

Introduction

This think piece examines Francis Fukuyama's¹ ideas on political order, institutions, and political decay, as set out in *Political Order and Political Decay: From the Industrial Revolution to the Globalisation of Democracy*.² I will argue that Fukuyama's theory is convincing because he shows that democracy, equality, and development cannot work properly without strong institutions.

In my view, this relates to power and inequality because political development depends on the state, the rule of law, and democratic accountability, whereas weak institutions often result in volatility and unequal outcomes.

Fukuyama's Argument

As I understand it, Fukuyama argues that political development is not simply about elections, leaders, or events; it concerns the long-term development of institutions. Fukuyama describes institutions as 'stable, valued, recurring patterns of behaviour'³ and as 'persistent rules that shape, limit, and channel human behaviour'⁴. This suggests that societies are formed not only by dominant individuals but also by rules and structures that last long after those individuals have gone.

In my view, this is one of the strongest aspects of Fukuyama's argument. Political structures require institutions that endure. If a country depends on a single leader, it may struggle to remain secure. This is why Fukuyama emphasises the state, the rule of law, and democratic accountability.

The State and Political Order

Fukuyama places great importance on the state. He argues that before a country can properly adopt democracy, it must first have order. This supports the idea that 'before a polity could be democratic, it had to provide basic order'⁵.

This also supports Samuel Huntington's⁶ view that 'the most important political distinction among countries concerns not their form of government but their degree of government'.⁷ I find this convincing because democracy cannot function without security, the rule of law, and a central authority able to protect the people.

¹ Britannica Editors. "Francis Fukuyama". *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 23 Oct. 2025, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Francis-Fukuyama>. [Accessed 17 June 2026].

² Francis Fukuyama, *Political Order and Political Decay: From the Industrial Revolution to the Globalisation of Democracy* (Profile Books, 2014).

³ Fukuyama, *Political Order and Political Decay: From the Industrial Revolution to the Globalisation of Democracy*, p.6.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p.6.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p.7.

⁶ Richard K. Betts, 'Samuel P. Huntington', *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 14 April 2026 <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Samuel-P-Huntington> [accessed 16 June 2026].

⁷ Samuel P. Huntington and others, 'Political Order in Changing Societies', *Verfassung Und Recht in Übersee* (Baden-Baden), 3.2 (1970), pp. 257–61, doi:10.5771/0506-7286-1970-2-257.

Fukuyama's example of Libya helps explain this point. After Gaddafi's fall, Libya did not become a successful democracy. It struggled because it lacked a functioning state.

Fukuyama argues that Libya's main problem was the absence of a 'central authority that can exercise a monopoly of legitimate force over its territory'.⁸ This means no government had sufficient authority to maintain peace and enforce the law.

In my opinion, this supports my view that order must come before democracy, because freedom and rights are difficult to practise without security. Without a functioning government, armed groups may take control and increase inequality.

Weak Institutions and Inequality

Fukuyama's argument is strongly linked with inequality. Weak states are often unable to provide basic services such as education, healthcare, security, and economic opportunity. He links poverty in parts of Africa to weak governments, arguing that poorer outcomes in 'income, health, education'⁹ are linked to a "lack of strong government institutions".¹⁰

This shows that inequality is probably not only about money but also about whether political institutions function properly. If a state cannot enforce laws, protect its citizens, or provide services, inequality becomes harder to reduce. Richer groups may still protect themselves, while poorer groups rely more on the Government.

I find Fukuyama's theory useful, as he shows that weak states can increase inequality, but stronger states can create better conditions for services, rights, and opportunities.

The Rule of Law

Fukuyama also argues that a strong state is not enough on its own. It must be controlled by the rule of law. I think that the rule of law means that even powerful rulers must obey the law. The second lecture explains that the rule of law means rules are 'binding even on the most politically powerful actors in a given society'.¹¹

This is important because a strong state without the rule of law can be dangerous. A government may have power, but if that power is not controlled, it can become undemocratic or corrupt.

⁸ Fukuyama, Political Order and Political Decay: From the Industrial Revolution to the Globalisation of Democracy, p.2.

⁹ Ibid, p.3.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Power and Inequality Lecture 2, 'The Origins and Evolution of the State', lecture slide, slide 27, [accessed 16 June 2026].

Fukuyama argues not only for a strong government but also for one constrained by law. If these are absent, powerful groups may use the state for their own benefit, increasing inequality.

Democratic Accountability

In Fukuyama's theory, there is democratic accountability. I believe this means the government should respond to society rather than serving itself or elites. The lecture describes accountability as the government's responsiveness to 'the interests of the whole society'.¹²

I think this matters because even if a state has laws, it may fail if it ignores ordinary people. Fukuyama's debate of Turkey, Brazil, Tunisia, Egypt, and China shows how growth can create new groups with higher expectations. He argues that a 'new middle class had emerged'¹³ and that their expectations were 'much higher than those of their parents' generation'.¹⁴

Development shapes people's expectations of the government. As populations become more educated or feel more secure, they often demand better services, less corruption, and more political voice. If governments don't adapt to these changing needs, this could lead to political instability and possibly civil unrest.

Conclusion

I find Fukuyama's argument convincing because he does not treat democracy as something that can be achieved quickly. He shows that democracy, equality, and rights require strong political foundations. Without order, the rule of law, and functioning institutions, these ideas are difficult to put into practice and may remain mere promises rather than real improvements in people's lives.

He also shows that power alone is not enough. A state must be strong, lawful, and accountable; otherwise, it may create more inequality and control. In my view, political order is important for development and equality. Elections alone are not enough because democracy works best when state power, the rule of law, and accountability work together and protect ordinary people.

¹² Power and Inequality Lecture 2, 'The Origins and Evolution of the State', lecture slides, slide 40, [accessed 16 June 2026].

¹³ Fukuyama, Political Order and Political Decay: From the Industrial Revolution to the Globalisation of Democracy, p.5.

¹⁴ Ibid.

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