

Defending Liberal Democracy from the Slide Toward Authoritarianism

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To answer the question of how to defend liberal democracy from the slide toward authoritarianism, I must first justify the claim that there *is* a global (and I fear *European*) slide toward authoritarianism. Unfortunately, this is no longer difficult to show. For the past roughly 12 years, freedom and democracy have been receding in the world. For most of this period, the recession has been a mild (and even debatable) phenomenon. Beginning around 2006, democracy stopped expanding, and average levels of freedom in the world (as measured by Freedom House) have been declining. In fact, in each of the past eleven years, the number of countries declining in freedom outstripped the number gaining (reversing the pattern of the first fifteen years after the Cold War). Less noticed has been the rising rate of democratic failure: About one in six democracies failed in the first decade of the Third Wave (1975-84); then the failure rate declined to a little less than ten percent in the subsequent two decades; and now in the past decade or so it is again approaching the rate (above 15 percent) of those early years of the Third Wave.¹

Three inter-related trends have recently persuaded a growing number of observers and analysts that the global conditions for freedom and democracy are clearly trending downward. First are the growing signs of a democratic distemper or recession spreading to the core of the world's liberal democracies, Europe and the United States. For a number of years now, scholarship has focused on the growing dysfunction and polarization of American democracy, and the long-term secular declines in confidence in government (which has fallen in half from the Reagan years, to about one in five Americans) and trust in political institutions (with now less than ten percent of Americans expressing confidence in the Congress). But until 2016, virtually no one anticipated that an illiberal populist demagogue could—and indeed would—get elected to the U.S. presidency. More generally, nativist and illiberal populisms are gaining electoral ground across many advanced liberal democracies, and we now have an instance of a loss of democracy in a member nation of the EU, Hungary, at the hands of a populist leader and ruling party. The ruling illiberal populist Law and Justice Party is eroding democracy in Poland as well, and there has been a marked growth in the expression of authoritarian and intolerant sentiments in Polish society. There are reasons to be concerned about other post-communist EU democracies, along with the growth in support for various kinds of populist and illiberal parties and movements even in Western Europe. *Since the dawn of democracy's Third Wave, this is the first time that serious doubts have arisen about the future of democracy in the advanced liberal democracies.*

Second, the erosion or malfunctioning of democracy in liberal democracy's core is part of a broader downward shift in the entire spectrum of regimes. Some liberal democracies are showing increasing signs of illiberalism, de-

institutionalization, and, Roberto Foa and Yascha Mounk even provocatively suggest, “de-consolidation.”² But in recent years we have also seen declines in the quality or stability of democracy in less well entrenched liberal democracies (e.g., South Africa, Botswana, Mongolia, and Brazil); the breakdown of prominent (illiberal) electoral democracies—such as Thailand, Turkey, and Bangladesh; decay or growing vulnerability in other electoral democracies (the Philippines, Indonesia, perhaps Mexico); the quashing of pluralism and competitiveness in “competitive authoritarian” regimes, from Venezuela to Uganda and Cambodia; the failure of all the Arab Spring political uprisings save for Tunisia; the stalling of the transition in Burma into an increasingly illiberal and military-dominated competitive authoritarian regime; and the intensification of authoritarianism in already very authoritarian regimes such as Russia, China, Egypt, and Iran.

This leads to the third recent trend: *The rising power and assertiveness of Russia and especially China, and the growing tendency of autocrats worldwide to identify with these powerful autocracies and cite them as models.* Even if publics in these other countries are largely not buying it, or are more resentful of Chinese neo-imperialism than is generally being reported, China and Russia—through their increasingly resourceful and multidimensional projection of soft power—and authoritarian ruling elites in various African, Asian, and post-communist countries are spreading the word that democracy is passé, that it leads to chaos and stagnation, and that concentrated power is the path to progress. This ideological counter-narrative is struggling mightily to give birth to a new authoritarian global zeitgeist.

