Realist Governance Within a Liberal Framework: the Tension of American Democracy as a Paradigm or Counter Paradigm

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DOI: https://doi.org/10.51584/IJRIAS.2025.100900079

Received: 29 Aug 2025; Accepted: 05 Sep 2025; Published: 22 October 2025

ABSTRACT

This article examines the contradictions of American democracy as both a global paradigm for liberal governance and a counter-paradigm, defined to address political dysfunction and ideological polarisation. Drawing from realist and liberal theoretical traditions, it investigates fundamental liberal ideals like the rule of law, constitutionalism, and individual rights, which showcase coercion and executive American dominance in the global political system. It interacts with realist imperatives such as national interest, coercion, and executive dominance in the American political system. The study further highlights instances where realist governance has pushed for liberal norms, such as executive authority expansion, systemic gridlock, populist insurgencies, and foreign interventions in advancing democratic progress. It also looks at the international presentation of American democracy as a paradigm, despite internal challenges and legitimacy crises. The paper suggests that American democracy, while frequently extolled as an exportable ideal, is increasingly functioning as a cautionary tale, a counter paradigm, illustrating liberal government's limits in dealing with realist power relations. This contributes to current arguments over the global future of democracy and the sustainability of Western political models in a multipolar world. The study concludes that, while it contains elements that could serve as a paradigm for other democracies, such as its founding principles, the realities of political practice frequently present significant barriers that may render it a counter paradigm in certain contexts and thus recommends that bipartisanship initiatives be promoted to encourage collaborative efforts across party lines.

Keywords: Counter paradigm, Liberal democracy, Democratic theory, Global paradigm, Realist Governance, Liberal democracy,

INTRODUCTION

Realist governance is a pragmatic approach that advances political leadership that prioritises tangible outcomes over ideological commitments. In the context of a liberal state like the United States, this approach may be contrasted with the values of liberal democracy, which emphasise individual rights, equality, and democratic involvement. The discord within American democracy, marked by polarisation, partisanship, and disillusionment with traditional political institutions, raises the question of whether the United States serves as a global governance paradigm or a counter paradigm that demonstrates the pitfalls of liberalism when confronted with realist principles due to its inherent contradictions and challenges. The study subject provides an intriguing perspective on American democracy through the lens of realism and liberalism. The relationship between realism and liberalism in the context of American democracy is complex and multifaceted. Realism emphasises competitive and conflictual sides of international politics, where states act primarily in their national interests, often prioritising power and security over ideological considerations.

Liberalism, on the other hand, advocates for a world order founded on collaboration, international institutions, and the rule of law, with democracy, human rights, and economic interdependence serving as pathways to peace. According to Jones et al. (2024), Kiçmari (2024), and Tomaščík (2024), American democracy is characterised by a plurality of voices reflecting various interests and ideologies. This diversity can be interpreted as both a strength and a drawback. It promotes discussion, creativity and provides representation to many groups, which stimulates civic involvement. However, this cacophony may lead to polarisation, paralysis

ISSN No. 2454-6194 | DOI: 10.51584/IJRIAS |Volume X Issue IX September 2025

in government, and difficulties in finding an agreement on vital subjects such as healthcare reform, climate change policy, and immigration legislation.

American democracy is seen as a global paradigm or a counter paradigm, depending on one's perspective on realism versus liberalism. Proponents argue that American democracy provides a framework for individual freedoms and rights that many countries aspire to emulate, such as free elections, checks and balances among branches of government, and civil liberties (Nogueira de Brito, 2024). Critics contend that the dysfunction observed in U.S. politics, such as partisanship leading to legislative stalemates, demonstrates significant shortcomings. Issues like voter suppression, gerrymandering, systemic inequality, and influence from special interest groups challenge the notion that America is a beacon of democratic ideals. The current state of American democracy grapples with competing ideologies stemming from differing interpretations of what constitutes national interest versus global responsibility. For instance, debates surrounding immigration policies can illustrate this tension; while some advocates for open borders based on humanitarian grounds (a liberal perspective), others argue for stricter controls over national security concerns (a realist perspective). Media fragmentation and social media's role in shaping public discourse further complicate consensus-building within democratic institutions (Nogueira de Brito, 2024; Abbondanza, 2025). The interaction of various kinds of polarisation poses substantial issues for governance in a liberal state such as the United States: Legislative gridlock occurs when parties' ideological differences prevent necessary measures from being passed. As emotional polarisation grows, democratic principles such as respect for opposing viewpoints and readiness to compromise risk being eroded. This deterioration can rise to anti-democratic attitudes and behaviours among citizens, who may regard political opponents as existential dangers rather than just rivals. This tension has profound implications for democratic theory, global norm-setting, and the legitimacy of liberal democratic models in the 21st century. The study contributes to ongoing debates about the future of democracy and the viability of Western political templates in a multipolar world. The study provides an intriguing perspective on American democracy through the lens of realism and liberalism. Realism in political theory emphasises power, national interests, and anarchy in international interactions, whereas liberalism emphasises collaboration, democratic government, and individual rights. The discord within American democracy contributes to disillusionment with democratic institutions and results in indifference or withdrawal from civic activity (Nogueira de Brito, 2024; Abbondanza, 2025).

