



Conference Proceedings

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# Democracy at Risk?

Summary of an International Conference on Challenges Facing Democracies



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## About These Conference Proceedings

A decade-long worldwide decline in democracy possibly found its apotheosis in the 2021–2023 death throes of democratic governance in Tunisia. The last remaining shoots of the 2010–2021 Arab Spring, which had started its quickening in that country a decade earlier, were extinguished. Motivated by this trend and by concerns that allied programming in support of democracy was increasingly losing traction, the RAND Corporation’s Center for Global Risk and Security convened an international experts’ conference on democracy and governance programming in Washington, D.C., from May 4 to 5, 2023. The conference’s purpose: to begin a reassessment of allied approaches to supporting democracy internationally. This document summarizes the conference’s key findings and should be of interest to both policymakers and the general reader.

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# Democracy at Risk? Summary of an International Conference on Challenges Facing Democracies

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## Introduction

A decades-long worldwide decline in democracy possibly found its apotheosis in the 2021–2023 death throes of democratic governance in Tunisia. The last remaining shoots of the 2010–2021 Arab Spring, which had started its quickening in that country a decade earlier, were extinguished. Those events were the proximal cause for the RAND Corporation’s Center for Global Risk and Security to organize an international experts’ conference titled Democracy at Risk? in Washington, D.C., from May 4 to 5, 2023. There were, however, four additional reasons for doing so:

1. concern about a decade of decline in democracy in more than a dozen important countries, including the United States
2. hopes of identifying the underlying causes and drivers of that decline
3. concern that democracy programming was increasingly unable to meet the challenges posed by autocracies weaponizing new technology to undermine democracy
4. eagerness to rethink allied democracy programming.

The conference agenda was built around a keynote speech that would address changes in the broader international system in which democracy programming takes place. The conference was divided into seven panels. The first panel (“Allied Democracy Programming: What’s Working, What’s Not?”) was intended to zoom in from the global system to the level of challenges to democracy and governance programming. Kenneth Wollack and Damon Wilson—respectively the chair and president and CEO of the U.S. National Endowment for Democracy—led the following discussants:

- Larry Diamond of Stanford University
- Maiko Ichihara of Hitotsubashi University, Japan
- Shanthi Kalathil, former coordinator for democracy and human rights, U.S. National Security Council staff
- H el ene Landemore of Yale University
- Shannon O’Connell of the UK Westminster Foundation for Democracy.

The next two panels followed standard academic practice by defining the terms under consideration (“Democracy, Human Rights & Governance: Do Shared Definitions Exist?”), and by stress testing their empirical bases and their measurement (“Measuring Democracy: Do We Stand Where We Think We Stand?”). H el ene Landemore of Yale University and Claudia Chwalisz of DemocracyNext led the former panel, whereas Staffan Lindberg of the Varieties of

Democracy Institute (V-Dem) at Sweden’s University of Gothenburg and Adrian Shahbaz of Freedom House led the latter. The discussants were

- Thomas Carothers of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace
- Nic Cheeseman of the University of Birmingham, United Kingdom
- Francis Fukuyama of Stanford University
- Tess McEnery of the Project on Middle East Democracy
- Roelf Meyer, chief negotiator for the South African government during the negotiations to end apartheid
- RAND researchers Christopher Paul, William Courtney, and Marek Posard.

The final panel of the conference’s first half day turned to Alicia Phillips Mandaville of the U.S. Millennium Challenge Corporation and to Scott Carlson of the American Bar Association to examine the question posed in the title: “What Role for Economic Growth and the Rule of Law?”—specifically regarding supporting democracy and governance programming. The discussants were:

- Leopoldo López, a prominent Venezuelan politician in exile
- Robert B. Zoellick, former World Bank president and U.S. Deputy Secretary of State
- RAND senior economist Howard Shatz.

Robert B. Zoellick delivered the subsequent after-dinner keynote speech. Then, the conference switched gears during its second half day, turning its focus inward. Daron Acemoğlu of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology led the first panel, “Why Is It So Difficult to Develop and Sustain Liberal Democracy?” He presented a summary of the two books that he coauthored with James Robinson of the University of Chicago: *Why Nations Fail* and *The Narrow Corridor*.<sup>1</sup> Commenting on Acemoğlu’s presentation were

- Michael Abramowitz of Freedom House
- Matjaž Gruden of the Council of Europe.

Todd Helmus and Marek Posard of RAND led the penultimate panel, “What Is the Health and Prognosis of Allied Democracies?” The commentators were

- Francis Fukuyama
- Maiko Ichihara
- Martin Weiss of the Salzburg Global Seminar.

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<sup>1</sup> Daron Acemoğlu and James A. Robinson, *Why Nations Fail: The Origins of Power, Prosperity and Poverty*, 1st ed., Crown Publishers, 2012; Daron Acemoğlu and James A. Robinson, *The Narrow Corridor: States, Societies, and the Fate of Liberty*, Penguin Press, 2019.

In the closing panel (“Allied Democracy Programming: Brainstorming on Next Steps”), Matjaž Gruden and King Mallory of RAND asked the audience to identify lessons learned, possible solutions, and ways of following up on the discussion launched at the conference.<sup>2</sup>

## Big Themes and Geopolitics

Changes in the overall operating environment were said to present both opportunities to advance democracy and risks to the cohesion of democracies.<sup>3</sup> The European Union’s continued expansion might at some point force consolidation in and change to its structures of governance. At the same time, demographic change—all things equal—might drive continued or expanded northward migration from Africa.<sup>4</sup> Although a potential boon to employment in shrinking European societies, migration might cause increased racially driven social tensions, political instability, and democratic backsliding. By contrast, demographic and economic developments might act as a brake on China’s expanding international role, causing it to pull back from challenging democracy internationally to address more-pressing problems at home.<sup>5</sup>

The energy transition that was being forced by global climate change might mean that autocracies in the Persian Gulf become less able to mount, and less interested in mounting, future challenges to democracy as their wealth and political influence began to wane. However, the by-necessity forced pace of the energy transition might create unexpected future energy shocks of the kind experienced in the 1970s and in the immediate aftermath of Russia’s war of aggression against Ukraine in 2022. Exogenous shocks of this kind caused social tension that could erode the cohesion of democracies, as would a repeat pandemic.<sup>6</sup> Should Russia fail to subjugate Ukraine, the challenge Russia would be able to pose to democracy in concert with China might weaken. In such an eventuality, domestically driven openings for greater political pluralism might also present themselves in Russia.

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<sup>2</sup> Throughout this document, references are provided to literature to which the presenters, panelists, and participants referred during their presentations or to literature that provides definitions of terms of art used by the participants. Video recordings of the following presentations are available on RAND’s YouTube channel: RAND Corporation, “Measuring Democracy: Do We Stand Where We Think We Stand? with Staffan Lindberg,” video, July 17, 2023a; RAND Corporation, “Democracy, Human Rights & Governance: Do Shared Definitions Exist? with H el ene Landemore,” video, July 21, 2023b; RAND Corporation, “Why Is It So Difficult to Develop and Sustain Liberal Democracy? with Daren Acemođlu,” video, July 21, 2023c.

