

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: Let's take some of the fundamental research of recent, what are key terms in the analysis of the quality of government?

Roberto Stefan Foa:

“Quality” of government - or “good governance” as it is also termed - is fundamentally a normative concept, that gets used to describe what features of our political institutions might be considered desirable. As such, there is no single agreed definition, and it is more of an umbrella term.

That said, absence of corruption, congruity between citizen preferences and policy outcomes, quality of public services, rule of law, or political stability are typically the things authors have in mind. There are obviously differences between these, so it can be thought of as multidimensional, rather than operating along a single spectrum.

Jacobsen: The Centre for the Future of Democracy was founded in January 2020. Its inaugural *Global Satisfaction with Democracy 2020* report examined some of the indices of “satisfaction” with democracy writ large. What were some of the most startling findings in the midst of the research? It's a 60-page report.

Foa: The main finding is that there has been a sustained decline in citizen satisfaction with democracy across the world over the last generation, especially in the United States, Southern Europe, and Latin America. By using a dataset that has been compiled by my colleague Andrew Klassen, which combines over 4 million respondents from over 25 datasets across all major world regions, we were able to get the most comprehensive overview on this issue to date.

The second finding, however, is that some parts of the world have bucked this trend. In much of Asia, for example, people are fairly satisfied with their political institutions, so to some extent, the “crisis” of democratic legitimacy is also simply a crisis of the West. And in sub-Saharan Africa, though satisfaction has fallen since the 1990s, it remains comparatively high relative to other regions of the world. While the headline finding of global democratic dissatisfaction received the most press attention, the report itself sought to highlight these differences, not least of all as until now most empirical research is based on western democracies.

Jacobsen: We have been seeing concerns about Brexit, about inept handling of Covid-19, about populism and national reactionaries in much of the West, and the crumbling of infrastructure in several societies. Do these factors emerge in some of the data analyses? For example, we have seen more democracies in the world at any time in the history of the world now. So, I would not necessarily expect a massive drop in the number of democracies. Rather, I would predict a slowing or a declining of the rate of the institutionalization of democratic systems in previous autocratic or theocratic societies with said realities.

Foa: The data in the January report only public examined satisfaction with democracy and not the “health” of democracy in a broader sense. For example, we are not looking at the health of liberal democratic institutions, such as freedom of the courts or of the press. It is not that those things are not important, but rather that they are already covered very well by other projects, such as *Freedom House* or *V-Dem*. And there is already a very vigorous debate about whether the world is currently undergoing a democratic recession, and if so, whether that should be seen as a temporary plateau in the adoption and spread of democracy or if it is the start of a more profound reversal. But that’s not the focus of our January report. Academic research is a collective enterprise, so you have to focus on the areas where you are able to make an original contribution.

So instead the contribution of the report was deliberately very narrow - just to examine democratic legitimacy, measured via the indicators for which truly comprehensive comparative data are available. That is less a measure of the health of democratic institutions, and more a measure of how well citizens feel they are performing in delivering the other outputs citizens care about, such as public services, rule of law, and accountability in office.

That’s an important metric, though, because if citizens do not feel that democracies are delivering then it augurs badly for the stability and consolidation of democracy going forwards. While it is possible to have a democracy in which civil liberties are generally respected, but which are losing the faith of citizens, it may not be a sustainable equilibrium in the long term. If you look at countries like Venezuela in the 1990s, there was widespread disillusionment with the political system even though the country had been a liberal democracy for four decades. Then Chávez was elected and began to chip away at political rights and liberties. More recently we’ve seen the same thing in many western societies, and that has foreshadowed the rise of populism, so we need to see it as a warning indicator of potential instability.

Jacobsen: Following from the previous question, another facet is the decades-long view on the “satisfaction” with the level of democracy or democratic participation in societies, which leads to some questions about the international perspective or the global view on democratic participation and satisfaction. How pleased or satisfied are citizens in each region of the world with democracy as an idea?

