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Seven Myths about Democracy

JØRGEN MØLLER
AND SVEND-ERIK SKAANING



Seven Myths about Democracy

This timely book challenges seven widespread misconceptions about democracy that continue to shape public and academic debates about its past, present, and future.

Drawing on historical evidence, comparative research, and case illustrations, it demonstrates that commonly repeated claims—such as that democracy cannot be defined, that it was born in ancient Athens, that it is only for Western countries, that it is ineffective, or that it is in terminal decline—rest on shaky foundations. In a clear, accessible, and research-based style, the authors show how these myths distort our understanding of democracy and exaggerate its vulnerabilities—challenging doomsday accounts of democracy to offer a more balanced, historically informed perspective. While not ignoring real challenges such as populism, polarisation, and authoritarian pushback, the book emphasises that the core promise of democracy—the peaceful transfer of power through elections—remains unmatched as a tool to secure peace, freedom, and progress. It is thus both a myth-buster and a treatise in defence of democracy.

This book is of key interest to scholars and students of democracy, and more broadly, to readers interested in international relations, comparative politics, and history.

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Routledge

Taylor & Francis Group

LONDON AND NEW YORK

First published in 2026
by Routledge
4 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

and by Routledge
605 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10158

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

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The Open Access version of this book was made possible by a grant from the Aarhus University Research Foundation (AUFF-E-2021-4-23).

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Published in Danish ('Syv myter om demokrati') by Aarhus Universitetsforlag 2022

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-1-041-25327-3 (hbk)

ISBN: 978-1-041-25328-0 (pbk)

ISBN: 978-1-003-74619-5 (ebk)

DOI: 10.4324/9781003746195

Typeset in Times New Roman
by Newgen Publishing UK

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Preface

We began studying democracy and democratisation a quarter of a century ago, when we were both university students. Even then, some warned that democracy was struggling—declining in quality, failing to deliver, and proving hard to sustain beyond the Western world. Since then, we have worked to qualify the debate on the state of democracy in lectures, newspaper articles and columns, interviews in the Danish and international media, as well as in academic articles and books. However, misunderstandings and unwarranted pessimism have grown to a point where we feel compelled to offer a more forceful and sharply articulated response. Our aim is to critically examine the dominant narratives of democratic failure in our time—along with several related claims—in a manner that is both accessible to a broad audience and grounded in research.

We would like to thank a number of colleagues who have taken the time to read and comment on several different drafts of the book: Jakob Tolstrup, David Andersen, Mette Kjær, Merete Bech Seeberg, Suthan Krishnarajan, Lasse Rørbæk, Masaaki Higashijima, Palle Svensson, Lasse Leipziger, Laurits Florang Aarslew, Jonathan Stavnskaer Doucette, Kristian Frederiksen, Mikkel Thorup, and two anonymous peer reviewers. Their positive feedback encouraged us to continue the work, while their constructive suggestions—to elaborate, refine, and clarify key arguments—did much to improve the book. We are also indebted to the editor of the Danish version of the book, Karina Bell Ottosen, who responded enthusiastically when we presented her with the idea and who has supported the project with valuable input ever since, as well as to Søren Mogensen Larsen, who found the time to read and comment on parts of the manuscript, less than a year before his tragic and much too early death.

This English edition updates and expands our analysis, incorporating new findings and examples that reflect political developments since the Danish version appeared in 2022. A special thanks goes to Andrew Taylor at Routledge, who shepherded the manuscript through to publication with Routledge in a very efficient and supportive way. We have used Microsoft Copilot and ChatGPT for proofreading. Finally, we are grateful to the Aarhus University Research Foundation for its financial support.

Introduction

Myths about democracy¹

Everywhere one looks, democracy is being debated. Both those rallying behind President Donald Trump and those mobilising against him claim to do so in the name of democracy. Observers argue over whether populist right-wing parties, such as the *Alternative für Deutschland* in Germany and *Rassemblement National* in France, are fundamentally undemocratic, and whether countries like Hungary and India can still be regarded as democracies. Democracy is constantly invoked in debates about war and geopolitics, including whether Russia must be stopped in Ukraine, and whether China presents a threat to our freedom and prosperity or represents an alternative model worth learning from, or even emulating. Democracy is thus both a rallying cry and a battleground—praised, contested, and invoked in strikingly different and often contradictory ways.

Piles of books have been written about the retreat of liberal values and democratic practices, the rise of populism and the return of fascism, and democracy's alleged failure to stabilise and deliver. This book is different. It charges directly into the fray—the ongoing struggle over how to think about democracy, the front line in many of today's political battles. But it does so by taking a step back: revisiting fundamental questions about what democracy is, where it comes from, and how it is faring. The book addresses seven myths about democracy that muddy the waters, fuel disagreement, and sustain the prevailing narrative of a deep-seated contemporary democratic crisis.

We understand myths as claims that are uncritically accepted by many, despite lacking a firm factual basis. This is not to say that myths are necessarily completely false. As one scholar has put it, 'Myths are not lies, but symbolically powerful articulations of sensed realities.'²

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Such sensed realities prove themselves right by virtue of being constantly felt, transmitted, and repeated. However, a closer look at the evidence often reveals these claims to be partially or entirely unfounded. It is precisely because such distorted portrayals of reality gain traction that scholars must step in to scrutinise and correct them.

We begin each chapter by documenting that a certain myth exists. We then proceed to show how it lacks a convincing factual basis or can be questioned in a logical sense. In all seven instances, these are claims that we have encountered time and again in news media and academic writings, and in connection with the many lectures we have given on democracy over the years. Although the myths address different issues, we believe they deserve to be examined side by side. They all revolve around the same subject—democracy—and are deeply intertwined and mutually reinforcing.

Our aim is thus to bring greater nuance to how we understand democracy and democratic developments in a manner that is both accessible and engaging. As Steven Pinker, Hans Rosling and Johan Norberg have done before us with respect to developments in living standards and quality of life, we go against the grain, emphasising progress and positive developments. More generally, we scrutinise the historical preconditions of democracy and its current state in a balanced way, relying on sound data, broad perspectives, and robust findings.³ In doing so, we hope to strengthen the reader's confidence in democracy—while also offering a clearer understanding of its nature, historical development, and the political trials it faces today.

First and foremost, we challenge the great decay narrative that is being told about democracy in these years, by academics and pundits alike. For almost 20 years, the American organisation Freedom House has issued reports with alarming headlines, such as *Democracy in retreat*, *Discarding democracy: return to the iron fist*, and *The global expansion of authoritarian rule*. The annual reports on the state of democracy by British magazine *The Economist* have featured subtitles such as *Global democracy in retreat*, *Democratic setbacks*, and *Democracy under stress*. These and similar reports have been accompanied by a flurry of books by scholars and public intellectuals bearing equally ominous titles and messages, including *The People vs. Democracy*, *Twilight of Democracy*, *Democracy's Last Breath*, and *Grieving Our Loss of Democracy: How We Can Navigate Our Grief When Nothing Makes Sense Anymore*.⁴

Several of these reports and books draw parallels with earlier periods when democracy was on the defensive. Analogies with the interwar period—when democracies collapsed across Europe and Latin America—have become particularly common. A good example is the international bestseller by Harvard political scientists Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die*, with the telling subtitle *What History Tells Us About Our Future*. Two other examples are the American historian Timothy Snyder's *On Tyranny: Twenty Lessons from the Twentieth Century* and former US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright's *Fascism: A Warning*.⁵ These books find striking similarities between events in Europe in the 1920s and 1930s, and what we are witnessing in our time, especially in the USA. Prominent figures, such as writer George Prochnik, Congressman Jim Clyburn, and filmmaker Spike Lee, have even drawn direct comparisons between Trump and Adolf Hitler.⁶

If these warnings are correct, those of us who value democracy have good reason to lie awake at night. If, on the contrary, the warnings are overstated or distorted, democrats can sleep more easily. We therefore believe the time is ripe to critically examine the claim that we are witnessing a large-scale global democratic crisis, which might even point back to some of the dark developments of the interwar period. But to do that, we first need to dig deeper. Several other claims about democracy have gained traction, which contribute to creating a distorted image of the nature of democracy and the challenges it faces today—claims that often unravel, in whole or in part, under closer scrutiny.

Seven myths

It is of course no coincidence that we are addressing *seven* myths. Like three, seven is a magic number. Just think of the seven days of the week, the seven virtues and the seven deadly sins, the seven fat and seven lean years, the seventh heaven and the seventh hell, the seven planets, the seven chakras, and the seven pillars of wisdom.⁷

The first myth has to do with the concept of democracy itself. For more than 100 years, democracy has been an honorific term for ordinary people and political thinkers alike; a word with unabashedly positive connotations. This has led to passionate disagreements about what democracy is. Depending on what is valued, widely different—sometimes contradictory—features are associated with the concept.

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This has led many to throw up their hands and argue that the very attempt to define democracy is a fool's errand, meaningless and perhaps even wrongheaded. Hence, we start the book by challenging the myth that democracy cannot or should not be defined. We do so by emphasising free elections as the core element that separates modern democracy from undemocratic forms of government—and which makes democracy the only regime form that enables the people to rid themselves of a government by peaceful means. We introduce another distinction: between minimalist, low-quality democracies and high-quality democracies (also known as polyarchies). In the former category, democracy is simply a place where the rulers can lose elections; in the latter category, this electoral competition for power is realised via universal suffrage and respect for the political freedoms of speech, association, and peaceful assembly.

The widespread notion that we are in the throes of a deep-seated democratic rollback and the repeated warnings of the hardships facing democracies has fostered a pervasive sense of anxiety. This unease now permeates media coverage, influences political elites and public intellectuals, and has gradually spread to the broader public. We believe it is time to critically assess the claim that we are amid a grave, global crisis of democracy that has grown steadily for decades. As we show in the chapter on Myth 2, the current democratic reality is more nuanced than some sceptics would suggest. This is not to say that democracy is not struggling. But we must put this into global and historical perspective, and when we do so, the interpretation of what is happening at present changes.

There is also considerable disagreement when it comes to the origins of modern democracy. Here, we dispel the common assertion that the representative democracy of our day should be traced in a straight line back to the Greek democracies of antiquity, particularly that which arose in Athens around 500 BCE (Myth 3). Next, we debunk the notions that Islam is incompatible with democracy and that, in contrast to Protestantism, the Catholic Church has historically been a consistent anti-democratic force. These assertions contain a grain of truth—but no more than that. We use these observations to shine a critical light on the more general claim that certain religions are incompatible with democracy (Myth 4).

It is important to set straight these facts about the historical origins of democracy because they contribute to some of the misconceptions of our day. In particular, they have helped feed a version of

the current crisis narrative, which is based on the following—correct—observation: modern representative democracy originated in the Western world, which is where it has been most widespread and has proven most stable. Against this backdrop, it has been argued that democracy is only for Western countries, because it requires a basis in Western cultural heritage, early successful state-building, and economic prosperity. This perspective implies that it is only by following the original Western sequencing—by prioritising state-building and pausing democracy—that developing countries can realistically aspire to a democratic future. Poor countries and countries characterised by, for example, ‘Asian values’ and ‘African communalism’, or countries that try to democratise in the absence of a capable state, stand little chance of becoming democracies. We critically examine these claims in a separate chapter (Myth 5).

From here, we turn to a related perspective. An often-repeated claim, Myth 6, is that democracies, with their squabbles, sluggish decision-making procedures and pandering to special interest, are less effective than dictatorships, and that democratisation often leads to division and conflict rather than stability and unity. The Covid-19 pandemic in 2020–2023 further fuelled this fire and it even seems to have resurrected one of the ghosts of the past: Autocratic leaders such as Chinese president Xi Jinping openly criticised ‘Western democracies’ as being too soft and ineffective in delivering results. We show that there is scant or no empirical basis for these claims.

There is even greater reason for scepticism when it comes to the claim that we are witnessing a repeat of the political developments of the interwar period, Myth 7. We show how, despite frequent warnings, there is little reason to fear a resurgence of genuine totalitarian fascism in our time. This movement could only find broad popular support in societies where large parts of the middle class dreaded a communist revolution and had already been shaken to their core by the mass slaughter of World War I. Even in the interwar period, fascist mass movements only succeeded in seizing power in two countries: Italy and Germany.⁸ Meanwhile, there has been a tendency to forget that a large number of old, well-consolidated democracies actually managed to navigate the crises of the 1920s and 1930s successfully and to avoid large-scale political radicalisation in the streets and during elections.⁹

The claim that the depressing developments of the interwar period are repeating themselves is a myth based on a superficial knowledge of the period between the two world wars—and a false historical analogy

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to the present. As we demonstrate in our chapter on the interwar years, this serves as an example of what the interwar US Supreme Court Justice Benjamin N. Cardozo warned against: metaphors and analogies, intended to liberate thought, often end up enslaving it.

Based on the premise that the more precisely we understand the challenges facing democracy, the better equipped we are to defend it, this book thus seeks to dispel the following seven myths about democracy:

1. Democracy cannot be defined
2. Democracy has been in grave decline for decades
3. Democracy originated in ancient Athens
4. Democracy is incompatible with major religions
5. Democracy is only for Western countries
6. Democracy is ineffective
7. Democracy's interwar history repeats itself

That we feel able to debunk these myths obviously does not imply that all is well with democracy. Most recently, we have seen Russia under Vladimir Putin trying to topple a democratically elected government in neighbouring Ukraine, to put in place a dictatorial regime; and the Chinese one-party regime has flexed its muscles to intimidate elected leaders and voters in democratic Taiwan.

Large parts of the world's population are still living under authoritarian rule without political rights—in a state of fear of violent responses from the powers-that-be if they make critical comments or meet with the wrong people. There are places where things are going in the wrong direction, and democratically elected decision-makers are certainly not flawless, as clearly demonstrated by Donald Trump's brazen attempt to tilt the political playing field in the USA by illegitimate means, such as stifling dissent and criticism, persecuting political opponents, bypassing the legislature, defying the courts, utilising military and national emergencies for partisan purposes, and manipulating or stretching institutional guardrails to stay in power.

There are thus real political challenges facing democracy. But these topics should be discussed on an informed basis. We are concerned about how observers generalise based on gut feelings and spectacular (typically negative) single events, or how easily they are misled by one-sided or insufficient information. By tackling the seven myths head on, we hope to give the reader a broader and more accurate picture of the historical development of democracy and its state in the

world today—and to question the narrative about poorly functioning and crisis-ridden democracies that is dominating current debates.

It is important to remember the many virtues of democracy, including the most important of all: that it is a formula for solving political disagreements in peaceful ways. This book is thus not only a myth-buster, but also a treatise in defence of democracy: the only regime form known to mankind that is both legitimate and viable.

Notes

- 1 All content is originally written by the authors, but Microsoft Copilot and ChatGPT 4-5.2 were used for proofreading.
- 2 Peter Marshall (2009), *The Reformation: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), p. 3.
- 3 Steven Pinker (2018), *Enlightenment Now: The Case for Reason, Science, Humanism, and Progress* (New York: Viking); Hans Rosling, Anna Rosling Rönnlund, & Ola Rosling (2018), *Factfulness: Ten Reasons We're Wrong about the World—and Why Things Are Better than You Think* (New York: Flatiron Books); Johan Norberg (2017), *Progress: Ten Reasons to Look Forward to the Future* (London: Oneworld Publications).
- 4 Yascha Mounck (2018), *The People vs. Democracy: Why Our Freedom Is in Danger and How to Save It* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press); Anne Applebaum (2020), *Twilight of Democracy: The Seductive Lure of Authoritarianism* (New York: Penguin); Loretta Elgren (2025), *Democracy's Last Breath* (independently published, <https://www.amazon.com/Democracys-Last-Breath-FIGHT-FREEDOM/dp/B0FR9KD1T3?>); Anne Egan (2025), *Grieving Our Loss of Democracy: How We Can Navigate Our Grief When Nothing Makes Sense Any More* (New Castle: BooksGoSocial).
- 5 Steven Levitsky & Daniel Ziblatt (2018), *How Democracies Die* (New York: Crown); Timothy Snyder (2017), *On Tyranny: Twenty Lessons from the Twentieth Century* (New York: Penguin); Madeleine Albright (2018), *Fascism: A Warning* (New York: HarperCollins). See also Aaron Sibarium, 'The Weimarization of the American Republic', *American Purpose* (26 October 2020), www.americanpurpose.com/articles/weimarization-american-republic/.
- 6 George Procnik, "When It's Too Late to Stop Fascism According to Stefan Zweig," *The New Yorker* (6 February 2017), www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/when-its-too-late-to-stop-fascism-according-to-stefan-zweig; CNN (20 March 2020), 'Top House Democrats compare Trump's rise to Hitler's', <https://edition.cnn.com/2019/03/20/politics/james-clyburn-trump-hitler-comparison/>; *The Hill* (25 January 2021), Spike Lee: Trump 'will go down in history with the likes of Hitler', <https://thehill.com/homenews/media/535667-spike-lee-trump-will-go-down-in-history-with-the-likes-of-hitler>.

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- 7 Annemarie Schimmel (1993), *The Mystery of Numbers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), Chapter 7.
- 8 Kurt Weyland (2021), *Assault on Democracy: Communism, Fascism, and Authoritarianism during the Interwar Years* (New York: Cambridge University Press).
- 9 Agnes Cornell, Jørgen Møller, & Svend-Erik Skaaning (2020), *Democratic Stability in an Age of Crisis: Reassessing the Interwar Period* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).

1 Myth 1

Democracy cannot be defined¹

Shortly after the French Revolution, the father of modern conservatism, Edmund Burke, proclaimed that ‘a perfect democracy is...the most shameless thing in the world’.² In contrast, most conservatives in Western Europe now perceive democracy as part of an honoured political legacy to be cherished and defended. And woe to the poor soul who would concur with Irish-American writer John Boyle O’Reilly, who issued the following brash tirade in 1883: ‘Woman suffrage is an unjust, unreasonable, unspiritual abnormality.’³ Even contemporary dictators exercise restraint when they speak of democracy. It is almost unthinkable to imagine any of them making a public statement like the one Mussolini made in 1928 in a letter to Edwin L. James of *The New York Times*:

Democracy is talking itself to death. The people do not know what they want; they do not know what is the best for them. There is too much foolishness, too much lost motion. I have stopped the talk and the nonsense. I am a man of action. Democracy is beautiful in theory; in practice it is a fallacy. You in America will see that some day.

A lot of water has also flowed under the bridge since Danish politician and later prime minister J.B.S. Estrup, in 1849, proclaimed universal suffrage to be ‘the greatest folly in a time already so rich in folly’,⁴ and it is heartening to note that it is no longer acceptable to argue that the poor, women, or those with limited education or a different skin colour should be restricted from participating in the democratic process.

Democracy has thus become a rallying call, or even a mantra. This claim is documented by a series of opinion polls in which a vast majority of the population in almost all the countries surveyed stated that they are in favour of a democratic political system.⁵

There is a flip side, however. The popularity of the term means that democracy risks becoming a kind of empty or floating signifier, used in a variety of different contexts, the meaning of which varies from person to person, and which is often used to beat political opponents over the head. To quote one of the leading scholars of democracy, Robert A. Dahl:

Today, the idea of democracy is universally popular. ... Yet a term that means anything means nothing. And so it has become with 'democracy', which nowadays is not so much a term of restricted and specific meaning as a vague endorsement of a popular idea.⁶

The result is slightly paradoxical: While there is broad consensus that democracy is a good thing, there is little agreement on what it means, whether one asks ordinary citizens or political thinkers.⁷ There is nothing new about this. In 1949, the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) commissioned an overview of the meanings of democracy in the world, which reached the following conclusion:

The opinion has become very widespread that there is no such thing as 'democracy' in general, but only a long series of 'democracies', differing with different historical, social and psychological conditions: there is Athenian democracy, medieval democracy, bourgeois democracy, proletarian democracy, soviet democracy, but no 'general democracy'.⁸

According to British philosopher W.B. Gallie, writing in the 1950s, democracy is in fact the essentially contested concept par excellence.⁹ Essentially contested concepts are multidimensional, abstract, complex, and value-laden, and can therefore be interpreted in very different ways. Against this background, one might question whether it makes sense to attempt to define democracy at all. Reaching consensus on its meaning seems hopeless and pointless; even academic understandings of democracy point in all directions.

When US history professor Samuel Moyn was recently asked in an interview, 'How do you define democracy?', he quipped: 'You are

starting with an almost impossible question.¹⁰ Similarly, the US political science professor Frederic Schaffer holds that it is problematic to define democracy as it risks excluding alternative, including ‘non-Western’, understandings and practices.¹¹

The belief that democracy cannot—or should not—be defined has opened the door to an unfortunate tendency: Many characterise political views and policies with which they disagree as undemocratic. In the USA, the right to bear arms is perceived by some as a core element of democracy, whereas others view it as decidedly undemocratic. A similar political struggle is being waged over the relationship between democracy and private property, with right-wing voices arguing that property rights are a fundamental democratic freedom, while some opponents on the left believe them to be incompatible with democracy. Logically, both perspectives cannot be right; in this case, it seems to us that both sides are wrong.

This lack of agreement leads to another problem: that people’s expectations of democracy become impossible to meet. Democracy is seen as a way of realising the good life, and when reality falls short, one is easily led to place the blame on democracy itself. As US classical philologist Josiah Ober notes:

There is a real danger in believing that democracy is good for everything, that it can readily give us everything that we want in terms of good government and the right kind of values and the right kind of moral and social order.¹²

In this chapter, we introduce and justify a simpler understanding of what democracy is, which we apply throughout the rest of the book. At its core, we argue, democracy is a form of government that involves the people, either directly or through elected decision-makers, in the making of political decisions that are binding for society. Regular, free elections are a solution to the problem of transferring power from one person or group to another in a legitimate and non-violent manner, rather than through coups, revolutions, or hereditary succession, or by letting a small elite appoint a ruler. That is no small feat, as we shall see.

From a shameless thing to a rallying cry

Before delving further into our definition, we first explore how the term ‘democracy’ has evolved from carrying negative connotations to

being widely embraced; an evolution that has, paradoxically, made it harder to reach consensus on what democracy truly means.

The word itself comes from ancient Greece. In the next chapter, we take a closer look at the similarities and differences between the direct democracy of Athens in antiquity, and modern, representative democracy. Here, we simply note how democracy in the ancient Greek city states was a controversial concept (and practice) that had its proponents and its opponents. In fact, most of the written sources handed down to us are by critics of democracy, including history's two most famous philosophers: Plato, who viewed democracy as the absolute worst form of government; and Aristotle, who distinguished between good and bad versions of rule by the many.¹³

Aristotle reserved the word 'democracy' for the bad version. Like Plato, his objection against democracy as a form of government was that it gives the poor and uneducated majority power at the expense of the affluent and insightful. Democracy degenerates into a form of majority tyranny or even mob rule (*ochlokratia*), as the Greek historian Polybius later put it. Aristotle had himself referred to the democratisation of Athens as a result of the increased prominence of the navy, staffed by poor citizens, as creating rule by a 'mob of oarsmen'.¹⁴

Plato called for 'rule by philosophers'—a punditocracy, to use a modern concept. Aristotle focused on avoiding the excesses of both democracy and one-man rule, and, like Polybius, he recommended a mixed constitution in which elements of the two forms of government balanced each other. Elsewhere in his writings, he advocates a form of middle-class rule by the property-owning minority.

The democracy-as-mob rule views held by Plato and Aristotle survived the demise of the Greek city states in late Roman times. For the next one-and-a-half millennia, democracy was a pejorative term. A good example is found in the writings of Thomas Aquinas, the most influential theologian of the High Middle Ages, who interpreted democracy as an unjust form of government (*iniquum regimen*), but who followed Aristotle by arguing in favour of a mixed constitution, where democratic elements are tempered by aristocratic and monarchical elements.¹⁵

Later political thinkers followed suit, including the Italian Niccolò Machiavelli, who, to his contemporaries in the Renaissance, highlighted the Roman Republic as a shining example of a mixed constitution. Machiavelli drew on Polybius, who had interpreted the Roman form of government as the ideal combination of monarchical,

aristocratic, and democratic elements. Where Machiavelli quite simply saw the problem with democracy as one of the tyranny of the majority, Thomas Hobbes was more blunt: democracy breeds instability, and an autocratic ruler is preferable, no matter how he behaves.¹⁶ English political theorist Robert Filmer went even further, claiming that the king's power depended on the grace of God, and that the people were therefore duty-bound to obey him.¹⁷

Enlightenment thinkers such as John Locke, Charles de Montesquieu and Jean-Jacques Rousseau challenged the theory of absolutism and struck a blow for either representation and division of power (Locke and Montesquieu) or direct political self-government (Rousseau).¹⁸ However, we must fast-forward all the way to the French Revolution of 1789 to find the term democracy again used as a rallying cry, for the first time since antiquity. Even then, only a small minority, including Maximilien Robespierre and his Jacobins in France, and the American Thomas Paine, went that far. Both the US founding fathers and a string of liberal politicians in Europe maintained the view of democracy as a tyranny of the majority, as illustrated in Box 1.1.

The liberals and conservatives objected to equal and universal suffrage for the same reason as the philosophers of Greek and Roman antiquity: If you gave the unaffluent political power, their first act would be to cast envious eyes on the possessions of others. At the same time, it was feared that letting the ignorant have a hand in setting the standards for what is good and beautiful would lead to moral decay.

Box 1.1 Examples of early liberal views of democracy¹⁹

- François Guizot (France): Democracy is 'the echo of an ancient call for social war'.
- Giuseppe Mazzini (Italy): Democracy is 'the cry of Spartacus, the expression and manifestation of a people in its first arising'.
- James Madison (USA): 'Had every Athenian been a Socrates, every Athenian assembly would still have been a mob'.
- Thomas Macaulay (England): 'If you grant universal suffrage, the country is lost. My firm conviction is that, in our country, universal suffrage is incompatible...with property and that it is consequently incompatible with civilisation'.

One simply could not entrust the poor and uneducated with political power; the result would be utterly plain and ugly.

In fact, it is not until the end of World War I that we reach a decisive turning point. Across Europe, the war had weakened the old political elites, whose complicated political manoeuvres had unleashed the guns of August in 1914. Meanwhile, the war provided previously excluded groups, including the working class and women, with the opportunity to mobilise politically; the war effort depended on these groups, a fact noted by themselves and the elites alike. Finally, American president Woodrow Wilson justified the participation of the USA in the war by declaring that it would 'make the world safe for democracy'. Wilson's agenda in the first years of peace was seen as the best defence against a communist world revolution, which was perceived as a real threat in the wake of the Russian Revolution of 1917.

After 1918, it became increasingly challenging to voice open criticism of democracy. In 1921, English historian James Bryce took note of a 'significant change' in the form of 'the universal acceptance of democracy as the normal and natural form of government'.²⁰ During the 1920s and 1930s, democracy was challenged from a new and more dangerous side, namely by the great totalitarian mass movements of the day: communism, fascism and Nazism. But these movements differed from the liberal and conservative critics of the preceding century by claiming to represent true democracy; that is, the will of the people. It was superficial, bourgeois democracy they challenged.

It was during the political struggles of the interwar period that the problem of democracy being defined in markedly different ways, shaped by varying political perspectives and agendas, began to emerge with real force. As George Orwell wrote after World War II: 'It is almost universally felt that when we call a country democratic, we are praising it; consequently the defenders of every kind of regime claim that it is a democracy.'²¹

This trend was further reinforced by the collapse of communism between 1989 and 1991. It was on this occasion that American political scientist Francis Fukuyama wrote his book about the end of history, in which he defended the view that modern democracy, with its free choice and liberties, was now the only remaining legitimate form of government.²² Although Fukuyama's analysis has faced considerable criticism, he made compelling points about the absence of viable ideological alternatives to democracy. It seems fair to say that, since 1989 at the latest, most dictatorships have tried to imitate

features of democracy, rather than present themselves as hard-and-fast alternatives. For example, they often hold elections, but the process of campaigning, voting and counting votes is manipulated by those in power, so they do not risk losing.

If we examine the most important contemporary dictatorships, we see that they all pay lip-service to democracy. Vladimir Putin proclaimed in 2015 that:

Russia has made its choice in favour of democracy. Fourteen years ago, independently, without any pressure from outside, it made that decision in the interests of itself and interests of its people—of its citizens. This is our final choice, and we have no way back.

China's leader, Xi Jinping, who has repeatedly criticised Western democracies, emphasises in his speeches that the Chinese Revolution introduced democracy in 1949 and that China is characterised by socialist, process-oriented democracy, where 'all power of the country belongs to the people'.²³ Russia and China have even published a common declaration saying that the political system in China should be characterised as an 'extensive, whole-process socialist democracy. It reflects the people's will', while the Russian system was described as a 'democratic federative law-governed state with a republican form of government. Democracy is the fundamental principle of its political system'.²⁴ The declaration was directed against American president Joe Biden, who had not invited China or Russia to the so-called Democracy Summit in December 2021. The summit aimed to unite the forces of freedom in a collective effort to safeguard and defend democracy.

Scholars and political elites are not the only ones to disagree on the meaning of democracy; ordinary citizens also express vastly different conceptions. While some associate democracy with people choosing their leaders in free elections, others mainly associate the concept with a prospering economy, state aid for unemployment, and severe punishment of criminals. There are even people who link it to army rule and the intervention of religious authorities in political life.

Table 1.1 shows how interesting patterns emerge if we look at the degree to which citizens consider particular conditions as essential characteristics of democracy or not, in autocracies, low-quality democracies, and high-quality democracies (see pp. 18–19 for this distinction).

