

Hyperdemocracy

Is a rising tide of authoritarianism sweeping across the globe, or are we actually in a hyper-charged era of democracy? As people choose their governments – not just by voting but by moving into like-minded communities, whether physical or virtual – the question should not be whether democracy can survive the onslaught of illiberalism. It should be, rather, whether liberalism can survive the onslaught of democracy.

Thirty years ago, Francis Fukuyama famously declared that we had reached “the end of history”. Democracy – and, just as importantly, liberalism in the classic sense – was now universally recognized as the only real answer to humanity’s challenges. A generation later, not so much.

Are we descending into an era of authoritarianism, or has democracy held – if tenuously? That’s the question being debated on both sides of the aisle in Washington,

Eric Schnurer, president of Public Works LLC, is a prolific writer, an advisor to public policy decision-makers, and founder of the “Greater Good Gathering”, an initiative that aims to develop constructive solutions to the world’s governance challenges.



and on both sides of the Atlantic as well. And it's the wrong question. The great question facing the world, as history continues on without obvious end, is not whether democracy can survive the onslaught of illiberalism. It is, rather, whether liberalism can survive the onslaught of democracy.

A GOLDEN AGE OF DEMOCRACY, AND YET RISING ILLIBERALISM.

Let me state a bold claim: This is a golden age of democracy. That runs counter to recent conventional wisdom, which holds that there is a rising tide of authoritarianism sweeping across the globe.

44

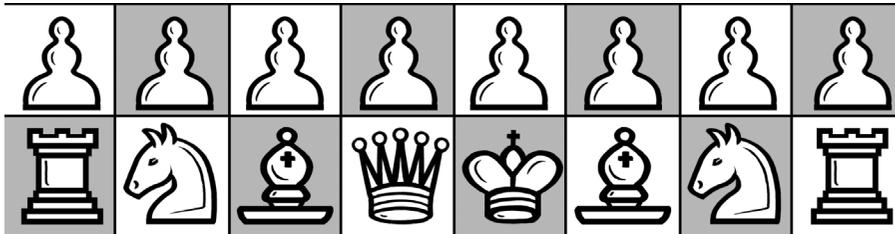
While authoritarians have been on the rise over the last few years in many countries – not to mention pre-existing autocrats in others – there has also been widespread democratic opposition in virtually all these countries. Just since I raised this argument last winter (in articles for the Italian editions of *Aspenia* as well as at aspensiaonline.it), the standing of authoritarians such as Jair Bolsonaro, Narendra Modi, and Vladimir Putin has fallen sharply. In fact, the cause of authoritarianism generally has been set back by the Covid-19 pandemic: despite the supposed efficiency advantages of authoritarian regimes, the pandemic has laid bare the destructive societal consequences – the secrecy, the denial, the failures of governance, the undermining of trust – of their obsessively self-protective instincts.

Donald Trump, the poster boy for all these trends, was voted out of office and removed, despite a forcible attempt to keep him there. The Trump era, with all its democratic norm-breaking and attempted authoritarianism at the top, in fact has generated unprecedented levels of grassroots democratic participation, from voting to massive organized demonstrations to spontaneous nationwide protest and civil disturbance unseen in a half century. There are certainly xenophobic, intolerant, anti-democratic leaders and movements in the United States, as elsewhere, but the majority of voters did not vote in

that direction. Even the vast bulk of those who did vote for Trump (about half the adult population) believe in the democratic process and chose to express that by, well, voting.

While many consider the worldwide right-wing populist movements authoritarian – and, indeed, such movements have helped to elect authoritarians like Trump or worse on almost every continent in recent years – even these movements are in fact broad-based, grassroots, and anti-elite. In short, they are highly democratic. They’re just not very liberal; there’s a difference. We are living at a time of both rising democratization and rising illiberalism.

FB



45

DEMOCRACY IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY. That points to a crucial issue. We need to define what is meant by “democracy”. To date, we have understood it too narrowly – as a particular set of political and governmental arrangements. We should view it as something much broader.

