

“DEMOCRACY WILL NOT HELP US SOLVE THE ISSUES FACING THE WORLD TODAY”. DISCUSS.

1 INTRODUCTION

Democracy comes in different forms, but is generally described as a governmental system where the whole citizenry is sovereign to decide political outcomes, either through influencing elected representatives or delegates, or by deciding directly on issues in a direct democratic system. According to the Economist World in Data, democracy has become increasingly prevalent over the past two centuries, with 50.84% of regimes either classed as liberal democracies or electoral democracies as of 2023¹. This trend was accelerated in part with the legacy of the European Enlightenment and later the end of the Cold War, the latter seeing democracy spread across the European continent. Proponents of democracy cite its tendency to promote liberties and freedoms, as well as compatibility with economic prosperity and resultant improvements in human welfare, as reasons for its continued viability. But, as we shall discuss in this essay, the current nationalist model of democracy is impotent to solve the issues facing the world today.

The reasons for this are manifold, but the most important reason is simple – democracy, as understood in the popular liberal tradition, is linked inextricably to nation-state nationalism. It is therefore incapable of solving the issues of today, since the paramount issues facing the world today are *international* in nature – they are existential threats which threaten all nations and therefore cannot be fixed by national democracies. I have termed these issues *global* issues, and their nature is discussed in Section 2. National democracy is the kind that has prevailed worldwide in the statistics above, and for democracy to be able to match the challenges facing the world today, these being global challenges, the nature of democracy would have to change to be that of an international democracy rather than a national phenomenon of individual democratic nation states. As we shall see, this would be nearly impossible to achieve.

Furthermore, the democratic system can be seen to possess clear and blatant structural flaws. Its inclusivity, transparency and collective nature make it vulnerable to political short-termism and impulsive decision making, as well as to undue influence from outside actors.

It is the purpose of this essay to explore these issues, and furthermore to demonstrate that democracy cannot be relied upon to solve the issues facing the world today. Not only is it unfeasible to develop functional and sovereign international democratic institutions in time to solve pressing global issues, the inherent flaws of democracy make it so that any such system would likely run into gridlock, irrationality and eventually failure. In short, democracy will not help us solve the issues facing the world today.

2 THE LIMITATIONS OF INTERNATIONAL DEMOCRACY

“We should change our attitude toward the United Nations. There has to be some power in the world superior to our own.” - Andy Rooney²

We should be under no illusions – our period of history is uniquely threatened. The end of the Cold War brought about a honeymoon period that saw many, such as American political scientist

¹ Economist “Our World in Data”, retrieved 2024 - <https://ourworldindata.org/democracy>

² Quotefancy, Andy Rooney, retrieved 2024 - <https://quotefancy.com/happiness-quotes>

Francis Fukuyama, declare the “end of history”³ – in Fukuyama and others’ views, the end of the Cold War had brought about a new historical consensus which would see humanity enter a post-conflict era. Such claims were myopic. As the 21st century dawned, and democracy reached its peak globally⁴, new issues emerged. These issues were distinct in one way: unlike those of the previous century, such as inequality, war and repression, these additional issues could not be mitigated in a single nation state by the actions of that state’s government. That is not to say that issues of the previous century were limited to individual nation states – events such as the Second World War by definition crossed borders – but national governments in the 20th century had more agency to mitigate these issues by their own actions. In contrast, the new *global* issues of our era are almost entirely unmitigated *externalities* – that is to say, effects dumped on those who may have done nothing to create them, even those who actively opposed them. Perhaps the greatest example of a global issue would be the threat of Earth Systems Failure⁵.

This threat is defined by Monbiot and Hutchinson as the aggravation of ecological damage by rapacious capitalism. The result is climate change, habitat destruction and other severe environmental damage caused by the pursuit of increasingly scarce natural resources leading to the accumulation of externalities in the environment. The result, as backed by widespread scientific consensus, is an impending environmental catastrophe requiring international action to prevent. For this reason, Earth Systems Failure can be considered the paramount global issue. For the purposes of this essay, global issues possess the following two properties:

1. The effect is externalized onto a global scale, meaning that those who did not aggravate the issue feel negative effects in equal magnitude, although perhaps in different form, to the aggravating party.
2. The issue is unsolvable by means of national democracy. This is because it is a global issue, and individual nations are impotent to solve global issues due to their severity (which requires global consensus to mitigate) and due to the nature of the effect as an externality, meaning no country can singlehandedly decide to make itself immune to the effects.