<sup>3</sup> A video recording of Zoellick’s speech and the ensuing questions and answers is available on RAND’s website; see Robert B. Zoellick, *Big Themes and Geopolitics with Robert B. Zoellick*, RAND Corporation, CF-A2800-1, 2023. See also Robert B. Zoellick, *America in the World: A History of U.S. Diplomacy and Foreign Policy*, 1st ed., Twelve, 2020.

<sup>4</sup> Eduardo Olaberria and Carmine Reinhardt, “The Reversal Problem: Development Going Backwards,” April 15, 2022.

<sup>5</sup> Nicholas Eberstadt, “The China Challenge: A Demographic Predicament Will Plague the Mainland for Decades,” American Enterprise Institute, June 15, 2021.

<sup>6</sup> Covid Crisis Group, *Lessons from the Covid War: An Investigative Report*, PublicAffairs, 2023.

Technological change still held out the prospect of providing a vehicle by which to advance democracy. The connectedness that this change brought with it could be used to provide greater transparency, accountability, and responsiveness of governments to voters. At the same time, technology was two-faced; it had been weaponized against democracy.<sup>7</sup> It remained to be seen how, in the balance, genetic engineering, artificial intelligence, and quantum computing would either benefit or pose future risks to democracy.

## So, Why Promote Democracy?

In that rapidly changing broader context, it was fair to ask: “To what end do the United States and its allies fund programs to support or promote democracy and good governance worldwide?” Answers proffered broadly aligned with two differing philosophical approaches to national security policy: the liberal or idealist approach and the neorealist one.

Idealists—participants said—argue that the United States funds democracy programming to support people who want to live in greater freedom, to help fulfill people’s basic needs, and to improve the standard of living, welfare, progress, and human development in the world. This argument was said to appear to be accompanied by an imbedded axiomatic albeit debatable assumption that life in any polity will improve once it transitions to a democratic form of governance. At a minimum, idealists were said to argue, the checks and balances provided in a liberal democracy deterred corruption and incompetence that could block national development.

Neorealists were said to take a more hard-security perspective. They supported democracy programming in pursuit of the U.S. national interest in stability. Because repressive regimes are more likely to act aggressively toward their neighbors, nondemocratic areas are more likely to be a source of violence and refugee flows. What happens in those areas could, allegedly, spread regionally—and globally. Neorealists thought of democracy programming as a risk diversification strategy that served U.S. and allied interests. Democracies lacked common values with autocracies. Autocratic regimes were friable. It was good to have parallel tracks in relationships with such countries, several pillars of support within these countries across a diversity of actors, some of which—such as outright opponents of incumbent regimes bent on their ouster—it might be too risky for governments to engage with directly.

## What Is Democracy, Anyhow?

Throughout the conference, the expert participants referred to various regime types and to the mediating institutions supporting them. Drawing on literature cited by the participants, this

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<sup>7</sup> Steven Feldstein, *The Rise of Digital Repression: How Technology Is Reshaping Power, Politics, and Resistance*, Oxford University Press, 2021; Krzysztof Izdebsky, Teona Turashvili, Haykuhi Harutyunyan, and Beth Kerley, *The Digitalization of Democracy: How Technology Is Changing Government Accountability*, National Endowment for Democracy, 2023.



section of the conference proceedings provides readers with definitions of those terms. Democracy and autocracy lie at different points or extremes on a spectrum consisting of a plethora of political regimes. The authoritarian end of that spectrum starts with *politically closed regimes*: “one-party, military or personal dictatorship.”<sup>8</sup> The spectrum continues with uncompetitive or *hegemonic authoritarian* regimes. These governments are characterized by

- a ruling-party stranglehold on legislative seats
- leaders who win more than three-quarters of the popular vote
- rulers whose incumbency ranges between 12 and 20 years.

*Electoral authoritarianism* (also known as *pseudodemocracy* or a *hybrid regime*) allows significant parliamentary opposition. Multiparty electoral competition and pluralism of some kind are also permitted. However, such regimes lack a political contest sufficiently open, free, and fair that the ruling party can readily be turned out of power. Electoral outcomes, while competitive, still deviate significantly from popular preferences. *Ambiguous regimes*, which are neither fish nor “foul,” make up the middle point of the spectrum.<sup>9</sup>

*Electoral democracy* is said to be democracy’s most restricted form. It involves universal suffrage and periodic free, fair, and competitive elections of officials from among the electorate for all principal positions of political power.<sup>10</sup> It also involves the regular exchange of elites in positions of power.<sup>11</sup> Electoral democracy requires freedom of expression and association to be able to clear the numerous hurdles to mounting free and fair elections.<sup>12</sup> Almost immediately, the question of participation arises. Is the electoral democracy a *direct* one, such as in Switzerland, or is it *majoritarian*? Majoritarianism reflects the idea that the will of the majority should be sovereign. It ensures that the many prevail over the few in decisionmaking, that one party remains clearly accountable to the electorate, and that political institutions centralize rather than disperse power. The United Kingdom might be an example. Or is this electoral democracy

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<sup>8</sup> Andreas Schedler, “Elections Without Democracy: The Menu of Manipulation,” *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 13, No. 2, 2002.

<sup>9</sup> Larry Diamond, “Elections Without Democracy: Thinking About Hybrid Regimes,” *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 13, No. 2, April 2002.

<sup>10</sup> Michael Coppedge, John Gerring, Staffan I. Lindberg, Swend-Erik Skaaning, and Jan Teorell, “V-Dem Comparisons and Contrasts with Other Measurement Projects,” working paper, Varieties of Democracy Institute, University of Gothenburg, April 2017.

<sup>11</sup> Robert A. Dahl, *Polyarchy: Participation and Opposition*, Yale University Press, 1971.

<sup>12</sup> According to Diamond, 2002, 11 criteria must be satisfied to call elections free and fair. To call elections free, three criteria must be met: low barriers to entry into the political arena, substantial freedom to campaign and solicit votes, and little or no coercion of voters in expressing their electoral choice. To call elections fair, eight criteria must be satisfied: electoral districts and rules do not systematically disadvantage one or more participants; administration is done by a neutral, competent authority that is adequately resourced to guard against fraud; candidates and parties are treated equally by state security apparatus; candidates and parties have equal access to mass media; virtually all adults can vote; the secrecy of the ballot is protected; there are transparent and well-known procedures for organizing and counting the vote; there is independent monitoring of voting and vote counting at all locations; and there is a clear and impartial dispute resolution mechanism.

