

Will Liberal Democracy Survive the Century?

Written by David Moscrop

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DAVID MOSCROP, DEC 18 2017

A steadfast belief in the inevitability of progress is not modernity's only conceit, but it is one of its most dangerous delusions. Armed with the legacy of Enlightenment rationalism, a commitment to liberal democracy, and steady, remarkable successes, humankind marched through the latter half of the 20th century confident that we were approaching the end of history, even if we had not yet arrived. The world was converging and democratizing; buttressed by technological solutionism, the liberal-democratic capitalist utopia was at hand. After a long road trip and centuries of bumpy stretches and periods spent stalled on the side of the highway, we were just pulling into the driveway of our political utopia.

Some Disturbing Data

The last two decades have witnessed the car rolling back out of the driveway and down the street. Today it is not unreasonable to ask if liberal democracy will survive the 21st century as the preferred form of government throughout the world. Currently, roughly 120 of 192 states are democracies. In 2016, the Economist Intelligence Unit pegged the count at 19 full democracies, 57 flawed democracies, and 40 “hybrid” regimes. The headline of their annual Democratic Index report, however, was about decline and retrenchment. The same concern is evident in Freedom House's *Freedom in the World* report for 2017, which reported 2016 as the 11th consecutive year in which global freedom declined. Numbers released by a Pew Research Center survey were accompanied by a cautiously optimistic note, “Support for Democracy High Around the World”, yet betrayed by the subhead “But many also endorse nondemocratic alternatives” and subsequent numbers that indicate significant support for “Rule by experts” (technocracy) (49 percent), “Rule by a strong leader” (26 percent), and “Rule by the military” (24 percent).

Democratic states have survived existential threats before—war, civil war, attempts at revolution, sustained civil unrest, epidemics, bitter polarization. They have also collapsed in the face of these challenges. In a 2005 paper for the *International Political Science Review*, Abraham Diskin and his colleagues studied 62 democratic cases (30 cases of collapse and 32 cases of stability) and found that variables related to the end of democracy include social cleavages, unfavourable history, malfunctioning economies, and party system polarization (Diskin et al. 2005). This study is not decisive, but the data raises concerns in a world in which these variables (social cleavages, economic malfunctioning, and party system polarization) are not uncommon. Perhaps the deleterious effects of social dysfunction as well as institutional weakness and decline can be offset by the strength of other variables, including well-functioning federalism, but you would have to imagine that there's a breaking point for even the most robust institutions.

Last year, Foa and Mounk developed a three-factor model for investigating democratic decline. The model is based on public support for democracy, openness to non-democratic government forms, and anti-system movements (Foa and Mounk, 2016). They became worried about democratic deconsolidation—the breaking apart of established democracies (ibid, 7). They write^[1]:

What we find is deeply concerning. Citizens in a number of supposedly consolidate democracies in North America and Western Europe have not only grown more critical of their political leaders. Rather, they have also become more cynical about the value of democracy as a political system, less hopeful that anything they do might influence public policy, and more willing to express support for authoritarian alternatives. The crisis of democratic legitimacy extends

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across a much wider set of indicators than previously appreciated.

They're not the only ones who are concerned about the state of democracy. In a forthcoming book, *How Democracies Die*, Ziblatt and Levitsky argue that democracies "die" as central institutions decay over time and they raise concerns about the degree to which American institutions are in decline, citing the election of Donald Trump—and more so the extreme partisan polarization that enabled it—as a very serious cause for worry. Indeed, the teaser for the book bills Trump's win as a missed exit ramp "on the road to authoritarianism" (Levitsky and Ziblatt, 2018).^[2] Their analysis should cause us concern, not only because their conclusions indicate that American democracy is in trouble, but also because of the potential global effects of U.S. democratic decline or outright collapse.

Will Democracy Collapse?

There are plenty of threat vectors that could push democratic decline towards and even past a tipping point—either on their own or in concert with others: economic inequality, extreme polarization, environmental catastrophe, bigotry and hatred, the growth of (vocal) support for fascism, epidemics, war or revolution. But each of them poses the more fundamental question: Why are these threats (potentially) enough to collapse democratic states?

There are probably several answers to this question, perhaps varying from state to state and from era to era. Perhaps there isn't a single explanation or story of why things fall apart. Surely there are many variables at work mixing together to produce long-term and immediate outcomes that affect democratic institutions. But one factor stands out as worthy of immediate attention: liberalism.

Is liberalism as it is practiced in much of the democratic West compatible with democracy in the long run? By default, we assume the answer is a 'Yes'. Indeed, the double-barreled "liberal democracy" is loaded with the idea that democracy is liberalism and liberalism is democracy, which is untrue and a dangerous assumption to boot (Macpherson 1965, 1977). Of course, there are variants of democracy that are not liberal, just as there are elements of liberalism that are not democratic. As Macpherson argued "In our Western societies the democratic franchise was not installed until after the liberal society and the liberal state were firmly established....It was the liberal state that was democratized" (Macpherson 1992 [1965]: 6).

