



What's gone wrong with democracy

Democracy was the most successful political idea of the 20th century. Why has it run into trouble, and what can be done to revive it?

T

HE protesters who have overturned the politics of Ukraine have many aspirations for their country. Their placards called for closer relations with the European Union (EU), an end to Russian intervention in Ukraine's politics and the establishment of a clean government to replace the kleptocracy of President Viktor Yanukovich. But their fundamental demand is one that has motivated people over many decades to take a stand against corrupt, abusive and autocratic governments. They want a rules-based democracy.

It is easy to understand why. Democracies are on average richer than non-democracies, are less likely to go to war and have a better record of fighting

corruption. More fundamentally, democracy lets people speak their minds and shape their own and their children's futures. That so many people in so many different parts of the world are prepared to risk so much for this idea is testimony to its enduring appeal.

Yet these days the exhilaration generated by events like those in Kiev is mixed with anxiety, for a troubling pattern has repeated itself in capital after capital. The people mass in the main square. Regime-sanctioned thugs try to fight back but lose their nerve in the face of popular intransigence and global news coverage. The world applauds the collapse of the regime and offers to help build a democracy. But turfing out an autocrat turns out to be much easier than setting up a viable democratic government. The new regime stumbles, the economy flounders and the country finds itself in a state at least as bad as it was before. This is what happened in much of the Arab spring, and also in Ukraine's Orange revolution a decade ago. In 2004 Mr Yanukovich was ousted from office by vast street protests, only to be re-elected to the presidency (with the help of huge amounts of Russian money) in 2010, after the opposition politicians who replaced him turned out to be just as hopeless.

Between 1980 and 2000 democracy experienced a few setbacks, but since 2000 there have been many



Democracy is going through a difficult time. Where autocrats have been driven out of office, their opponents have mostly failed to create viable democratic regimes. Even in established democracies, flaws in the system have become worryingly visible and

disillusion with politics is rife. Yet just a few years ago democracy looked as though it would dominate the world.

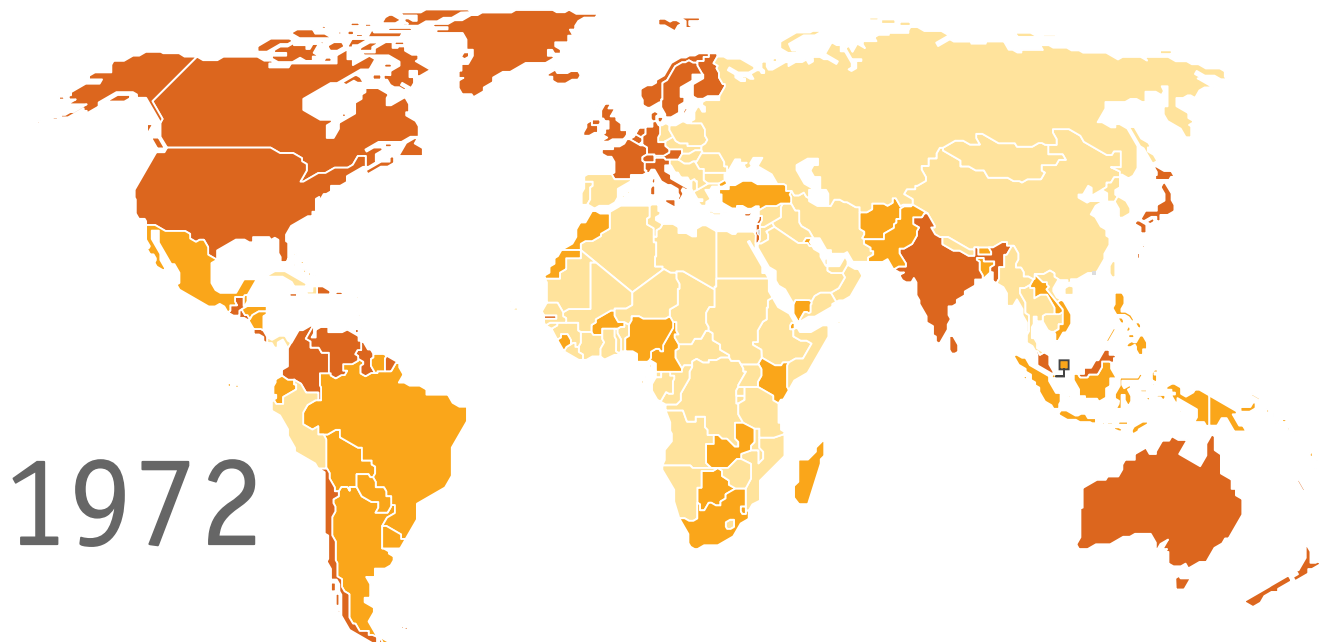
In the second half of the 20th century, democracies had taken root in the most difficult circumstances possible—in Germany, which had been traumatised by Nazism, in India, which had the world's largest population of poor people, and, in the 1990s, in South Africa, which had been disfigured by apartheid. Decolonisation created a host of new democracies in Africa and Asia, and autocratic regimes gave way to democracy in Greece (1974), Spain (1975), Argentina (1983), Brazil (1985) and Chile (1989). The collapse of the Soviet Union created many fledgling democracies in central Europe. By 2000 Freedom House, an American think-tank, classified 120 countries, or 63% of the world total, as democracies.