*consensual*? This approach posits that political institutions should include as many perspectives as possible. Political institutions should facilitate the representation of small groups and make their voices heard. Israel might be an example. This approach prioritizes the ideal or goal of democratic responsiveness. Proportional representation, bicameralism, federalism, and supermajorities are all means of implementing consensual democracy. Consensual democracy can also be implemented via other nonelectoral forms of participation, such as citizens' assemblies, referenda, and primaries.<sup>13</sup>

Electoral democracy leaves plenty of leeway for abuse and is only a hollowed-out form of *liberal democracy*. Several features distinguish liberal democracy from electoral democracy. Civil liberties and human rights (such as freedom of religion, conscience, social action, organization) are guaranteed under a liberal democracy. Countermajoritarian institutions protect individual rights against the “tyranny of the majority.” Those rights are upheld by enforcing the principle of the rule of law: citizens' equality before the law and legal decisions that are based on agreed-on, established principles and procedures as opposed to individual discretion.<sup>14</sup> The separation of powers into competing branches of government that provide checks and balances on one another and the idea of limited government also belong to the concept of liberal democracy. Liberal democracy is sometimes depicted as the ideal that countries should strive for. However, liberal democracy was criticized by conference participants because it could lead to undemocratic outcomes and because it privileges rights over duties and individuals over community or obligations of any kind.

Two further facets of democracy deserve mention. To be truly functional, a liberal democracy should also be a *deliberative democracy* grounded in representative institutions. Meaning that public decisionmaking should be based on informed, respectful dialog among competent participants—open to persuasion. Public reasoning focused on the common good should motivate political decisions. They should take place as part of a process that elaborates positions that can withstand public scrutiny and test.

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<sup>13</sup> United Nations Democracy Fund and newDemocracy Foundation, *Enabling National Initiatives to Take Democracy Beyond Elections: New Democracy*, undated. This and the following two paragraphs have also largely drawn from Coppedge, 2017.

<sup>14</sup> One presenter, citing the United Nations, provided the following definition: “The rule of law is a principle of governance in which all persons, institutions, and entities, public and private, including the state itself, are accountable to laws that are publicly promulgated, equally enforced, and independently adjudicated, and which are consistent with international human rights norms and standards. It requires measures to ensure adherence to the principles of supremacy of the law, equality before the law, accountability to the law, fairness in the application of the law, separation of powers, participation in decisionmaking, legal certainty, avoidance of arbitrariness, and procedural and legal transparency”; see United Nations, *The Rule of Law and Transitional Justice in Conflict and Post-Conflict Societies: Report of the Secretary-General*, United Nations Security Council, S/2004/616, 2004. See also Christopher Paul Colin P. Clarke, Beth Grill, and Molly Dunigan, *Paths to Victory: Lessons from Modern Insurgencies*, RAND Corporation, RR-291/1-OSD, 2013; Colin P. Clarke and Christopher Paul, *From Stalemate to Settlement: Lessons for Afghanistan from Historical Insurgencies That Have Been Resolved Through Negotiations*, RAND Corporation, RR-469-OSD, 2014.

Finally, there is the concept of *egalitarian democracy* pursued by many social democratic political parties. Its goal is to deliver results equitably and inclusively for all citizens. It focuses on substantive outcomes as opposed to just procedural democracy in pursuit of those goals.<sup>15</sup> It originates in the idea that inequalities inhibit the optimal use of formal rights and liberties. It posits that a more equal distribution of resources may be needed to achieve political equality.

Egalitarian democracy attempts to address two similar types of inequality, differing in their degree, that can afflict both autocracies and democracies: *plutocracy* and *oligarchy*. Russia has been called *oligarchic*. The United States was termed *plutocratic* by conference participants. The challenge here lies in striking a balance between equality of opportunity and equality of outcomes.<sup>16</sup> Straying too far in the direction of the former, ignoring outcomes, was said to potentially lead to a widening sense among voters that undermined the political system's legitimacy—namely, that the nation's political economy is rigged in favor of elites.

For democracy to succeed, it requires the support of mediating social, political, and governmental institutions. Social institutions include an education system of a quality that allows voters to weigh evidence, discern truth from lies, and make informed political decisions. A flourishing misery of dissonant civil society voices that provides differing perspectives and holds both society and government morally accountable is also required, as are free media that provide the electorate with transparency and access to objective impartial information and facilitate some degree of political accountability.

A vibrant middle class is another important mediating institution. Because the middle class has resources greater than those needed for bare survival, its members invest in human capital (education), which makes the economy more efficient. Because the middle class owns significant assets, it has a vested interest in the economic and political status quo and therefore acts as a stabilizer.

A troupe of well-functioning and accessible political institutions is also required for democracy to succeed. Electoral commissions are an important starting point. Political parties that organize to advance the common good are another important ingredient. A legislature that provides deliberative democracy and consistently passes a national budget to ensure proper stewardship of the state's fiscal resources is a further requirement, as are the institutions that give meaning to the rule of law: a system of courts and justice. Finally, to function well, democracy requires peace and security. Loyal military, intelligence, and law enforcement organs are required to provide both.

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<sup>15</sup> Coppedge, 2017.

<sup>16</sup> Phil Gramm, Robert B. Ekelund, and John Early, *The Myth of American Inequality: How Government Biases Policy Debate*, Rowman & Littlefield, 2022.

## Where Does Democracy Stand?

According to Staffan Lindberg, of Gothenburg University's V-Dem, V-Dem uses more than 650 indicators to measure democracy along the various dimensions outlined above. V-Dem likely is the current gold standard when it comes to measuring democracy. Freedom House, the benchmark more commonly used in the United States, measures a subset of those indicators consisting of groups of political rights<sup>17</sup> and of civil liberties<sup>18</sup> and tends to focus more on measuring freedom than on measuring democracy. Regional barometers can also be important additional instruments by which to gauge popular attitudes to democracy, a panelist added. Although these organizations' methodologies differ and suffer from potential deficiencies, they largely converge on similar results in attempting to measure democracy.

More countries are “free” now than earlier, and voluntary step-downs by heads of state in Africa have increased relative to previous levels; however, in 2022 democracy in the world was at its lowest level since 1986, according to two presenters. When analyzing change over the decade from 2012 to 2022, all components of democracy had declined. According to V-Dem, the share of countries living under autocracy in 2012 was 46 percent. By 2022, that share had risen to 72 percent. Although three countries were “autocratizing” in 2012, 42 were doing so in 2022.<sup>19</sup> Of the components of democracy, the presenters said that media freedom and freedom of private expression had declined most. Both said that, by 2023, democracy's decline had begun to bottom out. However, as others noted, despite this reversal, alarming deterioration of democracy continued to be observed in important countries, such as India, Indonesia, Kenya, Mexico, and Nigeria.