16 *Seven Myths about Democracy*

Table 1.1 Citizen views on essential characteristics of democracy across regime types²⁵

<i>Rank</i>	<i>High-quality democracies</i>	<i>Low-quality democracies</i>	<i>Autocracies</i>
1	Women have the same rights as men (9.03)	Women have the same rights as men (8.43)	People choose their leaders in free elections (8.59)
2	People choose their leaders in free elections (8.74)	People choose their leaders in free elections (8.42)	The economy is prospering (8.33)
3	Civil rights protect people's liberty against repression (8.12)	The economy is prospering (8.01)	People can change the laws in referendums (8.23)
4	People can change the laws in referendums (7.98)	Civil rights protect people's liberty against repression (7.89)	Criminals are severely punished (8.17)
5	People receive state aid for unemployment (7.28)	Criminals are severely punished (7.66)	Women have the same rights as men (8.16)
6	Criminals are severely punished (7.10)	People can change the laws in referendums (7.53)	Civil rights protect people's liberty against repression (8.01)
7	The economy is prospering (7.06)	People receive state aid for unemployment (7.14)	People receive state aid for unemployment (7.65)
8	Governments tax the rich and subsidise the poor (6.38)	Governments tax the rich and subsidise the poor (6.43)	Governments tax the rich and subsidise the poor (7.08)
9	The army takes over when government is incompetent (3.06)	The army takes over when government is incompetent (4.66)	Religious authorities interpret the laws (5.52)
10	Religious authorities interpret the laws (2.69)	Religious authorities interpret the laws (4.58)	The army takes over when government is incompetent (5.48)

Note: The figures in parentheses refer to the mean level of approval on a scale ranging from 0 to 10 about whether a condition is an essential characteristic of democracy.

Citizens across regime types both share and diverge in their understandings of what constitutes democracy. In both high- and low-quality democracies, women's equal rights and free elections are most widely seen as essential components of democracy; there is thus a broad consensus that political equality and popular participation are central to the concept. In high-quality democracies, civil rights and referendums also rank highly; people thus clearly emphasise individual freedoms and citizens' involvement in lawmaking. Low-quality democracies share these core elements but mix them with socioeconomic and punitive dimensions such as economic prosperity, state aid for unemployment, and the severe punishment of criminals. This blend of electoral, liberal, and material conceptions indicates that citizens in less established democracies associate democracy not just with procedures and rights, but also with effective governance and social outcomes. It is also noteworthy that, in both kinds of democracies, only political interventions by the army or by religious authorities receive an average score below 5 (the middle of the scale).

The pattern looks quite different in autocracies. Here, free elections still appear high on the list, but economic prosperity and the harsh punishment of criminals are ranked as more essential to democracy than civil rights and gender equality. Elements clearly inconsistent with democracy such as army intervention in politics and religious authorities interpreting laws also receive noticeably higher endorsement as being integral to democracy. This suggests that, in autocratic settings, the conceptual boundaries of democracy are even more fluid and are often infused with authoritarian or performance-based expectations.

Democracy's undisputed core

Scholars dispute the practice of undemocratic rulers to mimic democratic institutions, calling their regimes democratic. Results from surveys about people's understandings underscore the extent to which the concept of democracy is interpreted in vastly different ways. In short, there is no agreement on what democracy is. Long ago, George Orwell pointed out that the disagreement was entirely deliberate, as 'defenders of any kind of regime fear that they might have to stop using that word if it were tied down to any one meaning'.²⁶

Here, we can return to Gallie's claim that democracy is an essentially contested concept: a value-laden construction that cannot be slotted into a formula because it contains so many different pieces,⁹

meaning that the jigsaw can always be completed in different ways, depending on what we value most. Any definition becomes a procrustean bed where limbs need to be chopped off to make a fit.

However, looks may be deceiving. As Gallie noted, even contested concepts often have an uncontested core. In the case of democracy, that core is reasonably clear: rule by the people either directly or through free and regular elections. This core meaning of democracy refers to the political regime, rather than a way of life or a broader social structure. The problem of ‘each person having their own definition’ only emerges once we move beyond that core concept. This serves as the starting point for what are arguably the two most influential definitions of democracy in democratisation research—formulated by the Austrian economist Joseph A. Schumpeter and the American political scientist Robert A. Dahl, respectively.²⁷

Schumpeter simply defines democracy as a form of government in which those in power can lose elections. His definition, which dates back to 1942, is extremely lean: we can speak of democracy if government is determined via competitive elections—even if the right to vote is limited and regardless of whether it is supported by the right to express oneself freely. A minimalist understanding of democracy requires only that opposition parties and candidates have a genuine chance of winning and taking power—and that they will not afterwards be removed by unconstitutional means. In terms of free elections, this implies that systematic fraud does not determine the outcome and that opposition forces are not prevented from running for illegitimate reasons. Dahl endorses the view that democracy is a regime form, but he finds Schumpeter’s perspective too minimalist. He therefore expands the definition by making equal and ordinary suffrage a requirement, adding freedom of expression and association.

These definitions allow us to do two things: first, to sort the world’s countries into autocracies and democracies; second, within the latter category, to distinguish (Schumpeterian) low-quality democracies from (Dahlian) high-quality democracies. The Scandinavian countries are clear examples of high-quality democracies fulfilling all Dahl’s criteria. Saudi Arabia, with no national elections, is an autocracy but so are Russia and Nicaragua, even though they hold regular multi-party election; presidents Putin and Noriega and their loyalists undermine electoral integrity so much that they do not risk losing. In low-quality democracies, such as Honduras, Malawi, Slovakia, and the Philippines, the electoral playing field is typically skewed

in favour of the incumbents, who concentrate political power in the executive and undermine critical voices in illegitimate ways. But the Schumpeterian condition is still fulfilled in the sense that the powers-that-be face the genuine risk that they can be ousted at elections.

With these definitions, Schumpeter and Dahl have given democracy research a focal point or a kind of anchor, which has ensured that new research can build on existing research, using the same understanding of democracy. In empirical democracy research, the majority of scholarship is based on Schumpeter's and Dahl's electoral definitions, which focus on institutions and procedures that regulate access to political power. In this way, democracy takes on a more precise and bounded meaning that corresponds with the original understanding of the concept and distinguishes it from other valued phenomena.

But the electoral definitions proposed by Schumpeter and Dahl have also been subjected to sustained critique. Some have warned of an 'electoral fallacy', objecting that democracy is neither guaranteed nor sustained simply by the presence of multi-party elections. There are various perspectives on what additional elements are required.

The most prominent approaches that extend beyond electoral democracy can be grouped into four distinct categories. One is liberal democracy, where the electoral core is complemented by a battery of liberal freedoms and rule of law institutions that protect the individual from the abuse of power and from the tyranny of the majority. Another is social democracy. Here, the additional layer involves ensuring equal resources for all societal groups—or at minimum, guaranteeing access to education, healthcare, and social security—seen as essential conditions for meaningful political participation. The third version can be called participatory democracy, where the addition is that citizens participate as actively and frequently as possible in political processes and decision-making in all areas and on all levels. The fourth and final variant, deliberative democracy, requires—in addition to electoral democracy—that political decisions are made on an informed basis with the public good in mind, rather than based on one's own prejudices, whims, or narrow self-interest.²⁸ Figure 1.1 illustrates how all five conceptions of democracy share an electoral core, but differ in what additional features they consider essential—if any.

There are different ways of looking at the various additions. However, regardless of their normative appeal, it makes sense to stick to the core notion of democracy as a regime form in which access to

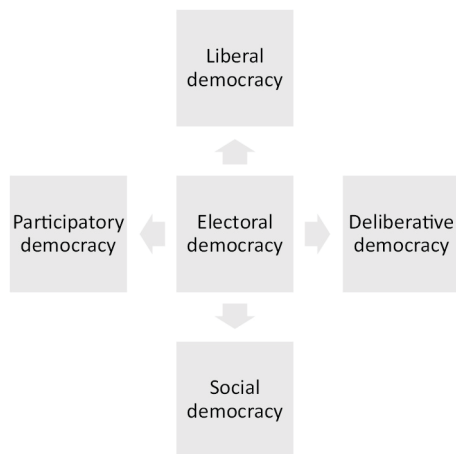


Figure 1.1 Five understandings of democracy.

political power is achieved through frequent and free elections, for two reasons.

First, virtually everyone agrees that the electoral element must be fulfilled before one can talk of a government that emanates from and is exercised by the people. Fundamentally, democracy requires that citizens either exercise direct control over policy decisions, or that such control is delegated to elected representatives. This is obviously also why the other four perspectives take elections as a starting point.

Second, there is fierce disagreement over the additions that go beyond the electoral core. Where is the line to be drawn? In our opinion, there are several good reasons to maintain a relatively narrow understanding. In doing so, democracy acquires a clear meaning that is linked to the original understanding—rule by the people—via a focus on the procedures that determine access to executive and legislative power in a society. The electoral understanding also has practical benefits; it makes it easier to determine whether certain countries are, in fact, democratic, and it does not overlap with the possible causes and effects of democracy, which can therefore be investigated. Both points are central to the approach taken in this book. Accordingly, we adopt an electoral understanding of democracy—based on Schumpeter's and Dahl's definitions—as a guiding framework throughout the

subsequent chapters. More specifically, we use these definitions to distinguish between autocracies and democracies and, within the latter category, between low-quality and high-quality democracies.

Power transfers and bloodshed

We have argued that democracy is the only form of government that acknowledges citizens as free and equal individuals capable of making collectively binding decisions, and that this capacity is inseparable from the right to remove those who govern them by peaceful means, via elections. The latter point might sound trifling, but that is certainly not the case. History is replete with examples of the deaths of those in power leading to devastating conflicts, often including civil wars, which in turn have dragged neighbouring countries into the fray and sometimes triggered wars between great powers, including the many ‘wars of succession’ that we know from Europe’s past.²⁹

Even the autocracies of our time are regularly destabilised when their rulers die or are deposed. In fact, research reveals how a significant portion of all modern dictatorships collapse after the death of the dictator, whether by natural causes or by violent means.³⁰ Shifts in power are therefore dangerous moments associated with great risks and uncertainties—a persistent source of instability and upheavals.³¹ Even in democracies, power transfers can provoke drama, as we saw in the USA after the November 2020 presidential election, when the basic democratic premise was challenged. Tellingly, however, Trump and his supporters failed. The democratic playbook for a peaceful transfer of power prevailed despite a sore loser and without leading to civil war, as an equally high-stake and polarised conflict would likely have done in a dictatorship.

Modern democracy, understood in the electoral sense we employ in this book, is thus an excellent recipe for carrying out a peaceful transfer of power. According to the Austrian philosopher Karl Popper, not only is democracy the sole legitimate form of government, it is the only system that enables the population ‘to get rid of a government without bloodshed’.³²

Here, we find a fundamental difference between democracies and all other forms of government—a difference that cannot be disguised by flowery pronouncements about how this or that country is in fact a form of democracy, despite the absence of real competition for power via elections. In other words, the efforts of Schumpeter, Dahl, and

Popper to delineate the essential features of democracy enable us to meaningfully distinguish between the political regimes of the world.

Beware of abuse

Democracy is thus a form of government where political power is placed with elected representatives, and where changes of power are determined by the outcome of peaceful elections. The content of political decisions is left to these elected politicians, and there is a very wide scope for making different decisions—just as the democratic institutions can be arranged in many ways. A case in point is the difference between presidential systems, such as the American one, where a directly elected president appoints and heads the government, and parliamentary systems such as the British one, where the government is appointed by the House of Commons. In the USA, the political system is also organised around a federal structure with strong states, and representatives are elected through majority, first-past-the-post elections in single-member constituencies; that is, the person who gets the most votes in a designated area is elected, irrespective of their total tally. Denmark has a unitary state, where the government and parliament can ultimately decide over regions and municipalities, while politicians are elected through a proportional electoral system, where the parties win seats proportionate to their number of votes. The fact that these three countries also differ significantly in political culture and the welfare state regime further emphasises how democracies can be very different, while still living up to the same basic premise that the people—or at least a broad section of the people—elect those in power.

If we accept this electoral definition of democracy, it follows that we must stop and pause before labelling decisions or actions we disagree with as ‘undemocratic’. Unfortunately, the term is often misused in this way to discredit political opponents. In 1969, Jack Wasserman, a former president of the Association of Immigration and Nation, accused the immigration statutes of the USA of being ‘among the worst, longest, most ambiguous, complicated, illogical, *undemocratic* and arbitrary laws in the world’ (our emphasis). Leaving aside the other adjectives (which are not important for our purposes), it seems unwarranted to label the immigration statute undemocratic, especially because Wasserman’s criticism concerns the regulation of admission and not the rights of immigrants once they had been admitted.³³

The same was the case when the Danish prime minister Mette Frederiksen, in 2016, criticised some statements made by visiting imams about marriage and childrearing, declaring that corporal punishment is ‘undemocratic’.³⁴ There is much to suggest that one should not strike one’s children, but that does not make the position (that it is acceptable to strike one’s children) or the action (actually striking one’s children) undemocratic. In Denmark, corporal punishment is now a criminal offence; that does not mean that Denmark was undemocratic until 1997, when the right to exercise corporal punishment was finally abolished by a (democratically elected) parliamentary majority. And the USA is not an autocracy today, despite the fact that it is still legal for parents in the USA to (lightly) spank their children.

As a final example, in 2004, Bill O’Reilly of The O’Reilly Factor, aired on the Fox News Channel, described the unregulated conditions on the internet as ‘undemocratic’, even if what he meant was probably just that a lot of filth and rubbish is made available to sensitive, uncritical minds.

In all these cases, the concept of democracy is inadvertently misconstrued. Of course, we all retain the right to view democratically enacted policies as unfair or misguided, to criticise them, and to seek their repeal or reform through democratic means. This is exactly the stuff that democratic debates and free elections are made of. But our frustrations must not make us lose sight of what democracy really is—a peaceful method for ensuring the ability of the members of a society to control who makes authoritative, collectively binding decisions for that society; no more and no less. Only by defining democracy precisely and avoiding conflating it with other valued phenomena can we distinguish a genuine crisis of democracy from ordinary political turbulence and policy disagreements. This clarity helps us avoid misleading historical analogies, as we shall see in the chapters that follow.

Notes

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2 Myth 2

Democracy has been in grave decline for decades¹

Having established what democracy is, we now turn to the prevailing narrative of our time: that we are amid a deep-seated crisis of democracy that goes back several decades. In the new millennium, we have witnessed democratic breakdowns in several large, important countries, including Nigeria, Thailand, Türkiye, and Venezuela, and significant attacks—overt or covert—on core democratic institutions in many others, including the USA, Brazil, India, and South Korea. In undemocratic countries like China and Russia, the opposition has felt the iron fist, while the Chinese and Russian governments have prevented or rolled back democratic openings at home and sometimes abroad. In addition, hopes of the 2011 Arab Spring leading to a lasting political thaw in the Middle East—the only remaining region where there are hardly any democracies—were quickly dashed. Finally, many democracies in other parts of the world have found it difficult to stabilise or live up to the expectations of their citizens.

Indeed, one need not look beyond the Western world to identify troubling political developments. In Hungary, Prime Minister Viktor Orbán effectively stifled free media and made it difficult for the opposition to function between 2010 and 2026. In Poland, the conservative Law and Justice Party, led by Jarosław Kaczyński, did its best to imitate Orbán until the opposition won the parliamentary elections in 2023. Meanwhile, the White House in Washington has twice been inhabited by a president who has displayed little interest in promoting democratic values and institutions, at home and abroad, who in 2020 refused to acknowledge his own electoral defeat, and who has resorted to extremely hostile rhetoric and disrespect for and manipulation of democratic institutions against his political opponents. It is hardly

surprising that many democrats feel that the world is going down the drain.

There is no shortage of warnings that democratic institutions are being undermined and that support for democracy is crumbling among citizens. A 2018 *New York Times* review of a book with the grim title *Can It Happen Here? Authoritarianism in America* bluntly stated that the United States is evolving into ‘the kind of authoritarian state that America was actually founded to overthrow’.² As mentioned before, many have equated the situation in the USA up to and during the first and second Trump administrations with the interwar period. Parallels have also been drawn to, for example, the military coup in Chile in 1973.³ Even in our native Denmark, considered by many a stellar democracy,⁴ several books and articles declare democracy to be in crisis. A report recently released by the Danish Democracy Commission concludes that the Danish democracy is challenged and not far from a genuine crisis.⁵

According to Freedom House, democracy has been in decline worldwide every year since 2006. The Democracy Report 2025, issued by the V-Dem Institute, notes that the world now has fewer democracies than autocracies for the first time in over 20 years, and that an ongoing wave of autocratisation took off around the turn of the millennium, if not earlier.⁶

But does the global state of democracy really look as grim as many claim? The aim of this chapter is to offer a measured and sober assessment of current democratic developments. We concede that there has been a clearly negative trend over the past decade. But, on closer examination, many recent warnings about a global democratic crisis rest on a shaky empirical foundation—often relying on questionable interpretations of global datasets or on sensational political events, typically negative, in a few select countries. Overall, the global decline in democracy began later and has been less pronounced than suggested by many proponents of the crisis narrative.

Moreover, the concept of crisis itself has been used in a remarkably loose and flexible way. As the German political scientist Wolfgang Merkel observes: ‘In political and social science, hardly any other term has been carried to market as often as crisis’; the use of the concept in democracy studies is ‘nothing short of inflationary’.⁷ The crisis literature is also suffused by an ambivalent and biased relationship to the past. Democracy’s past trajectory is either idealised, or downturns are assumed to repeat themselves. This chapter challenges the more

alarmist interpretations that dominate parts of the debate. We first examine global data on democratic change, and thereafter place recent developments in a long-term historical perspective. Our data suggest that, while democratic erosion certainly exists, it is more recent and less grave than the crisis narrative claims. In the final part of the chapter, we discuss some reasons for the prevailing crisis narrative.

A bird's eye view of the world

The democratic optimism that followed the end of the Cold War in 1989–1991 was replaced by a pronounced democratic pessimism as early as the mid-1990s, and since 2005 the alarm bells have been ringing almost constantly. One would imagine, therefore, that democracy has experienced a dramatic downturn in this period.⁸ What do the numbers show? Is democracy in crisis worldwide or not?

While many countries around the world do not hold free elections that determine control of the legislative and executive branches, there are quite a few more countries where this is, in fact, the case. According to the Lexical Index of Electoral Democracy (v6.9), the general situation in recent decades is one of remarkable stability on a global level with a moderate increase in the number of democratic regimes until 2015, followed by a modest decline.

The vast majority of countries today remain in the same regime type as they were ten years ago. Between 2014 and 2025, there were only 13 instances of democratic transitions and 26 instances of democratic breakdowns, that is, less than four regime changes of any kind in an average year. Many of these shifts happened in a small group of countries—including Bolivia, Honduras, Georgia, Myanmar, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, and Thailand—that have oscillated between democracy and dictatorship.

Some might object that the picture is quite different when we consider the proportion of the global population living under democratic regimes. To be sure, population-rich dictatorships like China, Russia, Bangladesh, and Egypt weigh heavy in such statistics. But there are also many democracies with large populations, such as the United States, Brazil, India, and Indonesia. Taken together, the situation does not look much different when we calculate it this way, as a little more than half of the world's population still lives under democratic rule.

Figure 2.1 illustrates trends in regime types since 1995. It is based on the more fine-grained distinction between closed

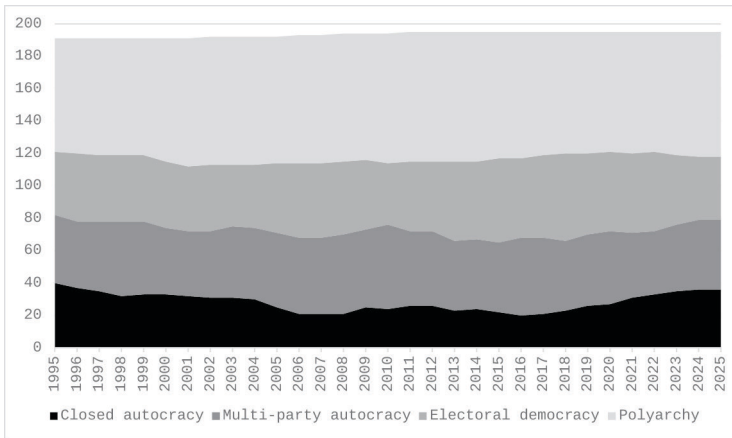


Figure 2.1 Developments in regime types, 1995–2025.

Note: Stacked number of countries classified in each regime type.

Source: Electoral Index of Electoral Democracy (v6.9).

The regime types are operationalised based on the Lexical Index Plus indicator (0–1=closed autocracy; 2–3=multi-party autocracy; 4–6=electoral democracy; 7=polyarchy). Coverage: All independent countries.

autocracies (no elections or one-party elections), multi-party autocracies (opposition parties run in elections, but do not have a genuine chance of winning), Schumpeterian low-quality democracies (electoral democracies), and Dahlian high-quality democracies (polyarchies).

Overall, the total number and the share of democracies today (116/60 percent) is almost the same as in 2010 (118/61 percent). That being said, the figures are substantively lower than in 2015 (130/67 percent)—at the time of writing, the year in which democracies peaked, globally. Between 2015 and 2025, the number of high-quality democracies (polyarchies) has been rather constant, in the range of 74 to 78, meaning that it is merely the number of low-quality democracies (electoral democracies) that has decreased in recent years. In the same period, the number of closed autocracies increased from 22 to 36, while the number of multi-party autocracies remained at 43. The recent declines in global democracy scores thus largely reflect a reduced use of democratic façade institutions in autocracies, many of which have become more assertive and fully fleshed dictatorial,

as well as some low-quality democracies crossing the line to autocracy. It does not reflect any widespread decline among high-quality democracies.

Next, global democratic decline did not begin in the 1990s or 2000s as claimed by many public intellectuals and in frequently cited democracy reports. It only began around 2015, and in most respects, democracy is still holding up strongly. The rollback we have seen in the last 10 years has been smaller than asserted by many observers.

This certainly does not mean that nothing is amiss. Several large and symbolically important democracies have moved in an authoritarian direction, and even if these setbacks have yet to be translated into a radical drop in global democracy scores, the present trend is clearly negative. It is always disconcerting when democracies are challenged; and there is much left to be desired in terms of the state of democracy in the world around us. From a bird's eye view, however, the developments in recent decades, where we have heard one warning voice after another lamenting the dire state of democracy, have been much less negative than the prevailing crisis narrative suggests. The democratic wave of the 1990s has ebbed, and a negative trend has kicked in recently, but we still cannot identify a large-scale wave of autocratisation that cancels out the gains made during the latest wave of democratisation, which we describe further below.

Old and stable democracies

One empirical observation that is strangely absent in the current debate is the remarkable political stability of old and established democracies. On the first page of their international bestseller, *How Democracies Die*, Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt note about their native country, the USA, that ‘...even though we know democracies are always fragile, the one in which we live has somehow managed to defy gravity’.⁹

Let us look at the experience of the ‘old’ European democracies that had emerged from within—due to internal political struggles and developments—on the eve of the outcome of World War I, that is, Belgium, Denmark, France, the Netherlands, Ireland, Luxembourg, Norway, Sweden, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom. To these we add the four overseas English settler colonies that also democratised before 1918: Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and the USA.

Altogether we thus have a group of 14 old European or Anglosphere democracies.

If we apply the Schumpeterian minimalist definition formulated in the preceding chapter, these countries transitioned to democracies at different points in time:

- Australia: 1901
- Belgium: 1830
- Canada: 1867
- Denmark: 1901
- France: 1870
- The Netherlands: 1848
- New Zealand: 1907
- Norway: 1905
- Sweden: 1917
- Switzerland: 1848
- The United Kingdom: 1832
- The USA: 1789

Their democratisation processes differed in many respects; some were seamless and peaceful, others much more irregular and conflictual. It is all the more striking that none of these countries have experienced a democratic breakdown in the period since these transitions, if we disregard the temporary ‘externally induced’ breakdowns that occurred due to German occupation in a string of European countries during the two world wars. In other words, we have altogether 1 885 country-years of uninterrupted democratic experience in this group of countries. Indeed, if we use the threshold for low-quality democracy (and thus disregard universal suffrage and high levels of respect for political liberties), the most recent internally induced democratic breakdown in any of these countries dates to Napoleon III’s coup d’état in France in 1851. Upon inspection, it turns out that quite a number of countries have defied gravity.

There is only one genuine global exception to this ironlike survival of old democracies. In Latin America, we find four older democracies that have, in fact, broken down, sometimes repeatedly: Argentina (first democratic transition in 1912), Chile (1894), Costa Rica (1894), and Uruguay (1903). But these exceptions may also be said to prove the rule. These are the Latin American countries with the longest spells of democracy; a group of countries where autocratic reversals have

typically been followed by redemocratisation after relatively few years. These four countries today rank as among the few high-quality democracies in Latin America, and have proven to be the most stable Latin American democracies over time.

So, old democracies have historically proven to be exceptionally stable and able to cope with crises, of very different sorts. In Europe and the English settler colonies, we have not seen a democratic breakdown in an old democracy for close to 200 years, disregarding German occupations. This means that many of these political systems have weathered far greater storms than we are currently amid: two world wars, the Great Depression, the great totalitarian movements, the Cold War, the Vietnam War and its repercussions, stagflation, the financial crisis, etc. US democracy even survived a bloody four-year civil war between 1861 and 1865.

History does not allow us to make hard-and-fast predictions about the future of democracy; what lies ahead is unknown, and new crises might be of a different ilk or magnitude than those of the past (say, global warming, artificial intelligence, mass immigration, and plummeting birth rates). These historical patterns nonetheless throw some cold water on the prevailing crisis narrative. At the very least, there is no historical basis for fearing that old, established democracies will prove fragile in the face of the current crises.¹⁰

The glass is half full

Let us continue by placing the development in a long-term historical perspective. Figure 2.2 presents two trend lines: the number of Schumpeterian democracies and the ratio of democracies of all political regimes in the period from the French Revolution to today, based on the same dataset we used above. Three observations can be made.

First, the world has never been more democratic than in the 21st century. In the 19th century, democratic progress was limited, despite the fact that it was building from a near-zero starting point. The democratic snowball first began rolling for real in the 20th century; and although the road was strewn with obstacles and proved rather bumpy, the world saw a marked increase in the number of democracies and in the average level of democracy, which took off towards the end of the century. In the new millennium, the number of democracies reached a historically high level—although still far from that in an all-democratic world.

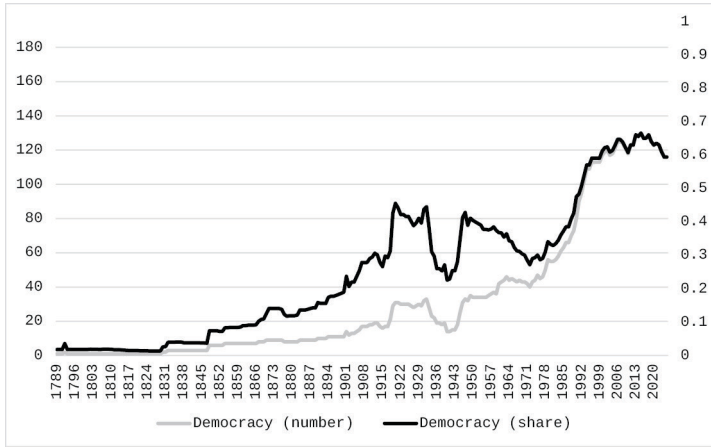


Figure 2.2 Global number and share of democracies, 1789–2025.

Source: Competitive Elections Indicator from the Lexical Index of Electoral Democracy (v6.9). Coverage: All independent countries.

Second, the figure shows only a single period in the last 200 years that experienced a clear democratic decline: the second half of the interwar period and World War II. Other periods are marked either by democratic progress or by overall stability if we focus on the number of democracies.¹¹

Third, the 1990s were clearly a highly unusual period. This period and, to a lesser extent, the aftermaths of World War I and World War II represent the few times in the past two centuries when democracy spread in a rapid and widespread way. The many alarmist analyses of recent decades seem to rest on an unspoken premise that the democratic achievements of the 1990s would automatically continue in the new millennium. In fact, it is only by directly or indirectly comparing it with this extraordinary decade that a period of relative democratic stability comes to appear as a form of radical democratic decline. If we make this historically abnormal period of progress our baseline for comparison, it is no wonder that democracy appears to be in crisis. When commentators claim that democracy has been in grave decline for decades, they are implicitly treating the exceptional increase of the early 1990s as the new normal—and mistaking a plateau at a historically high level for a dramatic fall.

A helpful way to grasp this final point is through the familiar metaphor of a glass that is simultaneously half full and half empty. To rephrase this metaphor slightly, there has been a tendency to see today's glass as almost empty. From a historical perspective, this is clearly misleading. Previous waves of democratisation have reached saturation points, often followed by extended periods of relative stagnation—or genuine decline, in a single case, namely the period from Hitler's *Machtübernahme* in 1933 to the Allied victory over the Axis powers in 1945. Given the extent of democratic progress in the decade and a half following 1989, it is hardly surprising that the recent political momentum could not be sustained indefinitely—and that several countries have since experienced various forms of democratic backsliding.

What is perhaps most striking is just how robust democracy has proven in the face of the many crises that have taken place in the new millennium. It had barely begun before the 9/11 terrorist attacks on New York and Washington in September 2001 shook the USA, the country underwriting the democratic order created in Western Europe after 1945. The events of that September day provoked Washington and its allies to invade Afghanistan and thereafter Iraq. In both cases, the wars became much more costly—both in human life, and politically and economically—than the decision-makers had anticipated. Then came the financial crisis and the 'Great Recession' in 2008. Subsequently, we have seen Russia under Vladimir Putin flex its muscles in its 'near abroad' and in the Middle East. At the same time, an undemocratic China has emerged as one of the world's most dynamic economic centres—bringing with it a growing political influence. Despite all these challenges, there has, so far, not been any sharp decline in democracy. Democracy has proven resilient, with the substantial gains of the 1990s largely consolidated. In this light, it seems fair to say that the glass is half full, not half empty. Put differently, the idea that democracy has been in grave decline for decades is an exaggeration. The world has certainly seen serious democratic setbacks, but from a global and historical vantage point, the democratic trajectory remains much more resilient than the crisis narrative suggests.

