

WHY IS DEMOCRACY UNDER SIEGE?

By Susana Malcorra

We are living a very special moment in History in which even the very concept of democracy as it has been considered for most of the citizens of the world over the last century is open for discussion. While there seems to be general agreement that there is no possibility of genuine democracy without the respect for human rights and the exercise of free and fair elections, I will choose to highlight some aspects that deserve renewed consideration:

- *Majority rule*
- *Minority rights*
- *Equality before the law*
- *Social, economic, and political opportunities for all, in pluralism*

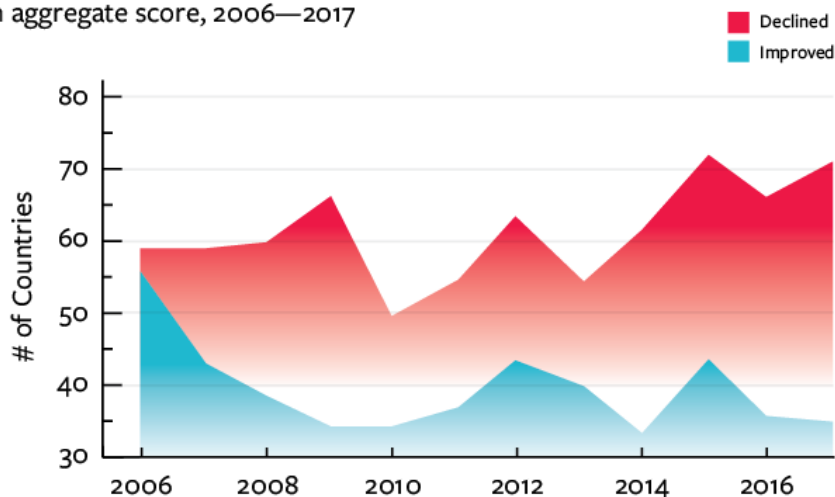
These principles are very grounded and seem so focused on the interest of the people and the peoples that appear to be unchallengeable.

Nonetheless, in recent years, democracy has been under threat and has lost ground not only in the share of democratic governments throughout the world, but, most worrisome, in the hearts and minds of many people.

The graphic below (taken from the Freedom in the World Report 2018) shows this decline in the last twelve years, measured by the number of countries evaluated in their aggregate score. The shift from decline in the aggregate score to improve is dramatic: from a relationship of 51/49 % in 2006 to a 67/33 % in 2017.

Twelve Years of Decline

Number of countries that declined and improved in aggregate score, 2006—2017



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This has been a systemic tendency and shows that some of the recent election results that caught our collective attention are only part of a larger trend that cuts across all regions and all peoples.

It is then opportune that we ask ourselves what has made a significant number of citizens move away from democracy as a prevailing value and cast their votes in support of authoritarian candidates that make their case based on self-centered, populist and isolationist propositions.

I think the concepts underpinning globalization –and specifically the rise of social media– have to be discussed early on. The fact is that globalization has reduced poverty worldwide - however, it has done so in a manner that has also generated increased wealth disparity within societies and national boundaries and among peoples and nations. Media has exacerbated the speed of information sharing across the globe and social media has eliminated many filters for the information that is disseminated. As we'll see later on in my analysis, these two elements are an integral part of the problem.

What has happened in the last ten years or so that has detonated this wave of anti-democracy in so many different corners of the world? Why is it that, after a sustained increase in the search for free societies, this backlash of thirst for more authoritarian leadership seems to gain space? Can we find a correlation between these objective results and some events that could have triggered them? Could this be based on the analysis of the principles that we referred to at the beginning of this paper?

I will search, in a concise manner, for answers to these questions. Without making an exhaustive analysis, I will try and probe which have been the most recent drivers of change in attitude towards democracy.

I will look into the tenets that underpin democracy as earlier described. I have chosen those ones that, from my perspective, may have had the most negative impact in people's minds.

The first ones to dwell into refer to the notion of **Majority rule and Minority's rights**. This delicate balance, in which "winner takes all" is not acceptable, has been put into question in many places. The recognition of compromise to foster balanced solutions accepted by all has weakened across continents. We see more cases of governmental paralysis due to blockages from majorities in one branch of government fighting against majorities in another one: legislative locked downs are more frequent even in cases where the subject under discussion is of utmost urgency, i.e. budget approvals. This has taken place not only in the United States but in many other countries in which care-taker governments survive for months or years or budget roll-overs become the norm due to the unwillingness to compromise between extreme partisan proposals.

The obvious conclusion for many is that traditional politicians care more about their infighting than about the people they are supposed to serve, that bureaucracies are not interested in finding real solutions and, most worrisome, that the good exercise of debate and dialogue that democracies bring is neither efficient nor effective enough to serve as a catalyst to effectively address the interest of the common citizen. Hence voices have been raised in defense of a stronger grip on decision-making processes by arguing that democratic procedures

do not have enough teeth to produce the much needed results in large circles of societies in which citizens view that their rights and needs have been left unattended and unaddressed by their leadership. Against this backdrop, the call for more authority and more authoritarian leaders is gaining traction.

The second area for consideration is **Equality before the Law**. Historically this has been at the heart of democracy; the notion of “all being equals” has given societies strength and resilience, and a sense of purpose that we all stand an equivalent opportunity to rise and grow.

Lately we have seen an explosion in the number of cases that show that the ones who “have” get a very different treatment before the law than the ones that “have not”. The idea that elites are able to get away with a different treatment in cases of misbehavior has permeated broadly. It applies to politicians, business people and people “of reference”, in sports, culture, media, education and science.

