

How, if at all, can democracy defend itself against authoritarianism?

Political and Economic Thought Final Exam

BSc in International Business and Politics

Copenhagen Business School

Examiner: Joachim Lund

Pages: 9 (12 including front page and bibliography)

Characters: 20,050

Reference system: APA 7th edition

Student number: XXXXXXXX

January 10th, 2024

For much of history, democracy was a nonexistent, unknown or distant concept, but in more recent times, democracy has become more widespread than ever. However, while the prevalence of democracy has been on an upwards trend for many years now, it is no secret that the individual change is not necessarily permanent, as countries can and sometimes do backslide and regress to authoritarian regimes. But while some countries have staggered on the edge of democratic viability, others have acted as bastions of democracy, remaining steadfast in their commitment. What causes these differences, and is it even possible for countries to realistically alter these circumstances to protect themselves from democratic backsliding? This assignment will focus on just that, arguing that, yes, democracies are able to at least lower the risk of turning to autocracy. It will do so by including the ideas and theories of a selection of political and economic thinkers on differing subjects that relate to the development and strength of a democracy. These ideas will be juxtaposed with both modern and historical observations to assess the applicability and evaluate the measures by which a country can ensure the continued survival of its democracy.

Throughout this assignment, “democracy” is used as a term to denote the rule by the people, be it participatory or direct, however, the word has been used throughout history to include systems wherein small or large groups of a given population are excluded from the mechanisms by which the law is written and exercised. An example of this is the ancient Athenian democracy in the time of Plato, which is also the first known, albeit flawed democracy, where voting was effectively limited to free males, and participation as a politician even more strictly limited to the upper class due to societal barriers such as education as well as the free time and funds required to pursue a political career (Plato, Makridis, 2021, p.8). While the early democracy of Athens would later fall, the alienation of the majority of the population is hardly a sufficient explanation in this case, however, the failure to include a group of people in the rule “by the people” has throughout history shown itself to be a cause of conflict,

which can lead to political instability and different groups taking power by force. One example of this alienation is the women's suffrage movement, which saw the struggle for the enfranchisement of women gradually come to fruition in most western countries throughout the 20th century (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2023). Suffragettes, such as Emmeline Pankhurst, evidently felt disillusioned by a system in which they contributed but reaped none of the political rewards, with her pointing out the unfairness of the system in a 1913 speech by drawing attention to the fact that as both a taxpayer and a resident of her country, she was not allowed to participate in the democratic representative institutions (Pankhurst, 2017). The title of the speech, "Freedom or Death", along with her continual comparisons of herself and other women as soldiers on the battlefield, highlights the perceived importance of the matter to Pankhurst (2017), which coincided with the uptick in violent action during the period by increasingly desperate suffragettes (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2023). The exclusion of minorities, or in this case, almost majorities, of the population comes in many different shapes and sizes, but they all share an undemocratic nature, which presents an obstacle for democracy to flourish. But as history has shown, there are many examples of countries overcoming these barriers to a fuller democracy, such as many of the early adopters of the enfranchisement of women (New Zealand, Australia, Finland, Norway Sweden) being among the strongest democracies today (Armstrong, 2023).

This coincides with what Alexis de Tocqueville (1835/1997) pointed out to be an important bastion of a democratic society in his work "Democracy in America", namely the importance of compromise in shaping democratic society. He states that, as a result of a democratic society *"The nation, taken as a whole, will be less brilliant, less glorious, and perhaps less strong; but the majority of the citizens will enjoy a greater degree of prosperity, and the people will remain quiet, not because it despairs of amelioration, but because it is conscious of the advantages of its condition."* (Tocqueville, 1835/1997). Here, Tocqueville argues that democracy leads to an

overall ceiling for some in prosperity but a collective lift of society, leading to wider stability because of the universally known advantages with the system. This makes Tocqueville one of the earliest proponents of rational choice theory, but also cements the idea that this stability, if universally known, could act as a shield against a democratic backslide towards the more contemporary monarchical authoritarian regimes of, for example, the former colonizer of the country that his book centers around. In the examples of the suffragettes, the ruling men chose to gambit their stronger political influence in favor of a more just and stable society in which women could also participate politically and where they at the same time would not find it necessary to violently revolt. This shows how wider political participation can be used as a means to achieve a more stable democracy by strengthening the democratic ideas on which the system is built.

