The resurgence of autocracy during the mid and late 2010s provided a leitmotif for transformation of our program that is still ongoing today. This confidence in the assumed arc of history was reflected—in a prudent way—in our curriculum, which focused on topics such as political development and democratic transitions. Hailing from the US, South America, Europe, the Middle East and Asia, for the most part, our students pursued careers in democracy assistance and human rights rather than in the challenging art (and science) of managing existing democracies. The absence of any reference in the original title of our MA program to “governance” was hardly coincidental: the prevailing assumption in a democracy field that was only beginning to professionalize was that once a transition had succeeded and democratic consolidation was well underway, governance would follow suit. The key task was to help political leaders, civil society social activists and leaders abroad grapple—and perhaps negotiate—with autocratic regimes in ways that would put these countries on a democratic path. Our program thus focused on giving our students the education, training and experience they needed to partner with NGO and governmental institutions in the US and abroad to advance democratic change. This focus on transitions underscored the widely shared view that while the road ahead was surely difficult, it nevertheless pointed to a democratic future.
Welcome to this year’s edition of Democracy & Society, the result of the hard work of Editors, Janelle Clausen and Alex Mayer and assistant editors Yusuf Can and Evan Mann. The 2021–2022 has been a busy year at our Democracy & Governance program. We said farewell to the previous associate director, Jennifer Dresden, who left Georgetown to join the Protect Democracy organization as a Policy Advocate, and program coordinator Justin Harried. As incoming Associate Director and now Director of the program, I am grateful for the hard work by Dr. Dresden and Justin, as they helped through the transition.

This year, we welcomed our 16th class of sixteen incoming students, our largest thus far, as Georgetown started in person classes again. We also say farewell to ten graduating students who are starting careers in the field. You can find more about the events and developments of the year in the Program Highlights section of this issue.

This issue of Democracy & Society opens with a special reflection by Program Co-founder and Director, Professor Daniel Brumberg. He reflects on the genesis and evolution of the Democracy & Governance program, as the optimism of the global democratic wave was tempered with the recognition of autocratic resurgence and democratic backsliding. The program has evolved and adapted to changes in global and domestic context, as we continue to innovate in experiential education and international networks.

The remaining contributions focus on the theme of this issue, Democracy and Crises. They address issues in Trust and Governance, Democracy and Fragility in the midst of climate change and global pandemic, and Inequality and Corruption.

Wagner Horta investigates if the world is actually facing a crisis in democracy through three assessments of democracy around the world, the Economist’s Democracy Index, Freedom House’s Freedom in the World report, and the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Project. He is hopeful that the crisis is not irreversible and that local contexts matter.

Yusuf Can and Evan Mann explore the relationship between democratic backsliding and corruption in their paper, arguing that they mutually impact each other, as opposed to a linear relationship of backsliding leading to corruption. They use the cases of Turkey and Hungary to highlight the vicious cycle of erosion of the performance and legitimacy of democratic institutions.

Ursus Eijkelenberg investigates the Capital Riots of January 6th, and highlights classical political theoretical insights of political frustration. The rise of political questions around pandemic, financial crisis, inequalities, racial and gender equality, and climate change, challenge democratic responsiveness and make politics more existential. Unheard people shout, and may turn to violence. Eijkelenberg proposes the democratic route of civic constitutionalism, through inclusive, citizen-based participation and deliberation, as a positive answer to political frustration.

Justin Daniels examines the lessons from Sri Lanka’s constitutional reform, as mass nonviolent protests in Sri Lanka removes the authoritarian-leaning government. A constitutional reform proposed by an opposition party to limit the powers of the presidency would strengthen Sri Lanka’s democracy. To outlast the bill reforms, the democrats need to engage broad sectors in the society to ensure the performance and legitimacy of institutions. Sri Lanka highlights the hope of democratization in the midst of global democratic erosion.

Ibrahim Sulley examines the four successful and two failed coups in West Africa between August 2020 and February 2022. While military takeover is partly due to widespread poverty and corruption among ruling civilian elites, the coups also highlight the inability of the government to counter security risks, such as insurgencies and jihadism.

Maciej Skrzypek investigates the growing populist rhetoric and illiberal turn in Czechia, as part of broader democratic backsliding in Central and Eastern Europe. He argues that measures to address the pandemic strengthened the executive power, weakened parliamentary oversight, and suspended certain rights and liberties.

Nazerke Mukhlissova examines the Kyrgyz government’s response to the COVID pandemic, as journalists compensated for weak institutions to clarify the confusing policies and rules toward COVID that led to fake news and conspiracy theories. Instead of improving communication channels with the citizens, Kyrgyz state officials criminalized journalists and news agencies, and shut down protests, by claiming to act on behalf of public health, thereby increasing authoritarianism in the country.

Max Henning looks at the theoretical intersection of neuroscience and democracy to create pathways to reinvigorate democracy. By questioning the rational foundations of democracy, Henning points out how feelings coexist with reason to create tolerant, deliberate decision-making processes that enhance democratic structures. As people learn to participate in local processes and feel like they belong and matter, they make democracy at the macro level more resilient.
That said, this focus did not translate into any effort on my part, or that of Steven Heydemann — the co-founder of the MA program — to imbue the MA with an ideological message. Our concern for a principled and rigorous objectivity was shared by our second co-director, Professor Samuel Mujal Leon, and by our successive associate directors, Barak Hoffman, Yonatan Morse, and Jennifer Dresden all of whom played vital roles in the success of this MA program.

I shared with Heydemann an especially strong allergy to political preaching, a perspective that probably owes much to the fact that we were both students of autocracy in the Middle East. Imbued with a keen conceptual and empirical grasp of the tenacity of regimes and the geo-strategic realities that support autocracies — not least of which are from outside powers including the United States — we created a program that emphasizes the social, economic, institutional, and identity based obstacles to democratic change while also highlighting strategies that activists might deploy to dent or erode the armor of autocracy. To find the sweet spot between realism and aspiration was our basic goal. In this spirit we forged close working relationships with a myriad of Washington-based NGOs, official US agencies, and private sector firms, including the National Endowment for Democracy, the National Democratic Institute, the International Republican Institute, Freedom House, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) Democracy Program, and the Department of State’s Bureau of Democracy, Labor and Human Rights, Democracy International.

If these partnerships reflected the MA’s practical ethos, they went hand in hand with a focus on theory and conceptualization which was rooted in the fact that the MA in fact grew out of a PhD program in the Department of Government. From the outset we believed in and still try to realize the department’s unofficial motto, which is to link theory and practice.

It is precisely with this idea in mind that over the ensuing years we revised its analytical and practical contours to reflect the changing landscape of national and international politics. This involved adding more practice-oriented classes in topics such as policy and proposal writing, election observing, and program monitoring and evaluation. On a wider plane, we began to highlight classes on topics related to governance — hence the change in the name of the program adopted in 2012. With the support of the wider university and many GU programs and centers, we also encouraged our students to take classes on critical topics such as market reforms, transforming security sectors, and judicial or constitutional politics. And with the proliferation of hybrid or semi-authoritarian regimes around the world, we emphasized the many challenges posed by what Thomas Carothers once called the “grey zone” of political change.

Indeed, the resurgence of autocracy during the mid and late 2010s provided a leitmotif for transformation of our program that is still ongoing today. Three related developments were central to this change. First, the emergence of a multi-polar global order gave aspiring autocrats greater room for maneuver, even as this rise of a “market place” of competing states also created openings for new democratic leaders to work with Western democracy assistance organizations. Second, the shifting world order also created opportunities for Russia and especially China to compete with and challenge Western democracies, assert their military and economic power, and cooperate in ways designed to deflect internal and external democratic challenges. Seeking to address these dynamics, I offered a new course on Global Autocracy that highlighted the complex interaction between national level political change and international politics. Echoing this focus on international relations, many of our students took courses in subject such as international security, migration, and foreign policy in Russia, China, the US, and other states.

The third and perhaps most important development that shaped our program was the 2016 election of Donald Trump and the associated rise of populist nationalist movements and leaders in the US and other Western democracies. These developments not only placed the threat of “democratic backsliding” at the center of US politics: they also showed that the empirical and conceptual wall between the study of US politics and the politics of the wider global arena was increasingly an outdated if porous artifice, one that no longer captured the complex if shared challenges facing democracies in the West, in Eastern Europe, and the so-called developing world. With the very notion of “American exceptionalism” — or for that matter, the notion of any kind of unchanging, one dimensional national level exceptionalism — up for grabs, we began to rethink our own teaching of democratization.

This shift was reflected in a set of innovative initiatives focusing on polarization in the US. These efforts highlighted grassroots strategies for countering or mitigating polarization: practice oriented and experiential, this work took the education process outside of the classroom by rooting it in the lived context of young people grappling across the ideological, social, cultural and ideological divides that have emerged in the US.

The first of these efforts began in the 2018-19 academic year, when our MA program joined with GU’s Laboratory for Global Performance and Politics, its co-director, Derek Goldman, and Patrick Henry College—a small, conservative Christian college outside Leesburg, Virginia — to shape a project that we called In Your Shoes. Using performance, dialogue and narrative strategies rooted in theater, the project challenged students from both schools to grapple with themes such as home, belief, friendship and community by telling stories about their own lives, and then having their counterparts perform these narratives and thus “step into their shoes.” The following academic year we offered a formal, 3 credit course based on this initial experiment that also involved students from both campuses. Conducted mostly online, the course was recognized by GU when it
received the "Provost's Innovative Teaching Award," and got national attention when it was covered by PBS's News Hour.

Needless to say, the January 6, 2021 storming of the U.S. Capitol provided fresh impetus to widen our work on polarization. In the wake of this shocking event, we organized a third on-line In Your Shoes program that involved both students and faculty from GU. And in Spring 2022 I joined with our new Associate Director (and now Director) Elton Skendaj to do a course on “Countering Polarization,” half of which featured speakers from US based NGOs and programs, in class exercises (including an In Your Shoes segment) and a guest lecture by Professor Larry Diamond, who addressed a range of ongoing initiatives as well as the difficult question of electoral reform in the US.

While these efforts emphasize experiential education, they are fully in line with our long-standing quest to link theory and practice. The important, if sometimes tricky, task here is to sustain our focus on rigorous, objective analysis even as we grapple with contentious political issues that affect our personal, family and professional lives, thus implicating us in a political world from which we cannot and should not disengage.

As our MA program evolves and tries to meet the opportunities and challenges of engaged analysis, we are also determined to expand our teaching on global affairs, and to sustain within this framework grassroots work abroad. This is no small goal for a small program, but one that we plunged into three years ago with a summer program that brought 11 of our students to Tunisia, where they met with political leaders, policy makers, social activists and scholars to discuss the challenges of democratic consolidation. We hope to renew this effort, although given events in that country, a new version of this class will probably focus on problems of democratic backsliding. We are also looking at potential partnerships with other overseas universities, including the Catholic University of Portugal’s Democracy Program. We will also endeavor to open up opportunities for our students to participate in other hands-on field work, such as election observation, NGO support and program evaluation.

Professor Elton Skendaj is already doing a superb job leading these efforts and expanding the horizons of our MA. His experience growing up, pursuing studies and working in his native Albania and other European countries, and his previous work on the nexus of democratic and conflict resolution (including his own experience using theater and performance to foster dialogue) will be critical to advancing what remains the only MA program of its kind in the US. Joining with our colleagues in the American Politics and Conflict Resolution MA programs—and with a range of DC partners in the NGO world and in government—he will help students build careers that I am sure will make a real and positive difference in the lives of others, whether in the US or the wider global community.

As for me, in my new role as MA Senior Advisor, I look forward to working with Elton and our students in a range of activities including our polarization work and overseas programs. I also look forward to anchoring our new gateway course in our core curriculum, and in supporting the wide range of classes that animate our program, not a few of which are taught by our talented adjunct faculty colleagues, all of whom have brought their experience and insights to the classroom. A program of this kind is a collaborative endeavor that draws insights, inspiration and support from many arenas and institutions in GU, in DC and beyond — not least of which is the Department of Government, whose successive chairs and remarkable faculty have supported our MA in so many ways.

Liberal Democracy in Crisis: Evidence from Three Reports and Some Reflections

Wagner Horta

Introduction

In recent years, an increasing number of texts have been positing the world is undergoing a “democratic crisis” — that democracy as a system of government is threatened worldwide as political leaders with autocratic tendencies capture the power and manipulate democratic institutions in their favor, various forms of increasingly extreme social polarization — from the partisan divide in the United States to religious sectarianism in India — threaten the functioning of democratic politics, and resurgent authoritarian powers (notably China and Russia) have regained their primacy in the world stage and even work to reshape international norms along more authoritarian lines.

However, is it certain that global democracy is threatened today? Are there really signs that democratic institutions and processes are globally eroding, or are the various texts which posit as much to some extent hyperbolic? From an academic perspective, how much objective evidence currently exists to “prove” the world is experiencing a democratic crisis? This paper seeks to provide a tentative answer to that question by comparing data and reports from three different outlets that publish yearly assessments of the state of democracy across the world: The Economist’s Democracy Index, Freedom House’s Freedom in the World report, and the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Project. These sources use quantitative methods, guided by the qualitative assessments of experts, to measure countries’ democratic quality and classify how democratic their current political regimes...
are. In reviewing their methodologies, inherent subjectivities, and latest findings, this piece can posit an assessment of global democracy today, and whether it is truly in crisis.

Definitions and Report Methodologies

Democracy theorists and practitioners often defend liberal democracy as the ideal political regime. Stringently defined, it is a system where voters choose political leaders through regular, free and fair elections, while enjoying various political and civil rights and practicing liberal ideals such as rule of law, minority rights, and political pluralism. Such is not an easy system to reproduce: it requires political elites to only compete for power through peaceful means, and always subject themselves to public accountability. Moreover, it requires that a suite of individual rights is equally provided to a country’s entire population. Predictably, liberal democracy thus also needs various public institutions like electoral boards, oversight bodies, and political parties to ensure such processes are carried out.

Since this concept of liberal democracy is not easy to replicate given material and political pressures in different countries, scholars have often defined political regimes across a spectrum of how democratic they are: if, on one end, there are “full” liberal democracies where these standards and conditions are significantly (if not necessarily perfectly) fulfilled, on the other there are fully-consolidated authoritarian regimes where neither effective elections nor political and civil rights are at all guaranteed, and political power rests solely with the state. Between each, one can find the so-called “democracies with adjectives” and “hybrid regimes”: political systems where liberal-democratic and undemocratic political structures coexist to varying proportions.

For this paper, the term “democratic quality” refers to the various measures the reports mentioned here use to define where countries fall along this spectrum.