Representatives of more than 100 countries gathered at the World Forum on Democracy in Warsaw that year to proclaim that “the will of the people” was “the basis of the authority of government”. A report issued by America's State Department declared that having seen off “failed experiments” with authoritarian and totalitarian forms of government, “it seems that now, at long last, democracy is triumphant.”

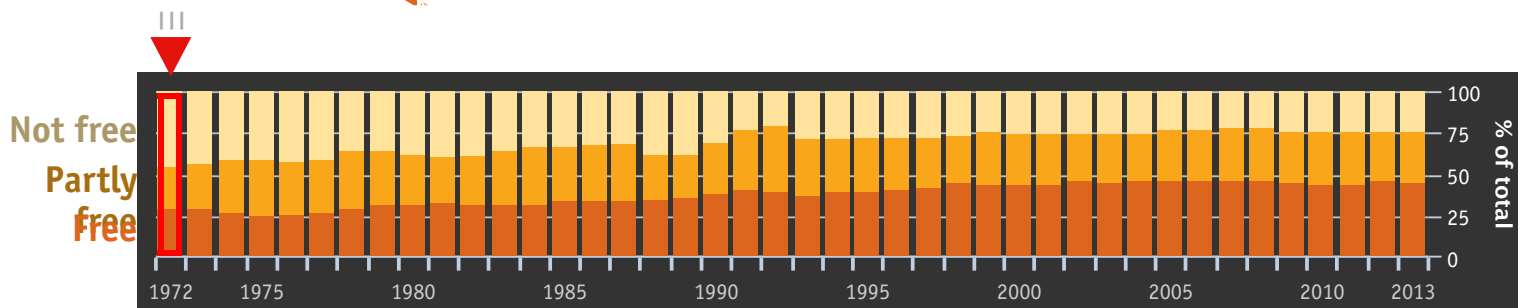
Such hubris was surely understandable after such a run of successes. But stand farther back and the triumph of democracy looks rather less inevitable. After the fall of Athens, where it was first developed, the political model

had lain dormant until the Enlightenment more than 2,000 years later. In the 18th century only the American revolution produced a sustainable democracy. During the 19th century monarchists fought a prolonged rearguard action against democratic forces. In the first half of the 20th century nascent democracies collapsed in Germany, Spain and Italy. By 1941 there were only 11 democracies left, and Franklin Roosevelt worried that it might not be possible to shield “the great flame of democracy from the blackout of barbarism”.

