

THREE CHALLENGES TO LIBERAL DEMOCRACY

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My topic is not liberalism per se, but “liberal” as an adjective modifying the noun “democracy.” In the familiar term “liberal democracy,” liberal is not the antithesis of conservative, but rather of total. Liberal democracy is *limited* democracy, a regime in which the power of government is limited in multiple ways—by a protected zone of privacy, by individual rights, by constitutions (written and unwritten), and by a commitment to the rule of law. These restraints delimit not only the legitimate ends that majorities may pursue, but also the legitimate means that may be employed to achieve them. In liberal democracies, the ends do not justify the means, because the distinction between permitted and forbidden means serves the overall objective of protecting individuals and minorities against tyranny of any sort.

In my judgment, liberal democracy is the best form of government possible in contemporary circumstances. This does not mean that it is perfect, but rather that every effort to replace it with something different leads to worse outcomes in the long run. Political responsibility requires the amendment, not abolition, of liberal democracy.

Liberal democracy is exposed to three kinds of challenges: from its enemies, external and internal, who must be opposed through political action and, when necessary, by force of arms; from inherent weaknesses that cannot be eliminated and can only be managed; and from self-incurred illusions that the friends of liberal democracy must discard if their cause is to prevail.

Enemies

The first, and most discussed, of these challenges need not detain us. The friends of liberal democracy have awakened to the threat posed by external aggressors, of which Russia and China are the most dangerous, and by various forms of domestic illiberalism. The only question is whether liberal democracy’s defenders will be skillful and determined enough to resist these threats effectively.

Inherent weakness

The second category of challenges is less well understood. Here are some of its dimensions:

First: because liberal democracy restrains majorities, it slows the achievement of goals that majorities support. This generates impatience and even (we must admit it) an envy of authoritarian systems that can act quickly and decisively. It is often remarked in the United States that China can build huge cities in the time that it takes us to review the environmental impact of small highway projects. Liberal democracy requires more patience than many possess.

Second, liberal democracy requires tolerance for minority views and ways of life to which many citizens are deeply opposed. It is natural to feel that if we consider certain views or ways of life to be odious, we should use public power to suppress them. In many such cases, liberal democracy requires us to restrain this impulse, a psychological burden that some will find unbearable.

This leads directly to the third inherent problem of liberal democracy—the distinction it requires us to make between civic identity and personal or group identity. For example, although we may believe that certain religious views are false and even dangerous, we must accept those who hold these views as our equals for civic purposes. They may freely express these views; they may organize to promote them; they may vote, and their votes are given the same weight as ours. The same goes for race, ethnicity, gender, to all particularities that distinguish us from one another. As citizens, we are equal—indeed, identical.

This requirement of liberal democracy often goes against the grain of natural sentiments. We want the public sphere to reflect what we find most valuable about our private commitments. Liberal democracy prevents us from fully translating our personal identities into our public lives as citizens. This, too, is not always easy to bear.

Nor is the fourth inherent difficulty of liberal democracy—the necessity of compromise. If what I want is good and true, why should I agree to incorporate competing views into public decisions? James Madison gives us the answer: in circumstances of liberty, diversity of views is inevitable, and unless those who agree with us form a majority so large as to be irresistible, the alternative to compromise is inaction, which is often more damaging, or oppression, which always is.

These are always those who prefer purity to compromise, and sometimes they are right. The Israeli political philosopher Avishai Margalit has distinguished between tolerable compromises and what he calls “rotten” compromises—agreements so deeply flawed that no morally conscientious person should accept them. But applying this distinction in practice is not easy. For example, Margalit regards the compromise with slave states that made the U.S. Constitution possible as a rotten compromise; better for the free states to have gone their own way, as the Abolitionists argued. Abraham Lincoln disagreed, however, and rightly so.

This brings me to the final ensemble of liberal democracy’s inherent challenges—namely, the tangled relationship between liberty and equality, and the tendency of each to exceed its rightful bounds. As Tocqueville observed, the passion for equality can overwhelm the commitment to liberty; in the pursuit of ever-greater equality, core individual liberties such as freedom of speech and property can be abridged.

The converse is also the case, however: in the pursuit of more expansive freedom, the legitimate concerns of equality can be ignored. Since Aristotle, the relationship between decent republican governance and a strong middle class has been well understood. But contemporary liberal democracies have not always attended to the impact of economic change on middle class families, opening themselves to attacks from both illiberal Right and the authoritarian Left.

The problem extends beyond potential imbalances between equality and liberty. Each, considered by itself, can lose its balance. Taken too far, equality can deny the existence—and legitimate claims—of excellence. Taken too far, the exercise of liberty shades over into what many see as license, or outright moral anarchy. Liberal democracies face the perennial challenge of keeping its liberty and equality—its core commitments within—appropriate bounds.

Illusions

I turn now from the inherent, age-old problems of liberal democracy to the final category of threats it faces—that is, to the unforced and avoidable errors of understanding that have weakened the ability of the defenders of liberal democracy to resist its adversaries. These errors fall into three groups—naivete, myopia, and parochialism.