Statement of the problem

The study unravels the identified problem and explores the complexities and challenges of governance in liberal democracies, particularly the United States. It focuses on understanding realist governance and emphasises practical considerations over ideological aspirations. The study also examines the dynamics of a liberal state, which often conflicts with the realities of political life, leading to discord. Discord in American democracy, including polarisation among political parties and social movements, can undermine effective governance. The study explores whether American democracy serves as a global paradigm for other nations striving for liberal governance or acts as a counter paradigm due to internal conflicts. The findings inform better governance practices within liberal states and offer lessons for other democracies facing similar challenges. The following objectives form the basis for this exploration: Examine the extent to which realist governance principles influence policy decisions in a state built on liberal democratic ideals; Analyse the ideological tensions between realism and liberalism within the U.S. political system; Evaluate the effectiveness of realist approaches in managing economic policies, foreign relations, and national security within a liberal framework; Investigate public and political perceptions of whether America's hybrid governance structure serves as a global paradigm or a counter-paradigm; Assess the long-term implications of realist governance on the stability and global influence of American democracy.

METHODOLOGY

This study uses a desktop research methodology, relying solely on secondary data sources, to evaluate the use of realism within a liberal state framework. The study takes a comparative and historical approach, allowing for an evaluation of governance trends across different times in the United States. This approach helps to analyse both the continuity and shifts in realist policymaking during different political governments. Data for this study were gathered from a variety of credible and reliable secondary sources, including peer-reviewed

ISSN No. 2454-6194 | DOI: 10.51584/IJRIAS |Volume X Issue IX September 2025

journal articles, scholarly books, and conference papers that offer theoretical and empirical insights on realism and liberal state governance. Government reports include policy documents, official comments, and legislative records from US government agencies and executive offices.

Media coverage includes reputable news channels and investigative reports that offer current accounts of policy actions and their impacts. Think tank assessments comprise research briefs, policy papers, and expert commentary from established policy institutes specialising in international relations and governance. The primary analytical tool employed in the research is thematic analysis, which detects and categorises recurring themes relevant to realism governance systems. This process includes Data familiarisation, involving the review of all collected sources to gain a comprehensive understanding of content and context. Coding involves assigning labels to segments of data that reflect beliefs or ideas about realism in governance. Theme identification consists of grouping codes into broad themes that mirror repeated policy strategies or ideological stances. Interpretation connects recognised themes to existing theoretical frameworks and historical trends. Additionally, a comparative analysis is conducted to evaluate differences in realist policymaking across various US administrations. This requires carefully contrasting case studies to identify patterns, differences, and possible causal factors behind changes in governance styles. Since this study solely relies on secondary data, it faces limitations due to the availability, accuracy, and potential bias of current sources. Government documents may present selective narratives, while media coverage and think tank analyses may reflect institutional viewpoints. To address these limitations, the research employs source triangulation and emphasises data from well-established, credible, and peer-reviewed outlets.

LITERATURE

The Concept of Realist Governance

Realist governance is a political realism approach that emphasises the role of power dynamics, national interests, and the anarchic nature of the international system in shaping governance structures and practices. It posits that states are the primary actors in global politics, focusing on their interactions based on self-interest and security concerns. Power politics is central to realist governance, as states seek to enhance their power relative to others, often leading to competition and conflict. The international system is viewed as anarchic, meaning there is no overarching authority to enforce rules or norms consistently across states. States must rely on their military, economic, and diplomatic capabilities to ensure their survival and pursue their interests. The security dilemma is acknowledged, as actions taken by one state to enhance its security can inadvertently threaten other states, leading to an arms race or increased tensions (Pashakhanlou, 2013; Fehér, 2024; Jones et al., 2024). Realist governance prioritises pragmatic solutions over ideological commitments or moral considerations, making decisions based on what will effectively advance national interests. The roots of realist governance can be traced back to classical theorists like Thucydides, Machiavelli, and Hobbes, who emphasised the role of human nature and historical context in shaping political behaviour. Adaptation is essential in realist governance; states must be prepared to reassess their strategies as new challenges arise (Morgenthau, 1973; Hurrell & Bull, 2002; Pashakhanlou, 2013; Fehér, 2024; Jones et al., 2024; Kiçmari, 2024; Tomaščík, 2024). Realist governance represents a worldview in which power dynamics drive state behaviour in an anarchic international system. It emphasised practical techniques based on the facts of state behaviour above idealistic conceptions of collaboration or fairness. Focusing on national interests and pragmatic solutions while noting the complexities of security concerns and historical antecedents is a good method that provides valuable insights into understanding contemporary global politics.

