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Democracy's Pessimism Paradox

Our self-doubt is a secret source of democratic strength



WE LIVE in an era of democratic pessimism. This is true in at least three senses. First, people in democracies today are much less hopeful than previous generations about their children's prospects. Second, they are also skeptical about the value of democracy itself. Unhappy with social decay, sluggish and unequal economic growth, failing public services, ideological polarization and the endless culture wars that go with it, they question the political system that has produced these things. And third, they gravitate toward political saviors whose democratic commitments are questionable at best.

The evidence for these propositions is overwhelming. When the 21st century began, a CBS News/*New York Times* poll found that 71 percent of Americans thought the country's youth would

lead better lives than their parents. By 2022, when Gallup asked the same question, that number had fallen to 42 percent. A 2020 study from Cambridge University found that dissatisfaction with democracy among citizens of developed countries was at its highest point ever—close to 60 percent. Freedom House noted in its 2023 report that freedom around the globe had declined for its 18th consecutive year. “The breadth and depth of the deterioration were extensive,” the think tank reported. “Political rights and civil liberties were diminished in 52 countries, while only 21 countries made improvements.”

What the data show, everyday life corroborates. Whether it’s in the United States, Israel, Poland, France, or other advanced democracies, people increasingly view their political choices as zero-sum struggles between democrats and authoritarians—the authoritarians being whoever is on the other side. They’re also prepared to use antidemocratic means to maintain their grip on power, whether it’s in the form of denying the results of an election, or employing mob tactics to obstruct legislative processes, or using sketchy legal claims to try to jail a political opponent.

Underlying these antidemocratic behaviors is an antidemocratic mentality: Our side alone is in possession of the truth. Our political opponents are mortal enemies. Disagreement is heresy. Where you stand politically is who you are morally. Wherever one looks, the habits of mind and spirit that sustain free societies seem to be withering.

The domestic challenge to democracy is compounded by foreign threats. George W. Bush probably spoke too soon when, in 2002, he named Iraq, Iran, and North Korea as the world’s “axis of evil.” Its current, much more powerful membership includes Russia, which retains the world’s largest nuclear arsenal, and China, with the world’s second-largest economy. Their partnerships with Pyongyang

and Tehran, along with their burgeoning influence in the Global South, makes our period reminiscent of the 1930s — another time when willful dictators, intent on conquest and genocide, confronted a diffident and enfeebled West. The only difference is that, back then, Franklin Roosevelt and Winston Churchill were in office or waiting in the wings. Their astonishing achievement was to ready their people successfully for the challenge. There are no similar figures available to us today.



To all this, I would offer a three-word rejoinder: Don't panic — yet.

If this is an era of democratic pessimism, it's one of many. “We shall soon see this country rushing into the extremes of confusion and violence,” wrote Mercy Otis Warren, the Massachusetts historian and playwright — in 1788. (She was expressing her disapproval of the Constitution.) Pessimism about American democracy was, with reason, a staple of the pre-Civil War era (“a house divided against itself cannot stand”). It was with us during the Gilded Age, the Progressive era, the McCarthy era, most of the 1960s, nearly all the 1970s, and much of the Reagan and Clinton years. A sample of influential titles from the last three decades of the 20th century includes *The Totalitarian Temptation*, by the French intellectual Jean-Francois Revel; *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers*, by Yale's Paul Kennedy; and *Slouching Toward Gomorrah*, by Robert Bork.

If we weren't falling to the communists, or falling behind Japan, we were falling into sin.

Why is pessimism so regular and even so frequent a condition of democratic politics? Part of the answer is objective reality: Certain problems, such as slavery and disunion, depression and war, illiberalism at home and the threat of totalitarian regimes abroad, induce

entirely legitimate fears for the future. Part of the answer is psychological: People are prone to depression, phobias, and catastrophizing. Humanity has always nursed apocalyptic fears.

But some of the pessimism has its roots in the nature of democratic life itself. A few of the more obvious factors:

1) *Information abundance and asymmetry.* Liberal democracies produce vast quantities of information—and have been doing so at an exponentially increasing rate at least since the advent of the internet. But information is not evenly distributed between good news and bad. Negative information generally draws more interest, generates more discussion, and gets higher ratings. No newspaper ever went to print with the banner headline “Most Things Are Slowly Getting Better.”