Naivete

I start with the false belief, which gained currency after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the Soviet Union, that history moves in only one direction, toward the permanent victory of liberal democracy over other forms of governance. How many times have we heard Western leaders claim that something is mistaken because it is on “the wrong side of history” or that something is unthinkable because it belongs to the past? But history has no side, and regression to past horrors is always possible. Many European leaders were shocked, but should not have been, when Vladimir Putin invaded Ukraine. The principle that internationally recognized boundaries cannot be changed by force is a contingent norm, not an immutable fact. Our commitment to liberal democracy must not be entangled with faith in the inevitability of historical progress.

This mistaken faith in historical progress goes hand in hand with psychological naivete. The defenders of liberal democracy tend to believe that some combination of reason and self-interest suffices to explain human behavior. This leaves out most of the dark passions that shape political life—anger, humiliation, resentment, fear, and the lust for domination. Ordinary people often resent their treatment at the hands of elites, and entire countries can be driven by a sense of national humiliation—Germany after the Treaty of Versailles, China after what most Chinese call the century of humiliation from the 1840s to the 1940s, and Russia after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Or consider Viktor Orban, who continues to inveigh against the Treaty of Trianon, the post-WW I agreement that stripped Hungary of more than half its territory and left millions of Hungarians as minorities in other countries. The desire to strike back often contradicts self-interest as conventionally understood, but this does not weaken the motivating power of revenge.

Myopia

Today’s defenders of liberal democracy often suffer from what might be termed myopic materialism: the belief—especially pervasive among elites—that economic issues are the real issues and that cultural issues are diversionary, deliberately heightened by unscrupulous leaders to gain support for their anti-liberal agendas. This quasi-Marxist framework (economics is the base, everything else is the superstructure) wrongly denies the autonomy and power of cultural issues. Populist democrats and autocrats know better. They advance their cause by battling their liberal adversaries on the terrain of culture, invoking traditional gender roles and moving issues such as homosexuality, same-sex marriage, and transgenderism to the frontlines of the struggle.

At the heart of culture is religion, whose persistent power liberals often underestimate. Events in Turkey offers the latest example of this blindness. As the recent election campaign began, many observers believed that Turkey’s economic downturn and runaway inflation would end President Erdogan’s two-decade grip on power. This view became even more dominant after Erdogan’s halting response to an earthquake that destroyed a generation of infrastructure and ended or disrupted the lives of hundreds

of thousands of his citizens. The international community was stunned when Erdogan led by five percentage points after the first round of balloting and then won reelection with 52% of the vote, about the same share as in the previous presidential election five years ago.

To be sure, Erdogan has done everything to tilt the playing-field in his favor, leading many international observers to conclude that the election had been free but not fair. But this was not new. It was Erdogan's religious rural and small-town base that kept him in power. Pious women were especially fervent in their support. Before Erdogan, they explained, they could not get government jobs if they wore headscarves. Now they can. By ending the Kemalist tradition of strict secularism in public life, Erdogan had made them full citizens for the first time, no longer forced to choose between religious observance and the economic wellbeing of their families. Until liberals—mostly clustered in large cities and national capitals—make the effort to understand the enduring influence of religion and traditional morality in the hinterlands, they will continue to be surprised by political events.

Parochialism

Many defenders of liberal democracy espouse some form of transnationalism, whether diffuse (the “international community”) or concrete (“citizens of Europe” or even citizens of the world. From this perspective, national boundaries and loyalties are regarded as forms of irrationality. After all, we are all brothers and sisters under the skin, and the moral claims of sub-Saharan refugees are as important as those of our fellow citizens.

These views, however sincere, are not widely shared. Transnationalism is the parochialism of the elites. Most people in advanced democracies as well as “developing” nations value particular attachments—to local communities and to the nation, to friends and family and compatriots. “Liberal nationalism” is neither oxymoronic nor obsolete, and good liberal democrats are not morally debarred from giving extra weight to the interests and views of their fellow citizens. This does not mean that we can ignore the suffering of refugees, but the responses required of us generate may be limited by our special attachments. Universal utilitarianism is a philosophical theory inapplicable to the real world of politics.

So is the view that all human beings want the same things. Yes, there is a universal aversion to the great evils of the human condition—poverty, famine, pestilence, and violence. And if the U.S. Declaration of Independence is correct, every human being is morally equal and possesses inalienable, inviolable rights. It does not follow, however, that everyone wants to live in a liberal democracy. The need for security often trumps the desire for democracy; many experience freedom as a burden, not an opportunity; and a sense of superiority, individual or collective, often drives out the awareness of moral equality. Ignoring these realities leads to expensive mistakes, such as believing that liberal democracy will emerge when tyrants are removed.

In sum, those who wish to strengthen the ability of liberal democracies to resist illiberal and anti-democratic assaults must begin by shedding their illusions. Rational self-interest does not always drive human events; the passions matter. Economics isn't everything; culture and religion have not lost their power. Not everyone is committed to the rights and moral equality of others.

History does not guarantee the victory of liberal democracy over its adversaries; nothing does. Freedom and self-government come without guarantees. Liberal democracy will survive—if it does—only through the unending struggle of our generation and of those yet to come.