The reasons for the ebbing of global democratic progress have been several. First, there was bound to be some correction or leveling off of the trend toward democratic expansion, which had extended to countries with weak enabling conditions. Second, the 2008 global financial crisis along with increasing economic competition and technological change have heightened economic inequality and undermined the economic security of many people in the middle and working classes. Third, rising levels of immigration have stirred nativist and ethnocentric sentiments, providing fertile ground for right-wing populist parties with anti-immigrant platforms and authoritarian tendencies and historical linkages to make striking electoral gains. Fourth, as a result of the Iraq war and general exhaustion, the U.S. and EU have pulled back from democracy promotion efforts, and the defense and advance of democracy has been downgraded in foreign policy and foreign aid. Fifth, social media have become potent tools for polarizing (wittingly and unwittingly) democratic publics, sowing doubts about democracy and mobilizing disaffected citizens into new, populist, anti-establishment movements and appeals. Finally, Russia and China have enjoyed some success in sowing doubts and discord about democracy and promoting their alternative, authoritarian norms and models.

The result of all of this is that we have now entered a new period in world history of much broader and more palpable erosion of freedom and democracy. There is even a gathering sense among observers that liberal democracy may be

facing its most serious challenge since the radical upheavals of the mid-1970s. In this context, it becomes easier and easier for illiberal parties and candidates to make electoral gains, and even to win power; and then it becomes easier and easier for them to abuse power in order to erode the freedoms, the norms, and the constitutional constraints of liberal democracy.

The Populist Wave

The cutting edge of the threat to liberal democracy is the wave of illiberal populism that has been sweeping across many democracies. Populism has many manifestations and definitions, but these are its core elements. It is:

1. Anti-elitist, condemning the corrupt dominance of established elites whose interests do not align with the majority of the people.
2. Anti-institutionalist, arguing that at least some established institutions (including potentially the party system) are perpetuating the unfairness that is being inflicted on the people, and must be abandoned or reformed.
3. Plebiscitary, favoring mass mobilization of the popular majority, and a direct relationship between the populist leader or movement and the people, rather than the indirect filters of public opinion through representative democracy that the American constitutional founders favored as a check on the potential for “tyranny of the majority.”
4. Therefore, majoritarian, in its desire to empower strong, energetic elected government that can overcome the establishment bias to perpetuate the status quo.

If that is *all* that populism is at a minimum, then it is possible to argue that it is not all bad, and that there are times in the history of democracy when a certain dose or impulse of populism can have a tonic effect in promoting needed economic and institutional reforms that break up monopolies, redistribute power and income, attenuate injustices, and invite new grassroots forms and sources of political participation that are not inconsistent with liberal democracy and may actually invigorate it.

Some limited form or degree of populism can be functional or “good” for democracy when 1) conditions of rising and extreme inequality are actually, objectively, pitting a narrow, privileged elite against the bulk of the population; 2) the established political institutions are no longer working to address this and other pressing policy challenges; and 3) grassroots mobilization for social, economic, and political reform proceeds in a democratic spirit, which values pluralism, opposition and the underlying norms (what Levitsky and Ziblatt call the “soft guardrails”) of democratic life;³ and 4) the leaders of popular reform organizations or movements model democratic behavior and understand the need ultimately to work through and not over or around democratic institutions to achieve change. In other words, “good” populism is not purely populist, even in the above four respects, but may combine a passionate, populist tone and style with other elements of democratic

pluralism and pragmatism, including absolute commitment to democratic procedures and minority rights.

So now we come to the additional elements of populism that render it a serious threat to *liberal* democracy:

5. Anti-pluralist (hegemonic): Populism becomes a danger to democracy when it rejects democratic pluralism and posits that its leader and party are the only true, legitimate expression of the popular will.
6. Illiberal: Populism becomes a danger to democracy when it seeks to restrict the rights of political, racial, ethnic and other minorities, or simply seeks in general to erode freedom of thought, information, and expression, or the ability of people in society and the media to criticize the elected populist leader.
7. Nativist: Populism is at risk of mutating into an illiberal threat to democracy when it targets immigrants. While the members of this targeted group are typically not (yet) citizens, some of them are, and if one studies the rhetoric of European nativist parties, like the Front National (FN), it is not difficult to discern a broader narrative that at least borders on racism and applies as well to people of the targeted group of national origin who have in fact become citizens or are even native born.