Another proposed threat to democracy is the ‘tyranny of the majority’, which Tocqueville (1835/1997) describes as a weakness stemming from the greatest strength of democracy, namely the power of the majority to rule as tyrants against either an individual or a minority group. He cites an example of all applicable institutions in America being instruments of the majority, stating *“When an individual or a party is wronged in the United States, to whom can he apply for redress? If to public opinion, public opinion constitutes the majority; if to the legislature, it represents the majority, and implicitly obeys its injunctions; if to the executive power, it is appointed by the majority, and remains a passive tool in its hands; the public troops consist of the majority under arms; the jury is the majority invested with the right of hearing judicial cases; and in certain States even the judges are elected by the majority.”* (Tocqueville, 1835/1997). As presented here, the tyranny of the majority clearly represents a threat to democracy, at least for the individual, but crucially, this individual is supposed to be represented by the democratic institutions as well. Tocqueville especially views the tendency of the majority to treat incumbent public officers as servants as a problem, as they are beholden to the whims of the majority according to his observation of the early

American democracy, leading to a conflict of interest. He also states “[*Unbounded power of the majority*], which is favorable to the legal despotism of the legislature, is likewise favorable to the arbitrary authority of the magistrate.”. This shows how a tyranny of the majority can expand and compound the powers of the legislature and the executive branch, leading to what might be considered an authoritarian regime, albeit a popular one. However, all this is not to say that the tyranny of the majority is an insurmountable problem; it is simply based on the observations in the American system, deemed as being a result of unbounded power, and it stands to reason that the opposite of this can mitigate the risk of such a development. That is to say, effective checks and balances against the centralization of power among one group, no matter the size of the majority, can counteract the antidemocratic and authoritarian nature of the tyranny of the majority. This can be implemented in multiple different ways, such as relevant legislature limiting power to a certain extent, or as Tocqueville (1835/1997) himself proposes, a system of what he calls “associations” that he likens to the role of the nobility in an aristocracy, but which more closely resemble the role of modern watchdog groups, overseeing the use of power of the government and reporting malpractice.

However, the matter of defending democracy is not purely a political matter. The economist and philosopher Friedrich Hayek cautioned against the expansion of socialist policies throughout the world during the Second World War, likening it to the interwar period of progressive socialist policy originating from Nazi Germany (Hayek, 1944, p. 2-3). He declared that Nazism sprung up, not as a reaction against socialist trends, but as a result of it (Hayek, 1944, p. 4). While refuting a point about Nazism stemming from the ties between Prussianism and socialism, he wrote “*It was the prevalence of socialist views and not Prussianism that Germany had in common with Italy and Russia-and it was from the masses and not from the classes steeped in the Prussian tradition, and favoured by it, that National-Socialism arose.*” (Hayek, 1944, p. 9). This shows that he viewed socialism and its associated economic policy as

precursors to the authoritarian National-Socialism present in Germany at the time. He also claims that similar authoritarian movements such as the fascists in Italy and the communists in the Soviet Union experienced similar trajectories because of the widespread socialist views. Hayek explains this through the role of the government in the economic policy of the country, stating that *“in a society which for its functioning depends on central planning, this control cannot be made dependent on a majority being able to agree; it will often be necessary that the will of a small minority be imposed upon the people, because this minority will be the largest group able to agree among themselves on the question at issue.”* (Hayek, 1944, p. 73). He claims that, because of the nature of central planning requiring a strict consensus, the socialist system of government is incompatible with democracy at large. This is because a smaller group is more likely to reach a consensus, and the act of their will being imposed in a forceful manner for the envisioned socialist state, they effectively rob the majority of their personal freedom. Therefore, he argues for the implementation of a free market system, as it is both more efficient and avoids coercive and undemocratic force as a means of regulating behavior (Hayek, 1944, p. 37-38). This is because the individual is able to choose for themselves whether something is worth doing it or not instead of the choice being made for them. Philosophically, one might wonder if the difference between conscious and unconscious social control is really that great, but this at least theoretically gives the individual more freedom to act for themselves without the forced decisions of a politburo. Thus, a socialist regime is inherently undemocratic according to Hayek, and its policy must be avoided as a means of defending democracy.