A high-water mark? Freedom score, by country



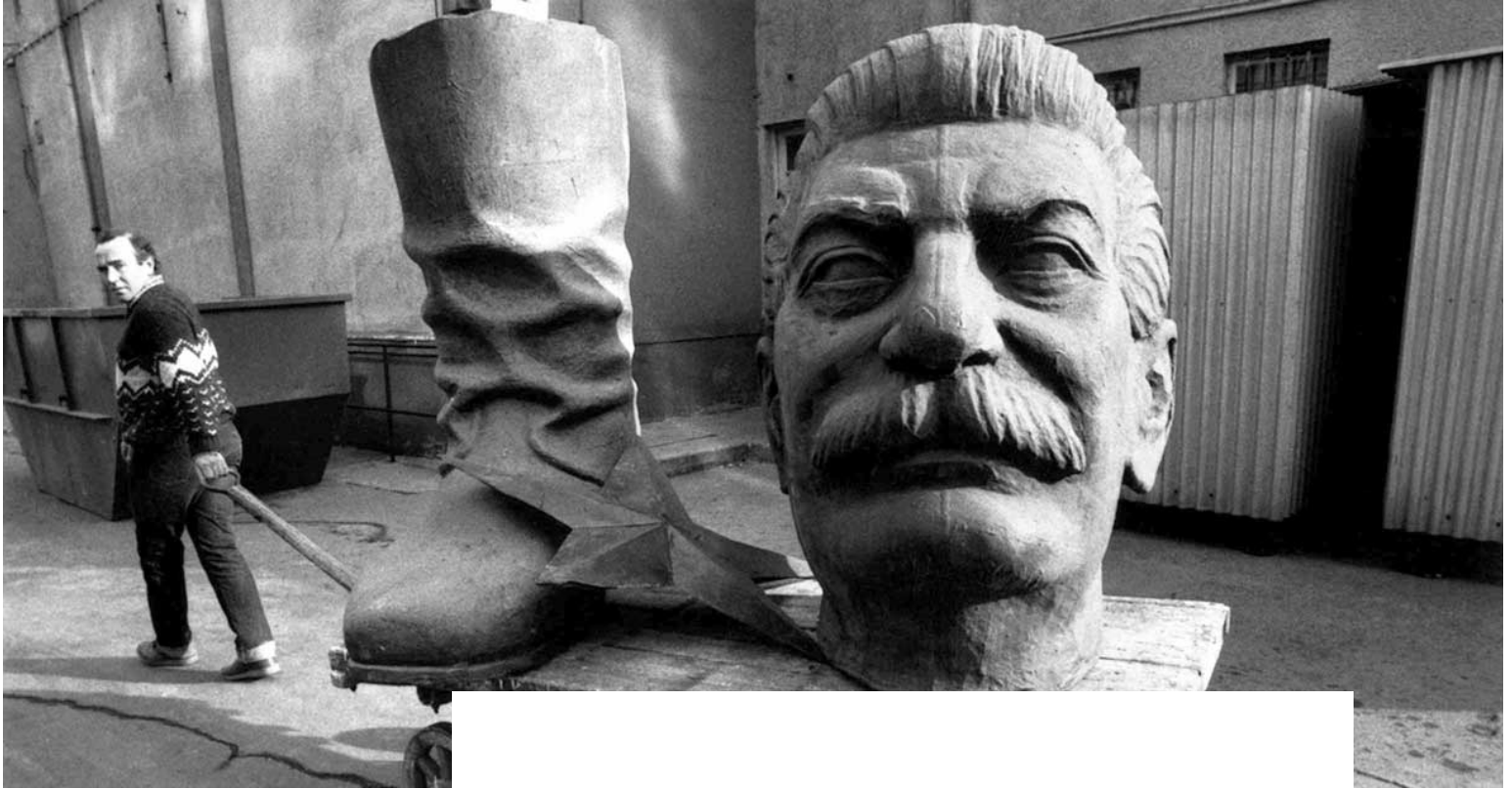
1972



Sources: Freedom House; *The Economist*

The progress seen in the late 20th century has stalled in the 21st. Even though around 40% of the world's population, more people than ever before, live in countries that will hold free and fair elections this year, democracy's global advance has come to a halt, and may even have gone into reverse. Freedom House reckons that 2013 was the eighth consecutive year in which global freedom declined, and that its forward march peaked around the beginning of the century. Between 1980 and 2000 the cause of democracy experienced only a few setbacks, but since 2000 there have been many. And democracy's problems run deeper than mere numbers suggest. Many nominal democracies have slid towards autocracy, maintaining the outward appearance of democracy through elections, but without the rights and institutions that are equally important aspects of a functioning democratic system.

Faith in democracy flares up in moments of triumph, such as the overthrow of unpopular regimes in Cairo or Kiev, only to sputter out once again. Outside the West, democracy often advances only to collapse. And within the West, democracy has too often become associated with debt and dysfunction at home and overreach abroad. Democracy has always had its critics, but now old doubts are being treated with renewed respect as the weaknesses of democracy in its Western strongholds, and the fragility of its influence elsewhere, have become increasingly apparent. Why has democracy lost its forward momentum?



The return of history

THE two main reasons are the financial crisis of 2007-08 and the rise of China. The damage the crisis did was psychological as well as financial. It revealed fundamental weaknesses in the West's political systems, undermining the self-confidence that had been one of their great assets. Governments had steadily extended entitlements over decades, allowing dangerous levels of debt to develop, and politicians came to believe that they had abolished boom-bust cycles and tamed risk. Many people became disillusioned with the workings of their political systems—particularly when governments bailed out bankers with taxpayers' money and then stood by impotently as financiers continued to pay themselves huge bonuses. The crisis turned the Washington consensus into a term of reproach across the emerging world.

Meanwhile, the Chinese Communist Party has broken the democratic world's monopoly on economic progress. Larry Summers, of Harvard University, observes that when America was growing fastest, it doubled living standards roughly every 30 years. China has been doubling living standards roughly every decade for the past 30 years. The Chinese elite argue that their model—tight control by the Communist Party, coupled with a relentless effort to recruit talented people into its upper ranks—is more efficient than democracy and less susceptible to gridlock. The political leadership changes every decade or so, and there is a constant supply of fresh talent as party cadres are promoted based on their ability to hit targets.

China says its model is more efficient than democracy and less susceptible to gridlock



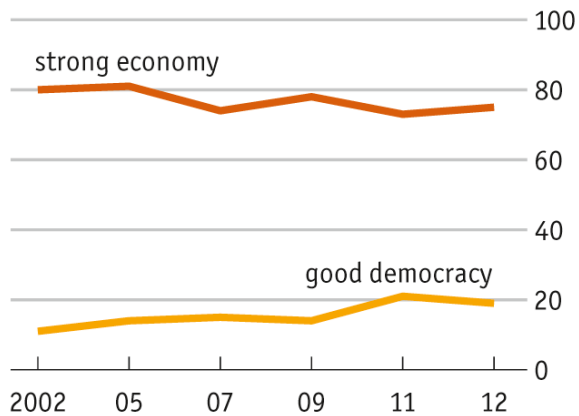
China's critics rightly condemn the government for controlling public opinion in all sorts of ways, from imprisoning dissidents to censoring internet discussions. Yet the regime's obsession with control paradoxically means it pays close attention to public opinion. At the same time China's leaders have been able to tackle some of the big problems of state-building that can take decades to deal with in a democracy. In just two years China has extended pension coverage to an extra 240m rural dwellers, for example—far more than the total number of people covered by America's public-pension system.