Multiple public cases of collusion between government and private sector, corruption scandals that touch the most senior levels, privileged treatment of government officials and use of taxpayers money in ways not consistent with ethical behavior have not concluded –in time and form- with justice applied to the ones who have broken the political, moral and ethical compact they are supposed to serve under. This lack of accountability has become a major threat to democracy.

It has created an overarching skepticism among large cadres of citizens that see elites not as a responsible part of their societies that work to improve the overall wellbeing, but as networks that, in a intertwined manner, maneuver for their self-service and gain. It also creates the very dangerous culture in which hard work and meritocracy do not matter because being part of the connection network is what really makes the difference.

I will end up this short analysis by referring to the notion of **social, economic, and political opportunities for all, in pluralism**, the

idea that we can all excel and have a promising future that allows our children to live better than us.

Trends of globalization and technological break-throughs have changed the pattern of job opportunities in a manner that has left many, in many places, jobless and without the skills necessary to reintegrate themselves into the workforce. The mismatch between geographic location of jobs and geographic location of workers with the required skills has yielded pockets of populations that have little hope in their future. No matter how good the overall throughput is (and it has been) and how many new jobs of new profiles have been created, the reality for those who were left out is grim and their future looks grimmer. Excellent average improvements do not change that reality and, even worse, they do not change the perceived reality of those individuals or groups that feel left out.

In this context, the 2008 crisis brought another reason for those people to feel that opportunities were not for them. The influx of resources into corporations that needed help was unprecedented: the automotive industry and banking sector were only two examples. Saving them from total break down was a high bet. Many economists argue that this was necessary to avoid a larger crisis that would have lingered and affected all people in an unknown manner, much larger than the crisis of the 1930's. It is outside of the scope of this paper to question this assumption. I will only make the case from the point of view of the common citizens. They perceive that decisions to allocate resources for big corporations in trouble were rapidly taken while there is not an equivalent decision process applied to small businesses or citizens in need. The theme of "Wall Street" vs. "Main Street" has permeated in the minds of many whose jobs ceased and have no alternative ones, the ones that feel that politicians provide no answer for or to them and, even worse, do not care about them.

The wave of rage that arose with the combination of all these factors, particularly in many "old industrial centers" is, in my view, the beginning of the search for magic solutions that bring back a past that doesn't exist anymore (for reasons far beyond democracy). A search that seeks the elimination of the root causes of the problems as perceived, problems produced by globalization, job displacement driven by supply chain integration, migrants that take away jobs and

self-serving political elites. This search for the promised land has become a perfect storm leading to the rise of nationalism, protectionism and populism across the western world and beyond.

In the meantime, the flipside of the coin has been that, in most of the developing world, a vast population has profitted from this jobs relocation and reprofiling which allowed for the largest number of people being lifted out of poverty in human history. It is also important to emphasize that many of these new opportunities profitted by many countries do not necessarily materialize in full democratic conditions. Somehow this fact seems to put in question the correlation between rising opportunities in democracy and a more equal and free society. These examples add doubts to an already suspicious audience.

Now I want to look into what is happening among the younger generations. Millennials have felt the impact of all these combined effects in a significant manner. It is millennials that have the largest negative perception growth vis-à-vis democracy. Foa and Mounk's research shows that millennials have become less attached to the importance of voting. In 1995, only 16% of 16 to 24-year-old Americans believed that democracy was a bad way to run the country. By 2011, that share had increased to 24%. In Europe, the generation gap is somewhat less stark but equally clear, with 53% of older Europeans and only 36% of millennials strongly rejecting the notion that a government's incompetence can justify having the army "take over".

These young people are more disenfranchised from politics and political activism. This, in a way, can become a self-fulfilling prophecy. The malaise has also deeply affected political parties because many people do not see the value in their intermediation role to exercise democracy.

With this loss of trust in democracy and its leaders, two trends have emerged:

- Those ones who seek more authoritarian leadership. A leadership willing to take the needed tough decisions and

- exercise the bestowed power to bring order and discipline and to set policies that favor the silent majorities; and,
- those ones who believe in “direct democracy”, without any intermediation, as the only way to practice it, through a continuous plebiscite that makes citizens govern and decide on every matter.

Social media has become a key instrument to further these views. The risk is that, as we have seen recently, social media can be clinically manipulated and ‘truth’ can be designed, encapsulated and targeted for different audiences, so that they hear and read what they want in their echo-chamber, they assume this to be “The Truth” and act accordingly.

These two trends are interrelated and play to each other’s advantage. They also represent a very dangerous path to follow. We have seen what authoritarian leaders with strong communications control have achieved in the XX century.

After this brief analysis, I can only conclude that, for democracy to be the government of the people, by the people and for the people, there are certain prerequisites to be met:

- Trust reestablished between the ones who lead and the ones who follow;
- Accountability for all but, particularly, for the ones who have been elected to serve;
- Equal opportunities for all; and,
- Equal and fair access to undistorted information in order to build a shared agenda.

The dire need to reconstruct this basic compact among all social actors is unquestionable. Politicians must understand the importance of recreating hope in the values of democratic societies, values that translate in a better future for all.

The rather simple formula should be:

- To focus on those policy decisions that minimize inequalities within and between societies;

- To prioritize those who are left further behind, especially young people;
- To realize that bringing women to the forefront yields the highest return in social and economic investment; and,
- To aim high in the long term while producing short-term deliverables that show continuous improvement in the lives of the people.

This represents hard work, a work that translates words into deeds, a work that starts by speaking the truth to avoid false expectations. I do not see any other way to move forward in a positive manner. Having said this, I leave you with the question of how feasible this is in a context where politics is dominated by marketing not by substance.