Assumptions and methodological challenges are sometimes imbedded deep within attempts to measure democracy. One panelist pointed out that there is an implicit assumption that democracy and good governance are linked, when that frequently is not the case.<sup>20</sup> Another imbedded unproven assumption is that of a linkage between political resilience and well-developed and well-protected civil liberties. For another panelist, attempts at measuring democracy were potentially defective due to an overreliance on expert ratings and those ratings' concomitant susceptibility to confirmation bias and groupthink.

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<sup>17</sup> These are electoral and political pluralism, participation, and functioning of government.

<sup>18</sup> These are freedom of expression, religion, social action, organization, rule of law, personal autonomy, and individual rights.

<sup>19</sup> Evie Papada, David Altman, Fabio Angiolillo, Lisa Gastaldi, Tamara Köhler, Martin Lundstedt, Natalia Natsika, Marina Nord, Yuko Sato, Felix Wiebrecht, and Staffan I. Lindberg, *Democracy Report 2023: Defiance in the Face of Autocratization*, Varieties of Democracy Institute, University of Gothenburg, March 2023.

<sup>20</sup> Christian Schuster, Kim Sass Mikkelsen, Daniel Rogger, Francis Fukuyama, Zahid Hasnain, Dinsha Mistree, Jan Meyer-Sahling, Katherine Bersch, and Kerenssa Kay, “The Global Survey of Public Servants: Evidence from 1,300,000 Public Servants in 1,300 Government Institutions in 23 Countries,” *Public Administration Review*, Vol. 83, No. 4, 2023.

Freedom House’s polytomous categories of “Free,” “Partially Free,” and “Not Free” were useful for ease of public communication. V-Dem’s more refined set of measures might potentially be more valuable for operational purposes of (de)selecting countries for assistance and of measurement and evaluation of democracy programming.<sup>21</sup>

## What Are the Roles for Economic Growth and the Rule of Law?

Despite isolated claims to the contrary, case studies, large sample studies, and the body of economic literature do not support the existence of a link between economic growth and democracy. Nor is there agreement on the direction of any such causality, should it exist, said a presenter. One study found the link to be negative, if it existed at all.<sup>22</sup> If there was an effect, it was perhaps indirect. A growing economy tends to lead to a growing middle class. Democracy also tends to provide greater economic freedom through evenhanded enforcement of the rule of law.

In the words of a panelist, “You can have a nice democracy. If it can’t deliver basic goods, it won’t last for long.” Failure to deliver economic growth increases discontent and social unrest and creates situations in which democratic backsliding is more likely. Economic growth had to be the minimal foundation on which efforts to defend, consolidate, or advance democratic rule were built, said the same panelist.<sup>23</sup> Economic mismanagement had frequently put an end to autocratic rule. Under democratic rule, economic recessions had often led to changes in government, a testament to the resilience of the democratic model. However, compounding economic and social shocks of the kind experienced in recent years could be much more damaging than simply causing another downturn in the business cycle.<sup>24</sup> Such shocks offered unprecedented opportunities for demagogues and populist political entrepreneurs.

A panelist first stressed the importance of mediating institutions, such as civil society organizations. They create different centers of influence in society and spawn a need for political

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<sup>21</sup> Andreas Schedler, “What Is Democratic Consolidation?” *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 9, No. 2, 1998. When measurements of democracy are made, reference to the underlying historical base rate of democracy is difficult to find. The terms *autocratization*, *democratic consolidation*, *democratic deconsolidation*, and *democratic backsliding* were frequently used without any formal definition of those terms. Varying definitions do exist in the literature, making it unclear whether relative or absolute change is meant when these terms are used.

<sup>22</sup> Robert J. Barro, “Democracy and Growth,” *Journal of Economic Growth*, Vol. 1, No. 1, 1996.

<sup>23</sup> Herman E. Daly, *Beyond Growth: The Economics of Sustainable Development*, Beacon Press, 1997.

<sup>24</sup> Recent such shocks have included the 1997 Asian financial crisis, the 2003 SARS crisis, the 2008 financial crisis, the 2012 MERS crisis, the 2015 European and North American migration crises, the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic, the United Kingdom’s 2020 secession from the European Union, and the food and energy security crises unleashed by Russia’s 2022 invasion of Ukraine. From a systems perspective, globalization might have created a greater number of international linkages and feedback loops than previously existed. Those may, in turn, be permitting self-organizing hierarchies to emerge that amplify the system-wide oscillations (or destabilizing effects) of shocks of the kind just described. See, for example, Donella H. Meadows and Diana Wright, *Thinking in Systems: A Primer*, Chelsea Green Publishing, 2008.

rules by which to adjudicate between those centers. Second, that panelist stressed the importance of women. They tend to spend more on the family than men do. Programs of cash transfers to women conditioned on health checks and schooling for children were effective ways of improving human development and economic growth and thereby providing a basis for democratic rule. Third, the panelist highlighted the power of technology. Although much had been made of the abuse of technology to undermine democracy, technology also offers unique opportunities. It could provide transparency and accountability in government budgeting and procurement. Corruption of both processes could have a highly corrosive effects on the perceived legitimacy of democratic rule.

As democracy programming was likely to remain a long-term ongoing effort, donor countries might be well served by integrating their approach across the various economic growth, governance, and security cones through which national assistance programs are delivered. It was perhaps also better to partner with other countries, such as Germany's political foundations (*Stiftungen*). A panelist asked:

How to create a multilateral basis for some of this support? How does one strengthen the coherence, flexibility, resilience, and adaptability of a network of democracies? How could such a coalition provide faster, deeper assistance to democracies that are hit with a compounding series of external shocks? How could like-minded countries build out the microeconomic bases of "Washington Consensus" policies?<sup>25</sup>

Another presenter stated that, in addition to these economic challenges, more than two-thirds of the world lacked meaningful equal access to justice.<sup>26</sup> The presenter said that the 1989 Washington Consensus was too big picture and too often presupposed the presence of a functioning indigenous legal and institutional infrastructure where none in fact existed. First-generation rule-of-law programming had fallen victim to the *Field of Dreams* fallacy (build it and they will come). Consequently, the development community had elaborated a concept of

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<sup>25</sup> The Washington Consensus was liberal economic guidance provided to countries seeking to transition to democracy and good governance after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. The Washington Consensus was summarized as consisting of ten points: (1) Reduce national budget deficits, (2) redirect spending from politically popular areas to neglected fields with high economic returns, (3) reform the tax system, (4) liberalize the financial sector with the goal of market-determined interest rates, (5) adopt a competitive single exchange rate, (6) reduce trade restrictions, (7) abolish barriers to foreign direct investment, (8) privatize state-owned enterprises, (9) abolish policies that restrict competition, and (10) provide secure, affordable property rights (Scott Carlsson, "What Role for Economic Growth and Rule of Law," paper presented at Democracy at Risk? Center for Global Programs, American Bar Association, May 4, 2023, p. 3, citing John Williamson, "The Washington Consensus as Policy Prescription for Development," lecture delivered at the World Bank, January 13, 2004).

