Barely a quarter century after the collapse of the Soviet empire, it is democracy that has entered an intense period of public scrutiny. The election of President Trump and the Brexit vote are dramatic moments in a populist uprising against the postwar political consensus of liberal rule. But they are also signposts in a process long in the making, yet perhaps not fully appreciated until the intense electoral upheavals of recent years. The current moment is defined by the distrust of the institutional order of democracy and, more fundamentally, of the idea that there is a tomorrow and that the losers of today may unseat the victors in a new round of electoral challenge. At issue across the nuances of the national settings is a deep challenge to the core claim of democracy to be the superior form of political organization of civilized peoples.

This Article roots the current democratic malaise not so much in the outcome of any particular election but in four central institutional challenges, each one a compromise of how democracy was consolidated over the past few centuries. The four are: first, the accelerated decline of political parties and other institutional forms of popular engagement; second, the paralysis of the legislative branches; third, the loss of a sense of social cohesion; and fourth, the decline in state competence. While there are no doubt other candidates for inducing anxiety over the state of democracy, these four have a particular salience in theories of democratic superiority that make their decline or loss a matter of grave concern. Among the great defenses of democracy stand the claims that democracies offer the superior form of participation, of deliberation, of solidarity, and of the capacity to get the job done. We need not arbitrate among the theories of participatory democracy, deliberative democracy, solidaristic democracy, or epistemic democratic superiority. Rather, we should note with concern that each of these theories states a claim for the advantages of democracy, and each faces worrisome disrepair.