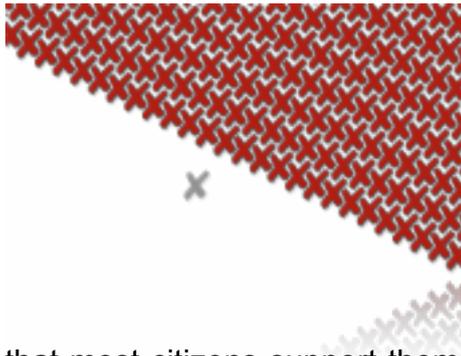


Could populism actually be good for democracy?

A wave of populist revolts has led many to lose faith in the wisdom of people power. But such eruptions are essential to the vitality of modern politics.



Everyone seems to agree that democracy is under attack. What is surprising is how many of its usual friends have come to fear democracy itself – or perhaps to fear that a country's people, too inflamed by narrow passions, risk turning politics into a distasteful blood sport, pitting *The People vs Democracy*, in the startling words of one recent book title.

Observers have understandable qualms about political programmes that are alarmingly illiberal, yet obviously democratic, in that most citizens support them. In Poland and Hungary, democratically elected ruling parties attack Muslim migrants for undermining Christian identity. In the Philippines, President Rodrigo Duterte rules with an iron fist, pledging to put drug pushers in funeral parlours, not prisons.

Modern democracies all rest on a claim of popular sovereignty – the proposition that all legitimate governments grow out of the power of a people, and in some way are subject to its will. Yet when a large majority of a country's people vehemently supports policies a critic finds abhorrent, many liberals, even avowed democrats, recoil in horror.

Thus arises the possibility of a painful paradox: that “democracies end when they are too democratic”. So concluded a 2016 piece by the US political observer Andrew Sullivan, resurrecting an argument made two generations earlier by Samuel Huntington (in a 1975 report called *The Crisis of Democracy*, issued in the wake of the international student revolts of the 1960s).

Even the leftwing scholar Chantal Mouffe, who has long championed raw populist conflict as the essence of “radical democracy”, seems distraught at current events.

“Democracy that is in good working order – with conflict, but where people accept the existence of their adversaries – is not easy to re-establish,” she recently told an interviewer, gesturing implicitly toward tolerance, one of the most jeopardised liberal norms in the current context: “I’m not that optimistic.”

Current affairs may seem especially bleak, but fears about democracy are nothing new. At the zenith of direct democracy in ancient Athens, in the fifth century BC, one critic called it a “patent absurdity” – and so it seemed to most political experts from Aristotle to Edmund Burke, who considered democracy “the most shameless thing in the world”. As the American founding father John Adams warned,

“there never was a democracy yet that did not commit suicide”.

For almost 2,000 years, most western political theorists agreed with Aristotle, Burke and Adams: nobody could imagine seriously advocating democracy as an ideal form of government. It was only at the end of the 18th century that democracy reappeared as a modern political ideal, during *the French Revolution*.

Ever since, popular insurrections and revolts in the name of democracy have become a recurrent feature of global politics. It needs to be stressed: these revolts are not an unfortunate blemish on the peaceful forward march toward a more just society; they form the heart and soul of modern democracy as a living reality.

It is a familiar story: out of the blue, it seems, a crowd pours into a city square or gathers at a barnstorming rally held by a spellbinding orator, to protest against hated institutions, to express rage at the betrayals of the ruling class, to seize control of public spaces. To label these frequently disquieting moments of collective freedom “populist”, in a pejorative sense, is to misunderstand a constitutive feature of the modern democratic project.

Yet these episodes of collective self-assertion are invariably fleeting, and often provoke a political backlash in turn. The political disorder they create stands in tension with the need for a more stable, peaceful form of collective participation. That is one reason why many modern democrats have tried to create representative institutions that can – through liberal protections for the freedom of religion, and of the press, and the civil rights of minorities – both express, and tame, the will of a sovereign people.

Thus the great French philosopher Condorcet in 1793 proposed creating a new, indirect form of self-rule, linking local assemblies to a national government.