The second point is very important. Nationalism and democracy are inextricably linked, and this makes democracy as we understand it powerless to solve global issues.

A good example of this link between nationalism and democracy is Brexit. The EU, despite its flaws, represents potential for an effective international democratic institution. Whilst not global, it is reasonable to suggest that its European Parliament would be more effective than national democracies at solving global issues. In confronting the Earth Systems Failure crisis, the EU secured the largest legally binding cut in emissions at the 1997 Kyoto Summit of any world region, a rate of 8% by 2012 from 1997 levels, a demonstration of the power of the EU to contribute to the solving of global issues⁶.

During the campaign for the UK’s withdrawal from the EU in 2016, the Leave.EU campaign emblazoned their campaign bus with the phrase “Let’s Take Back Control”. The issue of EU

³ *The End of History and the Last Man*, Francis Fukuyama, 1992.

⁴ Economist “Our World in Data” - <https://ourworldindata.org/democracy>

⁵ *The Invisible Doctrine: The Secret History of Neoliberalism (& How It Came to Control Your Life)*, George Monbiot and Peter Hutchinson, 2024

⁶ *Kyoto Protocol for the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change*, Annex B, United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, 1998 - <https://unfccc.int/resource/docs/convkp/kpeng.pdf>

membership was made into an issue of national sovereignty and the need to make democratic decisions domestically rather than internationally, even though members of the European Parliament were elected along with British MPs⁷. There is little doubt that the message struck a chord, and figures on the British right continue to espouse the return to the sovereignty of the UK's Parliament as a key advantage of Brexit in principle. The success of British democracy, in the eyes of these politicians, was linked to the national sovereignty of the UK, and the Brexit result gives credence to this view, giving these politicians a mandate to claim that democracy must be considered a national phenomenon.

Suspicion of international governmental institutions naturally springs from the widely held belief that democracy should be everywhere a national phenomenon. Following the Second World War, the United Nations was established. Although not an elected institution, the UN provides a template of global government, and an indicator of the extent to which international consensus can be brokered by debate to solve global issues. In its first 79 years, its efficacy has been doubtful, largely because of the suspicion member states have of international government as a principle. Take the US' relationship with the institution as an example. The John Birch Society has campaigned extensively for American withdrawal from the UN⁸, and an American Sovereignty Restoration Act has received sporadic support from some Congresspeople, although the law has yet to pass⁹. Amongst the provisions of this bill would be the US withdrawal from the institution in its entirety. US states including Tennessee have introduced state legislation to disavow UN sovereignty¹⁰, and President Trump's "America First" stance has seen US membership of NATO¹¹, and perhaps the UN, come into question. Many countries see national sovereignty and democracy as complementary priorities. Arguably this is because of their concurrent emergence in the European Enlightenment and other intellectual movements.

Beyond nationalistic suspicion, international democracy is threatened by discord. International government, perhaps as a result of the suspicion and low importance it is held in by much of its membership, can be simply ineffective due to disagreement. The columnist Jake Wallis Simmons writes in his book *Israelophobia* that Israeli delegates to the UN frequently complain that Israeli treatment of Palestinians is disproportionately scrutinized by the UN¹², for example by accusing the UN of being biased in its assessment of how many civilian casualties have occurred in the ongoing war in Gaza¹³. In contrast, delegates from Arab League states have accused Israel of genocide, apartheid and other crimes against humanity¹⁴. It is natural for debate to exist around points of difference, but the UN is frequently brought to a standstill by extreme disagreement over versions of events, facts and statistics – in short, disagreements over truth itself. Such

⁷ *"Let's Take Back Control": Brexit and the Debate on Sovereignty*, Revue française de civilisation britannique XXII(2), 2017

