

American Democracy: For Whom Does the Death Knell Toll?

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American liberal democracy, once a model throughout the world, is in crisis. The most obvious symptom of this malaise is a paradoxical attitude that pervades an underprivileged section of the population that, against its own interests, supports the ruling plutocrats. How to explain this?

American democracy presents itself today in a dark light. Since Tocqueville, French intellectuals have often pontificated about American democracy, but this easy Tocquevillism gives short shrift to the insights of thinkers embedded within American political culture. Americans know very well what is happening to them. This article, written for both French and American audiences, gives the floor to Americans whose job it is to reflect on or act within American politics. Through a selection of recent books and public debates organized by Harvard's [Ash Center for Democratic Governance and Innovation](#), we can see how American intellectuals and practitioners view themselves. Under the direction of Archon Fung, the center offers an enlightening and unrestricted view of American democracy. Long serving as a hegemonic model, however contested, American democracy has changed since Tocqueville—and since the election of Donald Trump. The wounds are visible and could well prove deadly. The disease infecting American liberal democratic consciousness is advanced.

WE LIBERAL DEMOCRACIES NOW KNOW THAT WE ARE MORTAL

In the year 2018, *How Democracies Die* by Daniel Ziblatt and Steven Levitsky (Viking, Crown, 2018), both political scientists at Harvard, is a bestseller. The book is a comparative political exercise launched as a cry of alarm in the chaos of 2017. Like historian Timothy Snyder, author of *On Tyranny* (Tim Duggan Books, 2017), they dare to say the name of the political evil that hangs over the country by its name, the authors see the US joining the ranks of the very authoritarian regimes its leaders so often lectured on democracy. The roots of this evil lie in extreme political polarization, which, coupled with weak public support for political parties, helps explain the emergence and appeal of a populist candidate with belligerent instincts. The book, which regrets the loss of “institutional temperance” and “mutual tolerance,” is fundamentally Tocquevillian

in that it puts the onus not on institutions but on “culture,” liberal manners, and the democratic responsibility of the elites to block extremist forces.

This “culturalist” explanation, however, ignores history, because the New Deal, for example, was an inclusive democratic policy born in a very polarized moment. We must therefore also pay attention to the historical context, as the historian Moshik Temkin asserts in a noted article.¹ Ziblatt and Levitsky also ignore the deep economic causes of the anger and resentment expressed by Trump voters that preceded the erosion of democratic norms.

Sociologist Arlie R. Hoschild explores these sentiments in *Strangers in their Own Land* (The New Press, 2016), an exciting multi-year ethnographic study of Louisiana’s Tea Party. Bursting her own “liberal bubble” to “break the wall of empathy” between “us and them,” she endeavors to understand Trump voters and make an emotional appeal to the citizens of a state in the midst of economic and ecological “horror.” Her study reveals the “great paradox” that pushes conservative voters to refuse, by voting against a federal government with strong regulatory powers, the help they so badly need. This is the story of workers who feel abandoned by a government owned by predatory oil industries—a story in which faith and religion, repackaged by the Tea Party, exercise a consoling role that could be that of traditional partisan politics, if citizens had not turned away from it, convinced that neither the Republicans nor the Democrats cared about their growing misery.

Hoschild’s account is ultimately a story of the resentment of white men who see themselves as victims of anti-discrimination policies since the civil rights era. Advocates of social justice, affirmative action, and other progressive causes seem to care about everybody but them, and they feel “foreign in their own country.” Obsessed with the idea that they are being “passed over,” they resent not just political correctness, but also the tax laws and government that could potentially alleviate their suffering.

On this ravaged ground, one can understand the success of candidate Trump,² who needed only to blow on the wounds of lost honor and promise belonging in a new moral community (invoking Reagan’s “silent majority”), to provoke a sort of ecstatic

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1 “Historians should not be pundits.” *New York Times*, June 26, 2017.

2 Trump won 41% of the votes in the Republican primary in that state, beating Ted Cruz.

“high”—a “collective effervescence” based on the emotional communion between the charismatic leader, who became a “totem,”³ and his faithful followers.

What is harder to understand is why Americans have come to have such contempt for the political and social equality and ideals of inclusivity and justice that are the normative foundation of any democracy.

Entrenched inequality is also a feature of American life and political culture. As suffrage historian Alex Keyssar observed, the price of American “democracy” was an absolute inequality—the disenfranchisement of black voters, particularly in the South, by any means necessary.⁴ The public memory of racism remains fractured and contentious, with some defending monuments to the Confederacy and others—for example, Hasan Kwame Jeffries, who led students on a “trek” to the new Memorial for Peace and Justice in Montgomery after a [heartbreaking seminar on lynching](#)—highlighting the country’s history of racial terror.

