

The Deconsolidation of Democracy: Is it new and what can be done about it?

Abstract

Democracy in the US and Europe is said to be at the crossroads. I review five recent books that seek to diagnose and cure this ‘crisis’. Explanations range from institutional dysfunction and elite maleficence to technological change and rising economic inequality. Remedies include everything from institutional engineering to moral persuasion. Collectively, the books raise two important questions: is this really a crisis, and if it is can democratization theory, the branch of political science dedicated to explaining why regimes rise and fall, tell us why. I conclude that if we are to explain the deconsolidation of well-established democracies in which all of the usual pre-conditions had been met, then we must first question the linear narrative about democracy being a naturally legitimate form of regime.

Keywords: democracy; democratization; transitions; pre-conditions; deconsolidation; crisis

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Dasandi, Niheer. *Is Democracy Failing? A primer for the 21st century*, Thames and Hudson, 2018

Grayling, Anthony C. *Democracy and its Crisis*. Oneworld Publications, 2017

Levitsky, Steven, and Daniel Ziblatt. *How Democracies Die*. Crown, 2018

Mounk, Yascha. *The People Vs. Democracy: Why Our Freedom is in Danger and How to Save it*. Harvard University Press, 2018

Runciman, David. *How Democracy Ends*. Profile Books, 2018

For most of human history democracy has been viewed as an inherently unstable regime whose propensity to collapse rendered it an undesirable form of government. But since at least the end of the Cold War this long-held democratic pessimism has been replaced by a belief among large sections of both the public and the academy that democracy is the naturally legitimate and preeminent regime. To be sure, democracy can regress in parts of the so-called developing world from time to time. But that is because certain pre-conditions have not been met (Carothers 2002). Once it is properly consolidated democracies durability is inevitable because, even putting its moral superiority to one side, more than any other regime type it has the capacity to reinvent itself from within (Runciman 2013). This inherent flexibility ensures it survives.

This view was supposedly shattered by the election of Donald Trump in 2016. Or at least that is what the authors of a spate of new books heralding the ‘death’ of democracy would have us believe. David Runciman, the author of *How Democracy Ends*, sums up this sentiment most succinctly when he states that 2016 is when we collectively realised that ‘Democracy is no longer the only game in town’. To be sure, populist leaders like Erdoğan (Turkey), Orbán (Hungary), Duterte (Philippines), and Modi (India) proceeded Trump. But this was the United States, leader of the free world and the first ‘true’ democracy. Within months of Trump’s election, democratic deconsolidation was at the forefront of popular debate, at least in liberal-progressive circles. Comparative politics scholars found themselves explaining to

the media that democracy might be in decline and that the US showed many of the warning signs that typically precipitated democratic collapse.¹ Drawing parallels with the 1930s fascism became common.² The gravity of the trend appeared to be confirmed by it occurring in parallel with Britain's vote to leave the European Union and the success of the radical right in subsequent French and German elections. The key question was: how did it come to this and what should we do about it? These questions are of immediate importance for scholars interested in the fate of democracy in the US and Europe, which is the primary audience for the five books reviewed here. But they are also of more general relevance to scholars of democratization, who are supposed to be the community within the political science discipline with expertise in democratic (de)consolidation.

The 'Crisis' of US and European Democracy

Concern that democracy is facing a 'crisis' is not new. The 1975 report of the Trilateral Commission carried the title *The Crisis of Democracy*. Since the 2000s a body of scholarship has blossomed on both sides of the Atlantic concerned with explaining mounting democratic disaffection and anti-politics (e.g. Norris 1999; Phar and Putnam 2000; Dalton 2004; Stoker 2006; Hay 2007; Flinders 2012; Clarke et al 2018) and the rise of populism (e.g. Canovan 1999; Mudde 2004; Müller 2017). Symptoms include declining party membership, falling voter turnout, the deterioration of traditional print media, and the erosion of social institutions that previously structured political preferences. But these studies did not seriously consider that democracy in the US and Europe might actually fail; it is far too well entrenched for that. Rather, they underpinned discussion about reform and innovation. The problem, in this view, was democratic institutions appeared immutable when actually they needed to be reinvented.