Crisis: A stretched concept used in inflationary ways

Let us take a closer look at this narrative to better understand what is amiss. Long ago, Reinhart Koselleck observed how, in the case of

crisis, '[t]he old power of the concept to set unsurpassable, stark, and non-interchangeable alternatives has dissipated in the uncertainty of arbitrary alternatives'.¹² In the literature on democratic resilience, the term 'crisis' originally referred to situations where the survival of the democratic regime was at serious risk.¹³ Such crises may arise from political, economic, or social challenges, but they only qualify—or more precisely qualified—as crises when democracy itself faces a genuine threat of regime breakdown.

This means that changes in institutions, behaviours, or public attitudes do not, by themselves, signal a crisis unless they directly undermine core democratic institutions: the free, inclusive elections and fundamental political liberties that we identified as the core of democracy in the preceding chapter. Developments affecting other elements of the political system, such as governments, parties, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), media landscapes, or policies, are only indirectly relevant when we evaluate the purchase of the crisis narrative. Indeed, these factors resemble other variables that may causally predict democratic decline, including economic downturns, rising inequality, or the spread of autocratic practices in neighbouring countries.

This traditional understanding presents clear advantages, compared to the loose use of the concept characterising contemporary debates about the state of democracy. The concept of crisis is best reserved to capture a life-or-death situation, a stark choice between alternatives that create the potential for a decisive turning point.¹⁴ This is also the etymological meaning of the concept, from Classical Greek where it denoted a decision, for instance the delivery of a verdict. This return to the traditional understanding—one in which the phenomenon in question faces a tangible risk of collapse—implies that a situation constitutes a crisis only when there is a real and substantial risk of democratic breakdown, typically driven by powerful actors actively working toward that outcome. Crises are thus situations in which, given the point of departure, genuine disaster threatens.¹⁵

This understanding of the concept stands in contrast to the overstretched and inflationary ways crisis is often used today,¹⁶ a tendency that risks reinforcing pessimistic, if not outright defeatist, views of democracy. What we have tried to show above is precisely that there is little evidence that democracy is facing a life-and-death situation at present; instead, what we have is general stability, coupled with a limited democratic decline, especially in low-quality democracies and already authoritarian regimes.

The eyes of the beholder

We have questioned whether the current political developments can be said to make up a crisis of democracy, at least when crisis is defined in a clear way, in line with the traditional meaning of the concept. Why, then, has the perception of democratic crisis become so ubiquitous and so menacing?

It is said that beauty lies in the eye of the beholder; reality is shaped by the perspective of the observer. There seem to be two key reasons behind the current democratic pessimism. First, it rests on the haphazard use of historical comparisons. Our shared historical memory seems to be either too superficial or too short. Many of the disturbing analyses that permeate the media and academia are based on false or at least problematic historical analogies. Later in the book, we will drive a stake through the attempt to draw parallels between interwar Europe and our own time, including between the Great Depression of the 1930s and the Great Recession that began in 2008, and between today's right-wing populism and interwar fascism. In these cases, the political challenges of our time are exaggerated by identifying superficial similarities with a period marked by much worse crises and by ignoring the many examples from the interwar period in which democracies proved resilient in the face of crisis.

However, we also find the exact opposite problem: a romanticised view of the past, the so-called 'good old days', which is seldom grounded in fact. For example, there has been a tendency to forget how challenged many Western democracies were in the 1970s, when observers from both the left and the right made strong claims about democratic malaise, often with considerable urgency.

In the USA, the period from the mid-1960s to the early 1980s was marked by violent political clashes in the streets, including at several national party conventions. These dramatic protests were driven by anger over the Vietnam War, the civil rights struggle, political assassinations, American president Richard Nixon's abuse of power, and economic stagnation. Many US citizens wanted their country to stop being the policeman of the world and to focus on its domestic problems.

Europe in the 1970s was ridden by poor economic performance in the form of slow growth and double-digit inflation and unemployment rates. The major Western European democracies experienced episodes that, while falling short of democratic breakdown, involved clear

erosions of democratic norms. In France, Charles de Gaulle's return to power in 1958 occurred in the shadow of the Algerian crisis, which was a brutal and polarising colonial war marked by mass violence, military insubordination, and the threat of a coup d'état by French officers opposed to Algerian independence. This situation enabled De Gaulle to refurbish the political system through a new constitution that dramatically strengthened executive authority and weakened parliamentary oversight.

Elsewhere, governments responded to severe security threats by curtailing civil liberties. In Italy, the fight against left- and right-wing terrorism during the 'Years of Lead' expanded emergency police powers and restrictions on due process. In the United Kingdom, the confrontation with the Irish Republican Army (IRA) resulted in internment without trial and emergency rule in Northern Ireland. In West Germany, the campaign against the left-extremist Red Army Faction (RAF) prompted measures such as the *Radikalenerlass*, which excluded suspected extremists from public employment and narrowed political pluralism.

In 1996, one of our former colleagues at Aarhus University, Palle Svensson, defended his higher doctoral dissertation about this period, titled 'Democracy in Crisis?' To this question, his answer was an unequivocal 'No!'¹⁷ But the reason he posed the question was precisely because so many had been concerned about the state of democracy in the preceding decades. Svensson's treatise documents how widespread the perception of crisis was in academic circles in the 1970s and 1980s, as well as in the media and among politicians and ordinary citizens. A large number of books from the period warned of a deep-seated democratic crisis. Both left- and right-wing intellectuals agreed that the democracies of the time were severely ill, although they disagreed on the concrete diagnosis (too much versus too little involvement of ordinary citizens) and, unsurprisingly, about the possible cure.¹⁸ In other words, in historical perspective, what many today see as an unprecedented democratic emergency, looks more like the latest episode in a recurring cycle of crisis talk.

Meanwhile, there is considerable evidence that support for values commonly associated with democracy has grown in recent generations. In 1951, researchers from the Norwegian Institute for Social Research conducted an opinion poll among the population in Oslo. The poll included a question as to whether the need for strong and mature leaders was greater than the need for laws and programmes; 37 percent

‘agreed completely’. In 2017, the Norwegian election survey contained a similar question, but here only 11 percent completely agreed. In the 1951 survey, which came immediately after the persecution of Jews during World War II, 44 percent of the respondents also supported the statement ‘It is largely the Jews’ own fault that they have often been persecuted’ (22 percent disagreed). To almost identical questions in the Norwegian election survey for 2017, only 8 percent answered in the affirmative, while 70 percent disagreed.¹⁹

Despite heated debates today about freedom of expression and hate speech, involving accusations of bigotry and cancel culture, ordinary Americans have also become more tolerant of outgroups, with the important exception of political opponents. This is indicated by an increased willingness since 1972 to allow people who are, for example, communists, homosexuals, atheists, and militarists, to give public speeches, teach at colleges, and have their books available in local libraries.²⁰ Similar shifts toward more tolerant views of disadvantaged groups have been observed in many other countries over the past few decades.²¹

Such comparisons with the political views of previous generations are rarely made because we lack systematic historical survey data. Perhaps more surprisingly, the political and economic crises of the 1970s and 1980s receive scant attention today. When we compare current political challenges with those of that era, our perspective shifts considerably. Unlike today, self-proclaimed undemocratic groups flourished in Western Europe, especially on the political left, and undemocratic ideas thrived far into the parties represented in parliaments—and for that matter also in much of academia and among university students.²²

But this is not the period to which we typically turn for comparisons. Instead, the 1990s, when democracy spread to the farthest corners of the world and economic progress and international cooperation were the rule rather than the exception, are considered to be a kind of ‘historical normal’, or at least the baseline for comparisons. As already argued, this is problematic, because the 1990s are really the major exception in the 200-year period in which democracy has emerged and spread—a rare moment when democracy expanded globally with little significant resistance, while liberal values thrived.

To make matters worse, people tend to be overly pessimistic in their assessments of global political developments. This stems from a human inclination to overestimate problems and to give more weight

to negative information than to positive developments. For example, psychological research has shown that most of us are much more annoyed at losing an amount of a certain size than gratified by winning a similar amount.²³ This ‘negativity bias’ leads to disproportionate attention and emphasis being placed on bad news, often at the expense of more positive developments: it makes a big impression on everyone when democracy falters, especially in large countries. Hardly anyone notices gradual improvements, and even democratic transitions are often interpreted in a negative way as dangerous political upheavals. This trend is being amplified by the media, because crises and fateful events are better news material.²⁴ The emergence of social media and the lack of source criticism and comparative perspectives have further amplified the problem. In the context of democratic developments, this bias often leads to skewed conclusions, as even well-informed observers overlook instances of stability or democratic progress and fail to situate negative developments within a broader historical perspective.

Far from a stark, decades-long democratic decline, the empirical patterns documented in this chapter show democracy to have held up well, despite the many challenges that have faced it in recent decades. What we have identified is—in historical perspective—a modest downturn that only began around 2015. This reflects that democracies continue to adapt and persist, and that especially old democracies are remarkably resilient. The subsequent chapters place this resilience in context by critically examining a string of widespread claims about the historical roots of democracy, how they perform, where we find them, and how they have responded to past crises.

Notes

- 1 All content is originally written by the authors but Microsoft Copilot and ChatGPT 4-5.2 were used for proofreading.
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- 3 The Guardian (11 September 2018). I Thought Democracy in Chile Was Safe. Now I See America Falling into the Same Trap, www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/sep/11/us-chile-coup-democracy.
- 4 Francis Fukuyama (2014), *Political Order and Political Decay: From the Industrial Revolution to the Globalization of Democracy* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux). Denmark ranked highest among all countries on both the electoral democracy index and the liberal democracy index compiled

- by V-Dem, https://v-dem.net/documents/61/v-dem-dr_2025_lowres_v2.pdf, pp. 62–63. Other recognised democracy measures also continuously rank Denmark about the best-performing countries. For a detailed account, see David Andersen & Svend-Erik Skaaning (2025), *Dansk demokrati i perspektiv* (Aarhus: Aarhus University Press).
- 5 Demokratikommisjonen, Er demokratiet i krise (Is Democracy in Crisis?), https://duf.dk/wp-content/uploads/Demokratikommisjonen_betaenkning-1.pdf; see also Anne Storkjær Binderkrantz, Lene Holm Pedersen, & Michael Bang Petersen (2025), *Demokratiets udfordringer* (Aarhus: Aarhus University Press).
 - 6 Freedom House, Freedom in the World 2026: The Growing Shadow of Autocracy, freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2026-03/FIW2026_final_digital%20%281%29.pdf; V-Dem Institute, Democracy Report 2025: 25 Years of Autocratization – Democracy Trumped? https://v-dem.net/documents/61/v-dem-dr_2025_lowres_v2.pdf
 - 7 Wolfgang Merkel (2018). “Challenge or Crisis of Democracy.” Pp. 1–28 in Wolfgang Merkel & Sascha Kneip (eds.), *Crisis and Democracy. Challenges in Turbulent Times* (Cham: Springer International), p. 1, 12.
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 - 9 Steven Levitsky & Daniel Ziblatt (2018), *How Democracies Die* (New York: Crown), p. 1.
 - 10 See also Kurt Weyland (2021), *Assault on Democracy: Communism, Fascism, and Authoritarianism during the Interwar Years* (New York: Cambridge University Press); Kurt Weyland (2024), *Democracy’s Resilience to Populism’s Threat: Countering Global Alarmism* (New York: Cambridge University Press).
 - 11 The share of democracies dropped in the 1960s, but this was mainly due to decolonisation, where most new countries were either autocracies from the outset or very soon experienced democratic breakdown. The number of democracies was relatively constant.
 - 12 Wolfgang Merkel (2018). “Challenge or Crisis of Democracy.” Pp. 1–28 in Wolfgang Merkel & Sascha Kneip (eds.), *Crisis and Democracy. Challenges in Turbulent Times* (Cham: Springer International), p. 13.
 - 13 Palle Svensson (1986). “Stability, Crisis and Breakdown: Some Notes on the Concept of Crisis in Political Analysis.” *Scandinavian Political Studies* 9(2), 129–139, p. 133.
 - 14 Ercan, Selen & Jean-Paul Gagnon (2014). “The Crisis of Democracy, Which Crisis? Which Democracy?” *Democratic Theory* 1(2), 1–10, p. 4.

- 15 Adam Przeworski. (2019). *Crises of Democracy* (New York: Cambridge University Press), p. 20.
- 16 Wolfgang Merkel (2018). "Challenge or Crisis of Democracy?" Pp. 1–28 in Wolfgang Merkel & Sascha Kneip (eds.), *Crisis and Democracy. Challenges in Turbulent Times* (Cham: Springer International), p. 12.
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- 21 Christian Welzel (2014), *Freedom Rising* (New York: Cambridge University Press).
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- 23 Kurt Weyland (2021), *Assault on Democracy: Communism, Fascism, and Authoritarianism during the Interwar Years* (New York: Cambridge University Press), p. 13.
- 24 See Hans Rosling, Anna Rosling Rönnlund, & Ola Rosling (2018), *Factfulness: Ten Reasons We're Wrong about the World – and Why Things Are Better than You Think* (New York: Flatiron Books); www.politico.com/interactives/2019/how-to-fix-politics-in-america/misinformation/correct-for-the-medias-negativity-bias/; T. A. Ito, J. T. Larsen, N. K. Smith, & J. T. Cacioppo (1998), "Negative Information Weighs More Heavily on the Brain: The Negativity Bias in Evaluative Categorizations," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 75(4), 887–900; Stuart Soroka, Patrick Fournier, & Lilach Nir (2019), "Cross-national Evidence of a Negativity Bias in Psychophysiological Reactions to News," *PNAS* 116(38), 18888–18892; David L. Altheide (2002), *Creating Fear: News and the Construction of Crisis* (Piscataway: Aldine Transaction).

3 Myth 3

Democracy originated in ancient Athens¹

Most of us have heard the story: Democracy originated in ancient Greece, and the democracies of our time are based on the legacy of this ‘first democratic transformation’.² In other words, the Greek democracies of antiquity were the precondition for the ‘second democratic transformation’, which began with the American and the French revolutions in the late 18th century, and which led to modern representative democracy.

We know this story because it is told over and over in public debates and in educational institutions. A *National Geographic* encyclopaedic entry on *Democracy (Ancient Greece)* asserts that ‘The ancient Greeks were the first to create a democracy. ...The system and ideas employed by the ancient Greeks had profound influences on how democracy developed, and...impact on the formation of the US government.’³ Similarly, a lesson on a popular educational platform states that ‘the ancient Greece government system of Athens is considered the first democracy in the world and the model for our modern system’.⁴

The story of democracy’s origins is thus usually told as if it began and ended in the Pnyx (the outdoor hillside where the popular assemblies gathered) of ancient Athens. Here we encounter an echo of what the historian David Gress refers to as the ‘Great Narrative’ in his book *From Plato to NATO*.⁵ This story, which has traditionally dominated the history teaching in European and American universities, describes a continuous, almost linear development of civilisation that began with the ancient Greeks and culminated in the democratic Western bloc after World War II—a straight line from Plato to NATO.

In this chapter, we revisit that assumption, showing that Athens' contribution to the modern age was more symbolic or ideological than institutional: there is little evidence of any direct influence on modern-day representative democracies.

The myth that modern democracy originated in Athens is problematic because it reinforces a broader misconception: that countries lacking direct ties to the classical cultural heritage are inherently less capable of developing and stabilising democracy. We therefore end the chapter by tracing evidence of early democratic practices beyond Europe. As we shall see, democratic-like practices have historically emerged in many other parts of the world, meaning that the Greek experience is not unique. We return to this topic later in the book, where we examine, among other things, the contemporary presence of democracy outside the Western world. Here, we clear up some historical misunderstandings.

However, there is an important caveat. The historical insignificance of the Greek precedent is clearly magnified by our definition of democracy, presented in the previous chapter. Had we focused on, say, participatory democracy, emphasising active citizen engagement rather than electoral institutions, the democratic experiment in Athens would arguably have had more bearing on the present because of its role in the development of Republicanism. But our attempt to isolate the core of democracy emphasises political representation. We further pursue the historical roots of this political practice in the next chapter.

Direct democracy in ancient Greece as a regime form and ideology

It is not for naught that generations of schoolchildren and students have been introduced to ancient Greek democracy. This is where we meet the most sophisticated version of what the political scientists David Stasavage has termed early democracy⁶—both as an ideology (a civic philosophy) and as a regime form (a set of political institutions). It is also the version that comes closest to the ideal of a government by the people.

So, what did these ancient Greek democracies look like?⁷ Aristotle and his students collected 158 different constitutions from the Greek city states. But when we examine the evidence more closely, it turns out that our knowledge of ancient Greek democracy is largely confined to Athens during the period 500—300 BCE, irrespective of whether

we emphasise political institutions, historical events, or contemporary writings supporting and opposing democracy. The following account therefore focuses on Athens, fully aware that other forms of democracy existed in ancient Greece, although, regrettably, we are unable to explore them in detail here. Aristotle, for example, fleetingly refers to the existence of a form of democracy in which citizens elect officials who make political decisions—a practice that seems closer to later representative forms of government than the direct democracy of Athens.

Athenian democracy was rooted in the city state, or *polis*. It was the direct rule of the Athenian citizens as opposed to indirect rule through elected representatives, as we know it from modern democracy (see Box 2.1). All male Athenian citizens—in some periods 30 000 to 40 000 men—had the right to attend the Assembly on the Pnyx and participate in political decisions. The Assembly met around 40 times a year and was usually attended by around 6 000 citizens. There was also the legislative body, the Council of Five Hundred (*nomothetai*), which was a kind of executive committee of the Assembly. Citizenship was hereditary, and both parents had to be Athenian citizens, although only adult men had political rights. These male citizens made up a small minority of the inhabitants of the Athenian city state (the total population was up to 250 000). Other groups were the *metoik* (free non-citizens, usually hailing from other parts of Greece), the public and private slaves, and the female citizens.

This model can be understood as a form of direct popular rule exercised through assemblies. Naturally, not all aspects of public administration could be managed via large gatherings. The citizens of Athens therefore resorted to a combination of rotation and sortition to assign public offices. Most offices were limited in time—often of short duration—and were filled via lottery from among the citizens who made themselves available. Lottery was seen as the only true democratic principle. Aristotle, for example, categorises the election of officials as an aristocratic principle, because it risked choosing the best (*aristoi*), not the random or average citizen. In practice, therefore, one can also think of Athenian democracy as lottocracy, that is, a sortition democracy based on the equal access of citizens to the exercise of power and to gain political office (see Figure 3.1).

The main exception was the appointment of generals (*strategoi*), which was not left to chance. Athens also had several thousand public slaves, the so-called *dēmosioi*, who carried out tasks ranging from

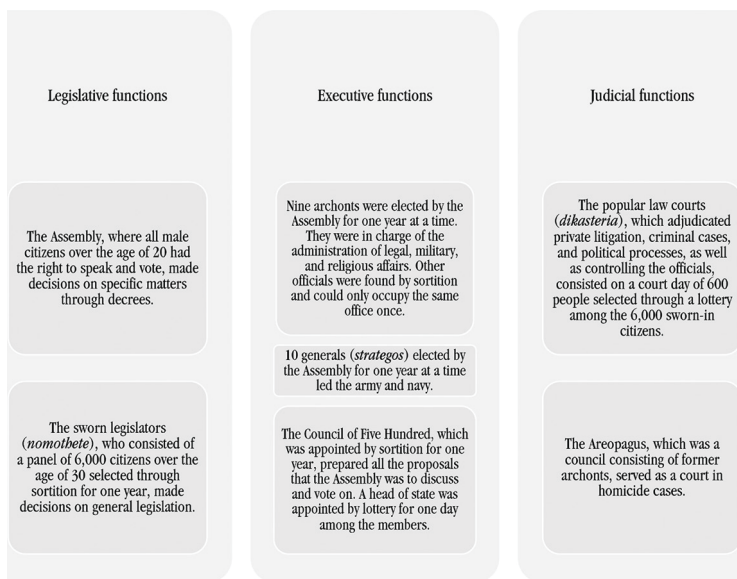


Figure 3.1 Overview of the Athenian democratic institutions.

menial sanitation work to the public control of the value of silver coins. These slaves constituted a kind of permanent civil service; the Athenian officials could rely on them and draw on their expertise. Slaves thus served as a solution to the challenge that randomly selected citizens could not be expected to possess certain competencies, such as overseeing weights and measures in the marketplace or organising meetings in the Assembly. Moreover, public slaves acted as a safeguard against corruption and abuse of power—partly because, unlike citizens, they faced severe punishment if they violated the laws. Recent research has gone so far as to argue that these *dēmosioi* made ‘rule by the people’ possible.⁸

If we disregard the public slaves, a picture emerges of a political system that had no real distinction between citizens, politicians, and officials; the state-civil society distinction of our time makes little or no sense from an Athenian perspective. Democracy was a way of life that was pursued daily by the politically active citizens in the *polis*. This perspective on democratic participation is often illustrated using

the Greek word for a private citizen: *idiōtēs*. In the Athens of that time, this did not denote a private person in our modern sense, but rather a citizen who attended the Assembly but did not make himself available for office.⁹ In vulgar Latin, the word took on the meaning ‘uneducated or ignorant’, from which we get the ‘idiot’ of our time.

All in all, the Athenian political system has little in common with modern representative democracy. But the form of government is one thing; the ideology behind it is something else. Democracy in Athens—and in ancient Greece more generally—had its partisans and its enemies. How did ancient thinkers themselves understand democracy and freedom, and how does that differ from the modern sense?

To understand the ideology behind Athenian direct democracy today, we must reconstruct it from surviving texts, both in support of and opposed to democracy. The most famous pro-democracy text is the Athenian statesman Pericles’ funeral oration for the fallen soldiers of the Peloponnesian War, as relayed by his contemporary, the great historian Thucydides:

Its administration favors the many instead of the few; this is why it is called a democracy. If we look to the laws, they afford equal justice to all in their private differences; if no social standing, advancement in public life falls to reputation for capacity, class considerations not being allowed to interfere with merit; nor again does poverty bar the way, if a man is able to serve the state, he is not hindered by the obscurity of his condition.¹⁰

There is an old but tenacious view that the notion of freedom in the Greek city states was fundamentally different from our modern understanding. This view was expressed forcefully in a lecture given by the French liberal statesman Benjamin Constant in 1819.¹¹ According to Constant, the ancient understanding of freedom solely emphasised political self-government; one was free when one took part in the political decisions, regardless of their content.

The English historian of ideas Isaiah Berlin further developed Constant’s thoughts and distinguished between the positive, antique conception of freedom and the modern or liberal negative conception.¹² In doing so, Berlin tweaked Constant’s interpretation of the freedom of the ancients (the positive view) in an important way: Where Constant emphasised political self-government, Berlin expanded the understanding to include a more general notion of how we, as humans,

are capable of governing ourselves and realising our potential. This stands in contrast to negative freedom, which is about the absence of coercion—in other words, the right to live one's life as one pleases. According to Berlin, this freedom did not exist at all in the ancient Greek city states, including Athens.

Recent research has lent little support to Berlin's ideas in this regard, or at least not to their relevance for understanding the notion of freedom in ancient Greece. First, there was a wide variety of conceptions of freedom, *eleutheria*, in ancient Greece. Two of the most common were the right to participate politically (Constant's ancient freedom) and the freedom to decide over one's own life. The latter is reminiscent of Berlin's negative freedom. Second, according to Aristotle, freedom is the 'basic premise of the democratic sort of regime', more important than equality itself, *isonomia*.¹³

Furthermore, a crucial difference between the democracies and oligarchies of the time was that the former—despite the famous trial of Socrates, which ended with a death sentence for having led the youth astray—safeguarded freedom of expression and the rule of law, two ingrained elements in Berlin's negative freedom. A case in point is an oft-quoted statement made by the Athenian statesman Demosthenes that the Athenians had the right to criticise democracy and praise the Spartan constitution, whereas the Spartans were not allowed to praise any constitution other than their own.¹⁴

Finally, the sting of Plato's critique of democracy was directed against the freedom of the democratic citizen to follow their dreams rather than serving the common good. This, too, suggests the existence of negative freedom in the democratic city states of antiquity. Why else would its enemies have criticised this feature of democratic life? According to Constant, Athens was indeed the one exception to his dichotomy. Modern freedom thus existed in Athens in the classical period, he asserted in his lecture. However, Constant took Sparta as the norm for the ancient Greek city states, which puts his distinction in a slightly different light.

Inspiration in name alone

If we shift the focus from political institutions to ideology, we can identify some significant similarities between classical and modern democracy. At the same time, the form of government in ancient Athens

was fundamentally different from modern, representative democracy. Where does that leave us? Is there a connection between the direct democracy of Athens in the period 500—300 BCE and the modern representative democracies that have emerged in the last 250 years?

We can begin by noting that we find at least one straight line between the Greek democracy of antiquity and modern representative democracy, namely the word itself. ‘Democracy’ comes from the Greek *demokratia*, which is a contraction of *demos*, the people, and *kratos*, rule; that is, popular rule. The Greek democracies disappeared in late Roman times, but the word survived in the idiom of Western political thought and ended up being rehashed to describe the large-scale political upheavals taking place in the wake of the American and French revolutions in the late 18th century.

But what the term came to denote in the modern era was something entirely different. According to the French statesman and political scientists Alexis de Tocqueville, the only thing the two have in common is the name. A Greek citizen from the Athens of Pericles or Demosthenes would recognise little in the democracies of our time. They might well concur with Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s famous 18th-century denunciation of the English political system:

The people of England deceive themselves when they fancy they are free; they are so, in fact, only during the election of members of parliament: for, as soon as a new one is elected, they are again in chains, and are nothing. And thus, by the use they make of their brief moments of liberty, they deserve to lose it.¹⁵

Even more striking is the lack of a link between the democratic institutions of antiquity and the modern ones. The Danish philologist Mogens Herman Hansen, one of the leading scholars of ancient Athenian democracy, has convincingly documented the similarities between the ancient and modern democratic ideologies. But when it comes to democratic institutions, he begs to differ:

Not one single Athenian institution seems to have left its mark on posterity neither in the Middle Ages nor in the Early Modern period—when democracy was still conceived as direct rule by the people—nor in the 19th century—when democracy became conceived as representative government based on elections.¹⁶

One of the foremost authorities on modern representative democracy, the Polish-American political scientist Adam Przeworski, is equally unequivocal on this point:

It is easy to find elements of democracy in ancient India, medieval Iceland, or precolonial Africa, but the implication that modern politics in these places owes something to their own political traditions is at best farfetched. Indeed, modern Greek democracy has no roots in the democracy of Ancient Greece. English constitutional monarchy had more impact on modern Greek political history than Athens did.¹⁷

The first part of Przeworski's statement underlines that we find early elements of political self-government in many places other than ancient Greece, an observation we pursue in the rest of this chapter to further place the Greek institutions in historical perspective. The last part of the quote emphasises that there is no direct nexus between the direct democracy of the *poleis* of antiquity and the representative democracies of our time. Present-day democracies look nothing like the lottocracy of Athens. Instead, they descend from the political regimes that emerged in the USA and France two-and-a-half centuries ago, and which were built around the same core institutional architecture: constitutional rule, representative legislatures, competitive elections, and the protection—at least in principle—of basic civil liberties. Where they differ most markedly from the ancient Greek model is in the scope of the franchise.

Early institutions of self-government and consent

Forms of political self-government existed in many other places before, during, and after the ancient Greek democracies. As mentioned above, the American political scientist David Stasavage has termed this form of government 'early democracy'.¹⁸ The qualifying adjective is meant to emphasise that we are not talking about democracy in the modern sense: most of the examples would not cross our Schumpeterian threshold. However, they are still characterised by varying degrees of political influence (consent) granted to at least a portion of the inhabitants beyond a king and a narrow elite. In some cases, this applied only to elite groups; in others, it extended to segments of the broader population, typically through regularly convened councils or assemblies (see Table 3.1).

Table 3.1 Selected proto-democratic institutions outside ancient Greece

<i>Region</i>	<i>Example</i>	<i>Period</i>	<i>Political form</i>	<i>Notable feature</i>
Mesopotamia	City state councils	c. 2000 BCE	Council with ruler consultation	Consent principle
India	Gana sanghas	c. 400 BCE	Clan republics	Elective councils
Africa	Ashanti	17—19 c. CE	Assembly of chiefs	Collective decision-making
The Americas	Huron/Tlaxcala	15—16 c. CE	Multi-tier councils	Federated representation
Europe	Icelandic <i>Althing</i>	930—1262 CE	Popular assembly	Absence of state

Early forms of consent were especially common in small political entities where agricultural activity was difficult to monitor and tax, and which were characterised by a relatively equal balance of power between the rulers and the ruled—for example because people could seek their fortune elsewhere if they were dissatisfied.¹⁹ This form of government typically disappeared as agricultural production developed and civilisation progressed.²⁰ Technological advances led to a more intensive and productive form of agriculture that made it possible to feed a political and priestly elite and a warrior caste, which, in turn, made it more difficult for people to just walk away. Intensified agricultural production was also easier to tax. This led to writing and measurement systems that formed the backbone of the first bureaucratic structures. All of this strengthened the state at the expense of society and spelt an end to political consent.