“By ingrafting representation upon democracy,” as Condorcet’s friend Tom Paine put it, the people could exercise their power both directly, in local assemblies, and indirectly, by provisionally entrusting some of their powers to elected representatives.

Under the pressure of events, another ardent French democrat, Robespierre, went further and defended the need, amid a civil war, for a temporary dictatorship – precisely to preserve the possibility of building a more enduring form of representative democracy, once its enemies had been defeated and law and order could be restored.

But there was a problem with these efforts to establish a modern democracy at scale. Especially in a large nation such as France or the US, representative institutions – and, even worse, dictatorial regimes claiming a popular mandate – inevitably risk frustrating anyone hoping to play a more direct role in political decision-making.

This means that the democratic project, both ancient and modern, is inherently unstable. The modern promise of popular sovereignty, repeatedly frustrated, produces recurrent efforts at asserting the collective power of a people. If observers like the apparent result of such an effort, they may hail it as a renaissance of the democratic spirit; if they do not, they are liable to dismiss these episodes of collective self-assertion as mob rule, or populism run amok.

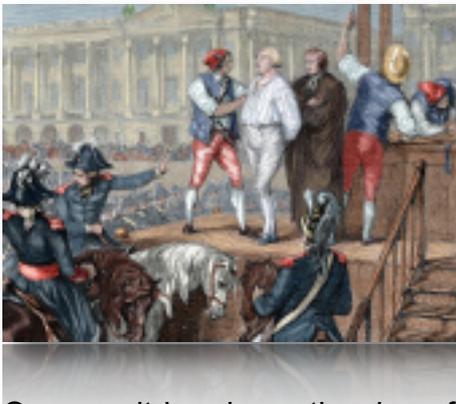
No matter. Even though the post-second world war consensus over the meaning and value of liberal democratic institutions seems more fragile than ever – polls show that trust in elected representatives has rarely been lower – democracy as furious dissent flourishes, in vivid and vehement outbursts of anger at remote elites and shadowy enemies.

It is important to sharply distinguish democracy from liberalism – two value-laden words that, in recent years, have become almost hopelessly conflated and confused, especially in the work of social scientists and western political pundits who fret that western liberal democracy, once the “promised land”, has become “the enemy” in places like Hungary.

Unlike democracy, “liberalism” is a relatively late addition to our political lexicon. In Europe, the word first came into wide usage in the 19th century by various political theorists and statesmen in France, Germany and Italy, united in their horror at the bloodshed of the *French Revolution*, but otherwise varied in their positive views.

Modern democracy also has no necessary connection to liberalism. The Protestant champions of popular sovereignty in the 16th century summoned it for the express purpose of dethroning rulers with whose religious views they disagreed:

“It was not religious liberty they sought, but the elimination of wrong religions,” as the historian Edmund Morgan wrote in 1988.



The execution of King Louis XVI in 1793, during the French Revolution. Illustration: Alamy

What is clear today is that while democracy may be widely admired, it is, in its liberal form, an embattled ideology. As the social scientist William Galston has sharply observed:

“Few leaders and movements in the west dare to challenge the idea of democracy itself. Not so for liberalism, which has come under mounting attack.”

One result has been the rise of popular movements in which a majority of ordinary citizens has embraced a narrow conception of solidarity and rallied around a leader who claims to embody the will of such a closed community.

Another result has been a resurgence of traditional anxieties, notably in the UK and the US, about democracy and its obvious dangers. After all, why should we entrust the fate of the Earth to large numbers of ordinary citizens foolish enough to support self-destructive policies and manifestly unfit leaders?

Most ancient authorities reviled democracy in Athens. Plato, perhaps the most widely admired writer in antiquity, and someone who lived under democratic rule in the fourth century, criticised the false beliefs that prevailed in a city governed by public opinion rather than true knowledge, and he deplored the “insolence, anarchy, wastefulness, and shamelessness” that those false beliefs facilitated. The historian Thucydides, another citizen of democratic Athens, who chronicled the *Peloponnesian War* with Sparta that ended with the defeat of Athens in 404, essentially blamed the power of the ordinary people of Athens, and their susceptibility to manipulation by mendacious orators, for this catastrophic outcome.