Many Chinese are prepared to put up with their system if it delivers growth. The 2013 Pew Survey of Global Attitudes showed that 85% of Chinese were “very satisfied” with their country’s direction, compared with 31% of Americans. Some Chinese intellectuals have become positively boastful. Zhang Weiwei of Fudan University argues that democracy is destroying the West, and particularly America, because it institutionalises gridlock, trivialises decision-making and throws up second-rate presidents like George Bush junior. Yu Keping of Beijing University argues that democracy makes simple things “overly complicated and frivolous” and allows “certain sweet-talking politicians to mislead the people”. Wang Jisi, also of Beijing University, has observed that “many developing countries that have introduced Western values and political systems are experiencing disorder and chaos” and that China offers an alternative model. Countries from Africa (Rwanda) to the Middle East (Dubai) to South-East Asia (Vietnam) are taking this advice seriously.

Riches over rights

What is more important?
% of Russians polled responding:



Source: Pew Research Centre

China's advance is all the more potent in the context of a series of disappointments for democrats since 2000. The first great setback was in Russia. After the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 the democratisation of the old Soviet Union seemed inevitable. In the 1990s Russia took a few drunken steps in that direction under Boris Yeltsin.

But at the end of 1999 he

resigned and handed power to Vladimir Putin, a former KGB operative who has since been both prime minister and president twice. This postmodern tsar has destroyed the substance of democracy in Russia, muzzling the press and imprisoning his opponents, while preserving the show—everyone can vote, so long as Mr Putin wins. Autocratic leaders in Venezuela, Ukraine, Argentina and elsewhere have followed suit, perpetuating a perverted simulacrum of democracy rather than doing away with it altogether, and thus discrediting it further.

The next big setback was the Iraq war. When Saddam Hussein's fabled weapons of mass destruction failed to materialise after the American-led invasion of 2003, Mr Bush switched instead to justifying the war as a fight for freedom and democracy. "The concerted effort of free nations to promote democracy is a prelude to our enemies' defeat," he argued in his second inaugural

address. This was more than mere opportunism: Mr Bush sincerely believed that the Middle East would remain a breeding ground for terrorism so long as it was dominated by dictators. But it did the democratic cause great harm. Left-wingers regarded it as proof that democracy was just a figleaf for American imperialism. Foreign-policy realists took Iraq's growing chaos as proof that American-led promotion of democratisation was a recipe for instability. And disillusioned neoconservatives such as Francis Fukuyama, an American political scientist, saw it as proof that democracy cannot put down roots in stony ground.



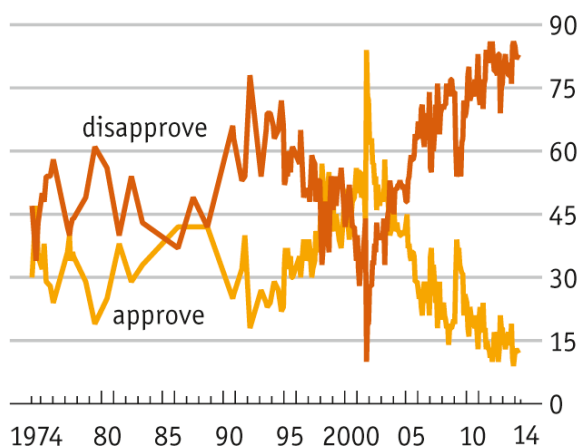
Democracy's ups and downs

A third serious setback was Egypt. The collapse of Hosni Mubarak's regime in 2011, amid giant protests, raised hopes that democracy would spread in the Middle East. But the euphoria soon turned to despair. Egypt's ensuing elections were won not by liberal activists (who were hopelessly divided into a myriad of Pythonesque parties) but by Muhammad Morsi's Muslim Brotherhood. Mr Morsi treated democracy as a winner-takes-all system, packing the state with Brothers, granting himself almost unlimited powers and creating an upper house with a permanent Islamic majority. In July 2013 the army stepped in, arresting Egypt's first democratically elected president,

imprisoning leading members of the Brotherhood and killing hundreds of demonstrators. Along with war in Syria and anarchy in Libya, this has dashed the hope that the Arab spring would lead to a flowering of democracy across the Middle East.

Federally fed-up

US Congressional approval rating
% saying they:



Source: Gallup

Meanwhile some recent recruits to the democratic camp have lost their lustre. Since the introduction of democracy in 1994 South Africa has been ruled by the same party, the African National Congress, which has become progressively more self-serving. Turkey, which once seemed to combine moderate Islam with prosperity and democracy, is descending

into corruption and autocracy. In Bangladesh, Thailand and Cambodia, opposition parties have boycotted recent elections or refused to accept their results.