Methodologically, the Democracy Index, V-Dem, and Freedom in the World reports are relatively similar: they gather qualitative assessments from analysts and experts about the current state of a country’s democracy and, through a process of internal deliberation and data validation, transform them into quantitative scores for overall democratic quality. All three sources openly admit there is some subjectivity in this process, since it depends on individual experts’ judgments. Each report has its own ways to balance this. V-Dem uses a measurement model to statistically relativize the reliability of experts’ scores, while the Democracy Index limits individual indicators for democratic quality to two- or three-points scoring scales, in order to make expert assessments more easily comparable. Moreover, Freedom House conducts an extensive process of internal review and discussion before publishing scores. Although one should not discount the value of such efforts, the findings of each report will always be uncontroversially differences in methodology and experts’ interpretations of complicated political phenomena likely means each report will never be entirely comparable. Nonetheless, if their findings are to some extent overlapping, then some meaningful conclusions can be reached about the state of global democracy.

Main analysis of the reports

The latest editions of the Freedom in the World Report, the Democracy Index, and V-Dem’s Democracy Report all agree that global democratic quality is generally worsening and has been for several years. However, this statement requires nuance: as mentioned, each of these organizations has its particular ways of evaluating countries’ democracies, which likely helps explain discrepancies in their temporal trends of democratic decline. For example, the Democracy Index has data going back to 2006, and tracked an almost continuous decline among 167 countries’ average “overall score” for democracy starting only in 2015 (going from an average international score of 5.55 to 5.28 in 2021). Before then, global averages intermittently fluctuated up or down. By contrast, the Freedom in the World report suggests a different tipping point: with a score closer to 1 signifying a greater degree of freedom, the average between all countries has almost continuously increased since 2005 — from 3.34 in that year to 3.51 in 2021. Finally, V-Dem posits 2010 as the year when its Liberal Democracy Index measure started declining, from an average of 0.39 among all countries (weighted for population size) in that year to 0.31 in 2021. These drops are relatively small, and they seemingly relativize the impact of global democratic decline - but such is deceptive: small drops in overall scores can reflect significant political upheavals and erosion of liberal institutions. For example, India’s Liberal Democracy Index score in V-Dem fell from 0.57 in 2013 to 0.36 in 2022, reflecting the increasing level of autocratization and sectarianism the country is facing under Narendra Modi. Meanwhile, The Economist’s Democracy Index decreased Hong Kong’s score from 6.02 to 5.6 between 2019-2021, following the crackdown by the Chinese Communist Party on local civil society. Lastly, the Freedom in the World average score for Brazil rose from 2 in 2018 to 2.5 in 2021, coinciding with the start of Jair Bolsonaro’s presidency in the former year. Decimal-point score changes can thus be quite consequential.

On a different note, the differences in dates for the start of the democratic decline between each report create problems from a historical perspective: if one had to write a history of liberal democracy in the 21st century based on this data, which year should they pick as the start of a decline? Either 2005 or 2010 may seem tempting, since they are relatively close to the Great Recession and could suggest a narrative of how economic decline weakened democracy. The year 2015 could also be tempting, since it was when Donald Trump announced his candidacy for president. But any of these years is problematic: choosing one of them as the start of a global democratic crisis lends primacy to certain events while diminishing others, thus
inserting more subjectivity into whichever narrative we use to explain democratic decline. Even if one uses empirical data gathered and coded by experts to write a history of democratic decline, methodological differences between them may thus still lead to some ambiguity.

Another aspect adding complexity to the current understanding of democratic decline is how it varies regionally: all three reports suggest democratic quality is overall the worst in Africa, the Middle East, and parts of Eastern Europe and the Asia-Pacific - which is not surprising given that most of the globe’s authoritarian regimes are concentrated in those areas. However, there is greater disagreement about which regions have seen the greatest decreases in democratic quality over the last several years: for example, the Democracy Index cites Western Europe as the region that suffered the second-largest drop in its average score (behind Eastern Europe), from 8.6 in 2006 to 8.22 in 2021 (thus remaining relatively high compared to other regions) - the other organizations concur that democratic quality has decreased among Western European nations, but not enough to make it one of the worst-faring areas. Similarly, V-Dem and the Democracy Index list Latin America as having suffered one of the steepest drops starting in the early 2000s, though Freedom House, likely because it measures the Americas as a single region including the United States and Canada, did not do the same.

Moreover, it is important to note that different places are experiencing different causes for democratic backsliding: each region and country has distinct performances across subcategories of democratic quality (e.g. electoral processes, political pluralism, etc.), and specific political or cultural factors may create more localized causes for democratic erosion. For instance, the Freedom in the World posits that authoritarian regimes in Eurasia are modeling themselves after Vladimir Putin’s in Russia, with the latter’s influence thus becoming a key catalyst for autocratization in the region. Meanwhile, the Democracy Index cites many citizens in Eastern Europe as having ‘low confidence in democracy as a form of government and believe that democratic governance leads to poor economic performance.’ Such factors may create regional dynamics fueling democratic backsliding, with the global crisis manifesting itself in specific ways across the world.

Nonetheless, the reports feature important points of concordance: for one, regardless of differences in overall timelines, all of them agree the average democratic quality across the world has declined over the last several years. This is the most immediate piece of evidence they give for a global democratic crisis of some kind. Moreover, all three reports highlight that liberal democracy is not the most common political regime in the world today: both the Democracy Index and V-Dem point to most countries being neither consolidated liberal democracies nor full authoritarian regimes, but rather falling somewhere in-between due to institutional shortcomings that hamper democratic rule, such as widespread corruption or constraints on civil society. The Democracy Index classified only 21 countries or territories as being “full democracies,” while a majority (87 countries) fell under either the “flawed democracy” or “hybrid regime” category. Similarly, V-Dem’s 2022 report classified only 34 countries as full “liberal democracies,” with 115 being either “electoral democracies” or “electoral autocracies.” Lastly, Freedom House classified 83 out of 195 countries in 2021 as being “Free,” with the rest falling under either “Partly Free” or “Not Free.” Though the proportions between them vary, all sources thus point to most countries today lacking the ability to fully deliver on liberal democracy. The proportion of countries that are not considered full democracies overtaking those that are not new - indeed, all reports point to this already being the case since at least the early 2000s. What is more worrying is that this proportion may worsen in the coming years due to the decreasing global average for democratic quality.

The Democracy Index, Freedom in the World Report, and V-Dem Project do thus provide evidence that the world is indeed experiencing a global crisis of liberal democracy. However, one needs to see the nuance in this statement: fewer countries having a perfect claim to liberal democracies does not mean democracy as a system of government is at risk of extinction. Even if an increasingly larger share of countries fit into the “second-best” categories of regime types (that is, “electoral” and “flawed” democracies, along with “Partly Free” countries), democratic institutions and processes will likely continue to persist there in meaningful ways. Rather, the real risk is that countries will become increasingly unable or unwilling to fully provide the liberties, rights and political participation that liberal democracy truly calls for.

Finally, the reports do suggest that some causes for democratic erosion are global, affecting countries across regions. For example, the 2022 editions of both Freedom House and the Democracy Index paid particular attention to China’s attempts to influence the international system, delegitimizing forms of democratic governance and chilling civil society voices speaking out against its human rights abuses. Furthermore, V-Dem suggests that autocratization today is being galvanized by increasing levels of toxic political polarization across the world: would-be dictators are adopting a playbook of leveraging social divisions to demonize their opposition, and justify the breakdown of democratic institutions. V-Dem posits this pattern has been seen across a wide variety of national contexts, from Poland, through Brazil, and to India - and it may repeat itself elsewhere as global levels of polarization increase, including within established liberal democracies. Lastly, both V-Dem and the Democracy Index concur that the coronavirus pandemic has harmed democratic processes across the world, though to varying degrees. While the Democracy Index posits pandemic restrictions were a serious infraction on civil liberties, V-Dem found “that the pandemic has had limited direct effects on the global downward trend in democracy. While leaders of some countries take advantage of the pandemic
to further consolidate power, autocratization was typically happening already.”

Conclusions

Studying global democratic decay reminds one of the parable of blind men trying to describe an elephant: each of them could touch and describe specific parts of the animal, but it was much more difficult to connect those descriptions into an accurate whole. Likewise, the democratic crisis’s multifaceted nature means it is challenging to ascertain which factors are causing it: as suggested by the reports analyzed here, those causes may vary in important ways across time, region and country. Even though it is known that there is a democratic crisis, its overall nature thus remains elusive. However, the very fact each report points to drivers of democratic erosion varying globally also provide an important clue for how to counter them, since programmatic or academic approaches to democracy promotion could be best-served by understanding what those drivers are in each specific context, rather than assuming only global factors (like the influence of authoritarian nations or the coronavirus pandemic) are to blame. One should not easily assume the world is irreversibly set on a course towards autocratization: the full history of liberal democracy has not yet been written, and we have both time and some tentative clues for how to affect it for the better.

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Endnotes


6 Berman, Democracy and Dictatorship in Europe: from the Ancien Régime to the Present Day, 6.


8 The Democracy Index, V-Dem and Freedom in the Word report score both countries and some territories (such as Hong Kong, Western Sahara, Macao, etc.) in their respective analyses - for the sake of expediency, the word “country” is used here to refer to both the countries and territories taken into consideration by each report, and the global quantitative trends presented in this paper also use scores for both.


10 That is, the scoring scale for indicators range from either 0–1 (two-point) or 0–0.5–1 (three-point).


13 The Economist Intelligence Unit, Democracy Index 2021, 36.


15 This does not include the average rating for territories, such as Hong Kong or Macao, only countries - Freedom House. Country and Territory Ratings and Statuses, 1973–2022. (Washington, DC, 2022), https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2022/global-expansion-authoritarian-rule/countries-regions.

16 V-Dem actually provides us with two possible start dates for the democratic decline: if we weigh each country according to their share of the world’s population, as V-Dem itself did in its 2022 report, then the continuous decrease in the Liberal Democracy Index measure indeed started in 2010 - with the average global citizen enjoying a decreasing level of democratic quality from that point onwards. But if we do not weigh any countries and just consider the overall average between all of them (as the Democracy Index and Freedom House data provided here do), then the drop in democratic quality was less steep: it started falling from 0.42 in 2011 to a low of 0.39 in 2021 - Coppedge, Michael et al. V-Dem [Country-Year/Country–Date] Dataset v12. (Varieties of Democracy Project, Sweden: University of Gothenburg, 2022), https://doi.org/10.23696/vdemds21.

Introduction

Democracies are built on networks of living institutions that need constant protection from both endogenous and exogenous threats. These institutional pillars upholding democratic regimes rest on unsteady ground, susceptible to subversion and cooptation during political and economic crises. However, recent events in previously consolidated democracies have forced a re-evaluation of exactly how, and at what speed, these processes function.

Instead of focusing on precipitating events and crises as the catalysts for democratic reversion, recent literature has shifted towards an understanding that democracies’ institutional pillars can be incrementally eroded over long periods, leaving once consolidated democracies as hybrid or authoritarian regimes. This process, now widely known as democratic backsliding, has quickly become the go-to way that would-be autocratic leaders employ when seeking to consolidate their power.

This paper borrows its formal definition of democratic backsliding from Haggard and Kaufman’s influential 2021 article, in which they posit that democratic backsliding is the “incremental erosion of institutions, rules, and norms that results from the actions of duly elected governments” (27). This definition is utilized in this paper because it is widely accepted and relatively non-controversial, and because of its focus on both the formal rules and institutions governing the regime as well as the crucial informal norms that undergird or, in some cases, supplant these various formal institutions.

Democratic backsliding is a fertile ground for current-day political scientists as the issues facing democratic regimes worldwide continue to metastasize. However, one area we believe has been understudied by scholars in the field is the connection between corruption and democratic backsliding. While corruption is mentioned in the majority of well-read and highly cited pieces on the topic, it is usually just a passing reference to some form of bribery, most often clientelism, and not an in-depth examination of how corruption interplays with democratic backsliding.

Instead, this paper explores the relationship between democratic backsliding and corruption more deeply, arguing that the relationship is more reminiscent of a cyclical feedback loop than the more traditional conceptualization of democratic backsliding leading to corruption. We begin by defining corruption and assessing how corruption and democratic backsliding interact conceptually. We then shift towards an examination of these interacting forces in Turkey and Hungary, as Haggard and Kaufman explicitly labeled both countries as backsliding, and their geographical, historical, and economic variation provides room for assessing the interplay of these forces in practice. Finally, we conclude that corruption and democratic backsliding are mutually reinforcing processes, creating feedback loops that serve to erode the actual functioning of and public faith in democratic institutions.
Corruption and Democratic Backsliding

Democracy does not only mean the rule of the people by the people and the guarantees of rights and freedoms. Democracy depends on citizen's responsibility as political actors and the public faith in democratic institutions. The financial consolidation of power and the partisan funneling of state resources leads to the erosion of public faith in institutions and undermines democratic values, norms, and institutions. Regardless of geographic location, the global political landscape is plagued by democratic backsliding, and the horizontal and vertical diffusion of corruption appears as a critical component in this relationship (Boese, et al., 2022). Corruption fuels backsliding by entrenching a political landscape where the ruling actors' political existence depends on uninterrupted and even expanded relations of continuous exchange of resources and fostering triangular interdependent relations between elites, state officials, and voters.

Transparency International defines corruption as the “misuse of entrusted power for private gain.” Corruption manifests in many forms; it may, for instance, be petty or grand, and it transcends all jurisdictional borders. Although there is seldom a single identifiable cause of corruption, certain factors may contribute to its manifestation, including poverty, low social and economic status of public officials, and insufficient or an absence of institutional transparency and accountability mechanisms (Johnston, 2014). In this way, these forms of corruption fuel political, social, and economic inequity as they skew how resources are allocated and distributed. By fueling inequity, corruption erodes universalism and impartiality, the very ideals inherent in democratic governance.

This definition implies that corruption is illegal; however, from election campaigns to public procurement deals, corruption can be done under legal pretexts. The United States is a prime example of an influence market, where “legalized corruption” persists; this form of corruption revolves around the use of wealth to influence policymaking, as lax financial regulations on lobbying, spending, and campaign financing allow special interests to pressure political actors to misuse entrusted power for private gain. These issues rose to prominence in the wake of the US Supreme Court’s Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission decision in 2011, allowing corporations to allocate unlimited resources to influence policymakers (Levitt, 2010). Much in the same way, loose public spending regulations in Turkey allow both local and central governments to conceal the details of public procurement contracts.