The Concept of the Liberal State

Liberalism's core tenets, individual rights, political equality, and the rule of law, are the foundational ideas of a liberal state. A liberal state is distinguished by its dedication to upholding individual liberties and rights while ensuring that governmental authority is constrained and subject to accountability. The concept of a liberal state emerged during the Age of Enlightenment when philosophers such as John Locke advocated for individual liberties and consent-based government (Locke, 1689). The American Revolution (1776), the French Revolution (1789), and the Glorious Revolution in England (1688) are significant events that laid the foundation for modern liberal governments (Craig, 1998; Berger, 2023; Das et al., 2024; Goodin et al., 2024).

ISSN No. 2454-6194 | DOI: 10.51584/IJRIAS |Volume X Issue IX September 2025

Throughout history, several movements have attempted to rectify social injustices by enacting changes that advance social justice and increase civil freedoms within liberal democracies, such as suffrage campaigns that call for universal voting rights. A liberal state is characterised by the recognition and protection of individual rights, such as freedom of speech, assembly, religion, and privacy (Craig, 1998; Berger, 2023). These rights are protected by law and not infringed by government authorities or private entities. The rule of law is a fundamental characteristic of a liberal state, ensuring equal application of laws to all individuals, including those in positions of power. Liberal states typically have limited government powers, preventing overreach and abuse of power. This limitation allows citizens to participate in the decision-making process through free and fair elections, fostering accountability and allowing citizens to express their preferences regarding public policies. Economic freedom is another hallmark of a liberal state, where market economies operate with minimal government intervention. Individuals have the right to own property, engage in commerce, and make economic choices based on their preferences, supporting innovation, entrepreneurship, and competition (Jones et al., 1794; Das et al., 2024; Goodin et al., 2024; Laruelle, 2024; Sadiqi, 2024; Tate, 2024)

Liberal states promote pluralism, the coexistence of diverse groups with varying beliefs, cultures, and lifestyles. Tolerance for differing viewpoints is essential for fostering social harmony and ensuring minority voices are heard in public discourse. Modern interpretations of classical liberalism advocate for social welfare provisions, such as access to education, healthcare, and social services designed to support vulnerable populations. The concept of a liberal state encompasses individual rights protection, rule of law adherence, limited governmental power, democratic governance structures, economic freedom principles, pluralism with tolerance for diversity, and considerations for social welfare aimed at promoting equality among citizens. Considering this, a liberal state is fundamentally rooted in the principles of liberalism, which emphasises the protection and enhancement of individual freedoms as the central concern of political governance. A liberal state is characterised by several key features that distinguish it from other forms of governance.

Realist Governance Principles

The relationship between realist governance principles and liberal democratic ideals is a complicated and diverse subject. Realism, which is most linked with international affairs, focuses on power dynamics, national interests, and pragmatic decision-making. Liberal democracy, on the other hand, emphasises individual rights, equality, and participatory government. This investigation is to unveil how realism principles might impact policy decisions in a state that promotes liberal democratic norms. Realist governance concepts are based on the idea that governments function in an anarchic international system in which security and power are prioritised. Realists believe that the basic purpose of every state is to ensure its existence and increase its power in comparison to others. This frequently leads to prioritising economic expansion, military might, and geopolitical ties over ideology (DeRouen, 2004; Steff, 2025).

Realism in international relations suggests that power is the currency of states, with military capabilities and economic resources dictating influence. Realist approach advocates practical solutions over idealistic aspirations, leading to policymakers prioritising effective governance strategies that yield tangible results (Dominiak, 2024). In liberal democracies, realist governance principles influence policy decisions in foreign policy formulation, economic policies, domestic security measures, public opinion and political pressure, international cooperation vs. national sovereignty, and balancing ideals with reality. Foreign policy formulation often involves military alliances or defines spending over diplomatic engagement, while economic policies may reflect protectionist measures or strategic trade agreements that prioritise national interests over free-market ideals. Domestic security measures may involve curtailing civil liberties in response to internal threats. Public opinion and political pressure can lead to adopting more realist stances, even if they conflict with liberal democratic values (DeRouen, 2004; Dominiak, 2024; Steff, 2025).

