

The People vs. Democracy

THE PEOPLE VS. DEMOCRACY

Why Our Freedom Is in Danger and How to Save It

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INTRODUCTION

Losing Our Illusions

THERE ARE LONG DECADES in which history seems to slow to a crawl. Elections are won and lost, laws adopted and repealed, new stars born and legends carried to their graves. But for all the ordinary business of time passing, the lodestars of culture, society, and politics remain the same.

Then there are those short years in which everything changes all at once. Political newcomers storm the stage. Voters clamor for policies that were unthinkable until yesterday. Social tensions that had long simmered under the surface erupt into terrifying explosions. A system of government that had seemed immutable looks as though it might come apart.

This is the kind of moment in which we now find ourselves.

Until recently, liberal democracy reigned triumphant. For all its shortcomings, most citizens seemed deeply committed to their form of government. The economy was growing. Radical parties were insignificant. Political scientists thought that democracy in places like France or the United States had long ago been set in stone, and

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would change little in the years to come. Politically speaking, it seemed, the future would not be much different from the past.

Then the future came—and turned out to be very different indeed.

Citizens have long been disillusioned with politics; now, they have grown restless, angry, even disdainful. Party systems have long seemed frozen; now, authoritarian populists are on the rise around the world, from America to Europe, and from Asia to Australia. Voters have long disliked particular parties, politicians, or governments; now, many of them have become fed up with liberal democracy itself.

Donald Trump's election to the White House has been the most striking manifestation of democracy's crisis. It is difficult to overstate the significance of his rise. For the first time in its history, the oldest and most powerful democracy in the world has elected a president who openly disdains basic constitutional norms—somebody who left his supporters “in suspense” whether he would accept the outcome of the election; who called for his main political opponent to be jailed; and who has consistently favored the country's authoritarian adversaries over its democratic allies.¹ Even if Trump should eventually be constrained by the checks on his power, the willingness of the American people to elect a would-be authoritarian to the highest office in the land is a very bad omen.

And the election of Trump is, of course, hardly an isolated incident. In Russia and Turkey, elected strongmen have succeeded in turning fledgling democracies into electoral dictatorships. In Poland and Hungary, populist leaders are using that same playbook to destroy the free media, to undermine independent institutions, and to muzzle the opposition.

More countries may soon follow. In Austria, a far-right candidate nearly won the country's presidency. In France, a rapidly changing political landscape is providing new openings for both the far left and the far right. In Spain and Greece, established party

systems are disintegrating with breathtaking speed. Even in the supposedly stable and tolerant democracies of Sweden, Germany, and the Netherlands, extremists are celebrating unprecedented successes.

There can no longer be any doubt that we are going through a populist moment. The question now is whether this populist moment will turn into a populist age—and cast the very survival of liberal democracy in doubt.



After the fall of the Soviet Union, liberal democracy became the dominant regime form around the world. It seemed immutable in North America and Western Europe, quickly took root in formerly autocratic countries from Eastern Europe to South America, and was making rapid inroads across Asia and Africa.

One reason for liberal democracy's triumph is that there was no coherent alternative to it. Communism had failed. Islamic theocracy had precious little support outside the Middle East. China's unique system of state capitalism under the banner of communism could hardly be emulated by countries that didn't share its unusual history. The future, it seemed, belonged to liberal democracy.

The idea that democracy was sure to triumph has come to be associated with the work of Francis Fukuyama. In a sensational essay published in the late 1980s, Fukuyama argued that the conclusion of the Cold War would lead to “the end point of mankind's ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government.” Democracy's triumph, he proclaimed in a phrase that has come to encapsulate the heady optimism of 1989, would mark “The End of History.”²

Plenty of critics took Fukuyama to task for his supposed naiveté. Some argued that the spread of liberal democracy was far from inevitable, fearing (or hoping) that many countries would prove resis-

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tant to this Western import. Others argued that it was too early to foresee what kind of improvement human ingenuity might be able to dream up over the course of the coming centuries: perhaps, they ventured, liberal democracy was just a prelude to a more just and enlightened form of rule.³