Introduction to Case Studies

This paper focuses on two prime examples to explore the relationship between democratic backsliding and corruption: Turkey and Hungary. There are several reasons why these two examples were chosen. First and foremost, both countries have experienced severe surges in corruption and democratic backsliding since 2011. Hungary, a European Union (EU) member, has undergone an increase in graft and regressed towards illiberalism with ineffective pushback from the EU. Hungary dropped from ranking 46th to 73rd over the past decade on Transparency International’s Corruption Perception Index (CPI), which scores countries on a 0–100 scale with higher scores representing less corruption.

Similarly, Turkey dropped from ranking 54th to 96th on the same index. Under President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’s rule, Turkey has rapidly declined in the rule of law and accountability, leading to widespread corruption. Additionally, both Hungary and Turkey’s democratic status were recently downgraded on Freedom House’s Freedom in the World (FITW) Index, which scores countries on a 0 - 100 scale on the quality of democracy achieved. Turkey was downgraded from “Partly Free” to “Not Free” in 2018, and Hungary was downgraded from “Free” to “Partly Free” in 2019. As such, Turkey and Hungary are pertinent recent examples of countries experiencing severe democratic backsliding and rising levels of corruption, making them perfect examples to survey how these forces interact.

Turkey

President Erdoğan and his party, the Justice and Development Party (AKP), came to power in 2002 after campaigning on three main promises: combating poverty, lifting restrictions on liberties, and diminishing corruption. But over the past decade, as the rule of law deteriorated, corruption emerged increasingly as a systemic issue. According to the global Corruption Perception Index provided by Transparency International, Turkey’s rank dropped from 59 to 86 out of 180 countries over the last decade. Widespread corruption has metastasized to every level of government and bureaucracy, including the judicial system, which was designed to be autonomous. It has been converted into a tool that only serves the interests of a select few at the expense of providing impartial justice for all — with large numbers of judges and public prosecutors dismissed or jailed in recent years. As such, it should come as no surprise that, according to the World Justice Project’s Rule of Law Index, Turkey ranked 103rd out of 139 countries.

Institutions entrusted with monitoring governmental spending, while technically retaining some power to oversee spending, have been subjugated to the executive branch and turned into enablers of graft. Inspection boards tasked with monitoring the government’s expenditures were rendered inoperative. Institutions such as the SDIF (Savings Deposit Insurance Fund), BRSA (Banking Regulation and Supervision Authority), and the Central Bank, designed to be autonomous, have continuously seen their oversight powers weakened by the executive branch. Most importantly, new regulations severely limit the Court of Accounts’ authority to audit government expenditures and the right of the Turkish Grand National Assembly to make a budget.
Consequently, public resources became a tool for building patrimonial relations and were arbitrarily distributed. A select group of companies were awarded an unusual amount of government contracts and overpaid for their services. For example, the Court of Accounts had discovered that about 532 million Turkish Liras were missing from the budget of the Ministry of Commerce in 2019. However, corruption is not limited to one specific ministry. Investigative journalist Mustafa Bildircin revealed that 752 million Liras were paid instead of the agreed-upon 73 million Liras to a company owned by Yasemin Acik, a former AKP candidate for the Turkish Assembly, during a government construction project deal with the Ministry of Transportation and Infrastructure.

Five corporations, Cengiz, Limak, Kolin, Kalyon, and MNG, are famous for being awarded unusual quantities of government contracts. In fact, according to the World Bank, these five corporations are among the top ten companies in the world that receive the most government contracts for infrastructure projects. It is not a secret that these five companies and many others that receive government contracts have close ties with the regime and have expanded their businesses in the past 20 years. Corruption did not emerge as a discrete issue but metastasized in parallel with drastic illiberalization and deterioration of democratic values.

Turkish democracy decayed rapidly during the past decade. According to the Varieties of Democracy Institute’s (V-Dem) Electoral Democracy Index, which scores countries on a 0 - 100 scale with higher scores indicating higher levels of electoral democracy, Turkey dropped from 55 to 28 in the last decade. It is not a secret that these five companies and many others that receive government contracts have close ties with the regime and have expanded their businesses in the past 20 years. Corruption did not emerge as a discrete issue but metastasized in parallel with drastic illiberalization and deterioration of democratic values.

Hungary

Corruption is an ever-present reality for citizens of Hungary. In Transparency International’s 2021 CPI, Hungary scored at just 43, giving the country the second-worst score among EU member states, with only Bulgaria scoring one point lower. Although Hungary explicitly outlawed bribery in 2012, the perceptions of corruption have continued to worsen. Since (ironically) 2012, Hungary’s CPI score has slid 12 points, from 55 to 43. It is no coincidence that Hungary’s scores on well-known democracy indexes dropped tremendously over nearly that exact time. On Freedom

Corruption has permeated specific sectors within Hungarian society to an astounding degree. Public procurement is one such afflicted area of the economy, with companies stating that irregular payments and bribes were a pervasive part of the bidding process for government contracts. Mechanisms for enforcement of procurement and anti-corruption laws are notoriously weak, particularly at the local level, and, as such, companies with strong ties to the Hungarian government have sizable advantages in securing lucrative government contracts.

Given the abundance of corruption in this sector, it is not surprising that only 31% of Hungarian citizens polled felt that the most qualified firms offering the best prices secured public procurement contracts.

Another facet of the Hungarian economy that is often rife with corruption is how it spends money from the European Union (EU). In one particularly egregious example, the EU’s anti-fraud office determined that Hungary owed 240 million USD back to the EU after a metro project was severely impaired by corruption.

In response to projects like these, Hungary recorded the most investigations by the EU in 2018 into allegations of fraud relating to EU funds. When asked about these investigations, over 70% of the Hungarian public felt that the EU was justified in investigating the misuse of EU funds. In late 2021, citing specific issues with public procurement and ineffective prosecution of corruption, the European Commission wrote to Hungary and stated that these issues pose a risk to the EU’s financial interests, an implicit ominous warning to Hungary that these issues must be remedied.

Finally, 56% of Hungarians believed that corruption often has no consequences in the country, with only 15% of respondents disagreeing or strongly disagreeing with this statement. This air of immunity for corrupt practices breeds further corruption and is emblematic of the feedback loop of corruption and backsliding we envision. On the one hand, if members of Prime Minister Viktor Orbán’s Party, Fidesz, can take advantage of increasingly illiberal norms to construct elaborate patronage networks and are not actively punished for corrupt activities, these practices will continue. On the other, however, the more embedded systemic corruption becomes in Hungarian politics and daily life, the more the system will continue to backslide to ensure that those who gain from the system will continue to do so (Bankuti, et al., 2012). In this way, tackling corruption is not merely attacking the symptoms of democratic backsliding: it is helping to address a core driver of democratic backsliding.

Conclusions

This paper shows that corruption and democratic backsliding are inextricably intertwined processes, feeding off and creating space for one another to seep into democratic institutions. We do not go as far as to argue that direct causation is running in either direction. Instead, we take issue with the prevailing narrative that democratic backsliding leads to corruption: our investigation into two prominent, recent cases of democratic backsliding leads us to believe that increased levels of corruption can exacerbate democratic backsliding.

We believe that the intersection between corruption and democratic backsliding is severely understudied in comparative politics literature. In this way, our paper is designed not as an answer to the questions surrounding how corruption and democratic backsliding influence each other, but as an exploratory dive into how these forces interact in the real...
world, as reflected by the democracy and corruption scores outlined above.

Future research in this space should focus on three areas:

More work is necessary to better understand the direction of causality between corruption and democratic backsliding. Our work does not assert that it runs in any particular direction but refutes that it runs solely from increased backsliding to increased corruption.

Because democratic backsliding and corruption, in particular, take on dramatically different forms across the world, an increasingly global focus is necessary to understand the different contextual manifestations of these dynamics.

Work focusing on outliers would better illuminate these processes. For example, if a country were to backslide yet have extremely low levels of corruption, it would have interesting theoretical implications for these explored dynamics.

Democratic backsliding has gained steam in recent years, particularly in established democracies once thought to be immune from deconsolidation. We contend that corruption can both lead to and stem from democratic backsliding, imposing dramatic human and economic costs. As such, understanding the nexus between democratic backsliding and corruption is imperative as we move forward in the 21st century.

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ENDNOTES


5 Ibid.


9 Ibid.


13 “Court of Accounts Laws” https://www.sayistaygov.tr/pages/20-sayistay-kanunu


17 Ibid.


Five centuries ago, the Italian political philosopher Niccolò Machiavelli noted on state survival that when dealing with a crisis, one needs to ‘return to first principles’ and go back to the starting points. January 6, 2022, marked the first anniversary of one of the most ground-breaking crises in US democratic history: the Capitol riots. To this day, the search for explanations is in full swing: a Congressional ‘January 6 Committee’ investigates the roles political actors played in inciting the violence; the FBI is tracking down individual rioters and providing insights into the coordination of the events; investigative journalists are revealing critical information about the structured nature of the chaos; and after increasing pressure, social media behemoths are pledging to investigate their facilitative role — half-heartedly conceding that inadequate content regulation on their platforms was crucial to the outburst of violence.

As these actors and factors take center stage, Machiavelli would interject that little attention is paid to the relation between the civil unrest and the functioning of the political system. The consequence of focusing on exogenous explanations is that the political insurgency is approached as an anomaly in a stable system of democratic governance. This approach discounts the possibility that those tumultuous events hint at systemic defects, which, unless attended to, have the potential of turning anomaly into normalcy, incident into standard, exception into rule.

When the problem of political frustration is placed at the heart of the matter, however, systemic analysis becomes inevitable. It brings to light the structural condition of political impotence and its relation to the systemically repressed practice of constitutional politics as a source of frustration. It takes on the idea that extreme forms of political frustration emerge at rare historical moments when the stakes of politics become existential while the political system is incapable of facilitating an exceptional type of politics. As a result, the experience of impotence intensifies, frustration flourishes, and frustration-based politics like Trumpism — even civil conflict — becomes a real threat. Whether to abstain from changing the constitutional foundations or, as Machiavelli would suggest, confronting the problem at its ‘starting points’ by moving toward civic constitutionalism is the crossroads American democracy approaches.

Political frustration

While the political divide between Republicans and Democrats has grown, they share one important common characteristic: high levels of political frustration. The images of turbulent and, at times, even violent political manifestations in recent years tell the story of mass frustration on both sides of the political polarity. Frustration, as defined by Oxford Languages, is ‘the feeling of being upset or annoyed as a result of being unable to change or achieve something.’ Translated into political terms, frustration refers to a feeling of powerlessness and hints at a condition of political impotence, or ‘the inability to effectively influence and partake in formulating the structures and rules under which one lives.’ Political frustration is a psycho-political effect that surfaces in highly polarized democratic societies in which institutional channels for effective popular-democratic voice and participation are occluded.

A central reason for the climaxing frustration in the US right now is the fundamental importance of the political questions at stake. These questions lead to decisions that will deeply affect the lives of present and future generations. The financial crisis of 2008 and the more recent COVID-19 pandemic demanded immediate as well as long-term strategies while raising the question of who pays what price when. The financial crisis of 2008 and the more recent Coronavirus crisis have each in their own way put a question mark behind globalization as it is. Rising inequalities erode the dominance of market-driven neoliberal economics as the ideal economic approach. The Black Lives Matter movement has elevated the issue of racial inequality on the political agenda while #MeToo advocates gender equality and justice by challenging patriarchal social norms — the potential judicial overturning of Roe v. Wade would reinforce the challenged social norms. Hyper-consumerism, addic-
tion, electoral manipulation, and surveillance potentialities cause concerns about the power of Big Tech and the rise of transparency-driven Dataism as central public philosophy. The Herculean challenge of climate change looms large on the horizon, demanding yet to be decided but most certainly heroic sacrifices — who will sacrifice or be sacrificed? With the rise of these questions, democracy itself is increasingly challenged for being unresponsive, captured by the well-educated meritocratic elite who operate on the basis of a neoliberal corporate and technocratic mindset in which efficiency trumps the public good.

Under these circumstances, politics becomes existential, and the will for politics amplifies. At those moments, when the desire to perform politically increases while the ability to act politically does not follow suit, problems emerge. At those moments, political subjects are confronted with their impotence, and frustration replaces apathy as the primary political impulse. To put it differently, the direct confrontation with the feeling of powerlessness provokes frustration and resentment — or, to use Friedrich Nietzsche's terminology: resentiment — vis-à-vis the institutions and actors said to produce it. The consequences of political frustration and resentiment are visible in recent US history. When people feel unheard, listening turns into shouting. And when desperate shouts fall on deaf ears, shouting matches turn into games of force. This context of existential and frustration-based politics confronts American democracy with a fundamental choice between two possible routes: the first is to ignore the problem, leading to a negative antidemocratic route of Trumpism and potentially civil conflict. The second approach entails confrontation and constitutes a positive democratic route of civic constitutionalism.

**Trumpism and civil conflict**

What happens if the problem of political frustration is ignored? Trump happens. Trump is the personification of political frustration. His ability to utilize frustration as a source of personalistic political power is arguably his only true quality. In order to do this effectively, he positions himself as a political outsider who fights the establishment in the name of the people, and his promise is as simple as it is populist: to give power back to the people. This version of democratic politics has a strong authoritarian ring to it. The mythical People is realized and understood as unity, the People-as-one, a homogeneous and morally defined group with an interior of belonging and an exterior of non-belonging. This interior of ‘right’ or ‘true’ People, as political theorist Nadia Urbinati maintains, is interpreted not to represent the whole, *pars pro toto*, but the authentic part only, *pars pro parte*, in conflict with the excluded outside. The friend-enemy logic underlying these political dynamics is anti-elitist in nature, aimed specifically at politically established powers. In the US context, as public philosopher Michael Sandel asserts, this can be seen as a class struggle along educational lines, a fight against the hegemony of the meritocratic elite. The true People, moreover, does not act directly; its will is mediated through the medium of the leader who claims to embody and speak for the true People. In other words, the leader fights the establishment to replace it with himself: the true voice of the true People. In doing this, the People-through-leader, as morally deserving of power, undermines power-constraining institutions and aims to occupy the ‘empty place of power’ at the heart of democracy.

In *Trumpism*, the leader absorbs the political energies of politically frustrated parts of society by holding out a carrot of re-empowerment to politically impotent and frustrated people. This “democratic” promise rests on an anti-pluralistic, highly exclusionary, enemy-focused, and leader-based majoritarianist understanding of representative democracy. The friend-enemy logic driving it, that is, the People’s perpetual need for an enemy to self-identify, combined with a morally induced will to power, creates fertile ground for rabid socio-political clashes. Trumpism, in short, is a recipe for civil conflict. As Trump is planning his return to politics and power, the question of a viable alternative becomes pressing.