The classic version of this argument is re-visited by British philosopher AC Grayling in his 2017 book *Democracy and its Crisis*. Grayling diagnoses the failure of democracy in Britain as the result of institutional dysfunction, including insufficient checks on the power of political and economic elites; the lack of a constitution; party unity; the first past the post electoral system; an ill-informed informed populace; and ideological distortion created by corporate interests. Haas (2018) takes a similar view in *Why Democracies Flounder and Fail*, blaming the problem on intermediary institutions—i.e. professional political parties—that have increased the distance between leaders and voters.

Based on this diagnosis, Grayling (2017, p. 186) in particular argues there are:

Simple and direct remedies that would go a long way to rescuing representative democracy from the distortions and manipulations it has been subjected to.

These remedies include: 1) greater transparency around election campaign, including the involvement of individuals, financing and methods; 2) subjecting the press to strict fact-checking and monitoring; 3) banning gambling on elections; 4) making voting compulsory; 5) replacing the first-past-the-post electoral system with proportional representation; and 6) banning MPs from being whipped on issues other than those outlined in election manifestos. These fundamental changes, Grayling argues, would give representative democracy a chance of working for the benefit of everyone.

¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/29/world/americas/western-liberal-democracy.html> (accessed 12 October 2018)

² <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/us-politics/donald-trump-1930-thirties-fascist-dictator-adolf-hitler-reichstag-fire-trick-yale-historian-timothy-a7651766.html> (accessed 12 October 2018)

All of these reforms have merit but a weakness of this classic conceptualisation of the problem in the UK is that it struggles to explain why democracy is experiencing a crisis *now*—the problem’s Grayling identifies: executive domination; the lack of a constitution; party unity; the first past the post electoral system; an ill-informed informed populace; and ideological distortion created by moneyed interests / corporate power are hardly new features of British government. What’s more, other countries have separated the executive and the legislature, or adopted electoral systems based on proportional representation, and yet face the same democratic crisis. In which case, while they may be sensible reforms, **in the absence of an explicitly comparative approach** it is not clear that reinventing democracy in this way will stop democracy from dying.

The idea that the current crisis of democracy is the result of institutional dysfunction is also central to Levitsky and Ziblatt’s (2018) *How Democracies Die*. But their diagnosis differs because they believe the problem isn’t that politics is captured by out of touch elites. Rather, elites are not fulfilling their role to uphold basic democratic norms. Democracies, for Levitsky and Ziblatt:

...work best—and survive longer—where constitutions are reinforced by unwritten norms. Two basic norms have preserved America’s checks and balances in ways we have come to take for granted: mutual toleration, or the understanding that competing parties accept one another as legitimate rivals, and forbearance, or the idea that politicians should exercise restraint in deploying their institutional prerogatives (p. 8).

And it is up to elites to uphold these norms even in the face societal pressure to usurp them. **Drawing on Latin America’s long-studied democratic transitions**, Levitsky and Ziblatt (p. 21-24) identify four warning signs for authoritarianism:

1. A politician rejects in words or actions, the democratic rules of the game;
2. A politician denies the legitimacy of opponents;
3. A politician tolerates or encourages violence; and
4. A politician indicates a willingness to curtail the civil liberties of opponents, including the media.

They are not alone in identifying these factors. But, from the perspective of this article, the first two words (‘a politician’) are the important ones because, unlike the **other works canvassed here**, it focuses attention on the key actors or what they call ‘gatekeepers’ (political parties and party officials) upon whose shoulders the fate of democracy rests. When the public choose a demagogue (i.e. Trump), it is their responsibility to ensure the system survives. The reason is that backsliding takes time. It occurs gradually. And so, citizens are often slow to realise democracy is being dismantled (p. 92). Trump did not start the process in the US and if democracy is to die in that country it is unlikely to end with him either.

