Williams et al., 2025).

The Supreme Court has also become involved in disputes concerning digital speech, misinformation regulation, and social media governance. Cases involving online moderation, free speech protections, and government communication with technology companies have raised broader constitutional questions regarding the

balance between civil liberties and democratic stability in the digital age.

Artificial intelligence and deep-fake technologies may further complicate the information environment by making misinformation more convincing and difficult to detect (Williams et al., 2025). Addressing these challenges requires stronger digital literacy, platform accountability, and public education initiatives.

Although discussed separately, economic inequality, racial divisions, immigration debates, and misinformation reinforce one another through their cumulative effects on democratic legitimacy. Economic insecurity may heighten political dissatisfaction; identity-based conflicts can deepen partisan polarization; contentious immigration debates often become symbolic expressions of broader disagreements regarding national identity; and misinformation accelerates distrust by undermining shared factual understanding. Together, these dynamics weaken confidence in democratic institutions, reduce opportunities for constructive compromise, and increase the perceived legitimacy of political extremism. Viewed collectively, these challenges represent interconnected structural pressures rather than isolated policy problems.

7. Declining Trust in Institutions

One of the most concerning socio-political trends in the United States is declining public confidence in institutions (Carrier & Carothers, 2025). Trust in Congress, political parties, media organizations, universities, and even the judiciary has weakened significantly.

Institutional distrust creates a cycle of democratic instability (Carrier & Carothers, 2025). Citizens who lose confidence in institutions may become less likely to participate constructively in democratic processes and more likely to support anti-establishment movements. This environment benefits populist leaders who frame institutions as corrupt or illegitimate.

The Supreme Court's declining approval ratings illustrate this broader crisis. Surveys conducted by Gallup in recent years show that confidence in the Court has fallen sharply, particularly after controversial rulings concerning abortion rights and executive authority (Pew Research Center, 2024). Ethics controversies involving undisclosed gifts and political relationships between justices and wealthy donors have also intensified scrutiny regarding judicial accountability and transparency.

Research from the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace warns that democratic backsliding often occurs gradually through erosion of institutional checks and balances rather than through sudden authoritarian collapse (Carrier & Carothers, 2025).

The January 6 Capitol attack and subsequent political controversies intensified concerns regarding constitutional norms and peaceful democratic transitions (Carrier & Carothers, 2025; Eisen & Katz, 2025). Although American institutions remain resilient compared to many nations, continued erosion of trust could weaken long-term democratic stability.

8. Policy Recommendations

Addressing America's socio-political challenges requires multidimensional reforms.

First, democratic institutions must be strengthened through electoral reforms, protection of voting rights, judicial ethics reforms, and anti-corruption measures (Eisen & Katz, 2025; Carrier & Carothers, 2025). Increased transparency and enforceable ethical standards for Supreme Court justices may help restore public confidence in judicial independence.

Second, economic inequality should be addressed through investments in education, infrastructure, healthcare affordability, and workforce development (Galston & Kamarck, 2022). Expanding economic opportunity may reduce political alienation and social frustration.

Third, civic education must be revitalized to improve democratic literacy, constitutional understanding, and media awareness (Eisen & Katz, 2025). Citizens require tools to navigate misinformation and engage constructively in political dialogue.

Fourth, social media companies should face increased accountability regarding misinformation, political manipulation, and algorithmic amplification of extremism (Williams et al., 2025).

Finally, policymakers and civil society organizations should promote national unity initiatives emphasizing shared democratic values while respecting cultural diversity and constitutional pluralism (El Baz & Jin, 2025).

Limitations

This paper is intended as an interpretive review rather than an empirical research study. Its analysis focuses specifically on the contemporary United States and therefore should not be generalized to other democratic systems without comparative investigation. The discussion relies primarily on secondary literature, publicly available policy reports, judicial opinions, and nationally representative survey data rather than original data collection or statistical analysis. Although every effort has been made to present multiple perspectives on contested political issues, interpretations of constitutional decisions and democratic developments remain subject to continuing scholarly debate.

9. Conclusion

The United States confronts a complex network of socio-political challenges that collectively threaten democratic governance and social cohesion (Carrier & Carothers, 2025; Eisen & Katz, 2025; Williams et al., 2025). Political polarization, economic inequality, racial tensions, immigration disputes, misinformation, judicial politicization, and declining institutional trust interact in ways that intensify instability.

The Supreme Court, once broadly viewed as an apolitical guardian of constitu-

tional order, has increasingly become a focal point of partisan conflict. Controversial rulings concerning abortion, affirmative action, executive power, campaign finance, and voting rights have contributed to perceptions of ideological bias and weakened confidence in judicial neutrality. Although defenders of the Court argue that such decisions reflect constitutional interpretation rather than partisan preference, the political consequences of these rulings remain substantial.

Think tanks such as the Brookings Institution, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, and Center for Strategic and International Studies consistently warn that democratic resilience cannot be taken for granted (Carrier & Carothers, 2025; Eisen & Katz, 2025; Williams et al., 2025). Despite these challenges, the United States retains significant institutional strengths, civic traditions, and adaptive capacities. The nation's future will depend on whether political leaders, institutions, and citizens can rebuild trust, strengthen democratic norms, preserve judicial legitimacy, and pursue inclusive policies that reduce division rather than deepen it.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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