

Why Democracy is Its Own Worst Enemy?

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The challenges that lay ahead for democracy are so serious that few political scientists have the courage to risk their reputation and pin down with relative accuracy what will happen on a 5/10/15 year basis. As a matter of fact, when the term “democracy” and “enemy” is used in the same sentence there’s a natural and immediate tendency—for those who are lucky enough to live in electoral democracies—to look over the fence and not to our own backyard. That is to say, democracy’s enemies, our enemies, are some sort of mythological creatures that live far away from our perfect democratic bubble. This reasoning can be in part seen in the on-going debate about democracy’s struggle against its external enemies. During the Cold War period democracy was at “war” with communism and, before that, with national-socialism and fascism. Currently, democracy faces new enemies: global authoritarianism, international terrorism, religious extremism, and Islamic fundamentalism. This thoughtfulness is only partly true. At least it’s not the only reason why we are debating this matter today. According to this paper, and that’s precisely part of the problem, democracy is to some extent its own worst enemy. Why? Because most of the issues that we’re debating today are the result of a certain apathy and disentanglement of liberal democracies around the world in the last decade.

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Introduction

The challenges that lay ahead for democracy are so serious that few political scientists have the courage to risk their reputation and pin down with relative accuracy what will happen on a 5/10/15 year basis. We probably will not find a completely satisfactory solution for most of the problems in hand shortly.

With this in mind, as an initial disclaimer, perhaps it is imperative to say at the outset that when the term “democracy” and “enemy” is used in the same sentence there’s a natural and immediate tendency—for those who are lucky enough to live in electoral democracies—to look over the fence and not to our own backyard. That is to say, democracy’s enemies, our enemies, are some sort of mythological creatures that live far away from our perfect democratic bubble. This reasoning can be in part seen in the on-going debate about democracy’s struggle against its external enemies. During the cold war period democracy was at “war” with communism and, before that, with national-socialism and fascism. Currently, democracy faces new enemies: global authoritarianism, international terrorism, religious extremism, and Islamic fundamentalism. This thoughtfulness is only partly true. At least it’s not the only reason why we are debating this matter today. Let’s elaborate on that last point.

Sir Winston Churchill's famous quote is more than meaningful to describe the argument presented here: "When there is no enemy within, the enemies outside cannot hurt you". From this point of view—and that's precisely part of the problem—democracy is to some extent its own worst enemy. Why? Because most of the issues that we're debating today are a result of a certain apathy and disentanglement of liberal democracies around the world in the last decade. One might say that this problem has two dimensions.

Firstly, that lethargy fostered a deterioration of democracy's quality at a state level. This "enemy" is rooted deeply inside the democratic system and is responsible for corruption and the undermining of the rule of law. In fact, we have witnessed a decay of democracy's fundamental principles in western democracies. In the United Kingdom and other parliamentary systems the problem is roughly the same with the first-past-the-post (FPTP) system. In France Marine Le Pen stormed the political foundations of democracy. In the European Union "democracy" remains a vague concept with the current top-down procedure and an elite-led process. Brazil's impeachment process is just one more example of democracy's corruption. In Portugal democracy's paradoxes engendered a prime minister that wasn't the most voted for in the last parliamentary elections. In May 2016, Austria just made a last-minute swerve away from the far right. Again, last March Dutch far-right politician Geert Wilders rocked the political context in the Netherlands. On top of that, voter turnout has been in decline since the mid-1980s.

Secondly, consequently, as a direct result of what has happened at a state level, mainly in the US and Europe, it also cultivated an evident lack of legitimacy abroad. As a result of this backdrop, democratic principles became more unappealing. The image of democracy is suffering in the world. Why should countries like Thailand, Bangladesh, Turkey, and Ukraine (all of them with democratic breakdowns) look up to the United States, Brazil, or Europe? They probably won't. One cannot speak of democracy promotion without first solving countless problems at state level. What is the point of having North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) "institutionalizing" democracy if the United States, France, or the UK don't lead by example? What is the point of establishing Europe as a democracy lighthouse for neighbouring countries if we are currently witnessing the decline of democracy in East-Central Europe? What is the point of it all if European Union (EU) member states, like Hungary, are subjugated by far-right ideals and live under "populist democracies"? Again, what is the point of it all if EU member states contradict the democratic spirit responsible for the construction of the EU project in the first place?

