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Journal of Democracy, Volume 27, Number 3, July 2016, pp. 18-23 (Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2016.0053>



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The Danger of Deconsolidation

HOW MUCH SHOULD WE WORRY?

Ronald F. Inglehart

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In this issue of the *Journal of Democracy*, Roberto Foa and Yascha Mounk write that the citizens of many countries are becoming dissatisfied with democracy and increasingly open to nondemocratic alternatives. The authors present considerable evidence in support of this claim, concluding that democracy is in danger.

Although I agree that overt mass support for democracy is currently weakening, Foa and Mounk's data suggest that this phenomenon is, in large part, a specifically American period effect, as the age-linked differences found in the United States are much greater than those found in other countries. For example, in Figure 1 of their essay, which shows the percentage of people who consider it "essential" to live in a democratically governed country, there is a 41-point difference between the youngest and oldest U.S. birth groups; the difference between the comparable European age cohorts is only 9 or 10 points.¹ The United States also stands out on a number of other variables as showing much larger changes in public opinion than most other countries.

What makes the United States so distinctive? One reason may be that in recent years U.S. democracy has become appallingly dysfunctional. It suffers from 1) virtual paralysis at the top, as exemplified by the will-ingness of Congress to shut down the federal government, regardless of the damage to the country's credit, after failing to get its way via normal procedures in a budget standoff with the White House; 2) massive increases in income inequality—greater than those found in any

other established democracy, with most of the population's real income declining during the past few decades despite substantial economic growth; and 3) the disproportionate and growing political influence of billionaires, as money plays a greater role in U.S. politics than in almost any other democracy. Most EU and Latin American countries have been much less severely afflicted by these problems. Indeed, one could argue that in recent years authoritarian China has been more competently governed in many respects than the United States.

I have not given up on democracy; I am convinced that, in the long run, it has crucial advantages over authoritarian rule. But I would agree that democracy in the United States has of late performed quite poorly, often even worse than other advanced democracies. A large share of the U.S. electorate seems to concur—especially the younger generation, whose political views are still relatively flexible.

Understandably enough, Foa and Mounk emphasize the most dramatic evidence in support of their thesis. Other evidence from the World Values Survey (WVS), however, presents a more nuanced picture. For example, although the prevailing trend is toward rising support for military rule, only eight countries show changes in this direction of 10 percentage points or more, and nine countries have moved in the opposite direction (though only two of them by more than 10 points). In the EU countries and in India, support for rule by “a strong leader who doesn't have to bother with parliament and elections” has shown net increases over time of about 5 percentage points, while in the United States it has shown net increases of about 10 points. The pattern is statistically significant but relatively modest.

Shifting Values

In fact, evidence from some key indicators suggests that the mass basis of support for democracy is growing *stronger*. For surprising as it may seem, cross-level analysis examining the impact of individual-level attitudes on societal-level democracy, based on survey evidence from scores of countries, demonstrates that tolerance of minorities is an even stronger predictor than overt support for democracy of how democratic a society actually is.² Thus the extent to which a public pays lip service to democracy is a far weaker predictor of Freedom House scores than is the extent to which a society accepts gender equality or tolerates homosexuality. Furthermore, as WVS time-series data demonstrate, mass support for both gender equality and tolerance of gays is growing rapidly in almost all developed democracies, including the United States, where same-sex marriage became legal in 2015.

Nevertheless, I agree with Foa and Mounk's central claim that public faith in democracy has eroded during the past two decades, while

support for nondemocratic alternatives has risen. And I agree that this is an extremely serious problem. I also agree with most of the reasons that they give for why this has been happening. But I would add one more.

About 45 years ago, I argued that “a transformation may be taking place in the political culture of advanced industrial societies. This transformation seems to be altering the basic value priorities of given generations as a result of changing conditions influencing their basic socialization.”³ A later birth-cohort analysis, based on hundreds of surveys carried out from 1970 to 2008, suggests that the relatively high levels of economic and physical security enjoyed by postwar birth cohorts brought about an intergenerational shift from “materialist” to “postmaterialist” values, as younger cohorts gradually replaced older ones in the adult population.⁴ This analysis also reveals clear period effects, reflecting current economic conditions: The intergenerational difference persists, but in times of insecurity all cohorts shift toward more materialist views, and with economic recovery they shift back toward their long-term baseline. Thus across this 38-year span, virtually all cohorts remain at least as postmaterialist as they were at the start.