In an important effort to distinguish among the “challengers to liberal democracy,” Takis Pappas argues that the merely nativist parties, such as the FN (as it has been “restyled” under Marine Le Pen), the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP), and the Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ), are neither populist nor illiberal because they are not “against political liberalism *for the natives*,” they are not unwilling to join in coalition governments, and they are “fully committed to parliamentary democracy and constitutional legality.”⁴ This is a line of argument that, at a minimum, has not been fully tested (and hopefully never will be), but even now it must be acknowledged that some of these parties have deeply illiberal origins and harbor at least some much more blatantly extremist elements, including a wing of the now booming Alternative for Germany with neo-Nazi sympathies. The real distinction that must be made is between parties that take a reasoned stand in favor of stricter rules for immigration (which can be entirely liberal and democratic) and parties that in practice, if not as a matter of party policy, mix up opposition to liberal immigration policies with illiberal demonizing of Muslims, Africans, and other racial and religious minorities. The history of nativist parties and movements in the United States certainly inspires no grounds for confidence in their commitment to liberal values.⁵ All cultural exclusionary political projects tend to slide down the slippery slope of anti-pluralist illiberalism. And it is no coincidence that right-wing social conservatism has been repeatedly found to have an affinity for authoritarianism.⁶

Populism becomes a threat to liberal democracy when it is culturally exclusionary (not to mention racist); when it yields to its hegemonic pretensions,

exhibiting contempt for pluralist notions that intrinsically respect differences and opposition; and obviously when it seeks to restrict basic freedoms of the press, association, and so on. And the more comprehensive (across the above seven characteristics), extreme, unfettered, and uncompromising the version of populism, the more it is likely to represent a threat to democracy.

Unfortunately this is the kind of populism that has been surging in, and dragging down, democracy in a number of countries, such as Turkey, Hungary, and now Poland. Certainly there are worrisome signs of trends in these directions in other European countries. What can be done to defend liberal democracy against this dangerous tide?

The Autocrats' 12-Step Playbook

The first imperative is to understand how incipient autocrats move in stages to destroy first the liberal character of democracy and then democracy itself. There is no fixed sequence that all such instances must traverse. Moreover, the stages or domains overlap with one another in time. But there is a kind of playbook, what may be termed the autocrats' twelve-step program:

1. Begin to demonize the opposition as illegitimate and unpatriotic, part of the discredited establishment (or other disloyal elements), out of touch with the "true people."
2. Undermine the independence of the courts by forcing existing judges to retire or restructuring the judiciary so as to "pack the courts", particularly at the highest court that will interpret the constitution.
3. Undermine the independence of the media, by denouncing them as partisan, mobilizing the intense populist following against them, then bringing to bear tax and regulatory pressure, discouraging advertising, and then finally, after independent media are severely weakened, taking over ownership of them through politically loyal businesses and party-linked political cronies.
4. If there is public broadcasting, gain control of it and politicize it.
5. Impose stricter control of the Internet, in the name of morality, security, counter-terrorism, but casting a chilling effect on free speech.
6. Subdue (depoliticize) other elements of civil society—particularly NGOs and universities—by casting independent and especially anti-corruption and human rights NGOs as politically partisan and anti-government representatives of the corrupt, effete elite who have betrayed the "true people," the majority of the country. Make university professors afraid to criticize the government in their writings and classrooms, and student protest groups liable to prosecution for peaceful protest. Create a new, fake civil society that is loyal to the authoritarian populist leader and party.
7. Intimidate the business community into ceasing support for opposition parties, by threatening to unleash tax and regulatory punishment on businesses that continue to fund opposition parties and candidates—and

- then actually victimizing (e.g. bankrupting) business corporations and owners that do so.
8. Use state control over contracts, credit flows, and other resources to enrich a new class of political crony capitalists who are tightly linked to and reliably supportive of the ruling party.
 9. Extend political control over the state bureaucracy and security apparatus to purge the “deep state” of “corrupt elites disloyal to the nation,” which is to say professional civil servants and military officers who are loyal to the nation and not to any political party. Use the state intelligence apparatus as a weapon against the opposition.
 10. Gerrymander constituencies and otherwise rig electoral rules to make it much more difficult for opposition parties to win the next election, and to ensure that the ruling party can return to power even if it wins less than majority support at the polls.
 11. Gain control over electoral administration to further tilt the electoral playing field and institutionalize competitive authoritarianism.
 12. Repeat steps 1 to 11, ever more vigorously, deepening fear of opposing or criticizing the new political hegemony and thus demobilizing all significant forms of resistance.