⁸ *Get Us Out! Of The UN*, John Birch Society, retrieved 2024 – <https://jbs.org/un/>

⁹ *H.R.7806 – American Sovereignty Restoration Act of 2022*, United States Congress, 2022 – <https://www.congress.gov/bill/117th-congress/house-bill/7806>

¹⁰ *State of Tennessee Public Chapter No. 479 Senate Bill No. 1147*, Senate of Tennessee, 2023 – <https://publications.tnsosfiles.com/acts/113/pub/pc0479.pdf>

¹¹ *Trump says he would "encourage" Russia to attack Nato allies who do not pay their bills*, BBC News, 2024 – <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-68266447>

¹² *Israelophobia: The Newest Version of the Oldest Hatred and What to Do About It*, Jake Wallis Simmons, 2023

¹³ *The case against Israel has just collapsed*, Jake Wallis Simmons for The Daily Telegraph, 2024 – <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2024/05/18/the-case-against-israel-has-just-collapsed/>

¹⁴ *Israelophobia: The Newest Version of the Oldest Hatred and What to Do About It*, Jake Wallis Simmons, 2023

gridlock has led many to label the UN ineffective, and it is difficult to imagine an international institution which would be able to circumvent these extreme differences of opinion, let alone a democratic one.

The issue of a lack of international democracy is therefore two-fold – a suspicion held by many of the world’s nation states concerning giving away sovereignty to an international government in principle, and where such institutions do exist, the intense differences of opinion that can render them ineffective. However, the nature of global issues demands that consensus be reached. Is democracy a suitable way to reach this consensus?

3 THE STRUCTURAL FLAWS OF DEMOCRACY

“For monarchy to work, one man must be wise. For democracy to work, a majority of the people must be wise. Which is more likely?” - Charles Maurras¹⁵

Presume, hypothetically, that the above issues could be solved. In this model, the nation states of the world remain sovereign over national issues, but they delegate power to an international body to solve the global issues facing the world. It would still be the case that inherent structural flaws of the democratic system would prevent consensus. The main issues which would have to be overcome, visible in almost all democratic systems today, are, amongst others, short-termism and the capture of the democratic system by exogenous actors.

3.1 POLITICAL SHORT-TERMISM AND OTHER VOTER IRRATIONALITIES

Proponents frequently portray the need for democracy as an entitlement deriving from human rationality. In this model, thinkers such as Locke describe humans as reliably rational, motivated by a desire to maximise self-interest¹⁶. Other thinkers such as Bentham¹⁷ and even non-liberal thinkers such as Hobbes¹⁸ admit that humans are consistently and predictably motivated by some form of self-interest. The consensus that emerged during the Enlightenment, where theoretical models of democracy that inform the present were formed, was that humans were predictable in some way. The belief is that, even if voters sometimes make decisions with their hearts and not their minds, they would reject outcomes that would actively harm them, and consistently make choices to satisfy rationally grounded desires.

This view has been increasingly challenged in recent years. There is a growing body of evidence to suggest that many voters act with blatant irrationality, subject to psychological biases which impair decision-making and prevent rational outcomes. We must be careful to separate this from decisions that we personally disagree with. I have therefore only described instances where objectively assessed psychology shows a lack of human capability for rationality, and its influence on politics.

One of the biggest irrationalities is short-termism. In 1979, Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky published a paper introducing their theory of loss-aversion bias. Using assessments on students, they uncovered evidence suggesting the link between certainty and immediate gratification and

¹⁵ Goodreads, Charles Maurras, retrieved 2024 – <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/8108754>

¹⁶ *Two Treatises of Government*, John Locke, 1689

¹⁷ *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*, Jeremy Bentham, 1789

¹⁸ *Leviathan*, Thomas Hobbes, 1651

a reluctance for consumers to delay benefits, even if the benefits were certain and greater in magnitude. Simply, what Kahneman and Tversky discovered can be summarised as “losses loom larger than gains” – that people are motivated by certainty and gratification in the short-term, rather than long-term security and rewards at the detriment of immediate returns¹⁹.