Thanks to such critiques – as well as subsequent political developments, from the Macedonian empire of Alexander the Great to modern European monarchies claiming a divine right to rule – for a long time nobody much cared about the Athenian political system, or about democracy as a form of government.

The Athenian democracy certainly doesn't measure up by modern liberal standards: at its zenith in the fifth and fourth centuries BC, it did not choose most of its government by holding elections; nor did it protect the human rights of its citizens, as it lacked any notion of such rights; nor were the fundamental powers of the Athenian polis enshrined in a comprehensive written document.

What Athens did have is a community in which every citizen was expected to participate in the political life of the city – and far more actively than in any modern democracy. At the height of democracy in Athens, an assembly of citizens, open to all, met at least 40 times a year. All political offices were held by ordinary citizens, randomly selected, and all legal judgments in the city's courts were reached by large juries of ordinary citizens, similarly selected. And all this happened in a comparatively large commercial city that dominated the eastern Mediterranean world for nearly two centuries.

These institutions were the result of a popular uprising in 508 BC, against Spartan troops who had seized the Acropolis. Instead of acquiescing in a foreign occupation, the ordinary citizens of Athens spontaneously converged on the Acropolis and surrounded the Spartan army. It took only three days to drive the Spartans from the city – which suggests the popular uprising had numbers and force on its side.

The result was a sweeping transformation of Athenian institutions and the subsequent appearance, for the first time in history, of “democracy”, as a word to describe a regime where power (*kratos*) was in the hands of ordinary people (*demos*). Henceforth all legislation in Athens had to be validated in the assembly, which was now open to all citizens, no matter how poor. Even more important was the use of a lottery to staff most city offices and juries, which nullified the corrupting advantages conferred in elections by wealth and family prominence.

By empowering an impoverished multitude in this manner, critics charged, the assembly and democratic orators had in fact created a new kind of tyranny – a collective tyranny of the majority, a de facto welfare state that doled out money and patronage to the ordinary citizens who manned the imperial fleet and staffed the city's courts and offices.

For Plato, the key problem was epistemological: most people – “the many” – had no knowledge of truth and no clear pattern of justice in their minds. Democracy corrupted even intelligent citizens by leading them to dumb down their policies in order to pander to ignorant crowds.

When they gathered “in assemblies, courts, theatres, army camps, or any other common meeting of a multitude,” the Athenian demos, Plato reports, would “blame some of the things said or done, and praise others, both in excess, shouting and clapping; and besides, the rocks and the very place surrounding them echo and redouble the uproar of praise and blame.”

After the eclipse of direct self-rule in the ancient world, the idea of democracy survived, barely. In the west, it was mainly used as a term of art, deployed by legal scholars, generally in two contradictory usages. On the one hand, democracy became a virtual synonym for violent anarchy: the Roman historian Polybius said “the license and lawlessness” of democracy inevitably “produces mob rule”, to complete a cycle through which all governments had to pass, going from best (monarchy) to worst (democracy, and then mob rule).

On the other hand, Polybius also argued that democracy had a potentially constructive role to play. He suggested that the most durable political regime would be a republic that combined the three pure forms of government (monarchy, aristocracy and democracy) into interlinked branches that would check and balance each other, enabling a well-ordered republic to navigate the winds of time “like a well-trimmed boat”.



Polling booths in Chesterfield, Virginia. Photograph: AP

In the centuries that followed, a tradition of republican thought emerged, based on the example of ancient Rome. During the Renaissance, some theorists working within the republican tradition cautiously suggested that ordinary people might have an especially useful role to play, especially as watchdogs and soldiers. Because they were jealous of their freedom, they would be vigilant spectators of executive and administrative conduct, on guard against mal-

feasance. The very passions of the people, which could generate a certain *esprit de corps*, could also be harnessed for the enhancement of a republic's military might. Machiavelli, dreaming of a resurgence of Italian glory in the Renaissance, was eager to exploit popular ardour:

"The best armies are those of armed peoples," rather than paid mercenaries.