International cooperation vs. national sovereignty can also be a challenge, as realist principles may lead to prioritising national sovereignty over collective action when it conflicts with perceived national interests. Balancing democratic ideals with realpolitik considerations can result in compromises that dilute adherence to core democratic values. Historical examples, such as U.S. foreign policy during the Cold War, illustrate this dynamic. The sustained influence of realist principles can lead to a gradual erosion of liberal democratic norms as governments justify authoritarian measures under the pretext of security or stability. While states built on

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liberal democratic ideals strive to uphold principles such as individual rights and participatory governance, they are frequently influenced by realist governance principles that prioritise national interest and pragmatic decision-making (van Bijsterveld & ten Napel, 2024; DeRouen, 2004; Dominiak, 2024; Steff, 2025; Sawyer, 2025). This tension shapes policy decisions across various domains, including foreign affairs, economic strategy, domestic security measures, and public opinion management. The extent of this influence varies depending on contextual factors such as geopolitical realities and domestic political landscapes, but it remains a significant aspect of contemporary governance in liberal democracies.

Ideological Tensions Between Realism and Liberalism

The ideological tensions between realism and liberalism within the U.S. political system can be understood through a detailed examination of their foundational principles, historical context, and contemporary implications. The U.S. political system is characterised by ongoing ideological tensions between realism and liberalism, two major schools of thought in international relations. These tensions manifest in foreign policy decisions, national security strategies, and economic policies, shaping America's global engagement. Realism is the belief that power dynamics and national interests primarily drive international relations. It asserts that states operate within an anarchic international system, where security concerns dominate foreign policy decisions. They argue that ethical considerations are secondary to pursuing national interests, frequently emphasising military capability as a measure of power. Realism is founded on the assumption that states operate solely for their benefit; they pursue power and security in an anarchic international system. Realists argue that conflict is inevitable and that the U.S. must maintain military dominance to protect its national interests. This perspective is rooted in classical theorists like Thucydides, Machiavelli, and Hobbes, who viewed human nature as inherently self-interested and conflict-prone. Liberalism emphasises cooperation, democracy, and the potential for peace among nations. It advocates for the importance of international institutions, economic interdependence, and the promotion of human rights as mechanisms to mitigate conflict. Liberals believe states can transcend their competitive instincts through diplomacy and collective action, drawing on ideas from Enlightenment thinkers who championed reason and progress (Keohane & Nye, 1977). Liberals advocate for diplomacy, human rights, and economic interdependence to create a peaceful world order.

The ideological tensions between realism and liberalism have historically shaped U.S. foreign policy decisions. During the Cold War, realism was predominant as U.S. leaders prioritised containment strategies against the Soviet Union based on power politics. The emphasis on military alliances such as NATO reflected a realist approach focused on balancing power. The Realist Perspective mentions that the U.S. prioritises military strength and strategic alliances (e.g., NATO) to counter potential threats. Realists supported interventions in Iraq (2003) and Afghanistan (2001) as necessary for U.S. security (Mearsheimer, 2001). Liberal perspective in another breath favours diplomatic engagement, arms control treaties, and multilateral institutions like the United Nations. President Obama’s Iran Nuclear Deal (2015) reflected liberal ideals by promoting diplomacy over military action. However, with the end of the Cold War and the emergence of globalisation, liberal ideals gained traction and became a central tenet of U.S. foreign policy under administrations such as Bill Clinton and George W. Bush, who advocated for interventionist policies spreading democratic governance worldwide.

This oscillation between realist and liberal approaches has led to significant debates within American political discourse regarding issues such as military intervention, trade agreements, climate change policies, and responses to authoritarian regimes. Liberalism promotes democracy and human rights, justifying U.S. interventions in Libya (2011) and Kosovo (1999) under the banner of humanitarianism (Doyle, 1986). Realism warns against imposing democracy, emphasising national sovereignty over ideological missions. Critics argue that democracy promotion has often led to instability (Mearsheimer, 2019). In recent years, these ideological tensions have become increasingly pronounced within U.S. politics. The rise of populist movements has challenged traditional liberal internationalism by questioning multilateral agreements such as the Paris Climate Accord or trade deals like NAFTA (now USMCA). Critics argue that these agreements undermine national sovereignty, a core concern for realists, while proponents assert, they are essential for global stability. Realists support protectionist policies to safeguard national interests, as seen in the "America First" trade policies under the Trump administration (Walt, 2018). Liberals advocate for free trade agreements (e.g., NAFTA, WTO), arguing that economic interdependence reduces the likelihood of war and fosters cooperation (Keohane, 1984).

