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DEMOCRATIC DECAY

WHY DOES IT HAPPEN AND WHAT CAN
WE DO TO PREVENT IT FROM
HAPPENING?

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Democratic Decay:

Why Does It Happen And What Can We Do To Prevent It From Happening?

Natasha Lindstaedt

The last several decades have not been good for democracy. For the first time since 2001 there are more authoritarian regimes than democracies, with more than a third of the world living in countries that are becoming more autocratic.¹ Democratic decay was notable in countries such as the US, Brazil, India, Israel, Bolivia and Ukraine. Somewhat surprisingly, many of the worst cases of democratic decay are taking place in the European Union, with Hungary, Poland, Bulgaria, Romania, Croatia and the Czech Republic backsliding considerably. Meanwhile, though Turkey attempted to democratize over a decade ago, it is now fully authoritarian with its president, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, likely to hold power until at least 2029. An opening for democracy in Myanmar about ten years ago has come full circle. The military recently staged yet another coup and is now fully in charge again after exercising de facto power behind the scenes.

A DEMOCRATIC DECONSOLIDATION?

But while autocratization is not surprising in Myanmar and Turkey, it is shocking what has taken place in the United States. Its former leader, President Donald Trump, refused to accept the election results, spewed lies about the validity of the elections and then inspired a deadly insurrection on the Capitol to thwart the transmission of power to his legitimate successor.

¹ <https://www.v-dem.net/en/>

At their core, democracies only have one major distinction from autocracies--- peaceful turnover in power of the executive through elections that are free, fair and relatively frequent. The siege on the US Capitol was a fitting end to an administration which attempted to undermine democratic institutions every turn.

But why would a country with more than two centuries of experience with democracy be able to almost fall apart within four years? Some scholars have noted that we are not just experiencing democratic backsliding, but **democratic deconsolidation**.² By that we mean not just the erosion of democratic institutions (such as the independence of the judiciary and legislative and executive balance), but the decay of democratic norms and values. For democracy to be consolidated it needs to be considered the “only game in town.” Political support for democracy should remain high even when things aren’t going well. This is important because there is often a high correlation between a country’s economic outlook and satisfaction for democracy, with countries that are struggling economically like Greece (74%), Bulgaria (71%), and Spain (61%) reporting high levels of dissatisfaction with how democracy is working their countries.³

POLITICAL POLARIZATION AND THE ROLE OF THE MEDIA

This becomes more difficult in an environment of polarization. In cases like the US and elsewhere, political polarization is on the rise.⁴ There is simply less tolerance of the opposition and less civility—both important building blocks to a functioning democracy. Some of this polarization grew as a result of unchecked globalization and rising inequalities. Immigration is often to blame, but anti-immigration sentiments are heightened among

² Foa, R.S. and Mounk, Y., 2017. The signs of deconsolidation. *Journal of democracy*, 28(1), pp.5-15.; Howe, P., 2017. Eroding norms and democratic deconsolidation. *Journal of Democracy*, 28(4), pp.15-29.

³ <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2020/02/27/satisfaction-with-democracy/>

⁴ Svobik, M.W., 2019. Polarization versus democracy. *Journal of Democracy*, 30(3), pp.20-32.

groups that are the most negatively affected by economic globalization.⁵ Cultural wars were picked up by the media and political entrepreneurs. Divisive narratives were seized upon to win more votes, while the media played its part in fanning the flames rather than informing.⁶

In particular the role of the media is important to focus on. In the past, we - for the most part - all consumed the same information. We may have interpreted that information differently depending on our world view, but the information and the facts were the same. Today we have entered an era of alternative facts and evidence. Information is also consumed much differently than in the past. The role of social media is instructive—with social media, individuals can enter echo chambers where their pre-conceived notions are reinforced and amplified by information that supports their views. The information that flows through social media, which never has to be fact checked by editors, is deliberately targeted to people who would be receptive to its consumption. In many cases the information is being delivered by bots who use machine learning to carefully curate false narratives that will play well with unknowing individuals. These online attacks, sometimes executed by authoritarian regimes (most notably Russia), have destroyed norms of tolerance and decency.⁷

LOW LEVELS OF TRUST

With two sets of facts, polarization has only grown. This also makes it impossible to have civil debates when the two sides cannot agree on the basic facts. In the face of dealing with an opponent that one cannot be civil with, the knee-jerk reaction for some living in democracies is to do whatever it takes to undermine the opposition. This means that shifts in the political culture in some democracies have taken place whereby individuals have become so intolerant or full of contempt towards the opposition, that they are increasingly open to non-democratic

⁵ Rodrik, D., 2020. *Why does globalization fuel populism? Economics, culture, and the rise of right-wing populism* (No. w27526). National Bureau of Economic Research.

