

## **THREATS TO DEMOCRACY: CAN IT BE SUSTAINED, AND WHAT MIGHT REPLACE IT?**

RANDOLPH. H. PHERSON, Pherson LLC  
rpherson@pherson.org

AVNER BARNEA, University of Haifa  
avnerpro@netvision.net.il

ALEXANDRU FOTESCU, Helmut Schmidt University  
alex.fotescu@futuregovernance.org

ANDI GROSARU, Chamber of Deputies, Parliament of Romania  
andi.grosaru@cdep.ro

ALEXA O'BRIEN, Independent Analyst and Writer  
alexaobrien@gmail.com

MONICA ROBBINS, Georgetown University  
mrobbins@intrepidminds.com

### **ABSTRACT**

Democracy has increasingly come under pressure as democratic norms are being eroded. This article explores why democratic processes are at risk in Europe and the United States and what might replace them. It reflects the thinking of the Study Group on Democracy convened under the auspices of the International Association for Intelligence Education in 2022. Its deliberations identified a set of underlying key drivers, documented how they manifested, and speculated on what new forms of governance might replace democratic rule. Recent trends cited include the corruption of norms, the disruptive influence of social media, the growing diversity of society, the shift from community-based problem-solving to reliance on identity politics, the emergence of existential threats, and the need for strong leadership. The group concludes that prospects for sustaining democratic institutions can best be understood by viewing future trends along two perspectives: the complexity of society and modes of decision-making.

Keywords: *democracy under stress, structured analytical techniques, threats to democracy*

---

### **INTRODUCTION AND PROBLEM STATEMENT**

In recent years, democracy has increasingly come under pressure as democratic norms have eroded. The most striking example of this phenomenon was the January 6, 2021, attack on the U.S. Capitol intended to prevent the peaceful transfer of power to newly elected President Joseph Biden. But the trend away from liberal democracy toward adopting more authoritarian forms of governance is not limited to the United States. In September 2022, the EU parliament declared that Hungary was no longer a “full democracy” (European Parliament, 2022). In October,

Giorgia Meloni became Italy's first far-right premier since the end of World War II (Associated Press, 2022), and Chinese leader Xi Jinping began his norm-breaking third term in power. In November 2022, Benjamin Netanyahu returned to power in Israel, bringing two extreme-right parties into his coalition (Tov & Shpigel, 2022). This article explores why democratic processes seem to be increasingly at risk and what might replace them.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This study proposes a methodology that addresses the following question: What has put democratic institutions under threat across the globe? It reflects the thinking of the Study Group on Democracy convened under the auspices of the International Association for Intelligence Education (IAFIE) in 2022. The group's deliberations identified a set of underlying key drivers, documented how they manifested, and speculated on what new forms of governance might replace democratic rule in the coming five years.

## **KEY DRIVERS**

The study group identified five key drivers.

1. The accelerating pace of change. Many feel overwhelmed by the complexities brought by globalization, accelerating technology, and demographic shifts.
2. The desire for greater personal safety/security—and the belief that a strong leader can make it all better. COVID-19 and the war in Ukraine have disrupted energy and financial markets, work patterns, and job security. In addition, much of the world has experienced disruption caused by volatile weather and climate change.
3. The use of social media to spread disinformation and create false narratives, sometimes purposefully.
4. The growing fragmentation and tribalization of society as reflected in the growth of polarized political parties, conspiracy movements, and growing income disparities.
5. The weak performance of many global leaders prompts people to question whether they can trust the system and its representatives.

## **KEY FINDINGS**

The study group believes the key drivers have led to an increase in

- Anger against elites.
- An “us versus them” mentality.
- A shift from a rational to emotion-based political dialogue.
- The proliferation of real and perceived “existential threats.”
- The failure to abide by long-established societal and political norms.
- The growing strength of extremist parties and movements.

- The growing influence of the super-rich.
- A search for simple solutions and a political savior.
- Efforts by politicians to retain power at all costs.
- The discrediting of political leadership.

### **POTENTIAL NEW THREATS TO DEMOCRACY**

If society does not correct for these trends, the study group believes democracy is likely to become eroded in new ways. Proponents of authoritarian “solutions” will most likely gain power and influence.

#### **Corruption of Norms**

Corruption has always threatened good governance, but in recent years we are witnessing a new form of corruption eroding established democratic norms. A classic strategy of leaders moving their countries toward autocratic rule has been to portray the media as an enemy of the people. Their mantra is that no news—not fact-based reporting—can be trusted. As a result, faith in core democratic institutions is increasingly and purposely being eroded. In the United States, for example, Congressional subpoenas have been ignored and the integrity of the Intelligence Community, the Department of Justice, and the FBI has been assailed.

#### **Social Media**

The Internet and social media are increasingly supplanting the role of traditional media. The traditional “filters” used by network news and respected national newspapers for fact-based reporting are less respected. Many cable news channels are ignoring the traditional rule of requiring three sources to publish a story. Much of the media the public encounters is algorithmically targeted and emotion-based, exacerbating fears of perceived threats. Fact-based news now must compete with alternative—and often false—narratives. Politicians are free to spout extremist views and practice performance politics because social media provides them with independent sources of revenue.