Defending Liberal Democracy from the Inside

Liberal democracy today is under diffuse threat around the world. Philippe Schmitter has argued that the new democracies of Europe and were “condemned to be democratic”—that is that democracy, even if it was disappointing and somewhat corrupt, would prevail for want of any “plausible alternative to some form of popularly accountable government.”⁷ In the early 1990s, democracy was “the only game in town.” Today that is no longer true. Today, there are systemic rivals to liberal democracy, in several forms: what Viktor Orban calls “illiberal democracy”, which is really a soft but nevertheless authoritarian form of right-wing, nationalist pseudo-democracy; what Vladimir Putin has developed as a more explicitly authoritarian and extreme right-wing, nationalist, anti-Western regime; and the Chinese authoritarian developmental state, with its renewed intense emphasis on ideological control and the personal charisma of the ruler. No less troubling has been the rise of a variety of other populist challengers to liberal democracy, on both the left and right, which, like Orban, use the mechanisms and rhetoric of democracy to eviscerate it. If none of these pose as ideologically compelling and coherent an alternative to liberal democracy as fascism or communism, they are nevertheless alternatives, and alternatives that have a greater potential to develop an indigenous, national “flavor.” How can the rise of these various potential rivals to liberal democracy be stopped?

Democrats need a comprehensive strategy that has both near-term and long-term components, and that pursues both an “inside” (purely national) game and an external, international approach. Let me first address the components (near-term and longer-term) of the inside game.

In every country, the most important imperative in defending liberal democracy is to defeat its enemies electorally before it becomes too late. This means preventing illiberal and anti-democratic forces from coming to power, and if they come to power, it means waging a vigorous political and electoral struggle to keep their stay in power as brief as possible. It means that political parties committed to liberal democratic principles—whether they are from the left, right, or center—must be prepared to sublimate their programmatic agendas to the more urgent goal of containing anti-democratic forces. The longer that aspiring hegemonic parties control the government, the more checks and balances are likely to erode over time, giving illiberal forces time and political space to reshape the courts, the civil service, and the political culture in their image. And the longer these illiberal parties are in power, the more they may distort the electoral rules and institutions in ways that make it much more difficult for them to be dislodged from power by “normal” electoral means.

Democrats should bear in mind two of the most important lessons of democratic theory and democratic struggle. From Juan Linz’s timeless study of *The Breakdown of Democratic Regimes*, we learn the critical importance of avoiding opportunistic behavior that empowers or facilitates the rise of autocracy.⁸ We can identify as authoritarian any rhetorical posture or actual behavior that questions or rejects the legitimacy of the democratic process; that violates the constitution or the rule of law or denies the civil or political rights of political opponents or ethnic or religious minorities; that uses, encourages, or justifies violence in the pursuit of power or political goals; or that violates the political neutrality of the military, the police, or the intelligence agencies. These are all instances of “democratic disloyalty.”

But Linz warns equally of the dangers of “semi-loyalty”, the willingness by parties and politicians to excuse, justify, dismiss, or cover up these transgressions against liberal democracy, or to ally with democratic disloyal forces, in the quest for power. The record of failed democracies is littered with instances of betrayal by semi-loyal actors doing what was politically expedient in the short term rather than what was necessary to defend democracy. There is a special place in hell for these kinds of politicians. So the first lesson is: No compromises with authoritarianism. Yes, the purpose of politics is to get and exercise power, but the highest obligation of all democratic parties and politicians is to defend democratic principles—and thus to call out and oppose those who are using the democratic process with the clear intent of eroding or destroying it.

Second, we learn from the literature on transitions to democracy—but it is also a key insight of the literature on breakdowns of democracy, particularly democracies in crisis—**the importance of unity among democratic forces**. In the face of authoritarian regimes and authoritarian threats, democrats must put aside their personal, ideological, and programmatic differences and act together to achieve or defend democracy. Democracy is achieved when splits emerge in an

authoritarian regime and democrats forge a strong unified front across party and ideological lines. Then, democrats can exploit the divisions in the authoritarian regime and widen the cracks to negotiate and/or mobilize for democratic change. Democracy is lost when antidemocratic forces are able to exploit the divisions among democratic parties and politicians, winning cooperation or indulgence from people who should know better but can smell which way the political wind is blowing. It is hard for a scholar of democracy to issue a blanket condemnation of political opportunism; to some extent that's simply in the nature of politics. What we must condemn is political opportunism that surrenders not only programmatic principles but the commitment to democracy itself.