2) *Controversy and political hyperbole.* Open societies don’t just make people continuously aware of the worst facts and most worrying trends in society. They also are designed, through representative government, to be adversarial rather than consensual. Demonization and fearmongering are the hallmarks of democratic debate: Why offer a restrained criticism of a political opponent when you can more easily and with greater effect accuse him of dragging the country and the planet into hell?

3) *Dynamism and amnesia.* Market economies offer growth and opportunity—but also change, loss, fear, and nostalgia. Loss aversion is a powerful human instinct (more powerful, as Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky taught us, than the chance for gain), generating a constant sense that further change is likely to produce bad outcomes. The result is a longing for halcyon days in which life was slower, steadier, more predictable, and secure. It takes a struggle to recall that, on most measures of human welfare, the present is immeasurably richer, healthier, and safer than the past.

4) *Dissatisfaction and naïveté.* Open societies examine and fret

about their weaknesses to the point of forgetting their strengths. Closed societies disguise their weaknesses and advertise their strengths. The result is a tendency within democracies, particularly among the intelligentsia, to look with awe at what appear to be the power, efficiency, unity, and purposefulness of authoritarian systems. That is true (at least until recently) of China in our own day, just as it was with the Soviet Union and Fascist Italy in the 20th century.

5) *Choice and responsibility.* They are the keys to self-governance—and heavy burdens. Not everyone wants to shoulder them. We are pessimists about democracy because many of us are reluctant masters of our own fates.

All this is to say that pessimism comes much more naturally to people in democracies than many of us suppose. Moments of democratic triumphalism, typified by the post-Cold War “End of History” mindset, are more the exception than the rule. Just as Jews are supposedly the “Ever-Dying People,” democracy, one might say, is the Ever-Dying System—“never more than one generation away from extinction,” as Ronald Reagan warned in 1967. There is also no shortage of cases of fragile democracies sliding, or collapsing, into illiberalism and dictatorship: Turkey under Erdogan, Russia under Putin, Venezuela under Chávez, Hungary under Orbán.

And yet liberal democracy adapts, endures, and—historically—prevails. It’s resilient. It’s worth thinking through why.



Some of the reasons are obvious. The consent of the governed generates loyalty, loyalty undergirds legitimacy, and legitimacy fosters law-abidingness. Competitive elections prevent the buildup of resentments, limit the harm that bad leaders do, and reflect the evolution

of social norms. Bills of rights and checks and balances curb the political power of temporary majorities. Societies based on political and economic choice are attractive, especially to ambitious and hard-working immigrants. And so on.

But there's a deeper reason: What has saved democracy in the past, and what will likely save us again, is not what we think we know. It's what we know we don't.

What does that mean?

There's an easy way to tell whether a company, an institution, or a nation is in trouble. It thinks it has seen the future. In the early 1980s, IBM, the world's leading technology company, decided it didn't need to develop its own proprietary software—choosing instead to get it from a small Seattle-based company called Microsoft. IBM never recovered. Institutions of higher education in the United States convinced themselves that they were indispensable to any American who wanted to be part of the middle class, so they kept raising their prices and lowering their standards. In response, millions of astute teenagers and their parents are having second thoughts about the value of a college degree. In this century, China's leaders became convinced they were sure to become the world's dominant power and began to revert to Maoist instincts as a way of preserving their positions and shoring up their prestige. Now the main worry about China isn't the certainty of its rise but the consequences of its decline.

The word for all this is arrogance—to which liberal democracy and the competitive markets that go with it serve as powerful checks, whether it is the arrogance of political incumbency and market dominance; of class snobbery and moral authority; or of national pride and individual self-regard. Politicians fear losing their next election; CEOs fear new, more agile competitors. Knowledge of our ignorance, awareness of our fallibility, a recognition that we have far to fall—all these are spurs to maintaining a competitive edge, being receptive to

new ideas and methods, and un-wedding ourselves from our past for the sake of our futures.

Think again about our 21st-century pessimism. While the United States was failing to win wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, electing bad presidents, allowing our universities to collapse into wokeness, struggling with an opioid epidemic, and failing to maintain control at our borders (to name some of the more common indictments of modern America), we also:

1) Became the world's largest producer of *both* oil and natural gas thanks to a fracking revolution that none of the major energy producers saw coming at the beginning of the century.