A good example of short-termism in the market setting could be the situation of the UK’s privatised water industry. Free-market “neoliberal” economists argued at the time of privatisation in 1989 that human rationality was such that the new private water firms would be incentivised to continue investment, since this was the only way to ensure profits in the long-term. But short-term loss aversion bias prevented this rational decision for long-term profitability – instead, in the more than 30 years since privatization, dividends taken by shareholders increased by £85.2bn, whilst a real terms investment cut of £5.5bn occurred in the same period²⁰. The resulting capital consumption and degradation of potable water infrastructure is a key reason why the UK has suffered a sewage crisis. Simply, investors chose short-term returns over long-term returns, and were motivated to do so by the framing of the decision as a choice of whether to “lose” their short-term profits.

Applied to politics, it is clear how this cognitive bias can limit our response to global issues. For example, would a sovereign international democratic body have the political capital to realistically prevent climate breakdown, if it meant the short-term loss of utility? Kahneman and Tversky’s theory suggests not.

In an LSE Blog, Ian Marsh wrote that short-termism was observable in British politics in the phenomenon of partisan dealignment, the increasing trend for voters to change votes between political parties at different election cycles. He argued that identity politics based on societal stratifications other than class such as race, as well as declining engagement with political parties, had meant that the old class allegiance to political parties was dying out. The result was political parties competing over increasingly short-term policies for an increasing number of changeable voters occupying the political centre of the Overton Window, the section of the ideological spectrum in acceptable political debates²¹. This trend has accelerated short-termism in democratic politics.

Why is this significant? This is relevant because the issues that face the world today are long-term ones. The paramount global issue facing the world today – Earth Systems Failure, holds that if we fail to reduce emissions, consumption and habitat destruction as soon as possible, irreparable damage will be done to ecosystems and population centres. By 2050, 1.5 billion people will be displaced by climate change according to current trends, and the threat of increased conflict, famine, increased spread of disease, desertification and other dangers will increase²². The reason why proportional action has not been taken is simple – loss aversion bias.

¹⁹ “*Prospect Theory: An Analysis of Decision under Risk*”, Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky, 1979 – https://web.mit.edu/curhan/www/docs/Articles/15341_Readings/Behavioral_Decision_Theory/Kahneman_Tversky_1979_Prospect_theory.pdf

²⁰ *Water investors have withdrawn billions, says research*, BBC News, 2024 – <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cw4478wnjdpo>

²¹ *How contemporary politics became trapped in the short term and whether it can be repaired*, Ian Marsh, 2013 – <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/politicsandpolicy/contemporary-politics-is-trapped-in-the-short-term-how-did-it-happen-can-it-be-repaired/>

²² *Ecological Threat Register 2020: Understanding Ecological Threats, Resilience and Peace*, Institute for Economics & Peace, 2020 – https://www.visionofhumanity.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/ETR_2020_web-1.pdf

Consumers in developed countries are being asked to *reduce* consumption, and that means the foregoing of utility today in exchange for ill-defined benefits in the future. With the loss aversion, short-termist bias at play, it is clear why proportional action has not been taken by democratic governments.

Many have accused voters of having other irrational biases that limit their capability to make rational decisions in their own best interest. The loss aversion bias is one example of the limitation of voters, and therefore the limitation of democracy.

3.2 THE SUSCEPTIBILITY OF THE DEMOCRATIC SYSTEM TO CAPTURE AND DISRUPTION BY EXOGENOUS ACTORS

“Lobbying is the world’s second oldest profession” - Bill Press²³

When one considers a democratic system – in an ideal world open, transparent, malleable and receptive – it is obvious why such a system can be prone to influence. Democratic outcomes, be they the election of representatives or a referendum result, are made by many people making decisions. It is not unreasonable to suggest that it may be in the interest of some to influence these decisions for their own ends, or annul the decision entirely by destruction of the democratic system.