Of course, all of this is fine in general. But each national circumstance is different, and it is crucially important to begin with an analysis of the political context. Efforts to contain illiberal parties and movements confront a number of different dilemmas. For example, how should other parties treat an antidemocratic (or least clearly illiberal) challenger? The essence of liberal democracy is tolerance, but should there be tolerance for intolerance? Some European democracies, notably Germany and Italy, outlaw the advocacy or organization of explicitly Nazi or Fascist political sentiment. From an American context, that may seem an impingement on freedom of speech and organization, but if you look at the history of these countries, it does not seem unreasonable.

In fact, all democracies establish legal boundaries of some kind that rule out political violence and intimidation, and maybe even tough rules against hate speech. It is important to enforce the rules vigorously when extremist groups get going and try to build support. A democratic state should avoid as much as possible being maneuvered into a trap of repression that makes martyrs of extremists. So the enforcement of the law should be done in a careful, neutral, and restrained fashion that does not make celebrities out of political thugs..

A second dilemma concerns whether to treat these parties as potential coalition players. Again, this depends on the party and the national context. It is generally a bad idea to do so—because that is what these parties want, legitimacy. Of course, where, as in Hungary or Poland, the illiberal party wins an outright parliamentary majority or nearly so, democrats have no choice but to cede power. And many of these parties look more normal until they acquire power and suddenly reveal their authoritarian ambitions. But typically, illiberal parties emerge, win a parliamentary foothold, and then try to expand that over time. This of course is what the Nazis did, in a more extreme game that used authoritarian street tactics as well as electoral politics. Alternative for Germany is not a Nazi or neo-Nazi party, but its commitment to liberal democracy (or at least that of some of its members) is troubling enough in its ambiguity. It is much better if a party like that can be kept out of government and marginalized as much as possible.

But here is the dilemma: In many instances, the easiest way to keep fringe parties out of government is for the establishment parties to join in a center-leaning

“grand” coalition spanning from moderate left to moderate right. In fact, this would seem to be precisely what would be required if we stipulate that democrats should unify in the face of authoritarian threats. Yet this can be a dangerous choice, because it sets up a polarity in which the parties committed to liberal democracy come to be seen, collectively, as the government, the establishment, leaving the illiberal or potentially authoritarian parties as the only alternative if (and invariably, when) voters decide it is time for change. When there is an economic downturn, a crisis, a scandal, or just an accumulation of policy disappointments and voter fatigue, a grand coalition leaves the illiberal and anti-democratic parties as the only “untainted” alternative. This is why grand coalitions are generally a bad idea in the face of illiberal challengers, and why it is probably now a good thing that the Social Democrats in Germany are opting to leave the governing coalition and go into the opposition. But if the one of the two larger parties stands outside of government, this places a moral burden on smaller liberal democratic parties to join with a larger one in forming a government and preserving governability.

The near-term national game is of course much different if a party or leader with authoritarian tendencies has won power—as in Hungary and Poland. Then it is crucial for democrats to recognize, call out and resist early signs of the implementation of the authoritarian playbook. The near-term game must involve careful scrutiny of these parties and politicians, and vigorous efforts to monitor their rhetoric and behavior, to expose any acts of corruption or wrongdoing, and to challenge rhetoric and actions that violate either the spirit or the letter of democracy. Authoritarian populist parties gain momentum around the image of a pure and selfless leader who is defending the people against a corrupt political establishment that is “betraying the people.” Often, solid investigative reporting will reveal the hypocrisy in that claim, exposing patterns of crony capitalism if not corruption, and other cynical departures from good governance. Now, it is true that publics in an angry, anti-immigrant, and anti-elitist mood may elect such corrupt figures anyway, but it is vital to keep up the flow of independent reporting and to expose and publicize the autocrats’ corruption and conflict of interest. It is usually where their legitimacy is most vulnerable.