Even within the great agrarian civilizations of Eurasia, early forms of democracy can be found if we look back far enough, with China as the notable exception. In ancient Mesopotamia, there are clear traces of early political units in which popular or noble assemblies had political influence. This was noted almost a century ago by the Danish Assyriologist Thorkild Jacobsen, who was led on the trail by reading the first literary masterpiece in world history, *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, written more than 4 000 years ago.²¹ Here, we find an ancient echo of Mesopotamian states where rulers like Gilgamesh (according to tradition the fifth king of the Sumerian city state of Uruk) apparently had to consult a council when making important decisions. Likewise, ancient India was littered with republics ruled through council assemblies.²² When Alexander the Great marched his army down the Indus River in the 4th century BCE, some of his Greek companions allegedly took notice of political systems that reminded them of the democratic city states they knew from home.²³ But as intensive agriculture and royal and princely power consolidated in these ancient cradles of civilization, the early democracies disappeared, because those in power grew strong enough to first sideline and then rid themselves of the popular assemblies.

However, early forms of consent survived in many other places right until the European overseas colonisation. Different versions can thus be found in sub-Saharan Africa, and in North and South America.²⁴ This is documented by an ethnographic database of how 1 167 different original societies have been organised, culturally, socially, economically, and to some extent politically, prior to contact

with Europeans.²⁵ For 186 of these communities, each selected for representing a distinct region and thus likely to have developed independently, researchers have coded a set of more specific variables, including whether those in power ruled together with some kind of council or assembly. In roughly half of the 186 communities, only local political entities were present; in the other half, a broader political structure connected the local dots. The data reveal that some kind of council existed in around half of the cases that fall into the first category and one third of the cases in the second category. A good example from sub-Saharan Africa is the Ashanti Empire, located in present-day Ghana. Before the advent of the European colonisers, the Ashanti people were ruled by a king, but major decisions required the consent of a national assembly, the so-called *Asamtemanhyiamu*, which met at least once a year in the capital Kumase and was attended by up to 2 000 local chiefs.

In the New World, as described by the Europeans following Columbus' seafaring voyage in 1492, there is ample evidence of early consent, for instance among the Huron in eastern North America and the Tlaxcaltecas in Mexico.²⁶ According to French Jesuits visiting the Huron in the early 17th century, political power lay in the hands of assemblies on three levels. The lower level was that of the individual Huron villages, which lay scattered along the banks of the St Lawrence River and were collectively governed by councils, of which the local chief was a born member. The chief also served as the village representative in regional assemblies of Huron tribes. Finally, these tribes were part of a 'federal' assembly for all Hurons, which met much less frequently. At all levels, decisions were made collectively, and one of the French Jesuits compared the federal assembly to the European parliaments they knew from home.

Tlaxcala, Mexico, was one of the first Native American communities the Europeans encountered during Hernán Cortés' conquest of the Aztecs in 1519. His route passed through Tlaxcaltecas territory, and Cortés noted that the political power of Tlaxcala—unlike Aztec civilisation, which had kings—lay in the hands of a council of 50 to 100 nobles. This was reminiscent of what he knew from republics such as Venice, Genoa, and Pisa. Spanish conquistadors simply spoke of the 'Republic of Tlaxcala'.²⁷

Finally, Europe has historically been associated with early democratic traditions. As previously mentioned, the Greek city states are the most well-known example. The Roman Republic prior to

the Imperial Era also bears mention, although its political structure more closely resembled the kind of oligarchy encountered by Cortés among the Tlaxcaltecas. Popular assemblies were similarly widespread throughout northwestern Europe during and after the Roman Imperial Period. Following the collapse of the Western Roman Empire in 475 CE, popular assemblies continued to play a crucial role in Germanic states such as Merovingian France, Visigothic Spain, Lombard Northern Italy, and Anglo-Saxon England. As part of this ‘assembly model’ of politics, the freeborn (or at least their leaders) met at regular public gatherings convened by Merovingian, Visigothic, Lombard, or Anglo-Saxon kings and princes, usually several times a year.²⁸ The Scandinavian *ting* offers another example of this form of government. The most famous example is the Icelandic *Althing*, founded in 930 CE. It was a popular outdoor assembly with the participation of all free Icelandic men in a society where there was no state power at all.²⁹

Among the historical examples mentioned above, only the Huron and the Icelandic *Althing* rival the broad popular participation found in Athenian democracy, although, in both cases, their political institutions were far less developed. Nonetheless, what our historical overview documents is that institutions based on consent emerged independently of the ancient Greek model in various periods and regions across the world.

Coupled with the absence of a direct link between the institutions of ancient Greek democracy and modern democracies, these are important historical insights with implications for how we see the world today. If Europe does not have a patent on early examples of democratic elements of consent, and if the most well-known example of early European democracy has not left significant traces in the form of concrete political institutions, this suggests that there are different ways of building and arranging a democracy, and that democracy is not reserved for Western countries. By recognising that democracy has appeared in many different places and many different forms, we rid ourselves of the illusion that the introduction and survival of democracy today depend on a single Western lineage.

Notes

- 1 All content is originally written by the authors but Microsoft Copilot and ChatGPT 4-5.2 were used for proofreading.

- 2 John Dunn (2019), *Setting the People Free: The Story of Democracy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press); Robert A. Dahl (1989), *Democracy and Its Critics* (New Haven: Yale University Press).
- 3 National Geographic (Education, Encyclopedic Entry), Democracy (Ancient Greece), <https://education.nationalgeographic.org/resource/democracy-ancient-greece/>.
- 4 Study.com, Ancient Greece Government & Politics, <https://study.com/learn/lesson/ancient-greece-government-politics.html>.
- 5 David Gress (1998), *From Plato to Nato* (New York: Free Press).
- 6 David Stasavage (2020), *The Decline and Rise of Democracy: A Global History from Antiquity to Today* (New York: Cambridge University Press).
- 7 The rest of this section is largely based on Jørgen Møller & Svend-Erik Skaaning (2024), *Democratization and Autocratization in Comparative Perspective: Concepts, Currents, Causes, Consequences, and Challenges* (London: Routledge), Chapter 1. More detailed descriptions and references may be found there.
- 8 Paulin Ismard (2017), *Democracy's Slaves: A Political History of Ancient Greece* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press).
- 9 Mogens Herman Hansen (1999), *The Athenian Democracy in the Age of Demosthenes* (London: Oxford), pp. 144, 308.
- 10 Thucydides (1972), *History of the Peloponnesian War* (London: Penguin), p. 177.
- 11 Benjamin Constant (1988 [1819]), "The Liberty of the Ancients Compared with that of the Moderns," pp. 309–328 in Benjamin Constant, *Political Writings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).
- 12 Isaiah Berlin (2002 [1958]), "Two Concepts of Liberty," pp. 166–217 in Isaiah Berlin, *Liberty* (Oxford: Oxford University).
- 13 Aristotle (2013 [350 BC]), *Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), p. 172 (1317b).
- 14 Mogens Herman Hansen (1989), *Was Athens a Democracy?* Historisk-Filosofiske Meddelelser 59 (Copenhagen: Det Kongelige Danske Videnskabernes Selskab), p. 15.
- 15 Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1947 [1762]), *The Social Contract* (New York: The Haffner Press), p. 85.
- 16 Mogens Herman Hansen (2010), "Introduction," pp. vii–xxxviii in *Démocratie Athénienne – Démocratie Moderne: Tradition et Influences* (Geneve: Entretiens sur L'Antiquité Classique 56), p. xxxii.
- 17 Adam Przeworski (2010), *Democracy and the Limits of Self-Government* (New York: Cambridge University Press), pp. 2–3.
- 18 David Stasavage (2020), *The Decline and Rise of Democracy: A Global History from Antiquity to Today* (New York: Cambridge University Press). Large parts of the sections that follow draw on this book.
- 19 James C. Scott (2017), *Against the Grain: A Deep History of the Earliest States* (New Haven: Yale University Press).

- 20 David Stasavage (2020), *The Decline and Rise of Democracy: A Global History from Antiquity to Today* (New York: Cambridge University Press). See also Steven Muhlberger & Phil Paine (1993), "Democracy's Place in World History," *Journal of World History* 4(1), 23–45.
- 21 Thorkild Jakobsen (1943), "Primitive Democracy in Ancient Mesopotamia," *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 2(3), 159–172. See also David Wengrow & David Graeber (2021), *The Dawn of Everything: A New History of Humanity* (Harmondsworth: Penguin), p. 29.
- 22 Jagdish P. Sharma (1968), *Republics in Ancient India, c. 1500 B.C.–500 B.C.* (Leiden: Brill); Anant S. Altekar (2015), *State and Government in Ancient India* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass).
- 23 David Stasavage (2020), *The Decline and Rise of Democracy: A Global History from Antiquity to Today* (New York: Cambridge University Press).
- 24 Guy Martin (2012), *African Political Thought* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan), Chapter 1; Richard E. Blanton & Lane F. Fargher (2008), *Collective Action in the Formation of Premodern States* (New York: Springer). See also Kent Flannery & Joyce Marcus (2010), *The Creation of Inequality: How Our Prehistoric Ancestors Set the Stage for Monarchy, Slavery, and Empire* (London: Harvard University Press); David Wengrow & David Graeber (2021). *The Dawn of Everything: A New History of Humanity* (Harmondsworth: Penguin).
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- 26 David Stasavage (2020), *The Decline and Rise of Democracy: A Global History from Antiquity to Today* (New York: Cambridge University Press).
- 27 David Stasavage (2020), *The Decline and Rise of Democracy: A Global History from Antiquity to Today* (New York: Cambridge University Press), p. 41; David Wengrow & David Graeber (2021), *The Dawn of Everything: A New History of Humanity* (Harmondsworth: Penguin), p. 357.
- 28 Chris Wickham (2009), *The Inheritance of Rome: A History of Europe from 400 to 1000* (New York: Viking), pp. 101–105.
- 29 Jesse Byock (2002), "The Icelandic Althing: Dawn of Parliamentary Democracy," pp. 1–18 in J.M. Fladmark (ed.), *Heritage and Identity: Shaping the Nations of the North* (Abingdon: Routledge).

4 Myth 4

Democracy is incompatible with major religions¹

Specific religions, and doctrinal faith more generally, have often been portrayed as fundamentally incompatible with democracy. A case in point is the work of the Austrian legal scholar Hans Kelsen. In the 1950s, Kelsen wrote a book that was published posthumously by the Hans Kelsen Institute in 2012 under the title *Secular Religion*. The book is mainly a defence of modern science against religion, but Kelsen extends part of the argument to democracy, which to him presupposes relativism, contestability, and human-made law. Religion rests on the opposite, absolute, revealed truths that are immune to criticism. For Kelsen, this epistemological difference creates a fundamental tension: once political authority is grounded in religious doctrine or theological certainty, democratic self-government becomes impossible, because democratic politics requires all rules to remain open to revision through public reasoning and disagreement.

This line of reasoning is still used by some committed secularists today. Take, for instance, Megan Manson, associated with the National Secular Society, who states that ‘Secularism isn’t optional for democracy. It’s essential.’ and that ‘[d]emocracy and secularism are like violin and bow. Without one, the other doesn’t really work.’² Meanwhile, the very same argument is put forward by some of the fiercest enemies of secularism; religious fundamentalists argue that since religion and religious doctrines stand over anything else, they cannot commit to democratic procedures.

In contemporary discussions, Islam has arguably attracted most attention, frequently being portrayed as inherently opposed to democratic principles. The purpose of this chapter is to show that these incompatibility claims are based on a misunderstanding of the nature

of religion and politics. As we show, it is not doctrine in itself that matters, but the interpretations and reinterpretations of it, made by important religious and political figures. Islam and the other major world religions have historically been quite plastic, sometimes emerging as obstacles to democracy, while under other circumstances being interpreted and used as sources of support for democratic development.

To show this, we start with a forgotten known: If we go back in time, it was not Islam that was seen as the main religious obstacle to democracy. Historically, this allegation was most clearly directed against the Catholic Church, which in Northern Europe and the Anglosphere has traditionally been regarded as a conservative force, reinforcing rigid and petrified gender roles and entrenched social, economic, and political hierarchies. The influence of the Catholic Church has been used to explain why women were given the right to vote one to two generations later in Southern Europe and Latin America than elsewhere in the Western world,³ and why democracy has historically struggled to take root in Catholic-majority countries.

It is perfectly correct that the political conservatism of the Catholic Church in the period since the French Revolution has sometimes worked to stall democratic developments. But this insight has overshadowed two important historical points. First, modern representative democracy rests on a set of political innovations that took place within the church in the High and Late Middle Ages. The medieval Catholic Church devised and spread the principle of political representation, the bedrock of modern representative democracy. These developments are important for understanding the historical roots of modern democracy. The religious origins of these institutions underline how representative democracy does not solely spring from a secular source.

Second, the Catholic Church has proven surprisingly flexible politically. For example, during the 20th century, the papal church reconciled itself with modern democracy; the struggle for political freedoms became an official and integral part of its self-understanding in the 1960s. This is no different than Protestantism. In contrast to Catholicism, Protestantism, according to a large body of research, has been a battering ram for the market economy, the modern state, and modern democracy.⁴ However, Protestantism was originally anti-democratic and anti-liberal, and only evolved in a direction that made it compatible with both after several centuries of religious and political struggle.

The development of pro- and anti-democratic ideas and practices within the Catholic Church and Protestantism reveals important insights about the relationship between religion and politics in general, and religion and democracy in particular.⁵ Many scholars and political pundits are too quick on the trigger when declaring certain religious systems incompatible—or just difficult to reconcile—with democracy. In historical perspective, the major world religions have displayed remarkable political agility. There is no evidence that their doctrines must necessarily be interpreted in an anti-democratic manner, even if this has often been the case in practice.

We begin the chapter by tracing the Catholic Church's hostility toward modern democracy back to the French Revolution, then explore how its medieval institutions anticipated key democratic principles and how the first ideological defence of representative government was formulated by Catholic theologians. Thereafter, we present shorter discussions of Protestantism and Islam. The purpose is to show how religions have been quite flexible in terms of their interpretation and compatibility with democracy, something that remains the case today.

The Catholic Church fights modern representative democracy

The American philosopher and journalist Michael Novak has summed up the traditional view on the political conservatism of Catholicism as follows:

Catholic cultures seem on the whole rather more vulnerable to the traditional style of single-person leadership, as in the monarchies of old and in the dictatorships of today...[and] to extremist and terrorist forms of political romanticism, neither much admiring pragmatism nor much committed to the arts of compromise and the habits of a loyal opposition.⁶

Among other things, Catholicism has been considered incompatible with democracy because it:

...attempts to control so many aspects of life, to encourage so much fixity of status and submission to authority, and to remain so independent of secular authority that it invariably clashes with the liberalism, individualism, freedom, mobility and sovereignty of the democratic nation.⁷

The notion that the Catholic Church has been an adversary of modern representative democracy is not pulled out of thin air; far from it. The Catholic Church embarked on an outright reactionary political course after the French Revolution. This was, in part, a response to the way many revolutionaries declared war on the church. As early as November 1789, the *Assemblée Nationale* expropriated the church, which at the time owned almost 10 percent of all agricultural land in France.⁸ In 1792, the new French Republic banned Catholicism outright, after which many French churches, including the most iconic, Notre Dame in Paris, were transformed into temples for the worship of reason. Tellingly, the great revolt against the revolutionary ideas and the new government in Paris, which took place in Vendée in the west of France in 1793, was led by a self-proclaimed Catholic army. The Vendée rebellion was brutally put down, resulting in hundreds of thousands of casualties. For many Catholics, these events signalled that revolution was the work of the devil.

The Catholic indictment of revolutionary forces further intensified following two key events associated with the unification of Italy. The first was when the Romans proclaimed a republic in 1848/49 and forced Pope Pius IX to flee; the second was when, as part of the efforts to unite Italy in the 1860s and 1870s, King Victor Emmanuel II conquered the Papal States and left the Pope with the diminutive Vatican City. Pope Pius responded by distancing himself from political upheaval in general and radical political ideas in particular. In his *Syllabus Errorum* of 1864 (literally: Syllabus of Errors), Pius denounced democracy, national self-determination, liberalism, and the separation of church and state.

The document summarised and rejected 80 notions that, according to the Pope, were erroneous as they went against the Catholic faith. The last of these 80 points aptly illustrates Pius' political conservatism. In wording that might have been taken from a Monty Python sketch, he rejected that the Pope 'can, and ought to, reconcile himself, and come to terms with progress, liberalism and modern civilization'. It was also under Pius—the longest-serving pope in Roman Catholic Church history (r. 1846—1878)—that the First Vatican Council (1869/70) affirmed two absolutist principles within the church itself: the doctrinal infallibility of the Pope and his supremacy over the church. This occurred just as the new Italian state conquered Rome—with the exception of the Vatican, where the Pope and his supporters were raging against the hostile wave of nationalism and liberalism that was

engulfing them. But to truly understand the relationship between the Catholic Church and representative democracy, we must go further back in time.

The invention of representation and consent

We have already seen how the ancient Greeks did not use political representation as we know it today. This political innovation dates instead to the High and Late Middle Ages, where representative institutions or parliaments mushroomed across Western and Central Europe.

There is, in fact, a direct nexus between these medieval representative institutions and modern parliaments.⁹ The best example is the English Parliament in Westminster, which can be traced back to the parliament that emerged under the Plantagenet kings in the 13th century.¹⁰ To this day, the Parliament of Westminster is organised as a House of Commons and a House of Lords. This is a relic of a bygone era (the 14th century), when representatives from the cities and the gentry (commoners) came to sit in one chamber, while the magnates and high clergy (lords) sat in another. Long before modern democracy, England (later Great Britain/the United Kingdom) was characterised by a representative form of government in which parliament shared power with the king, a combination known as the 'king-in-parliament'.

Modern democracy is a consequence of the democratisation of these medieval political institutions in recent centuries. This has been achieved by extending the right to vote from a narrow elite (as late as 1831, on the eve of a big extension of the franchise, only about 5 percent of adult British men had the right to vote) and by giving parliaments, rather than the monarch, the right to appoint and remove the government.

Medieval parliaments were by no means democratic; they served as instruments through which the elite preserved its privileges. During the 19th century, first the bourgeoisie and then the working class grew so strong they could wrest from the elite many of their political privileges. Or perhaps more precisely: extend these privileges to cover other groups, which was tantamount to making them general civil rights. This was achieved through the modern parliaments, which came to form a focal point for the first genuine democratisations. As Dahl has argued, it is no coincidence that the modern breakthrough

to democracy took place where (undemocratic) representative institutions already existed:

The first successful efforts to democratize the national state typically occurred in countries with existing legislative bodies that were intended to represent fairly distinctive social interests: aristocrats, commoners, the landed interest, the commercial interest, and the like. As movements toward greater democratization gained force, therefore, the design for a 'representative' legislature did not have to be spun from gossamer fibers of abstract democratic ideas; concrete legislatures and representatives, undemocratic though they were, existed.¹¹

But from where do these representative institutions hail? And where do the ideas associated with them come from (that is, the ideological argument for representative government)? The surprising answer is that both were conceived within the Catholic Church.¹²

Medieval parliaments were based on two political innovations: representation and consent. The first principle involved a group (e.g. a municipal council) sending one or more representatives to a public assembly with a written mandate. Representatives could only approve decisions within this mandate.¹³ In return, the decisions bound the group that had appointed the representatives, including, for example, a municipal council. The second principle meant that groups that were influenced by political decisions had the right to be heard. Above all, they had the right to be consulted if the decisions challenged their property rights, as was the case with taxation. Taxes could therefore only be levied in parliaments with the consent of the representatives of the groups concerned.

We often associate representation and consent with the English Parliament in Westminster. Representatives from towns were first summoned in 1264 and 1265, and in 1295, King Edward I convened the so-called 'Model Parliament', where explicit reference was made to political consent in the summons.

However, representation and consent had already been developed elsewhere, namely within the Catholic Church in the 12th century.¹⁴ This came about in response to the conflict between church and state that erupted in the late 1000s, known as the Investiture Controversy (1075—1122). Basically, this conflict was about whether the pope or emperors, kings, and princes had the right to appoint bishops and

other important clergy. But much else followed from this disagreement. The papal 11th-century 'Declaration of Independence' was the catalyst for the two great legal systems of the Middle Ages: Roman law and ecclesiastical law.¹⁵ In the 1070s, a copy of the 500-year-old Roman Emperor Justinian's collection of Roman law was allegedly found in an Italian monastery, and around 1140, a monk named Gratian was the man behind the first major attempt to summarise or codify existing canon law. In the 12th century, lawyers and theologians at what came to be known as the universities of Bologna and Paris began interpreting these collections of laws, in large parts to distinguish between the rights that belonged to the church and those that belonged to emperors, kings, and princes.

The interpretations were flexible to the point of being creative. It was in Roman law that a solution was found to a specific problem triggered by the papal declaration of independence: the flood of trials now to be held in ecclesiastical courts, which often meant before the pope in Rome. Everything from cathedral chapters to bishops and monasteries brought cases to be decided in the Eternal City, as the Papal Court after the Investiture Controversy was considered the 'omnicompetent court of appeal for all Christendom'.¹⁶ The great distances from Germany, England, or northern France to Rome made this difficult, even if all roads, as the saying goes, led there.

Representation and consent were developed to solve this problem. Representation was found in a passage in Roman private law, according to which a corporation (*universitas*) could appoint a representative (*procurator*) with full powers (*plena potestas*). Consent was found in an even more obscure corner of Roman law, namely in a provision that stated that it was possible to enter a shared authority if something affected several people and that the conditions of that agreement could only be changed by mutual consent. Crucial here was the phrase *quod omnes tangit ab omnibus approbetur* (whatever touches all, must be approved by all). It was this very axiom that Edward I made use of in 1295 when summoning representatives to the Model Parliament.

Representation and consent were thus in the first instance legal principles. Representatives could be compared to lawyers, and they appeared in courts, not parliaments. Representation and consent served to ensure that the court's decision bound the parties to the case—precisely because they had been present via their representative, who was consulted on their behalf based on a written mandate from which their man on the ground could not deviate.

Around 1200, one of the great medieval popes, Innocent III, himself a law graduate of the University of Bologna, began applying these principles in a more, shall we say, political way. On several occasions, he summoned representatives from cities in the Papal States to his court in Rome. In April 1213, he went one step further and convened representatives of cathedral chapters for the 4th Lateran Council, which met in November 1215. Almost 1 500 clergy from all over Europe came together: the largest church council in the High and Late Middle Ages. One of the aims seems to have been to oblige the chapters to grant a tax to finance church activities. However, Innocent had to shelve these plans after opposition from the representatives. Ten years later, a French church council was convened in Bourges, south of Paris, with about 1 000 participants, once again including representatives from cathedral chapters. It was convened by a papal legate, Romanus, and its aim was to get the French church to finance a crusade against the heretical Cathars in the south of France.¹⁷

In both cases, we see the links between representation, consent, and taxation. Innocent's successor as pope, Honorius III, had explicitly recognised in 1217 that ecclesiastical law required representatives of ecclesiastical chapters to be consulted if a decision affected their property rights, as was the case with taxation. According to the canon lawyers who commented on Honorius' decree, this was done with reference to the need to secure consent. Here, we meet an early version of the principle that would later become the rallying cry of the American Revolution: 'No taxation without representation.'

Representation and consent had never been used in this way in the original Roman law. But the intellectual creativity of the High Middle Ages was not to be denied, and clerical jurists transformed the template they found in Justinian's law collection into political representation through parliaments. In this way, they had not simply revived Roman law; they had invented something brand new.¹⁸

These new political practices spread rapidly from the church to royal courts. The first time we have clear evidence of political representation being used in a secular assembly is as early as 1214, in the Crown of Aragon in present-day eastern Spain. The story is packed with drama. The Aragonese King Peter II had fallen in battle in the south of France in 1213. His son and heir, James, was just five years old and in custody of the enemy. Aragon was therefore without a king, something that usually triggered anarchy and sometimes even civil war in the High and Late Middle Ages.

A few years earlier, King Peter had made Pope Innocent III his liege lord, meaning that the Crown of Aragon was now a vassal of the pope. Innocent responded to the events described above by sending one of his right-hand men, Cardinal Peter of Benevento, as the papal envoy to solve the affair. Having secured the release of Crown Prince James, Cardinal Peter convened an assembly that included clergy, nobles, and people from the cities of the two most important parts of the kingdom: Aragon and Catalonia. The assembly was intended to get James recognised as the new King of Aragon and Count of Catalonia. It did so when it met in Lerida in August 1214. What makes the case particularly interesting is that the men from the cities appeared as official representatives of their municipal governments, in accordance with Roman law.

When examining the course of events, it becomes clear that Cardinal Peter simply copied the new political principles that had been adopted by Innocent a year earlier when he issued summonses for the 4th Lateran Council. The episode shows how the clergy spread representation to secular politics and how quickly this happened.¹⁹ The assembly in Lerida in 1214 laid the foundations for the actual parliaments that emerged during the 13th century in both Aragon (*cortes*) and Catalonia (*corts*), and which were to become at least as important for the monarchy—with respect to opposition, as well as cooperation—as the English Parliament in Westminster.²⁰

The Great Schism

As noted in the previous chapter, political institutions are one thing; ideology is something else. Interestingly, the rather lofty political thinking of the High and Late Middle Ages largely overlooked the emergence of parliaments and the representative form of government they embodied. Instead, political thinkers continued to discuss the ancient distinctions between monarchy, aristocracy, democracy, and the mixed constitution.²¹

Genuine change first occurred in the 15th century, once again driven by currents within the Catholic Church. The background this time was a conflict that threatened to tear the Catholic Church apart, the so-called Great Schism of the West (1378—1417). During this period there were two popes, one in Avignon in the south of France and the other in Rome. They divided the believers of Western and Central Europe between them. The kings of France, Castile, Aragon,

and Scotland supported the Pope in Avignon, while the kings of England, Denmark, Sweden, Poland, and Hungary backed the pope in Rome. The German emperor swayed back and forth. It was an intolerable situation for what was supposed to be ‘one holy, catholic, and apostolic church’. Yet neither of the two warring parties was willing to yield.

This quandary led to the movement referred to within the church as ‘conciliarism’, the intellectual hotbed of which was the Faculty of Theology at the University of Paris, the Sorbonne (named after its founder, Robert de Sorbon, a 13th-century chaplain to King Louis IX of France). Conciliarism was based on ideas that had been developed by university theologians and jurists over the preceding centuries. The conciliarists emphasised a cryptic passage in Gratian’s canon law that stated that a heretical pope could be deposed. Combined with the principles of representation and consent, this enabled arguments that the church—conceived as an association or corporation—could depose heretical popes through councils attended by representatives of ecclesiastical institutions. The supreme authority of the church was thus not the pope, but church councils. The pope was comparable to a prime minister in charge of a clerical, Catholic parliament.

The conciliarists also drew on the traditions of the early church. By the 4th century, Roman emperors such as Constantine the Great had convened ecumenical church councils that had sought to reach agreement on church organisation and dogmas, including a common creed, which remains in use to this day. At the same time, the bishops of the day were each other’s equals. The traces of the conciliarist organisation of the ancient church permeated several passages in Gratian’s ecclesiastical law, and it could now be turned against the popes. This was also the case with certain New Testament scriptures, including the account in the Epistle to the Galatians of how in Antioch—in modern-day Syria—Paul confronted Peter about whether gentiles (the uncircumcised) could become Christians.²² The conciliarists viewed Paul as a spokesman for the church or community of believers, while Peter (from the medieval perspective, the first Pope) represented the papacy and Rome. Here, then, was an example from Scripture itself of the former correcting the latter.

The conciliarists now applied these ideas to solve the Great Schism. Their first attempt was a spectacular failure: A church council in Pisa in 1409 merely added to the confusion by appointing a third pope, while none of them succeeded in deposing the pope in Rome or the

one in Avignon. Things went better at a church council in the southern German city of Constance, which sat from 1414 to 1418 and had the support of monarchs such as the German King Sigismund of Bohemia (and during which the Czech theologian and reformer Jan Hus was burned at the stake for heresy, despite being promised safe conduct).

The Council of Constance deposed the three sitting popes, replacing them with Pope Martin V, who gained support throughout Western Christendom. The council also adopted two landmark decrees, which stated that church councils had a higher authority than the pope, and that they would henceforth be convened at regular intervals.

The conciliarists had hereby developed and put into effect the first genuine theory of representative governance.²³ They were also the first to distinguish between a secular and a religious sphere, each with its own political institutions.²⁴ Previously, political thinkers had seen religion and politics as two parts of a single whole. That notion had roots dating back to late antiquity, and proved enormously resilient even after the 11th-century conflict between church and state. But the conciliarists now introduced the idea that the two spheres should be kept separate. Here, we find another historical precondition for modern liberal democracy: the separation of church and state.

Although ultimately defeated by the papacy within the Catholic Church, conciliarist thought continued to dominate the Faculty of Theology in Paris until the French Revolution. In fact, it was only at the First Vatican Council in 1869/70 that conciliarism was finally buried, illustrated by the adoption of the twin dogmas of papal infallibility and supremacy mentioned above. At that point in time, the conciliarists had been on the defensive since the second half of the 15th century.

In their campaign against the conciliarists, the papalists could draw on both Roman law, according to which the emperor was above the law and was legislator, and scripture, including the Gospel of Matthew (16: 18—19), where Jesus allegedly gives Peter (and thus his successors as popes) power over the church.

However, the story does not end there. Just as representation and consent had spread from the church to secular parliaments, the same thing now happened in the world of ideas. In the following centuries, conciliarist ideas influenced secular political theory,²⁵ where they contributed to constitutionalist ideas in general and the notion that the people had the right to rebel against unjust rulers in particular.

Yet the conciliarist ideas were not alone in leaving a mark on secular political theory. Lay rulers could also use the notion of the papal head of the church as propaganda for absolutism. This further underscored the observation that the Roman Catholic Church was politically flexible with respect to ideas, as well as institutions. Church law and Roman law could be used to defend opposing principles: representative government versus an absolutist or autocratic form of government. This point holds broader relevance, as seen when we shift our focus to Protestantism, which, following the Reformation of the 16th century, spread across much of Northern and Central Europe.