**Constitutional politics**

Questions concerning the COVID-19 crisis, climate change, neoliberal economics, Big Tech, globalization, and racial and gender inequalities present non-particularistic challenges. These are political questions of a general and fundamental nature, and their answers have equally fundamental, often multigenerational, ramifications. In this context of exceptional political stakes, an exceptional type of politics becomes imperative. The ordinary political mechanisms of periodic elections in a two-party system fall short in accommodating existential concerns. Attempting to channel enormous and diverse issues through the democratically narrow institution of elections intensifies the experience of impotence and cultivates frustration. That is to say, elections alone cannot and probably should not deal with those fundamental questions — especially in a skewed electoral system that is increasingly constrained by the Republicans’ voter suppression in several states. Instead, when fundamental questions arise, fundamental political action is required: a politics fundamentally different from ordinary politics. To use Bruce Ackerman’s terminology, what emerges is a moment for ‘constitutional politics.’

Constitutional politics is an essential aspect of state durability. Niccolò Machiavelli, in *The Discourses*, wrote that ‘those [states] are better constituted and have a longer life whose institutions make frequent renovations possible […]’ For it is clearer than daylight that, without renovation, these bodies do not last. The way to renovate them is to reduce them to their starting points. In a similar vein, Hannah Arendt stressed that ‘the very authority of the American Constitution resides in its inherent capacity to be amended and augmented.’ More recently, constitutional law scholar
Sanford Levinson, in his book *Our Undemocratic Constitution*, highlighted the political-democratic weakness of the US Constitution and called for constitutional politics in the form of a Second Constitutional Convention. While essential for state durability, in terms of practical feasibility, constitutional politics in the US has been dead and buried for quite some time. The near-sacred US Constitution is the most rigid legal document in the democratic world. Since 1789, the Constitution has been amended thirty-three times, only two of which took place during the last fifty years, while the most recent amendment dates back thirty years. The rigidity of the Constitution is created by the amendment procedure established in Article V, which regulates the procedures of constitutional politics. The multi-faceted and exceptionally demanding procedure incorporates high minimum thresholds and leaves both the initiation and decisions concerning constitutional amendments exclusively to institutionalized political actors. In addition, and partly due to the onerous amendment requirements, the Supreme Court has self-established its extensive constitutional review prerogatives, thereby absorbing constitutional politics into the legal realm, away from political-democratic influence, providing the judicial body with an exclusive role in interpreting, explaining and thus changing (or not) the meaning of constitutional provisions.

It is ‘clearer than daylight,’ to quote Machiavelli, that constitutional politics in the US is constitutionally repressed, and the citizen’s voice and participatory spirit are — although nominally channeled through electoral institutions — left to their own devices in an extra-institutional wasteland. The perilous potential of this systemic composition is that extra-institutional political energies, unheard and unable to access the occluded institutional channels of constitutional politics at times of exceptionally high political stakes, are fueled by frustration and resentment and are prone to transform into anti-systemic energies. As a result, they become a serious disruptive threat to the constitutional democratic order. The unprecedented attack on a central symbol of American democracy — this can never be qualified as ‘legitimate political discourse’ in a democratic context — made that threat visible to all. To defuse the anti-systemic menace and prevent recurring systemic crises, it is imperative, as Machiavelli suggested, to go ‘back to the starting points.’ In order to do this effectively, constitutional politics in the US needs reimagina­tion.

**Civic Constitutionalism**

What if the time for constitutional politics has come but the given procedures are unfit to facilitate it? A change of procedures is warranted. This change takes the form of a radical and counterintuitive alternative: constitutional politics in a democratic form. This approach is radical (Latin: *radix*; root) because it is directed at the state’s foundations. It is counterintuitive because the preceding period of intensified socio-political frustration leads most interpreters away from democratic solutions. As history shows, fearful of the ‘emotionalism’ of people, antidemocratic threats are often met with nondemocratic answers. By applying concepts like ‘militant democracy’ — the pre-emptive limitation of democracy as a protective mechanism against perceived antidemocratic adversaries — political power is increasingly displaced to institutions insulated from popular pressure.

Such a solution, however, fails to get the problem right. The problem here is not a democratic excess, but a deep-rooted democratic deficit. Nondemocratic solutions would exacerbate rather than ameliorate the issue of political impotence and frustration. Although counterintuitive, the sustainable response in a context of high levels of political frustration is more, not less democracy.

In relation to constitutional politics, democratization entails a reformulation of constitutionalism in civic and republican terms. Civic constitutionalism is a doctrine of constitutional politics in which the state’s fundamental norms and its choice of direction are open to civic-democratic input. This does not mean to collapse the difference between ordinary and constitutional politics, as constitutional theorist John E. Finn suggests, but to make the procedures of fundamental constitutional politics open to both periodic re-consideration — what constitutional theorist Joel Colon-Ríos calls ‘weak constitutionalism’ and reconstitutionalization — and to reach beyond the institutionalized political and legal actors to include citizens’ constitutional-political endeavors. These are procedures that are citizen- (and lot-) based, inclusive, participatory, deliberative, educative, non-partisan — in short, democratic. Civic constitutionalism, to the words of socio-legal scholar Paul Blokker, ‘emphasizes possibilities for the democratization of constitutional democracy.’

Radical problems demand radical solutions. Civic constitutionalism could cool the simmering threat of affective polarization as it rephrases the societal sentiments from ‘us’ versus ‘them’ into a single yet inherently plural ‘we.’ It emphasizes dialogue beyond partisan feuds and platitudes to substantially consider current fundamental problems in terms of the common good — a practice which, by means of sincere involvement and interaction, has civic and educational value in and of itself. It challenges the presidential urge to spend time and effort undoing his or her predecessor’s policies and instead, while still open to change of emphasis through ordinary political procedures, move in a citizens-endorsed general direction. Fundamentally, civic constitutionalism offers a sustainable and open route for the constitutional democratic state, which can always be democratically (re)legitimized. In this way, instead of being repressed, constitutional politics is acknowledged and made accessible, creating channels for civic-democratic participation in those exceptional times when fundamental questions are bound to decide the future of political communities.

At this moment, however, the president has the monumental task to appease and defuse a highly polarized and frustrated society while operating in an equally polarized
political arena. He faces the challenge of providing, at the same time, answers to some of the most fundamental questions of our time. In light of this, the absence of critical systemic discussions after January 6 is cause for concern. The unprecedented Capitol crisis has underlined the disruptive potential of political frustration. Whether the issue is ignored or confronted at its 'starting points' will be decisive for the durability of the political system. All things considered; it is imperative to acknowledge that civic constitutionalism is far less radical when compared to civil conflict. In this context, American democracy approaches a crossroads. Based on the legend of blues guitarist Tommy Johnson who went to the crossroads and sold his soul to the devil, there is one critical question to be answered: will American democracy do the same?  

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Endnotes
2 This article has been written, submitted and edited prior to the hearings and findings of the January 6 Committee.
6 Oxford Language Dictionaries.
8 In this work, the ‘will to politics’ is used in terms of a political-democratic translation of Friedrich Nietzsche’s ‘will to power’ as a rejection of political apathy.
9 For more on the transition from apathy to frustration in relation to the condition of political impotence, see: Eijkelenberg, “On Political Impotence”, 164.
11 See for a theoretical exploration of the authoritarian potential of democracy in terms of the ‘people as one’ and the ‘empty place of power’ e.g. Claude Lefort, Democracy and Political Theory, (Oxford: Polity Press 1988).
13 The antagonistic friend/enemy theory has been most influentially developed by the German legal theorist Carl Schmitt. See: Carl Schmitt, The Concept of the Political, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1993).
15 Lefort, Democracy and Political Theory, 17.
16 For a brief outline of voter suppression, see: Block the Vote: How Politicians are Trying to Block Voters from the Ballot Box, ACLU, August 18, 2021, [https://www.aclu.org/news/civil-liberties/block-the-vote-voter-suppression-in-2020/](https://www.aclu.org/news/civil-liberties/block-the-vote-voter-suppression-in-2020/)
17 Bruce Ackerman, Constitutional Politics/Constitutional Law, Yale Law Journal 99 no. 3, (December 1989).
20 Sanford V. Levinson, Our Undemocratic Constitution: Where the Constitution Goes Wrong (And How We the People Can Correct It), (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).
21 This disruptive potential is underlined by German legal theorist Carl Schmitt, who theorized about the power of extra-institutional constituent forces. See: Carl Schmitt, Constitutional Theory, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008).
23 Whereas the grievances and frustration of the protesters could be seen as legitimate, a violent attack cannot be justified or framed as ‘legitimate political discourse’ within a democratic framework.
27 For Robert Johnson’s rendition of the ‘Cross Road Blues’: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GsB_cGdgPTo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GsB_cGdgPTo)
Lessons from Sri Lanka’s Constitutional Reform

Justin Daniels

Has a new opportunity for democratic renewal opened in Sri Lanka? Starting in April, mass anti-government protests, spurred by an economic crisis and the country’s near bankruptcy, have brought the authoritarian-leaning government to its knees. An opposition party has seized the opportunity to present constitutional reforms which would limit the powers of the presidency—a response to President Gotabaya Rajapaksa’s attempts to amass power and limit the rights of ethnic and religious minorities. These changes would strengthen Sri Lanka’s democracy, at least on paper.

For all the attention that constitutional reform has received from those looking to reverse democratic backsliding, well-intentioned reform is not a democratic cure-all, and can even yield negative outcomes for democracy. Regardless of the outcome of Sri Lanka’s current crisis, democratic reformers worldwide should consider the country’s recent constitutional history before embarking on constitutional amendments.

In Sri Lanka, constitutional amendments have “ping-ponged,” as once promising constitutional reform was reversed by Rajapaksa. More specifically, the “Good Government” opposition coalition, elected on the platform of correcting the excesses of then-President Mahinda Rajapaksa (Gotabaya’s brother), passed the 19th amendment in 2015, which limited executive authority and represented a victory for democracy in Sri Lanka. But five years later, Mahinda’s brother, Gotabaya Rajapaksa, captured the presidency and passed the 20th amendment to expand executive power anew.

This constitutional dynamic—of democratic reform quickly overtaken by executive aggrandizement—resembles Dan Slater’s “democratic careening” model. Democracies careen when two key democratic components conflict: vertical and horizontal accountability. The first concerns voters’ ability to check executives via the ballot box, while the second refers to the checks that other institutions of government, such as the legislature and judiciary, can impose. Slater warns that the accountability conflicts driving democratic careening are often protracted, as each side can claim to be upholding a core tenet of democracy. Supporters of the 19th amendment expressed a classic democratic fear—that of the unrestrained power of one man, a tyrant. While Gotabaya Rajapaksa’s claims to defend democracy are self-serving and cynical, his campaign did respond to a legitimate popular desire for vertical accountability in the wake of the “Good Governance” coalition’s governance failures.

While careening might not cause a democracy to collapse, it can degrade its quality. Rajapaksa’s majoritarian appeals and contempt for horizontal checks resemble the populism that has rotted democracies worldwide. But strongmen who blame democracy for their country’s problems will remain popular as long as democratic institutions prove dysfunctional.

As such, Sri Lanka’s constitutional developments provide two lessons for pro-democratic oppositions. First, reformers must balance demands for vertical and horizontal accountability. The democratic opposition’s 19th amendment saw initial success because it restrained the executive and had a wide popular backing representative of Sri Lanka’s ethnic and religious diversity. Second, oppositions must behave democratically while in government—even when a populist authoritarian may not—lest their failings tar their democratic reforms.

In the January 2015 presidential race, voters elected Maithripala Sirisena, whose “Good Governance” coalition promised to correct the corrupt and anti-democratic policies of Mahinda Rajapaksa’s presidency (2005–15). These included the 18th amendment of 2010—which abolished presidential term limits, among other things—and a move to remove a Supreme Court justice for investigating Rajapaksa’s relatives, many of whom were in government during his presidency. In the wake of Sri Lanka’s devastating twenty year civil war with Tamil separatists, Rajapaksa, a Sinhalese Buddhist nationalist, pushed policies that antagonized ethnic and religious minorities.

The “Good Governance” coalition, meanwhile, was far more inclusive: a multiethnic coalition of more than fifty civil society groups and political parties (including substantial support from Sinhalese Buddhists), the coalition’s victory in the 2015 elections embodied vertical accountability. Its efforts to reform the constitution had wide backing, as over 90 percent of parliament (including many legislators from Rajapaksa’s party) voted for the 19th amendment.

This wide support was a reflection of both the scale of Mahinda Rajapaksa’s excesses in office and the compromise needed to secure the amendment’s passage. Many in Sirisena’s coalition wanted to abolish the presidential system entirely, replacing it with a Westminster-style system led by the prime minister, but Sinhalese Buddhist nationalists viewed a strong presidency as essential to protecting their interests. The 19th amendment split the difference by keeping the presidency but reimposing term limits and barring the president from firing the prime minister without consulting parliament. These changes turned Sri Lanka’s presidential system into a semi-presidential one. Overall, this reform represented a major, united effort to renew the country’s democracy. But for the “Good Governance” coalition, who had popular backing and moved to limit executive power by balancing vertical and horizontal accountability, why did the amendment fail?

Horizontal checks alone cannot ensure democratic resilience if not accompanied by sustained popular support.
As such, when the coalition lost the people's confidence, the amendment was quickly called antidemocratic and an obstacle to effective governance. Despite the coalition's successes, its time in office was marked by failures and incomplete reform. For instance, the government implemented, then stalled transitional justice efforts which might have created greater tolerance for ethnic and political pluralism in the wake of the civil war. But two dramatic crises stand out in dooming the 19th amendment.

The first crisis occurred in October 2018 when Sirisena attempted to unilaterally fire the prime minister, Ranil Wickremesinghe, with whom he had frequently clashed. From the start, the Sirisena-Wickremesinghe pairing had been a marriage of convenience to unite the coalition: Sirisena was seen as more provincial, while Wickremesinghe was a member of the urban elite. Sirisena opted to unilaterally replace him with Mahinda Rajapaksa, a move that was clearly unconstitutional and perhaps surprising. Even though Sirisena had abandoned Rajapaksa's party to create the “Good Governance” coalition, the two had remained in communication, and Rajapaksa remained popular after his defeat, holding massive allies around the country. But citing the constitution, Wickremesinghe refused to accept his dismissal, and parliament would not approve Rajapaksa’s appointment. Sirisena responded by brazenly ordering the proroguing of parliament before demanding new elections. For several weeks, both Rajapaksa and Wickremesinghe claimed to be prime minister. The constitutional crisis ended only when the Supreme Court accepted the parliament’s petition and confirmed Wickremesinghe remained premier. Wickremesinghe’s dismissal contravened the constitution and illustrated the very sort of executive aggrandizement that the 19th amendment aimed to prevent.