#### **Diversity**

The trend in academia, business, and government that supports diversity, equity, and inclusion is being challenged by some who have sought to weaponize the concept and demonize minority populations. The labels of diversity are increasingly used by some to fuel division and fear, often for political gain.

#### **Trust**

The digitalization of society bolsters the movement from community-based problem-solving to reliance on identity politics. This trend may have received a major boost from the social isolation required to deal with the outbreak of COVID-19. In an atomized society, facts and assumptions are no longer challenged. People trust and believe in those who reside in their same echo

chamber. As a result, they lack exposure to alternative perspectives. Disinformation campaigns erode trust in public institutions, destabilizing the practices of liberal democracy.

### **Existential Threats**

Use of the phrase “existential threat” has grown exponentially in recent years, reflecting the growing polarization of society and the growth of an “us versus them” culture. This is exacerbated by disinformation propagated on social media and broadcast channels and reinforced by echo chambers. The phrase, used by the right and the left, often appears in discussions pertaining to abortion, gun safety, immigration, the right to vote, global warming, and societal change. As society becomes more polarized, more issues become “do or die.” The ability to legislate at the national level or forge communal solutions at the local level is increasingly challenging, if not impossible.

### **Leadership**

As the world becomes more complex and “uncomfortable,” leaders who espouse simple solutions and have authoritarian tendencies become more popular. The statement “Only I can fix it” attracts many adherents. In contrast, democracy is messy; fact-finding and truth-telling are hard work. Traditional methods of democratic problem-solving often generate results no one fully supports but represent a consensus view. Compromise is eschewed; creating or adjusting a narrative that is not reality-based is easier and quicker.

## **POTENTIAL FUTURE TRAJECTORIES**

Prospects for sustaining democratic institutions and preserving democratic rule can best be understood by viewing future trends along two perspectives: the complexity of society and modes of decision-making.

### **Complexity of Society**

In five years, will we describe our world as one of growing simplicity or expanding complexity? Is it a world where everyone has their own set of “facts” and is guided by the narratives of their tribe? Or is it a world where communities come together to deal with growing complexity and forge constructive communal solutions to their problems? In Figure 1, the study group lists contrasting factors that describe how society views its priorities and organizes itself.

Figure 1. Simplicity-Complexity Descriptors\*

<b>Simplicity</b>	<b>Complexity</b>
<b>Slow Pace of Change</b>	<b>Accelerating Pace of Change</b>
Legacy Technologies	Disruptive New Technologies
Homogeneity	Diversity
Conspiracy	Rationality
<b>Multiple Competing Narratives</b>	<b>Common Shared Narrative</b>
Safety	Vulnerability
<b>Tribalization</b>	<b>Community</b>
Exclusion	Inclusion
Fragmentation	Coalitions
Short-term Thinking	Long-term Thinking
Every Person for His/Herself	Collaboration

*\*Key distinguishers are bolded*

### **Modes of Decision Making**

How the world governs itself could change dramatically in the next five years. Democratic rule is under stress and could collapse in many countries, including the United States, Brazil, Mexico, Hungary, Poland, Israel, and Italy. Alternatively, democracies could prove more resilient than many expect, as demonstrated by the 2022 mid-term elections in the United States and when former right-wing Brazilian President Bolsonaro refused to concede in the October 2022 election but allowed his leftist opponent, Luiz Inácio Lula, to take office. At a minimum, however, the question of whether democracy works will continue to be debated, with some suggesting that a “benevolent autocracy” provides a more stable way to manage societal challenges, including globalization, technology, immigration, and climate change.

In Figure 2, the study group lists what may be the best terms to describe two alternative and contrasting modes of decision-making. The challenge is predicting which list is likely to gain traction in the coming five years.

Figure 2. Modes of Decision-Making Descriptors

<b>Interconnected</b>	<b>Insular</b>
<b>Community-Based</b>	<b>Strongman-Dictated</b>
Fact-Based	Emotion-Based
Facts	Alternative Facts
<b>Rational/Reality-based</b>	<b>Not Rational/Lacking Rigor</b>
Established Norms	Arbitrary Rules
<b>Rule of Law</b>	<b>Law of the Jungle</b>
Equitable	Corrupt
<b>Coalition-Building</b>	<b>Atomizing</b>
Collaboration	Noncooperation/alienation
Consensus	Unilateral/Arbitrary
Trusting	Suspicious

*\*Key distinguishers are bolded*

### PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER

Having explored these themes, the study group decided to present the lists as spectrums and to array them in a 2x2 matrix (see Figure 3).<sup>1</sup>