Despite the vociferous criticism, Fukuyama's core assumption proved highly influential. Most of the people who warned that liberal democracy might not triumph around the world were just as sure that it would remain stable in the democratic heartlands of North America and Western Europe. Indeed, even most political scientists, far too careful to make sweeping proclamations about the end of history, reached much the same conclusion. Democracies in poor countries, they observed, often failed. Autocrats were regularly ousted from power even when they could offer their subjects a good standard of living. But once a country was both affluent and democratic, it proved incredibly stable. Argentina had experienced a military coup in 1975, when its gross domestic product per capita was about \$14,000 in today's currency.⁴ Above that threshold, no established democracy had ever collapsed.⁵

Awed by the unparalleled stability of wealthy democracies, political scientists began to conceive of the postwar history of many countries as a process of "democratic consolidation."⁶ To sustain a durable democracy, a country had to attain a high level of wealth and education. It had to build a vibrant civil society and ensure the neutrality of key state institutions like the judiciary. Major political forces had to accept that they should let voters, rather than the might of their arms or the thickness of their wallets, determine political outcomes. All of these goals frequently proved elusive.

Building a democracy was no easy task. But the prize that beckoned was both precious and perennial: once the key benchmarks of democracy were attained, the political system would be stable forevermore. Democratic consolidation, on this vision, was a one-way street. Once democracy had, in the famous phrase of Juan J. Linz

and Alfred Stepan, become “the only game in town,” it was there to stay.⁷

So confident were political scientists in this assumption that few considered the conditions under which democratic consolidation might risk running in reverse. But recent events call this democratic self-confidence into question.

A quarter century ago, most citizens of liberal democracies were very satisfied with their governments and gave high approval ratings to their institutions; now, they are more disillusioned than they have ever been. A quarter century ago, most citizens were proud to live in a liberal democracy and strongly rejected authoritarian alternatives to their system of government; now, many are growing increasingly hostile to democracy. And a quarter century ago, political adversaries were united in their shared respect for basic democratic rules and norms; now, candidates who violate the most basic norms of liberal democracy have gained great power and influence.⁸

Just take two examples drawn from my own research: Over two-thirds of older Americans believe that it is extremely important to live in a democracy; among millennials, less than one-third do. The sinking attachment to democracy is also making Americans more open to authoritarian alternatives. Back in 1995, for example, only one in sixteen believed that army rule is a good system of government; today, one in six do.⁹

Under these radically changed circumstances, it would be foolhardy to assume that the stability of democracy is sure to persist. The first big assumption of the postwar era—the idea that rich countries in which the government had repeatedly changed hands through free and fair elections would forever remain democratic—has, all along, stood on shaky ground.

If the first big assumption that shaped our political imagination has turned out to be unwarranted, there’s reason to reexamine the second big assumption as well.

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Liberalism and democracy, we have long thought, make a cohesive whole. It is not just that we care both about the popular will and the rule of law, both about letting the people decide and protecting individual rights. It's that each component of our political system seems necessary to protect the other.

There is indeed good reason to fear that liberal democracy cannot survive if one of its elements is abandoned. A system in which the people get to call the shots ensures that the rich and powerful cannot trample on the rights of the lowly. By the same token, a system in which the rights of unpopular minorities are protected and the press can freely criticize the government ensures that the people can change its rulers through free and fair elections. Individual rights and the popular will, this story suggests, go together like apple and pie or Twitter and Donald Trump.

But the fact that a working system needs both elements to thrive does not mean that a system that has both will necessarily be stable. On the contrary, the mutual dependence of liberalism and democracy shows just how quickly dysfunction in one aspect of our politics can breed dysfunction in another. And so democracy without rights always runs the danger of degenerating into the thing the Founding Fathers most feared: the tyranny of the majority. Meanwhile, rights without democracy need not prove to be more stable: once the political system turns into a playground for billionaires and technocrats, the temptation to exclude the people from more and more important decisions will keep on growing.

This slow divergence of liberalism and democracy may be exactly what is now happening—and the consequences are likely to be just as bad as one would predict.

From style to substance, much divides the populists who are celebrating unprecedented successes on both sides of the Atlantic.