All this has demonstrated that building the institutions needed to sustain democracy is very slow work indeed, and has dispelled the once-popular notion that democracy will blossom rapidly and spontaneously once the seed is planted. Although democracy may be a “universal aspiration”, as Mr Bush and Tony Blair insisted, it is a culturally rooted practice. Western countries almost all extended the right to vote long after the establishment of sophisticated political systems, with powerful civil services and entrenched

constitutional rights, in societies that cherished the notions of individual rights and independent judiciaries.

Anti-austerity protests in Greece, October



“Nothing is more wonderful than the art of being free, but nothing is harder to learn how to use than freedom.”

ALEXIS DE TOCQUEVILLE, “DEMOCRACY IN AMERICA”

Yet in recent years the very institutions that are meant to provide models for new democracies have come to seem outdated and dysfunctional in established ones. The United States has become a byword for gridlock, so obsessed with partisan point-scoring that it has come to the verge of defaulting on its debts twice in the past two years. Its democracy is also corrupted by gerrymandering, the practice of drawing constituency boundaries to entrench the power of incumbents. This encourages extremism, because politicians have to appeal only to the party faithful, and in effect disenfranchises large numbers of voters. And money talks louder than ever in American politics. Thousands of lobbyists (more than 20 for every member of

Congress) add to the length and complexity of legislation, the better to smuggle in special privileges. All this creates the impression that American democracy is for sale and that the rich have more power than the poor, even as lobbyists and donors insist that political expenditure is an exercise in free speech. The result is that America's image—and by extension that of democracy itself—has taken a terrible battering.

Nor is the EU a paragon of democracy. The decision to introduce the euro in 1999 was taken largely by technocrats; only two countries, Denmark and Sweden, held referendums on the matter (both said no). Efforts to win popular approval for the Lisbon Treaty, which consolidated power in Brussels, were abandoned when people started voting the wrong way. During the darkest days of the euro crisis the euro-elite forced Italy and Greece to replace democratically elected leaders with technocrats. The European Parliament, an unsuccessful attempt to fix Europe's democratic deficit, is both ignored and despised. The EU has become a breeding ground for populist parties, such as Geert Wilders's Party for Freedom in the Netherlands and Marine Le Pen's National Front in France, which claim to defend ordinary people against an arrogant and incompetent elite. Greece's Golden Dawn is testing how far democracies can tolerate Nazi-style parties. A project designed to tame the beast of European populism is instead poking it back into life.



The democratic distemper

EVEN in its heartland, democracy is clearly suffering from serious structural problems, rather than a few isolated ailments. Since the dawn of the modern democratic era in the late 19th century, democracy has expressed itself through nation-states and national parliaments. People elect representatives who pull the levers of national power for a fixed period. But this arrangement is now under assault from both above and below.

From above, globalisation has changed national politics profoundly. National politicians have surrendered ever more power, for example over trade and financial flows, to global markets and supranational bodies, and may thus find that they are unable to keep promises they have made to voters. International organisations such

as the International Monetary Fund, the World Trade Organisation and the European Union have extended their influence. There is a compelling logic to much of this: how can a single country deal with problems like climate change or tax evasion? National politicians have also responded to globalisation by limiting their discretion and handing power to unelected technocrats in some areas. The number of countries with independent central banks, for example, has increased from about 20 in 1980 to more than 160 today.

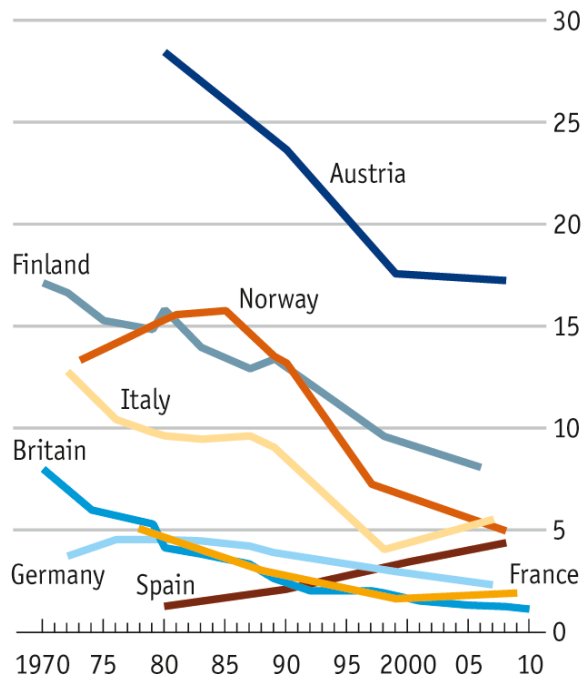
From below come equally powerful challenges: from would-be breakaway nations, such as the Catalans and the Scots, from Indian states, from American city mayors. All are trying to reclaim power from national governments. There are also a host of what Moisés Naim, of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, calls “micro-powers”, such as NGOs and lobbyists, which are disrupting traditional politics and making life harder for democratic and autocratic leaders alike. The internet makes it easier to organise and agitate; in a world where people can participate in reality-TV votes every week, or support a petition with the click of a mouse, the machinery and institutions of parliamentary democracy, where elections happen only every few years, look increasingly anachronistic.

