

# The Decline of Democracy in the 21st Century

By [Prof Rodrigue Tremblay](#)

Theme: [History](#)

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*“In general, unfortunately, the qualifications required to gain power and keep it have almost no connection with those required to govern with competence and impartiality.”* - **Jean-François Revel** (1924-2006), [French](#) author and philosopher. (In ‘Ni Marx ni Jésus’, 1970, p. 68).

*“The first truth is that the liberty of a democracy is not safe if the people tolerate the growth of a private power to a point where it becomes stronger than the democratic state itself. That, in its essence, is fascism —ownership of government by an individual, by a group, or by any other controlling private power.”* - **Franklin D. Roosevelt** (1882-1945), 32nd American President (1933-1945). (In a speech to Congress, on April 29, 1938).

*“The jaws of power are always open to devour, and her arm is always stretched out, if possible, to destroy the freedom of thinking, speaking, and writing.”*- **John Adams** (1735-1826), 2nd American President, 1797-1801. (In ‘A Dissertation on the Canon and Feudal Law’, 1765).

*“Men’s capacity for justice makes democracy possible, but men’s inclination to injustice makes democracy necessary”.* - **Reinhold Niebuhr** (1892-1971), American Protestant theologian. (In ‘The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness’, 1944).

*“Well, Doctor, what have we got—a Republic or a Monarchy? —A Republic, if you can keep it.”*- **Benjamin Franklin** (1706-1790), US Founding Father. (A lady’s question and Franklin’s answer: at the close of the Constitutional Convention, in 1787).

[Democracy](#), as President Abraham Lincoln phrased it at Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, in 1863, is *“the government of the people, for the people, and by the people”*. It is a political system that guarantees an individual’s [basic human rights and freedoms](#) (of thought, conscience, speech, religion, assembly, petition and of the press, etc.). — It guarantees due process and equality before the law. — It makes the government accountable to the people and it forbids a government from subjecting individuals to arbitrary prison, slavery or bondage, etc. — In a democracy, a person is able to speak his or her mind and express political preferences with reasonable safety.

Historically, the legal principle of [Habeas Corpus](#), which originated in England in the 12th century, was a great step toward liberty and freedom in democracies, because it forbids unlawful arrest and detention or imprisonment, without due process.

Democracy is a system, which is based on the fundamental principle that political power in a society comes from the [sovereignty of people](#), and not from abstract deities and from their convenient interpreters on Earth (kings, emperors, etc.). In a democracy, people in government govern with the consent of the people. **Benjamin Franklin** made the concept

perfectly clear when he wrote, *“In free governments, the rulers are the servants and the people their superiors and sovereigns”*.

However, the democratic system is not perfect and it constantly runs the risk of being corrupted and subverted. — *“Democracy”*, said **Winston Churchill** in 1947, *“is the worst form of Government, except for all those other forms that have been tried from time to time”*. — In reality, representative democracy is a fragile form of government. It cannot be taken for granted. It requires special conditions and constant vigilance to exist and to last, lest it perish in the hands of dictators or of different types of oligarchies.

— It is based on three fundamental principles:

- 1- that people, through the majority rule, should be the deciding final authority, in elections or referendums, and in the respect of political minorities;
- 2- that people should be equal under the law, and
- 3- that there should be constitutional rules and political and legal institutions to make sure that the first two principles are respected.

Historically speaking, democracy is by no means a natural form of government. [Dictatorship](#), especially totalitarian dictatorship, relies on violence and brute force, and on the government of a single man or an oligarchy, to exert absolute governmental control over the people. Throughout history, indeed, it has allowed kings, emperors, demagogues, despots and autocratic men, and their oligarchies, to usurp absolute power, to subjugate the people and to eliminate any opposition and other political parties, but their own.

In reality, no democracy is immune to an authoritarian push. That is why a democracy, to survive, must be defended and protected by the people, by unbiased medias, by intellectuals and thinkers, and, above all, by a [democratic constitution](#) and a non corrupt judiciary system.

## **The second half of the 20th century saw a big jump in the number of democracies**

The first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century was plagued with two world wars and a severe economic depression. The economic problems and poverty, which resulted from the First World War (1914-1918) and which were endemic in many countries created a fertile ground during those times for dictators and autocrats of all kinds. During that period, the percentage of democratic countries did not surpass 31 percent. At the end of World War II, in 1945, there were a total of 137 [autocracies](#) against only 12 true democracies in the world, (i.e. with a democratic constitution, protection for civil liberties, free elections and an independent judiciary).