⁶ Wilson, A.E., Parker, V. and Feinberg, M., 2020. Polarization in the contemporary political and media landscape. *Current Opinion in Behavioral Sciences*, 34, pp.223-228.

⁷ Woolley, S.C. and Howard, P.N. eds., 2018. *Computational propaganda: political parties, politicians, and political manipulation on social media*. Oxford University Press.

alternatives. This is also coming at a time when trust in democratic institutions in some democracies is at an all-time low. In OECD countries on average only 45% of citizens trust their governments.⁸

Low levels of trust in institutions does not happen overnight and does not happen in a vacuum. Typically, democracies see their political parties decay first. Parties, in many countries, have become more personalistic, less institutionalized, and less responsive to their constituents. The ossification of party systems has led to growing discontent and feelings of disenfranchisement and marginalization. This has led to the rise of anti-system candidates—which sell themselves as political outsiders who will cut through red tape, and “drain the swamp” of corrupt elites.

These anti-system candidates/leaders, who have often been labelled *populist* (and sometimes authoritarian populist), have played an important role in democratic decay. While the context that these styles of leadership have emerged from is important, the cuts to democracy are not possible without the presence of authoritarian elites deliberately working to undermine institutions, while carefully masking these intentions with empty rhetoric.

This is the most common way that democratic decay takes place today (for more on this see Lindstaedt, 2021). A “populist” style leader is democratically elected, who then uses democratic institutions such as referenda to push through policies and structural changes to consolidate their power in a slow, piecemeal fashion. If the media is supportive of the leader, the relationship is symbiotic. Once the media begins to criticize the leader, the leader systematically attacks the media in order to undermine its legitimacy and to control the narratives. Once the media has been partially disabled, the leader is freer to take more risks in dismantling democratic institutions, without fear of whistle blowers having much traction in the media. Thus, the lack of discursive accountability facilitates greater undermining of other forms of accountability—such as weakening the judiciary and the legislatures vis-à-vis the executive, and eventually undermining the fairness of elections.

⁸ <http://www.oecd.org/gov/trust-in-government.htm>

With all of these institutions weakened, corruption rises while public dissatisfaction with democracy grows.⁹ Breaking free from this vicious circle becomes a difficult task, and much depends on the maturity and strength of the institutions to begin with. However, key to reverse backsliding is the role of both actors that caused the decay in the first place: elites and citizens. In the case of Ecuador, after years of backsliding under Rafael Correa, his successor Lenin Moreno reversed course and re-instituted the democratic safeguards that the country had in place in the past.¹⁰

THE NEED FOR DEMOCRATIC EDUCATION

But the public also plays an important role in rejecting authoritarian forms of leadership and educating themselves about the facts. For this to happen there needs to be greater investment in education in general, and more education about democratic processes, democratic norms and media literacy - in order to be able to distinguish between fact and fiction. Seeking justice of those who violate the rule of law is also important to healing a nation. Those who engage in corruption and have assaulted democracy need to be held to account. Finally, some democracies will need to do a better job at targeting current campaign finance laws which allow for dark money to secretly bankroll candidates. In the case of the US, since 2008 over \$1 billion in dark money has been spent.¹¹ This erodes the bonds of representation that fuels greater frustration in the public with the way that democracy works.

Ultimately democracy can't function without democrats—and elites, the media and the public itself, have an important role to play.

Natasha Lindstaedt is the author of *Democratic Decay and Authoritarian Resurgence*, (Bristol: Bristol University Press, 2021).

⁹ <https://institute.global/policy/populist-harm-democracy-empirical-assessment>

¹⁰ De la Torre, C., 2018. Latin America's Shifting Politics: Ecuador After Correa. *Journal of Democracy*, 29(4), pp.77-88.

¹¹ <https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/analysis-opinion/dark-money-2020-election>

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