Douglas Carswell, a British member of parliament, likens traditional politics to HMV, a chain of British record shops that went bust, in a world where people are used to calling up whatever music they want whenever they want via Spotify, a popular digital

music-streaming service.

When the party's over

Political party membership
Selected European countries, %



Source: European Journal of Political Research

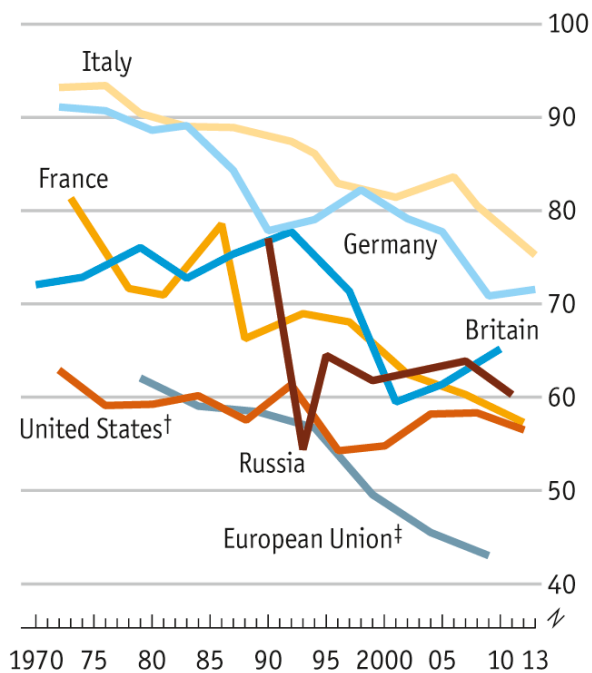
The biggest challenge to democracy, however, comes neither from above nor below but from within—from the voters themselves. Plato’s great worry about democracy, that citizens would “live from day to day, indulging the pleasure of the moment”, has proved prescient. Democratic governments got into the habit of running big structural deficits as a matter of course, borrowing to give voters what they wanted in the short term, while neglecting long-term

investment. France and Italy have not balanced their budgets for more than 30 years. The financial crisis starkly exposed the unsustainability of such debt-financed democracy.

With the post-crisis stimulus winding down, politicians must now confront the difficult trade-offs they avoided during years of steady growth and easy credit. But persuading voters to adapt to a new age of austerity will not prove popular at the ballot box. Slow growth and tight budgets will provoke conflict as interest groups compete for limited resources. To make matters worse, this competition is taking place as Western populations are ageing. Older people have always been better at

Democratic disillusion

Voter turnout at parliamentary elections*
Selected countries, % of voting-age population



Sources: Census Bureau;
parties-and-elections.eu

*First round †Presidential
‡Number of member countries increases
from 9 to 27 between 1979 and 2009

getting their voices heard than younger ones, voting in greater numbers and organising pressure groups like America's mighty AARP. They will increasingly have absolute numbers on their side. Many democracies now face a fight between past and future, between inherited entitlements and future investment.

Adjusting to hard times will be made even more difficult by a growing cynicism towards politics. Party membership is declining across the developed

world: only 1% of Britons are now members of political parties compared with 20% in 1950. Voter turnout is falling, too: a study of 49 democracies found that it had declined by 10 percentage points between 1980-84 and 2007-13. A survey of seven European countries in 2012 found that more than half of voters "had no trust in government" whatsoever. A YouGov opinion poll of British voters in the same year found that 62% of those polled agreed that "politicians tell lies all the time".

Meanwhile the border between poking fun and launching protest campaigns is fast eroding. In 2010 Iceland's Best Party, promising to be openly corrupt, won enough votes to co-run Reykjavik's city council.

And in 2013 a quarter of Italians voted for a party founded by Beppe Grillo, a comedian. All this popular cynicism about politics might be healthy if people demanded little from their governments, but they continue to want a great deal. The result can be a toxic and unstable mixture: dependency on government on the one hand, and disdain for it on the other. The dependency forces government to overexpand and overburden itself, while the disdain robs it of its legitimacy. Democratic dysfunction goes hand in hand with democratic distemper.



VIDEO

Spotifying politics

Democracy's problems in its heartland help explain its setbacks elsewhere. Democracy did well in the 20th century in part because of American hegemony: other countries naturally wanted to emulate the world's leading power. But as China's influence has grown, America and Europe have lost their appeal as role models and their appetite for spreading democracy. The Obama administration now seems paralysed by the fear

that democracy will produce rogue regimes or empower jihadists. And why should developing countries regard democracy as the ideal form of government when the American government cannot even pass a budget, let alone plan for the future? Why should autocrats listen to lectures on democracy from Europe, when the euro-elite sacks elected leaders who get in the way of fiscal orthodoxy?