It is tempting, for example, to see Donald Trump as a uniquely

American phenomenon. From his brash manner to his boasts about his net worth, he is a walking caricature of the American id—the sort of figure a communist cartoonist tasked with ridiculing the archenemy might have drawn on behalf of some Soviet-era propaganda ministry. And in many ways, of course, Trump *is* very American. He emphasizes his credentials as a businessman in part because of the deep veneration for entrepreneurs in American culture. The targets of his ire, too, are shaped by the American context. Fears that liberal elites are plotting to take the people's guns away, for example, would seem peculiar in Europe.

And yet, the real nature of the threat Trump poses can only be understood in a much wider context: that of the far-right populists who have been gaining strength in every major democracy, from Athens to Ankara, from Sydney to Stockholm, and from Warsaw to Wellington. Despite the obvious differences between the populists who are on the rise in all these countries, their commonalities go deep—and render each of them a danger to the political system in surprisingly similar ways.

Donald Trump in the United States, Nigel Farage in Great Britain, Frauke Petry in Germany, and Marine Le Pen in France all claim that the solutions to the most pressing problems of our time are much more straightforward than the political establishment would have us believe, and that the great mass of ordinary people instinctively knows what to do. At bottom, they see politics as a very simple matter. If the pure voice of the people could prevail, the reasons for popular discontent would quickly vanish. America (or Great Britain, or Germany, or France) would be great again.

This begs an obvious question. If the political problems of our time are so easy to fix, why do they persist? Since the populists are unwilling to admit that the real world might be complicated—that solutions might prove elusive even for people with good intentions—they need somebody to blame. And blame they do.

The first obvious culprit often lies outside the country. So it is

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only logical that Trump blames America's economic problems on China. Nor should it be surprising that he preys on people's fears by claiming that the United States is being overrun by rapists (Mexicans) and terrorists (Muslims).¹⁰

European populists see their enemies elsewhere, and most express their bile in a more circumspect manner. But their rhetoric has the same underlying logic. Like Trump, Le Pen and Farage believe that it must be the fault of outsiders—of Muslim moochers or Polish plumbers—when incomes stagnate or their identity is threatened by newcomers. And like Trump, they blame the political establishment—from Brussels bureaucrats to the mendacious media—for their failure to deliver on their outsized promises. People in the capital, populists of all stripes argue, are either in it for themselves or in cahoots with the nation's enemies. Establishment politicians, they say, have a misguided fetish for diversity. Or they root for their country's enemies. Or—simplest explanation of all—they are somehow foreign, or Muslim, or both.

This worldview breeds two political desires, and most populists are savvy enough to embrace both. First, populists claim, an honest leader—one who shares the pure outlook of the people and is willing to fight on their behalf—needs to win high office. And second, once this honest leader is in charge, he needs to abolish the institutional roadblocks that might stop him from carrying out the will of the people.

Liberal democracies are full of checks and balances that are meant to stop any one party from amassing too much power and to reconcile the interests of different groups. But in the imagination of the populists, the will of the people does not need to be mediated, and any compromise with minorities is a form of corruption. In that sense, populists are deeply democratic: much more fervently than traditional politicians, they believe that the *demos* should rule. But they are also deeply illiberal: unlike traditional

politicians, they openly say that neither independent institutions nor individual rights should dampen the people's voice.

The fear that populist insurgents would undermine liberal institutions if they came to power may sound alarmist. But it is based on plenty of precedent. After all, illiberal populists have already been elected to office in countries like Poland and Turkey. In each of these places, they took strikingly similar steps to consolidate their power: they ratcheted up tensions with perceived enemies at home and abroad; packed courts and electoral commissions with their cronies; and took control of the media.¹¹

In Hungary, for example, liberal democracy was a much more recent—and rather more brittle—transplant than in, say, Germany or Sweden. And yet, throughout the 1990s, political scientists were bullish on its prospects. According to their theories, Hungary had all the attributes that favored a democratic transition: it had experienced democratic rule in the past; its totalitarian legacy was more moderate than that of many other Eastern European countries; old communist elites had acquiesced to the new regime in a negotiated settlement; and the country bordered a number of stable democracies. Hungary, in the language of social science, was a “most likely case”: if democracy didn't make it there, it would have difficulty making it in all the other postcommunist countries as well.¹²