Protestantism as a mirror

Unlike Catholicism, Protestantism has traditionally been seen as a battering ram for modernity, including modern democracy. The classic study is Max Weber's *The Protestant Ethics and the Spirit of Capitalism*, which links modern capitalism to Protestantism, particularly the Calvinist strand.²⁶

Later research has argued that Protestant missionaries also paved the way for democracy outside Europe. This was not because the missionaries were deliberately working to spread democracy; it sprang from Protestantism encouraging the individual believer to consult the Bible and other scriptures, such as Martin Luther's *Catechism*. Missionary efforts included teaching converts to read and write. Protestants thus helped to spread education, voluntary organisations, and printed texts in the areas in which they operated. For the same reason, illiteracy was first eradicated in otherwise impoverished parts of Europe, such as Scotland and Scandinavia, whereas Catholic Southern Europe, which had historically been much more prosperous, lagged behind when it came to the reading and writing skills of the common people.²⁷

Today, there is widespread agreement that high education levels and strong civil societies are conducive to democracy; in that sense, the link between Protestantism and modern democracy is highly plausible.²⁸ Nonetheless, if we go a little further back, there is something paradoxical about the relationship; the two main Protestant reformers, Martin Luther and John Calvin, were both deeply anti-liberal and anti-democratic. They both rejected the right—well established in medieval political theory—to rebel against unjust rulers. Their argument was entirely straightforward and, in itself, unassailable: as the Apostle Paul had emphasised, secular power was instated by God, and unjust

rulers had to be part of God's great plan. Indeed, they carried out the will of God by punishing sinners: as Luther put it, they served as 'God's jailers and hangmen'.²⁹ Rebellion against tyrants was sinful; almost tantamount to rebelling against God Almighty.³⁰

Both Luther and Calvin therefore rejected the medieval notion of the right of resistance against unjust rulers on the grounds that it ultimately rested on the premise that subjects can hold their rulers accountable. As they both saw it, this was incompatible with the notion of an almighty god. However, the teachings of Luther and Calvin proved unbearable for persecuted Protestant minorities, especially in France, England, and the Netherlands. In the 16th and 17th centuries, these groups were victims of religious wars, which were far more ruthless than the more limited campaigns of medieval times. The only good medieval counterpart is the crusades waged against Muslims in the Holy Land and on the Iberian Peninsula, as well as against heretics in Europe, which, like the later religious wars, were fought to the death because their opponents were seen as blasphemers—to be converted or exterminated.

It was obviously difficult for Protestant minorities simply to turn the other cheek and accept that their persecution was an expression of God's just punishment for their sins. The French Calvinists (the Huguenots) therefore developed a new set of resistance theories during the French religious wars from 1562 to 1598, which drew inspiration from the conciliarist theories that continued to dominate the University of Paris. The Huguenot notions of the right to revolt spread to other Protestants (and, incidentally, to French Catholics as well) and became part of early liberalism via the work of English philosopher John Locke.³¹ These ideas thereby contributed to the American Declaration of Independence in 1776.

This amounted to a 180-degree turn in relation to Luther and Calvin. The new Protestant theories of rebellion marked a return to conciliarist ideas—ironically, the very concepts the early Reformers had initially rejected. With these theories of resistance, Protestantism thus began 'to find its way back to the familiar and broader medieval channels from which it had earlier departed'.³²

The trajectories of both Catholicism and Protestantism therefore underscore something that is easily forgotten: that religions are not immovable obstacles to democracy. They are rather dynamic traditions, doctrinally and institutionally. Religions can assume different political roles, even within the same context, depending on how religious leaders and followers choose to interpret and employ them.

Islam as a litmus test

Whereas Catholicism was once the undemocratic or anti-democratic religion par excellence in the eyes of learned observers, Islam today fills that role. Precisely because Islam is so frequently cast as incompatible with democracy, it offers a litmus test for the argument we are presenting in this chapter: if political flexibility and agility can be found here, it is difficult to sustain the claim that any religion is inherently at odds with democracy.

Numerous scholars and pundits have made the case for Islam being fundamentally incompatible with democratic self-government, a point of view that is also widespread in the public sphere in many Muslim and Western countries. The critics point to the lack of institutional separation between religion and state; it allegedly undermines secular leadership, and places large areas of law and public policy beyond open debate and political contestation. Critics also claim that certain doctrinal elements in Islam hinder the development and recognition of key liberal-democratic principles such as individual rights and basic civic equality.³³

For example, a former Muslim writing under the pseudonym Ibn Warraq has long defended this view. His main arguments are that:

Islamic Law tries to legislate for every single aspect of an individual's life. ...Islamic law denies the rights of women, and non-Muslim religious minorities. Pagans or nonbelievers are shown no tolerance: death or conversion. ...Islam continuously manifests hostility toward human reason, rationality, critical discussion without which democracy and scientific and moral progress are not possible. ...The notion of an individual—a moral person—who is capable of taking rational decisions and accepting moral responsibility for his free acts is lacking in Islam.³⁴

What can we say about these objections? If we go back to the Early Middle Ages, it was in the Muslim world that the Greek philosophy of antiquity was preserved and debated. Philosophers such as Averrōes (*ibn Rushd*) and Avicenna (*ibn Sina*) played a major role in the medieval rediscovery of Aristotle, and it was not until well into the High Middle Ages that secular political philosophy seriously fell into disrepute among Muslim scholars. It has been said that, in the period 800—1258 CE, Islam experienced a form of enlightenment that did not leave the same lasting imprint as the later European Enlightenment.³⁵

Moreover, for several centuries, Islam was a flexible religious system that only gradually found the form that characterises, for example, Sunni Islam today. It was long unclear whether the caliph or the religious jurists (*ulama*) had the right to interpret the Muslim doctrines. The status of religious law (*sharia*) in relation to secular law was also undecided.³⁶ Finally, of course, there is considerable variation within Islam, both between Shia and Sunni Muslims, and within each of these overarching branches.

When it comes to the great monotheistic scriptural religions, the decisive political factor is usually not the religious writings themselves, but rather the dominant interpretations of the time. These are influenced by more prosaic conditions, such as political agendas, and social and economic conflicts.³⁷ Today, there are undeniably interpretations of Islam that are emphatically anti-democratic. But there are also rationalist and humanist variants, and, in principle, there is nothing to prevent even conservative branches of Islam from being interpreted in radically different ways with respect to the religion-politics relationship.

These sociology of religion arguments may not make much of an impression on readers who are more interested in the here and now. But the claim that Islam and democracy are like fire and water is even more seriously challenged if we take a little look at developments on the ground. In practice, democracy and Islam have proven entirely compatible. Today, there are several Muslim-majority democracies, including Albania, Gambia, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Senegal. While it is correct that democracy has made few inroads in the Middle East and North Africa, where the vast majority of countries are Muslim, the picture looks different when we consider the rest of the Muslim world. The non-Arab Muslim countries are not much different from the rest of the world in their level of democracy.³⁸ The misconception that Islam and democracy are irreconcilable is probably due, in large parts, to the tendency to confuse or even conflate the core Arab countries with the Muslim world in general.

According to recent research, there are a number of more specific historical reasons why the Arab countries have fared so poorly with respect to democracy. Political scientists have highlighted how the legacy of early statehood made it possible for rulers to stave off opposition in this area. This is reflected in how the so-called ‘Muslim dummy’—a statistical measure of whether countries have Muslim majority-populations or not—becomes insignificant in analyses of

democracy levels when controlling for early statehood.³⁹ Economists have meanwhile argued that the long-run divergence between Western Europe and the Middle East can be attributed to different political bargains between rulers and religious elites. Religious authorities matter politically when they can credibly constrain rulers; historically, they came to do so in Europe but not in the Middle East.⁴⁰

If we examine the general support for democracy in the world today, studies find little difference between Muslims and people with other religious backgrounds, whereas attitudes towards freedom of expression, and gender equality and sexuality differ more. Finally, it is worth mentioning that there is a world of difference in the political role that religion plays in different Muslim countries, such as Bosnia, Brunei, Mali, Iran, Kyrgyzstan, and Saudi Arabia.⁴¹

The historical paradox

Where does this leave us? Today, there is a broad consensus among social scientists working on religion that it is not doctrine but political agency that matters. This scholarship generally rejects essentialist religious explanations and instead emphasises how it is the leading interpretations of the day, and the political bargains struck between rulers and their religious elites, that either facilitate or block democratic developments.⁴²

The history of the rise and fall of conciliarism and of the development of Protestant resistance theories clearly demonstrates the political flexibility inherent in religious ideas. Another good example is how the Catholic Church officially reconciled with modern representative democracy and liberalism in the 1960s. This occurred at the Second Vatican Council (1962—1965), which reformed the Catholic Church, with the result that it henceforth came to play an active role in promoting democracy in Southern and Eastern Europe, as well as in Latin America and Asia.⁴³

At the same time, the Catholic Church has had a harder time reconciling with a newer liberal current that has been gaining momentum since the 1970s, aiming to give equal rights to women and LGBTQ people, and leaving it up to individuals how to define and realise their life. Pope John Paul II (r. 1978—2005), former Archbishop of Krakow, challenged communism in the name of democracy and citizen rights, but was at the same time archconservative on questions regarding rights for women and homosexuals, especially within the

Catholic Church.⁴⁴ This ambivalence is relevant to understand the current political situation in Poland, where the Catholic Church has, through selective endorsement of the PiS party's conservative agenda and its moral authority in public life, helped legitimise democratic backsliding.

Upon closer examination, the relationship between the Catholic Church and democracy is marked by a historical paradox. We have seen how representation and consent were developed by clergy, as legal and then political principles, and that conciliarists were the first to devise an intellectual defence of the representative form of government. But we have also seen how conciliarism was defeated by the high papalist or absolutist wing within the church, and how, after the French Revolution and the great liberal revolutions of the mid-19th century, the Catholic Church directly denounced democracy and liberalism.

Protestantism saw the exact opposite development, with the renunciation of the idea of political consent by Luther and Calvin being replaced by Protestant theories of resistance, culminating in modern liberalism, in which individual liberties merge with political representation, and checks and balances. Therefore, if we look exclusively at the period following the American and French revolutions, we form an image of Protestantism as a pro-democratic force and Catholicism as an anti-democratic force. While this image holds some truth, it obscures a more significant historical insight: Modern representative democracy is based on political innovations that were made within the Catholic Church in the High and Late Middle Ages.

A similar pattern appears when we shift focus to Islam. Although today portrayed as the religion most hostile to—indeed, frequently seen as fully incompatible with—democracy, Islam likewise contains reformist strands that challenge this assumption. When we go further back in time, we find that it, too, has undergone liberal and anti-liberal phases, and that the present versions of Sunni Islam, for example, took a long time to crystallise. In other words, the historical paradox extends across the major monotheistic religions.

This point is not just of historical relevance. The present chapter shows how we must be wary of concluding that certain religions are incompatible with democracy simply because influential groups use them to attack democracy and liberalism. As we have seen, new interpretations can suddenly emerge and replace positions that seemed impregnable (e.g. the denial of the right to rebel against unjust rulers

by Luther and Calvin). In fact, we find examples of directly opposing political ideas succeeding each other, anchored in one and the same set of religious conceptions.

Consider, for instance, the aforementioned Pope Pius IX, who was just 54 years old when he was appointed in 1846. He was elected despite opposition from among the old guard of the cardinals, and his election was met with high expectations by progressives. Pius was seen as a modern and liberal voice within the church, and as an advocate of political freedom for the many Italians who were subject to the yoke of foreign states at that time. For the next two years, he was undoubtedly the most popular man in Italy, perhaps in all of Catholic Europe. Then came the great liberal revolutions and the unification of Italy. Pius never forgave the national liberal forces that forced him to flee Rome in haste in 1849 and left him a self-proclaimed prisoner in the Vatican after 1870. It is against this background that we must understand his political diatribes against democracy and liberalism, and against the new Italian nation state. The career of Pope Pius could have been very different had he not become engulfed in the 19th-century national liberal maelstrom.

To conclude, history demonstrates how even deeply hierarchical traditions can adapt to the political norms we associate with democracy. This indicates that hardly any religious system is inherently incompatible with democracy, in the way we defined it when discussing Myth 1.

Notes

- 1 All content is originally written by the authors but Microsoft Copilot and ChatGPT 4-5.2 were used for proofreading.
- 2 Megan Manson, *Secularism Isn't Optional for Democracy. It's Essential*. www.humanisticallyspeaking.org/post/secularism-isn-t-optional-for-democracy-it-s-essential
- 3 Adam Przeworski (2009), "Conquered or Granted: A History of Suffrage Extensions," *British Journal of Political Science* 39(2), 291–321.
- 4 Jørgen Møller (2015), *State Formation, Regime Change and Economic Development* (London: Routledge), Chapters 4 and 16.
- 5 Large parts of this chapter are based on Jørgen Møller (2019), "The Catholic Invention of Representative Government", www.the-american-interest.com/2019/01/24/the-catholic-invention-of-representative-government/.
- 6 Michael Novak (1989), *Catholic Social Thought and Liberal Institutions: Freedom with Justice* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers), p. 30.

- 7 Kingsley Davis (1951), "Political Ambivalence in Latin America," pp. 224–247 in A. N. Christensen (ed.), *The Evolution of Latin American Government* (New York: Henry Holt), p. 240. In the same vein, it has been emphasised that 'Catholic nations have not always been ardent supporters of democracy. They are authoritarian in spiritual matters; and since the dividing line between the spiritual and the temporal may be very fine or even confused, they are often disinclined to seek solutions in temporal affairs through the mere counting of heads.' Pierre E. Trudeau (1960), "Some Obstacles to Democracy in Quebec," pp. 241–259 in Mason Wade (ed.), *Canadian Dualism: Studies of French–English Relations* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press), p. 245.
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5 Myth 5

Democracy is only for Western countries¹

American president Woodrow Wilson saw World War I as a war that would make the world safe for democracy and national self-determination. But by ‘the world’, Wilson, who had grown up in the American South and allowed racial segregation in his government apparatus, clearly meant ‘the Western world’. As late as 1917, he had explained his reluctance to enter the war to some of his advisors by pointing out that a strong post-war America was needed to ensure the continued dominance of the white race. Political self-government was not seen as something that was relevant to, for example, Africans or Asians.

During the post-war peace negotiations, Japan, although formally one of the victors of the war, unsuccessfully lobbied to introduce an article on racial equality that would apply to all members of the League of Nations. Conservative British Foreign Secretary Arthur Balfour expressed the scepticism of the day when he nonchalantly objected that surely no one would say that a person from Central Africa was equal to a European.² As late as in the decades following World War II, most European colonial powers refused to let the peoples of their overseas colonies decide on their own affairs. The Vietnam War originated in stubborn and backward-looking French attempts to maintain their grip on what was then called French Indochina, and well into the 1970s, Portugal sought to prevent the peoples of Angola and Mozambique from gaining independence.

This was even though democracy had, in practice, proven perfectly viable in colonial settings. Three of the world’s oldest representative democracies are Australia, Canada, and New Zealand, all of which introduced equal and universal suffrage for men and full female

suffrage before anything similar happened in the mother country, Britain, and at a time when they were still in many respects colonies. In fact, we can add South Africa to this list. But that addition highlights how democratic rights were given only to whites, a clear minority in South Africa. Similarly, the aborigines in Australia had to wait until 1960 to get political rights. In Canada, the Inuit were formally given the right to vote in 1950, but were prevented from actually voting by a lack of ballot boxes, which were first provided in 1962, and prior to 1960, First Nations could not vote without losing their Indian status.

Although modern representative democracy is now over 200 years old, we need only look back a generation or two to find a time when it was largely confined to Western Europe, the Americas, and Oceania. Japan experimented with democracy as early as the 1920s, and the Land of the Rising Sun introduced a stable democracy after World War II at the same time as India, which had gained independence from Britain and has since formed the world's most populous democracy. However, as recently as 1985, there were only eight democracies outside the Western world.³

Many observers would argue that this was no coincidence. This sceptical view of the democratic potential of non-Western countries especially thrives outside of academia. However, there are also examples of researchers who, in recent decades, have said and written things along these lines, thereby contributing to the view that 'the struggle between democracy and autocracy—or liberalism and illiberalism—inherently pits Westerners against non-Westerners'.⁴ This perspective is most closely associated with the late American political scientist Samuel P. Huntington. According to his *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*,⁵ democracy presupposes a Western cultural background, which he associated with Catholicism and Protestantism.

Huntington argues that Western civilisation has unique preconditions for democracy. These preconditions can be traced back to the classical heritage of ancient Greece and Rome, the tradition of distinguishing between secular and religious authority, and strong civil societies. Huntington also highlights individualism and historical experiences with parliaments and the rule of law as factors that separate the 'West' from the 'rest', and which together are a necessary precondition for democracy to function. According to Huntington, democracy is a foreign element that is incompatible with local cultures and traditions outside the West.

Interestingly, some African, Asian, and Muslim political elites have advocated a similar view. Here, the assertion, which clearly serves to maintain the grip of elites on power, is that a form of soft or benign authoritarian rule with restrictions on freedom of expression and assembly, as well as limited political participation, is best suited to countries where the peoples are community-oriented.⁶ This has led to attempts to establish alternatives to liberal democracy that are more in line with local customs—as interpreted by local political and religious elites.

Reflecting on the question of whether certain nations are inherently incapable of responsibly exercising the right to vote, *Washington Post* journalist Keith Richburg has observed:

It is a view I have heard more often than I care to recount, except these days it does not necessarily come from right-wing racists. It's a view more often voiced in another form by despots usually as a justification for their own continued hold on power. I heard it repeatedly as a foreign correspondent for nearly 20 years while travelling around Africa, Asia and the Middle East. I was lectured about "Asian values" and told how the tradition of Confucianism meant Asians favoured a paternalistic, authoritarian form of rule. And in Africa I was told about the benefits of "African-style democracy," which sometimes meant "no-party democracy," as in Uganda. I was warned about the dangers of unfettered democracy leading to tribalism, chaos, violence and worse. Africans, I repeatedly heard, preferred "Big Man" rule, modern-day versions of old tribal leaders.⁷

In addition to cultural factors, observers who are sceptical about democracy beyond the Western world often point to low levels of socio-economic modernisation and the absence of a strong, effective state.⁸ In poor countries, the population is not sufficiently moderate, their time horizon is often short, and they lack the necessary basic competencies, including education, to organise and provide the elite with qualified opposition. Similarly, weak states struggle to uphold law and order through democratic means. Corruption and a lack of administrative efficiency undermine growth-promoting economic measures, creating political frustrations, disorder, and increasing support for authoritarian leaders, meaning democratisation without a strong state is doomed to fail.⁹ These are some of the main objections against the democratic potential of non-Western countries.

We have already described how representative government was developed within the Catholic Church and spread by clergy throughout Catholic Europe. We have also seen that Protestantism fertilised the ground for democracy in many places by being a catalyst for education, the printing press, and associational life. In that sense, it is hardly surprising that it was in Europe and the European settler colonies that modern representative democracy emerged. This is also where democracy has been most stable, and Europe and its overseas offshoots remain the most democratic parts of the world, almost regardless of the metric. But this does not mean that a Western cultural background, a strong state, and prosperity are necessary conditions for introducing and maintaining democracy. In the previous chapter, we already touched on this issue in the discussion of the flexibility of religion and whether democracy is incompatible with Islam. Here, we broaden the perspective to include additional factors.

We begin this chapter by showing that democracies have emerged and endured in many places beyond the Western world. Thereafter we challenge three claims: that certain civilisations and cultures inherently preclude the practice of democracy, that democracy requires a strong state, and that prosperity is a prerequisite for democratic development.

The flexible nature of culture

There may well be a difference in terms of how easy or difficult it is for different belief systems to be reconciled with democratic principles, directly or indirectly. But all the major monotheistic ‘religions of the book’—Christianity, Judaism, and Islam—have historically proven culturally and politically flexible, as we saw when discussing Myth 4. This is even more the case with quasi-religious systems of thought, such as Confucianism and Buddhism.¹⁰ In all these cases, the scriptures contain passages that can be used to justify very different (even opposing) political forms of rule or perceptions of freedom. Religions and cultures are, in short, malleable and ambiguous entities.

The idea that democracy is somehow alien to the cultural traditions outside Europe and North America has not only been advanced by external observers. During the era of decolonisation, several African leaders argued that Western-style multiparty democracy was inappropriate for post-colonial contexts, because it imported confrontational party politics into societies that needed development and

national cohesion. Julius Nyerere in Tanzania famously promoted his conception of *ujamaa*—a special kind of African socialism—as a more authentic form of collective decision-making rooted in village traditions of consensus. His contemporary, Kwame Nkrumah in Ghana, today one of the heroes of the post-colonialism academic approach, similarly defended one-party rule on the premise that pre-colonial African political cultures had been based on communal deliberation rather than adversarial party competition.¹¹

We find a parallel line of reasoning across parts of East and Southeast Asia, articulated by prominent heads of government such as Lee Kuan Yew in Singapore and Mahathir Mohamad in Malaysia. They argued that ‘Asian values’ emphasised harmony, duty, and respect for authority rather than liberal individualism and pluralism, and that liberal democracy is a culturally specific product of Western civilisation unsuitable for Asia’s cultural and historical context.¹²

However, the moment we turn from official rhetoric to institutional developments, a rather different picture emerges. Several countries in East Asia with deep Confucian traditions, including Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan, have become stable democracies that combine high levels of economic development with individual rights. These examples have made such a big impression that arguments are now presented to the effect that Confucian traditions of meritocratic governance, limits on arbitrary rule, education, and civic duty support democracy rather than undermine it. Neither Confucian heritage nor ‘Asian values’ thus pose inherent obstacles to democratic transitions or the consolidation of democracy.

At the same time, African experiences also contradict the cultural incompatibility thesis. Botswana’s democratic experience since independence, and Ghana’s robust democratic track record since the 1990s illustrate that democratic institutions can take root in contexts that leaders previously claimed were culturally unsuited for electoral competition.¹³

Appeals to cultural authenticity have often been strategically deployed by incumbent rulers, rather than grounded in genuine societal values. Authoritarian leaders have invoked local or regional customs to justify one-party dominance, limit public accountability, and frame opposition as culturally alien. However, popular support for democratic reforms and demands for political participation suggest that cultural traditions are neither fixed nor politically deterministic. Just as we saw in the religious context, cultural traditions are highly

malleable and have been interpreted both against and in favour of democratic rule, to a large degree depending on the political interests of those voicing critique or support.

If we broaden our perspective to societal values more generally, a substantial body of research has identified a strong positive association between so-called self-expression values (also referred to as post-materialist or emancipatory values) and democracy. Societies in which citizens place greater emphasis on personal autonomy, tolerance, and quality of life tend to be more democratic than those in which concerns about material survival, security, and order dominate.¹⁴

However, important exceptions from this pattern exist. For example, the level of self-expression values in democratic South Korea and Taiwan is similar to those in autocratic China, and the level in the democratic Baltic countries is similar to that in autocratic Azerbaijan, Morocco, and Zimbabwe. In Latin America, El Salvador and Venezuela score as high as many democracies in the region and as many countries in Southern Europe. Recent analyses suggest that the causal relationship may run in the opposite direction: rather than values fostering democracy, democratic institutions and practices may promote orientations toward self-realisation.¹⁵ In this sense, democracy appears to cultivate more individualistic and freedom-oriented citizens, as experience with political rights and influence gradually shifts priorities away from a narrow focus on economic conditions, order, and tradition.

Against this background, it is all the more striking when political and religious authorities claim that 'Western' democracy is not a good fit for the culture of their country, as King Fahd of Saudi Arabia did in 1992 when he made the following blunt statement, in the context of the wave of democratisation that was then flooding most other parts of the world:

The democratic system that is predominant in the world is not a suitable system for the peoples of our region. Our peoples' makeup and unique qualities are different from those of the rest of the world. ... We have our Islamic beliefs that constitute a complete and fully integrated system. Free elections are not within this Islamic system.¹⁶

Invoking Asian, Muslim, African, or Russian models to defend authoritarianism often amounts to a misuse of cultural arguments—serving as

a convenient shield for authoritarian elites to protect their privileges from both domestic and international demands for democratic reform and individual freedoms.¹⁷

The strong state as a double-edged sword

The notion that democracy presupposes a strong state is based on the European political development from the Middle Ages up to World War I. As we have already made clear, this is where modern democracy first emerged, and it is here—as well as in the former British colonies of Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and the United States—that democracy has proven most stable. According to many scholars, this is due to a three-stage process, in which an effective state was first established, which subsequently helped foster a national community that, in turn, formed a solid foundation for modern democracy.¹⁸ The first two steps were allegedly taken because war and the threat of war forced European monarchs to establish efficient administrations and, over time, a common footing based on a national identity.¹⁹

In many places outside Europe, the sequence has been the exact opposite: Elections have been introduced in the absence of strong state institutions and/or a national community. It is therefore hardly surprising that the result has been different, it is often claimed.²⁰ Popular government, lacking the foundational elements that ensure its stability, has often devolved into majority tyranny, disorder, or simply malpractice. In addition, the ‘global community’ has prevented wars between states since 1945, which means that the political elites have not been incentivised to create efficient and independent public institutions that will eventually rein in their own power. Here, too, the situation differs fundamentally from the European state-formation process, which was extremely violent and bloody, especially from the Reformation onwards. Some researchers have gone so far as to suggest that, in areas characterised by weak states, we should ‘give war a chance’,²¹ an ironic take on the old peace movement slogan ‘give peace a chance’.

The problem with these notions is that they are based on a very selective reading of European history. First, there is certainly no reason to romanticise the European democratisation process. The period from the French Revolution to 1945 was marked by the three most destructive wars ever: the Napoleonic Wars, World War I, and World War II. The latter two, in particular, were characterised by unprecedented

'ethnic cleansing'. Going back to 1500, we can further add a string of religious wars that were waged with an almost unfathomable fanaticism and cruelty, because they were about the most important thing for a human being who subscribes to a religious faith: salvation.

Secondly, as we have already described, the representative form of government emerged long before the modern state. In fact, representation was a solution to the problem that there was no state.²² In many areas of Europe, medieval parliaments themselves collected the taxes they agreed to, because European kings and princes lacked a body of administrators that could do so. In the High and Late Middle Ages, the crowned heads of Europe did not even have standing armies (only a body of household retainers), let alone a police force or local government. Until the French Revolution, state capacity was extremely feeble throughout Europe, and state power was often entirely absent on the local level, where cities, parishes, and other entities controlled their own affairs.

Taking this into account, the European experience suddenly looks rather different. European state-building took place after the establishment of a kind of political self-government through parliaments. Fully or partially autonomous local entities were already a reality. That made it no less brutal. We have already mentioned that the road to the modern state was paved with violence, purges, and destruction. But the many autonomous corporate groups meant that those in power could harness existing institutions (from parliaments to cities and parishes) as conduits for authority, which cleared the path for the modern state. In other words, one can turn the European development upside-down and use it to argue that effective state-building presupposes a form of political self-government; or at least that those in power are not despotic and are held accountable by parliaments and strong social groups.²³

No matter how we read European history, it is difficult to find evidence that state-building should take precedence over democracy. Moreover, according to much research, this formula is like a set of instructions for preventing democratic breakthroughs: If those in power can rely on a strong state, it is difficult to see why they should give the population political concessions. Here, we can delve back into our description of the conditions for 'early democracy'. Throughout history, self-government has frequently been sacrificed on the altar of state-building. In cases like China, where state power was strong from an early stage, while civil society was weak, political self-government never stood a chance.²⁴

As mentioned in the previous chapter, research shows that the countries outside Europe that had the strongest states, including many Arab-speaking countries, were able to keep democratic impulses at bay for longer.²⁵ Recent scholarship also suggests that it is important to distinguish between the strength and administrative quality of the state. While a well-functioning administration seems to be associated with democratic stability and the possibility of developing democracy further, this is not the case with the ability of the state to control its territory.²⁶

Many researchers have recently challenged the idea of 'state first, then democracy', in and beyond Europe.²⁷ Their main objection is that democracy is the best way to handle political conflicts in a non-violent manner and thus create a peaceful foundation for state-building. Although democratic openings can bring long-suppressed ethnic tensions and other conflicts to light, such challenges can often be addressed through the democratic process. And while a strong state can put obstacles in the way of democratisation processes, democratically elected politicians are incentivised to make the administration less corrupt and more efficient simply to please voters.²⁸ Thus, a form of synergy or symbiosis can arise, where democracy and administrative capacity reinforce each other.

Finally, we can add two rather prosaic, but nonetheless important points. First, it is rather naive to believe that dictators have an interest in promoting state-building that goes beyond securing their own position of power. There may be exceptions, including Lee Kuan Yew in Singapore, who we will get back to. As a general rule, however, dictators have less incentive to take the wellbeing of the general population into account. They rarely have an interest in creating an efficient and impartial administration that will limit their ability to exercise power arbitrarily; and when they do attempt it, they often encounter challenges every bit as formidable as those faced by democratically elected leaders.

Second, we live in an age when expectations about political self-government are such that it is difficult to imagine populations being ready to put them on standby to prioritise state-building.²⁹ In England, nearly 700 years passed between the first convening of Parliament in the 13th century and the series of 19th- and 20th-century reforms that led to the increased protection of political liberties, which safeguarded parliamentarism, and introduced universal suffrage. In America, de-facto universal suffrage was only achieved with the Voting Rights

Act in 1965. In our native Denmark, more than 50 years passed from the first liberal constitution in 1849 to the breakthrough of responsible government in the form of parliamentarism in 1901, and it took another 14 years, until 1915, before equal franchise was a reality. The sequence was even more protracted in other European countries and characterised by numerous setbacks.