A belief that democracy will die slowly is central to Runciman’s (2018) *How Democracy Ends*. Like Levitsky and Ziblatt, Runciman’s starting point is that democracy is unlikely to die via a coup d’état. This, after all, is the lesson of the 1930s and the rise of fascism in Europe. Democracy can die by coup d’état—and in many of the post-colonial transitions this is exactly what has happened—but it can also die at the hands of elected officials who, having won office legally, turn the institutions of democracy to undemocratic ends. But having made this point Runciman rejects the claim that we are returning to a version of the

1930s on the grounds that political violence is less of a threat than it was almost a century ago, and there is little capacity for the overthrow of governments via military force. To illustrate this point, he compares the (real) 1967 coup d'état in Greece with the (shadow) coup d'état precipitated by the EU since the Global Financial Crisis (GFC) under the guise of a financial bailout. In the former democracy ceases. In the latter it is hollowed out to the extent that it is no longer clear that it can be called a democracy despite the presence of elections, a parliament and so on.

Having dismissed the classic ways in which democracy might die, as well as alternatives like epistocracy and meritocracy, Runciman concludes that democracy is more like to suffer a slow and uneventful death. It is in a funk; a form of mid-life crisis. It will most probably continue on for many years but will increasingly enjoy a 'half-life'. As a result, its end will be subtle. Most will barely notice when it just fizzles out. This prospect doesn't cause Runciman great despair. Rather, he believes it will create room for new arrangements, including local communities making use of technologies to create new and more effective forms of civic participation (although he is less clear how this might occur.) But from the perspective of this article, this isn't the main point of the book. Where Grayling and Haas focus primarily on institutional dysfunction, and Levitsky and Zablatt on norms and gatekeepers, the strength of Runciman's account is that it focuses attention on technological change.

Runciman argues that despite digital technology having fundamentally altered the way modern politics is conducted, we don't really know what the impact of this revolution will be and there is little sense that political parties or governments know either. **This focus on 'new' social media and the death of print journalism is welcome, albeit it has been extensively canvassed by political communication scholars (e.g. Ryfe 2013). The old Assumption is that** a free and fair press is a key indicator of a functioning democracy. The digital revolution and 'new' media represent a fundamental shift that renders a fascination with newspapers, radio and television, and with it the common understanding of 'civil society', virtually redundant. **Runciman is not overly concerned by this because while he concedes** Trump may have found a way to manipulate new technologies better than anyone else, he is sceptical that this version of Twitter populism can work in the long term even if the threat of attention-grabbing narcissists is real and will continue. **Again, he is less clear on what will replace either old or new media as the fourth estate.**

One of the surprising things about Runciman's book is that it pays less attention to economic factors and the impact of the global financial crisis in particular. The final two books reviewed here both place this front and centre of their analysis. Niheer Dasandi's (2018) *Is Democracy Failing?* explains the rise of populism and the threat it poses to democracy as the result of several factors, including those identified elsewhere (e.g. technological change, terrorism, and citizen apathy). But he also argues that the 2008 global financial crisis (GFC) has wrecked untold havoc on US and European public life. Specifically, in much the same way that the great depression resulted in a hard turn to the right, the GFC has inflamed tensions over immigration and inequality. In time this may taper off. But at the moment it has added fuel to simmering tensions, themselves the result of the inequality created by unchecked globalization, that threaten to explode in the form of rising nationalism among middle and working classes. As a result, the future of democracy will be determined by how it addresses declining living standards among large sections of the population. This has echoes of older accounts **in the democratization** literature that emphasised the importance of gross economic wealth (Lipset 1959; Przeworski and Limongi 1997), but for Dasandi the

emphasis is on distribution and the popular perception that structural inequality, be it between generations or communities, is increasing.

Yascha Mounk's (2018) *The People Vs. Democracy* makes a similar claim: that throughout history democratic stability has been dependent on citizens enjoying rapid increases in their living standards. And when these increases have not materialised, they at least held out high hopes for a better future. This chimes with the claim of democratization scholars that high levels of growth prevent reversals. But democratization theory does not account for the fact that inequality could also rise so dramatically and that the young in particular would face a future in which they are likely to be less economically well off than their parents. If it had then it perhaps wouldn't be as surprising that they have come to question the value of democratic norms and freedoms (Grasso et al 2017).