Despite this argument, a free and unchecked market is not a definite ticket to a stronger democracy, as a market with no checks and balances might end in a situation that can hardly be considered democratic. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels (1888) contended that *“The bourgeoisie keeps more and more doing away with the scattered state of the population, of the means of production, and of property. It has*

agglomerated production, and has concentrated property in a few hands. The necessary consequence of this was political centralisation". They effectively stated that both economic and political power were being hoarded and centralized by just a few powerful hands. This can hardly be considered a democratic development, as it leads to an uneven spread of power favoring the wealthy. While neither Engels nor Marx saw democracy as an end goal, rather a loosely defined "dictatorship of the proletariat" followed by no traditional government at all (Kivotidis, 2019), their views can still be useful when talking about protecting democracy, as they deal with the same dimensions as other thinkers. And while many of their prophecies of capitalism destroying itself leading to the seizure of power by the proletariat have yet to conclusively occur, it is hard to deny some of their points. During the time of the release of the Communist Manifesto following the industrial revolution, labor laws were horrendous with little to no safety standards or regulations and incredibly low and uneven wages across sexes (Beck, 2016). The manifestation of the widespread ideology of classic liberalism of the time with laissez-faire capitalism led to abhorrent working conditions, and while detrimental to the working class, it massively enriched the few owners of the means of production (Beck, 2016). With these factors at play, it is hard not to view the working class of the time as being exploited. At the same time, one wonders whether a working-class individual being chained to a 16-hour workday and barely earning enough to sustain themselves and nothing more could really enjoy the fruits of the personal liberty integral to a democracy. Working conditions have since changed massively for the better, but only with the introduction of a variety of regulation concerning, among others, wages, free time and safety in the workplace (Schregle & Jenks, 2023). This shows that some degree of market regulation is needed to maintain a semblance of democracy as well as its core values of personal freedom and human rights.

But market regulation and a free market are not necessarily mutually exclusive, and a balance between them can foster a strong democracy that doesn't allow a politburo takeover, nor an unchecked oligarchy controlled by the wealthy. Despite being a staunch defender of the free-market system and generally in favor of limiting the role of the government, Hayek himself conceded that some regulation was necessary, writing *"In no system that could be rationally defended would the state just do nothing. An effective competitive system needs an intelligently designed and continuously adjusted legal framework as much as any other."* (Hayek, 1944, p. 40). What he meant by this is that some degree of regulation is both necessary and compatible with the free market as a concept for maintaining the personal freedom that the free market brings. However, the government is only to intervene with regulation affecting every firm equally and without indirectly controlling price or supply with measures such as safety, limits on working hours and sanitation being proposed among others (Hayek, 1944, p. 43). This leaves out the mechanisms of the market, such as restrictions on entering a trade or the ability to freely choose the price point of a given good. With each regulation, and in the spirit of his ideas of the free market, a consideration of whether the social costs are outweighed by the advantages of its implementation is also necessary (Hayek, 1944, p. 43). This distinction is why the free market does not equate to either the financial lawlessness or semi-oligarchy that has been observed after the industrial revolution, and why it with its limitations can serve to protect democracy.

But for everything in a democracy to come together, a universal agreement must be in place for society to function. John Locke argued that a government exists because of the consent of the people due to the benefits a government provides, such as protection of personal property and propagation of the common good in return for the power and jurisdiction over them (Nation, 2019). His idea of the social contract theory stipulates that, should the government fail to uphold its end of the deal, the people possess the right to reject the government, as he laid out in his work *"Two Treatise of*

Government” as follows “*whenever the legislators endeavour to take away and destroy the property of the people, or to reduce them to slavery under arbitrary power, they put themselves into a state of war with the people, who are thereupon absolved from any farther obedience*” followed by “*Whensoever, therefore, the legislative shall transgress this fundamental rule of society, [...], by this breach of trust they forfeit the power the people had put into their hands*” (Locke, 1689, p. 201-202). That is to say, the ruler knows that breaching the social contract will lead to nothing but political destitution, meaning the real power rests in the hands of the population as a whole. While Locke was probably referring to the monarchical rulers of his time, the theory is just as applicable to democratically elected ones, as they theoretically possess the same ability to violate the social contract with the power given to them. The social contract is an important part of safekeeping democracy because it highlights that the people have the power to change the government, be it by battle or ballots. While on the surface the existence of many tyrannical authoritarian regimes throughout history might seem to be proof of the irrelevance of the social contract theory, Locke never put an explicit time limit on the people to exercise their right to object to an unjust government, and in the context of democracy one can even counter this argument with the knowledge that democracies have generally been on the rise for the last several centuries (Herre et al., 2013), which hints to their permanence and honoring of the social contract. Maintaining the social contract is paramount for defending democracy, because if the contract is not honored, the country in question effectively ceases to be a democracy. The upkeep is performed by both government and people honoring their end of the bargain, ensuring that no party has reason to absolve the contract, thereby ensuring the continued existence of democracy.