Like the first, the second crisis was an offshoot of the Sirisena-Wickremesinghe rivalry. During the 2019 Easter Sunday attacks, Islamic terrorists targeted several churches and hotels around the country, killing 290 people. Muslim leaders had warned of the extremist leanings of the lead attacker, and Indian authorities had provided the Sri Lankan government detailed intelligence on the attacks in advance, but the divisions between Sirisena and Wickremesinghe prevented a coordinated government response. In the minds of many Sri Lankans, the Easter attacks brought to light the tragic human costs of the Sirisena-Wickremesinghe government’s failures.

These two crises illustrated in painful terms the failings not only of the Sirisena-Wickremesinghe administration, but also those of the semi-presidential system that the 19th amendment created. The divided executive seemed to only yield conflict as neither the president nor prime minister was willing to show deference toward the other. As popular favor swung away from the government, it froze a nascent effort to rewrite the constitution, preventing further reform. It also presented an opportunity for new leadership.

In the 2019 and 2020 elections, voters handed Sirisena and his coalition devastating defeats, underscoring the need for oppositions to respect democratic norms for their reforms to last beyond their time in office. Sirisena’s failure to respect the constitution opened the 19th amendment to criticism. On the presidential campaign trail, Gotabaya Rajapaksa claimed that it was a “disruption to the smooth functioning of government” and designed in the interests of “certain individuals and political parties.” He also ran on his record helping to end the civil war as defense minister during his brother’s presidency. This had particular resonance in the wake of the Easter attacks. These arguments proved persuasive: elections in 2019 and 2020 sent Gotabaya Rajapaksa to the presidency and Mahinda to the prime minister’s office. The two brothers also won a parliamentary supermajority. This underscores the lesson that democracies must deliver to survive.

But it is also true that democracy did respond to these failings of government. Sirisena’s dismissal of the prime minister was met with popular protest, civil society action, and ultimately legislative and judicial oversight. In this case, horizontal accountability worked to check the executive. Regarding the Easter attacks, the government admitted to its failure to act on intelligence warnings, and Sirisena launched a presidential commission that recommended prosecution charges for him and other high-level officials.

While this response is probably far from adequate, it is hard to imagine something similar occurring in an authoritarian regime. Or under the RajapaksaS: they have gone to great lengths to suppress investigations into their financial dealings and potential human rights abuses. But these horizontal accountability responses may have been too removed from voters; intergovernmental procedures can be unintuitive and inadequate. Vertical accountability can offer a clearer result: new leaders. Thus not only must democratic reformers deliver, but the way in which they deliver matters as well. Despite successful efforts to check Sirisena and the government, Gotabaya Rajapaksa was still able to portray the 19th amendment as ineffective.

Gotabaya Rajapaksa promised to deliver better governance once the 19th amendment’s checks on the presidency were removed. In 2020, he passed the 20th amendment, which frees the president to dismiss the prime minister at a whim (returning Sri Lanka to a presidential system) and make political appointments with little oversight. And at the last minute, Rajapaksa squeezed in a court-packaging measure as well. These changes make the presidency much stronger by weakening horizontal checks from other branches of government.

The current political and economic crisis underscores not only the RajapaksaS’ fiscally irresponsible governance, but also the dubiety of the claim that authoritarian strongmen outperform democracy. By contrast, the protests highlight the continued appeal of a key feature of democracy: the ability to remove bad government. But for the country to not only implement democratic reform, but to sustain it, Sri Lankans will have to address the deeper issues persisting across their 70-year constitutional history. Among these
are the divides between supporters of Sinhalese Buddhist nationalism and those who embrace a pluralist vision that includes ethnic and religious minorities. To resolve these differences peacefully will mean doing so democratically. Thus, the near-term danger is that, after the failures of both the Rajapakasas and the “Good Governance” coalition, Sri Lankans will grow disaffected or reject democracy. Before they do, will the divided opposition rise to the occasion?

Unfortunately, Sri Lanka’s constitutional dynamics are not entirely unique. In 2021, barely decade-old prodemocratic reforms in Kyrgyzstan and Tunisia were swept away by elected presidents-turned-autocrats in the name of removing impediments to good governance.15 Kyrgyzstan’s Sadyr Japarov held several extralegal referendums to replace a parliamentary-style system with a strong presidential one, and Tunisia’s Kais Saied invoked the emergency-powers clause of the 2014 Constitution to close parliament indefinitely. Like Sri Lanka, both cases reflect democracy’s failure to deliver. Kyrgyzstan’s parliament was a cesspool of corruption, and Tunisia’s population is suffering a severe economic and social crisis on top of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Both of these cases can take away from the Sri Lankan case: pro-democratic oppositions will need to look beyond constitutional reforms and seek to engage broad sectors of society and must ensure that, if elected to power, their behavior models the very values they claim to represent. While democracy is on the back foot in all these countries and around the world,16 there is cause for hope. Their citizens have tasted freedom and have delivered oppositions the opportunity for reform, but also to ensure their reforms outlast their time in government.

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**Endnotes**


4 Following a similar pattern, the 17th amendment (2001), which constrained executive power, was succeeded by the 18th amendment (2010), which expanded it.


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**West Africa’s ‘Comeback Coups’: Tying the Democracy Cause Up with the Military Cause**

Sulley Ibrahim

Four successful and two failed coups have taken place in West Africa between August 2020 and February 2022, resulting in three out of the region’s fifteen countries, being militarily governed.4 Colonel Assimi Goita led elite military members to topple Mali’s transitional government in May 2021. This was Goita’s second coup, as the transitional gov-
The rising spate of coups raises fears that the region is returning to its infamous tag of Africa's coup-belt and that the spectre of future military takeovers is likely to become regular, with Côte d'Ivoire, Benin, and Togo likely to be the next victims, while Ghana and Nigeria look increasingly vulnerable. The military takeovers have been attributed to a variety of causes, including poor delivery on poverty and corruption, but also social justice on the part of elected leaders while others, as illustrated below, believe there is a growing illiberal foreign influence on democracy in the region: The regional bloc, Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), has also been criticized for reluctantly enforcing regional protocols on good governance and democracy. Analysts hold ECOWAS accountable for idly watching as supposedly democratically elected leaders pivot and leverage undemocratic strategies to prolong their stay in power against the wishes of their people. The bloc is alleged to have been mute as Guinea ousted President Alpha Condeh and Ivorian incumbent President Alassane Ouattara violated presidential term limits in 2020 to prolong his stay in power. These accusations have been buttressed by mass protests against ECOWAS sanctions on coup leaders and wild celebrations of the downfall of elected leaders. The critical point, argued below, is that: In countries like Guinea and Mali, leaders did not lose popularity because they established genuine democracies that failed... Instead, presidents atrophied support because they undermined their own democratic credentials in a context of rising instability and — in the case of Burkina Faso and Mali — jihadist insurgencies.

Indeed, Mali and Burkina Faso have seen swaths of their territories taken by extremist groups. Militant attacks in Mali and Burkina Faso increased by 70 percent, from 1,180 to 2,005 between 2020 and 2021. This increase has caused disruptions to the relationship between state and society and detached citizens in terrorist-occupied territories from identifying effectively with central governments. These analyses suggest massive deficits in democratic governance and global terrorism have merged at a point significant enough to bring back militaries into national politics. Their point is that ongoing democracy and security crises have combined to push militaries into assuming the position of a “savior” and unconstitutionally grabbing power to exhibit their might. These emergent debates, however, fall short of looking at these coups in terms of the pushback stemming from problematic civilian initiatives in West African militaries.

**Tying Up Democracy and Military Causes**

West African militaries have historically used mutinies to push back unwanted civilian initiatives viewed as disruptive to military discipline. Civilian disruptions, Dwyer argues, foster a sense of injustice that gives rise to material grievances within the armed forces. These grievances lead to military disobedience and can be followed by uprisings within the armed forces. However, instead of viewing military mutinies in terms of tactical acts, seeking to open a dialogue with military leadership and provide platforms “for soldiers to vocalize their expectations in an environment devoid of the intentional stifling of the voices of the junior members,” West Africa’s elected elites often counter military dissent by dispensing patronage rewards to top-level military officers. These include prime appointments and retirement packages to buy top-level military loyalty and lower the probability of a coup against them. In the process, however, they undermine senior-ranked officers’ control over military discipline. Indeed, some coup leaders were rapidly promoted prior to their coups. Burkina Faso’s Damiba was promoted on December 23, 2021, which many analysts viewed as an attempt by President Kabore to shore up support within the army: but only a month later, he was overthrown by Damiba. This case appears to suggest that not all military officers may be enticed with patronage rewards.

The decline of intra-state (i.e., civil) and interstate wars in the region also increases deployments of militaries in non-traditional missions. These deployments often include internal peacekeeping missions in political disputes, missions often reserved for police officers. In most cases, junior officers are those deployed to such politically polarizing missions. The militarization of civilian affairs leads to popular outcry, which draws negative media reportage to military officers. Indeed, militaries, in general, are inherently reluctant to fully embrace non-traditional missions due to their potency to intensify divisions and foment mutinies within armed forces.

The maiden speeches and the socio-demographic features of coup leaders show that recent coups are also linked to military dissent caused by restlessness within the armed forces. The maiden speeches of Mali, Guinea, and Burkina Faso’s juntas revealed a common trend of military disapproval of certain political decisions. The coup in Burkina Faso followed the killing of 49 military officers by terrorists in November 2021 and a mutiny against weekslong starvation of officers involved in direct combat against terrorists. The military blamed Kabore’s government for starving them
of much-needed logistics. Mali’s ousted President Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta imposed austerity measures and yet purchased a $40-million presidential jet. This sparked controversies, including with the International Monetary Fund, which demanded an explanation because it had granted the government a credit facility of $23 million. Militaries, in particular, appear to loath corrupt dissipation of public resources. A 2019 survey of 742 African security sector professionals from 37 countries found that 46% reported that corruption was the most significant security challenge, given that it deprives soldiers of resources needed to perform professionally.

The recent coup leaders also seem to be mostly junior officers. They bear lower-ranking lieutenants and colonels, compared to higher-ranking insignias of generals and brigade decals. Mamady Dombouya of Guinea, Assimi Goïta of Mali, and Paul-Henri Sandaogo Damiba of Burkina Faso are forty-one, thirty-nine, and forty-one respectively, which seems to reveal a trend of dissent among younger junior officers. That the spate of military takeovers has links to military dissent is further explained by how senior military officers have been speedily retired by coup leaders, as illustrated below:

Citing the failure of the ousted civilian governments in Mali and Burkina Faso to defeat Islamist insurgents, the new military rulers want to reorganize their countries’ security systems, retiring many of the old cohorts of senior officers. Coup leaders thus seem to hold senior officers accountable for watching on while elected leaders dissipate meager national resources for personal agrandizement. Guinea’s Mamady described the leadership of the ousted president, Alpha Condé, as inhumane as the “rape” of the nation: “we don’t need to rape Guinea anymore, we just need to make love to her.”

Although coup instigators often ill-treat the liquidated regime, Mamady’s crude description calls into question the extent to which he personally observed errors in judgments on the part of Condé. Condé’s response to public dissent over his authoritarian tendencies in the weeks prior to the coup involved the use of security agencies to further terrorize and jail political opponents and anti-government activists. Mamady was also a security guard for Condé’s office and could have loathed how Condé perceived and deployed security offices to terrorize civilians for demanding the fair distribution of national resources. Burkina Faso’s ousted President Kabore similarly used security officers to arrest and detain protestors who marched against his poor handling of the activities of terrorist groups.

Way Forward

The spate of military takeovers in West Africa may be underpinned by poor democratic leadership, but it has also repositioned the armies as the regulators of last resort. Thus, future studies should re-examine how elected leaders perceive and treat the democratic subordination of militaries to civilians. The maiden speeches and background characteristics of coup leaders point to an apparent rise of military dissent. This suggests elected leaders have misconstrued their civilian control over military policy to mean subservient of military leaders to them, resulting in deployment of their armies in missions that tend to polarise national barracks. This polarization underlines much of the restlessness that has instigated the region’s ‘comeback coups’. It is thus recommended that efforts to counter armed forces’ predispositions to push their way into politics should first address tendencies of civil leaders to polarise national barracks and undermine military discipline.

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The Illiberal Turn and Quasi-Militant Democracy Measures During the Coronavirus Crisis in the Czech Republic

Maciej Skrzypek

Introduction

The result of democratic backsliding and the growing populist rhetoric, an illiberal turn has become the primary challenge for semi-consolidated democracy in Central and Eastern Europe. One of the main results has been an outbreak in several consolidated political party systems, including Czechia, experiencing a shift toward Eurosceptic and anti-liberal rhetoric and politics. The illiberal turn is defined often on a linear trajectory (a sequence of ‘episodes’) of persistent backsliding within a consolidated democratic system. The challenges posed to liberal democracy in the age of Covid-19 generated an opportunity for populist governments to consolidate their power and bypass checks and balances. Anti-pandemic measures strengthened the executive power, weakened parliamentary oversight, and suspended certain rights and liberties.

The following article aims to reflect upon an illiberal turn by using theories and frameworks of quasi-militant democracy and reviews attempts to limit a political nation’s sovereignty through legal restrictions. It is an antinomic ideal type of new-militant democracy, a modern type of militant democracy that seeks to protect democratic regimes. According to Lenka Bustikova and Petra Guasti, one of the pre-conditions of the illiberal turn is the contestation of sovereignty. It confirms the application of this conceptualization, considering the aims of quasi-militant democracy to limit sovereignty through legal restrictions and controls.

The starting point is March 2020, following the first public declared state of emergency in Czechia. The final point is in April 2021, after the conclusion of an unconstitutional state of emergency. This study attempts to address the following questions: (1) What quasi-militant democracy instruments were adopted in Czechia? (2) How did these measures impact the dynamics of the illiberal turn and reduce the sovereignty of the political nation? (3) How can the political nation defeat attempts to use these measures? The study draws on a qualitative analysis of sources, including legislative acts adopted to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic.
new-militant democracy rest on the categorization of militant democracy introduced by Karl Loewenstein. In the face of the fascist threat in Europe, Loewenstein called for the use of legal instruments to protect democratic regimes. At present, militant democratic measures include anti-extremism, counterterrorism, and anti-terrorism legislation, restrictions on the registration of political parties, freedom of speech, the press, religion, association, passive and active voting rights, and access to public employment, citizenship, and referendums. However, some scholars over time challenged the goals of using militant democracy measures. For this reason, Roman Bäcker, and Joanna Rak proposed a new conceptual distinction between neo-militant democracy and quasi-militant democracy. Neo-militant democracy, as a modern type of militant democracy, seeks to protect democracy, defined by Rak and Backer as the sovereignty of a political nation. Roman Bäcker understood the political nation as a set of equal individuals who comprise a single society, capable of deciding the most important matters of the state in a sovereign manner. The political nation does not have to be identical to a cultural nation, or even to an ethnic nation. The political nation is a component of democracy (Bäcker, 2020, 35). In turn, quasi-militant democracy is the antinomy of militant democracy. It leads to authoritarianism, defined as the lack of the sovereignty of a political nation, utilizing the same means of the state but with opposing goals for a political regime.