Mounk also identifies two additional factors that are relevant to the current crisis of democracy (p. 135). The first, echoing Levitsky and Ziblatt's emphasis on elites and Runciman and Dasandi's arguments about new media, is that the dominance of mass media in the last century limited the distribution of extreme ideas, created a set of shared facts and values, and slowed the spread of 'fake news'. The rise of the internet and of social media has since weakened traditional gatekeepers, empowering once-marginal movements and politicians. This new technology could be good for democracy – i.e. the radical potential of the Arab Spring – but in the US and Europe its effect appears to be largely negative.

The second is that nearly all stable democracies were either founded as monoethnic nations or allowed one ethnic group to dominate. This dominance is increasingly being challenged and provides an opportunity for populist leaders to blame economic disadvantage on minorities. This shift is compounded by new media as there is no way to check the spread of these extremist views. The result, Mounk argues, is we are witnessing the slow divergence of liberalism and democracy. Populists are deeply democratic but also deeply illiberal:

On the one hand, the preferences of the people are increasingly illiberal: voters are growing impatient with independent institutions and less and less willing to tolerate the rights of ethnic and religious minorities. On the other hand, elites are taking hold of the political system and making it increasingly unresponsive: the powerful are less and less willing to cede to the views of the people. As a result, liberalism and democracy, the two core elements of our political system, are starting to come into conflict. (p. 13)

To fix democracy we need to reduce inequality, better prosecute the moral case for multiculturalism on the basis of respect for individual rights as a counter point to rising nationalism, and convince social media platforms to act as censors of hate speech and in doing so renew civic faith in representative institutions. (p. 6). But, first we must challenge the assumption that democracy is immutable and a naturally legitimate form of government.

Back when we understood democracy to be a daring, fragile experiment, we invested vast educational and intellectual resources in spreading the good news about our political system. Schools and universities knew that their most important task was to educate citizens. Writers and academics recognized that they had a big role to play in explaining and defending the virtues of liberal democracy. Over the years, this sense of mission has dissipated. Now, as liberal democracy is facing existential danger, it is high time to revive it. (p. 18)

In sum, individually and collectively, these books raise several important questions about the causes and cures of the current crisis. I conclude by considering two: how serious is this crisis and should it alter the way we think about and study democracy?

But is this really a crisis?

Predicting and explaining the death of democracy is a good way to sell books. If it comes to pass the authors can say ‘I told you so’. If it doesn’t, they can claim that readers paid attention to their diagnosis and prescribed the necessary medicine. This win-win situation might explain why so many of these books have been published by trade rather than academic presses—grand, sweeping analysis are likely to sell far better than a narrower academic text. **The problem is that the crisis they claim to be explaining is unfolding and its magnitude is not entirely clear.**

Aside from these books, the arguments in favour of this being a full-blown crisis of democracy can be found in the longer tradition of studies discussed above that have charted the rise of democratic disaffection across Europe and the US. These studies typically eschew the incendiary claim that democratic disaffection will lead to regime collapse, favouring more circumspect language that if unchecked it has the potential to precipitate deconsolidation. Outside these regions, Freedom House has highlighted a decline in democracy in most other parts of the globe for over a decade with Plattner (2015, p. 6) positing:

By 2010, we were prepared to grant that “there now may even be grounds for speaking of an erosion of freedom over the past few years, though its dimensions are very slight.”

This pessimism is reflected in the growing literature on ‘pre-conditions’ and rising ‘illiberalism’ outlined below.

The problem for naysayers is that the gloomiest predictions never quite comes to pass. As we saw, scholars have been predicting that democracy will fail for millennia and the Trilateral Commission report illustrates that the crisis of modern representative democracy has been touted only a generation ago. The claim that all this talk of crisis is overstated is buttressed by the view that while Trump clearly has a unique political style, his victory was won on the back of a typical Republican voting coalition. When combined with the institutional structure of US politics, including its federal system and separation of powers, the assumption is that democracy will survive his term(s) in office (Wayland and Madrid 2019) and may indeed be revitalised thereafter. Elsewhere, including Central and Eastern Europe or Asia, the claim is that populist leaders like Erdoğan, Orbán, or Duterte have taken advantage of contexts in which democratic norms and values were weak to begin with (e.g. Dawson and Hanley 2016). In which case, the trend towards a global crisis is much less compelling than it first appears and we should be more cautious about claiming that there is a crisis. Given the gains democracy made in the last century it is just as likely that this is a minor bump on the road to ever expanding democratic freedoms.