Foa:

There are huge differences by region, while as I say was one of the key messages from our January work. The “crisis of democratic legitimacy” that we see today is disproportionately concentrated in specific regions, such as Latin America, Southern Europe, and the United States. Of course, those regions contain a significant proportion of the world’s democratic citizenry, so that means there is also a “global” crisis in a very real sense.

Jacobsen: Are there countries in the world in which the citizen population do not like democracy, do not see it as an ideal?

Foa:

Back in the 1990s, when global comparative survey research was still in its infancy, scholars noticed that majorities in every country agreed with the statement that “democracy” is the “best way to govern the country”. That was seen as proof that liberal democracy had emerged as the only remaining legitimate form of governance and fit with the *Zeitgeist* of the times.

But the problem with that conclusion is the ambiguity inherent the term “democracy” itself. It is what Walter Bryce Gallie had called an “essentially contested concept,” in that is interpreted very differently across different regions and within different ideologies. To give a very simple example, the country which in the 1990s had the lowest public support for democracy as a system of governance was Russia, where “democracy” was associated with the country’s anarchic transition from communism. Today, by contrast, a much higher proportion of Russians say they are “satisfied with democracy”, but they have in mind the system of “managed” or illiberal democracy set in place by Vladimir Putin. So that is hardly evidence of support for *liberal* democracy, in the western sense of the term, even if it is more pluralistic than the system of Soviet authoritarianism that prevailed in the 1980s.

More recently scholars have become a great deal more attentive to this issue, and there have been some innovations in survey design to attempt to tease out differing understandings of democracy. There is also good research on how those vary across the world, such as the work of Doh Chull Shin at the Center for the Study of Democracy at UC Irvine using the Asian Barometer surveys. But I still think comparative survey research has a long way to go on this issue. For example, comparative survey projects are only now starting to do bring in items examining “populist” conceptions of democracy, for example based on the principle of the “will of the people” or the denigration of political elites. Scholars of populism have examined this for decades, but somehow it never permeated through to the broader comparative survey community.

Finally, though, I think there is a more fundamental problem in making inferences about citizen support for democracy, which goes to the root of the assumptions inherent in survey research as a field. While survey respondents may have well-formulated opinions about their own lives, most people don’t have deep or fixed theories about political concepts. There is a longstanding tendency among political scientists to over-estimate the degree to which citizens are literate and fluent in political ideas. But since the classic work of Philip Converse in the 1960s, we know that isn’t true: people may have intuitions about certain issues, but those can be fairly shallow and labile. Perhaps one of the reasons why political scientists failed to anticipate the rise of populism, was an overly strong inference from responses to survey items, as the example of “support for democracy” above illustrates. Often people have a vague sense of what prevailing norms or socially desirable responses

are - but if those are skin deep, then they can alter rapidly when a society undergoes a dramatic change in the climate of ideas.

Jacobsen: Are there nations of the globe where the citizenry love democracy in spite of known or perceived flaws in the system, the leadership, the laws, and the institutions?

Foa: Yes, there are. This is something we generally observe in transitional democracies, where citizens are still fresh with the euphoria of democratic transition and the demise of an autocratic regime that was widely seen to be corrupt, oppressive, and illegitimate. In such cases, citizens are prepared to forgive the flaws and failures of their democratic institutions. So we see that today in Southeast Asia (e.g. Malaysia or Indonesia), as well as sub-Saharan Africa.

Secondly, it is still fundamentally true for many western democracies, insofar as many citizens who are frustrated or dissatisfied with the functioning of democratic institutions in practice still desire such institutions to function better. So for that reason, low levels of citizen satisfaction with democracy do not in and of themselves portend a systemic crisis. But the issue in my mind is how stable it is to have a society in which citizens desire a functioning democracy, but “really-existing” democratic institutions seem to be structurally incapable of reform. Something has to give - and the risk is that sooner or later that feeling turns into something more destructive, a desire to tear down the status quo and upset existing institutions, rather than implement gradualistic improvements.