On the 11th September 1973, Augusto Pinochet seized control of Chile in a coup. Three years earlier, such a move would have been unthinkable – Pinochet and the wider Chilean army were trained in the Prussian tradition of political non-interventionism, and even in the run-up to the coup Pinochet had expressed his support for the incumbent socialist president, Salvador Allende²⁴. Allende’s rule had been turbulent, but he remained popular, using his platform to redistribute wealth and educate the country’s agricultural working class²⁵. Why had a supposedly stable country destroyed its own democracy in a coup? The answer was exogenous influence from the US. In 2000, the United States Intelligence Community delivered a report indicating that the CIA had been complicit in undermining the administration due to the Chilean government’s socialism²⁶. The CIA had known that the Chilean military had begun to move towards a coup, and many blamed American “economic warfare” for this shift, citing the disastrous impact an American embargo on Chilean copper exports had dealt to the Chilean economy²⁷. The image that emerged – particularly following the revelation that the CIA had been involved in the 1970 murder of a Chilean general who refused to lead a coup, general Rene Schneider²⁴ – was that the US had deliberately undermined socialist Chile in order to further geopolitical objectives. What is striking is how vulnerable democracy was. No American bombs fell on Chile, no American troops set foot on Chilean soil: instead, the upheaval that the US government instigated came from Chile itself. The revelation from this episode is that democracy is easily influenced, manipulated or destroyed entirely when exogenous influence – such as economic warfare or conspiracy from a foreign state – is exerted effectively.

²³ *AZ Quotes*, Bill Press, retrieved 2024 – <https://www.azquotes.com/quote/1336665>

²⁴ *The Rest is History* podcast, Dominic Sandbrook and Tom Holland, 2023

²⁵ *How Democracies Die*, Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt, 2018

²⁶ *CIA Activities in Chile*, United States Intelligence Community, 2000

²⁷ *Chile and the United States: Declassified Documents relating to the Military Coup, September 11, 1973*, Peter Kornbluh, 2023 – <https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB8/nsaebb8i.htm>

In *How Democracies Die*, the authors correctly describe circumstances in which authoritarian politicians can rise to prominence and they accurately identify four indicators of impending authoritarian regimes. However, what they fail to consider is that the susceptibility of democracy to exogenous influence is a natural, structural flaw of democracy itself. Take the United States as an example. The March 2019 Mueller Special Counsel Investigation concluded that Russian misinformation campaigns played a significant role in Trump's victory in the 2016 US Presidential Election. The Russian government recruited thousands of accounts which director Robert Mueller estimated had reached millions of Americans. The result was a "sweeping and systematic" campaign of misinformation²⁸. Whilst Lewinsky and Ziblatt are correct to claim that poor domestic conditions such as a failing economy or internal divisions can expedite a decline in democracy, the American example shows that these conditions are not necessary for democracy to falter. The American election of 2016 was influenced by illegal exogenous influence even when the US was at its wealthiest and most powerful. It is clear from these examples that democracies everywhere, regardless of reputation, are susceptible to exogenous influence, particularly in the internet era. This may further be aggravated by voter irrationalities making populations everywhere more susceptible to misinformation, false narratives and extremism. The fallacy of presenting democracies as "closed systems", immune from exogenous influence and with perfectly rational human agents, is easy to discredit. Can the democracy we observe, with all its fallacies, face global issues today?

4 NO ALTERNATIVE?

Democracy is clearly a flawed system. As we have seen, the sovereign international democratic framework that is needed to confront global issues does not exist, and there is little appetite for it. And even if, against the protestations of the nations of the world, a binding international democracy could be established, it would likely fail due to the inherent structural flaws of the democratic system. But do other systems of government offer convincing alternatives?