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The U.S. response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine (2022) reflects both perspectives. Realists argue for restraint to avoid escalating conflict with nuclear power (Umar, 2024). Liberals support military aid and sanctions to uphold international law. In U.S.-China relations, realists emphasise strategic competition and armed force preparedness, while liberals advocate for economic engagement and climate cooperation.

Moreover, events such as Russia's annexation of Crimea or China's assertive actions in the South China Sea have reignited realist perspectives advocating for a stronger military posture to deter aggression. Conversely, liberals argue for engagement through diplomacy and economic ties rather than confrontation. The Biden administration has attempted to navigate these tensions by promoting a foreign policy that balances realist concerns about great power competition with liberal ideals centred on democracy promotion and multilateral cooperation.

Managing economic policies, foreign relations, and national security within a liberal framework

Realism in economic policy management is a tool for state power, often favouring protectionism, economic nationalism, and strategic trade policies. Its effectiveness is positive, as it protects domestic industries from foreign competition, ensures economic security, and strengthens state control over key industries. However, it faces challenges within a liberal framework, such as the promotion of free trade agreements and the potential for trade wars. Overemphasis on state-controlled economies may stifle innovation and economic growth (Gilpin, 1987; Walt, 2018; Altay, 2024; Mariotti, 2024). Challenges within a Liberal Framework Liberalism promotes free trade agreements (e.g., WTO, NAFTA) that often conflict with protectionist policies. Economic nationalism can trigger trade wars, reducing global cooperation and market stability. Overemphasis on state-controlled economies may stifle innovation and economic growth. The U.S.-China Trade War (2018-2020) as an example reflects realism's influence on economic policy, where the U.S. imposed tariffs to counter China's economic rise. However, this approach disrupted global markets, highlighting realism's limitations within a liberal economic framework (Walt, 2018).

In foreign relations, realism prioritises power, alliances, and national interest over global governance or international law. It ensures state sovereignty by prioritising national interests over global norms and supports balance-of-power strategies to deter adversaries. However, it faces challenges within a liberal framework, such as the promotion of multilateral diplomacy by institutions like the United Nations and NATO, which realists view as constraints on sovereignty. Realist foreign policy prioritises power, alliances, and national interest over global governance or international law. The effectiveness of realist foreign policy positive outcomes ensures state sovereignty by prioritising national interests over global norms (Mearsheimer, 2019). Strategic alliances and military presence help maintain global influence. Liberal institutions like the United Nations (UN) and NATO promote multilateral diplomacy, which realists often view as constraints on sovereignty. Unilateral actions (e.g., U.S. withdrawal from the Iran Nuclear Deal) can undermine global cooperation. Over-reliance on military alliances can lead to conflicts rather than diplomatic resolutions. The U.S. withdrawal from the Paris Climate Agreement in 2017 under Trump exemplified realism's prioritisation of state interests over liberal global cooperation (Gilpin, 1987; Walt, 2018).

Realist security policies focus on military strength, deterrence, and strategic dominance. They maintain strong defence capabilities, prevent reliance on global security organisations, and support pre-emptive strategies to neutralise threats before escalation. However, liberal norms emphasise human rights and international law, which often conflict with aggressive military interventions. Over-militarisation can lead to prolonged conflicts and ignore diplomatic solutions, as seen in NATO's expansion in Eastern Europe to counter Russian influence. Deterrence, strategic dominance, and military might remain the focuses of realist security strategies. The benefits of the effectiveness of realist security approaches are that they maintain strong fortifications to stave off threats. Prevents reliance on foreign security organisations and guarantees national autonomy, favours preventative measures like drone strikes and cyber protection to get rid of threats before they get worse (Friedberg, 2011; Walt, 2018; Altay, 2024; Mariotti, 2024). Liberal Setting Liberal norms prioritise human rights and international law, which often conflict with aggressive military tactics. Over-militarisation can lead to protracted confrontations (e.g., the U.S. war in Afghanistan). The globe can become more unstable if diplomatic solutions are ignored. Though it also goes against liberal appeals for diplomatic engagement, NATO's expansion in Eastern Europe is a pragmatic tactic to oppose Russian influence (Mearsheimer, 2019).

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America's Hybrid Governance Structure: a Democratic global paradigm or a counter paradigm

The United States' hybrid governance structure, a blend of federalism, constitutional democracy, and capitalist economics, has been a subject of debate as both a global paradigm and a counter paradigm of democracy. Supporters argue that the U.S. serves as a global paradigm of democracy due to its constitutional framework, checks and balances, free elections, and civil liberties. Key democratic features include the U.S. Bill of Rights, separation of powers among executive, legislative, and judicial branches, federalism and decentralisation, and regular, competitive elections (Riegner, 2025). However, critics argue that structural flaws, partisan gridlock, and economic inequality undermine America's democratic legitimacy. Major criticisms include the Electoral College and representation issues, hyper-partisan polarisation, media polarisation, and economic and social inequality. The Electoral College allows presidents to win without the popular vote, while gerrymandering and voter suppression laws disproportionately affect minorities and low-income voters. Political gridlock in Congress has weakened governance, making compromise difficult. Media polarisation and misinformation have deepened public distrust in democratic institutions (Nogueira de Brito, 2024; Abbondanza, 2025; Riegner, 2025).