That prediction seemed to hold up well enough throughout the 1990s. Hungary's economy grew. The government peacefully changed hands. Its lively civil society featured critical media, strong NGOs, and one of the best universities in Central Europe. Hungarian democracy seemed to be consolidating.¹³

Then the trouble started. Many Hungarians felt that they were getting too small a share of the country's economic growth. They saw their identity threatened by the prospect (though not the real-

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ity) of mass immigration. When a big corruption scandal enveloped the ruling center-left party, their discontent turned into outright disgust with the government. At parliamentary elections in 2010, Hungarian voters gave Viktor Orbán's Fidesz party a stomping majority.¹⁴

Once in office, Orbán systematically consolidated his rule. He appointed loyal followers to lead state-run television stations, to head the electoral commission, and to dominate the country's constitutional court. He changed the electoral system to benefit himself, pushed out foreign corporations to channel money to his cronies, instituted highly restrictive rules on NGOs, and attempted to shutter Central European University.¹⁵

There was no Rubicon, no single step that cleanly marked that the old political norms had been destroyed for good. Any one of Orbán's measures could be defended in this way or that. But, taken together, their effect slowly became unmistakable: Hungary is no longer a liberal democracy.

What, then, is it?

Over the years, Orbán has answered this question with increasing clarity. At first he presented himself as an honest democrat with conservative values. Now, he states his opposition to liberal democracy loud and clear. Democracy, he vows, should be hierarchical rather than liberal. Under his leadership, Hungary will become an "illiberal new state based on national foundations."¹⁶

This is a much better description of the nature of his enterprise than most outside observers have been able to muster. They tend to denounce Orbán as undemocratic. But though they are right to worry that his illiberal reforms may eventually allow him to disregard the will of the people, it is a mistake to think that all democracies must by their nature be liberal, or resemble our current political institutions.

Hierarchical democracy allows popularly elected leaders to enact the will of the people as they interpret it, without having to make

allowances for the rights or interests of obstinate minorities. Its claim to being democratic need not be disingenuous. In the emerging system, the popular will reigns supreme (at least at first). What sets it apart from the kind of liberal democracy to which we are accustomed is not a lack of democracy; it is a lack of respect for independent institutions and individual rights.

The rise of illiberal democracy, or democracy without rights, is but one side of politics in the first decades of the twenty-first century. For even as ordinary people have grown skeptical of liberal practices and institutions, political elites have tried to insulate themselves from their anger. The world is complicated, they insist—and they have worked hard to find the right answers. If the people should grow so restive as to ignore the sage advice proffered by elites, they need to be educated, ignored, or bullied into submission.

Never was this attitude more starkly on display than in the early hours of July 13th, 2015. The Great Recession had saddled Greece with a vast amount of debt. Economists knew that the country would never be able to pay off everything it owed; most agreed that a policy of austerity would only serve to inflict further damage on a cratering economy.¹⁷ But if the European Union allowed Greece to default, investors would worry that much larger countries, like Spain or Italy, might be next. And so technocrats in Brussels decided that, for the rest of the European monetary system to survive, Greece would have to suffer.

With few other options open to them, a succession of Greek governments did Brussels's bidding. But with the economy shrinking from year to year and youth unemployment spiking above 50 percent, desperate voters finally put their trust in Alexis Tsipras, a young, populist leader who promised to end austerity.¹⁸

When Tsipras took office, he set out to renegotiate the country's

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debt with its main creditors, represented by the European Commission, the European Central Bank, and the International Monetary Fund. But it quickly turned out that the so-called “troika” was unwilling to budge. Greece would have to persist in penury—or go bankrupt and leave the euro. By the summer of 2015, with a harsh bailout package on the table, Tsipras was down to two options: capitulate to the demands of the technocrats or lead Greece into economic chaos.¹⁹