The financial crisis has starkly exposed the unsustainability of debt-financed democracy



At the same time, democracies in the emerging world have encountered the same problems as those in the rich world. They too have overindulged in short-term spending rather than long-term investment. Brazil allows public-sector workers to retire at 53 but has done little to create a modern airport system. India pays off vast numbers of client groups but invests too little in infrastructure. Political systems have been captured by interest groups and undermined by anti-democratic habits. Patrick French, a British historian, notes that every member of India's lower house under the age of 30 is a member of a political dynasty. Even within the capitalist elite, support for democracy is fraying: Indian business moguls constantly complain that India's chaotic democracy produces rotten infrastructure while China's authoritarian system produces highways, gleaming airports and high-speed trains.

Democracy has been on the back foot before. In the 1920s and 1930s communism and fascism looked like the coming things: when Spain temporarily restored its

parliamentary government in 1931, Benito Mussolini likened it to returning to oil lamps in the age of electricity. In the mid-1970s Willy Brandt, a former German chancellor, pronounced that “western Europe has only 20 or 30 more years of democracy left in it; after that it will slide, engineless and rudderless, under the surrounding sea of dictatorship”. Things are not that bad these days, but China poses a far more credible threat than communism ever did to the idea that democracy is inherently superior and will eventually prevail.

Yet China’s stunning advances conceal deeper problems. The elite is becoming a self-perpetuating and self-serving clique. The 50 richest members of the China’s National People’s Congress are collectively worth \$94.7 billion—60 times as much as the 50 richest members of America’s Congress. China’s growth rate has slowed from 10% to below 8% and is expected to fall further—an enormous challenge for a regime whose legitimacy depends on its ability to deliver consistent growth.

At the same time, as Alexis de Tocqueville pointed out in the 19th century, democracies always look weaker than they really are: they are all confusion on the surface but have lots of hidden strengths. Being able to install alternative leaders offering alternative policies makes democracies better than autocracies at finding creative solutions to problems and rising to existential challenges, though they often take a while to zigzag to

the right policies. But to succeed, both fledgling and established democracies must ensure they are built on firm foundations.



Getting democracy right

THE most striking thing about the founders of modern democracy such as James Madison and John Stuart Mill is how hard-headed they were. They regarded democracy as a powerful but imperfect mechanism: something that needed to be designed carefully, in order to harness human creativity but also to check human perversity, and then kept in good working order, constantly oiled, adjusted and worked upon.

The need for hard-headedness is particularly pressing when establishing a nascent democracy. One reason

why so many democratic experiments have failed recently is that they put too much emphasis on elections and too little on the other essential features of democracy. The power of the state needs to be checked, for instance, and individual rights such as freedom of speech and freedom to organise must be guaranteed. The most successful new democracies have all worked in large part because they avoided the temptation of majoritarianism—the notion that winning an election entitles the majority to do whatever it pleases. India has survived as a democracy since 1947 (apart from a couple of years of emergency rule) and Brazil since the mid-1980s for much the same reason: both put limits on the power of the government and provided guarantees for individual rights.

Robust constitutions not only promote long-term stability, reducing the likelihood that disgruntled minorities will take against the regime. They also bolster the struggle against corruption, the bane of developing countries. Conversely, the first sign that a fledgling democracy is heading for the rocks often comes when elected rulers try to erode constraints on their power—often in the name of majority rule. Mr Morsi tried to pack Egypt’s upper house with supporters of the Muslim Brotherhood. Mr Yanukovich reduced the power of Ukraine’s parliament. Mr Putin has ridden roughshod over Russia’s independent institutions in the name of the people. Several African leaders are engaging in crude majoritarianism—removing term limits on the presidency or expanding

penalties against homosexual behaviour, as Uganda's president Yoweri Museveni did on February 24th.

Foreign leaders should be more willing to speak out when rulers engage in such illiberal behaviour, even if a majority supports it. But the people who most need to learn this lesson are the architects of new democracies: they must recognise that robust checks and balances are just as vital to the establishment of a healthy democracy as the right to vote. Paradoxically even potential dictators have a lot to learn from events in Egypt and Ukraine: Mr Morsi would not be spending his life shuttling between prison and a glass box in an Egyptian court, and Mr Yanukovich would not be fleeing for his life, if they had not enraged their compatriots by accumulating so much power.



VIDEO

Democracy: A view from Cairo

Even those lucky enough to live in mature democracies need to pay close attention to the architecture of their political systems. The combination of globalisation and

the digital revolution has made some of democracy's most cherished institutions look outdated. Established democracies need to update their own political systems both to address the problems they face at home, and to revitalise democracy's image abroad. Some countries have already embarked upon this process. America's Senate has made it harder for senators to filibuster appointments. A few states have introduced open primaries and handed redistricting to independent boundary commissions. Other obvious changes would improve matters. Reform of party financing, so that the names of all donors are made public, might reduce the influence of special interests. The European Parliament could require its MPs to present receipts with their expenses. Italy's parliament has far too many members who are paid too much, and two equally powerful chambers, which makes it difficult to get anything done.