Before analyzing quasi-militant democracy measures in the age of COVID-19, it is worth noting that the ruling elites in Czechia utilized the following instruments prior to the coronavirus crisis: the politicization of domestic media; Prime Minister’s and President’s cooperation against the opposition; combating non-governmental organizations; changes in the Czech judicial system’s structure to limit the sovereignty of the political nation. Most of them were adopted by Andrej Babiš’ party ANO (in Czech: Akce nespokojených občanů; “Yes” in English) took power in 2017. The subsequent dynamics of the illiberal turn were the outcome of a struggle between neo- and quasi-militant democratic actors. Therefore, the Czech political system was dominated by the technocratic Babiš’s government with the solid support of the President, as well as the partisan media sector. Moreover, ruling elites attempted to put political pressure on judiciary power and ignore parliamentary opposition.

Quasi-militant Democracy Measures as a Base of the Czech Response to the Pandemic

On March 3rd, 2020, a state of emergency declared by the Czech government and approved by the parliament was the first event to confirm the presence of quasi-militant democracy. The possibility of resisting limitations of certain rights and freedoms was minimal, and the circumstances of spreading coronavirus suggested the need for a rapid response. One of the first decisions, classifiable as a quasi-militant democracy measure, was to postpone by-elections to the Senate, abusing the core of the political nation’s rights, through interference in the constitutional process of electing national representatives. Next, Babiš’s cabinet began governing by resolution, excluding legislative bodies, especially the Senate, when the opposition gained a majority. Such measures reduced the level of the sovereignty of the political nation. Moreover, during the first wave of the pandemic from March to April 2020, the parliament reorganized the government’s activities and reduced the frequency of its sessions. It should also be classified as quasi-militant democracy given that these decisions reduced the possibility to participate in the democratic decision-making process by representatives of the political nation.

Nevertheless, parliamentary opposition attempted to prevent further autocratization using quasi-militant democracy by rejecting reauthorizing a state of emergency. On the one hand, the opposition fulfilled the role of a brake against illiberal governance and sought to slow the dynamics of that turn. On the other hand, the state of emergency provisions limited the possibility of undermining the ruling camp’s decisions and changing the schedule of parliamentary work to reduce the number of parliamentary meetings. Quasi-militant instruments were adopted to limit the freedom of the press by preventing the political nation from obtaining public information from the state hospital personnel for Czechia journalists.

Other measures of quasi-militant democracy were adopted during the second wave of the pandemic, from October 2020 to April 2021, when the Czech government once again declared a state of emergency. In February 2021, the Senate refused an application for a request to extend the ongoing state of emergency, and the opposition argued that a national lockdown had not led to improvements to the country’s pandemic situation. Despite that decision, the ruling elites adopted a new law that allowed the Minister of Health to impose lockdown measures (e.g., shut down trade, services, production facilities, and restrictions on public and private events) and limit freedom of movement without a state of emergency. As a result, the Minister of Health was given the extraordinary power to adopt restrictions without parliamentary approval. It reduced the opposition’s opportunities to discuss and challenge their decisions in practice. By this logic, continuing illiberal governance by resolution without coordinating with legislative institutions became possible. This expansion of ruling elites’ power by violating fundamental rights and rules of liberal democracy is peculiar to quasi-militant democracy. Rejecting the extension of the old state of emergency by the opposition was ignored by declaring a “new state of emergency.”

How can the political nation defeat attempts to limit its sovereignty? On April 21, 2020, the Prague municipal court recognized four emergency measures, including limiting freedom of movement, a travel ban, and compulsory closure of large shops, as illegal. This decision undermined the pandemic-driven measures of quasi-militant democracy.
and exacerbated the dynamic of the illiberal turn. Although judgment provisions were obligatory for the government and public administration, the Prime Minister ignored them in practice. In the face of the illiberal decision of the Czech government, political opposition, media, and courts provided an effective bulwark against the rise of illiberalism.

Conclusions and discussion

The genesis of the illiberal turn in the Czech Republic emerged prior to the rise of ANO. Numerous corruption scandals led to a decline in confidence in traditional political parties and led to an increase in the popularity of populist rhetoric. Crucial for establishing ANO’s popularity was Babiš’s purchase of Mafra, a Czech media house. Influential newspapers and websites allowed ANO to spread an illiberal agenda, leading to subsequent success in the 2013 Parliamentary Election. Since the nomination of Babiš to Prime Minister by the President, the dynamics of the illiberal turn gained momentum because these politicians began to cooperate and contest groups recognized as enemies (e.g., the parliamentary opposition, NGOs, and journalists). The fig leaf for the illiberal turn was the promise of changing public governance and implementing technocratic rules against public administration corruption. Therefore, the Czech experience in adopting illiberal rules was reasonable grounds for accelerating this process during the coronavirus crisis. The illiberal turn’s dynamics increased in 2017–2020 and had its apogee in February 2021, when ruling elites adopted an unconstitutional state of emergency. Since March 2020, declaring states of emergency allowed the government to implement such quasi-militant democracy measures and to continue forms of illiberal governance to expand their grip on power and limit the sovereignty of the political nation.

Nevertheless, the opposition, judges, and independent media attempted to engage with the illiberal forms of governance. Since 2017, the political nation has attempted to resist the illiberal turn by mass anti-government protests in 2018 and the obstruction of the government’s decisions in the Senate. The main obstacle to the rise of the dynamic of the illiberal turn was a robust Czech political nation that protected democratic standards. During the pandemic, the possibilities to undermine the government’s decision were minimal by the emergency provisions. To stop the illiberal turn in the future, if the pandemic crisis recurs, it is necessary to protect democratic regimes by pursuing a balanced anti-pandemic policy that would not inherently challenge the political nation’s sovereignty and present a long-term threat to the nation’s checks and balances mechanism.

**Conclusions and discussion**

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Kyrgyzstan, COVID, & Civil Society: The Case for Crisis Journalism in an Unstable Democracy

Nazerke Mukhlissova

Introduction

Central Asia’s “Last Democracy,” or the last semi-free country in the region, has been in political turmoil for the last couple of years. The COVID crisis unlocked the full state powers and paved a way for extrajudicial policies that do not seem to have an expiration date. Kyrgyzstan is consequently burning off the last bridge connecting the people and the state through increased crackdowns on various media workers. In times of uncertainty, confusion, and turmoil, the journalists and news agencies were stepping in to temporarily take on government duties on clarifying and enforcing anti-COVID awareness. The situation has changed, with the Kyrgyzstani authorities turning back on this contribution to saving public health and, instead, abusing the deeply rooted fear of the pandemic against the media and its workers to the benefit of authoritarianism. Through the analysis of the media and government activities, this article closely examines the shifting tendencies in Kyrgyzstan, where the power dynamics grow more problematic than ever.

Kyrgyzstan and its significance in the region

In Western media, the Kyrgyz Republic is known as the sole democratic state within the landlocked territory of Central Asia. However, the state of things has not been so firm. Civil unrest, which many see as the fight for democracy, but others observe as a power struggle between elites can substantially complicate the routine work of the government. Kyrgyzstan is known as the only Central Asian country that manages to host NATO military bases in the country as a part of the fight against terrorism. Due to arbitrarily settled borders by Soviet authorities, Kyrgyzstan also consists of substantial national minorities, and many ethnic Kyrgyz happened to be on the other side of the border in its neighboring states. The pandemic hit Kyrgyzstan just as hard as any other country in the world, presumably even worse with its immediate border shared with China, as well as political turbulence inherent to the Kyrgyzstani political system. To determine the effectiveness of the battle with the COVID-19 pandemic, one does not need to judge on the grounds of the sole numbers, as state-provided numbers and statistics are often not the most accurate indicator of the efficiency of public health policies enforced by the governments. The statistical miscalculations and underlying systematic measurement errors might be present in a state where the vast majority of citizens live in rural areas. Therefore, COVID-19 cases might be either under-reported or simply have no possibility of being delivered by the local government or doctors to the higher authorities. Although it has been the case that autocratic states, in a general sense, are more decisive and timelier in responding to the public health crisis, Kyrgyzstan took its time. Initially, Kyrgyzstan was at the crossroads between democratic and autocratic paths, slowly but surely leaning toward the one-person rule. The continuous struggle between the opposition and the establishment, several regime changes, the resignation of parliaments, and the quasi-democratic Tulip Revolution all demonstrate how the nation has been paving the way and struggling for something seemingly better than just one-person rule. But COVID-19 has tipped that balance, unfortunately, toward the authoritarian side.

The political turmoil of 2020 and forwards.

On March 22, 2020, Kyrgyzstani authorities declared a state of emergency. The premise of protecting public health unlocked a wide range of powers and undisputed government policies that are likely to stay even with the end of the pandemic. This premise has a long-lasting legacy that, at any point in time, allows authorities to claim complete control over the people, the country, and the national politics. Every political decision in the country became tied to public health concerns, limiting the opposition to the establishment and enabling the government to execute authoritarian measures. Having started the public vaccination campaign last in Central Asia and advocating for untested and unproven traditional medicine against COVID-19, Kyrgyzstan seems to be staying for long in that emergency position. With the pandemic seeing no foreseeable end in the region, the informally claimed foreseeable end in the region, the informally claimed

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the Kyrgyzstani government are likely to be prolonged with no expiration date.

The locals depicted the presidential resignation of 2020 as the resignation of a politician who lost all influence and was not able to do anything for the country. For all that is known, the opposition’s hostile strategy was fuelled by the public outrage against the residing President Sooronbay Jeenbekov. Still, maybe there were more deep-rooted internal political struggles between elites that remain unknown. Sadyr Japarov, one of the leading opposition figures from 2020 and the newly elected president in 2021, recently signed a new constitution that strengthened the presidential powers against the parliament, giving rise to a new era in Kyrgyzstani politics. How does the COVID-19 crisis fit into all of this?

The consequences and opportunities of the COVID-19 pandemic

First and foremost, the fundamental functioning of the state apparatus was paralyzed due to political uncertainties and feuds. Even without considering for a moment the massive civil unrest on the Kyrgyzstani streets of 2020, the conduct of government affairs was fundamentally interrupted. Only the next presidential elections could have granted enough legitimacy to any government decisions, otherwise, the civil unrest would just persevere. It has been no surprise that the websites were out of order when the COVID-19 cases were peaking and regulations were needed the most. When governmental institutions were unable to serve the very purpose of their existence, the Kyrgyzstani government partly became replaced by other actors, like non-governmental organizations and the media.

In Kyrgyzstan, COVID-19-related policies relied largely on direct communication between journalists and officials. News articles and journalists did not refer to any legal documents, written texts, or posts from officials, which happened on rare occasions because access was difficult. In neighboring countries, Russia has strictly published all its decrees and legal documents for public access through the “official Internet-Portal of Legal information of Russia.” It demonstrates that autocratic regimes had different extents of transparency present during the pandemic, some willing to publish all legal decrees, others willing to be more restricted on the public access to public health documents.

Meanwhile, Kyrgyzstani articles and news outlets mainly reference briefings given by officials (i.e., “Сообщила пресс-служба мэрии/коммандаця” - “The press service of the city hall/commandant reported”), usually directly citing the words of public figures. In such cases, for average readers, it is impossible to fact-check those articles and news due to the absence of any primary sources, so one must rely on the reputation of the news agencies. Since the referendum on the constitution on January 10, 2021, the state mobilized austere measures against the press, which involved politically motivated legal persecution, physical offenses against independent news agencies, and more similar tactics employed.

Regime cracking down on the free press endangers not only the freedom of speech and several other civil rights but also the nation’s public health. Journalists and news analysts were forced to become the national enlighteners in the times of the pandemic, risking their own health for obtaining information directly from officials because there were no other sources of law and instructions available. When the government authorities use all the COVID-related terminology interchangeably, confusing, or not paying attention to the difference between lockdowns/quarantines or simple restrictions of businesses, journalists and news analysts were the ones who carried the whole communication burden and made sure to clarify the confusing moments that emerged because of the government officials.

Nevertheless, the media could not wholly replace the government. Until very recently, the citizens of Kyrgyzstan experienced liberal space for interpretation of COVID restrictions due to confusing public messages that came from the officials. Because there was no unified public message or interpretation of the restrictions, citizens acted on their own versions of the COVID-19 restrictions. During the pandemic, enacting timely and appropriate policies are only half of the deal. The other half is to ensure that those goals and decrees are deliverable and understandable to the public. Media could have been the most efficient tool for communication and raising awareness thanks to large and different platforms. However, Kyrgyzstani officials, by criminalizing journalists and news agencies, are burning the last bridge between the state and the people, resulting in a whole new set of even more significant problems. Fake news and conspiracy theories spread among the citizens of Kyrgyzstan due to the state’s blatant ignorance of communication issues, despite attempted measures against fake news. Instead of addressing the root of the problem, which is that there is no proper communication from the state to the citizens of Kyrgyzstan, the government has enforced criminal liability and other types of punishment on people who spread fake information regarding the origins of COVID-19 and treatment methods for it. The extreme punishment from those decrees might include several years of prison time. An approach that does not effectively deliver the correct information to the people but punishes the alternative explanations and interpretations of COVID regulations increases the popularity of conspiracy theories. Threatening jail time only deepens suspicions that have emerged over the Kyrgyzstani government and further public distrust toward the state.

Self-detruent and controversial stance of authorities on the media.

The media is one of the few efficient tools and institutions in countries with a low functioning state capacity. In Kyrgyzstan, the media serves as the primary source for informing citizens. It has been one of the pillars of functioning society in a sense that the livelihood of the press in Kyrgyzstan depends on how effective and understand-
able it is; therefore, it is in the best intentions of different media outlets to deliver the right information in the most coherent and straightforward formulations as possible. One instance of such impactful work is how the media workers have organized media literacy sessions, where the religious figures have a dialogue on the critical approach to the news and dissemination of fake information. Journalists are the ones who shed light on regional problems in Kyrgyzstan, where the official news coverage is otherwise filled with sugar-coated news from major cities like Osh and Bishkek. Media workers have also sought to alleviate the information desert in rural regions. During the conflict on the border between Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, Kyrgyzstani media organizations embraced and advocated for rational, appropriate and neutral coverage of the conflict by journalists from both sides, propagating a guiding principle “Do No Harm.” The media organizations realize the importance of the Internet as a platform for communication and a main source of information. There is also an implicit trust that media workers have from the public, which leads to self-regulation among the media community so as not to fuel further conflicts or offend anyone from their audiences. Such maturity of media in Kyrgyzstan comes from the fact that there is no other body or institution that can handle such a burden appropriately.