Don't get the story wrong. The formula used by the United States after the World War II—the creation of a highly institutionalised political, economic and military international order established mainly on the principles of democracy, free-markets and peace—is still, to a certain extent, the best way to solve some of the current problems internationally. But we can't simply discard the state level perspective.

Furthermore, Western states' inability to incorporate the normative dimension into foreign policy became more obvious and democracy promotion is nowadays a big "grey area". This situation paved the way to the resurgence of anti-democratic forces that are undermining democracy worldwide. The economic and political rise of authoritarian regimes (Russia, China, Venezuela, Saudi Arabia, or Iran), among others, is a result of this inefficiency and represents a direct challenge to the existing pro-democratic world order. That's why, supposedly, the world has been, to use Larry Diamond's (2015a) words, in a "democratic recession" (levels of democracy and freedom) in the last decade" (p. 152). As a result, the decline of democracy became a hot topic in academic and think tank circles.

Overall the argument presented here is that we are facing one of the most challenging times in years for

democracy. In fact, the years to come will be crucial regarding the preservation of democracy and its democratic foundations, both internally and externally. The negative trends associated to democracy need to be reversed, urgently.

This argument will be developed in three main steps. Firstly, it will analyse the reasons for the present deterioration of democracy's quality at a state level. Then, it turns to explore the debate around the growing political influence of the world's leading authoritarian regimes. Finally, Larry Diamond's argument will be used as a framework for a critical analysis of two main questions: Are we (really) facing a democratic decline? What can be done to resolve this problem?

Optimistic Democracy

In the summer of 1989, Francis Fukuyama published in *The National Interest* magazine an influential—and soon to be world-wide known—essay called “The End of History?”. At the time, Fukuyama (1989) argued that we were perhaps witnessing “not just the end of the Cold War or the passing of a particular period of post-war history, but the end of history as such: that is, the end point of mankind's ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government” (pp. 3-18). A few years later, the political scientist clarified the meaning of his argument with *The End of History and the Last Man*. What was suggested differed substantially from most interpretations, especially in one point: the meaning of “history”. History as an aggregate set of events did not come to an end, but rather “history” understood as an “evolutionary process, consistent” and “unique”. Fukuyama's (1992) intention was not to argue that there would be dramatic changes in society implying (pp. xii-xiii), therefore, the end of everything around us, but rather that there would be no more progress in the guiding principles and the institutions associated with it. Nevertheless, the central argument of his thesis remained: In the future parliamentary democracy (with its political/economic/cultural structure) and the rule of law would become more and more prevalent. This confidence on democracy led, for example, Mandelbaum (2002) to argue that the reality of the post-Cold War world had portrayed almost faithfully Woodrow Wilson's dream: “much of the world was democratic” (p. 34).

Fukuyama's democratic optimism was reinforced soon after with Samuel Huntington's “Third Wave” (1996, p. 3)¹. Huntington assessed that democracy's advances had occurred in three waves. His explanation stated that the first wave was initiated in 1828 with the extension of universal suffrage to 50% of all adult males living in the United States. Then this wave continued to grow until 1922, when it reached a peak of 29 democracies. From 1922 until 1942, the first “reverse wave” occurred reducing the number of democratic states to about 12. The allied victory in World War II gave new life to the democratic spirit and in 1962 around 36 countries. The second “reverse wave” (1958-1975) saw numerous breakdowns, namely from Latin American countries and newly decolonized nations.

According to Huntington (1996), the “third wave of democratization” started with the Carnation Revolution in Portugal (25th April 1974) and extended to Greece, Spain including the historic democratic transitions in Latin America in the 1980s, the Asia Pacific countries (Philippines, South Korea, and Taiwan) from 1986 to 1988, Eastern Europe after the collapse of the Soviet Union, and sub-Saharan Africa beginning in 1989. Between 1974 and 1990 at least 30 countries had made transitions to democracy, consequently,

¹ For the original argument see Huntington (1991).

expanding the number of democratic governments in the world. As Plattner (2016) argues, in this period, “democracy experienced the most massive global expansion in history [...] democracy had shown that it appealed to people in every corner of the globe and that it could be successfully instituted in vastly divergent kinds of societies. As democracy expanded, its legitimacy grew, and its growing legitimacy fostered its further expansion” (p. 3). But after 1995 democratic expansion began to slow down until it stopped around 2005. Since then the rate of democratic breakdowns in the world has enhanced considerably. Although there has not been a “reverse wave”, the number of democracies in the world didn’t increase either.