At the same time, republican writers tended to agree that the chief danger to a mixed constitution came from the democratic element, because of its tendency to degenerate into violence and anarchy. Machiavelli warned that the people, left to their own devices, were "*promoters of license*". Algernon Sidney, an English republican beheaded for expressing treasonous views in 1683, denied being a proponent of pure democracy. So did the Enlightenment philosopher Montesquieu, who pointedly worried about the "*spirit of extreme equality*" he assumed was typical of democracies. Even in the US, in the wake of a war against colonial rule by a distant monarch and amid expansive new assertions of the power of the people, political theorists handled the idea of democracy gingerly, if they acknowledged it at all.

In this context, the political writings of Jean-Jacques Rousseau came as a shock. The key was the audacious way he redefined sovereignty in terms of democracy. Before Rousseau, "*sovereignty*" had implied brute force, empire and the ability to command. After him, it defined not the dominion of monarchs, but the legitimate power of a people. In the wake of the *French Revolution*, he came to be seen as a prophet, for writings such as this, from *Emile*, first published in 1763:

"The great become small, the rich become poor, the monarch becomes subject; are the blows of fate so rare that you can count on being exempted from them? We are approaching the state of crisis and the century of revolutions."

By the summer of 1792, militants inspired by Rousseau were arguing that political power, properly understood, belonged neither to a king, nor to a distant body of elected representatives, but rather to the people assembled in their local neighbourhoods, where they could discuss their shared fate face to face. Events came to a head on 10 August 1792, when a majority of these local assemblies resolved that only an armed revolt would assure that the French people were truly sovereign. At midnight, they seized the town hall; in the morning they assaulted the king's quarters at the Tuileries Palace, although by then he and his family had fled for their lives.

As one witness to the violence that day later recalled:

"I remained ... until four o'clock in the afternoon, having before my eyes a view of all the horrors that were being perpetrated. Some of the men were still continuing the slaughter; others were cutting off the heads of those already slain; the women, lost to all sense of shame, were committing the most indecent mutilations on the dead bodies from which they tore pieces of flesh and carried them off in triumph ..."

Toward evening I took the road to Versailles ... [and] crossed the Pont Louis Seize, which was covered with the naked carcasses of men already in a state of putrefaction from the intense heat of the weather."

The most radically democratic phase of the *French Revolution* thus began with a carnival of atrocities. But the violence cracked open a new world of political possibilities. For the first time since ancient Athens, direct democracy had become a concrete, collective goal – at least in the minds of the Parisian commoners streaming through the streets with their muskets and pikes.

This uprising led to the dissolution of the *French National Assembly*, the convening of a constitutional convention and the public execution of the king after a show trial. The convention enabled Condorcet to draft the world's first democratic constitution. But it was never implemented – a *Jacobin* coup forced Condorcet into hiding, and led to a reign of terror, which the *Jacobin* leader, Robespierre, argued was necessary to defend the nascent democracy from its many foes, both foreign and French.

In the autumn of 1793, the new republic's conscripts, on orders from Paris, embarked on a murderous rampage in the Vendée that killed some 250,000 people, most of them innocent men, women and children. The *French Revolution* had resurrected the idea of democracy – and produced a hecatomb on a grand scale.

"Of this I am certain," Burke declared, "that in a democracy, the majority of the citizens is capable of exercising the most cruel oppressions upon the minority."

In the aftermath of the French Revolution, his fears were widely shared by conservatives and self-described "liberals".

Fearful of armed crowds and the possibility of mob rule, the American constitution had been explicitly designed to empower not ordinary citizens, but a "natural aristocracy". As Benjamin Rush, a signatory of the *Declaration of Independence*, explained:

"All power is derived from the people" – but this power is not wielded by the people: "They possess it only on the days of their elections. After this, it is property of their rulers, nor can they exercise or resume it, unless it is abused."

To this day, the US remains a deeply flawed democracy. It still has an electoral college designed to thwart majorities. It still has a senate that guarantees inequality of political representation. It still is the scene of pitched struggles over the right to vote.



Russian president Vladimir Putin emerging from a polling booth. Photograph: AFP/Getty

Yet, this primordial American prejudice against democracy was almost instantly transformed by an equally passionate upwelling of American enthusiasm for democracy, in the wake of the *French Revolution*. Among the enthusiasts was Thomas Jefferson, who, in 1800, brought his *Democratic-Republican* party to power, and in this way also brought democracy – at least as a word – into the American

lexicon.