Theorizing the case of Kyrgyzstan

There are no doubts about the vitality of a strong civil society presence in democratizing states. Yet, the case of Kyrgyzstan is worth considering for its own sake and through the prism of weak institutionalism and civil society dynamics. Its constantly fluctuating and changing political scene serves as a peculiar case for how quickly political mobilization accelerates. To narrow down the focus, journalists and media workers have historically been a key component in supporting political, economic, and regulatory situation accelerates. To narrow down the focus, journalists and media workers from accessing national events and gatherings and justified it by citing public health concerns. The case of Kyrgyzstan demonstrates that the media has the potential to serve as the immediate feedback mechanism on the government policies since the authorities are not motivated to explore the consequences of their decrees, while the media serves as an amplifier of local voices and their stories. Central Asia’s last democracy, or the last semi-free country in the region, faces a new challenge in the political arena. The country becoming a presidential system and replacing the parliamentary order served as a huge milestone toward the centralization and consolidation of power. To a great extent, all of this was enabled by the health crisis that played into the hands of the establishment. Legitimately shutting down any rising protests, blocking journalists and media workers from accessing national events and persecuting them one by one based on the variety of artificially made-up reasons all suddenly became an issue of national health. Such a securitizing of regime policies most likely plays only for a benefit of the regime, and not of people.

Meanwhile, the fact that the Kyrgyzstani government has shown a harsher stance on civil liberties and control over the nation is appealing to its neighboring countries. President Sadyr Zhaparov’s publicly stated alliance with authoritarian governments comes with benefits. Strongmen like President Vladimir Putin of Russia and President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev of Kazakhstan are showing support to Zhaparov’s regime in various ways. During the gathering of the EAEU countries in 2021, President Putin highlighted his intention of starting the production of the “Sputnik” vaccine in Kyrgyzstan, while the President of Kazakhstan has personally instructed direct humanitarian aid in the form of wheat to Kyrgyzstan. Chinese officials too have been active in the endorsement of a solidified autocratic regime: Kyrgyzstan welcomed the “Sinopharm” vaccine into the region after Kyrgyzstani and Chinese officials’ successful negotiations. Such undisputed support from Kyrgyzstan’s neighbors with resources only strengthens autocratic tendencies, making it far more difficult for people to fight against authoritarian policies in the future.

The political turmoil and clashes between the former and new presidents of Kyrgyzstan have had a destructive impact on the functioning of the whole state apparatus. Still, even with the bureaucratic recovery of those institutions, the COVID-19 crisis gave further rise to authoritarianism, seeds of which were already in the ground before 2020. With the crackdown on media workers, journalists, and news analysts, Kyrgyzstani authorities are decreasing the survival of the independent media when the public may need it the most. Yet the government of Kyrgyzstan has a variety of invisible but real dangers starting with being uninformed on regional problems of citizens and going all the way to jeopardizing the national public health.

Conclusion and the legacy

Free media is the last barrier before the country descends into total authoritarianism. The authorities have limited the presence of journalists and reporters at important political events and gatherings and justified it by citing public health concerns. The case of Kyrgyzstan demonstrates that the media has the potential to serve as the immediate feedback mechanism on the government policies since the authorities are not motivated to explore the consequences of their decrees, while the media serves as an amplifier of local voices and their stories. Central Asia’s last democracy, or the last semi-free country in the region, faces a new challenge in the political arena. The country becoming a presidential system and replacing the parliamentary order served as a huge milestone toward the centralization and consolidation of power. To a great extent, all of this was enabled by the health crisis that played into the hands of the establishment. Legitimately shutting down any rising protests, blocking journalists and media workers from accessing national events and persecuting them one by one based on the variety of artificially made-up reasons all suddenly became an issue of national health. Such a securitizing of regime policies most likely plays only for a benefit of the regime, and not of people.

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(Connecticut, USA) and will study Russian, European and Eurasian affairs in Fall 2022. Her research interests include the history of Soviet peripheries, nation and tradition building in Eurasia, as well as Eurasian integration. This article was written through my observations when she was a part of the CoronaNet Research project, where she went through hundreds of COVID-related public policies enacted by governments in Eurasia.

Endnotes


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Democracy 2.0: Resilience and Adaptability Built on the Neuroscience of Feeling

Max Henning

Intro

Democratic forms of government, where the needs and motives of citizens are integrated into governance decisions, are preferable to monarchies or autocracies both on an individual and systems level. On an individual level, democracies allow for individuals to have rights to safety and property and freedoms to self-expression. On a systems level, democracies offer more flexible and adaptable mechanisms than autocracies for conflict management, and for generating effective solutions to complex challenges.

However, modern democracies are not living up to their potential. Modern democracies increasingly struggling to peacefully manage political conflict, generate meaningful solutions to complex problems, and resist disruption from authoritarian actors, leading to reduced public faith in democratic institutions and democracy itself. Around the world, democracies are backsliding, and authoritarian and populist leaders and movements are gaining ground.

While we may identify the problem with democracy in flaws of human nature or in the structure of democratic
institutions that fail to adequately control them, an intriguing third option is emerging: The root of the problem may instead lie in a historic misunderstanding and disregard for the animating force of democracy itself—the much-maligned experiences known as feelings.

**Democracy is founded on reason**

Democracy requires tolerant and deliberative behavior, and the institutions, structures and systems of incentive which secure democracy have been designed to act to secure democratic behavior through reason alone. The longstanding assumption has been that, as rational beings, when we appraise the mechanisms and structures of democracy—the design of electoral and legislative mechanisms which guard the interests of the minority against the interests of the majority, and incentives for democratic behavior and punishment for anti-democratic behavior—we will surely realize that it is in our own interest to sacrifice some of our individual priorities in service of the democratic process and public interest.

This reliance on reason alone to secure democratic behavior can be traced to a conception of the relationship between reason and feeling. In this still-prevailing view, reason and feeling are competing, incompatible, mutually exclusive, and alternative modes of experience that are locked in a zero-sum struggle. It follows from here that the tolerant and deliberative reason necessary for effective public decision making is constantly under threat from feeling.

We all want more effective rational decision-making in public life, and we have attempted to tilt the scales in favor of reason, by insulating public decision-making from feeling. This is explicit in Federalist Paper 49, which argues that “the passions ought to be controlled and regulated by the government”, through constitutional designs which dilute passion through separation of powers and establish a high bar of consensus for major change.

**Reason gives democracy only shallow roots**

This conception of reason and feeling as being inherently competitive and mutually exclusive has only recently been reconsidered. Recent research into the neurobiological and evolutionary foundations of reason and feeling indicate that, far from inherently competitive and alternative processes, effective rational decision-making depends on, and is guided and driven by, feeling.

In a pioneering study which tested the effect of feeling on rational decision-making, damage to emotion processing brain regions was found to impede, not improve, rational decision-making (Damasio and Bechara, 2005). Individuals with and without damage to emotion-processing brain regions chose cards from between two decks. Each deck carried unknown odds of financial gain or loss, and the goal was to identify and favor the deck with better odds to have the most money at the end of the experiment. Individuals with damage to emotion-processing brain regions were significantly worse at learning which deck was preferable and rationally adjusting their behavior correspondingly. Individuals with intact emotion-processing brain regions fared far better, suggesting that effective rational decision-making requires the good function of emotion-processing brain regions.

The interdependence of reason and feeling is also evident at the level of neuroanatomy. Rational decision making is generally localized to recently evolved brain regions, namely the prefrontal cortex, while affect-processing regions are found at the base of the brain, in the brainstem, in regions which support all other brain functions. All signals from brain to body and from body to brain pass through the brainstem. Brainstem regions integrate chemical signals from throughout the body into a readout of the moment-by-moment condition of life. This readout is then used to inform functional adjustments to our processes of perception, memory, decision-making, and physiological function to maintain “homeostasis”—a physiological state in which the many variables of life (nutrients, fluids, temperature, stress, immunological, social) are within ranges conducive to survival and flourishing (Damasio 2019; Bernard 1974; Cannon 1921).

Brain regions involved in rational decision-making are built out of brain regions involved in feeling.

Many of us have learned either directly or indirectly to think of the brain and mind as separate from the body—that the brain does brain things like produce a mind, and the body does body things like produce basic animistic drives, and the more that we can insulate the mind from the animistic drives of the body the better. However, the brain is not separate from the body. In fact, the nervous system is distributed throughout the body, and in terms of signaling it is continuous with the non-neural systems of the body (Carvalho and Damasio 2021; Damasio and Carvalho 2013). Interoceptive neurons are permeable to molecular and chemical signals from other major physiological systems of the body, namely the endocrine system and the immune system (Damasio 2019). The first step to understanding the nature of any mental processes, including feeling or rationality, is to understand that the brain which produces them is fundamentally interwoven with the body. Mental processes are body processes first, and brain processes second.

In the picture that emerges, rational decision-making and feeling work together to maintain homeostasis (safety, survival, and flourishing). It works something like this: our present state of homeostasis is mentally expressed as feeling, feeling drives us to meet detected homeostatic needs, and reason helps us to select between options of behavior paths to meet those needs, based on our interpretation of our situation and context and what we have learned about how the world works and how to behave within it.

One implication of this is that our patterns of rational decision-making are constantly being adjusted and optimized for our current homeostatic needs. What is “rational” in terms of behavioral decision-making does not...
Modern democracy is vulnerable to disruption at the level of feeling. Depending on the state of homeostasis, our mode of decision-making changes to optimize toward either long term or short-term benefit. If our homeostasis is secure, it makes sense for us to optimize our actions for the long term, to be tolerant, compromising, to value and uphold the democratic process. If our homeostasis is insecure, then we would be expected to prioritize short term aims, even if that meant anti-democratic aims, because we may not be around for long.

Clarifying the nature of the relationship of reason and feeling unravels the idea that tolerant, deliberative rational decision-making conducive to democracy requires that we be unemotional. Tolerant, deliberative decision-making is no more unemotional than reactive and shortsighted anti-democratic decision-making. Both tolerant-deliberative and reactive-shortsighted decision-making are driven by feeling and are grounded in corresponding states of homeostasis. Both are rational strategies for decision-making; but they are optimized for, and driven by, different homeostatic conditions.

If tolerant and deliberative decision-making is not unemotional, but rather is driven by certain affective states, then democratic institutions and practices which rely on reason alone to secure democratic behavior can give democracy only shallow roots. If our mode of rational decision-making is driven by feeling and therefore is dependent on our state of physiology, an over-reliance on reason leaves democracy vulnerable to disruption at the level of feeling.

Modern democracy is vulnerable to disruption at the level of feeling

Feeling can arise either naturally/spontaneously or it can be provoked. Spontaneous feelings arise from actual changes in physiological signals, such as being injured, sleep deprived, hungry, ill, over-stressed, or socially isolated. Provoked feelings arise from ideas, thoughts, memories, or external signals that anticipate changes in physiological conditions, and engage the corresponding physiological state to meet a set of conditions which are not actually present (Damasio 2019).

Imagine that you experience real physiological insecurity and vulnerability, perhaps as a predictable result of a fragmented social fabric, a rapidly changing world, and limited prospects, but you are repeatedly told that your struggles are the fault of an outgroup who seek to harm. The more this message is repeated, the more you will experience it to be true (Lakoff 2004), and the less likely you will pursue change through a cooperative democratic process with said outgroup. Instead, we feel increasingly justified in attempting to meet our needs through undemocratic means.

Assuming that this divisive message is based on misinformation or outright lies, we may call the response "irrational", because the change in behavior is based on subjective experience and not on an objective appraisal of reality. But the fact remains that our mode of reasoning is driven by our state of homeostasis. If we are provoked into a state of insecurity or threat, our mode of reasoning changes. We either throw up our hands at the prevalence of “irrational behavior” or we update our models of rational behavior. The world we respond rationally to is the world of the interior, and not the objectively true conditions of the world around us. We did not evolve to see reality "as it is", we evolved to see those aspects of reality which would help us survive, given our needs at the time — when our survival needs change, our modes of perception and thinking change also, guiding us towards information in our environment and behaviors that will help us meet these needs (Hoffman 2018; Damasio and Damasio 2022).\textsuperscript{10, 11}

These considerations indicate that democracy, with its reliance on reason, is exceedingly and unnecessarily vulnerable to disruption through the mass provocation of anti-democratic sentiment and action. When tolerant and deliberative rational decision-making is disrupted, democratic structures and processes which depend on it cannot function, and democracy begins to unravel. The mass provocation of cynical fear and anger can disrupt tolerant and deliberative political decision-making, not because it makes us “irrational”, but because it changes the state of our homeostasis so as to make anti-democratic behavior rational.

Securing democracy at the level of feeling

To secure democracy against the mass provocation of anti-democratic sentiment and action, a reimagining and recalibration of democratic structures and processes is needed to secure democracy at the level of feeling. Such structures would make it more difficult for the mass provocation of cynicism, threat, anger to take hold, by actively enabling the citizenry to maintain affective and physiological states that are conducive to tolerant and deliberative rational democratic decision making. Such structures can produce, in effect, a buffer or inoculation against anti-democratic provocation.

In practice, democratic structures and processes can be deepened to secure democracy at the level of feeling by constructing additional avenues for bottom-up information flow within governance systems. Here, bottom-up information flow means an integration into the democratic process of the perspectives, needs, and interests of those without actual decision-making power.

Processes supporting bottom-up information flow can set in motion a virtuous cycle, not only by contributing to more granular and effective local problem-solving, but also by increasing individual identification with democracy, by offering an avenue for the intrinsic problem-solving motives of individuals to be realized through active citizenship. The experience of having one’s needs and perspectives integrated into governance reinforces one’s sense of belonging and maturing and identification within the political system, constructing new engines of democracy at the local level.
Creating within a population the widespread experience of identification with the democratic process can make democracy more resilient against disruption. If an individual experiences their ability to meet their survival needs and motives to be supported by the democratic system, that individual will have an interest in maintaining and improving that system. Such an experience would reinforce a sense of belonging, mattering, and identification within the political system, in effect expanding the boundaries of self-interest to include the broader democratic system, such that the vitality and ingenuity of an individual’s life process can be directed not only towards their own personal interest but also toward the interest of democracy itself. An analogous process can be seen in the literature on the predictive effect of gratitude on reciprocal prosocial behavior. When meaningfully supported in meeting their own needs, an individual’s personal interests are linked to the interests of the supporting entity (Henning et al. 2017; Fox et al. 2015).