Not surprisingly, Freedom House, in the 2016 *Freedom in the World Report* cites a consecutive 10th year of decline in freedom around the world. The detailed analysis put forward by Puddington and Roylance (2016) can be summed up in two ideas. Firstly, global freedom is under pressure due to a certain ineptitude of western liberal democracies to cope with a series of important international challenges (Syrian Civil War; European migrant crisis; Crimea, etc.). Secondly, the existing context encouraged the rise of the Big Five authoritarian regimes: China, Russia, Iran, Venezuela, and Saudi Arabia. This background—that emphasize, in a broader sense, democracy’s decline—serves as a starting point for this paper.

The World of Democracy?

Let us then begin by analysing the challenges that democracy’s quality endures at a state level. In 2016, at the University of Minnesota Humphrey School, Larry Diamond (2015a) publicly defended that America’s democracy was in trouble (p. 152). According to the Stanford political scientist, voters were increasingly dissatisfied with the two-party system and it was necessary to change it to bring in more independent voices and satisfy increasingly independent voters. We tend to agree with Larry. In Europe it’s difficult to understand the existence of only two political parties. The US electoral system, FPTP voting, gives a real advantage to Democrats and Republicans since it creates a barrier to competition and keeps out smaller parties. Gerrymandering is partly a result of the lack of competition. Because people only have two realistic options, it makes it much easier for politicians to carve up districts which are favourable to them. It also makes it possible to break up populations so that they don’t have a majority in any district and thus receive no representation. For instance, Thomas Carothers (2016) argues that “the deficiencies of democratic governance in the United States have snowballed in number and intensity, from the inability of the two main political parties to work productively together to the capture of the legislative process by elite interest groups to glaring shortcomings in the criminal justice system”. Moreover, according to Diamond’s (2015a) opinion there are additional signs of democratic ill health: “the diminished pace of legislation, the vanishing ability of Congress to pass a budget, and the 2013 shutdown of the federal government are only some of the indications of a political system (and a broader body politic) that appears increasingly polarized and deadlocked. As a result, both public approval of Congress and public trust in government are at historic lows” (p. 152). In 2015, Larry Diamond (2015b) offered a practical solution for this matter: “changing how elections are structured can help depolarize U.S. politics without jeopardizing the democratic process”. He might be right or wrong. We don’t know. But something has to be done soon to enhance democracy’s quality in the United States.

In Europe the situation isn’t much better. The absence of democratic legitimacy in the EU is not a new problem. The European integration process remains a top-down procedure. More, regardless of the growing power of the European Parliament, it is still an elite-led process where the citizens have little or nothing to say. High politics are hardly subject to democratic oversight and thus the elaboration of policies by the elites rests

upon tacit popular consent. If the EU wants to be serious about democracy, it needs to reach out to the public with important political, economic, cultural, and security questions. The European citizens have to be engaged. The Mediterranean migrant crisis, the Ukraine crisis, the financial crisis, the terrorist attacks on European soil and the threat posed by the Islamic State, to name a few, have raised serious questions about the EU's role as a democracy "promoter". If we add to this complexity of relationships between member states with the ultimate outcome of political divisions and the fact that some EU member states regard the EU as a political process with clear-cut strategic objectives whilst others simply regard the EU as part of an economic process and thus consider it apolitical, then the future doesn't look very hopeful.