It remains interesting to note that the danger to democracy highlighted by multiple thinkers stem from the people themselves, despite the people, i.e. voters, being at the core of democracy to begin with. This goes to show that no matter the highlighted

thinker, democracy is not perfect, and both can and does experience its share of trials and tribulations, but that by no means makes it inferior, nor puts it in a defenseless position. From discriminatory laws on minorities, ushered in and upheld by voters, to tyrannical majorities and despotic contract-breaking individuals acting on others behalf, the common ground for solutions is that change in the defense of democracy can come from within the government itself. This assignment found that these highlighted risks of democratic backsliding can be mitigated by passing legislation allowing minorities to participate, as well as having both sides honor the social contract as stipulated by John Locke through shared rationality. The tyranny of the majority could also be defeated by passing legislation limiting the outright power of the majority to a certain extent as well as with implementing watchdog groups. Likewise, economics also influence the strength of the democracy displayed by a country. The free market was deemed superior to the central planning socialist policy, as it allows for democratic values to prosper without first being vetted and approved by a small and powerful group possibly distorting them. However, if the market goes completely unchecked, the system can lose all democratic semblance, and a balance of market regulation is therefore necessary for democracy to prosper. All in all, this assignment found that democracy can be defended from authoritarianism, but it still has its limitations. Due to the size of the assignment, it was only able to scratch the surface of political and economic views on how democracy can be defended, and ideally many more perspectives and works could be included and discussed. This could possibly highlight shortcomings with the aforementioned conclusions and serve as a means to broaden the discussion that no doubt has more to offer than what was presented here.

Bibliography:

Armstrong, M. (2023, February 17). *Infographic: The State of Democracy*. Statista Daily Data. <https://www.statista.com/chart/18737/democracy-index-world-map/>

Beck, E. (2016, November 26). *Working conditions in the Industrial Revolution*. History Crunch - History Articles, Biographies, Infographics, Resources and More. <https://www.historycrunch.com/working-conditions-in-the-industrial-revolution.html#/>

Encyclopaedia Britannica. (2023, December 26). *Women's suffrage*. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/woman-suffrage>

Engels, F., & Marx, K. (1888). *The Communist Manifesto*. Project Gutenberg. <https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/61/pg61-images.html>

Hayek, F. A. (1944). *The road to serfdom*. Univ. of Chicago Press <http://digamo.free.fr/roadto.pdf>

Herre, B., Ortiz-Ospina, E., & Roser, M. (2013). *Democracy*. Our World in Data. <https://ourworldindata.org/democracy>

Kivotidis, D. (2019, December 11). *Marxist legal theory: Dictatorship of the proletariat*. Critical Legal Thinking. <https://criticallegalthinking.com/2019/12/11/marrxist-legal-theory-dictatorship-of-the-proletariat/>

Locke, J. (1689). *Two Treatises of Government*. York University. <https://www.yorku.ca/comninel/courses/3025pdf/Locke.pdf>

Nation, M. (2019). *Locke's Social Contract: Is it legitimate?* - UCA. University of Central Arkansas. <https://uca.edu/cahss/files/2020/07/Nation-CLA-2019.pdf>

Pankhurst, E. (2017, March 9). *Freedom or death - nov. 13, 1913*. Archives of Women's Political Communication. <https://awpc.cattcenter.iastate.edu/2017/03/09/freedom-or-death-part-1-nov-13-1913/>

Plato, & Makridis. (2021). *The Republic: The Complete and unabridged Jowett Translation*. Chartwell Books.

Schregle, J., & Jenks, C. W. (2023, December 5). *Labour law*. Encyclopaedia Britannica. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/labour-law>

Tocqueville, A. (1997). *Democracy in america* - Project Gutenberg. <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/815/815-h/815-h.htm> (H. Reeves, Trans.) (Original work published 1835)