Economic and social inequality is another major issue, with the U.S. system favouring corporate influence through lobbying and campaign financing, allowing economic elites to shape policy disproportionately. The lack of universal healthcare, wealth inequality, and systemic racial injustices contradict the ideals of equal representation and social democracy. Perceptions from abroad also highlight the U.S. as an unstable democracy, with events like the January 6 Capitol attack (2021) cited as signs of democratic backsliding. European democracies often highlight America's lack of social safety nets as a failure to uphold democratic equality. Public figures and celebrities also voiced their sentiments. Many expressed disappointment and concern over the election results, highlighting divisions within the country and apprehensions about the future of American democracy under Trump's renewed leadership (Mearsheimer, 2019; Lieberman & Schlozman, 2024). Following Donald Trump's return to the White House in 2024, experts and commentators explored the domestic and international ramifications of his second term. Vanity Fair contributing editor Eric Lutz stated that Trump's 2024 election triumph posed a major threat to democracy, pointing out that the 47th president of the United States was a thrice-impeached felon with totalitarian tendencies. However, objective observers focused on how the government handled important policy issues such as international relations, immigration, healthcare, and economic management. Political analysts remarked that his re-election was unique in modern American history, given the controversy surrounding his prior administration and legal challenges. Different people had different opinions about America's political system. Some saw it as a counter-paradigm that exposed the shortcomings of liberal democracy, while others saw it as a continuing worldwide paradigm of democratic governance. Even if the United States' institutional structure remained largely unaltered, persistent issues like partisan division, economic disparity, and worries about election procedures kept casting doubt on the sustainability of democracy. In this regard, the American style of governance functioned more as a complicated case study that demonstrated the flexibility and weaknesses of democratic systems in action than as an unchallenged blueprint.

Realist Governance and Global Influence of American Democracy.

The realist approach to governance, rooted in power politics, national interest, and pragmatic decision-making, has played a defining role in shaping U.S. domestic stability and global influence. While realism has strengthened American strategic dominance and state security, its long-term effects on democratic institutions, alliances, and global perceptions remain complex. This analysis evaluates the stability of U.S. democracy and its global standing under realist governance. Realist governance, a framework where states prioritise their interests and security concerns, can create tension between domestic values and foreign policy actions. This shift towards realism may lead to a militarised approach to foreign policy, potentially fostering a culture that prioritises security over civil liberties. This could result in increased surveillance measures, restrictions on freedoms under the guise of national security, and a public perception that democratic values are secondary to maintaining order. Moreover, if realist governance leads to interventions based solely on national interest rather than promoting democracy or human rights abroad, it may alienate segments of the population who value these principles, leading to political polarization or apathy towards civic engagement (Morgenthau, 1973; Mearsheimer, 2001; Levitsky, & Ziblatt, 2018; Walt, 2018; Gallarotti, 2024; Innerarity, 2024).

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On an international scale, realist governance may alter how other nations perceive American democracy. If U.S. foreign policy is characterised by opportunistic alliances or military interventions justified solely by strategic interests, it risks being viewed as hypocritical. This perception can diminish America's soft power, reducing its global influence over time. Nations might turn towards alternative models of governance that prioritise stability or authoritarianism if they believe American democracy is inconsistent or unreliable. In the long run, if realist governance continues to dominate U.S. foreign policy without a balance from liberal democratic ideals, there could be significant consequences for both domestic stability and global influence. These include the erosion of democratic norms within America, a shift in global alliances, and challenges to democratic resilience. Realist governance has bolstered U.S. national security and sustained its global dominance. However, its long-term effects on democratic values, international legitimacy, and global influence present challenges. While realism ensures state survival and power projection, its pragmatic and interest-driven nature risks eroding democratic norms both domestically and abroad. Moving forward, a balanced approach integrating realism with democratic principles may be essential for sustaining American stability and leadership (Morgenthau, 1973; Mearsheimer, 2001; Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018; Walt, 2018; Gallarotti, 2024; Innerarity, 2024). Realism provides a practical approach to international relations that emphasises state interests and power dynamics, but it may have negative long-term effects on American democracy by undermining America's position as a global champion of democratic values and possibly eroding democratic norms at home. The long-term effects of realist governance on American democracy include the possibility of democratic norms being eroded at home because security is prioritised over civil liberties; a decline in global influence as other countries see contradictions between U.S. actions and professed democratic ideals; and difficulties for democratic resilience in the face of growing authoritarian alternatives around the world.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study uses a hybrid theoretical framework based on Neorealism, Liberal Institutionalism, and Gramscian Hegemony Theory to critically examine the conflict between America's declared liberal democratic values and its realist-driven government practices. Each of these theories provides distinct insights into the contradictions that underpin the US democratic project and its worldwide positioning. Integrating Neorealism (Waltz, 1979), Liberal Institutionalism (Keohane & Nye, 1977; Ikenberry, 2001), and Gramscian Hegemony Theory (Gramsci, 1971), this paper examines the conflict between America's liberal democratic ideals and its realist governance tendencies in both domestic and international spheres. Kenneth Waltz's concept of **neorealism** emphasises the chaotic nature of the international system as well as the need for state strength and survival. According to this viewpoint, the United States functions largely in pursuit of national interests, strategic dominance, and security concerns, which frequently contradict its stated commitment to democratic values and multilateral collaboration.