It is too early to know which **of these versions of the story is the most accurate**. The shifts that might precipitate deconsolidation are happening all around us. There are endless possibilities. The backward glance of the historian will render events and trends inevitable. But living as we are in the midst of such interesting and potentially dangerous times, the

future appears more uncertain. This fact alone, however, should give us cause to pause and reflect on the inherent contingency at the heart of history. In turn, this should make us more cautious about claims that democracy can only thrive and fail in certain contexts. **The ancients warned that democracy is an inherently unstable form of regime. If that contingency is being revealed to us anew, how should it change the way we study democratization?**

If it is, how should we study deconsolidation?

Beneath what sceptics might call alarmism, there is a serious scholarly question at the heart of these discussions: if consolidated democracies can die, **can democratization theory, the sub-field of the discipline that is supposed to be expert in such matters, explain it? Indeed, we might even have expected it to see this 'crisis' coming.**

Like most intellectual fields, the study of democratization is susceptible to dominant theories and intellectual trends (Kuhn 1962). In the aftermath of the Second World War it was common to understand democratization as the inevitable consequence of modernization (e.g. Lipset 1959). Put simply, industrialisation, urbanisation and the rise of an educated middle-class brought modern representative democracy into being. This theory appeared to explain the experience of American and parts of Western Europe quite well. It was less adept at explaining democratization elsewhere.

The advent of new democracies that would later become part of the Third Wave was theorised by the 'transitions' paradigm (Rustow 1970; O'Donnell et al 1986). This approach, which focused on how conscious and committed actors brought democracy into being, was good at explaining the micro-politics of how an authoritarian regime comes to be replaced by a democratic one. By focusing on who agitated against the status quo, how constitutions were created and the interests of elites placated, transitions scholars were able to identify the stages through which countries typically pass to become democratic. They had less to say about why some of these new democracies consolidated, and why others failed.

This is where the pre-conditions paradigm (Carothers 2002) stepped in. Conscious and committed actors might be required for the actual democratic transition but the success or failure of a democracy was largely dependent on broader structural factors: economic wealth might not bring democracy into being but it seemed to guard against backsliding; deep cultural, ethnic and religious divisions appeared to make consolidation all but impossible; strong political parties were not required for a transition but party system institutionalisation was a good predictor of whether democracy would survive; and geographic location did not make you become a democracy but it sure seemed to help if you were located in a region of similarly democratic countries.

The importance of these 'pre-conditions' was confirmed in studies that charted the rise of 'illiberal' democracies (Zakaria 1997) and 'competitive authoritarians' (Levitsky and Way 2002) over the last two decades. Put simply, democratization had stalled in these countries, which were predominantly located in the developing world, because not enough of the pre-conditions had been met. Opportunist politicians could then exploit circumstances in which democratic institutions were weak to consolidate power. To be sure, many still clung to the façade of democracy in the form of elections, parliaments and so on. But, as became patently obvious when leaders like Zimbabwe's Robert Mugabe won election after election by huge margins, these democratic mechanisms were just window dressing that masked the more sinister way in which authoritarians and their supporters retained to power. Indeed, one of the

interesting features of rising ‘illiberalism’ all over the world is that the idea that power ought to be legitimised via popular vote largely remains.