Opposing populist authoritarianism must also *involve trying to figure out and respond to what is driving the surge of support for these actors*. Authoritarian populists exploit economic and cultural anxieties, appealing to people who see themselves on the vulnerable margins of a cultural, economic and social order that is crumbling. Their supporters tend to concentrate in small towns and rural areas and to see the urban elite as arrogant cosmopolitans who look down on them—the “real” people. They may be workers who once held secure jobs in factories that offered relatively good wages and benefits. Now those factories may be gone, or the wages may be too low to live on. They see a future of economic insecurity and a present of declining economic and social status. If they are men, their social dominance may once have been unquestioned in the home. Now it is challenged by a new era of gender equality. If they are religious or otherwise socially conservative, they see their values being challenged by social movements for LGBT

rights, marriage equality, a woman's right to choose whether to or not to have an abortion, and so on. They see immigrants coming not just from other countries but from entirely different cultures and religions. They feel besieged, and they are looking for someone who will restore the old, "natural" order of things. Some who will make the country they once knew, the culture in which they had felt comfortable, real again, "great again."

How can liberal democrats (left, right, and center) respond to illiberal cultural complaints, which may contain considerable doses of prejudice against minorities and out-groups, without becoming illiberal? I do not advocate pandering to prejudice. But democrats can exhibit respect for and a willingness to listen to the grievances of disaffected groups. One clear imperative is to bridge the cultural divide. That is a lesson liberals are learning in the United States: We must try to listen to, understand, and show some empathy for social groups who feel they are falling in income and status, who feel that the life they had known is threatened in a variety of ways, and that they are being treated unfairly. The alternative to pandering to social prejudice is to first recognize and affirm their worth and dignity, and second, to craft a program of economic and social policies that addresses their anxieties and offers them hope of a viable present and a better future. That cannot just involve income supplements and social programs, because those are unsustainable without economic growth, and because human dignity requires meaningful and rewarding work, not just material sustenance. So we need to think hard about where and how to generate the next generation of jobs that will provide this dignity and generate the revenue for social programs.

This is where the short-term response meets the imperative for a long-term strategy. It is too simple to say that the answer is: "education." We have to ask, what is the content of the education that will renew economic dynamism and help to immunize society against the authoritarian temptation? In the flat, competitive world we have entered, the economic returns will go disproportionately to those with technical and scientific skills, not least in computer science, but also to those with creative and entrepreneurial talent. So education must in part be geared to preparing people to innovate, to think creatively, and to fill the higher-end jobs that will be created in the new information economy. There will also be a continuing need for service trades, for health care workers, and for other service jobs. A long-term national strategy must involve thinking about how the educational system can generate the workers that we can now well predict the economy and society of the future will need.

We also need to develop a long-term strategy for civic education—education *for* democracy. Across new and old democracies, this now appears to be a glaring deficit. We cannot assume that a commitment to democracy will develop by osmosis, by simply living and breathing the air of a democratic society. That was never a safe assumption, but it is a particularly dangerous one in an era rife with cynicism about democratic politics—a cynicism now fanned by strident voices on social media, who gain notoriety and social power by being ever more extreme in

their cynicism. And then there are the calculated efforts of Russia to intervene in the politics of the advanced liberal democracies and sow division, confusion, alienation, and despair. I will have more to say about this in a moment.

If we want a democratic society, we had better educate our youth to understand and value democracy. Education for democracy should begin at an early age and begin to inculcate the fundamental values of a liberal democratic society: respect for social and cultural pluralism, and for the fundamental worth and dignity of every human being; tolerance of opposing points of view, and therefore of opposing political preferences and parties as well; hence, a willingness to engage and compromise with opposing views and parties that operate within the spirit of democracy; critical thinking and reasoning, and thus an attitude toward authority that is respectful but also skeptical and questioning; respect for evidence and truth, and therefore for science and the scientific method as fundamental to both democracy and a prosperous, sustainable society; and the skills and habits of active democratic citizenship, including how to participate and advocate for an issue or party without becoming intolerant. These attitudes and values can be taught directly, but evidence suggests that they will only become internalized through practice. Thus, it is not enough for civic education to be taught as a “civics” class. Democratic principles of pluralism, tolerance and reason must be woven more broadly into the curriculum and must frame the way that the history of one’s own country is presented to the student. History and social studies classes must honestly, and with increasing candor and thoroughness as students mature through the school system, confront the painful, *undemocratic* episodes in a country’s past. And of course they must help students to understand the structure of their constitutional system, how it works, how it compares with other democracies, and the underlying norms and values that sustain this constitutional system.