A generation later, Andrew Jackson, the first great American democratic leader – or, demagogue, to use the ancient Greek term of art for such a leader – became the US's first plebiscitary president, im-

bued with imperial prerogatives in the eyes of his most ardent supporters. He was, after all, the only representative nominally elected by all the nation's people (unless, of course, they were women, slaves or Native Americans – democracy in America in Jackson's day was only the white man's business).

Jackson tried, and failed, to eliminate the electoral college. Such enduring limits to democracy in the US were, paradoxically, one reason why it was the first country to give birth to populism, both as a word and as a phenomenon. From 1892 till 1896, a *People's Party* played a major political role in some parts of the US.

At roughly the same time, Woodrow Wilson, arguably the country's most ardent champion of democracy, criticised the populist movement and offered, instead, a new vision of the democratic system. A pioneering political scientist who would become the 28th president, Wilson pondered deeply the meaning of democracy, not just in the US, but in world history, where it marked in his view the highest stage of human evolution. In his private papers, after rejecting European conceptions of democracy as primitive, and corrupted by class conflict, he defined modern democracy "most briefly" as "government by popular opinion".

As Wilson concedes almost in passing, democracy in practice will always involve

"the many led by the few: the minds of the few disciplined by persuading, and masses of men schooled and directed by being persuaded".

In other words, Wilson's vision of self-rule is closer to Adams's "natural aristocracy" than the popular sovereignty the French revolutionaries and American populists fought for.

We find here a core ambiguity at the heart of modern liberal democracy, as Wilson understood it. All power in theory derives from the people – but in practice, the truest vessel of a people's hopes will be its highest elected official when he enjoys the support of "public opinion".

There were, nonetheless, serious problems with Wilson's recourse to public opinion. Views could rapidly change, and even an orator as persuasive as Wilson could not be sure if he had persuaded his fellows once and for all. Even worse – as Walter Lippmann pointed out in his landmark 1922 study, *Public Opinion* – in a complex political environment, where only disconnected bits of information are available to the average citizen, it was almost impossible in practice for the public's opinion on any matter of moment to be either cogent or coherent.

Lippman used for his epigraph Plato's famous image of the inhabitants of a cave bewitched by shadows and unaware of the real world outside. The majority of modern men, Lippmann argues, are prisoners of shadowy and unexamined assumptions, immersed in private lives involving the pursuit of personal interests, with limited time and even less attention to give to public affairs.

Lippmann's conclusion is most bluntly stated in *The Phantom Public*:

"The individual man does not have opinions on all public affairs. He does not know how to direct public affairs. He does not know what is happening, why it is happening, what ought to happen. I cannot imagine how he could know, and there is not the least reason for thinking, as mystical democrats have thought, that the compounding of individual ignorances in masses of people can produce a continuous directing force in public affairs."

In 1942, Joseph Schumpeter, an economist who had been born in Moravia and raised in Vienna before moving to the US in 1932 to teach at *Harvard University*, accurately summed up the strange results of merging a liberal democratic faith in public opinion with marketing methods refined by behavioural scientists.

“What we are confronted with in the analysis of political processes,” he wrote, “is largely not a genuine but a manufactured will.”

In his day, the primary tools for the manipulation of opinion were advertising and propaganda tailored to the results of public opinion polling. In our day, the integrity of public opinion is further threatened by the secrecy of many aspects of executive decision-making, and the increasingly sophisticated control of information by behavioural scientists and attention merchants, who are able to use new technologies to aim messages with unprecedented precision at responsive audiences.

Schumpeter argued that the primary role of the people in a liberal democracy was in any case strictly limited: it was

“to produce a government, or else an intermediate body which in turn will produce a national executive or government ... the democratic method is that institutional arrangement for arriving at political decisions in which individuals acquire the power to decide by means of a competitive struggle for the people’s vote.”

In other words, modern democracy was not the rule of a sovereign people – instead, *“democracy is the rule of the politician”*, someone skilled at commanding public opinion and winning elections, whose power is chiefly balanced by his need for reelection, and the requirement that he leave office peacefully, should he lose the vote.