The authors of the books reviewed here nominate a series of explanatory factors for the demise of democracy, namely: institutional dysfunction; citizen apathy; the erosion of norms and the negligence of gatekeepers; technological revolution and economic crisis and inequality. Some of these factors appear to fit the established pre-conditions: the importance of the economy dates back to modernization theory; the importance of democratic norms also echoes old arguments about civic culture; and the importance of political parties is well-established. But none of these mechanisms appear to have guarded against **what is happening in the US and Europe** in the manner that existing theory predicted. Economic growth continues but inequality has risen and so a large proportion of the population, who face a bleak future, are disaffected; the emergence of civic norms was said to be a product of liberal values (as opposed to collectivist societies and cultures) and yet individualism remains while key tenants of liberalism are being challenged; and political party systems are deeply institutionalised and yet are struggling to remain relevant or need to co-opt populist leaders to do so.

More significant to these adaptations or amendments of existing factors, however, are those parts of the story that the pre-conditions paradigm did not consider at all: institutional dysfunction and the professionalisation of politics; citizen apathy; the negligence of gatekeepers; and, perhaps most significantly, the digital revolution that has fundamentally altered the media landscape, radically reimagining the role of the fourth estate in the process.

The old ‘transitions’ paradigm’ could potentially be adapted to bridge this gap. **Levitsky and Zablatt’s emphasis on ‘gatekeepers’, for example, places the causal story in the lap of human agency in a way that the pre-conditions paradigm rejected.** Likewise, we could argue that a focus on agents and their choices, individually but also collectively, could help us make sense of the professionalisation of politics and corresponding citizen apathy. Certainly, neither of these trends are irreversible—citizens could choose to reengage and in doing so reject professional party machines. Indeed, one argument might be that is exactly the type of support Trump has mobilised.

The ‘transitions’ paradigm cannot, however, tell us much about the impact of digital technology on our politics. Indeed, this shift might better be explained by extending modernization theory but this time in reverse—technological advancement in the form of industrialisation, urbanisation and print media brought modern representative democracy into being but now technology is taking it apart. But, just like earlier modernization theory, this linear view of history struggles to explain the experience of countries outside the US and Europe where the same digital revolution either: 1) has not materialised; 2) has materialised in a pro-democratic form (i.e. the Arab Spring); or 3) is being actively managed because of its radical democratic potential (i.e. China).

Conclusion

The upshot then, if we are to take the lessons of these recent books seriously, is that democracy is a far more contingent regime type than **previously** presumed. As Mounk surmises:

We live in an era of radical uncertainty. The range of possible outcomes is much wider now than it seemed to be a few years ago. Prediction is a more difficult game than ever. And yet, the one prediction that has reliably misled us— the assumption that things will forever remain the way they have always been— remains the most popular, even today. “The thing is impossible,” one article after another seems to conclude. “It cannot be.” (Mounk, p. 26)

In making this claim Mounk sounds a lot like one of the most avid chroniclers of democracy, John Keane (2010; cf Chou 2013), who observed that when faced with crisis democracies are just as likely to commit ‘democide’ as they are to innovate and adapt (for discussion see Chou 2011). There are no pre-conditions for ‘democide’ because existing paradigms, tied as they are to the normative democracy promotion agenda, cannot conceive of democracy as anything other than the ‘end of history’. But if it isn’t. If it is a highly contingent form of regime that has endless varieties that rise and fall in different, often unique, combinations, some of which lead to it self-destructing, then focusing on pre-conditions is an intellectual dead end. Indeed, the pre-conditions paradigm **may have** made us overly-confident that ‘real’ democracy—the type found in the US, Europe and parts of the antipodes—is unassailable because it meets all of the necessary requirements: these democracies are rich, have high levels of education, a cultural and historical legacy of respecting democratic institutions and the rule of law, stable party systems, and are located in regions of democracies (for review see Haggard and Kaufman 2016). If the pre-conditions argument is correct, then the presence of these factors alone should ensure that democracy could not fail. **In which case all this talk of crisis is overblown. But if it isn’t then the major contribution of these books may be that they force us to ask a rarely considered question: how would political science explain the deconsolidation of a well-established democracy in which all of the usual pre-conditions had been met? These five books cast the first stone in this debate; they do not provide the last word. If nothing else the fact that so many have been published at virtually the same time is an indication that the triumphalist narrative about the inevitable legitimacy of democracy is being re-written.**

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