If the disease afflicting American politics is rooted less in culture than in the legacy of unfair laws and institutions, an investigation of the institutional causes of the evil grounded in classic political theory may offer clearer insight. This line of inquiry frames the threat to American democracy as the usual kind of corruption that precedes the fall of great republics and signifies the end of collective freedom.

THE AMERICAN PLUTOCRACY

Yesterday the object of admiration and imitation in the world, American institutions are today in full decadence; with the blessing of the Supreme Court, moneyed interests have unrestricted influence in politics, upholding the privileges of a monied class that denies climate change, threatens workers’ rights, and manipulates law to concentrate wealth in the hands of the very few.

This evil is well known to the American public: 77% think it is necessary to reduce the role of money in politics.⁵ The *Occupy* movement clearly framed “the

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3 Terms borrowed from Émile Durkheim.

4 Keyssar, *The Right to Vote* (Basic books, 2000, reissue 2009).

5 [Pew Research Center Survey, May 8, 2018.](#)

1%” as an oligarchy problem. As political scientists and activists not only confirm but also methodically measure, denounce, and deconstruct this oligarchy, the public’s collective outrage may yet coalesce into a clear and determined opposition that could hold promise for a possible democratic renaissance.

In a nod to Tocqueville, Martin Gilens and Benjamin I. Page, political scientists at the University of California Los Angeles and Northeastern University respectively, recently published *Democracy in America? What’s Gone Wrong and What We Can Do about It* (University of Chicago Press, 2017). The authors offer a mountain of objective data to support their finding that American political institutions no longer reflect the wishes of the majority of voters. Polls show majority support for progressive policies on health coverage, minimum wage, gun control, and climate action, but Congress, the subject of widespread public disdain, consistently passes laws favorable to the rich minority. This is evident in curves linking public policies adopted to the preferences of citizens by level of income: the curves move according to the preferences of those with the highest incomes and are relatively insensitive to the preferences of those earning the median income. This inequality of political influence is also evident in the concentration of political contributions from the richest 0.01% of the country. In 2012, 59% of political funds came from 159 people, who contributed as much as 3 million small donors combined. Two Supreme Court rulings—*Valeo vs. Buckley* (1976), which upheld wealth as a form of freedom of expression, and *Citizens United vs. FEC* (2010), which conferred the same rights on corporations as individuals—gave rise to “super PACS,” which permit unlimited spending on political campaigns.

If the preferences of the very rich aligned with those of the majority of citizens, the threat to democracy might be less dire, but they differ greatly—especially on economic issues such as the budget deficit or the minimum wage and the fight against unemployment. In a country where lobbying is a \$3 billion-a-year market, where there are 22 lobbyists for every representative, and where legislators spend their time not establishing laws for the public good but courting donors for their re-election campaigns, it is no secret that money buys political influence.

Moreover, America’s two-party system has given rise to the plague of “gerrymandering” (named after Massachusetts Governor Elbridge Gerry, whose 1812 redistricting effort produced a district in Boston contorted into a shape resembling a

salamander). It seems clear that the principle of “one man, one vote” is not and has never been a guarantee.

The net result of these developments is a non-representative system that responds not to the voters’ interests and preferences but to the financial strength of political donors—and a system in which, as noted by Eric Holder, attorney general under President Obama, it is no longer the voters who choose their representatives, but the representatives who choose their voters. In a hyper-polarized political system captured by private interests, any powerful group can effectively block policies that it does not like. Together, the blocking power of entrenched interests and congressional inaction create what Francis Fukuyama calls the “vetocracy,” which has led to the death of, among other things, strong federal action on climate change.

Even more disturbing is the *covert* influence of money, which does not even pretend to go through the public electoral space, however imperfect it may be, but works in the shadows against the general interest. In an enlightening best seller, *Dark Money* (Doubleday, 2016), investigative journalist Jane Meyers describes how sibling oil magnates Charles and David Koch and a few billionaire donors organized by them have taken American democracy hostage to a strategy, as effective as it is secret, of all-out financing aimed at promoting conservative and libertarian policies, especially on climate. Their direct electoral donations, political action committees, financing of pseudo-scientific think tanks and “front organizations” claiming to represent the public interests of citizens concerned about climate, have misled public opinion and made the cause of climate action uncertain and disputed, leaving the sustainability of life on our planet in doubt.