Changing the school curriculum is always a politically charged task. And one of the first things that authoritarian populists do is precisely to reshape the public school curriculum to reflect their own anti-pluralist, authoritarian values and their selective, hyper-nationalistic understanding of the country’s history, which may also soft-pedal or even celebrate authoritarian episodes in the country’s history. So the best time to fight for curriculum reform, to embed democratic narratives, lessons, and values into schooling, is when democrats are in power, and not when authoritarian populists have won power and begun to remake the school system in their image.

Education for democracy cannot only be the task of formal schooling, however, nor should it only be addressed to young people. This is supremely a cultural challenge, and the work of shaping a democratic culture must be taken up by all kinds of cultural entrepreneurs: musicians, playwrights, film makers, essayists, novelists, television and video producers, and in this day and age, video game producers and social media practitioners of all kinds. If, in the social media age, everyone can be a reporter, an investigative journalist, a photojournalist, a filmmaker, or an opinion columnist, then anyone can be an advocate for reason,

tolerance, and democratic values and standards. The key is to how to do so in a way that will penetrate the increasingly polarized and poisonous environment of cyberspace.

This raises the larger challenge of how to address the poisoning of the political atmosphere in the age of social media. Democrats must find, for the short run as well as the longer term, effective ways of countering fake news and authoritarian manipulation on social media, including manipulation by Russia and other hostile foreign powers. They need a strategy and resources, and possible new tools and algorithms, to do so. Part of this requires very comprehensive and effective monitoring, which also presses Facebook and other social media outlets to remove postings that amount to hate speech or deliberately false information. But you can't beat something with nothing. Democrats need cultural and social content for the Internet age that projects democratic values and the defense of freedom and reason in appealing, catchy ways, especially to youth. A long-term part of an Internet strategy must also train young people to question what they read on the Internet and to develop skills for questioning and verifying what they read, which requires a propensity to search horizontally outside of an article or post, rather than delve more deeply within the downward spiral of a politicized social media group or perspective.

The Outside Game

It is time for the world's most powerful democracies—the United States, Canada, Australia, Japan, the European Union (and its member democracies)—to realize that we face a gathering global crisis of liberal democracy. Freedom in the world now confronts a diffuse and insidious set of risks, more serious than anything we have witnessed in several decades. More and more countries are slipping back from democracy, or descending deeper into authoritarianism. This authoritarian slide will continue so long as aspiring autocrats perceive no harmful international consequences for their assaults on civil liberties, judicial independence, electoral fairness, and other key pillars of liberal democracy. It will continue so long as Russia and China have free reign to use money, overt propaganda, and covert manipulation of social media to subvert public opinion and even tilt election campaigns. And it will continue so long as democratic forces in civil society, the mass media, think tanks, universities, and even political parties in these swing countries feel isolated, besieged, demoralized, and increasingly at risk.

We—democrats in the liberal West—have to fight back. We have to do so openly, shrewdly, resourcefully, and unapologetically.

Here is what a strategy of fighting back might look like:

First, under articles 2 and 7 of the Lisbon Treaty, and any other provisions that can be drawn upon or that must be generated, the principal democracies of the

European Union must mobilize real and existential pressure on the backsliding democracies of the East, particularly Hungary and Poland, forcing these governments to choose between their ambition for authoritarian rule and their desire to remain in the European Union, with its substantial economic benefits. We cannot be sure that they will choose the latter, and certainly Russia will do everything it can to encourage them to choose the former. But if the principles of the Treaty of Lisbon are not enforced, then more and more European countries are likely to defect from them. That could lead to a European Union that is part politically free and part authoritarian, gradually dragging down the standards of democracy and human rights of the whole collective enterprise. As Lincoln observed about the United States 160 years ago, a house divided against itself in this fundamental way cannot stand.

Second, other forms of pressure should be brought to bear on elected political leaders who violate basic norms of democracy and the rule of law. This should include diplomatic statements and actions to expose and denounce these violations, symbolic expressions of solidarity with besieged civil society actors seeking to exercise their democratic rights, and where possible, exposure of acts of corruption and money laundering.