2) Invented, commercialized, and dominated the four most important digital innovations of our time: smartphones, mobile apps, social media, and generative AI. Pioneered the field of immunotherapies and other gene therapies. Achieved the first nuclear fusion reaction (at least one that created more energy than it consumed).

3) Landed a satellite on an asteroid, collected a dirt sample and returned the sample to Earth. Flew a satellite to Pluto and beyond. Landed multiple rovers on Mars and flew the first helicopter drone on the red planet.

4) Attracted tens of millions of immigrants, both legal and illegal, inflaming populist sentiment and causing undoubted strains but also relieving our long-term demographic decline, which would otherwise produce labor shortages, economic stagnation, and long-term national decline.

5) Increased our gross domestic product, in inflation-adjusted terms, by 64 percent. Our share of global GDP, at 25 percent, is effectively unchanged from 30 years ago. It is nearly double that of the European Union, even though the EU has 100 million more citizens.

6) Won 136 — 46 percent — of the 294 Nobel Prizes awarded since 2000. U.S. dominance of the prizes rises above 50 percent when the

Peace Prize — so often awarded to dubious honorees — is subtracted.

7) Gave birth to 61 of the world's 100 largest public companies, including eight of the top 10. Remarkably, most of our largest companies — such as Alphabet, Apple, Amazon, Meta, Microsoft, and Nvidia — are less than 50 years old.

8) Continued to be the most charitable people in the world, giving away far more of our money (in both absolute and proportional terms) and volunteering more of our time than people in any other developed nation.

None of this is secret. But it's obscured to us by our own pessimism, our trouble in seeing more than only what ails us. Optimism breeds complacency; it's an invitation to carry on as before. Paradoxically, pessimism — at least when it doesn't descend to fatalism — is a motivator, a spur to change, an invitation to personal or communal reinvention. To be convinced, from one generation to the next, that catastrophe lies around a corner, may be both the cause and the result of a deep cultural neurosis. But it also goes far to nurture the virtues of a healthy society: self-questioning, experimentation, a willingness to adapt, an instinct for danger, relentless industry.

Should we be optimistic, then, about our pessimism?



I wrote above that we shouldn't panic about the state of democracy, yet. What gives me pause is antisemitism.

In 2013, the Anti-Defamation League recorded just 751 antisemitic incidents in the U.S. — evidence, then—ADL Director Abe Foxman wrote at the time, that Jews had achieved “full acceptance in society.” A decade later, 8,873 incidents were recorded in one year, a 900 percent increase. Jewish cemeteries were desecrated 13 times. Jews were physically assaulted for being Jews at least 161 times. There were more than

1,000 bomb threats, 2,177 acts of vandalism, and several attempted or successful murders. It would be easy to attribute this rise to October 7, but it was a steeply rising trend well before that massacre.

As I wrote last summer in *SAPIR*, antisemitism isn't a problem for Jews to solve because it isn't, fundamentally, our problem, at least as Jews. It is, however, a grave problem for democracy, because antisemitism isn't mere bigotry. It's always a bigotry wedded to a conspiracy theory—a uniquely toxic form of irrationality that strikes at the root of the rational and empirical frame of mind that made the Enlightenment possible, and with it the enormous success of democracy. The antisemite isn't merely at war with the Jews. He's at war with reality, with the fact that no dark, secret power controls the course of events in an open society. The antisemite embraces a politics of envy that is also an assault on the idea of excellence, without which democracy cannot flourish.

This is why the rise of antisemitism in the United States and other Western countries is accompanied by a broad decline in certain core democratic values: cancel culture and the suppression of dissenting views; the embrace of “equity” as a dominant educational value; the demonization of personal success as a form of unearned privilege; the relentless racialization of cultural, social, and political discourse; the increasing resort to other conspiracy theories (replacement theory, Russian collusion, globalist cabals) to explain political phenomena. All this undermines the habits of a free mind that are the operating software of democracy.



Powerful forces in American life are now rallying to fight antisemitism. Millions of Americans, Jewish and Gentile, understand that the new Jew-hatred poses a profound threat to the things we love most about

the ways of a free and great society. American history should give us hope that those forces are not fighting a hopeless battle; that the ugliness we see on college campuses and editorial pages will remain on the fringes; that the vast majority of Americans will not lose their faith in their core ideals and their good sense about the world at large. But success in the fight against antisemitism and for democracy is not guaranteed. American history reminds us that retaining our best democratic ideals requires constant work in every generation. *

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