This theory of value change implies that relatively secure people are likely to be more tolerant and to be more supportive of democracy than are less secure people. Confirming this interpretation, Christian Welzel and I present evidence that 1) economic development—together with declining vulnerability to starvation, disease, and violence—brings a shift from survival values to self-expression values, of which postmaterialism is just one component,⁵ and 2) that societies with high levels of self-expression values are far likelier to have democratic institutions and to be relatively tolerant of outgroups.⁶ High levels of existential security seem to be conducive to tolerance of outgroups and to democratic institutions.

Existential insecurity has the opposite effect. Although the economic miracles and expanding welfare states of the immediate postwar decades produced rising security and an intergenerational shift toward self-expression values, in recent decades most advanced industrial societies have experienced economic stagnation, rising unemployment coupled with massive immigration, and the worst recession since the Great Depression of the 1930s. The theory of intergenerational value change holds that a major influence on deep-rooted public support for democracy is existential security—the extent to which people grow up taking survival for granted or perceiving it as precarious.⁷ High levels of existential insecurity are conducive to authoritarianism, xenophobia, and rejection of new cultural norms. The economic stagnation and rising inequality of recent decades have led to increasing support for authoritarian, xenophobic political candidates, from Marine le Pen in France to

Donald Trump in the United States (either of whom could conceivably win their country's next presidential election).

Modernization and Democracy

Does the evidence presented by Foa and Mounk mean that democracy has reached its peak and is now in long-term decline? I think not. The bad news is that almost all the economic gains for the past few decades in the United States and most other industrialized countries have gone to the very top. Meanwhile, existential security has been declining for most of the population—especially the young, who face high levels of unemployment, even among those with university or postgraduate educations. The good news is that, in the long run, modernization helps to generate conditions conducive to democracy.⁸ Modernization is a syndrome of social changes linked with industrialization. Once set in motion, it tends to penetrate all aspects of life, bringing occupational specialization, urbanization, rising educational levels, increased life expectancy, and rapid economic growth. This transforms social life and political institutions, promoting mass participation in politics and fostering values that—in the long run—make democratic political institutions increasingly likely.

The long-term trend toward democracy has always moved in surges and declines. At the start of the twentieth century, only a handful of democracies existed, and none of them was a full democracy by today's standards. There was a large increase in the number of democracies following World War I, another surge following World War II, and a third surge in the latter part of the twentieth century. Each of these surges was followed by a decline, but the number of democracies never fell back to the original base line. By the early twenty-first century, about ninety countries could be considered democratic.

More than fifty years ago, Seymour Martin Lipset pointed out that developed countries are much likelier than less developed ones to be democracies—a finding that has since been repeatedly confirmed.⁹ This strong correlation reflects the fact that economic development is conducive to democracy. Democratic institutions do not emerge magically when a country attains a certain level of GDP. Instead, development helps to promote democratization insofar as it 1) creates a large, educated, and articulate middle class of people who are accustomed to thinking for themselves, and 2) transforms citizens' values and motivations, making people give higher priority to free choice and freedom of expression.

Multivariate analysis of WVS data makes it possible to sort out the relative impact of economic, social, and cultural changes, and the results indicate that economic development promotes democracy by bringing specific structural changes (particularly the rise of an educated and ar-

ticulate workforce) and certain cultural changes (particularly the rise of self-expression values).¹⁰ Wars, depressions, institutional changes, elite decisions, and specific leaders also influence what happens—but cultural change is a major factor in the emergence and survival of democracy.