Things changed dramatically during the second half of the 20th century. This was a development the world had never seen before. The number of democracies exploded. The [United Nations](#) was established in 1945 with the mission of preventing future wars. Some 50 countries became the first signatories, although not all of them endorsed democracy as a political system. Nevertheless, the [Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#) proclaims the basic concept of democracy by stating unequivocally that: *“the will of the people shall be the basis of the authority of government.”*

During that crucial period, there were two important geopolitical developments:

- First, from 1945 into the 1960s, under pressures from the United States and other countries, strong independence movements liberated former colonies from previous colonial political systems. This process of [decolonization](#) took place in [Africa](#), but also in [Asia](#), especially in India, which is today the most populous democracy in the world. This led to the creation of new states, and many of them adopted the democratic system.
- Secondly, the [collapse of the Soviet Union](#) in December 1991, and its subsequent dissolution, led to another dramatic increase in the number of new states and new democracies in Eastern Europe.

No less than 14 of the [former Soviet republics](#) became independent states, besides Russia. However, only a handful of them (the Baltic states of Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia) are truly democratic and hold free and fair elections. Some of the new states, however, are *de facto* autocratic regimes (Belarus, Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan) **and they hold only symbolic elections**. Among the five other former Soviet republics, a few have become more democratic (Ukraine, Georgia, Moldova, Tajikistan and Armenia), but they are still a mixture of democracy and authoritarianism.

### **The number of true democracies in the world has declined since 2006**

Researchers at Stanford University have recently sounded the alarm: Without American moral leadership, they say, democracy everywhere is in danger of a free fall. Political scientist Larry Diamond, for one, has published a new [book](#), "*Ill Winds: Saving Democracy from Russian Rage, Chinese Ambition, and American Complacency*", in which he describes how liberty is under assault in the United States and abroad, by a rising trend toward authoritarianism, and how democracies globally have weakened or failed. He notes, for example, that as recently as 2006, 62 percent of all nations were functioning democracies, while that number, by 2017, had dropped to 51 percent. He sees a danger that the 21<sup>st</sup> century could be defined, one day, by the "rise of the autocrat".

Why is this so? One culprit, among others, is economic and financial [globalization](#), which has weakened democratic governments in their capability to solve domestic economic problems. Globalization has also produced important economic structural changes, which have spurred the growth of technology and of new industries, but which have left some groups of workers behind, especially in old industries, resulting in a process of [deindustrialization](#) and a loss of high-paying jobs.

Another cause of democratic decline in some countries may be due to a [nationalist backlash](#) against globalization having gone too far, too fast. Many nations have increasingly more porous national frontiers, which have increased the flows of immigrants and refugees from abroad, and which have persuaded some people that "*democracy does not work well for them and that it no longer promotes their interests*".

A certain [democratic regression](#) has also been observed, over the most recent decades, with the tendency in some nations to entrust to technocrats or to judges the task *ex officio* of solving some contentious social and political problems, rather than to establish public commissions of inquiry, as it was the custom in the past.

In some countries, indeed, especially within the [European Union](#), important political powers have shifted from national governments to unelected technocrats, at the center, thus creating a [democratic deficit](#). This has frustrated the will of the people, alienated them and undermined their faith in their own politicians. People in the [U.K.](#), for instance, want out of the EU essentially because they want to regain control over their borders. In some other countries, as it is the case in Canada, for example, since 1982, large chunks of political power have been transferred to what has been called a [government of judges](#), which consists in leaving to the judiciary decisions, which should normally be the responsibility of elected governments.

Another factor, related to the two causes mentioned above, could be tied to the rise of [inequalities of income and wealth](#) in some countries and the growing [role of big money](#) in domestic politics, so much so that some talk about a 'democracy for the rich'. It is a fact that economic and financial globalization has reduced global inequality between nations, but it has also increased inequality within the most industrialized nations.

In the [United States](#), for example, the winners of globalization have used their exploding riches to influence the U.S. government—not to compensate the losers of globalization but to lower taxes for themselves—thus adding political to economic reasons for increased inequality. The increased and destabilizing [political polarization](#), which can be observed in the U. S. and in some other countries, can be seen as a popular response to the infinite greed of some capitalists lacking a social conscience.

## Conclusion

The observed decline of democracy in this century appears to be both an economic and a political problem. If the retreat from democracy is to be stopped and hopefully reversed, both economic and political solutions will have to be found. Complacency and denial could only make matters worse.

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