Liberal Institutionalism, as proposed by Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye (1977) and expanded upon by G. John Ikenberry (2001), contends that international institutions can facilitate state cooperation and rule-based government. On the other hand, they see the United States as a normative leader who encourages international collaboration, democracy, and rule-based governance. Scholars such as John Ikenberry argue that American hegemony has been sustained by a liberal order built on institutions and norms. However, the selective application of liberal ideals calls into doubt the model's consistency and legitimacy.

Antonio Gramsci's **Theory of Hegemony** (1971) critiques how dominant powers use ideology, culture, and institutions to maintain control through consent rather than coercion. In this framework, American democracy can be viewed not just as a global paradigm but also as a hegemonic project that cloaks realist imperatives in liberal discourse, potentially functioning as a counter-paradigm upon deeper analysis. Antonio Gramsci's concept of hegemony emphasises the importance of agreement, compulsion, and intellectual leadership in sustaining dominating institutions. In this perspective, American democracy is evaluated as a paradigm that conceals realist imperatives beneath liberal language, potentially serving as a counter-paradigm when examined via its worldwide actions. The synthesis of these theories provides a holistic examination of U.S. governance, demonstrating persisting contradictions between ideology and strategy in the representation and execution of American democracy.

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DISCUSSION

The 2024 re-election of Donald Trump as president provided a significant case study for examining the persistence and implications of realist governance within a liberal democratic framework. Analysts and commentators assessed the domestic and international ramifications of his second administration, focusing on key policy areas such as foreign relations, immigration, healthcare, and economic management. Trump's re-election marked an exceptional moment in U.S. political history, as it sharpened debates about the character and trajectory of American democracy. Some observers saw the United States as a global paradigm of democratic governance, demonstrating institutional continuity despite political upheaval, while others saw it as a counter-paradigm, exposing structural weaknesses and the capacity for realist imperatives to override liberal commitments. Trump's governance combined realist tendencies with a more overt challenge to liberal institutional norms, particularly in the rhetoric surrounding the media, electoral processes, and international alliances. Persistent challenges, such as economic inequality, partisan polarisation, and concerns over electoral integrity, continue to raise questions about the durability of democratic principles. When situated within a broader historical comparison, the 2024 case echoed patterns observed in previous administrations. For example, realist principles, prioritising national security, strategic advantage, and economic competitiveness, were central to the Nixon administration’s foreign policy during the Cold War, the Reagan administration’s approach to Soviet containment, and the post-9/11 security strategies of the George W. Bush era. However, Trump’s governance combined these longstanding realist tendencies with a more overt challenge to liberal institutional norms, particularly in the rhetoric surrounding the media, electoral processes, and international alliances.

The study explores the influence of realist governance principles on policy decisions in the U.S., despite its foundation in liberal democracy. Realist governance principles prioritise national interest and power dynamics over ideological commitments, creating a hybrid governance structure where liberal ideals are often constrained by pragmatic and strategic considerations. This can manifest through foreign policy decisions that often prioritise security and strategic interests over humanitarian concerns or democratic promotion abroad. The study identifies continuous friction between realist and liberal ideologies in U.S. politics, manifesting in debates surrounding foreign policy, economic regulation, and social issues. Realists argue for a pragmatic approach centred on power and security, while liberals advocate for policies that promote democracy and human rights globally. This tension can lead to conflicting approaches in governance, such as during the Trump administration, where a more isolationist realist approach contrasted sharply with traditional liberal internationalism.