<sup>26</sup> More than 2 billion lacked proof of land or home ownership, without which assets became economically frozen. More than 1.5 billion were victims of unreported crime or violence or faced civil or administrative issues that they could not resolve (labor, consumer debt, inheritance, land disputes). More than 1 billion lacked legal identity, relegating them to the 2 billion employed in the informal economic sector worldwide who were excluded from a whole range of economic activities. About 253 million people lived in extreme justice conditions, 201 million lived in places that were so insecure that it was impossible to seek justice, 40 million people were trafficked modern-day slaves, and 12 million remained stateless.

*people-centered justice*. It focused on making micro-level legal fixes that improved people's daily lives. It was therefore said to represent a potential back door through which to bolster the legitimacy of democratic rule.

In closing the panel, a presenter reminded the audience that China's recent rise was not thanks to its authoritarian political system but thanks to its forced adoption of free-market economic reforms in the 1980s. China's and Russia's current opposition to the United States was not caused by a global standoff between democracy and autocracy. It existed because the United States was the only country that could thwart China and Russia in their revanchist goals. Attacks on democracy were simply a vehicle by which those countries sought to undermine the legitimacy of U.S. international leadership.

## Why Is It So Difficult to Develop and Sustain Liberal Democracy?

Why should we care about democracy? Because, according to Daron Acemoğlu of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, democracy has been good for human self-affirmation and agency. But democracy has also been good for growth. Previous economic analyses, he said, did not typically involve apples-to-apples comparisons. When such comparisons were made, democracies could be shown to have been more successful economically.<sup>27</sup>

According to Acemoğlu, there were four reasons why democracies were struggling. First, after a period of shared prosperity from 1950 to 1980, a significant increase in inequality had taken place. U.S. males with some high school education and U.S. male high school graduates had suffered a 20 percent decline in their real income that coincided temporally with the growth of political polarization. A retrenchment in the size of the middle class took place across almost all Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development countries during the same period (1980–2022). Second, new technology had empowered governments to better collect data and control the behavior of and repress their populations.<sup>28</sup> Third, globalization had fueled inequality, creating a sense of disruption and uncertainty that made consolidating democracy much harder.

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<sup>27</sup> Measured from the year of governments' transition to democracy, after a lull of eight to nine years, they began to grow faster than nondemocracies. After 25 years, they grew 20 percent more than nondemocracies did. Democracies generated more-inclusive growth. Democracies raised tax revenues to better redistribute income, build infrastructure, provide education, and provide health care than nondemocracies. Improvements in infant mortality in democracies versus nondemocracies were particularly striking. There was evidence that lower-income groups benefited disproportionately under democratic rule. See Daron Acemoğlu, Suresh Naidu, Pascual Restrepo, and James Robinson, *Democracy Does Cause Growth*, National Bureau of Economic Research, March 2014.

<sup>28</sup> Feldstein, 2021; Aynne Kokas, *Trafficking Data: How China Is Winning the Battle for Digital Sovereignty*, Oxford University Press, 2023; Josh Chin and Liza Lin, *Surveillance State: Inside China's Quest to Launch a New Era of Social Control*, 1st ed., St. Martin's Press, 2022.

Fourth, the rise of China had driven, contributed to, and exacerbated all three of the foregoing trends.<sup>29</sup>

Acemoğlu characterized the challenge facing democracies as one of building more-robust political participation and representation as opposed to the exquisite engineering of rules and constitutions by elites.<sup>30</sup> The challenge was also one of achieving inclusive growth without excessive inequality. It further encompassed striking the right balance between the power of society (e.g., civil society organizations that held government and society morally accountable) and the power of the state in providing economic growth and services but also repression—landing in the “narrow corridor” in which these countervailing forces were in rough balance.<sup>31</sup>

One panelist quoted *Newsweek* correspondent Rosie Waldeck writing from Bucharest, Romania in 1940.<sup>32</sup> According to her, the fall of France to German invasion that year was the climax of 20 years of failed promises by democracies to handle unemployment, inflation, deflation, and labor market unrest. Europe was relieved to try a new political model, albeit under an unattractive but smart National Socialist leader—Adolf Hitler. Democracy required hard work, investment, vigilance, and nurturing. It did not tolerate hypocrisy or double standards. Too often leaders of democracies had assumed that democracy would simply bounce back from the violation of such standards as opposed to discrediting itself for the longer term.

In addition to repressing free media, autocracies had been successful in marginalizing civil society organizations that worked to hold governments accountable. Participants emphasized once again that strong civil society organizations were crucial to the success of democracy. Another panelist stated that the narrative of liberal democracy between the two wars was equally important as that of democracy in Europe after World War II. After World War I, empires collapsed, and new liberal democratic constitutional republics appeared. Yet within 20 years they were all gone. It was important to understand in greater depth the causes of that extinction event.

Acemoğlu asserted that the decline in public support for democracy was much more worrying than the decline in countries’ democratization scores. Previously, autocracies had felt

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<sup>29</sup> David H. Autor, David Dorn, and Gordon H. Hanson, “The China Shock: Learning from Labor Market Adjustments to Large Changes in Trade,” National Bureau of Economic Research, Working Paper 21096, January 2016.

<sup>30</sup> During a previous panel discussion, a presenter characterized elections as “oligarchic-selection mechanisms.” She said that elections were vehicles used by competing elites for the purpose of elite capture of democracy’s institutions on behalf of their corporate and ultrawealthy individual sponsors. Democracies, she said, were ruled by professional politicians who either were or quickly became socioeconomic elites. She said that the legislatures to which politicians were elected were perceived as inadequately representative of the population. They overrepresented the rich and were run by a “gerontocracy of White boomer lawyers” who governed as and for the top 10 percent of society. For empirical support of these theses, see Martin Gilens and Benjamin I. Page, “Testing Theories of American Politics: Elites, Interest Groups, and Average Citizens,” *Perspectives on Politics*, Vol. 12, No. 3, 2014; Cameron Ballard-Rosa, Allison Carnegie, and Bryan Schonfeld, “The Geography of Democratic Discontent,” *British Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 53, No. 2, 2023.

<sup>31</sup> Acemoğlu and Robinson, 2019.