Jacobsen: Is there dial relationship between populism, as in negative populism such as ethnic nationalism or some such thing, and democracy in which the increase in one, as a principle, tends to lead to declines in the other?

Foa:

Actually, I don't think that is a simple relationship. There are liberal forms of nationalism, such as that which swept across Eastern Europe following the collapse of communism. And not all forms of populism are authoritarian, though there is obviously a relationship between the two.

Just as importantly, however, it is important to remember that many forms of authoritarianism derive their legitimacy from being explicitly anti-populist. This was clearly the case for the dictatorships in Latin America in the 1960s and 1970s, which saw themselves as vanguards against democratic populism, as well as more recent military coups in countries such as Turkey, Pakistan or Thailand. The late political scientist Guillermo O'Donnell referred to these as forms of “bureaucratic” authoritarianism, as in contrast say to fascist or communist regimes which legitimated their rule by claiming to represent “the people”, they did so by claims to technocratic competence and political stability. One avenue historically by which populism leads to authoritarianism is democratic erosion when populists are afraid

of losing office, and there is an extensive recent literature on this following the “populist wave” of 2016 to date. But another has been in the reaction to populist excesses by societal elites, and that probably merits greater awareness.

Jacobsen: Do post-colonial politics play a role in satisfaction with democracy, e.g., Canada, New Zealand, South Africa, the United States, and Australia?

Foa:

Well, most of the countries you list there are former British colonies, which either inherited their democratic institutions directly from colonial governors, in the case of Australasia or Canada, or developed democratic institutions based on the inspiration of English radicals, in the case of the United States. These are also countries in which democratic institutions and national identity have been fairly closely intertwined, and historically that provided a baseline legitimacy to democratic institutions, so in those cases there are limits to how far a politician can go in making explicitly authoritarian appeals.

Jacobsen: Men leading countries in the rule rather than the exception. A type of male leader has been seen more and called strongman or strongmen leadership. What characterizes it? Who represent it? Why are these threats to democratic ideals?

Foa: I don't think a “strongman” leader necessarily has to be male - there are plenty of examples of strong female leaders, from Margaret Thatcher to Indira Gandhi - though I suppose the attributes of “strength” or “decisiveness” are probably more strongly associated with a certain understanding of masculinity.

But at any rate, I think the reason why such “strongman” leadership has been appealing in many developing democracies is linked to the lack of strength - the weakness - of the state itself. It is sometimes said in politics that institutions should be strong, so that individuals do not have to be. The flipside of that, is that when institutions are weak, people look for “strong” leaders to take their place.

I think that is a very important and neglected explanation for the rise of authoritarian populism in developing democracies today, and I am working on a new article on this currently. If we look at many new democracies in Latin America, sub-Saharan Africa, or the former communist bloc, the period of democratic transition has been accompanied by a steady erosion of the state's basic prerogative to provide rule of law, accountability, and fair access to services. In Brazil, the homicide rate has soared by six times since the 1980s, reaching a peak in the year before Bolsonaro was elected president. In Russia in the 1990s, crime and corruption became rampant, while public salaries stopped being paid. In India, the political system was mired in corruption scandals in the years before Narendra Modi was elected prime minister. So it is not surprising that when citizens see signs of dysfunction around them, they will be attracted by outsider “strongman” politicians who say they will drain the

swamp, take back control, and restore order. In many developing democracies, this appeal to restore order is at least as important as appeals to identarian politics.

Jacobsen: Do you believe this is the end of the democratic century or not? This would oppose certain visions of the world of some inevitable march towards progress. What are the indicators of this?

Foa: For context, that is a reference to an article Yascha and I wrote in 2018 in *Foreign Affairs*; for which the final assigned title was *The End of the Democratic Century*. In the end I quite liked the heading, in that there's an oblique reference there to Hobsbawn's "short" twentieth century, from 1914-1989 - a period that saw both the "second wave" of democratisation after World War II and the "third wave" in Southern Europe, Latin America, and eventually Eastern Europe - and of course Fukuyama's End of History thesis.