Modernization raises the level of education within a society as the work force moves into occupations that require independent thinking, equipping people to engage more effectively in politics. As knowledge societies emerge, people become accustomed to using their own initiative and judgment on the job, making them more likely to question hierarchical authority. Modernization also makes people more economically secure. When a large share of the population grows up taking survival for granted, self-expression values become increasingly widespread. Despite the universal desire for freedom and autonomy, when survival is precarious such aspirations may be subordinated to the need for subsistence and order. But as survival becomes more secure, freedom and autonomy become higher priorities, and the basic motivation for democracy—the desire for free choice—becomes more dominant. As a result, people place greater emphasis on free choice in politics, and they demand political rights, civil liberties, and democratic institutions.

In recent decades, the majority of people in the United States (and many other developed democracies) have been experiencing declining real income linked with rising income inequality. Meanwhile, the U.S. government has been strikingly dysfunctional. Both factors have had a predictable impact on overt support for democracy. If we assume that these are permanent conditions, then the long-run outlook for democracy is indeed bleak.

But current mass dissatisfaction with the way in which democracy is functioning suggests that declining real income may not necessarily be a permanent factor. Economies are growing, but political parties on the left linked to the working class have lost their social bases and, consequently, their ability to bargain for redistributive policies. This has allowed economic gains to be captured almost entirely by those at the top.

Because of the resulting disparity in wealth, the struggle between the middle and working classes of previous centuries has been transformed (as Joseph Stiglitz put it) into a struggle between the 99 percent and the one percent—in other words, between the extremely wealthy and everyone else. In the United States, this has had profound political consequences: The Republican Party and the Democratic Party, to varying degrees, have both been viewed as serving the wealthy elite, and have lost the trust of much of the electorate. Mass publics are becoming convinced—correctly—that democratic institutions are not working well. This will not automatically bring wise and competent leaders to power. But one of the advantages of democratic institutions is that they are based on the principle of one person, one vote. In the

long run, if we really are facing a struggle between the elite few and the masses, a coalition representing the interests of the masses is likely to come to power.¹¹

NOTES

1. The is also true of Latin American countries, for which WVS data are available though not presented in the figure.

2. Ronald Inglehart, "How Solid Is Mass Support for Democracy—And How Can We Measure It?" *PS: Political Science and Politics* 36 (January 2003): 51–57; and Ronald Inglehart and Christian Welzel, *Modernization, Cultural Change, and Democracy: The Human Development Sequence* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

3. Ronald Inglehart, "The Silent Revolution in Europe: Intergenerational Change in Post-Industrial Societies," *American Political Science Review* 65 (December 1971): 991.

4. Ronald F. Inglehart, "Changing Values Among Western Publics, 1970–2006: Post-materialist Values and the Shift from Survival Values to Self-Expression Values," *West European Politics* 31 (January–March 2008): 130–46.

5. Inglehart and Welzel, *Modernization, Cultural Change, and Democracy*; Christian Welzel, *Freedom Rising: Human Empowerment and the Quest for Emancipation* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

6. Ronald Inglehart, *The Silent Revolution: Changing Values and Political Styles Among Western Publics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977); Ronald Inglehart, *Culture Shift in Advanced Industrial Society* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990); Ronald Inglehart, *Modernization and Postmodernization: Cultural, Economic, and Political Change in 43 Societies* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997).

7. Inglehart and Welzel, *Modernization, Cultural Change, and Democracy*; Welzel, *Freedom Rising*.

8. See Ronald Inglehart and Christian Welzel, "How Development Leads to Democracy: What We Know About Modernization," *Foreign Affairs* (March–April 2009): 33–48; Christian Welzel and Ronald Inglehart, "The Role of Ordinary People in Democratization," *Journal of Democracy* 19 (January 2008): 126–40; and Inglehart and Welzel, "Changing Mass Priorities: The Link Between Modernization and Democracy," *Perspectives on Politics* 8 (June 2010): 551–67.

9. Seymour Martin Lipset, "Some Social Requisites of Democracy: Economic Development and Political Legitimacy," *American Political Science Review* 53 (March 1959): 69–105.

10. See Inglehart and Welzel, *Modernization, Cultural Change, and Democracy*, chs. 7 and 8.

11. Ronald Inglehart, "Inequality and Modernization: Why Equality Is Likely to Make a Comeback," *Foreign Affairs* 95 (January–February 2016): 2–10.