Schumpeter was writing during the second world war, which had led to the total mobilisation of the civilian population in all combatant states. Worldwide, this unprecedented mobilisation led to the unprecedented slaughter of 60 million souls, the majority of them civilians, and six million of them Jews.

In the US, it entailed a dramatic increase in the powers of the administrative state and of the state’s armed forces; it also triggered a rise in the perceived need to keep key political deliberations and decisions concealed from the public.

Faced with such facts, no wonder Schumpeter was pessimistic about future political prospects, fearing that a

“socialist democracy may eventually turn out to be more of a sham than capitalist democracy ever was”.

And yet, as the second world war unfolded, just as had happened during the first world war, there was a paradoxical resurgence of democratic idealism, inspired by renewed Allied claims that their victory would help forge a world *“made safe for democracy”*, just as Wilson had promised two generations earlier.

After the horrors of two world wars, many hoped humanity would never again resort to violence on this industrial scale. After some hesitation, and with compromising caveats similar to those that undermined the *League of Nations* covenant – above all, a continuing effort to protect the imperial and racial prerogatives of the great powers – the victors agreed to create a new international organisation, the *United Nations*, and to ratify a new set of global principles, the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, adopted in 1948.



Woodrow Wilson, the 28th US president. Photograph: AP

It is easy to minimise the importance of a political document issued with no means of enforcing the norms it proclaimed. Yet the language of the declaration helped to inspire later human rights movements, and article 21 explicitly affirms that

“everyone has the right to take part in the government of his country, directly or through freely chosen representatives”.

Here is a key irony of the modern world: to this day, democracy, in most existing regimes, whether liberal or socialist or nationalist, is more or less a sham, even according to the criteria laid out in the UDHR, and just as Schumpeter said.

Still, this “sham” also represents an epochal transformation: in the early 21st century, very few regimes, unlike most in the early 18th century, can rule over a subject population with impunity. On the contrary: the rulers of every contemporary regime that professes democratic values, however feebly realised, must periodically face the mundane threat posed by ordinary citizens, however uninformed, periodically queuing at a polling station, to exercise their right to vote, and so to transfer power, if they choose, to an entirely new set of political leaders.

This is, as the Cambridge historian John Dunn puts it in the dyspeptic but accurate conclusion to his 2005 history of democracy,

“a world in which faith, deference and even loyalty have largely passed away, and the keenest of personal admiration seldom lasts for long” – a wan description of what the modern democratic spirit has wrought.

Yet this is also a world where the ideal of democracy is more universally honoured than ever before, and sometimes taken quite seriously, for better or worse.

For example, in the decades since the ratification of the UDHR in 1948, most US presidents and diplomats have followed in Wilson’s footsteps by promoting liberal democratic expectations around the world – sometimes at gunpoint – just as communist regimes were trying at the same time to export their rival version of “democratic centralism”.

We have also seen the election of demagogues who can appeal to the visceral impulses of ordinary citizens, and the emergence of political parties vehemently hostile to remote elites – even as most of these elites retain their grip on power, and a super-rich minority keeps getting richer and more insulated from the accidents of fate that define everyday life for the remaining 99% of the globe’s population.

So it is perhaps not surprising that our world has also witnessed, in virtually every country, poor or developed, socialist or communist, autocratic or liberal, a fitful, sometimes futile series of popular uprisings and protests, when crowds of ordinary people unite to demand a fairer share of the common wealth – and to claim for themselves a larger share in more truly democratic institutions.

These revolts against remote elites are essential to the vitality, and viability, of modern democracy – even as (and precisely because) they challenge the status quo, destructive though that challenge may be.

There are good reasons to be wary of what a people trying to exercise its sovereign rights may produce.

Democratic revolts can create perverse results – and so can democratic elections. Despite the obvious risks, both Rousseau and Jefferson invoked a relevant maxim in defence of their own faith in ordinary citizens:

Malo periculosam, libertatem quam quietam servitutem – “I prefer a dangerous freedom to peaceful slavery.”

It's an apt motto for these dark times.

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