Faced with a momentous choice, Tsipras did what might seem natural in a system that purports to let the people rule: he called a popular referendum. The backlash was swift, and it was mighty. Political leaders from all over Europe called the referendum irresponsible. German chancellor Angela Merkel insisted that the troika had made an “extraordinarily generous” offer. The media vilified Tsipras’s decision.²⁰

Amid high excitement, Greece went to the polls on July 5, 2015. The results were a big rebuke to the continent’s technocratic elites. Despite ominous warnings about impending doom, voters were unwilling to swallow their pride. They rejected the deal.²¹

Emboldened by a clear expression of popular will, Tsipras went back to the negotiating table. He seemed to assume that the troika would meet Greece halfway. Instead, the original deal was off the table—and the new offer imposed even greater hardships.²²

With Greece teetering on the brink of insolvency, Europe’s political elite assembled in Brussels for a marathon of backroom negotiations. When Tsipras stepped in front of the cameras in the early morning of July 13, his eyes red and his face ashen, it quickly became apparent that the night had ended in his capitulation. A little over a week after he had let his people reject an unpopular bailout deal, Tsipras signed off on an agreement that was, by any reasonable measure, worse.²³ Technocracy had prevailed.

The politics of the Eurozone are an extreme example of a political system in which the people feel as though they have less and less say over what actually happens.²⁴ But they are far from atypical.

Unnoticed by most political scientists, a form of undemocratic liberalism has taken root in North America and Western Europe. In this form of government, procedural niceties are carefully followed (most of the time) and individual rights are respected (much of the time). But voters have long since concluded that they have little influence on public policy.

They aren't altogether wrong.

Hungary's rise of the populists and Greece's rule of the technocrats seem like polar opposites. In one case, the will of the people pushed aside the independent institutions that were meant to protect the rule of law and the rights of minorities. In the other case, the force of the markets and the beliefs of the technocrats pushed aside the will of the people.

But Hungary and Greece are just two sides of the same coin. In democracies around the world, two seemingly distinct developments are playing out. 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.

Scholars have always known that liberalism and democracy could, at times, be observed in isolation from each other. In eighteenth century Prussia, an absolute monarch ruled in a comparatively liberal manner by respecting (some of) his subjects' rights and allowing (a modicum of) free speech.²⁵ Conversely, in ancient Athens, the people's assembly ruled in a blatantly illiberal manner, exiling unpopular statesmen, executing critical philosophers, and censoring everything from political speech to musical scores.²⁶

Even so, most political scientists have long thought of liberalism

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and democracy as complementary. While they recognized that individual rights and the popular will may not always go together, they held fast to the belief that they are meant to. Where liberalism and democracy do meet, the story holds, they form an especially stable, resilient, and coherent amalgam.

But as the views of the people are trending illiberal and the preferences of the elites are turning undemocratic, liberalism and democracy are starting to clash. Liberal democracy, the unique mix of individual rights and popular rule that has long characterized most governments in North America and Western Europe, is coming apart at its seams. In its stead, we are seeing the rise of *illiberal democracy*, or democracy without rights, and *undemocratic liberalism*, or rights without democracy.



Once upon a time, there was a very happy chicken. Every day, the farmer would come to feed the chicken. Every day, the chicken would grow a little more plump and a little more complacent.

Other animals on the farm tried to warn the chicken. “You are going to die,” they said. “The farmer is only trying to fatten you up.”

The chicken did not listen. All its life, the farmer had come to feed it, muttering a few friendly words of encouragement. Why should things suddenly be so different?

But, sure enough, one day things did change: “The man who has fed the chicken every day throughout its life,” Bertrand Russell writes in his characteristically wry tone, “at last wrings its neck instead.”²⁷ As long as the chicken was young and thin, the farmer wanted to fatten it up; once it was fat enough for the market, it was time for it to be killed.

Russell meant to warn us against making facile predictions: If we don’t understand what made things happen in the past, the story

of the unsuspecting chicken reminds us, then we can't assume that they'll keep happening in the future. Just as the chicken failed to anticipate that its world might one day crumble, we too may be blind to the changes that lie ahead.

If we want to venture an educated guess about the future of democracy, we have to ask the "chicken question." Was the past stability of democracy brought about by conditions that are no longer in place?