<sup>32</sup> See, for example, R. G. Waldeck, *Athene Palace*, Histria, 2018.



compelled to use the language of democracy, because of the legitimacy that it conveyed. Now, autocracies are using social media to create a new narrative of the failure of democracy, offering up alternative models that were authoritarian in nature but presented differently. Although social media was a contributing factor, it was not the main reason for the decline in democracy. That said, the next phase of social media's development might create very different dynamics of belief and legitimacy, of communication and suspicion. A panelist reminded participants of Hannah Arendt's words in her *Origins of Totalitarianism*:

The ideal subject of totalitarian rule is not the convinced Nazi or the convinced Communist, but people for whom the distinction between fact and fiction (i.e., the reality of experience) and the distinction between true and false (i.e., the standards of thought) no longer exist.<sup>33</sup>

## What Are the Health and Prognosis of Allied Democracies?

U.S. democracy was traditionally characterized by its "Lockean liberalism": small government, the rule of law, and free markets.<sup>34</sup> However, one panelist noted that U.S. conservatism had undergone a transformation to become more accepting of the coercive use of state power. This was not just due to Donald Trump. For example, the panelist said, a U.S. state currently under Republican political control (Florida) had shown a significant newfound penchant for government coercion.

What made the United States unique among developed democracies was that politicians there were actively trying to undermine its democratic institutions. As evidenced by the events of January 6, 2021, right-wing rhetoric of an existential fight for the survival of the United States was being employed to justify political violence. Referring in general to an unspecified series of recent surveys, a presenter stated that 42 percent of Americans now said that a strong leader was more important for the United States than democracy. With 58 percent of Republicans still believing that the 2020 presidential election had been stolen, he said that support for political violence had risen. He continued, saying that, in 2022, 19 percent of respondents strongly supported the idea that violence was required to protect democracy when elected leaders would not.

The panelists were of differing opinions on the state of democracy outside the United States. A presenter posited that Italy's new conservative prime minister, Giorgia Meloni, despite the fears of many, had turned out to be pro-Ukraine and that UK politics had stabilized after Brexit. Despite the emergence Germany's right-wing Alternative für Deutschland (Alternative for Germany) political party and the strong electoral showing of French conservative leader Marine Le Pen, and with the exceptions of Hungary and Poland, democracy in Europe was in pretty good shape compared with the United States, the presenter said. It mostly was characterized by

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<sup>33</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1951.

<sup>34</sup> John Locke, *The Second Treatise of Government*, ed. by Thomas Preston Peardon, Liberal Arts Press, 1952.

the usual conflictual politics. A European presenter demurred. Another stated that such Asian countries as India, Indonesia, the Philippines, and Thailand, had suffered a degradation in democracy.<sup>35</sup>

The panelists identified governments consistently falling short in delivering on voters' most-basic expectations as a fundamental cause of democratic decline. Democratic governments were no longer able to deliver on the promise that, if you worked hard, you could succeed, become well-off, buy a house, and pass a better standard of living on to your children and grandchildren.<sup>36</sup> The United States and governments in Europe had also proven unable to provide basic public security and security of borders in the face of an influx of migrants.

COVID-19 had acted as a fire accelerant, highlighting governments' limitations and raising concerns about excessive government coercion. The outbreak of war in Ukraine and the following economic crisis did not help. Sharp increases in energy prices and inflation stoked voters' distrust, fear, and uncertainty. Confronted with a surplus of problems, voters did not know whom to hold accountable. This provided opportunities for populist political entrepreneurs to "feast on people's anger at and fear of the problems . . . in their daily lives," according to a presenter.

A panelist said that economic inequality was feeding the degradation of democracy. The gap itself was less important than voters' subjective perception that they were losing out in the economic game. This was a driver of support for the politics of subjectivity and emotionalism spread by populists. There was a synergy between populism and social media. Populists framed the problem in simplified terms of corrupt elites versus moral, righteous people. Populists advocated minimal procedural democracy, overlooking the importance of minority rights, the rule of law, and the division of powers—key features of liberal democracy. These views could be easily communicated via memes in social media. People's drive for recognition amplified this phenomenon. It led them to further disseminate mis- and disinformation that subsequently "spread fiercely within an echo chamber," according to a panelist.

Social media represents a new era in which the cost of connecting previously disconnected extremist groups has fallen. The challenge was in ensuring that connections that were established became productive, constructive ones. Frances Haugen's 2021 U.S. congressional testimony showed that computer algorithms deployed on social media platforms, such as Facebook, had contributed to political polarization. After Facebook made changes to its algorithms in 2018, political polarization rose on that platform. Its algorithms introduced its users to extremist groups

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<sup>35</sup> A presenter said that the data largely supported these assertions. The 2022 World Values Survey of 77 countries showed that only 47 percent support for the idea that democracy is important, versus 52 percent five years previously. Support for "strong leaders" had risen from 38 percent in 2009 to 50 percent in 2021 (Global State of Democracy Initiative, *Global State of Democracy Report 2022: Forging Social Contracts in a Time of Discontent*, 2022).

<sup>36</sup> That expectation no longer existed in large parts of North America or Western Europe, said another presenter.

online.<sup>37</sup> Corporations played an outsized role in online mis- and disinformation as well. For an industry (that is, social media as a vehicle for corporate advertising) valued at between \$5 and \$8 billion annually, posting inflammatory mis- or disinformation was the surest way to get clicks and revenue. The net impact was to exacerbate political polarization.<sup>38</sup>

Transparency—warts and all—was said to be one of the United States’ greatest strengths. The country had a lot of social problems and needed to be open and forthright about them. When it came to mis- and disinformation, the United States did best when it simply told the truth. This was equally true at home as it was abroad. The challenge was to find ways to make progress on these problems. Transparency and progress on problems could do much to improve the legitimacy of democratic governance and U.S. pretensions to international leadership.

Another panelist stated that if, in addition or as an alternative to citizens’ assemblies, the United States could implement two-stage ranked-choice voting, the stranglehold of the Republican and Democratic political parties on U.S. politics might be broken and incentives to move to either political extreme might be removed in a dramatic fashion. So far, this system has only been implemented in municipal elections and in the U.S. states of Arkansas and Alaska. But in Alaska the system did help Lisa Murkowski, a moderate, win reelection where otherwise she might not have.

A presenter emphasized the need to figure out and scope out: Where are there problems that cause people to distrust government? Where are there actionable policy solutions and associated policy levers? Who should be held to account?

In closing the panel, a presenter asserted that one cannot study global democracy without studying democracy in the United States. One would encounter problems, however, because one cannot be honest about democracy in the United States without potentially angering many Republican party voters. It is probably best to start overseas. Another presenter reassured the audience that things were not as bad with democracy in the United States as they might seem. He urged the audience to think back to the 1960s. A U.S. President, John F. Kennedy, had been assassinated and his brother Robert killed. A prominent civil rights leader, Martin Luther King, Jr., had also been assassinated. Vice President Spiro T. Agnew had been forced to resign in

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<sup>37</sup> Frances Haugen, statement before the U.S. Senate Committee on Commerce, Science and Transportation, Subcommittee on Consumer Protection, Product Safety, and Data Security, October 4, 2021.