Realist views are effective in economics, foreign policy, and national security. Trade protectionism and economic nationalism are examples of economic policies that prioritise national interests. However, this approach may jeopardise global economic cooperation and erode the United States' credibility as a democratic leader. Realist diplomacy ensures strategic stability while undermining American public and political perceptions of the country's mixed governance form, exposing a divided public opinion. Supporters claim that realism ensures security and economic stability, which strengthens US leadership. Critics argue that realist policies undercut democratic accountability, citing examples such as executive overreach, surveillance measures, and interventionist wars. Global view indicates that US democracy remains important, but discrepancies in foreign policy and democratic advocacy have undermined its global legitimacy. Long-term implications of realist governance on stability and global influence include domestic stability, international influence, and sustainability of the hybrid model. Over-reliance on power politics could weaken democratic institutions, leading to authoritarian tendencies. Additionally, without a balanced approach, the U.S. could face internal democratic erosion and external diplomatic isolation. Assessing the long-term implications of realist governance on American democracy involves considering how prioritising national interest may erode public trust in democratic institutions over time.

The study argues that while it’s important to acknowledge the successes of American democracy, the emphasis on its flaws serves as a valuable warning to other nations. Recognising the complexities and challenges that can promote a more inclusive dialogue about democracy that respects the sovereignty of states and their unique contexts. America needs to lead by example rather than dictate what democracy should look like elsewhere.

ISSN No. 2454-6194 | DOI: 10.51584/IJRIAS |Volume X Issue IX September 2025

CONCLUSION

This study has examined the tension between realist governance practices and the liberal democratic framework of the United States through a comparative-historical and thematic analysis. The findings reveal that, while liberal democracy projects an image of participatory governance, its policy decisions frequently incorporate realist principles, prioritising strategic interests, security, and pragmatic power considerations over idealist commitments. This duality is not merely a political or philosophical contradiction; it is a sociological phenomenon that reflects deeper structural tensions within modern governance systems. From a sociological perspective, this tension illuminates how states negotiate the boundaries between ideology and practical governance. It exposes the mechanisms through which dominant political actors justify departures from democratic ideals in the name of stability, national interest, or global positioning. Such practices shape public trust, influence civic engagement, and contribute to the reproduction of political norms that may either reinforce or undermine democratic legitimacy.

The ramifications go beyond the U.S. context. As governance models become more challenged in a globalised society, the American experience provides an important case study for understanding how realism methods work inside purportedly liberal institutions. This resonates with both new and established democracies, which face similar challenges from geopolitical rivalry, economic competition, and domestic polarisation. Finally, this study calls for more research into whether the coexistence of realism and liberalism is an adaptive strength, allowing governance to balance ideals with strategic necessity, or a latent vulnerability that undermines democratic governance's moral and institutional foundations. This relates to ongoing debates in political sociology concerning the longevity, flexibility, and global influence of the liberal democratic paradigm.

List of Abbreviations

NAFTA – North American Free Trade Agreement

NATO – North Atlantic Treaty Organisation

U.S. – United States

USMCA – United States–Mexico–Canada Agreement

UN – United Nations

WTO – World Trade Organisation

RECOMMENDATIONS

The paper recommends that to ensure sustainable governance, American policymakers should adopt a moderate approach that integrates realism's pragmatism with liberalism's ethical governance. This includes enhancing diplomatic engagement and democratic partnerships while maintaining military dominance. Strengthening democratic institutions against authoritarian drift requires reinforcing checks and balances in policy decisions, increasing public transparency, reforming foreign policy to align with democratic values, avoiding strategic hypocrisy, and prioritising multilateralism. The Management of economic policies and global stability involves balanced trade policies, technological investment, and enhancing national security without compromising democratic values. Reforming surveillance practices respects civil liberties while ensuring national safety. The US should focus on smart power, combining military strength and diplomatic engagement, to ensure the country's security and democratic integrity. Balancing authority with democratic values, the United States can maintain its leadership while ensuring domestic stability, strengthening institutional checks, preserving international credibility, and promoting democratic consistency. This is critical to maintaining the durability of American democracy in the face of changing global circumstances. It further recommends transparent communication mechanisms to explain the rationale behind strategic policy decisions. It also emphasises the importance of structured dialogues to promote critical engagement with these

paradigms. The effectiveness of realist approaches is emphasised through independent evaluations in economic, foreign, and security sectors. The study also clarifies the U.S.'s role as a global paradigm or a context-specific adaptation, aligning diplomatic messaging with strategic objectives. The long-term implications of sustained realist governance on democratic resilience and international credibility are addressed through scenario-based foresight planning. These recommendations contribute to academic debates on governance paradigms and offer actionable pathways for policymakers and scholars.

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