

### **Is democracy experiencing a setback worldwide ?**

Since the turn of the millennium, it seems that democracy worldwide has been suffering.

Spanning across several continents, from Africa to the Americas. This essay will address three key factors undermining democracy in the modern day, spanning three key continents, analysing the extent to which they have damaged the legitimacy of democracy - directly or indirectly - in being for, of and by the people.

Beginning with the elephant in the room, the last 4 years of American politics have seen a resurgence of populist far right, in the form of Donald Trump. Here is where Abraham Lincoln's key criteria is particularly important. The fabric of democracy relies on a consensus that the government and people are one and the same - of, for and by the people. A considerable issue in American politics in the 2010s has been a growing divide between the two, with opinion polls placing government confidence in 2015 at an all-time low [1]. Donald Trump was a natural symptom of this growing distrust. Trump was a figure who had been in mainstream popular culture for decades and came as an outsider from the establishment - a position that many Trump voters felt at the time of the 2016 election. In his election campaign, Trump repeatedly referred to 'draining the swamp' [2] - a metaphor to supposedly rid Washington of 'deep lying corruption' - supported by internet group QAnon [3]. Tackling corruption and populism as a whole are not entirely threats to democracy, but the nature of Trump's new brand right wing populism, one of conspiracy - a distaste of experts and education [4] - threatens a building block part of democracy: information.

When politicians cannot agree upon information - a situation created by a distrust for experts and news media and popularised by this specific sort of conspiracy populism [5] - the bedrock of democracy - debate and agreement - falls apart. Partisan politics are no creation of this populism, but the distrust of experts has played a large role in exacerbating the divide between the two major parties - they can no longer agree on literal facts [6]. There are a

number of threats this poses to democracy. To begin with, voting integrity and independence is a key to a stable democracy. Although there are key cases of voter suppression and manipulation, this form of distrusting populism and disagreement on factual information has made voting in the United States become less of a free will decision. Ideally, a voter can examine all factual information, consider different framings, and come to a conclusion based on their own judgement. But in a society where mainstream networks are labelled fake news when they do not match an agenda [7] - and where experts are once again shunned [8] - it is impossible for the voter to gage a real, non-partisan state of affairs. Thus, voters are often pulled into completely separate and polarised worlds, with partisan, opinion-based news being fed to them to remain loyal to a certain perspective - passively limiting the concept of a 'free' vote. The eventual disconnect between the two realities created by a distrust for the establishment came more obviously in the form of the insurrection on January 6. Participants of the insurrection included members of QAnon [9], but also more mainstream Republican supporters. All insurrection participants joined in the mass rally in the belief that democracy had failed them and been undermined. The insurrection was a symptom of presidential agitation at the electoral system, claims with little to no basis of widespread fraud - which was unable to be fact-checked in the eyes of a group who no longer believed in facts. This distrust of information, of experts, of news, is what led to a direct attack on democracy in attempting to halt the democratic process of election confirmation. That is the case of right-wing conspiracy theory populism setting back belief in democracy in North America.

In South America, the last two years have provided issues and resolution to a broken democracy. In 2019, unpopular President Evo Morales was forced out of office, following a call from the military to do so [10]. Different political commentators have taken different stances, for Zibechi and Gutiérrez - the popular movements alongside military involvement make this a triumph for democracy, not a threat. Although true that Morales was wanted out by a large number of the people [11], the bypassing of democratic processes in his resignation spelt danger for democracy. The OAS observations found reasonable doubt on

the legitimacy of the election, and naturally, this - alongside a long length of court cases with Morales - cast doubt in the minds of the Bolivian people. The damage caused an erosion of trust in political institutions, with the natural response being a turn to authoritarianism [12] - trusting strong leadership to save the day. However, when bypassing the appropriate democratic processes, there is always the danger of undermining democracy as a whole. When the people place their faith in unelected authoritarian leaders, it poses a direct threat to the certainty a democracy requires - of when votes will be called, and the integrity of them [13]. Authoritarian leaders have continually undermined these principles of democracy, from Maduro to Stalin - strong man leading figures hold the risk of 'strong action' often ending in a disposal of opposition thought and figures. The erosion of trust in democracy and political institutions - a pattern seen around the world [14] - runs risk of handing, democratically - as seen with Trump - or by force - as seen with Áñez - ultimate power to strongmen leaders.

This is a fundamental flaw of modern democracy, once again sharpened by the continually declining levels of trust between the people and their representatives. However, as seen with the case of Bolivia, democracy may offer its own solution. The continual protests and shutdowns of the people in Bolivia eventually forced the government's hand in allowing for freely democratic elections [15]. The win of Luis Arce, after almost a year of an 'interim' government and president, can be seen as an indicator that democracy is alive and well. As long as the people are able to protest, and elections are kept free and fair, they are able to dispose of authoritarian leaders who may tyrannise the nation, and harm democracy. Herein lies the 'strongman paradox' [16] - an authoritarian leader makes themselves difficult to dispose of through democracy, and therefore can cause that same effect of erosion in public trust and turn to an alternative strong man. In some cases - those more subtle - strongmen bend democracy to suit them, by controlling heavily campaigning time and funding as can be seen with Erdogan's election in 2018 [16]. In short, authoritarianism is incompatible with democracy, but it is at first enabled with a disillusionment with democracy - which then

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becomes self-fulfilling. A rise of authoritarianism across the world can be seen as a symptom of the growing loss of trust, and thus - a setback for democracy worldwide.

There is also a modern, growing symptom of a failing democracy - voter apathy - as can be seen in Nigeria. Nigerian democracy has only stably existed since 1999, but it has already been made almost obsolete. The most recent Nigerian election yielded a 35% turnout rate [17] - although this was in part due to various forms of voter suppression in major areas, an overwhelming lack of turnout was also caused by complete lack of faith in democracy.

Popular opinion of many voters is extremely negative of both major Nigerian candidates [18] with Transparency International ranking Nigeria as one of the most corrupt nations in the world [19]. When the people cannot trust politicians to be anti-corruption, and public perception of them is as opportunists, voter participation falls [20]. There is an apathy created by the fact that voters do not care as to who wins, knowing their best interests will not be at heart. This is an entirely different response to the same scenario as of that in conspiracy populism, or traditional authoritarianism - but it is another threat to democracy created by erosion of trust between the people and their representatives - in this case, for good reason. Without a significant mandate of the people being handed to governments, the purpose of democracy becomes itself overridden - the people are not truly represented, because the people believe they never will be. That is the tale of corruption in several different states, particularly in post-colonial Africa [21].

In conclusion, democracy *is* facing a setback worldwide. People in almost all democratic nations appear to be experiencing a growing divide with those who are meant to represent them. Without this fundamental trust, that the government is operating in their best interest, fairly, and not exclusionary, democracy has been eroding. Major events such as the global financial crisis have sped up the process, eroding trust further - but the real case common among all three major issues mentioned above - populism, authoritarianism and corruption - has been warned of as far back as Plato's opportunistic demagogue. The crumbling of

democracy in the modern world has been somewhat inevitable, with the issues faced post millennium seemingly setting the stage for opportunistic leaders to inevitably undermine democracy as a whole. Trust erosion has been created naturally, by the fault of democracy itself, not manufacture - and so democracy has caused its own failure, worldwide.

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