Third, liberal democratic governments and private should substantially increase their financial support for independent organizations and media in Europe's endangered democracies. For a long time, we took for granted democracy in the Visegrad countries and elsewhere in Central and Eastern Europe. We assumed that democracy was consolidated in these countries and we could focus our democracy assistance elsewhere. Those happy assessments, it is now clear, were premature and naïve. They overestimated the depth of cultural change and democratic institutionalization in the region. And they underestimated—or altogether failed to anticipate—both the rise of social and cultural anxieties with the liberal order, and the scope, skill, and malevolence of Russian subversion. Whatever can be done to support intellectual, cultural, and political pluralism in these countries *must* be done, particularly the work of human rights groups, anti-corruption groups, civic education groups, think tanks, and independent media that are working to monitor and check government abuses and revive the health of democracy.

We must also recognize the global nature of this struggle. Many people—particularly young people—in this region who believe in and want to live in open societies do not see a future for themselves within countries that are retreating from liberal democracy. So they are voting with their feet and leaving. This enhances their individual freedom but it reinforces the downward spiral of their countries. We need to signal to these young people that they have a future in their own countries and we will help them fight for it. In the meantime, we can support them in the diaspora to wage the battle of information and ideas through digital means.

This then speaks to the long run. Of course in the long run, the best thing we could do for freedom in Central and Eastern Europe is to ensure that it remains vibrant and irreversible in the rest of Europe and more broadly in the West. That entails a large reform agenda for democracy (politically, socially and economically) and a comprehensive strategy to rebuff Chinese and Russian efforts at penetration and subversion of our democratic institutions.

But we have to go beyond that. A quarter century ago we really thought that history in a sense had ended, that the ideological struggle over systems of governance was over, and democracy had won. Now that victory seems fragile and even Pyrrhic. There is a new war of information and ideas underway, and it is being waged daily and at hyper-speed in cyberspace. We need to develop a new long-term program, a new repertoire of materials, and a new set of tools to promote the old and timeless virtues of democracy and the open society. We need to support new and authentic cultural voices within each society who want to make the case for these values, even as we diffuse and distill the large body of existing knowledge and writing about democracy. Like a venture capital firm seeking profit, we need to support a wide range of promising initiatives and tools, because in this fast-paced information environment, we can't be certain in advance which ones will work.

The post-Cold War world is over. We are back to a world where democracy as an idea and as a system of government is contested and on the defensive. After the signing of the Declaration of Independence, Benjamin Franklin is reputed to have said, "We must all hang together, or ... we shall all hang separately." We are not at anything like the fragility of that founding moment, but the principle remains. Within nations, and among nations, this a perilous time for freedom, and if democrats do not "hang together" and act resolutely, they will be imperiled.

¹ This is from my own coding of countries as democracies and non-democracies for every year since 1974, based on a minimalist definition of electoral democracy. In their 2015 *Journal of Democracy*, article, Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way come to the conclusion that there is no democratic recession because they count only "free" countries (as classified by Freedom House) as democracies, but I think this excludes a number of instances of regimes do not perform particularly well in protecting civil liberties and the rule of law but which nevertheless enable citizens to choose their leaders and replace their leaders in free, fair, and meaningful elections.

² Roberto Stefan Foa and Yascha Mounk, "The Danger of Deconsolidation: The Democratic Disconnect," *Journal of Democracy* 27 (July 2016): 5-17.

³ Steve Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die* (New York: Crown, 2018, forthcoming).

⁴ Takis S. Pappas, "Distinguishing Liberal Democracy's Challengers," *Journal of Democracy* 27 (October 2016): 27.

⁵ Seymour Martin Lipset and Earl Raab, *The Politics of Unreason: Right-Wing Extremism in America, 1790-1977*, 2nd. Ed (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978).

⁶ This is another finding of the Lipset and Raab work, but it also recurs as a major finding of Ronald Inglehart and Christian Welzel, *Modernization, Cultural Change, and Democracy: The Human Development Sequence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); and in an analysis, soon to be released, of a 2017 survey of democratic attitudes and values of the American population by the Voter Study Group.

⁷ Philippe C. Schmitter, "Interest Systems and the Consolidation of Democracies," in Gary Marks and Larry Diamond, eds., *Reexamining Democracy: Essays in Honor of Seymour Martin Lipset* (Newbury Park, CA: SAGE, 1992): 162.

⁸ Juan J. Linz, *The Breakdown of Democratic Regimes: Crisis, Breakdown, and Reequilibration* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978).