**Former Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta encourages collaboration between political parties to restore the United States’ ‘fragile’ democracy**

As political division in the United States remains, former Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta said in a press conference Tuesday that the country’s democracy is “fragile” and increased cohesiveness between Republicans and Democrats is vital to its rehabilitation.

Panetta said he attributes the delicate position of the country’s democracy to the lack of open dialogue and strong leadership. He didn't limit the challenges democracy is facing to the United States, though, mentioning conflicts abroad between Russia and Ukraine, China and Taiwan and Israel and Hamas, too.

In his home country, though, Panetta believes that the government is at a crossroads.

“Democracy is under siege, and that’s true here at home with our own democracy,” Panetta said. “...I often say that I think we’re living at a time where our democracy could go one of two directions.”

One direction that Panetta sees is democracy being reborn and rejuvenated, restoring it to how he said it was when he went to Washington, D.C., in 1966 to begin his [political career](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Leon-Panetta) after being discharged from the United States Army as a first lieutenant. He saw Republicans and Democrats working together to improve education, civil rights and national security, among other topics, and how, despite their differences, there was an explicit willingness to work together. It’s what he refers to as “Washington at its best.”

Yet Panetta said that the same can't be said currently because of a lack of leadership.

“If people that we elect are willing to exercise strong leadership, we can avoid crisis,” Panetta said. “But if leadership is not there, then we will govern the crisis.

“And too often, in recent years, we have largely governed by crisis. You can do that, but there’s a price to be paid, and the price is we begin to lose the trust of the American people.”

Along with the lack of solidarity between the parties and strong leadership, he used former President Donald Trump's [recent claim](https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/video/donald-trump-trial-rigged-after-convicted-counts-110694576) that his trial was "rigged" as another example of the government's instability, as Panetta thinks declarations like that from powerful people can undermine and weaken a democracy's credibility.

Panetta also said that when the mob of Trump supporters attacked the United States Capitol on [Jan. 6, 2021](https://www.americanoversight.org/investigation/the-january-6-attack-on-the-u-s-capitol), there was a threat of democracy halting. That “wake-up call” showed him how fragile the country’s democracy is.

But Panetta remains confident that his country can return to the togetherness he witnessed nearly six decades ago, with Americans working together and voting with the democracy’s future in mind.

He sees the obstacles, but he believes in the American people who are chasing the American dream because he comes from a family of Italian immigrants, who, too, chased that dream.

“I’m optimistic that ultimately we can come together and that we can protect the American dream for everyone, and more importantly, we can have a government of, by and for all people,” Panetta said.