According to the Merriam-Webster thesaurus, the antonym of democracy is dictatorship²⁹. Throughout history, the theory of "benevolent dictatorship" was floated as a potential solution to the flaws of democracy. For Plato, the ideal government was aristocracy, a word now mired with negative connotations but at the time envisaged as a dictatorship of meritocratically nominated peoples – literally translated as rule of the best³⁰. Later, Hobbes proposed a "Leviathan"³¹. This was to be an almost god-like figure with omnipotence and all-reaching sovereignty, motivated unerringly by the means of preserving private property, and the prosperity that came with it. Such theoretical models are attractive. They are simple, and the earlier quote by Maurras illustrates their persuasiveness as a way of tempering the irrationality of democracy. But they would fail for the same reason that democracy is flawed – because the humans that govern them would still suffer from the same irrationality this essay has described in democratic politicians, only now harnessing unchecked power. Even a cursory glance at history reveals the tremendous human

²⁸ *Report On The Investigation Into Russian Interference In The 2016 Presidential Election*, Robert S. Mueller, 2019 – https://www.justice.gov/storage/report_volume2.pdf

²⁹ *Merriam-Webster.com Thesaurus*, Merriam-Webster, retrieved 2024 – <https://www.merriam-webster.com/thesaurus/democracy>

³⁰ *Republic*, Plato, c. 375 BC

³¹ *Leviathan*, Thomas Hobbes, 1651

price paid when dictatorships begin acting irrationally and vindictively, since their power cannot be effectively checked.

Some have proposed a “hybrid” dictatorship, such as in the Roman system, where democracy remains but is overseen by a provisional dictator, granted total authority to make decisions against the grain of popular discourse³². Again, this theory is fallible. Dictators are either sovereign, or they aren’t – and when they are sovereign, the risk of democratic backsliding and the resultant consequences for civil liberties and freedom is obvious. Finally, such systems require an emergency to be recognized. A key feature of some global issues, notably Earth Systems Failure, is that their consequences are not noticeable in the developed world yet. The decision by a democratic legislature to rescind its own sovereignty with a declaration of emergency is therefore hardly plausible.

“People’s dictatorships”, such as a Chinese system, should not be aspired to as examples of benevolent dictatorships. Both regimes have seen egregious human rights violations, such as the massacre at Tiananmen Square³³, and neither have taken a lead in solving global issues – China’s skyrocketing emissions testify to this. There is no empirical evidence that a global dictatorship would be *better motivated* than a global democracy, making the argument for such a system just as flawed as the arguments made in favor of democracy. And even if dictatorship was shown to be theoretically superior to democracy, the world’s population is highly unlikely to accept a globalist dictatorship.

Furthermore, we must not overlook the many virtues of democracy. It is widely acknowledged that democracy creates the conditions in which civil liberties, such as freedom from persecution, discrimination and violence, can thrive. The Economist World in Data notes a link between democracy and reduced persecution, as well as increased economic security and more peaceful international diplomacy³⁴. Perhaps this is because in the democratic model, citizens hold their politicians to account, and whilst democracies make irrational decisions as we have seen, they can avoid the worst excesses as a result of this accountability. Implicit in all theoretical models of the dictatorship is a certain philosophical arrogance – removing the public from political responsibility because they cannot be trusted. This patronizing view of civilians is reflected in how authoritarian dictatorships behave, particularly in how they often abuse their citizenry. The relationship between state and citizenry becomes condescending, with the state seeing its people as feeble and incompetent, and therefore of less importance. Because democratic politicians depend on the people, it is not prone to the same dangerous flaw.

But, based on what we have seen, democracy is ill-equipped to surmount the issues facing the world today. Democracy works well when voters feel the need to express a preference, and due to the biases we have discussed, this is usually when the voters feel the impact on themselves. *Incipient* issues, especially global issues such as Earth Systems Failure, fall through the net and are missed. Global issues, being made of externalities, are often not noticed by the voting population of a given nation, and were they to be noticed it is unreasonable to expect an international consensus to be made from the decisions of a single nation, however powerful that nation may be. For this reason, democracy will not help us solve the issues facing the world

³² *Dictator: the evolution of the Roman dictatorship*, Mark B. Wilson, 2021

³³ *Quelling the People: The Military Suppression of the Beijing Democracy Movement*, Timothy Brook, 1998 – <https://academic.oup.com/psq/article-abstract/108/2/338/7135206>

³⁴ *Economist “Our World in Data”*, retrieved 2024 - <https://ourworldindata.org/democracy>

today, and we can only hope that a viable alternative way to reach international consensus is reached in time to prevent catastrophe.