Such political patience can hardly be expected in our globalised world. We saw this clearly in 2011, when millions of people in the Middle East and North Africa bravely challenged their dictatorial regimes. Some argue that these 'Arab uprisings' provide evidence of how political upheaval fuels fires of resentment and triggers conflicts, such as the brutal civil war that devastated Syria for over a decade. But events since 2011 demonstrate just how difficult it is to take power away from an authoritarian regime if it can rely on a strong state, including a powerful military and security apparatus.

Not the preserve of the rich

In the mid-1980s, South Korea and Taiwan emerged as shining examples of how the transition from a developing country to modern industrial society does not necessarily lead to democratic reforms. The two countries were used as ammunition against so-called modernisation theory; that is, the notion that large-scale socioeconomic modernisation processes lead to democracy. Then came the democratic transitions of South Korea (1988) and Taiwan (1996), and suddenly the two countries were among the favourite examples of modernisation theorists.

Which way is up? Is it at least not correct that poor countries cannot become democratic? Neither South Korea nor Taiwan was democratic when they emerged as independent countries, and democracy collapsed in South Korea the year after its first free election in 1960.

A quick glance at the contemporary world shows that rich countries are, on average, more democratic than poor countries. But a simple comparison of gross domestic product (GDP) per capita and various measures of democracy also reveals that there are many poor democracies, and that this has been the case for quite some time. This group includes very diverse countries, such as Bhutan, Guatemala, Ghana, Moldova, and Papua New Guinea. These examples and many others show that countries can democratise without being affluent, and therefore also in the absence of the high levels of education and welfare

systems that usually go hand in hand with prosperity. It is also worth noting that many Western countries transitioned to democracy at a time—in some cases as far back as the mid-19th century—when their level of economic development at best matched what we find in contemporary developing countries. If it was not possible for poor countries to become democratic, then the first democratic breakthroughs in Europe and the European settler colonies should have taken place much later.

Add to this that wealth, in itself, does not appear to be the most important factor; it matters more how a country has become prosperous. Industrialisation via a planned economy is less conducive to democracy than if it takes place within the framework of a market economy. If those in power have full control over the economy, power in society will be skewed (in favour of the elites), and it will be difficult for civil society groups to mobilise. And if the prosperity of a country largely comes from the exploitation of natural resources (e.g. large oil reserves), the prospects for democracy are actually worse than in poorer countries. Oil-rich dictators can take advantage of the ‘easy’ access to resources to bribe important groups—sometimes the whole population—and to build a strong security apparatus that allows them to crack down on political opposition.³⁰

Certain intermediate stages in a socioeconomic development process may also tempt anti-democratic forces in the military and bureaucracy to seize power, fearing that short-term popular demands—especially from a rising working class—could derail economic progress and weaken the country’s foreign policy capacity. Relatively prosperous Latin American countries in the post-World War II period, such as Argentina, Uruguay, Chile, and Brazil, provide some of the most illustrative cases of this development.³¹ Thus, it is not necessarily the poorest countries that face the greatest obstacles to democratisation.

Can we say something more general about the relationship between prosperity and democracy? Comprehensive statistical analyses point in different directions. Overall, economic development is more strongly associated with democratic stability than with the transition to democracy. In the latter case, numerous exceptions show that a country’s level of prosperity is neither a necessary nor sufficient condition for establishing democracy. Moreover, the context’s influence varies across different aspects of democracy.³²

Democracy in unexpected places

In this chapter, we have discussed a set of often heard claims that can be summarised as follows: Democracy presupposes a Western heritage that combines prosperity, Christianity, and early state-building. These notions have proven surprisingly resilient. We started with Huntington's gloomy predictions from 1996 that we should expect more and bloodier conflicts along the fault lines between different civilisations, and that democracy was unlikely to gain ground outside the West. Ironically, Huntington's book appeared just as democracy was spreading across much of the globe—including sub-Saharan Africa and parts of Southeast Asia. Since the breakdown of communism between 1989 and 1991, sub-Saharan Africa has accomplished something akin to a democratic miracle. Presently, 15 out of 49 countries in this region are categorised as democracies. Going back to the late 1980s, only Botswana and Mauritius held this title.

At the time, there was strong consensus among academics that democracy was not possible in sub-Saharan Africa because the necessary conditions were not in place. Three decades later, we can see that the researchers were wrong—and sub-Saharan Africa is not the only example. Democracies are now found in most regions of the world, including in the Dominican Republic, Peru, Iraq, Israel, Nepal, Mongolia, Indonesia, Taiwan, and Fiji. This is illustrated in Figure 5.1, where the democracies of the world are indicated in light grey, while the dictatorships are indicated in black.

It is also important to recognise that there were hard-and-fast geopolitical reasons that democracy had made such limited headway outside of the Western world around 1990. This part of the world could hardly democratise before decolonisation: being an independent country is a prerequisite for being a democratic state. These decolonisations, starting in the immediate aftermath of World War II but only ending in the 1970s, were often bloody struggles, which left a lot of scars and a legacy of violence.

Moreover, they took place within the context of the Cold War, an epic contest between the democratic West and the communist East. Scholars have shown how this contest suppressed democratisation everywhere, as the newly independent countries became pawns in a game played by the USA and its allies, on the one hand, and the Soviet Union and its allies, on the other. This was a game about geopolitics, not about democracy, and even the Western camp often sacrificed



Figure 5.1 Democracy versus dictatorship in 2025.

Source: Lexical Index of Electoral Democracy (v6.9).

Democracy versus dictatorship is measured using the competitive elections indicator, which indicates whether the executive and legislative political power is actually decided through competitive elections.

political self-government on the altar of power politics, for instance, in Chile in 1973. It was only with the end of the Cold War between 1989 and 1991 that non-Western countries were fully free to realise their democratic potential.³³ The scholars and pundits who were so very sceptical about democracy spreading beyond the West around this time—the high-tide of Myth 5—blithely ignored how even the democratic countries in which they were living and working had contributed to the democratic drought of the first four decades after 1945.

To the question of whether only Western countries can become democracies, the answer must therefore be an unequivocal ‘No!’ There is much to suggest that Catholicism and Protestantism have played a role in the historical emergence of democracy in the West, and there are good reasons to believe that prosperity and a well-functioning state apparatus are conducive to democratic stability in our time. But none of these factors are necessary for a country to establish, maintain, and refine democracy. Modern democracy emerged in the West, but that does not mean that it is ill-suited to other parts of the world. On the contrary, democracy’s inherent adaptability and broad appeal make it capable of striking roots in a wide range of societies.

If the aim is to promote democracy in the long term, there is little to suggest postponing democratisation to a later point in time, when the background conditions have become more favourable. In many cases, the best strategy appears to be to establish democracy as soon as possible. When elites and ordinary citizens practise democracy, they gradually learn to respect differing viewpoints, resolve conflicts peacefully, and exercise their rights to freedom. Over time, societies, large and small, become so accustomed to the logic of democracy that it comes to feel almost second nature. As experience with democracy increases (measured in time and in quality), so does the likelihood of democracy stabilising.³⁴ However, the beneficial effect arises primarily if there is genuine competition for governing power through free elections. A partial political opening, where the democratic institutions are mostly a façade, can do more harm than good.³⁵

In summary, this chapter has shown that democracy is not Western by nature, but universal in adaptation. It has emerged in different cultural environments, under different levels of socioeconomic development, and via different historical trajectories, and has endured wherever institutions allow citizens to hold rulers accountable via constraints on power. The varied experiences of Colombia, Bhutan, Botswana, Japan, Vanuatu, and many other places remind us that

democracy is not tied to a single culture or civilisation, but can be built in multiple ways, in different contexts, when political actors commit to rules that limit and replace governments peacefully.

Notes

- 1 All content is originally written by the authors but Microsoft Copilot and ChatGPT 4-5.2 were used for proofreading.
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- 3 The eight non-Western democracies were Gambia, Botswana, Mauritius, Türkiye, Japan, India, Thailand, and Papua New Guinea. The overview excludes ten democratic microstates in Oceania. The tally is based on the *Lexical Index of Electoral Democracy* v6.9, <https://dataverse.harvard.edu/dataset.xhtml?persistentId=doi:10.7910/DVN/WPKNIT>.
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- 13 See, e.g. Francis Fukuyama (1995), "Confucianism and Democracy," *Journal of Democracy* 6(2), 22–33; Amartya Sen (1999), "Democracy as a Universal Value," *Journal of Democracy* 10(3), 3–17.
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6 Myth 6

Democracy is ineffective¹

Democratic breakthroughs and hopes for a new and better world normally go hand in hand. The brave masses in East Berlin, Prague, and Budapest in 1989, in Kiev in 2004, and in Cairo and Tunis in 2011 are a mere fraction of the millions and millions of people who have witnessed dictators and oppressive regimes topple, seeing democracy as a high-speed train to security, solidarity, and prosperity: to the land of milk and honey, to use a Biblical metaphor.

Yet in many new democracies, citizens have quickly come to the sobering realisation that political rights do not automatically translate into a better or easier life. Even in the new European Union (EU) member states of Central and Eastern Europe, where standards of living have increased markedly in recent decades, widespread dissatisfaction and unfulfilled expectations persist. The transition from a planned economy to a market economy has been painful for many groups, and the new democratic rulers have often been unable or unwilling to do away with corruption, nepotism, and discrimination. Elsewhere, political concessions or collapse of dictatorships have at times ushered in even harsher realities—marked by civil war and ethnic cleansing.

These shattered hopes have breathed new life into a critique of democracy that can be traced all the way back to antiquity, and which comes in many different versions:² Democracies are inefficient and create anarchy; democracy is characterised by squabbles and sluggish decision-making processes; the consideration of the common good gives way to narrow special interests; politicians fail to implement reforms that cost support among voters and benefactors in the short term, but which are necessary in the long term; and those who pander

to the public (rather than the most noble and competent) are elected to the most important political posts, which means that the efforts to deal with major challenges, such as war and epidemics, are doomed to fail. These are just a few of the arguments that we have heard repeatedly in recent years, and which have led to the publication of books with ominous titles such as *Democracy Kills*, *Democracy: The God that Failed*, *The Dark Side of Democracy*, and *Against Democracy*.³

According to this line of reasoning, democracy is worse at securing stability and prosperity than a ‘benign’ dictatorship, what 18th- and 19th-century Europeans called ‘enlightened’ absolutism. This claim is also known as the ‘Lee hypothesis’, after former Singaporean prime minister Lee Kuan Yew, who was captain on the bridge during the period (1959—1990) when this small city state took the most important strides in its transformation from a poor developing country to one of the richest, most competitive, high-tech economies in the world. In addition to Singapore, China’s economic boom in recent decades has often been cited—by foreign observers and Chinese authorities alike—as evidence supporting the ‘effective dictatorship hypothesis’.⁴ For instance, when demonstrations turned violent during the presidential elections in Kenya in 2008, an editorial in the Chinese *People’s Daily* remarked that ‘Western-style democratic theory simply isn’t suited to African conditions, but rather carries with it the root of disaster.’⁵

Similar sentiments are occasionally voiced in Western countries. A couple of years ago, a Norwegian professor of economics wrote in a column about what many had likely been thinking, but had not dared say out loud:

Democracy can work perfectly well in good times, when all of the curves are pointing up, everyone is getting better off and no one worse, so that everyone is reasonably happy. It gets worse when it becomes necessary to cut off special interest groups and cut back on the privileges to which people have become accustomed: low retirement age, free medicine and health care, and free education all the way up to the doctoral level. Then people take to the streets and throw stones and what’s worse. The incumbent governments become paralyzed, and the problems grow worse and worse.⁶

Another critique of democracy has emerged from climate activists: The sluggish democratic decision-making processes, the tendency to

roll out the red carpet for industry lobbyists, and the constant need to placate voters are not to the benefit of Mother Earth and future generations. According to James Lovelock, researcher and leading environmentalist, democracy is one of the main obstacles to a rapid and effective response to climate change:

Even the best democracies agree that when a major war approaches, democracy must be put on hold for the time being. I have a feeling that climate change may be an issue as severe as a war. It may be necessary to put democracy on hold for a while.⁷

To summarise, democracies are accused of delivering bad results due to short-termism, pain aversion, elite capture, division and conflict, and voter ignorance.⁸ The alternative seems obvious. As highlighted by Daniel A. Bell, a Canadian professor based in China, Chinese government officials do not have:

...particular groups in society they have to please. When the selected leaders say there is a climate problem and define goals related to climate and energy, one can count on what they are saying and that they stand firm. ...It would be dreadful from a climate perspective if China were to introduce a political system characterised by one person, one vote.⁹

In a similar vein, it has been suggested that the best solution is to raise and educate a virtuous ruling class of eco-elites within authoritarian regimes, tasked with implementing effective environmental policies.¹⁰

But is democracy really to blame for the uncertainty and hardship that many citizens experience? Is rule by the people inevitably short-sighted, and would an enlightened strongman do better? Would the environment benefit from this? To address these questions, this chapter looks at four areas where democracy is often accused of falling short. We begin with the claim that democracies are weak, fractious, and prone to violent conflict or foreign-policy paralysis. We then turn to economic performance, asking whether democracies actually deliver prosperity and welfare. A third section considers the charge that democracy stands in the way of effective environmental and climate action. Finally, we take a closer look at China, which is frequently held up as an alternative model and supposed proof of autocratic efficiency.

The illusion of dictatorial stability and efficiency

A common starting point is the belief that democracies are messy, indecisive, and prone to internal conflict, whereas dictatorships appear stable and efficient. The claim that democracy increases the risk of civil and international wars can be summarised as follows: When a dictatorship collapses or is liberalised, the ability and willingness of those in power to maintain order with an iron fist, that is, through systematic or arbitrary repression, is reduced. Both domestic and external enemies will try to exploit this void to advance their agendas by violent means, and demagogues have free rein to mobilise their followers by calling for ethnic cleansing and foreign policy adventures. Democratic openings will therefore have negative consequences for peace and harmony; the pot will simply boil over.

In the 1990s and 2000s, these claims were confirmed in a series of studies that took the form of large-scale statistical analyses and/or historical reviews of individual cases.¹¹ However, these studies suffer from several problems. They rest almost without exception on a measure of democracy that is based on the so-called POLITY Index, where intermediate values often reflect a high level of political violence. It is hardly surprising that analyses indicate that ‘semi-democracies’ (hybrid regimes) or regime changes from closed dictatorships towards a middle position on the democracy index are associated with violent conflict. Such co-variation is almost true by definition, given the construction of the measure. If one removes the problematic sub-components from the index or uses alternative measures that do not suffer from the same problem, the negative relationship disappears. Moreover, there is broad agreement in the literature that countries that have successfully established a democracy with free elections face a significantly lower risk of civil war and political violence than any form of dictatorship.¹²

The historical cases that have been used to confirm the claims about the dark side of democracy are also problematic: Countries such as Egypt (1976–2009), Iran (1982–2008), Kazakhstan (1991–2009), Mexico (1917–1999), Morocco (1800–1964), Singapore (1965–2009), Tanzania (1961–2009), Hungary (1867–1943), Yemen (1993–2009), and Zimbabwe (1970–2009) have all been cited as evidence of how the early stages of democracy are rife with conflict.¹³ The same is true of the genocide committed by Türkiye against the Armenians during World War I, by the Hutus against the Tutsis in

Rwanda, and by the Serbs against the Bosnian Muslims in the 1990s. Indeed, even crimes against humanity committed under Hitler, Stalin, Mao, and Pol Pot have been invoked; though in this case, it is not democracy in the narrow sense that is cast as the villain, but rather the democratic notion of popular sovereignty—especially when it is tied to a single ethnic group.¹⁴

It is entirely accurate that several of the countries mentioned above have experienced significant conflict, including civil wars, interstate wars, and episodes of ethnic cleansing. However, it is also evident that none of these cases came close to being democracies, nor had they undergone genuine democratisation during the periods in question.¹⁵

Indeed, it would be quite surprising if that were truly the case. It is easy to challenge the notion that democracy leads to violent conflict. Normally, we would expect the opposite; that is, that popular dissatisfaction and political violence wanes as democracy gains ground. By its very nature, democracy reduces political discrimination and provides institutional mechanisms for resolving disagreements peacefully. More broadly, democracy offers meaningful opportunities for political participation, which boosts the legitimacy of political decisions. The losers can hope to obtain power at a later stage—either alone or as part of a coalition—and in the meantime they can try to influence politics via negotiations or interest groups, try to keep the government in check through the parliamentary process, and take comfort in the way the democratic rules of the game prevent political persecution.

But if democracies do not generate more violence than dictatorships, can it at least be argued that they are less effective in winning wars and disadvantaged in great power rivalries? The assumption that democracies are inferior in warfare because they are unable to put up a hard fight goes all the way back to the ancient Greek historian Thucydides' account of the Peloponnesian War, in which he highlighted the military superiority of oligarchic Sparta over democratic Athens.¹⁶ Nor was the French political thinker Alexis de Tocqueville particularly impressed when reflecting on democracy and foreign policy in the early 19th century: 'I do not hesitate to say that it is especially in their conduct of their foreign relations that democracies appear to me decidedly inferior to other governments.'¹⁷

Or consider British Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin, who, in 1936, explained the United Kingdom's lack of military rearmament in the early 1930s by pointing to the constraints of public opinion, famously remarking that 'a democracy is always two years behind the dictator'.¹⁸

Critics often point to the absence of centralised decision-making, hesitation, and perceived softness as key limitations when assessing democracies' ability to conduct a robust foreign policy. From this vantage point, democracy is a luxury good that can primarily be afforded in times of peace. Several historical examples seem to confirm this critical perspective, including the military exploits of Germany and Japan in the early years of World War II, when democracies were militarily rolled back or even defeated in both Western Europe and East Asia; the ability of the Soviet Union to control its satellite states and to challenge the far richer USA during the Cold War; and the defeats of France and later the USA in the Vietnam War. Recent examples include the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the Chinese ability to suppress critical voices abroad and increasingly set the international agenda—a stark contrast to the difficulties of the USA and its allies in, for example, Afghanistan and Iraq.

The idea that democracies are inefficient in conducting foreign policy holds strong intuitive appeal. Yet, when examined more systematically, a rather different picture begins to form. Since 1815, democracies have won over 80 percent of the wars in which they have participated. Despite initial difficulties, democracies emerged victoriously from both World War I and World War II, and in the Cold War, the undemocratic side also had to give in eventually. Democratic Britain dominated global politics for nearly a century until World War I. Its role was subsequently assumed by another democracy, the USA, which remains the leading global power, despite the recent 'Rise of China'.¹⁹

In fact, several scholars have argued that democracies possess a range of advantages with respect to tackling foreign policy challenges and waging war. First, they can enter into binding and credible alliances with other democracies, rooted in common values and mutual trust, which also means that democracies never fight each other. In fact, no two modern democracies—low-quality or high-quality—have so far been in full-scale war with each other. Second, democracies can mobilise more resources in crisis situations, because elected governments enjoy greater popular support. The willingness to make economic and military sacrifices tends to increase with the belief that the struggle is just and that future compensation is likely. Answering Stanley Baldwin, Winston Churchill pointed out that his utterance (quoted above) was deplorable because it implied that political leadership could not be used to convince the democratic public

to make sacrifices for the sake of the greater good. Churchill himself successfully used this strategy in several speeches, including the famous ‘Blood, Toil, Tears, and Sweat’ speech, his first address as prime minister, a powerful call for resilience, total war effort, and victory at all costs.²⁰

Third, democracies tend to choose their battles with greater care to avoid conflicts they cannot win. The underlying logic is that elected leaders, aware that military defeat could have political repercussions, tend to be more cautious and less inclined toward adventurous foreign policy decisions. Fourth, freedom in democratic societies means that soldiers are independent and enterprising, which is more important in modern warfare than old-fashioned hierarchy and slavish discipline. The last two reasons seem to be particularly decisive for how democracies perform on the battlefield.²¹ These factors explain why democracies have often proved more successful militarily than one would expect based on the size of the population, economic wealth or even tanks, airplanes, and missiles.

Democracies have several other foreign policy advantages. They enter into and abide by more international agreements than dictatorships; they are better at securing investment through international capital markets; and they are better placed to become international financial centres. From a foreign policy perspective, democratically accountable governments are more often an asset than a liability. Against this background, democracies often manage to punch above their weight in international affairs.²²

The Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 illustrates these points. The war began with what now clearly seems a misguided decision from a dictator—Vladimir Putin—who lacked good information about Russian military capacity, that of Ukraine, and the international response that the war would elicit. Next came the harsh reality that the Russian military fought in a half-hearted way and systematically alienated the occupied population, whereas the Ukrainian forces, defending their country and their democratic regime form, exceeded all expectations, while the great majority of Ukrainians sided with the democratic regime. Putin also seemed to have entertained the belief that he could split the Western democracies due to the dependence of many of these countries on Russian energy and then ride out the weak sanctions that would be implemented. Instead, he faced a united front from Western democracies, including Japan and South Korea, and sanctions that severely hurt the Russian economy.

Ukraine is still far from winning the war, which has now dragged on far longer than most observers initially anticipated. The conflict has increasingly taken the form of a grinding war of attrition, with high human and material costs on both sides and no clear prospect of a decisive breakthrough. Moreover, there are clear signs of weakened external support for Ukraine. Whereas democracies in the northern parts of Europe still show strong military and economic support, governments and citizens in other parts of Europe and the United States are more divided and less committed. These developments underscore that democratic solidarity, while often powerful, is neither automatic nor inexhaustible. But if we return to the baseline, the expectations about the outcome on the eve of the invasion in February 2022, there is no doubt that the Ukrainian side has punched above its weight.

If we return to the medieval institutions on which modern representative democracy is based, historical evidence also points to the military advantages of political consent. During the many medieval and early modern wars between England and France, the former, where the parliament was strong, was a match to the latter, where the parliament was weak, even though the odds seemed to be highly skewed based on resources.²³ As the Harvard historian Joseph Strayer put it in his seminal book, *On the Medieval Origins of the Modern State*, ‘England, with less than one-fifth of the population and probably much less than one-fourth the wealth of France, was often able to match France man for man and pound for pound in periods of conflict.’²⁴ Countries with strong parliaments were generally better at taxing their citizens and taking out loans in the financial markets of the time.²⁵ This connection becomes even more pronounced when examining city states where a substantial portion of the population held political power. The superior ability of city states to pursue fiscal policy contributed to the long-standing ability of the northern Italian republics to maintain their independence despite their modest territories and populations.²⁶

A trade-off between freedom and prosperity?

Yet, stability is only one dimension of effectiveness. Critics also argue that democracies underperform economically, that authoritarian regimes are better placed to deliver growth and welfare. What would you prefer: the right to vote and freedom of speech versus food on your plate, a roof over your head, and clothes on your body? Presented

with this choice, most people will probably opt for the latter, regarding the former as a luxury. But is this truly a valid dilemma? Or is it a false dichotomy, strategically employed by authoritarian regimes to legitimise their rule?

The answer seems clear: Dictators aiming for economic development can launch major projects, such as roads, dams, and factories, without having to take popular protests into account. They can also prioritise long-term investments over short-term policy measures and spending, given that voters typically prefer the latter. Dictators may also focus their efforts on the areas that provide the greatest returns instead of indulging various groups and special interests or being forced to do something for all segments of society, including pensioners or people living in peripheral areas. Against this background, one would expect dictatorships to be better positioned to deliver prosperity and improved welfare. Just look at how China and India have evolved since 1945: whether we are talking key economic figures, life expectancy and infant mortality, or education levels, China has distanced itself from India, despite the two being equally poor in the decades after World War II.

But the equation is not so simple. Democracies also have several benefits that must be considered. The fact that political leaders are held directly responsible for their actions in elections increases the likelihood that they will act in the public interest—rather than prioritising personal gain or investing in unprofitable prestige projects. Democracy often promotes investment in education and healthcare, which not only enhances public welfare, but also boosts overall societal productivity. Democracies tend to be more stable than dictatorships and offer stronger protections for private property rights. Enterprising individuals will therefore be more willing to invest in and risk new start-ups. Finally, with their critical debate and free exchange of ideas, democracies provide a better framework for developing and disseminating new technology, which is a major driver of economic growth.²⁷ These aspects of democracy make democratic countries attractive destinations for many of the best minds in research, culture, and business: free spirits who are easily dissatisfied with the conditions in their undemocratic homelands.²⁸

It is therefore possible to identify theoretical arguments both for and against the claim that democracies are economically inefficient. So, who is right empirically? As we show below, the trade-off between prosperity and democracy rarely holds up in practice

because democracies, despite their imperfections, tend to avoid the catastrophic policy errors that autocratic regimes are far more prone to make.

A string of studies based on updated data and research techniques finds a relatively robust positive correlation between democracy and economic growth, especially if the democratic institutions are of a high quality and have existed for many years. Recent reviews that pool results from hundreds of statistical models reach a similar conclusion: on average, democracies enjoy a modest but robust growth advantage over autocracies in the long run. Democracies also tend to be better at avoiding severe economic downturns and the implementation of catastrophic policies; an example of the latter is Mao's Great Leap Forward in China between 1958 and 1960. Indeed, an overview of the top 10 economic growth disasters shows how, for every decade of modern history, autocracies inhabit most or all places on the list.²⁹

While average economic growth rates in democracies and dictatorships differ little, the overall comparison favours democracies. This is even though the result is based on partially skewed numbers, as undemocratic regimes with poor growth rates often withhold statistics or misrepresent their achievements.³⁰ Taking this into account, democracies are, on average, faring even better.

Virtually all the world's most advanced economies are democracies, and it is difficult to gain entry into this club, which primarily counts countries in Western Europe, North America, and Oceania. Over the past century, only South Korea, Taiwan, Israel, Ireland, and Singapore have successfully joined the ranks of advanced economies—and with the exception of Singapore, each made at least the final leap while being governed democratically. Scholars have explained this pattern by emphasising the symbiosis between democracy and an advanced capitalist system. Undemocratic regimes can develop into middle-income countries by investing massively in education and infrastructure, as in South Korea and Taiwan prior to their respective democratisations in the 1980s and 1990s, and as China has been doing in recent decades. But the final leap to advanced economy status is difficult to make in the absence of democratic institutions that allow a modern knowledge-based economy to flourish.³¹

A comparison of democracies and dictatorships in terms of combating child mortality and prolonging life expectancy points in the same direction. It makes a particularly big difference if democracies combine free and fair elections with high levels of freedom of

expression and association (what we have termed high-quality democracy), and if they do so over extended periods.³²

The transition to democracy typically leads to greater redistribution and more equality among ethnic and religious groups in fragmented societies, but democratisation does not reduce economic inequality in general, as it is often followed by economic reforms that exacerbate income inequalities (calculated before taxes and social benefits). Several studies also find that democracies, especially in less-developed countries, provide more years of schooling and higher enrolment in basic education than autocracies, although the connection is less clear when it comes to the quality of education.³³

Dictatorships invest more in heavy industry, such as mining, steel rolling mills, and shipyards, than democracies. This strategy sometimes contributes to rapid economic progress.³⁴ However, the concentration of political power does not always lead to sensible investments. In many cases, the result has been ‘white elephants’—giant and unprofitable projects, motivated either by prestige or unrealistic ideological purposes. A good example is the predilection of dictators to build more and taller skyscrapers than there is economic sense in doing, and spending extra resources on ‘adorning’ them with extraordinary tops and ornaments.³⁵

Is nature losing out because of democracy?

Economic performance, however, is not the only arena where democracy is accused of falling short. In recent years, climate change and other environmental challenges have fuelled critical voices, arguing that democracies are too slow, divided, or short-sighted to tackle these issues. Long-term planning is obviously crucial when dealing with climate change and the environment. Future generations must be considered when crafting such policies. Problems tend to accumulate over time, while the solutions often have large short-term costs for different groups in society. Since future generations have no vote, and because many—both individual voters and interest groups—prioritise their own concrete, short-term interests over abstract, long-term gains for humanity (and life on earth more generally), politicians will be tempted to avoid taking the necessary but costly measures—for instance, to combat climate change. Conversely, a small and insightful elite is better able to consider the problem and act accordingly. Logically, therefore, democracy is a disadvantage.³⁶

It is certainly correct that many democratic governments delay costly climate reforms, and that autocracies can adopt far-reaching environmental and climate policies quickly. But the question is whether they actually do so, whether they adopt the right ones, and whether they implement them effectively without resistance and huge costs. Here, too, one can turn the tables on the critics of democracy and highlight the benefits of democratic governance. Freedom of expression provides opportunities to bring environmental issues to light and thus to motivate politicians to implement sustainable solutions. In democracies, green movements can organise themselves freely, demonstrate, and campaign, and researchers are typically also free to investigate environmental problems and contribute with evidence-based suggestions. At the same time, voters can support politicians and parties who are trying to do something to ensure a better environment and combat climate change in general and global warming in particular. This is a more realistic strategy than relying on a kind-hearted and enlightened dictatorship. Finally, democracies are more likely to participate in and abide by international environmental agreements.³⁷

Global statistical analyses indicate that these advantages outweigh the drawbacks of a democracy. This is the case irrespective of whether one is looking at CO₂ emissions, emissions of nitrogen oxides and sulphur oxides, deforestation, soil erosion, or water pollution.³⁸ Just as with growth and prosperity, there are, of course, exceptions, and the positive impact of democracy seems to be strongest in countries where the population does not live from hand to mouth. Moreover, the competitive edge of democracy is most evident in places where the quality of democracy has been high for many years.³⁹

The Chinese delusion

No discussion of democratic effectiveness would be complete without addressing the principal piece of evidence for today's critics of democracy: the staggering Rise of China. Its rapid growth and recently also its ambitious climate policies are often cited as proof that autocracies outperform democracies. We therefore conclude this chapter by dispelling one of the great delusions of our time: that the Chinese experience demonstrates the superiority of undemocratic systems.