If we take liberalism to refer first and foremost to a central commitment ontologically, epistemically, and ethically to the individual, then liberalism as a political philosophy is about a standard unit of organization (the unencumbered, self-determining person) who exists prior to the community and whose political and ethical obligation to any group with whom she chooses to associate is of secondary concern to her individual preferences and her right to choose. In this model, individuals exist on their own, they learn on their own, and they decide on their own with reference to their needs, goals, and desires. While this account of humanity is plainly not an accurate empirical assessment of the humans in the world (for instance, we're born into families and communities), it is not, strictly speaking, meant to be. It is a moral and political philosophy. It is also a good enough assessment of the political implications of a liberal worldview in which little is asked of the citizen, few opportunities to meaningfully participate in politics are offered, and in which life is primarily about personal pursuits—or the pursuits of a constrained group of which the individual happens to be a member.

As a push back against liberalism, Achen and Bartels argue convincingly that our politics is profoundly *group based* insofar as we are attached to groups and identities which shape not just our behavior but our perception, too (Achen and Bartels, 2016). Political life in liberal democracies is based on a philosophical commitment to the individual that runs up against our fundamental commitments as humans, which are group-based. Pluralism offers a potential way of bridging that divide, but liberal pluralism tends to suffer from a problem elegantly identified by Schattschneider: "the flaw in pluralist heaven is that the heavenly chorus sings with a strong upper-class accent" (Schattschneider 1960: 35). Liberal democratic pluralism marginalizes and disempowers certain sorts of individuals—and the groups to which they belong—as the model of capitalism that underwrites it does its part in corroding democratic institutions and capacities through structural exploitation and the de-democratizing effects of persistent economic inequality.

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What comes of such an arrangement? Gilens and Page found that U.S. policy for the last several decades has disproportionately favoured business interests over “average citizens and mass-based interest groups” who have had “little or no independent influence” (Gilens and Page, 2014).^[3] They conclude that their results “provide *substantial* support for theories of Economic-Elite Domination and for theories of Biased Pluralism, but not for theories of Majoritarian Electoral Democracy or Majoritarian Pluralism” (emphasis mine). In other words, the United States may be an oligarchy, or at least oligarchy-ish. So much for pluralism.

The Limits of Liberalism

Can a democratic state that asks little of its members, offers them few opportunities to self-govern, remains complicit in the exploitation and marginalization of many of them, and allows economic inequality to persist (or grow) last? On top of this, can such a state in which individuals owe strong alliances to sub-groups (for instance, their family or a political party) and in which membership in the broader community of the nation-state—which has to be routinely patched up or rebuilt—survive when the going gets tough? When the economy collapses? When disasters strike, such as we increasingly expect to see as the effects of climate change continue to emerge?

My sense is that liberal democracy as it is practiced in many—perhaps not all—Western democratic states will find it increasingly difficult to survive under conditions of economic inequality, cycles of boom and bust, more frequent environmental disasters, and other challenges that may include pandemics and war. Our liberalism is too selfish and sundered, our democratic engagement is too thin, our pluralism is too lopsided to sustain democracy in the long run given the serious threats we face. Our liberal democracies as we practice political, economic, and social life within them produce a corrosive run-off that threatens to eat away at democratic institutions and prepares them to dissolve into thin air when something puts significant pressure on them.

We have yet to settle whether the features of liberal democracy that I have critiqued here are *inherent* to the system itself, to particular varieties of the system, or to particular contexts in which the system is installed. We may never know for sure. What we are about to discover, however, is whether liberal democracy can continue to exist without fundamental modifications or compromise in the face of sustained threats from within and without. So far, we have reasons to doubt that it can.

Notes

[1] In the same issue of the journal, political scientist Ronald Inglehart disagrees with Foa and Mounk’s conclusion, arguing the data is “troubling” although “it does not mean that democracy is now in long-term decline.” See Inglehart 2016.

[2] See also David Frum’s treatment of the book.

[3] Some scholars disagree with Page and Gilens. See, for instance, Peter K. Enns’ “Relative Policy Support and Coincidental Representation,” *Perspectives on Politics*, Vol. 13, Issue 4 (December 2015): 1053-1064 and Alexander J. Branham, Stuart Soroka, and Christopher Wlezien’s “When Do the Rich Win?” *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. 132, No. 1 (2017): 43-62.

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About the author:

David Moscrop is a political theorist and a postdoctoral fellow in the Scholarly Communication Lab at Simon Fraser University and a writer. He is a regular contributor for Maclean's Magazine and his work has appeared in several magazines and newspapers. He is currently working on a book about why we make bad political decisions and how we can make better ones (Goose Lane, 2019). His first peer-reviewed article (co-written with Mark Warren) "When is deliberation democratic?" was published in 2016. You can follow him on Twitter at @David_Moscrop.