But reformers need to be much more ambitious. The best way to constrain the power of special interests is to limit the number of goodies that the state can hand out. And the best way to address popular disillusion towards politicians is to reduce the number of promises they can make. The key to a healthier democracy, in short, is a narrower state—an idea that dates back to the American revolution. “In framing a government which is to be administered by men over men”, Madison argued, “the great difficulty lies in this: you must first enable the government to control the governed; and in the next place oblige it to control itself.” The notion of

limited government was also integral to the relaunch of democracy after the second world war. The United Nations Charter (1945) and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) established rights and norms that countries could not breach, even if majorities wanted to do so.

The most successful new democracies managed to avoid the temptation of majoritarianism



These checks and balances were motivated by fear of tyranny. But today, particularly in the West, the big dangers to democracy are harder to spot. One is the growing size of the state. The relentless expansion of government is reducing liberty and handing ever more power to special interests. The other comes from government's habit of making promises that it cannot fulfil, either by creating entitlements it cannot pay for or by waging wars that it cannot win, such as that on drugs. Both voters and governments must be persuaded of the merits of accepting restraints on the state's natural tendency to overreach. Giving control of monetary policy to independent central banks tamed the rampant inflation of the 1980s, for example. It is time to apply the same principle of limited government to a broader range of policies. Mature democracies, just like nascent ones, require appropriate checks and balances on the power of elected government.

Governments can exercise self-restraint in several different ways. They can put on a golden straitjacket by adopting tight fiscal rules—as the Swedes have done by pledging to balance their budget over the economic cycle. They can introduce “sunset clauses” that force

politicians to renew laws every ten years, say. They can ask non-partisan commissions to propose long-term reforms. The Swedes rescued their pension system from collapse when an independent commission suggested pragmatic reforms including greater use of private pensions, and linking the retirement age to life-expectancy. Chile has been particularly successful at managing the combination of the volatility of the copper market and populist pressure to spend the surplus in good times. It has introduced strict rules to ensure that it runs a surplus over the economic cycle, and appointed a commission of experts to determine how to cope with economic volatility.

Isn't this a recipe for weakening democracy by handing more power to the great and the good? Not necessarily. Self-denying rules can strengthen democracy by preventing people from voting for spending policies that produce bankruptcy and social breakdown and by protecting minorities from persecution. But technocracy can certainly be taken too far. Power must be delegated sparingly, in a few big areas such as monetary policy and entitlement reform, and the process must be open and transparent.

And delegation upwards towards grandees and technocrats must be balanced by delegation downwards, handing some decisions to ordinary people. The trick is to harness the twin forces of globalism and localism, rather than trying to ignore or resist them. With the right balance of these two

approaches, the same forces that threaten established democracies from above, through globalisation, and below, through the rise of micro-powers, can reinforce rather than undermine democracy.

Tocqueville argued that local democracy frequently represented democracy at its best: “Town-meetings are to liberty what primary schools are to science; they bring it within the people’s reach, they teach men how to use and enjoy it.” City mayors regularly get twice the approval ratings of national politicians. Modern technology can implement a modern version of Tocqueville’s town-hall meetings to promote civic involvement and innovation. An online hyperdemocracy where everything is put to an endless series of public votes would play to the hand of special-interest groups. But technocracy and direct democracy can keep each other in check: independent budget commissions can assess the cost and feasibility of local ballot initiatives, for example.



“You must first enable the government to control the governed; and in the next place oblige it to control itself.”

JAMES MADISON, AMERICA'S FOURTH PRESIDENT

Several places are making progress towards getting this mixture right. The most encouraging example is California. Its system of direct democracy allowed its citizens to vote for contradictory policies, such as

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extremism. But over the past five years California has introduced a series of reforms, thanks in part to the efforts of Nicolas Berggruen, a philanthropist and investor. The state has introduced a “Think Long” committee to counteract the short-term tendencies of ballot initiatives. It has introduced open primaries and handed power to redraw boundaries to an independent commission. And it has succeeded in balancing its budget—an achievement which Darrell Steinberg, the leader of the California Senate, described as “almost surreal”.



Similarly, the Finnish government has set up a non-partisan commission to produce proposals for the future of its pension system. At the same time it is trying to harness e-democracy: parliament is obliged to consider any citizens' initiative that gains 50,000 signatures. But many more such experiments are needed—combining technocracy with direct democracy, and upward and downward delegation—if democracy is to zigzag its way back to health.

John Adams, America's second president, once pronounced that “democracy never lasts long. It soon wastes, exhausts and murders itself. There never was a democracy yet that did not commit suicide.” He was clearly wrong. Democracy was the great victor of the ideological clashes of the 20th century. But if democracy is to remain as successful in the 21st century as it was in the 20th, it must be both assiduously nurtured when it is young—and carefully maintained when it is mature.

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