China's economic achievements are undeniable. The country's growth rates in recent decades have been higher and lasted longer

than any other country in the history of the world. Up to 600 million Chinese have been lifted out of poverty since the 1980s.

There are, however, several important nuances to this story. First, according to analyses of the manipulation of official growth statistics, China is one of the biggest offenders.⁴⁰ While China's economic transformation is undeniable, its official statistics clearly overstate its pace and overall magnitude.

Second, it is important to understand that China faces major political and economic challenges. Most economists agree that the high Chinese growth rates will slow significantly in the coming years, as has been the case in other countries that have modernised their economies in a short time. The supply of cheap labour is declining—in fact, the Chinese population is likely to age quickly and fall sharply—and maintaining the high investment rates that have helped to prolong growth is well-nigh impossible. Corruption remains a significant obstacle. China ranks 76th in the Transparency International Corruption Perception Index 2025, which is on par with several developing countries in Africa. Moreover, the remarkable economic growth of recent decades has significantly exacerbated inequality and led to serious environmental degradation. In some cities, smog can get so thick that it is at times impossible to see the building across the street. To date, the Chinese regime has focused more on alleviating the symptoms of its challenges than on addressing their underlying causes. One spectacular example is how the Chinese authorities have removed entire mountain peaks to help polluted air drift away from cities surrounded by mountains. Access to clean drinking water is increasingly limited in many regions, as pollution continues to contaminate rivers and lakes. Finally, the cost of the repressive security apparatus has multiplied in recent decades and now clearly exceeds what China spends on its military.⁴¹

These challenges are as real as the achievements, and will almost inevitably create political instability in the years to come. At the same time, it is difficult to see how China will be able to take the final step from a middle- to a high-income country in a situation where property rights, including intellectual property rights, are often called into question, and where the iron fist of the regime can clobber enterprising Chinese who speak out of turn—or foreign companies whose country of origin criticises the Chinese Communist Party. As noted in discussions on the effectiveness of democracies, over the past century only one non-democratic country, Singapore, has successfully

joined the ranks of advanced capitalist economies. All other cases, including Israel, South Korea, and Taiwan, saw the final development of a high-tech economy take place in the context of a democratic political system or during democratisation processes.⁴²

Third, it is essential to understand that China is neither a representative case nor an unequivocal success story. In the late 1940s, China, Taiwan (often described as a ‘mini-China’), North Korea, and South Korea exhibited broadly similar levels of GDP per capita. Over the following decades, however, their trajectories diverged sharply. China experienced only modest long-term income growth under communist one-party rule in the Maoist era, with severe policy-induced disruptions such as agricultural collectivisation, the Great Leap Forward, and the Cultural Revolution contributing to stagnation and even sharp reversals in living standards. It was only after the late-1970s reform turn, marked by decentralisation and partial marketisation and opening to the world economy, that China—in contrast to North Korea—entered a prolonged phase of rapid economic growth. Despite this remarkable acceleration, however, China’s current income level per capita remains well below that of South Korea and Taiwan—both democracies for three decades now.

Consider also the handling of the Covid-19 pandemic, which occupied most governments in the world between 2020 and 2023.⁴³ Many observers, including the Chinese Communist Party, have pointed to China as a compelling example of how firm (read: autocratic) governance can effectively contain an epidemic. In record time, new hospitals were constructed, thousands of beds were installed, and mass testing was rapidly deployed. The Chinese authorities also enforced the lockdown of areas with high infection rates—including the forcible removal of citizens or literally locking them behind welded doors in several places—which significantly reduced the spread of infection, hospitalisation, and death. In this way, autocratic China appears to have managed to deal with the crisis more effectively than Western democracies, such as Italy, Spain, Britain, Sweden, and the USA, where periods of disarray have at times prevailed—not to mention less prosperous democracies, such as Brazil, India, and South Africa.

But before anyone feels overwhelmed, it is important to remember that effective epidemic control relies on more than just the form of government. Not all autocratic regimes could replicate China’s containment strategy. The Chinese government was uniquely positioned to do so, drawing on a strong state apparatus, a collectivist culture, and

prior experience with outbreaks like avian influenza and severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS). Two neighbouring countries and democracies, South Korea and Taiwan, with similar conditions, proved at least as effective in handling the epidemic; this suggests that factors beyond the democracy-dictatorship divide carry greater weight. It is therefore difficult for other countries to emulate China's approach, regardless of whether they are democratic or authoritarian. The relative success stories of Norway, Denmark, Finland, New Zealand, and Australia show that Western democracies could handle epidemics well and did not lack the capacity or will to act.

Furthermore, the decisions of the Chinese authorities were far from flawless. Forced removals and incarcerations are only one concern; more critically, the Chinese authorities' initial efforts to conceal the outbreak and silence whistleblowers significantly contributed to the epidemic's outbreak. Finally, the Chinese government struggled mightily to phase out the hard-handed pandemic controls it had created. It kept the oppressive policies that had first proved successful in place much longer than was necessary, only to lift them overnight in early 2023, a full year after most other governments had lifted restrictions, and let the virus run amok among what was a population with low immunity, a legacy of the previous policies.

China's socioeconomic transformation, then, stands out in comparative perspective. But rather than revealing a general advantage of autocratic rule, it reflects a highly specific historical and institutional constellation that is difficult to reproduce, and simultaneously exposes the limitations and dangers of political regimes that are not based on electoral accountability and political freedoms.

Not so bad after all

Critics argue that democracies often struggle to address major challenges—ranging from peace and security to economic growth, welfare, and environmental protection—due to inertia, vested interests, limited knowledge, and short-term political horizons. As a result, many observers praise undemocratic systems such as those of China, where the government possesses both the capacity and authority to implement its decisions effectively.

However, democratic leaders, subject to electoral pressures, are naturally more inclined to safeguard public welfare. By its very nature, democracy treats all citizens as equal and deserving of attention

and protection. Elected politicians have a clear incentive to address urgent problems; otherwise, they risk being out of office after the next election.

In this light, it is hardly coincidental that democracies have historically fared better than dictatorships. Looking at the statistics, democracies often prove efficient in delivering military victories, prosperity, and welfare. Democracies are also marked by domestic stability and peaceful relations with other democratic states. Moreover, they are significantly more effective at protecting citizens from abuse—particularly by state actors—and from ideological ventures that, historically, have led to catastrophes such as famine and genocide.⁴⁴ Needless to say, the benefits of democracy are not without exceptions, but upon a closer look, they are ‘not so bad after all’.

Niccolò Machiavelli, the Florentine official and political thinker, recognised something similar as early as the 16th century, in the context not of democracies and dictatorships, but of republics and monarchies. While he infamously urged the princes of the latter to be feared rather than loved, he elsewhere emphasised that ‘[f]ewer errors will be seen in the people than in the prince—and those lesser and having greater remedies. ... Hence it arises that a republic has greater life and has good fortune longer than a principality’.⁴⁵ The historical and contemporary record bears him out. When we compare democracies and dictatorships across multiple domains and over long periods, the verdict is clear: democracy is not only morally preferable, but performs at least as well as autocracy in many crucial areas—and in some it performs substantially better. The myth that democracy fails to deliver valued outcomes dissolves upon closer scrutiny.

Notes

- 1 All content is originally written by the authors but Microsoft Copilot and ChatGPT 4-5.2 were used for proofreading.
- 2 As already mentioned, Plato was the foremost—and most categorical—critic of democracy in antiquity. In his masterpiece, *The State*, he eviscerates the democratic form of government, categorising it as one of the worst due to tendencies towards anarchy and lack of expertise.
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- 4 He Li (2015), "The Chinese Model of Development and Its Implications," *World Journal of Social Science Research* 2(2), 128–138.
- 5 The Guardian (14 January 2008), Kenyan minister spurns Annan intervention, www.theguardian.com/world/2008/jan/14/kenya.uk.
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- 7 The Guardian (29 March 2010), James Lovelock: Humans Are Too Stupid to Prevent Climate Change, www.theguardian.com/science/2010/mar/29/james-lovelock-climate-change.
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- 12 James R. Vreeland (2008), "The Effect of Political Regime on Civil War: Unpacking Anocracy," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 52(3), 401–425; Henrikas Bartusevicius & Svend-Erik Skaaning (2018), "Revisiting Democratic Civil Peace: Electoral Regimes and Civil Conflict," *Journal of Peace Research* 55(5), 625–640; Zachary M. Jones & Yonatan Lupu (2018), "Is There More Violence in the Middle?," *American Journal of Political Science* 62(3), 652–667; Svend-Erik Skaaning (2021), *More State Repression in Hybrid Regimes? A Global Assessment, 1800–2016* (unpublished manuscript).
- 13 Edward Mansfield & Jack Snyder (2005), *Electing to Fight: Why Emerging Democracies Go to War* (Cambridge: MIT Press).

- 14 Michael Mann (2005), *The Dark Side of Democracy: Explaining Ethnic Cleansing* (New York: Cambridge University Press).
- 15 Michael McFaul (2007), "A Review of *Electing to Fight: Why Emerging Democracies Go to War* by Edward D. Mansfield and Jack Snyder," *Journal of Democracy* 18(2), 160–166; John Breuilly, David Cesarani, Sinisa Malesevic, Benyamin Neuberger, & Michael Mann (2006), "Debate on Michael Mann's *The Dark Side of Democracy: Explaining Ethnic Cleansing*," *Nations and Nationalism* 12(3), 389–411.
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- 18 Quoted in Henry Pelling (1999 [1974]), *Winston Churchill* (UK: Wordsworth Editions), p. 378.
- 19 Note, though, that democracies far from always carry out legitimate foreign policies, as illustrated by the British colonisation of large parts of the world, and US support for various dictators in different eras and regions.
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- 21 Dan Reiter & Allan Stam (2002), *Democracies at War* (Princeton: Princeton University Press); Michael E. Brown, Owen R. Coté, Jr., Sean M. Lynn-Jones, & Steven E. Miller (2011), *Do Democracies Win Their Wars?* (Cambridge: MIT Press); Steve Dobransky (2013), "The Dawn of a New Age? Democracies and Military Victory," *Journal of Strategic Security* 7(1), 1–15; Bruce Bueno de Mesquita, James D. Morrow, Randolph M. Siverson & Alastair Smith (1999), "An Institutional Explanation of the Democratic Peace," *American Political Science Review* 93(4), 791–807.
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- 43 The following sections are based in part on an op-ed by Svend-Erik Skaaning & Suthan Krishnarajan, “Er demokratiet en hæmsko under epidemier?,” *Berlingske Tidende* (4 April 2020).
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7 Myth 7

Democracy's interwar history is repeating itself¹

A deadly pandemic has ravaged the world. Radicalised parties are gaining ground at the ballot box, while political opponents are hurling insults at each other, and ethnic minorities are being scapegoated. Great autocratic powers are surging ahead, while democracies appear increasingly paralysed. To make matters worse, an economic crisis has eroded public trust in democratic institutions, deepening the sense of uncertainty. Does it ring a bell?

Intended as a description of the interwar period, concerned observers suggest it might as well be a depiction of our own time. As mentioned in the introduction, many books published in recent years draw ominous parallels between the situation today and the interwar period.² They argue that democracies today are weaker than we often like to believe, and that democratic collapse is a real risk—even in the oldest modern democracies in Europe and the Anglosphere.

A case in point is *How Democracies Die*, the international best-seller by Harvard professors Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt. They invoke the period between the two world wars to demonstrate how even Western democracies are fragile. They find disturbing similarities between the political dynamics that enabled Mussolini's and Hitler's rise to power in the 1920s and 1930s Italy and Germany, and those unfolding in many contemporary Western democracies. The more specific villain in Levitsky and Ziblatt's account is political polarisation, which drives otherwise moderate parties to open the door to extremists out of fear of losing public support. Instead of sticking to the core democratic values, they try to sway the electorate by imitating or pandering to extremist messages. The US situation under Donald Trump has been particularly troubling.

This observation is echoed by American historian Christopher R. Browning, who begins an analysis, reported in a Danish newspaper, of Trump's first years as president as follows:

As a historian specialised in the Holocaust, Nazi Germany, and Europe in the interwar period, I'm often asked, whether I see any parallels between the actual political situation in the US and the emergence of fascism in interwar Europe. And yes, I see several disturbing similarities.³

More broadly, the international book market is overflowing with titles about the 'new fascism', such as *Fascism Today*, *How Fascism Works*, *How to Spot a Fascist*, and *The Fascism This Time*.⁴

The warnings that history is repeating itself began long before Trump's first election victory in 2016, namely with the 2007–2008 financial crisis. The very term for the subsequent economic crisis, the Great Recession, is a paraphrasing of the 1930s 'Great Depression'. In 2011, the American economist and Nobel Laureate Paul Krugman identified striking similarities between these two economic crises, warning that the democracies of our time were once again under pressure. Just as in the 1930s, the economic downturn that began in 2008 has chummed the waters for undemocratic movements. Krugman gloomily added, 'nobody familiar with Europe's history can look at this resurgence of hostility without feeling a shiver'.⁵

However, invoking the interwar democratic crisis in such a casual way not only opens the door to simplifying and misreading history; it also risks exaggerating the fragility of today's democracies and mischaracterising the regimes likely to replace democracies if they break down. To assess whether history is repeating itself, we thus take a closer look at the lessons of the interwar period. As we will see, many interwar democracies survived serious challenges. And the context is radically different today: more democracy-friendly, with the autocratic alternatives facing democracies being softer forms of authoritarianism, not the full-scale totalitarian regimes of the 1920s and 1930s.

The chapter begins by identifying the political, social, and international conditions that made democracies vulnerable in the 1920s and 1930s. It then contrasts this situation with the very different world of today's democracies and their distinct, less totalitarian challengers. The purpose is to show how different these two periods—now almost

a hundred years apart—are when it comes to the historical context, and why this means that interwar developments are unlikely to repeat themselves. Against this backdrop, we arrive at an unorthodox interpretation of interwar democratic stability: that the developments of the 1920s and 1930s show how resilient democracy is once it has become rooted.

In a league of their own

When making comparisons with the interwar period, it is first necessary to provide some context. We need to truly understand how crisis-stricken the 1920s and 1930s were. Most people have heard of the stock market crash on Wall Street in October 1929 and the subsequent Great Depression, which was characterised by declining production, bankruptcies, and mass unemployment. But this is just one of the many crises that occurred in this period. We use the present day as a lens through which to better understand the magnitude of the crises of that period—and how markedly they differ from today's crises.⁶

We can begin by noting how the very term 'the interwar years' has crisis connotations. It refers to a 21-year period separating the two most destructive wars in world history: World War I, ending in 1918, and World War II, beginning in 1939. According to the English sociologist Michael Mann, European civilisation almost committed suicide during World War I.⁷ The war shook European societies to their foundations. Ten million young men lost their lives in the trenches under conditions that are hard to fathom today, and millions more were physically or mentally crippled when they returned to everyday life after the war. Many frontline soldiers struggled to readjust, and came to form the backbone of the extremist paramilitary groups in Germany, Austria, and Italy. This made the streets unsafe in big cities like Berlin, Munich, Vienna, Bologna, and Rome in the 1920s and 1930s. The Italian fascists had their *Squadristi*. In Germany, right-wing militias like *Stahlhelm* and *Sturmabteilung* clashed with left-wing militias like the *Reichsbanner Schwarz-Rot-Gold* and *Rotfrontkämpferbund*. In Austria, the fronts were formed by the conservative *Heimwehr* and the social democratic *Republikanischer Schutzbund*. Their ventures were not for the faint-hearted. In 1931 alone, 8 000 members of the German militias were wounded or killed in street fighting.⁸

The violence in the streets owed, in part, to the fact that the state was unable to enforce law and order during political demonstrations;

when the authorities tried to intervene, they often merely added fuel to the fire. This was the case in the deadly May 1 clashes between the Berlin police and protesters in 1929. On this ‘bloody May’, *Blutmai*, 33 civilians were killed by police bullets, as portrayed in the German hit television series *Babylon Berlin*. Another example is the torching of the Austrian Ministry of Justice on July 15, 1927, after which the police shot and killed nearly 100 demonstrators in the ensuing riot.⁹

Both violent state repression and politically motivated violence committed by non-state actors, such as militias and social movements, are significantly less common in contemporary Europe than they were during the interwar period. Indeed, the present scale of political violence pales in comparison. The modest rise in political violence that has taken place since 2000 merely offsets a similar decline observed between 2000 and 2010; Europe remains significantly more peaceful than it was as recently as in the early 1980s, not to speak of the 1930s.¹⁰

Extensive political violence is only one of the many ways in which the interwar period—and, to a lesser extent, the 1970s—differ fundamentally from the far more peaceful conditions of our time. Focusing again on Italy, Germany, and Austria, the years following the 1918 armistice saw a large-scale inflation crisis that far surpassed the high inflation episodes of the 1970s and 1980s. The crisis began in Austria, formerly the centre of the Austro-Hungarian Empire but now transformed into an impoverished rump state with an oversized capital, Vienna. The empire’s most dynamic economic areas were suddenly located outside the Austrian borders, particularly in Czechoslovakia, while Austria took over the dual monarchy’s debt obligations. The Austrian currency soon became worthless, and the inflationary surge between 1919 and 1922 severely disrupted the official market for foodstuffs.

The German currency suffered a similar fate. In 1923, Weimar Germany experienced a hyperinflation that almost defies imagination. Stamps with a face value of billions of marks were printed, and some wages were paid several times daily because the constant depreciation meant they had to be spent immediately. Germany’s printing presses ran at full speed—churning out currency at a frantic pace—partly in response to the reparations imposed by the Treaty of Versailles in 1919. The hyperinflation lasted until 1923 and meant that any monetary savings lost their value, while providing numerous opportunities for enrichment for speculators.

The inflation crisis also spread to Italy and the new states of Poland, Czechoslovakia, and Hungary, albeit without reaching the same grotesque proportions. To make matters worse, an influenza pandemic known as the Spanish flu raged in the years 1918–1920. It ravaged the entire Western world, came in several waves, and cost the lives of up to 50 million people. The Spanish flu struck especially hard in the countries involved in the war, where thousands of soldiers living in miserable conditions in the trenches, in camps, or in troop transports could easily infect each other, and where large parts of the populations on the home front were malnourished, save for the USA. Attempts at stemming the flu epidemics of 1918–1920 largely failed, as the authorities did not have the necessary resources or knowledge to deal with the situation. In contrast, healthcare expertise and a well-functioning state apparatus helped keep the Covid-19 pandemic under control between 2020 and 2023—at least in most high-quality democracies—and enabled the rapid development of effective vaccines.

The combination of war, inflation, and a pandemic had horrific consequences. The misery that prevailed in, for example, Vienna in the years following the armistice is difficult for us to comprehend today. During this period, thousands of starving and often ill Viennese children were sent—through private initiatives—to other countries, where they spent several months recovering in foster families who helped restore their health.

The second half of the 1920s was characterised by progress. The Locarno Treaties, signed in 1925, normalised the Franco-German relationship, and Germany became a member of the League of Nations, the forerunner of the United Nations. Even more important was the economic progress that helped stabilise and normalise political life in, for example, Germany, the great loser of World War II. The years 1924–1928 are known as the ‘golden years’ of the Weimar Republic, a period in which the young German democracy seemed to be finding its feet, led by the democratically minded and flexible statesman Gustav Stresemann, who received the Nobel Peace Prize in 1926 for his efforts to reach a mutual understanding with France.

However, the golden years ended abruptly in the autumn of 1929 when a new crisis emerged. The Great Depression was the deepest economic crisis in the modern era. Between 1929 and 1933, global industrial production is estimated to have fallen 37 percent, world

trade was reduced by 68 percent, and the price of agricultural products fell by 75 percent. In many countries, governments responded with massive tariff barriers and by opting for self-sufficiency, which led to an almost complete halt in foreign investment. The Great Recession after 2008 was triggered by similar negative developments on a wide range of key economic indicators but it occurred in much richer societies with completely different and well-developed social safety nets, and the economic curves improved markedly faster.¹¹

The economic crisis in interwar Germany led to mass unemployment that gave undemocratic parties wind in their sails. Support for communists and national socialists increased by leaps and bounds as the economic crisis worsened in the years between 1929 and 1933. The following description in the memoirs of former German Chancellor Franz von Papen captures at least a grain of truth: ‘The material conditions in Germany were so desperate that many young people took the brown shirt [the SA uniform] not because it was brown but because it was a shirt.’¹² The various crises provided fertile ground for both traditional reactionary forces and totalitarian ideologies. Communist, fascist, and Nazi mass movements grew, gaining ground in the streets, as well as in many parliaments and government offices. Today, there is no such popular support for decidedly anti-democratic movements. While right-wing and left-wing populist parties enjoy great support in many countries, they differ from the movements of the interwar period by being far less violent and significantly more ready to work within the framework of democratic institutions.¹³

One last crisis of the period worth mentioning was the gradual disintegration of the international order that the USA, France, and Britain had created during the peace settlements of 1919–1920. This order collapsed in the 1930s after having creaked and cracked in the 1920s. In 1933, Japan ignored the League of Nations’ decision that its occupation of the Chinese province of Manchuria was illegal. This pattern was repeated when the League of Nations in vain condemned the Italian invasion of Abyssinia (Ethiopia) in 1936. Mussolini’s Italy allied itself with Hitler’s Germany the same year, and the great democratic powers attended to their own problems. President Roosevelt dropped the foreign policy ambition of his predecessor, Woodrow Wilson, to make the world secure for democracy, concentrating instead on domestic political issues—fighting the Great Depression in particular. On the international stage of the 1930s, might made right,

and great undemocratic powers such as Germany, Italy, and the Soviet Union played an increasingly assertive role. They constantly tested their surroundings. Their repeated attempts to move border posts and their defections from past agreements culminated in the outbreak of World War II.

Russia and China have become increasingly self-conscious in recent decades, flexing their muscles on the international stage. Russia has annexed Crimea and appears to be doing everything it can to undermine democratic forces internally and among its neighbours, most blatantly in the form of the all-out invasion in Ukraine in 2022. China punishes countries that criticise internal Chinese matters (read: human rights violations) with trade boycotts; carries out severe repression of civil liberties at home; threatens to invade Taiwan; and supports African dictators. This behaviour—and the shift in global power toward the autocracies that has enabled it—may be where our time most closely resembles the interwar period.

Yet, if that is the case, it only serves to underscore the profound differences between the two eras. For even here, our situation is nowhere near that of the 1930s.¹⁴ Even though they are clearly enemies of democracy and a liberal order, Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping are not comparable with Mussolini, Hitler, Stalin, and Tojo in terms of foreign policy aggression and attempts of expansion. Moreover, we find ourselves in a situation where it is still a democracy—the United States—that is the strongest power, militarily, as well as economically, and the European Union remains a guarantor of peace and stability in Europe, even without the UK as a member. Just think of the fraternisation between France and Germany we have experienced since 1945, and how different this situation is from the Franco-German enmity leading up to the two world wars. Today's authoritarian geopolitical rivals are assertive, but they do not pursue the kind of expansionist, ideologically totalising projects that defined the revisionist powers of the 1930s.

Old versus new democracies

The crises of the 1920s and 1930s were diverse, intertwined, and mutually reinforcing, and worse than the crises experienced in recent decades. But did democracies really fail in this crisis-ridden period, as the observers who have recently drawn parallels to the current day seem to assume?

Initially, this was certainly not the case. On the contrary, a large-scale democratic wave flooded the whole of Europe in the wake of World War II; in 1919, the Soviet Union, Hungary, Spain,¹⁵ Portugal, and Albania were the only countries where those in power were not appointed through free elections. But just as many democracies had sprung up quickly, several of them proved to be ephemeral. As early as 1920, democracy collapsed in Bulgaria and Romania; Italy followed suit in 1922, Poland and Lithuania in 1926, and Yugoslavia in 1929. In the 1930s, further democratic collapses followed: Germany and Austria in 1933, Estonia and Latvia in 1934, Greece in 1935, and Spain in 1936. Whereas there had been 20 European democracies in 1920, only ten remained in 1939.

These democratic breakdowns appear to be in line with the dominant narrative about the interwar developments. There is, however, an important nuance to this story. As illustrated in Table 7.1, all the democratic collapses took place in ‘new’ democracies, where free elections were only introduced in or after 1918. Without exception, the old democracies—where the transition to democracy dated back before 1918—survived the 1920s, as well as the economic and political tempests of the 1930s.

When considered alongside the timing of each democratic collapse, this pattern illustrates the simple but important point that the new democracies were so fragile that they could collapse for very different

Table 7.1 Democratic legacy and democratic survival in interwar Europe

	<i>Democratic breakdown</i>	<i>Democratic survival</i>
<i>Democratisation after 1918</i>	Austria, Bulgaria, Estonia, Germany, Greece, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Spain, Yugoslavia	Finland, Czechoslovakia
<i>Democratisation before 1918</i>		Belgium, Denmark, France, Ireland, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, Switzerland, the United Kingdom

Note: Albania, Portugal, and Russia are not included in the table since they did not experience a democratic spell in the interwar years.

Source: Lexical Index of Electoral Democracy (v6.9).

reasons. Precisely half of Europe's democratic breakdowns took place before the Great Depression. Only in a few cases—most notably Germany and Austria—can we directly link a democratic collapse to the global economic crisis of the 1930s.

How can we make sense of this pattern? The new democracies were, in most cases, 'artificially' or at least 'externally' created by the victory of the Western democracies in World War I. These regimes were born of the democratic *Zeitgeist*, and lacked the institutional foundations needed to withstand the multiple crises of the interwar period—especially as the spirit of the age shifted with the rise of communism, fascism, and Nazism. The new democracies were installed in countries with weak or divided civil societies, and where the political parties were neither well organised nor entrenched. Moreover, the lack of democratic experience created a pronounced distrust between political opponents, which undermined their willingness to compromise.

The older democracies looked entirely different. Here, democracy had emerged gradually from within: via protracted internal political struggles between established elites and budding mass movements, such as peasants' and workers' movements. Democracy therefore had roots far back in the 19th century. These democracies rested on much stronger foundations, while the political parties and populations had had more time to develop mutual respect and get used to the golden rule of democracy: 'sometimes we win, sometimes we lose'.¹⁶ The resilience of many long-established democracies in the face of crisis is, in itself, remarkable. There was little or no support for extremist parties in the 1920s and 1930s in countries such as Denmark, Sweden, the Netherlands, Norway, the United Kingdom, and Switzerland, and the state never lost its control of the streets, as was the case in Italy and Germany.

Mussolini's and Hitler's respective takeovers in Italy and Germany led to dramatic democratic collapse. Multi-party elections were abolished and political freedoms trampled underfoot. The situation was very different in, for instance, Denmark and Great Britain, where the levels of democracy throughout the interwar years were high and stable.

To be sure, in some old democracies, France and Belgium being the most notable examples, political developments were less stable. In the Belgian parliamentary elections in May 1936, the so-called 'Rexists', led by the young Leon Degrelle, made dramatic strides, winning a quarter of the popular vote together with two other radical

right-wing parties. In France, democracy was also under pressure in the mid-1930s. Successive French governments seemed paralysed, and extremist right-wing movements went from strength to strength. Here, too, the moderate parties ultimately managed to stabilise the situation by joining together in a common front.

Similar events took place in two new democracies, Finland and Czechoslovakia. While these countries at times experienced violent political radicalisation, astute and democratically minded presidents succeeded in uniting moderate forces across the political centre to preserve democracy.

The Scandinavian pattern

Denmark and Sweden exemplify how stable the old democracies were in this period. Both countries were hard pressed by the global economic crisis, and both countries also grappled with the undemocratic currents of the early 1930s. Almost simultaneously, in the spring of 1933, the Conservative Youth (*Konservativ Ungdom*—KU) in Denmark and the Swedish National Youth Association (*Sveriges Nationella Ungdomsförbundet*—SNU) formed boot-clad corps following the Italian and German models. The young Swedish conservatives wore grey uniforms with blue ties and armbands; the Danish stormtroopers were dressed in olive drab. These groups were formed to fight left-wing groups in the streets, and to push their conservative mother parties in a fascist direction, inspired, especially, by Mussolini's example.

The creation of these conservative youth corps demonstrates how, even in old democracies like Denmark and Sweden, totalitarian ideologies found ready supporters. We see the same steely reaction from the conservative mother parties in both countries: the Swedish Conservative Party simply cut ties with the SNU in 1934, whereas Danish Conservative Party leader John Christmas Møller rolled back the radicalisation of the KU. By threatening to stop funding the youth branch, Møller installed a more moderate leadership of the youth party in 1936; although the conservative youth in Denmark only broke with the young Swedish conservatives after the latter proposed that Germany and Sweden should divide Denmark between them.¹⁷

In Sweden, the conflict between the mother party and the young conservatives had an interesting aftermath. The youth party ran for

parliament in September 1936 as an independent fascist party led by three former conservative MPs, resulting in a humiliating defeat. The party received just 0.9 percent of the votes, in a context where the Swedish unemployment rate briefly spiked at 23 percent while Hitler was reportedly eradicating unemployment in neighbouring Germany. This modest support for Swedish fascism among the electorate illustrates how the seeds of the totalitarian movements fell on stony ground in the old, high-quality democracies.

A similar pattern emerged in Denmark, where the Danish national socialists, led by Fritz Clausen, barely succeeded in gaining representation in the Folketing in 1939.¹⁸ The opposite wing, the communists, were likewise unable to capitalise in earnest on the crisis of the 1930s. In Sweden, the Communist Party received 6.4 percent of the vote in the September 1928 election, but lost votes in the following elections. In Denmark, the communists first won representation in the Danish parliament in the 1930s, but their electoral support remained marginal, never surpassing just over 2 percent of the vote during the interwar period.