Today’s technology is making it possible for a wider range of individuals to obtain essentially what they want, tailored to their own wishes and needs. Technology has enabled mass individuation, in which large-scale consumer goods can be mass-produced but tweaked to individual desires. Clothes and shoes, for example, can be ordered custom-designed to a particular body shape. And thanks to virtual reality and 3-D printing, individuals can now obtain virtually everything – from bespoke sex to bespoke guns, regardless of legality – in the privacy of their own homes.

And it's not just on the consumer side. Small-scale manufacturers can rent factory time for limited production runs, for example, making entry into a marketplace easier, without needing to invest in large-scale capital goods and facilities. In fact, the line between consumer and producer is thinning. It is becoming increasingly common for computer owners to rent out their excess capacity for everything from cryptocurrency "mining" to astrophysics data-crunching. Homeowners can rent out their excess rooms for commercial lodging. Car owners can rent out the majority of time their cars are otherwise idle to provide rideshare services.

All of this is going to make capital more accessible to more people in the long term. It is making it possible for more people to become entrepreneurs, publishers, broadcasters, and producers of all sorts, to obtain goods and services they want from anywhere at any time, and to work at whatever they want from wherever they choose. And it's a reflection of a world in which digital technologies – from the internet to blockchain – are increasingly disaggregating, decentralizing, and distributing all economic activities.

In that sense, our economy is becoming much more democratized – as are many other areas of life. This is even true (less happily) in areas such as the use of force. One of the leading books on this subject, *The Future of Violence* (by Benjamin Wittes and Gabriella Blum), for instance, recognizes the dispersion of destructive capability – through the increasing availability, decreasing cost, and continuing miniaturization of weapons technologies – as a form of "democratization". In the near future, individuals, and certainly groups, will possess weapons of mass destruction previously accessible only to nation-states. The scale of economic damage that an individual or small group of hackers can wreak today through cyberattacks can dwarf some gross domestic products. On the other hand, the Cambridge Dictionary uses the online degree program as an example of "the purest democratization of edu-

cation.” Democratization, in short, is all around us, in virtually every human activity; and it is rising, thanks to the ascendance of digital technologies.

But it should be clear from these non-political examples that “democratization” doesn’t necessarily mean either liberalization or the defeat of authoritarianism. The democratization of force clearly positions non-state actors as serious threats, not only to states but also to other individuals. The democratization of communications media from a mass enterprise to a “social” one has turned out to be, in fact, quite anti-social, empowering individuals to shout down and shut down those with whom they disagree. The multiplicity of information outlets is undermining authoritativeness and authority, making it possible for everyone to live within their own perceptual reality, separating us from each other and allowing us to “cancel” those we dislike from our lives, totally and permanently.

The democratization of most areas of life has not fed greater tolerance or liberal behavior. The arrival of not only “deep fake” technology but also widespread augmented and virtual reality will only deepen these phenomena. More and more, we all live in our own realities. And that is where illiberal parties increasingly find their opportunity.

ALTERNATIVE FACTS. Since the election, Republicans have defied most commentators’ predictions by doubling-down on virtually every conspiracy theory that emerged under Trump, including the truly crazy QAnon movement (which presents Donald Trump as a Christ-like figure waging a secret war against an international cabal of blood-drinking pedophiles, led by Jews wielding space lasers to rule the highest levels of government, not to mention that real seat of power, Hollywood).

Two things have become clear: the majority of Republican voters believe these things. The majority of Republican leaders do not. So why have they

nonetheless been willing to play along with such craziness? It's the same calculation they have been making for over a half-century: an agenda consisting almost entirely of letting large corporations and wealthy families do as they like, while making everyone else pay (Republicans' only major legislative initiatives under Trump were a massive tax cut for the wealthiest Americans and an unsuccessful attempt to repeal health coverage for others) carries little chance of winning a majority. So Republicans adopted the same gambit that conservatives everywhere pursue: feints in the direction of traditional religious morality and racial or ethnic animosity to attract the additional votes they need. Republican political leaders – from Barry Goldwater to Richard Nixon to Ronald Reagan to Donald Trump – have been willing to parrot whatever racist and moralizing rhetoric (welfare queens?¹ Willie Horton?²) was necessary to convince a majority of voters that government regulation and redistribution was a plot against them. Satan-worshipping international pedophilia rings run by Hillary Clinton, George Soros, and Tom Hanks? Only the latest incarnation of the phantasms Republican leaders pretend to believe in order to feed their voters' alternative reality. When non-Republican pundits chortle that Republicans have the wolf by the ears when it comes to choosing between Trump's base or disavowing the sheer nuttiness into which it has descended, they miss the point. That base – perhaps as much as one-third of all Americans, who thrill to Trump's message of social and economic revanchism – gets Republicans a majority in most of America. It also gets them most of the way toward the plurality they need to maintain power in the rest of America. Even with a candidate with the highest disapproval rating of any in presidential history, in the midst of over half a million American deaths and an economic collapse of historic levels, Republicans came within a whisker of holding the White House. And the geographic biases of America's electoral system – the con-