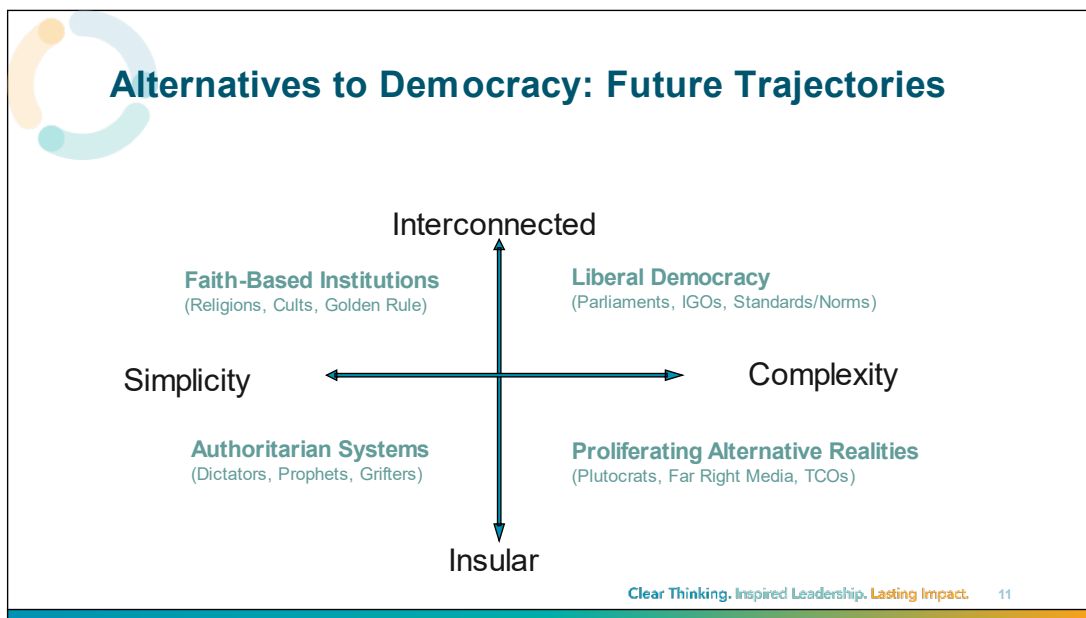
- In the upper right quadrant, Liberal Democracy reigns. Decision-making is community-based and complex problems are resolved through a rational process of coalition building. This is the world of functioning parliaments, congresses, the EU, the UN, and other international government organizations. It is a world where decisions are based on learning the truth and acting on it; where standards are set and established norms are observed and valued.
- In the lower left quadrant, we find the polar opposite of democratic rule. Authoritarian leaders rule the day. The results of elections—if they are held—are preordained, and the activities of the ruling elite are not subject to the rule of law. This is the world of autocrats, plutocrats, dictators, prophets, and grifters. It is the world of “Only I can fix it.”
- In the upper left quadrant, community-based decision-making still prevails, but the world is perceived in simpler terms. Behavior is organized around a basic set of norms or principles such as the Golden Rule or the Seven Principles of Unitarian Universalism.

<sup>1</sup> A description of this and related techniques can be found in Pherson, R. H., & Heuer Jr., R. J. (2021). *Structured analytic techniques for intelligence analysis*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., CQ Press, p. 251.

The Catholic Church's predominant role in the Middle Ages also comes to mind as a model. In addition, this is the world of conspiracy theories or cults such as QAnon.

- In the lower right quadrant, a much different world could be evolving where power is no longer the provenance of governments but is increasingly exercised by those leveraging their wealth or propagating alternative realities. Primary influencers would include billionaires such as Elon Musk or Rupert Murdoch who manage major media outlets, Russian plutocrats who could take control of the Arctic, right-wing extremist militias, and transnational criminal organizations. This is a world of growing income disparities, political and social fragmentation, waning state power, local autocrats, and identity politics.

Figure 3. Alternatives to Democracy: Future Trajectories



## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The world has become far too complex to predict the future of democracy accurately. Liberal democracy could prove resilient, and democratic institutions could rebound. Alternatively, democracy could fail in many countries worldwide in many ways. Alternative trajectories could include:

1. A peaceful, legal transition through elections
2. A peaceful, illegal transition
3. Insurgency
4. Insurrection
5. Civil War
6. Anarchy

A future research project would be to track the extent to which the exercise of political power is shifting away from the top right quadrant to the other three quadrants. Equally important would be to track not only the magnitude but the direction of the shift in power to the other three quadrants. What indicators can be developed to anticipate any major shifts in either of these three directions? Alternatively, what indicators demonstrate that liberal democracy is proving more resilient than expected?



**REFERENCES**

- Associated Press. (2022, October 22). *Far-right leader Giorgia Meloni has been sworn in as Italian premier*, National Public Radio (NPR). <https://www.npr.org/2022/10/22/1130724095/far-right-giorgia-meloni-italian-premier>
- European Parliament Press Release. (2022, September 15). *MEPs: Hungary can no longer be considered a full democracy*. <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20220909IPR40137/meps-hungary-can-no-longer-be-considered-a-full-democracy>
- Tov, M. H., & Shpigel, N. (2022, November 6). *After election win, Netanyahu begins coalition talks with far right*, Haaretz. <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2022-11-06/ty-article-live/.premium/after-election-win-netanyahu-begins-coalition-talks-with-far-right/00000184-4d73-ddcc-afec-cd7f63980000>