At a state level, despite the fact they're a long way from holding real power, there's a realistic problem with the far-right in the European continent and what we can call the deconsolidation of democracy. In Austria, Norbert Hofer, the gun-toting far-right Freedom Party candidate, almost had victory within his grasp, until the postal ballot results clinched it for independent candidate Alexander Van der Bellen. Hofer would have been the first European far-right head of state since the end of World War II and its popularity is a clear concern. Also, Germany's Alternative für Deutschland (AfD), Britain's United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP), and France's Front National (FN) are all having a real impact on debate in these countries. While others like the Danish People's Party, the Swiss People's Party, Hungary's Jobbik, The Sweden Democrats, and True Finns continue to exploit the fear that those in power are no longer accountable to citizens or represent their true interests.

Eligible voters are disillusioned with the political process and with politicians in general and they feel distant from it all. The result is a low voter turnout due in part to voter apathy. For instance, the May 2014 EU election saw the lowest voter turnout on record. And, with the exception of Northern Europe, in most of the European countries voter turnout for presidential and parliamentary elections have been decreasing continuously over the years. In a country supposedly run by elected officials, disenchanted and inactive citizens means that when very few people vote, the politicians elected do not represent the beliefs and values of the general population. Another criticism of democracy is that sometimes it allows paradoxes like voting in non-democratic forces or simply "misunderstandings" of what should be the true meaning of democracy including minorities losing out to majorities (especially in countries that struggle to integrate/assimilate a large foreign population); the perception that democracy is still a "hostage" of the wealthy elites that (a) have fund-raising capability to become the final candidates that voters choose from and (b) can "buy" more propaganda to convince the masses. Finally, the question of short term (populist) policies due to limited time in power (the short life span of governments means that they must deliver, however it also induces more populist policies), is also problematic. How do we solve this? First of all, either in representative democracies or direct democracies an informed opinion is paramount.

Authors like Boik, Fioramonti, and Milante (2015) argue that the "next generation of democracy would measure quality not as increased economic output but by the broader metric of increased wellbeing". That is to say, wellbeing implies the existence of better versions of economic and political decision-making systems that can promote decentralization, inclusion, tolerance, understanding, diversity, and openness of society, for example, through participatory budgeting where residents of a city democratically choose how public monies are spent. We should add to a diverse mainstream media, schooling, family upbringings and an effective social engineering. Larry Diamond (2014) contends that we need to strengthen "democratic institutions in both the political arena and the state" (p. 9). According to his argument, it's necessary to build and reform "the kinds of

impersonal institutions that sustain democracy, prosperity, and the rule of law". At the end democracy can't "have a secure future without a restoration of confidence in its ability to function in the wealthy, advanced states of the West". If that happens, democracy will not be its own worst enemy but, we are sure, it's very best friend.

Democracy and Its Enemies: The Authoritarian Resurgence

After the end of the Cold War, it seemed that democracy was spreading, dictatorships were tumbling and capitalism was leading. Today, the international scenario is quite different, for worse we might add. Liberal values such as transparency, rule of law, accountability and respect for human dignity are being widely crushed by authoritarian regimes. Democratic expansion slowdown since 1995 and virtually came to a halt a decade ago. Democratic breakdowns have accelerated. From 1990 to 2005, the number of countries identified by Freedom House as "electoral democracies" grew from 76 to 119. During the same period, the number of countries rated "free" expanded from 65 to 89. In 2014, 46 % of the countries were classified as free, the same as in 1998, and the percentage of electoral democracies in 2014 was the same as in 1999, at 63%. As we had the opportunity to emphasize early on, Freedom House, in the 2016 annual *Freedom in the World Report* cites a consecutive 10th year of decline in freedom around the world. Moreover, the quality or stability of democracy has been declining in the so called "swing states" and democracy hasn't been promoted abroad as it should.