When supported by a democratic system, individuals will defend the democratic system and advance it as they would their own interests. They will be less easily provoked to antidemocratic sentiment and action. Revitalizing democracy through feeling

Severing the link between feeling and democratic institutions has starved democracy of vitality and dynamism and limited its ability to rise to meet modern challenges. While some democratic energy can still be mustered by the identification of a common enemy, it is sporadic, volatile, unreliable, and insufficient to meet the challenges of the modern world.

If the roots of democratic institutions can reach the well of feeling, democracy can be revitalized in a more purposeful and sustainable way. We often think that democracy was created by reason, and while it is true that reason was necessary for the development of the institutions and structures of democracy, it is also true that reason is grounded in and driven by feeling, and that feeling is grounded in and driven by homeostasis. Felt motives for safety, cooperative survival, agency, and flourishing, have from behind the scenes driven the development of democracy all along.

Deepening democratic structures and processes to tap into feeling by building new channels for bottom-up information flow does more than make democracy more resilient, by helping people experience belonging and mattering or generate more fine-grained solutions to local issues. It also, by incorporating additional perspectives into the identification of causes and the potential for solutions, increases a democracies ability to respond to and tackle huge and complex problems. For any democracy to survive and flourish it must continually adapt to changing environmental conditions, it must be able to identify new problems as they emerge and new approaches to solving them. This can be done most effectively by tapping into the felt motives of citizens to build solutions for the problems that matter most to them. These felt motives not only reveal unmet needs, but they also contain the crucial activation energy needed to mobilize action to address them.

A more inclusive politics is not simply a moral aim, it is a strategic imperative for advancing the public interest. In addition to increasing the resilience of democracies to disruption through the mass provocation of anti-democratic sentiment and action, the inclusion of previously excluded perspectives in public decision-making also removes blind spots and enables new and innovative solutions to emerge. Diverse perspectives can be integrated, and political conflicts can be resolved, in the context of a recognition of the biological foundation for common needs and felt motives for safety, agency, survival, and flourishing. When the unmet needs experienced by distinct groups appear to conflict, a biological understanding of feeling allows for the tracing of both experienced needs down to core homeostatic needs. Seemingly conflicting high-level experienced needs can be resolved through identifying the core homeostatic needs which underlie them. A biological understanding of feeling offers the first principles for a new vision of modern democracy and a framework for how it can work.

To advance this vision, a new class of mechanism linking self-directed citizen initiatives and governing institutions is proposed. These could take the form of a new kind of government/civil society hybrid organization dedicated to developing new processes for connecting citizen needs and initiatives with available channels and priorities of local governance institutions. The key would be finding the overlapping areas where citizen initiatives overlap with government priorities and available processes for their enactment. These organizations would in effect serve as a bridge between citizens and their governance institutions, reducing barriers to good governance on both sides. They would offer governments political capital and citizen-driven initiatives and would offer citizens an avenue for the realization of the intrinsic felt motives to (1) build solutions to problems that matter to them, and (2) develop a sense of deep social belonging, mattering, and responsibility to ensure the future of the democratic system. A promising model for such a mechanism comes in the form of citizen assemblies, which are sanctioned by the governing institutions. However, citizen assemblies are usually just evaluative bodies voting on predetermined policy questions. The mechanisms outlined here would be definers of policy focus areas animated and driven by the experienced needs and wants of citizens.

Civic engagement must be about more than voting. It must be about enabling homeostatic motives for survival and cooperative flourishing to direct us towards those issue-areas which have affected us and allowing our capacity for reason to guide us in developing solutions at whatever level and scale we are able, all while building deep and lasting social bonds. Citizen perspectives, ideas, and projects can inspire and inform the political discussion; and political leaders can platform and support citizen engagement; while the citizen experience of self-directed civic solution-building
constructs new engines of democracy at the local level. From this basis democracy can be updated and revitalized for the modern world.

A dynamic and resilient democracy is a democracy that is guided, driven, and animated by citizen needs and perspectives. A democracy in which there are blockages and obstacles preventing citizen needs and perspectives from driving policy development will struggle to orient and adapt dynamically to the unpredictable challenges of a changing world. Building new structures and processes to unlock the generative vigor of citizen-driven problem-solving can update and revitalize democracy in the face of an uncertain and dangerous future.

Conclusion and implications

The central implication of the present analysis is that the fundamental animating force for democratic movements can be found at the level of feeling and in citizen identification with democracy. The inexorable groundswells of popular support for pro-democracy reforms which have driven real and lasting progress toward freedom and self-government are neither unpredictable nor inexplicable. Their natural force can be enabled systematically and reliably. Anti-democratic actors have leveraged feeling to their advantage since the beginning and now at last a framework is emerging through which the pro-democracy movement can answer in kind.

By extension, the prevalence of pro or anti-democratic feeling and personal identification with democracy offers a novel and potentially incisive indicator of the vitality and resilience of a given democracy. If our processes of reason are guided by processes of homeostasis, and if feelings offer a privileged window into our own homeostasis, then surveying feelings within a target population could offer new and useful insight not only into the unmet needs of that population, but also into the resilience of the democracy itself.

We are faced with a historically unique opportunity. Spurred in part by its own failures in recent decades to secure the consolidation of new democracies, the field of democracy promotion and assistance has seen the beginnings of a renaissance. There are strong indications that the field is seeking to learn from past mistakes, challenging old assumptions, and incorporating interdisciplinary models of human experience and behavior. The recent discovery of affective and physiological foundations of rational democratic decision-making offers just such an opportunity. By deepening the roots of democratic structures and processes to act below the level of reason alone at the level of feeling and homeostasis, we can protect democracy against backsliding, recover the dynamism and vigor of an active citizenry that has always been democracies central advantage, and mark a new chapter in our world historic experiment in self-governance.

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Endnotes

8 Ibid.
**Book Review**

*Citizenship in Hard Times: How Ordinary People Respond to Democratic Threat* by Sara Wallace Goodman

**Julian Perry**

Democracies derive legitimacy from the support of their citizens. Whether democracy can survive during moments of crisis, then, depends on how citizens respond to those moments: do they stand their ground and support the norms of democratic citizenship, or do they abandon those norms to favor the short-term interests of their political factions? Sara Wallace Goodman aims to answer this general question in her new book *Citizenship in Hard Times: How Ordinary People Respond to Democratic Threat*. Using survey data from Germany, the United States, and the United Kingdom, Goodman argues that citizens’ responses to democratic crises are dependent on their “positional incentives” as partisans and as supporters or opponents of the incumbent government—a verdict with significant implications for both theoretical understandings of democratic citizenship and practical initiatives to more effectively educate citizens.

In Goodman’s representation of democracy, the norms of good citizenship exist in three categories: norms of behavior, such as voting and protesting; norms of belief, such as accepting diversity and understanding the opinions of others; and norms of belonging, such as the feeling of being American (or German or British) and generally supporting the actions of one’s government. These categories provide a theoretical foundation for the empirical component of the book, which is centered on survey experiments Goodman conducted in 2019. The surveys—one conducted in each country—asked respondents to rate the importance of citizenship norms associated with the three categories Goodman outlines. Additionally, to measure the effect of democratic erosion on these norms, two treatment groups in each survey were first assigned to read a short vignette about a threat to democracy—one about polarization, the other about foreign interference in elections.

Goodman argues that when citizens do not view democracy through the lens of crisis, different political groups exhibit little disagreement about what comprises good citizenship. To make this point, she cites her control group, in which partisanship had little effect on how respondents in each country rated the importance of the citizenship norms described to them. But when respondents are exposed to vignettes that activate a fear of democracy’s fragility, the effect is not uniform. In the case of the respondents exposed to the polarization vignette, those who supported the party in power showed similar responses to the control group; opponents of the status quo, meanwhile, increased the value that they placed norms of belief in liberal democracy. A similar pattern occurs among respondents exposed to the foreign interference vignette: supporters of opposition parties showed higher support for a number of citizenship norms, while supporters of the parties in power were less likely to exhibit any difference relative to the control group.

Goodman explains her findings in terms of positional incentives created by partisanship. When a citizen supports a party currently out of power, that citizen benefits from the preservation of competitive elections, which offer chances to change the status quo. When a citizen supports a party already in power, however, that citizen faces fewer incentives to keep democracy intact. One limitation to this analysis is that in all three countries Goodman studies, the national leaders at the time of the surveys belonged to conservative parties, raising the question of how much ideology, rather than status as the incumbent or part of the opposition, influenced their supporters’ reactions to democratic threats. Goodman’s response to this line of reasoning is to highlight how members of Germany’s center-left SPD—at the time a junior partner in the country’s coalition government—gave similar survey responses to members of Angela Merkel’s center-right CDU. But it is not evident that the same positional cleavage would apply in, say, the United States, where opinions about core democratic issues are deeply divided along lines that may endure past one party’s stay in power. This is one area where further research, under a Democratic administration in the United States or a Labour premiership in the United Kingdom, would be able to test the robustness of Goodman’s argument.

In the conclusion that follows this analysis, Goodman acknowledges a limitation to the book, which is that it fails to offer policy solutions to the problems that it outlines. But implicit in that modest confession is precisely what gives the book novelty: *Citizenship in Hard Times* is not primarily about policy choices or what actions political elites can take. It is about the citizens themselves and how they as individuals react to crises. Much of the existing scholarship on democratic decline focuses on the elite-driven, top-down lens of viewing democracy; examples include Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt’s widely acclaimed *How Democracies Die*, which emphasizes how elites’ abrogation of democratic norms influences democratic backsliding. But the cooperation of elites is not, on its own, enough to ensure democracy’s survival—democracy requires citizen input, and if citizens fail to uphold democratic norms, then it is destined to implode. Political science, therefore, cannot afford to overlook the role of individual citizens’ adherence to these norms, even if the problems that this scholarship identifies lack clear policy solutions.
Because the expression of citizenship norms is an issue over which policymakers hold an uncharacteristically low degree of influence, *Citizenship in Hard Times* does not fall into the genre of scholarship whose central aim is to provide recommendations to political elites. However, this does not mean that the book’s findings cannot be used in service of social causes, including the defense of democracy. Even though some political scientists do find an audience among politicians—Levitsky and Ziblatt being notable examples—the more reliable audience that professors can count on having is the audience of their students. Those students have the potential to rise to the standards of citizenship that Goodman describes, and one way that political science can strengthen democracy is for professors to educate students on how to reach that potential.

For many professors, orienting the classroom to put citizenship at the center may mean navigating unfamiliar terrain—pedagogies that focus on the practical issues of students’ roles in democracy are unlikely to resemble those that train students to become dispassionate, impartial social scientists. A blueprint for the former vision can nonetheless be found in what the political philosopher Peter Levine calls “civic studies,” a proposed discipline that draws from political science and related fields to engage with the question of how students can become effective citizens. Even though readers of all stripes, from individual voters to influential policymakers, stand to benefit from reading about the tenets of good citizenship, such scholarship reaches its fullest potential in the hands of educators who translate these values into lessons for their students. With its theoretical and empirical analysis, both of which speak to the individual reader’s role in democracy, *Citizenship in Hard Times* will be a valuable addition to curricula that are crafted in this citizenship-centered model of civic education.

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**Endnotes**


Program Highlights 2021-2022

✦ As Georgetown shifted to in-person classes in the 2021-2022 academic year, the Democracy & Governance program welcomed our 16th class of incoming students, our largest thus far. A special welcome to Michael Angeloni, Ian Archbold, Kion Bordbar, Yusuf Can, Abigail Carlson, Max Henning, Lindsey Levy, Evan Mann, Owen Myers, Alexandra Orellana, Maryam Rayed, Sammy Saleh, Kenza Sandi, Ryan Soriano, Molly Sweet, and James Venslauskas. We welcomed new Associate Director, Elton Skendaj and program coordinator, Rick Ferreira.

✦ On October 28, 2021 we held our career panel virtually. The panel considered the "state of the field" against the backdrop of the wider question of US foreign engagement and the challenge of democracy assistance after the US withdrawal from Afghanistan. This year's panel included two alumni Liza Prendergast, Vice President, Strategy & Technical Leadership, Democracy International, Elizabeth Cutler, Communications Program Manager at CNA Corporation, along with professors Daniel Brumberg and Patrick Quirk.

✦ On November 18th 2021, as part of the International Electoral Policy and Practice course taught by Professor Fischer, Democracy & Society students organized a webinar on Democratic Backsliding: What it Means for America and the World, featuring speakers from International IDEA, the Election Reformers Network, and The Carter Center.

✦ On February 28, 2022, our Democracy & Society editor assistant, Yusuf Can, organized the Turkey: Prospects for Democracy Webinar, an in-depth discussion of the democratic possibilities for Turkey’s forthcoming elections. The discussion featured panelists, Murat Somer, Berk Esen, Deniz Ay, Lisel Hintz, Daniel Brumberg, and was moderated by Elton Skendaj.

✦ On March 8, 2022, our program joined the Conflict Resolution Program to organize a panel discussion on The Second Karabakh War & the Future of Armenia-Azerbaijan Peace Process with speakers from the region.

✦ On March 15, our program joined the Conflict Resolution Program to organize a panel discussion on Ukraine: Implications for Democracy in Europe about the Russian invasion of Ukraine. The panelists, Miriam Lansky, National Endowment for Democracy, and Stephen B. Nix, International Republican Institute, explored possible outcomes of the conflict.

✦ On April 22, 2022, professor Jeff Fischer hosted a webinar on Managing Electoral Volatility, the first in a series of Trending … In Elections, with speakers from the United Nations Electoral Assistance Division, Carter Center and Anchor Change. Since 2016, new dynamics have emerged in elections which have made them the targets of attack on their integrity and viability. This webinar examined three such volatilities and discussed their impact on upcoming elections in 2022 and 2024.

✦ On April 29, 2022, our program hosted Freedom House’s Michael Smeltzer and Noah Buyon for a presentation of Nations in Transit 2022, the latest edition of the organization’s annual index of democracy in Central-Eastern Europe and Eurasia. This edition finds a continued decline in democracy across the region, with Russia’s invasion of Ukraine and Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán’s re-election contributing to a new low.

✦ Program directors, Daniel Brumberg and Elton Skendaj participated and presented on our program at the Estoril Political Forum 2022, Confronting the Authoritarian Challenge held on June 27-29 in Portugal. Two students from the program, Michael Angeloni and Molly Sweet, attended this international conference as well.

✦ This year, we also said farewell to 10 impressive graduates of the MA program in Democracy and Governance: Joshua Allen, Saskia Brain, Janelle Clausen, Rebecca Harris, Marianna Jardim, Savannah Jones, Alexander Mayer, Nicholas “Coty” Novak, Wagner Rodrigues Horta, and Taylor Williams. We also said goodbye to Democracy & Society staff, Dr. Jennifer Dresden and Justin Harried.
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