The deliberate spread of anti-democratic ideology has hastened the degeneration of American democracy. In *Daring Democracy* (Beacon Press, 2017), a scathing denunciation of the American oligarchy and an inspired plea to escape its grip, democratic activists Frances Moore Lappe and Adam Eichen argue that an “anti-democratic movement” born in the 1970s as a conservative strategy aimed at “restoring private power” and a business-friendly climate, has achieved its goal to “master the narrative” and “manipulate the spirits” through massive investments in the media, lobbyists, and pro-business think tanks (e.g., The Heritage Foundation, the American Enterprise Institute), false journalism, support for laws restricting electoral participation or

climate action, and the continued stoking of white resentment against civil rights. This ideological movement effectively hollowed out the political system from the inside (following a chilling logic reminiscent of the Nazi party's internal phagocytizing of the German rule of law).

THE PEOPLE TO THE RESCUE?

The antidote to the plutocratic poison lies in two basic—but far from easy—tasks. The first is to remove money from politics by all available means: insisting on public financing of electoral campaigns (which often has immediate virtuous effects, such as more numerous and diverse candidates) and refusing large donations, as Bernie Sanders did and Kirsten Gillibrand, a rising star of the left wing of the Democratic Party, have done. The second is to ensure voter participation at levels that could back up the government's claim to be “of the people,” an objective illustrated by the simple but still utopian idea of “getting to 80%” promoted by Miles Rapoport, a former Connecticut secretary of state and president of the Demos think tank, who organized a symposium at the Ash Center with activists and policymakers from all states.

These solutions may appear overly optimistic and incremental as a response to an imperfect and archaic system. Achieving them will take a patchwork of approaches at the state and local level, including, for example, clean election laws that provide grants to candidates who refuse large donations, voter registration campaigns, and nonpartisan redistricting commissions. These initiatives all depend on a democratic activism that, state by state, kindles hope for democracy restored.

The “resistance” to Trump organized by groups like Indivisible, the Women's March, Friends of Bernie Sanders, Black Lives Matter, the March for Our Lives, and others have awakened hope for a [new federated social movement around democracy](#). With the support of these groups, new candidates determined to demand power and democratic equality among genders, races, classes, and ages are emerging as

determined opposition to the anti-democratic status quo.⁶ Democratic candidates across the country, from military veterans like Jared Golden in Maine to Stacey Abrams, first black gubernatorial candidate in Georgia, or Paulette Jordan in Idaho, who aspires to be the first Native American governor in the US, stand as reminders of all that America is and could be.

The 2018 elections will tell if this wave of democratic resistance is bearing fruit. Many are optimistic. The desire for equality is not dead in America, and the unheard voice of the people, outraged that their elected representatives have betrayed them for the economic benefit of the few, resounds not against, but for democracy.

A French language version of this essay was first published in *Analyse Opinion Critique* in June 2018 and can be found at aoc.media. The Ash Center for Democratic Governance and Innovation thanks *Analyse Opinion Critique* for granting permission to publish this essay in English.

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⁶ As illustrated by, for example, the fallout of the #MeToo movement. Fifty-two percent of voters now say they would never vote for someone accused of sexual harassment. See Barbara Lee Family Foundation, New Research: “[Voters, Candidates and # MeToo.](#)”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Muriel Rouyer is a Professor of Political Science at the University of Nantes and an Adjunct Professor of Public Policy at Harvard Kennedy School. A specialist of politics in the European Union, her research focuses on judicial and transnational democracy and mobilizations, constitutionalism, European and French feminism, and French politics.

She received her PhD in political studies from Sciences-Po Paris. Formerly she was a General Secretary of the *Observatoire National de la Parité entre les Femmes et les Hommes* (the National Agency on Gender Parity in France) and worked at the European Parliament. Involved in NGOs helping students escape the Balkan wars in the 1990s, she has an extensive international teaching experience: University of Chicago and George Washington University in Paris, Sciences-Po Paris, University of Belarus in exile in Vilnius (Lithuania), University Gaston Berger in Senegal, the University of Nice, and the University of Nantes, where she is on leave from her position as Professor of Political Science.

She is currently working on her book on *Transnational Democracy in Europe* (forthcoming, Presses de Sciences-Po). Her most recent publications include *Regards sur le cosmopolitisme européen (Perspectives on European Cosmopolitanism, 2011)* and “The Strauss-Kahn Affair and the Culture of Privacy: Mistreating and Misrepresenting Women in the French Public Sphere,” forthcoming in *Women’s Studies International Forum*.



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