The answer might well be yes.

There are at least three striking constants that characterized democracy since its founding but are no longer true today. First, during the period of democratic stability, most citizens enjoyed a rapid increase in their living standards. From 1935 to 1960, for example, the income of a typical American household doubled. From 1960 to 1985, it doubled again. Since then, it has been flat.²⁸

This has heralded a radical change in American politics: Citizens never especially liked politicians—and yet they did, by and large, trust that elected officials would stick to their end of the deal, and that their lives would keep getting better as a result. Today, that trust and that optimism have evaporated. As citizens have grown deeply anxious about the future, they have started to see politics as a zero-sum game—one in which any gain for immigrants or ethnic minorities will come at their expense.²⁹

This is exacerbating a second difference between the comparatively stable past and the increasingly chaotic present. All through the history of democratic stability, one racial or ethnic group has been dominant. In the United States and Canada, there has always been a clear racial hierarchy, with whites enjoying myriad privileges. In Western Europe this dominance went even further. Founded on a monoethnic basis, countries like Germany or Sweden did not recognize immigrants as true members of the nation. To an

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extent we often prefer to disregard, the functioning of democracy may have depended on that homogeneity.

Decades of mass migration and social activism have radically transformed these societies. In North America, racial minorities are finally claiming an equal seat at the table. In Western Europe, the descendants of immigrants are starting to insist that somebody who is black or brown can be a real German or Swede. But while a part of the population accepts, or even welcomes, this change, another part feels threatened and resentful. As a result, a vast rebellion against ethnic and cultural pluralism is gathering speed across the western hemisphere.³⁰

A final change has conquered the whole wide world in the span of a few short decades. Until recently, mass communication remained the exclusive preserve of political and financial elites. The costs associated with printing a newspaper, running a radio station, or operating a television network were prohibitive for most citizens. This allowed the political establishment to marginalize extreme views. Politics remained comparatively consensual.

Over the past quarter century, by contrast, the rise of the internet, and particularly of social media, has rapidly shifted the power balance between political insiders and political outsiders. Today, any citizen is able to share viral information with millions of people at great speed. The costs of political organizing have plummeted. And as the technological gap between center and periphery has narrowed, the instigators of instability have won an advantage over the forces of order.³¹

We are only now starting to understand what has caused the existential crisis of liberal democracy, let alone how to fight it. But if we take the major drivers of our populist age seriously, we should recognize that we need to take action on at least three fronts.

First, we need to reform economic policy, both domestically and

internationally, to temper inequality and live up to the promise of rapidly rising living standards. A more equitable distribution of economic growth, on this vision, is not just a question of distributive justice; it is a question of political stability.

Some economists have argued that we cannot have democracy, globalization, and the nation state all at the same time. And some philosophers have embraced the abandonment of the nation state, dreaming up predominantly international solutions to the economic problems we now face. But this is the wrong approach. To preserve democracy without giving up on the emancipatory potential of globalization, we need to figure out how the nation state can once again take control of its own fate.³²

Second, we need to rethink what membership and belonging might mean in a modern nation state. The promise of multiethnic democracy, in which members of any creed or color are regarded as true equals, is nonnegotiable. Difficult though it may be for countries with a deeply monoethnic conception of themselves to embrace newcomers and minorities, such a transformation is the only realistic alternative to tyranny and civic strife.

But the noble experiment of multiethnic democracy can only succeed if all of its adherents start to emphasize what unites rather than what divides them. In the last years, a righteous impatience with the continuing reality of racial injustice has increasingly pushed some people to denounce the principles of liberal democracy as hypocritical, or even to make group rights the building block of society. This is a moral as well as a strategic mistake: The only society that can treat all of its members with respect is one in which every individual enjoys rights on the basis of being a citizen, not on the basis of belonging to a particular group.³³

Finally, we need to learn to withstand the transformative impact of the internet and of social media. As hate speech and fake news have spread, there have been calls for social media companies—or governments—to act as censors. There are many commonsense

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steps Facebook and Twitter can take to make it more difficult for hate groups to exploit these platforms. But if governments or CEOs started to determine who can say what on the web, free speech would quickly go out the window. To make the digital age safe for democracy, we therefore need to shape not only what messages are spread on social media, but also how they are likely to be received.