<sup>38</sup> The presenter stated that, “according to a couple of researchers,” in the United States, in 1978 political in-party members were preferred to out-party members by a margin of 27 percent. By 2022, that number had risen to 56 percent. “Affective polarization” was the extent to which citizens felt negatively toward others. He stated that, according to Levi Boxell of Stanford University, the highest increase in affective polarization had taken place in the United States. China, France, Denmark, and New Zealand had also seen moderate increases. Bangladesh, Brazil, and Colombia remained countries of concern as well. According to a presenter from a previous panel, when a polity reached high “toxic” levels of polarization, would-be authoritarian populists and demagogues could start to talk about their political opponents as “enemies of the state.” Authoritarian populists and demagogues first close media outlets sympathetic to or funded by those opponents, he said. They then attack civil society organizations aligned with them. Then they call those organizations foreign agents and force them to register as such. And, ultimately, they jail—if they do not kill—their members.

disgrace because of corruption, and President Richard Nixon had tearfully resigned on television to preempt impeachment for Watergate offenses. People thought at the time that U.S. democracy was coming apart at the seams. It did not. Democracy in the United States was very messy, yes, but it was resilient.

## Allied Democracy Programming: Brainstorming on Next Steps

There was broad agreement that the question of how to support, consolidate, and advance democracy was more nuanced than that of a simple standoff between democracy and autocracy that was so frequently being alluded to in the public debate. There were many shades of both democracy and autocracy. Progress or relapse in both could be measured along multiple dimensions. There was also broad agreement that democracy had declined over the course of the past 15 years. Where participants disagreed was in their assessment of the gravity of that decline. Some were inclined to see democracy in the United States as the more pressing problem. Others, perhaps the majority, thought the problem to be much more widespread.

One of the closing presenters stressed the need for introspection and constant reassessment to understand why so many people were unhappy, frustrated, and angry with and distrustful of democracy. Why were people, both in the United States and abroad, so uncertain and fearful of their futures? Why did 42 percent of Americans prefer a strong leader to democracy? Why did only one-third of Dutch youth believe that democratic rule is important?<sup>39</sup> Two overarching themes that are explanatory of the degradation of democracy emerged from the conference:

1. governments' perceived shortcomings in providing basic requirements of the Hobbesian social contract: physical and economic security<sup>40</sup>
2. the deleterious influence on the political cohesion of democracies of a 20- to 30-year revolution in communications technology, which had culminated in the creation of internet-based social media.

The former has caused feelings of alienation, injustice, disenfranchisement, and a lack of agency. It has caused voters to look beyond existing mainstream political elites for (sometimes facile or simplistic) solutions to the problems that they faced. The business model of new media companies appeared to be one that poured oil on the flames of existing anger, resentment, and political polarization. One participant spoke of a need to constrain freedom of expression to save it. How political leaders dealt with these frustrations and the fiercely burning echo chamber that stoked them would be decisive to efforts to preserve or consolidate, much less advance, democracy.

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<sup>39</sup> Roberto Stefan Foa and Yascha Mounk, "Youth and the Populist Wave," *Philosophy and Social Criticism*, Vol. 45, Nos. 9–10, 2019.

<sup>40</sup> At the most fundamental level, government is about providing for citizens' economic and physical security—preventing a life that otherwise, in Thomas Hobbes's words, would turn out to be "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short" (Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 1651, Scholar P., 1969).

Conference participants appeared to take strength from the superior economic performance and openness provided by democratic rule. Democracies supposedly generated more-inclusive growth. The openness of democratic societies meant that they had to confront and address their mistakes—it was one of their greatest strengths. Democratic accountability constantly compelled democracies to reassess and adjust policy.

Two participants stated that people were bored, if not turned off, by the technocratic approaches to democracy programming that dominated current discussion. What was most needed in global democracy programming efforts was an overarching positive vision of what those efforts aimed to achieve. A dream, a story, a narrative that was responsive to the problems and fears that people faced. An aspirational vision that held out the promise of tackling insecurity and inequality, of providing better representation, participation, agency, and incentives when it came to decisionmaking about the public good. A vision that could inspire and that could be exported and sustained. Maintaining liberal democracy would be difficult without a vision. It would be even more difficult if large and frequent divergences between democracies' espoused goals and values and their actual practices continued.

Although it is almost trite to do so, a presenter's assertion that democratization could only occur if it was locally led bears repeating. The challenge for supporters of democracy is: How can we effectively support local actors on the front lines of the struggle? How can we do so without lecturing, with patience and humility, but at the same time with credibility and confidence? Engagement with nonelites—outside national capitals and with no ties to the implementation of assistance provided in support of democracy—was likely a good starting point. As one presenter pointed out, it seemed important to understand what communities wanted from democracy before trying to help local leaders deliver on those desiderata.

One presenter said that decades-long personal relationships built with local democracy activists over 20–30 years were likely to remain important. Dictatorships often collapsed amid economic mismanagement, he continued. Long-term relationships with local leaders allowed such opportunities to be seized and acted on when they presented themselves.

Four approaches to the challenge of supporting democracy appeared to offer promise. The first, because women spent more on the family, was to focus on women through bottom-up programs, such as conditional cash transfer programs and microfinance. The second was top-down approaches that worked with qualifying governments that remained democratic to make large, transformative investments in areas of the economy that local leaders had identified as constraints to future economic growth. A third possible area of focus was developing interventions that helped democracies build resistance and rapidly react to economic shocks. The fourth potential response involved developing a palette of measures by which to identify, arrest, and reverse democratic deconsolidation or backsliding.

One panelist stated that democracy was frequently referred to in its totality as a *Gesamtkonzept* (master plan). For practical purposes and purposes of more-effective communication, it might be better to focus on democracy's constituent parts. She pointed out that

V-Dem has shown that those parts could be measured on a recurring basis and suggested that programming could be designed around achieving progress in moving indicators of democracy in each area.

Any strategy to support democracy and democratization overseas almost had to be paired with one of domestic democratic renewal—a strategy to enhance citizens’ voices and buy-in that offered a positive future vision involving both income growth and more-effective representation and participation. Channels of communication between democracy promoters and democracy reformers would need to be strengthened to create a link between these two sets of strategies.

It would soon become clear whether the hopes placed on ranked-choice voting had been well founded. One presenter suggested that citizens’ assemblies, whose participants were randomly selected by sortition, as a method by which to reduce barriers to entry into politics and to boost the egalitarianism, representativeness, and responsiveness of democracies. Another presenter stated that it remained to be seen whether sortition could cope with charges of lacking accountability and agency. And a panelist pointed to assemblies’ susceptibility to capture by special interests and elites.

Rallying allies and improved communication were noted as additional measures that might be taken to reverse the recent decline in democracy. According to this suggestion, democracies need to countermobilize globally to ensure that autocracy does not prevail. Democracies need to work together to build greater interconnections in supporting democracies and democratization. They need to put an iterative process of constant learning in place that would help them to be nimbler in rapidly sharing and applying emerging best practices. Democracies should invest in creating a flexible, agile network that would provide a multilateral basis for democracy support. There is also much more that democracies could do to clamp down on the provision of safe havens for kleptocrats’ ill-gotten gains.