Given the background the "authoritarian resurgence" is viewed by Diamond (2015b) as "an important part of the story of global democratic recession" (p. 151). This downturn in democratization fostered the idea that democracy is in decline. Why? Plattner (2016) highlighted Diamond's argument stating that part of the answer is "bad governance" (p. 5), particularly in new democracies where it's difficult to build (legitimate) democratic institutions that can assure the existence of well-functioning and effective states: "disappointment with democracy's 'failure to deliver' accounts, at least in part, for its vulnerability to breakdown in countries that have adopted it for the first time and its failure to take root in some places until it has been tried several times". The other side of the equation is the lack of democracy's legitimacy that, in turn, increases all sorts of doubts about the "desirability of democracy". Why should countries adopt a political model that at home doesn't safeguard the rule of law? Why should countries want to copy an economic model that at home is a disaster? As Carothers argues (2016) "many people on the receiving end of U.S. democracy aid are questioning why Americans believe they have the answers to others' democratic shortcomings. What solutions, they rightfully ask, does the United States [or Europe] have to offer for overcoming, for example, a dysfunctional national legislature that commands little public respect, intolerant political populism, crippling polarization, problematic campaign financing, voter registration disputes, low voter turnout, or rights violations by security forces?". The failure to answer these questions explain the rise of the authoritarian regimes.

In fact, the rise of authoritarian states like China and Russia in the international order are simply crushing the political opposition from within leaving no room for civil society activity. Basically, democracy is a facade in authoritarian regimes where elections are held with no competitiveness whatsoever since they use government-approved shell groups to edge out genuine civil society, pass laws outlawing free association and speech, and force the news media into submission by pulling the strings of the owners and editors. These "neopatrimonial states", as Francis Fukuyama (2015) call them, prohibit or restrict foreign funding of civil society, limit and control the use of internet shaping cyberspace to their own strategic advantage and promote at the same time "widespread patronage and clientelism" (p. 13).

Likewise, they use “cooperation” forums like the Shanghai Cooperation Organization to push beyond their borders and fight back against democratic norms by mastering the soft power instruments that were previously practiced by democracies (international media, cultural institutes, exchange programs, scholarships, conferences and economic investments). In 2016, Christopher Walker wrote on the *Journal of Democracy*’s pages an important essay about authoritarianism called “The Authoritarian Threat: The Hijacking of ‘Soft’ Power”. This argument would be just a few months later extended with the book called *Authoritarianism Goes Global: The Challenge to Democracy*, edited by Larry Diamond, Marc F. Plattner, and Christopher Walker. Walker’s argument (2016) explains that Western powers embraced these regimes in the global political and economic institutions hoping that autocracies could trace a genuine path to political reforms and, in the long run, become more like the democracies (pp. 49-50, p. 62). What happened was precisely the opposite. Democratization processes didn’t liberalize national politics in the authoritarian regimes but “rather than reforming, most of these repressive regimes have deepened their authoritarianism”. Worst of all, they have pursued policies aiming at “blocking democracy’s advance” by undermining the institutions and arenas that welcomed them and in the process hijack “the concept of soft power as part of a broad assault on democracy and its values”. However their final goal, for Walker, “is not to promote authoritarianism, but rather to contain the spread of democracy and reshape the norms of the international order”.

This is deeply worrying for western liberal democracies and western way of life. Liberal democracies need to go head to head with authoritarian regimes and fight with all its strength these new enemies in order to preserve the international democratic order. Maybe we will face new challenges similar to those that we endured during the Cold War with the Soviet Union. But that’s the price to pay.

We want to underline once again our position on this matter. It is impossible to discuss ways of “fighting” non-democratic authoritarian regimes if we don’t think of this problem in a more profound perspective. That is to say, part of the reason why we are talking about the resurgence of authoritarianism in the first place is precisely because democracy in the West is simply not working properly. As underlined before, to resolve problems with democracy internationally, we have to first of all recognize all the problems domestically and address the major challenges of governance, particularly at a state level. If liberal democracies in the West want to lead by example they have an obligation to act accordingly. That’s why this paper argued in the beginning that democracy to some extent is its own worst enemy (obviously, we were addressing the type of democracy practiced in Western liberal democracies).

The world is listening and if we don’t speak about democracy promotion, if we look to the other side while far-right movements build up, if we say that is ok to undermine freedom of speech and the rule of law on our democratic societies then it’s only natural that authoritarian regimes and democracy’s external enemies (international terrorism, religious extremism and Islamic fundamentalism) can discredit democracy in general and cultivate an evident lack of legitimacy abroad. With this in mind, let’s explore the million dollar question: is democracy in decline?

Conclusion: Is Democracy (Really) in Decline?