There were several reasons for the modest appeal of extremist parties in Denmark and Sweden, one of which was that the democratic system did not appear paralysed in the face of the crisis, as was the case in Weimar Germany, where the last coalition government with a parliamentary majority collapsed in March 1930. Thereafter, President Paul von Hindenburg appointed toothless governments by decree. In Denmark, the four old parties came together to implement a crisis policy in the 1930s that sent a clear signal that the government and parliament were not incapacitated by the massive economic upheavals taking place.

The most well-known political compromise is the so-called *Kanslergade* settlement between the social democrats, social liberals and *Venstre* (liberals with a primarily rural base at the time). The agreement was concluded on January 30, 1933, the same day Adolf Hitler was appointed Chancellor of neighbouring Germany. The settlement averted a major labour market conflict by introducing a reform that provided improved social assistance to the unemployed, while a currency devaluation offered much-needed relief to agricultural exports. The conservatives were not part of the agreement, but took an active part in many other elements of the 1930s crisis policy. Throughout the period, they supported the democratically elected government and its institutions.

An important feature of the period's crisis policies in the established democracies was that political parties did not implement them in isolation. Civil society organisations were continuously involved and contributed actively. The *Kanslergade* settlement is a good example, as common footing between the associations representing larger and smaller farmers, respectively, and the connections between the trade unions and social democrats made it easier to secure a compromise and ensure popular support of it. The Church of Denmark (*Folkekirken*) and the majority of the press remained loyal to democratic principles throughout the period. Despite political disagreements, there was broad and mutual recognition of fundamental democratic principles—freedom of speech, political representation, and inclusion in the political community.

We find similar political dynamics in the other old democracies of the interwar period. While the Great Depression put democracies everywhere under strain, in the old ones, elected politicians came together to respond to the crisis—sometimes after initial hesitation or panic, as in the French case. Such an effective democratic response is illustrated by what happened in the UK. In 1931, the ruling Labour Party fractured over how to address the economic crisis. The narrow Labour government was replaced by a national unity government, consisting of the Conservatives, the right wing of Labour, and parts of the Liberals, under the leadership of former Labour prime minister Ramsay MacDonald. This 'national government' won a landslide victory in the October 1931 election, and repeated the feat in 1935. More generally, the British Conservatives developed into a broad, popular party in the 1930s that closed the flanks against extremist right-wing movements, such as the former Conservative and Labour MP Oswald Mosley's British Union of Fascists.

Lessons learned

What do these events tell us about our own time? Do the current crises mean that we are on the brink of a new round of democratic collapses—a restaging of the 1930s? Does history repeat itself, first as tragedy, then as farce, as Karl Marx famously put it? From our perspective, the political developments of the interwar period offer two key historical lessons.

First, the crises of the interwar period were far worse than anything we have experienced in our own time. Today's economic and social

problems pale in comparison to the challenges of the 1920s and 1930s. We live in far more prosperous, orderly, and peaceful societies. The social safety net is entirely different and more comprehensive, and we benefit from vastly improved knowledge—particularly in areas such as economic policy and public health.

The interwar period was one in which millions of former frontline soldiers who had experienced hardships and witnessed atrocities we can hardly imagine were released back into societies transitioning from wartime mobilisation to peacetime conditions, a shift that triggered sharp declines in industrial production. In large parts of Europe, this transition coincided with hyperinflation that rendered middle-class monetary savings worthless, while armed groups clashed in the streets. All of this took place in the shadow of the totalitarian mass movements and the collapse of international order, symbolised by the dire fate of the League of Nations in the second half of the 1930s. This context is radically different from ours, and for that reason alone, it is not plausible to expect a repetition of the frightening political developments of the interwar period, despite the occasionally farcical nature of some contemporary political events.

One is here tempted to quote the Scottish-American historian Niall Ferguson, who made the following comment on today's political challenges in a 2017 interview with a Danish newspaper:

I'm laughing out loud when someone compares today with the 1930s. You cannot make such comparisons. Both the political and economic situations are completely different nowadays. Populists of our time are not tyrants or dictators, and populism has nothing to do with fascism or Nazism. It is nonsense.¹⁹

As German-American political scientist Kurt Weyland has pointed out, contemporary debates have been characterised by conceptual stretching in the form of the loose, expansive use of terms such as coup and fascism.²⁰ Unlike the fascist movements of the 1920s and 1930s, today's nativist populist challengers generally lack both the paramilitary capacity and the revolutionary ambitions needed to overthrow democracy through organised violence, and to replace democracy with full-blown totalitarian rule. The most common replacement when democracy fails is some type of soft authoritarianism with a democratic façade, bad enough, for sure, but very different from Stalinist communism or Nazism.²¹

Second, upon closer inspection, the political dynamics of the interwar years do not support the warning that old high-quality democracies are fragile in the face of economic, political, and social crises. The many democratic collapses of the period took place in new low-quality democracies that had emerged in the wake of the victory of Western democracies in World War I. These democracies were indeed fragile, as they had not grown strong ‘from within’, and because the political elites and ‘people’ more broadly had not had time to get democratic values and practices under their skin—no strong democratic political culture existed. These regimes could therefore collapse for very different reasons, and it is telling that the first democratic breakdowns occurred as early as 1920.

It is hardly surprising that these newly established and fragile democracies struggled to absorb and navigate the complex and overlapping crises of the interwar period. The remarkable thing about those times of turmoil is how stable the old democracies proved to be. Even the Great Depression, with its many bankruptcies and mass layoffs, failed to turn the Danes, Swedes, Brits, and Dutch against democracy and to steer them towards undemocratic alternatives. The moderate parties were able to hold on to their voters and come together in a democratic response to the crises.

Upon a closer look, the interwar period demonstrates that, once firmly rooted, modern representative democracy has proven remarkably resilient—even in times of profound crisis. Contemporary Western democracies differ from those of the interwar past in many respects, but they are clearly more reminiscent of the old high-quality democracies of that period than of the new low-quality democracies that emerged between 1918 and 1920. In fact, democracies in our part of the world are significantly older than their predecessors were in the 1920s.

It follows from our warning against false historical analogies that we do not know precisely how the old democracies of our time will fare in the face of new challenges that differ from those of the past. Nevertheless, we maintain that a careful reading of the interwar experience does not support the notion that contemporary high-quality democracies are destined to repeat the dark political trajectories of the interwar period.

Notes

- 1 All content is originally written by the authors but Microsoft Copilot and ChatGPT 4-5.2 were used for proofreading.

- 2 Steven Levitsky & Daniel Ziblatt (2018), *How Democracies Die* (New York: Viking); Timothy Snyder (2017), *The Road to Unfreedom* (New York: Vintage); Madeleine Albright (2018), *Fascism: A Warning* (New York: Harper).
- 3 Christopher Browning, Trump er ikke en ny Hitler, men vores tid minder foruroligende om 1930'erne (Trump Is Not a New Hitler, but ...) *Information* (27 October 2018), <https://www.information.dk/moti/2018/10/trump-ny-hitler-vores-tid-minder-foruroligende-1930erne> (note that we have translated the quote from Danish).
- 4 Shane Burley (2017). *Fascism Today: What It Is and How to End It* (Chico: AK Press); Jason Stanley (2018), *How Fascism Works: The Politics of Us and Them* (New York: Random House); Umberto Eco (2020). *How to Spot a Fascist* (London: Harvill Secker); Theo Horesh (2020), *The Fascism This Time – and the Global Future of Democracy* (Boulder: Cosmopolis Press).
- 5 Paul Krugman, Depression and Democracy, *New York Times* (12 December 2011), <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/12/12/opinion/krugman-depression-and-democracy.html>.
- 6 The rest of the chapter is largely based on Agnes Cornell, Jørgen Møller, & Svend-Erik Skaaning (2020), *Democratic Stability in an Age of Crisis: Reassessing the Interwar Period* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), in which one can find detailed arguments, empirical overviews, analyses, and extensive references.
- 7 Michael Mann (1993), *The Sources of Social Power: Volume 2, The Rise of Classes and Nation States 1760–1914* (New York: Cambridge University Press), p. 740.
- 8 Richard Evans (2003), *The Coming of the Third Reich* (New York: Penguin), p. 37.
- 9 For an overview on political violence in the interwar period, see Kevin Passmore & Chris Millington (2015), *Political Violence and Democracy in Western Europe, 1918–1940* (Houndmills: Palgrave); Enzo Traverso (2017), *Fire and Blood: The European Civil War, 1914–1945* (London: Verso).
- 10 According to the political killings and political violence indicators provided by the V-Dem v15 dataset, www.v-dem.net.
- 11 Karl Aiginger (2010), "The Great Recession versus the Great Depression: Stylized Facts on Siblings That Were Given Different Foster Parents," *Economics: The Open-Access, Open-Assessment E-Journal* 4 (2010–18), 1–41; Paul De Grawe & Yuemei Ji (2020), "A Tale of Three Depressions," *VoxEU* (24 September 2020), <https://voxeu.org/article/tale-three-depressions>.
- 12 Franz von Papen (1953), *Memoirs* (New York: Dutton), p. 255.

- 13 Federico Finchelstein (2019), *From Fascism to Populism in History* (Berkeley: University of California Press); Cas Mudde (2017), *Populism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).
- 14 Zara Steiner (2011), *The Triumph of the Dark: European International History, 1933–1939* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).
- 15 Although Spain managed to experience a democratic period from 1931 to 1936.
- 16 Daniel Ziblatt (2017), *Conservative Parties and the Birth of Democracy* (New York: Cambridge University Press), p. 39.
- 17 Nikolaj Bøgh (2007), *Brødrene Møller: Historien om et konservativt dynasti* (Copenhagen: Aschehoug), p. 76.
- 18 The Nazi party received just 2.1 percent of the vote, the threshold for representation in the Danish proportional system being a meagre 2 percent.
- 19 *Berlingske Tidende* (2 July 2017), Er den vestlige civilisation ved at gå under? (Is Western Civilization Collapsing?) (note that we have translated the quote from Danish).
- 20 Kurt Weyland (2024), “Concept Misformation in the Age of Democratic Anxiety: Recent Temptations and Their Downsides,” *World Politics* 76(3), 594–637. See also Weyland (2021), *Assault on Democracy: Communism, Fascism, and Authoritarianism during the Interwar Years* (New York: Cambridge University Press).
- 21 Steven Levitsky & Lucan Way (2023), “Democracy’s Surprising Resilience,” *Journal of Democracy* 34(4), 5–20; Sergei Guriev & Daniel Treisman (2022), *Spin Dictators: The Changing Face of Tyranny in the 21st Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press).

Conclusions

A call for moderation and consistent commitment¹

The preceding chapters have sought to dispel seven pervasive myths about democracy, including that it has been in terminal decline for decades, that it has a certain set of cultural and socioeconomic prerequisites, that it is ineffective, and that the interwar experiences foretell an inevitable collapse. When examined in historical and comparative perspective, these assertions prove exaggerated or outright false. Democracy's record is far more resilient, its reach and appeal broader, and its capacity for performance and self-correction stronger than the crisis narratives suggest. Our purpose has been to make the reader think smarter and sharper about the history of democracy, its nature, its standing in the world today, and its promise.

But myth-busting alone is not enough. In this final chapter we ask how democracies and democrats can best navigate the real and pressing challenges that still confront them. Democracy's endurance is never guaranteed. Even if the number of democracies remains historically high, the past decade has revealed vulnerabilities that we ignore at our peril. In several countries, elected leaders have hollowed out democratic institutions from within. The growing assertiveness of dictatorial great powers, combined with a waning commitment among democratic powers such as the United States to promote and defend democracy abroad, has created a more hostile international environment than we have seen for at least three-and-a-half decades. Furthermore, polarisation, populist mobilisation, and the spread of misinformation and disinformation have deepened mistrust both among citizens and between citizens and their representatives. Meanwhile, the expectations placed on democracy, that is, its ability

to deliver prosperity, fairness, and moral rectitude, often exceed what any political system can deliver.

We have already made it clear that these developments do not justify the present narrative about democratic crisis and large-scale decline. But they illuminate the conditions under which democracies stumble: when citizens lose patience, when political actors treat opponents as enemies, and when the procedural foundations of self-government are sacrificed for short-term gain. Understanding these threats allows us to understand what is most urgently needed—not new institutions or heroic leaders, but civic virtues that make democracy work in practice.

In this final chapter, we bring the book's historical insights to bear on the present and future of democracy. We begin by examining the main contemporary challenges confronting democratic rule: from a more hostile international environment, the rise of elected autocrats rooted in the temptations of populism and polarisation, inflated expectations, and inconsistent support of democracy. These pressures also reveal what kind of civic and political dispositions are needed to preserve it. We conclude with a call for moderation and consistent commitment in the face of the challenges of the day, emphasising that democracy's greatest strength lies in its capacity for solving political disagreements in a peaceful way and in the mundane and piecemeal correction and renewal of policies and institutions.

The hostile international environment

The increasing economic, political, and military might and assertiveness of great undemocratic powers constitute a serious challenge. Using different strategies and tools, China and Russia have ramped up the internal repression of oppositional forces, and have directly and indirectly undermined democracy and democratisation at home, in their local neighbourhoods, and sometimes further afield.² Most recently, we have seen Putin's Russia attempting to introduce regime change via military means in democratic Ukraine (and chew up a large piece of Ukrainian territory).

According to one perspective, the democratic 'West' overreached during the American unipolar moment after the breakdown of the Soviet Union.³ Moving the borders of NATO closer to Russia and not outright rejecting a future membership perspective to Ukraine

and Georgia triggered a typical great power reaction—politically and militarily—from Russia, once it had stabilised under Putin.

However, there is a more compelling explanation, which is also more appealing from a democratic point of view. It focuses on domestic politics in dictatorships such as Russia. A great majority of people in the world clamour for freedom and self-determination. That makes dictators feel threatened everywhere, especially those unable to legitimise their rule through positive economic performance. They therefore perceive democratisation in their neighbouring countries as a threat to their own political position.⁴ Seen from this angle, Putin has a clear interest in destabilising Ukraine, politically and economically, and, if possible, to replace Ukrainian democracy with a kleptocratic dictatorship similar to the Russian one.⁵ We have seen similar developments across the former Soviet space, where Putin has propped up Moscow-aligned authoritarian regimes—most recently in Belarus in 2021, Kazakhstan in 2022, and Georgia in 2024—during periods of large-scale popular unrest. Ukraine has also experienced this pattern, notably during the Orange Revolution in 2004 and the events of 2014, culminating in the current full-scale military invasion in 2022.

Other plausible explanatory frames highlight ideological motivation, such as a sincere longing for Russia's lost 'greatness'.⁶ In any case, the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 shows that democracies must unite to reverse or at least slow down these developments. Open warfare with a nuclear-armed Russia or China is obviously not a desirable scenario and should be resisted by all responsible parties; all the more reason, then, to fight efforts to export and entrench authoritarian rule through alternative means. This requires democracies to come together and agree on common responses.

A further complication is that the USA plays a less democracy-friendly role today than it used to.⁷ This is not only evident in foreign policy decisions, but also in its weakened soft power. For decades, the USA served as a widely admired model of freedom and prosperity, and that prestige helped democratic ideas spread without any active promotion. Today, internal strife, rising social problems, and embattled democratic institutions have undermined the image of the USA as a political system others might wish to emulate. When confidence in the leading democracy declines, its influence on global democratic norms declines with it.

Most recently, active support for democracy abroad, including the funding of democracy assistance through USAID, has been

terminated. Under Trump, foreign strongmen have been courted and democratic allies pressured. Some scholars have proposed that what Trump 2.0 seeks is a great power conglomerate akin to the so-called Vienna Concert of the 19th century, where the great European powers cooperated to prevent unnecessary conflicts and upheavals, while respecting each other's right to govern their own spheres of influence. At times, it sounds like Trump is interested in establishing this in a modern version, with himself, Xi Jinping, and Putin, at the helm.⁸

In a world where rising authoritarian powers project their own preferred models of governance, such shifts in the stance of a major democratic power can have wider consequences: when the strongest great power's commitment to democratic norms is in doubt, political elites elsewhere adjust their expectations of what is viable or advantageous.

The European Union faces a related but distinct challenge. It was once a powerful engine of democratisation on the continent because candidate countries had strong incentives to improve the rule of law, protect civil liberties, and strengthen institutions before EU accession. After membership, however, the EU's leverage is far weaker, and its ability to respond to democratic backsliding is constrained by internal divisions and unanimity requirements.⁹ In recent years, economic pressures, growing anti-immigration sentiment in several member states, and concerns about geopolitical stability have further pushed the promotion of democracy down the list of priorities. As a result, the EU today exerts less consistent pressure on governments both inside and outside its borders to uphold democratic standards than it did during its enlargement era in the 1990s and early 2000s.

Democratically elected dictators

It is not only the external environment that has become less hospitable; corrosive forces also challenge democracy from within. When people think of democratic collapse, many probably conjure up evocative images of South American military juntas of uniformed generals wearing dark glasses. Historically, military coups have indeed been one of the most common ways of abolishing democracy. During the Cold War, they accounted for a staggering 74 percent of all democratic collapses. However, since 1989, patterns have changed. Today, it is predominantly elected governments that erode democracy from within. This category accounts for 63 percent of the post-Cold War democratic collapses, and the figure for the last decade is even higher. If we further distinguish between whether the incumbent government

abruptly and openly does away with democratic institutions by declaring martial law and abolishing parliament, or whether it instead resorts to a more covert and incremental strategy, 93 percent of the incumbent takeovers have been of the latter kind. Dramatic collapses, where it is clear to the outside world that democracy has ceased to exist from one day to the next, still take place—particularly in the Global South—but they have become the exception.¹⁰

Typically, a government elected with a clear popular mandate concentrates power step by step and undermines potential challengers, including free media, opposition parties, and critical groups in civil society. There are many ways of doing this. In some places, constitutional amendments are used to strengthen the executive so that electoral rules favour the ruling party, or the bureaucracy is made more partisan, while the courts and media lose independence, acting more like lapdogs than watchdogs. Elsewhere, existing laws are abused to accuse critics of libel, rioting, and tax evasion—or to prevent them from peacefully organising and demonstrating. Finally, democratic institutions can be weakened through ordinary legislation or referenda. These changes have a veneer of democratic legitimacy, even though a democratic mandate can never go so far as to abolish the core institutions of democracy.

This trend has been evident in, for instance, Türkiye over recent decades. These various forms of power abuse make it difficult—other things being equal—to keep the government on the straight and narrow path, and for the opposition to win elections, even if the actual vote tally has not been manipulated. This is reflected in the steady decline, since 2014, in the number of democracies maintaining robust protections for freedom of expression and assembly. It is therefore crucial to sound the alarm when there is reasonable doubt about the democratic mindsets of politicians, especially when they show clear signs of authoritarianism. One should not be lulled into complacency by the assumption that living in an established democracy outside the perceived risk zone offers immunity. In fact, citizens of newer democracies often appear more vigilant in holding governments accountable for undemocratic behaviour at the ballot box—perhaps because they are more attuned to the possibility of power being abused.¹¹

Populism and polarisation

Populism has been highlighted as one of the greatest threats to democracy in our time. But what is it, exactly? The answer is not entirely straightforward, as populism has many faces. Left-wing and right-wing

movements alike—of a more or less radical slant—have been assigned the term. That being said, there is a rather broad consensus on two defining features of the populist mindset. First, populists believe that society consists of two homogeneous and rival groups, one consisting of down-to-earth, honest people ('you and me'), and the other of a corrupt, out of reach, and arrogant elite ('them'). Second, populists believe that the policies pursued must be based on and immediately express the will of the people, where the members of the 'true' people are assumed to have similar (or at least overlapping) interests.¹²

The absence of a more systematic and detailed ideology means that populists are free to 'follow the popular mood'. They often make this a virtue, while outsiders deplore the lack of logical coherence in populist policy positions and take issue with the many simple diagnoses and solutions ('build the wall', 'bring prices down'), which often disregard how complex challenges such as immigration, inequality, economic growth, and international cooperation actually are.

The rise of populism cannot be solely attributed to factors such as inequality, taxation, or immigration. Comparative studies across time and countries reveal no consistent, one-to-one correlation between these developments and support for populist parties. There may be many different reasons for the growing distrust of established parties and political institutions, as well as for the associated sense of losing cultural and economic status that we see in several parts of the world today.

It is important to understand the causes of populism, but it is equally crucial to examine its potentially profound implications for democratic governance. On the one hand, populism can act as a political corrective by identifying and articulating mismatches between the attitudes of the elite and the established parties, and the views of groups in society that have been left behind. In many places, populist parties have helped put issues on the political agenda that deserve attention if citizens are to maintain their confidence in democracy, and which might otherwise have been ignored.

On the other hand, populism can contribute to undermining the very foundations of democracy. The ancient Greeks had already discussed how demagogues (that is, popular prophets or seducers) could lead democracy astray by appealing to people's feelings and coming up with empty promises rather than factual arguments. As emphasised several times, one of the cornerstones of democracy—indeed, *the* cornerstone—is that both winners and losers accept the

result of the elections. The winners must restrain themselves and not be tempted to use their popular mandate as a pretext to crack down on the opposition or distort the rules of the political game in a manner that creates an uneven playing field; the losers must accept their defeat without inventing conspiracy theories about election fraud or the like that question the legitimacy of the election, and therefore of democracy itself.

Here, many populist politicians and parties—especially those with a strong chauvinistic-nationalistic leaning—are problematic. First, they seldom feel bound by the rules and are able to excuse their actions with reference to the true interests of the people. Second, they feel only contempt for criticism and debate, combined with a willingness to use distorted or even false information. Mainstream parties also sometimes employ rhetorical shortcuts and present complex issues in a one-sided way. But populist parties often go a step further—intensifying distortions in ways that erode the quality of public debate and diminish the level of informed discourse. Social media has further accelerated the possibilities of connecting with like-minded individuals and disseminating information of questionable accuracy—often bypassing mainstream media, which remains subject to standards of fact-checking and balanced reporting. Against this backdrop, it is hardly surprising that populist actors often seek to undermine the legitimacy and functioning of the mainstream media.

The half- and quarter-truths offered by many populist leaders and the unsubstantiated or illegitimate ‘solutions’ they propose require a response grounded in clear counter-arguments and cooperation among moderate forces. The centre must hold, to paraphrase W.B. Yeats’ famous poem ‘The Second Coming’ from 1919; such collaboration is essential both to correct misperceptions and to offer citizens a trustworthy alternative to address real problems. It is important not to simply accept the idea that the rules of the game are being fundamentally changed.

It is particularly difficult for reasoned arguments to prevail when the political climate is pervaded by polarisation, as is certainly the case in the USA. Not only has the ideological divide between Republicans and Democrats widened in recent decades, but political discourse has also become increasingly moralistic and one-dimensional—transforming opponents into enemies and framing their policies as inherently evil. The space for meaningful deliberation and compromise narrows, and partisans become increasingly willing to sacrifice democratic rights

if doing so prevents their rivals from gaining political influence.¹³ Similar kinds of radical polarisation can be found in other high-quality democracies as well, but fortunately it is still the exception.

The perils of exaggerated expectations

Modern democracies face not only external threats and internal divisions, but also a more subtle danger: inflated expectations. Many citizens have come to view democracy not merely as a political framework for peaceful conflict resolution, but as a comprehensive guarantee of prosperity, justice, and moral virtue. When these lofty hopes inevitably collide with reality, disappointment is easily mistaken for decay. The frustration that follows fuels cynicism and alienation.

Today, democracy is the only legitimate form of government worldwide. Its great popularity has, however, created a new challenge: how do we distinguish between democracy and good policies? It is essential to maintain a perspective when evaluating whether something is genuinely undemocratic or simply reflects a disagreement with one's own views about what is reasonable or desirable. Just think of the many harsh and biased statements about Covid-19 restrictions that were raised in public and private debate during the pandemic of 2020–2023. As democracy has become a widely embraced ideal, there is a growing tendency to conflate it with the specific policies one personally favours. When others hold differing views—or worse, succeed in implementing policies that embody these views—many are quick to label such outcomes as undemocratic.

A good example is the so-called ‘Global Gag Rule’, which Republicans and Democrats in the United States have alternately introduced and abolished since 1984. It aims to prevent civil society organisations outside the USA from supporting abortions through counselling and the like. Supporters of the law consider abortion the violation of a fundamental democratic right to life, whereas critics describe it as anti-democratic because it infringes on women's autonomy over their own bodies. Democrats in the US Congress have even dubbed a counter-proposal ‘The Global Democracy Promotion Act’.¹⁴

Neither side seems to be right when they refer to this issue as pro- or anti-democratic. Both democracy and dictatorship can be reconciled with the right to abortion and attempts to make abortions easier—as can restrictions. We are here dealing with a more fundamental

problem: democracy is not given a narrow and concrete meaning that focuses on the political regime form; rather, it is considered a subjective set of instructions for living a good or even the proper life. This can create expectations that are ultimately unattainable. When harsh realities set in and it becomes clear that democracy is no cure-all, the consequences can be damaging. At this point, we can return to the American philologist Josiah Ober. Reflecting on the unsuccessful efforts to export democracy to the Middle East following the 9/11 terrorist attacks, he offers the following sober assessment: 'After struggling through a pro-democratic revolution or some other difficult process of regime change, there will be a great deal of frustration and anger when [people] come to find they don't yet have what they thought they wanted.'¹⁵

To expect democracy to solve all social and moral problems is to mistake it for something it was never meant to be. Democracy is designed to channel disagreement, not eliminate it; democracies often-times seem inefficient because they must be inclusive and rule-bound, and produce compromise rather than perfection. Democracy's genius lies not in providing the 'right' answers, but in allowing societies to correct their mistakes over time without violence, in a piecemeal and mundane way, as Karl Popper emphasised long ago.¹⁶ Recognising this is not an invitation to complacency, but an appeal to political maturity. Democracies endure when their citizens accept imperfection, cultivate patience, and understand that disappointment is not decay, but an entirely normal condition of self-government.

It is a basic democratic condition that one agenda can prevail over other agendas, and that the motives are not always noble or well thought out. But democracy as a form of government is colour-blind and therefore does not privilege the red, the green, the yellow, or the blue. Policies are determined by the values and interests currently prevailing in society. Political decisions inevitably affect the distribution of resources and the conditions of certain values in a society. The political arena involves a contest of wills; some win, others lose.

We would therefore do well to reserve the term 'undemocratic' for statements and actions that directly restrict or undermine democratic institutions, such as free and inclusive elections, and freedom of expression and organisation. Democracy has the right to defend itself, and democrats do not necessarily have to tolerate those who are intolerant of democratic rules and institutions, as Popper¹⁶ also emphasised. But they must tolerate alternative views of what is the

right policy. This is worth keeping in mind when, and this is bound to happen on occasion, one feels frustrated by government policy or criticism by the opposition. Otherwise, we risk fostering distrust in democracy, as reality inevitably falls short of ideals—whether in old, high-quality democracies or new, low-quality ones.

Democrats by convenience

Democracy is often taken for granted, and most people prefer to live in a democracy than a dictatorship.¹⁷ But if we scratch the surface just a little, underlying fractures appear: many citizens and political actors are committed democrats only when democratic institutions produce outcomes they favour. When they do not, they are quick to question the legitimacy of elections, the independence of courts, the autonomy of the media, or the authority of parliaments. Democracy becomes a tool for winning rather than a framework for handling disagreements.

Numerous studies have shown that many individuals are inconsistent in their commitment to democratic principles. First, support for concrete democratic institutions (e.g. free elections, freedom of expression) is at a lower level than the support for the abstraction ‘democracy’. Second, many prioritise policies over democratic rights, especially if the transgressions mainly harm their political opponents.¹⁸

It is therefore essential to raise awareness among politicians, opinion leaders, and citizens about this inconsistency—and to emphasise its potential dangers. It is no use if you only see the splinter in your opponent’s eye, but not the beam in your own; or if you only support democracy when doing so is convenient. The most serious threat to democracy is not a lack of belief in it, but a lack of restraint; the temptation to treat victory as a licence and defeat as fraud corrodes the very foundations of democratic rule. Meeting this challenge demands a renewal of civic virtues in the form of moderation, mutual tolerance, and a principled commitment to rules and institutions, even when they work against one’s own side.

Breaking with democratic principles is unacceptable, whether undertaken in good faith, such as for environmental or public health reasons, or when driven by self-interest. It is in the spirit of democracy that everyone, including the government, is equal before the law. These questions are not a matter of balancing pragmatic realism against idealistic naivety; they concern the fundamental divide

between democratic norms and authoritarian tendencies. The virtues of moderation and consistent commitment are neither innate nor are they automatically sustained. They must be cultivated through civic education, responsible leadership, and institutions that reward restraint rather than confrontation.

Controversial decisions must be made

The challenges outlined above must be taken seriously. Not all democracies are resilient, and hardly any is invulnerable. In a hostile environment, democratic stability depends on political tolerance and moderation, including a basic sense of unity around the rules of the game. These virtues are not dramatic or glamorous, but form the everyday guardrails that keep democratic politics from sliding into dysfunction and open conflict. If democracy is to sustain its two-century trajectory into the future, we must be prepared to defend it—not only when it is convenient, but also when we face trade-offs in terms of preferred policies and candidates. Moderate forces need to come together and dispel the myths spread by dictators and other foes of open society. It is so very important that we put things into perspective when criticising democracy. Remember Winston Churchill's one-liner: 'Democracy is the worst form of government—except for all the others that have been tried.'

No one is omnipotent, and experts do not always agree. What is good for something (or someone) is often bad for something (or someone) else. These are basic conditions under which both democracies and autocracies must function, and mean that controversial decisions must be made. The interests of some will always triumph over the interests of others. Democracies are imperfect, but the alternatives are much worse. A clear advantage of democracy is that it enables citizens to hold those in power accountable through a peaceful mechanism: regular elections. That advantage is so central that the alternatives pale by comparison—today and tomorrow, just as in the past.

Notes

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