But when we talk about the "end of the democratic century" we are not saying that the world is about to descend into autocracy, as some people might misinterpret it. Rather the core idea there is about what we can know based on the past and whether it still allows us to make inferences going forward. In many ways, the twentieth century has an exceptional period, in which western democracies were economically and culturally dominant and played a key role in spreading democratic institutions throughout the world. So now as we enter a new century in which this is no longer the case, we need to re-examine the question of whether the established relationships between economic prosperity and democratisation will continue to hold. Now, it might well be that those theories will be vindicated. But already there are other signs that the relationship is changing: compare the fates of democracy movements in Venezuela, Hong Kong or Iran to those of Chile, Korea, or Turkey in the 1970s to 1990s, which could rely upon extensive international linkage and support.

So this is really an epistemological issue more than anything else. Almost all of the theories - and most of the data - we have in comparative politics about democratisation are based on this short period of time, going back to the early twentieth century. That's an important scope condition. We simply don't yet know how well predictions based on data from this period will hold up in a world in which western powers are no longer dominant, and liberal democracy is not the only form of governance among the most economically developed powers. Of course, they *might* do. The point is, we don't really know.

On a similar note, the same holds for an earlier piece we wrote in the *Journal of Democracy*, in which we introduced the notion of "democratic deconsolidation". I think there was a widespread misconception that somehow we were conjecturing that democracies across the world were about to collapse, not least of all as the piece got caught up in the wave of debate over U.S. democratic stability that followed Donald J. Trump's election in 2016. But what we actually wrote was something far more nuanced - namely that the *conditions* for consolidation, or *certainty* about the future of democratic stability, might be eroding, such that in

the future we wouldn't be able to assert with confidence that currently democratic countries will remain so indefinitely. Ultimately, that is a claim about what we *don't* know: we tended to assume that countries that have been democratic for a certain duration of time, one generation say, had almost no chance of backsliding away from democracy. So this is an argument about the end of the "consolidation paradigm" as a way of thinking about democratisation.

Jacobsen: What is secularization? How does this play a role in some of the analyses of democracy, autocracy, authoritarianism, and the like?

Foa: It depends on your definition. Secularisation in its broadest sense, as Weber's "disenchantment" of the world, does not necessarily produce democratic outcomes - after all, there are secular authoritarian regimes, just as there are longstanding democracies in religiously devout societies. Once you take away divine legitimation as a justification to exercise authoritarian rule, there still remain secular alternatives such as the nation state, historical progress, or claims to technocratic competence.

On the other hand if we think of secularisation in a narrower sense, as the distantiation of the secular and the religious realms, with the notion that religion should be confined to the private sphere while the public sphere, then there is both a conceptual and an historical link to democratisation.

Historically that was a very important moment in the emergence of western democracy, because you had a period after the sectarian conflicts of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries following which religiously-divided countries such as England or the Netherlands had to find new means to govern. And conceptually, once you "desacralise" political authority, you take its legitimacy out of the divine realm, and in to the realm of humanity. In England that meant parliamentary sovereignty, and in the Netherlands it meant confederation and constitutional protection of religious freedom.

Such historical comparisons might not seem relevant to understanding the position of democracy today, but arguably there are some post-colonial states, such as India, Lebanon, or even Nigeria where religious pluralism has pushed societies on the road to more democratic and decentralised models of governance. But the key point here is that it is not about secularisation in the sense of a society becoming less religious, but rather, in terms of how you manage ideological diversity. And unfortunately, it is still a lesson we are learning today in many parts of the world, where deepening political polarisation and divides between secular and non-secular ideologies continues to strain the governance of the public realm. Ironically, secularisation in the former sense can actually exacerbate that, and that is part of what we have seen since the 1990s in countries like the United States, where progressive secularism has reopened a conflict about the ideological neutrality of the state, that in a formerly more pluralistic society had been relatively more settled.