The issue of democratic recession is not a new one. As we’ve seen, Huntington reflected after the Cold War on the possibility of a “reverse wave.” Over the years there have been various arguments in contention and to be fair-minded, from our perspective, *Journal of Democracy* has taken the lead numerous times in this debate focusing on whether or not democracy is in decline. For example, the editors’ introduction for the 2010

edition of the *Journal*—that discussed democracy’s past and future—in a very objective chronological analysis traced, since 1990, what can be understood as a downturn on democracy’s vitality. This debate gained a new dimension with the 25th anniversary issue of the *Journal* dedicated precisely to the question of whether democracy is in decline with the thought-provoking headline cover “Is Democracy in Decline?”. The article written by Larry Diamond, “Facing Up to the Democratic Recession” (generally arguing that democracy has been in a global recession for most of the last decade) took the front on this discussion and was attacked by Levitsky and Way (2015) with what they called “The Myth of the Democratic Recession” (pp. 45-58). Basically, the two authors pointed out that the decrease in overall Freedom House scores shows only a very slight decline in levels of freedom since 2000. The alleged “democratic recession” is nothing but a myth founded on misunderstandings originating in the post-Cold War period. This debate reflects a seminal fact: There will always be a positive and a negative point of view in contention on this matter.

Consequently, can it be argued that democracy is indeed in decline? Can we contend from an empirical point of view that 10 years is more than enough to talk about democracy’s decline or even of a reverse wave? Can we honestly say that the rise of the authoritarian regimes represents an end cycle for democracy? Is this “a momentary setback in a general movement toward greater democracy around the world, similar to a stock-market correction or [they] signal a broader shift in world politics and the rise of serious alternatives to democracy”, as Diamond (2014) puts it. Or, are we “witnessing a crisis of democracy around the world” (p. 9), as Berkowitz (2014) argues.

Despite the variety of arguments presented in recent years we simply don’t know for sure, it’s too soon to talk about a potential democratic roll back. But if liberal democracies want to find the right answers to these questions they need to go back to the basics. Democratic powers need to understand once and for all that the world is changing and it’s time to reset the way we approach democracy.

Francis Fukuyama (2014) wrote: “Democracy is a complex set of institutions that involves accountability, rule of law, and an adequate state; they have to work in conjunction with one another, and successful democracy happens when you successfully institutionalize all of these different components. All along we should have been focusing on the institutionalization of democracy much more than on the initial ending of autocracy” (p. 92). He is absolutely right.

That is to say, we need to address this issue in a combined way. The increase of democracy’s quality and legitimacy at a state level is vital in order to promote democratic principles externally. They have to be interpreted as one. By some means we need to “institutionalize” democracy’s standards at home and abroad. We do believe that it’s essential to engender a Toquevillian-Wilsonian approach (armed with Joseph Nye’s “soft power”) in a sense that democracy needs to be consolidated internally before we go “abroad in search of monsters to destroy”. For that to happen we need to follow Lilia Shevtsova’s (2013) advice: liberal democracies have to be attractive to the outside world and incorporate democracy promotion into their foreign policies. One way or another “the whole “democracy promotion” approach used by the West for decades has to be rethought”.

In the process, democracy needs to be strengthened and preserved where it already exists (increasing democracy’s quality: fighting bad governance, corruption and underlying the importance of the rule of law). And yes, shocking enough, liberal democracies have to become more appealing in the long run so they can boost perhaps a new wave of democratic transitions to strike back at the core of all its enemies.

As Plattner (2016) contends “there are strong reasons for thinking that democracy can recover some of the

momentum it has lost” (p. 6). Democracy has endured rough periods before, particularly during the Cold War, and has demonstrated an astonishing capability for “self-correction”. This resistance has the capacity to tell us that democracy can wake up from its lethargy and “rise to the challenge”. Leading authoritarian regimes, a little bit like the former Soviet Union, aren’t so strong politically and economically as they want to show to the “outside” world. For instance, in China the civil society is now well educated and living under the gains of economic capitalism and can push for some sort of democratic reforms. Democracy is strong and can appeal to a vast majority of citizens that live everyday without political freedom. Nevertheless it’s urgent to recognize that we have a serious problem in hand. The solution is solely (and will always be) a prerogative of western liberal democracies.

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