In communicating, democracies needed to do better at countering Russia’s and China’s narratives of democratic decline and incompetence. This went well beyond pointing the finger at the two countries’ disinformation efforts. The term *democratization* by now conjured up images of geopolitical confrontation and of attempts to force nations to choose sides in that confrontation.<sup>41</sup> In addition to laying bare autocratic lies, supporters of democracy should be up front that economic growth mattered, said another participant. They had to demonstrate repeatedly the ways in which democracies delivered better outcomes for their citizens, highlighting not just the principles of democracy but also why democratic governance was better than the alternatives. In short, supporters of democracy and of democratization need to rejoin a battle of values and ideas long thought confined to the ash heap of history.

The conference yielded clues for six potential directions for future research.

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<sup>41</sup> Ashley J. Tellis, “America’s Bad Bet on India: New Delhi Won’t Side with Washington Against Beijing,” *Foreign Affairs*, May 1, 2023.

1. **Metrics:** There appears to be plenty of scope to develop better measures of the *quality* both of democracy and of governance, including
  - a. voter polarization
  - b. voters' expectations for their future economic prosperity and that of their children
  - c. measures of voters' feeling of economic insecurity or uncertainty
  - d. ways of measuring the strengths and weaknesses of networks of democracies or autocracies
  - e. measures of relative inequality, social injustice, and marginalization within democracies
  - f. the resilience or fragility of those political systems
  - g. political systems' degree of openness and ability to self-correct
  - h. measures of democracies' relative representativeness—e.g., the composition of the legislature versus that of the nation
  - i. the responsiveness of the government or institutions to majoritarian preferences
  - j. the level of corruption of politicians and concomitant public approval of the legislature
  - k. the relative effectiveness of a polity's separation of powers as a gauge of its progress toward or away from the liberal ideal
  - l. a multifaceted measurement of the size, health, and influence of the middle class.  
As a general matter, one panelist noted, better measures of the quality of governance—measures of state quality—are needed.
2. **Linkages and trade-offs:** The conference highlighted the need more deeply to explore and understand linkages and trade-offs that are involved in democracy and democracy programming. Examples might include the following:
  - a. the chain of linkages between disinformation, polarization, and autocratization
  - b. the trade-offs involved between greater or lesser participatory versus representative democracy and methods of mitigating the shortcomings of both
  - c. the linkage—if any—between a well-developed and well-protected set of civil liberties and democratic resilience
  - d. the trade-offs between egalitarianism versus economic growth, inequality, and democratic legitimacy.
3. **Pathologies:** The conference highlighted the need for a more fully developed pathology of democratic degradation and an associated taxonomy of strategies that autocracies have employed with success to exploit the weaknesses of democracy:
  - a. What for instance are the indicia and drivers of voter distrust?
  - b. What are those of democratic backsliding and degradation?
  - c. Historical survey data might be culled to seek correlates of rising or falling voter distrust of government.
  - d. Case studies of transitions from democracy to autocracy might be compiled with a view to highlighting commonalities and thereby identifying weak points of democracy that would-be autocrats have exploited in the past.
4. **Successes:** Conversely, it might be useful to develop a rigorously constructed inventory of historical interventions in support of democracy that appear to have been successful:

- a. This inventory might include an examination of the use of citizens' assemblies in shaping public policy on controversial subjects, such as euthanasia and abortion in France and Ireland.
  - b. The inventory might, more generally, include analysis of the impact and utility of such assemblies, ranked-choice voting, or other interventions in increasing a local sense of agency and participation in key policy choices.
  - c. Case studies of the strengths and weaknesses of ranked-choice voting employed at the municipal and state level might also be useful.
  - d. The inventory might also include strategies for making greater use of the internet to solicit citizen feedback and to provide greater transparency and accountability in public budgeting and procurement.
5. **Strategy development:** Furthermore, it seems important to spend more time assessing existing strategies and developing new ones by which to mitigate identified weaknesses of democracies. There appears to be strong demand for new strategies to be developed by which to
- a. expand the microeconomic foundations of top-level Washington Consensus economic policy advice
  - b. enhance democratic resilience to compounding external (economic) shocks
  - c. provide deeper and speedier assistance in countering such shocks
  - d. prioritize between differing interventions in support of democracy in resource-constrained environments (most developing countries)
  - e. increase citizen engagement, participation, and democratic choice
  - f. improve democratic accountability
  - g. combat mis- and disinformation
  - h. counter autocratic attempts to marginalize civil society more effectively
  - i. identify, arrest, and reverse democratic backsliding.
6. **Structural approaches:** Structural solutions to the challenges faced by democracies and programming in support of democracy may also deserve further and deeper thought. Examples include
- a. methods of establishing broader and deeper connections between those seeking to reform democracy and those seeking to promote it
  - b. how to integrate individual donor countries' approaches across the various economic growth, governance, and security cones through which assistance is provided
  - c. how to create a multilateral basis for international programming in support of democracy
  - d. how to strengthen or weaken (the flexibility, resilience, and adaptability of) networks of democracies and of autocracies, respectively
  - e. how to harness global and regional governance institutions more closely in support of democracy
  - f. determinations of what U.S. comparative advantages in an emerging polycentric, networked system of global and regional governance can be leveraged to maximum effect in support of democracy and in opposition to autocracy
  - g. determinations of what insights can be gained by taking a systems and systems analysis approach to democracy and democracy programming.



In closing, one presenter emphasized the fact that people are less opposed to democracy than they are dissatisfied with it where it exists. That had been borne out by public opinion polls and by protest movements in every region of the world. People still preferred, overwhelmingly, democracy over any other system, and they tended to protest for democracy (in places that were nondemocratic) or for more, or for better, democracy (in places where democracies were not delivering). Nobody should depart with the impression that the Chinese governance model was preferred. Given the predatory nature of Chinese international engagement, particularly in the Global South, interventions by Beijing have not always been welcomed and certainly have not been popular among local citizenries. Moreover, as the same presenter noted, China, did not have a good story to tell. Finally, he said that it seemed clear that the issue of corruption must be addressed much more vigorously. It was an issue that affected democracies and nondemocracies alike. And it fueled discontent in both.

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A decade-long worldwide decline in democracy possibly found its apotheosis in the 2021–2023 death throes of democratic governance in Tunisia. The last remaining shoots of the 2010–2021 Arab Spring, which had started its quickening in that country a decade earlier, were extinguished. Motivated by this trend and by concerns that allied programming in support of democracy was increasingly losing traction, the RAND Corporation’s Center for Global Risk and Security convened an international experts’ conference on democracy and governance programming in Washington, D.C., from May 4 to 5, 2023. The conference’s purpose: to begin a reassessment of allied approaches to supporting democracy internationally. This document summarizes the conference’s key findings.

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