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.³⁴



There are ordinary times, when political decisions influence the lives of millions of people in ways both big and small, but the basic features of a country's collective life are not at stake. Despite deep disagreements, partisans on both sides of the political battle line endorse the rules of play. They agree to settle their differences on the basis of free and fair elections, are committed to the basic norms of the political system, and accept that a loss at the ballot box makes it legitimate for their political opponent to take a turn at ruling the country.

As a result, the denizens of ordinary times recognize that every victory is provisional and that the loser of one political battle may yet live to win the war. Since they have it in their power to transform progress defeated today into justice delayed until tomorrow, they see every loss as but another reason to redouble their efforts at peaceful persuasion.

Then there are extraordinary times, when the basic contours of politics and society are being renegotiated. In such times, the disagreements between partisans on both sides grow so deep and nasty that they no longer agree on the rules of the game. To gain an advantage, politicians become willing to undermine free and fair elections, to flout the basic norms of the political system, and to vilify their adversaries.

As a result, the denizens of extraordinary times start to regard the stakes of politics as existential. In a system whose rules are deeply contested, they have good reason to fear that a victory at the polls may turn out to be forever; that a loss in one political battle may rob them of the ability to wage the larger war; and that progress defeated today may turn out to set the country on a path toward perennial injustice.

Most of us have spent the bulk of our lives in ordinary times.

When I was coming of age in Germany in the late 1990s, for example, politicians were debating important questions. Should the receipt of welfare benefits be made conditional on good behavior?³⁵ Would immigrants and their children be allowed to take on German citizenship without giving up their other passports? Might the state recognize same-sex partnerships in the form of civil unions?

The answers they gave to these questions would, I was convinced, deeply shape the country in the years to come. The future was wide open. On one side, there lay the vision of an open, generous, welcoming country. On the other, a closed, niggardly, stagnant one. As a member in the youth organization of a big political party, I spent a lot of my time fighting for what I believed to be right.

At that time, I barely knew the United States. So I didn't understand that even bigger questions were being discussed in America. Would millions of uninsured citizens get access to decent medical care? Could soldiers be thrown out of the army for being open

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about their sexuality? And should key parts of the welfare state be abolished?

The answers to these questions, too, would deeply shape the country. They would make the lives of millions of people better or worse, more authentic or more dissimulating, more prosperous or more precarious. It mattered—deeply—which path the country would take. And yet, with the benefit of hindsight, I recognize that this was the stuff of ordinary politics.

Now, by contrast, it is, each and every day, becoming clearer that we live in extraordinary times: in times, that is, in which the decisions we take will determine whether terrifying chaos spreads; whether unspeakable cruelty is unleashed; and whether a political system—liberal democracy—that has done more to spread peace and prosperity than any other in the history of humanity can survive.

The predicament in which we now find ourselves is so recent, and so scary, that nobody has managed to make real sense of it so far. Individual pieces of the puzzle are dissected every day in the newspaper, on television, sometimes even in the academy. But the more we obsess about these individual pieces, the less we see the overall picture.

In this book, I try to make sense of our new political landscape by making four distinctive contributions: I demonstrate that liberal democracy is now decomposing into its component parts, giving rise to illiberal democracy on the one side and undemocratic liberalism on the other. I argue that the deep disenchantment with our political system poses an existential danger to the very survival of liberal democracy. I explain the roots of this crisis. And I show what we can do to rescue what is truly valuable in our imperiled social and political order.

We have the immense fortune of living in the most peaceful and prosperous era of human history. Though the events of the last years may seem disorienting or even paralyzing, we retain the

power to win a better future. But unlike fifteen or thirty years ago, we can no longer take that future for granted.

At the moment, the enemies of liberal democracy seem more determined to shape our world than its defenders. If we want to preserve both peace and prosperity, both popular rule and individual rights, we need to recognize that these are no ordinary times—and go to extraordinary lengths to defend our values.

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