centration of Democratic voters in a limited number of states and voting districts, the extra weight given territorially-extensive but thinly-populated states – means that Republicans can govern with a distinct minority.

Republican leaders have looked at this playing field and concluded that they like their chances. They're not sticking with Trump, QAnon, and the secret militias and ragtag insurrections who attacked the Capitol because they don't get how crazy they are; they do so because "crazy" is exactly what they need to win power in an age of illiberal democracy.

ILLIBERAL DEMOCRACY. I've argued elsewhere³ that separate virtual "countries" – where we choose our policies and what we're willing to pay for them by choosing a "provider" rather than through elections – are the probable technological end-point of our current democratization. In this new digital world, citizens will be able to choose between "communities" for their policies instead of choosing between policies for one's community. In fact, they largely do so already.

Over the last four decades, Americans have geographically self-sorted, by economics, culture, ideology and politics. People often now choose their governments not by voting in elections, but by moving – to California, say, or to Idaho. The cost of moving (whether people or goods) has been declining throughout history; with digital technologies, it approaches zero. This makes it even easier for people to opt out from (or into) governments as they choose, just as they do with other products and services. This represents a very democratic future – just not in the way we normally think of it.

The storming of the US Capitol and the further division of the American population into two essentially separate mental universes and virtual countries has only underscored this thesis. Thanks to digital technologies, it is now possible to live – at least in one's own mind – in the country of one's own

creation... one in which Covid-19 is not a threat, for example, or in which Joe Biden did not win a majority of both the popular and electoral votes. Was the Capitol assault an attempt to disrupt democracy, or was it a desperate, justified attempt to restore it? Was it a “false-flag” operation by liberals to make Trump look bad, or did the entire event even occur? It is increasingly possible to find and inhabit the world of one’s choosing.

Our technology is making it easier for everyone to have what they want, or at least to imagine that they do and expect that they will. This is tremendously, even heartwarmingly, democratic, just – as I’ve said – not in the way we normally think of it. The problem arises when this virtual world of hyper-democracy bumps up against the real world of physical constraints and shared spaces. In that environment, having everything one wants at some point requires vetoing everyone else who wants something different.

Elsewhere, I have called this “vetocracy”⁴ (Fukuyama himself has made much the same point, using the same term⁵). Trump’s followers, including many of those who stormed the Capitol “to take back democracy”, are the ultimate personification of this brave new world, where you can always have it your way. Like Thomas Hobbes’ “state of nature,” it’s highly democratic. It’s just not very liberal.

¹ Ronald Reagan’s 1976 presidential campaign speeches often included anecdotes about “the welfare queen”, a Chicago woman who had defrauded the government of hundreds of thousands of dollars.

² “A Willie Horton” has become shorthand for political advertisements that blatantly stoke racial fears and stereotypes. The actual Willie Horton campaign ad was produced by supporters of George H.W. Bush for his 1988 presidential campaign against Michael Dukakis. Horton, an African-American man, was a convicted murderer who raped a white woman and stabbed her partner while furloughed from prison under a Massachusetts program in place when Dukakis, the Democratic nominee, was governor.

³ See, for example, “Trump exposes and exploits holes in the traditional nation-state”, CNN, November 4, 2019.

⁴ See, for example, “The Rise of Vetocracy: Donald Trump was only the symptom,” *The Hedgehog Review*, November 10, 2020.

⁵ See Ezra Klein’s interview: “Francis Fukuyama: America is in ‘one of the most severe political crises I have experienced’”, *Vox*, October 26, 2016.