

The Puzzle of Liberal Democracy

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PRINCETON – Nearly two decades ago, the political commentator Fareed Zakaria wrote a prophetic article called “The Rise of the Illiberal Democracy,” in which he worried about the rise of popular autocrats with little regard for the rule of law and civil liberties. Governments may be elected in free and fair elections, he wrote, and yet routinely violate their citizens’ basic rights.

Since Zakaria’s piece, illiberal democracies have become more the norm than the exception. By Freedom House’s count, more than 60% of the world’s countries are electoral democracies – regimes in which political parties compete and come to power in regularly scheduled elections – up from around 40% in the late 1980s. But the majority of these democracies fail to provide equal protection under the law.

Typically, it is minority groups (ethnic, religious, linguistic, or regional) that bear the brunt of illiberal policies and practices. But government opponents of all stripes run the risk of censorship, persecution, or wrongful imprisonment.

Liberal democracy rests on three distinct sets of rights: property rights, political rights, and civil rights. The first set of rights protects owners and investors from expropriation. The second ensures that groups that win electoral contests can assume power and choose policies to their liking – provided these policies do not violate the other two sets of rights. Finally, civil rights guarantee equal treatment before the law and equal access to public services such as education.

Property rights and political rights both have powerful beneficiaries. Property rights are of interest primarily to the elite – owners and investors. They may be comparatively few in number, but they can mobilize material resources if they do not get their way. They can take their money elsewhere, or choose not to invest – imposing substantial costs on the rest of society.

Political rights are of interest primarily to the organized masses – the working class or ethnic majority, depending on the structure and cleavages in society. Members of the majority may be comparatively poor, but they have numbers on their side. They can threaten the elite with uprisings and expropriation.

The main beneficiaries of civil rights, by contrast, are typically minorities that possess neither wealth nor numbers. Turkey’s Kurds, Hungary’s Roma, Russia’s liberals, or Mexico’s indigenous population ordinarily command little power within their countries. Their demands for equal rights therefore do not have the potency that demands for property and political rights have.

Theories that purport to explain the historical origins of democracy have overlooked this asymmetry among claimants for different types of rights. These theories revolve largely around a bargain between the propertied elite and the working classes: faced with the threat of revolt, the elites expand the franchise and allow the masses to vote. In return, the masses – or their representatives – agree not to expropriate the elite.

Of course, the elite prefer an autocracy in which they rule alone and protect their own rights but no one else's. Throughout most of human history, they had their way.

A democratic bargain becomes feasible only when the masses are able to organize and mobilize around common interests. This makes credible both their threat of insurrection before the bargain and their promise to protect property rights afterwards. Historically, such mobilizations have been the product of industrialization and urbanization, wars, or anti-colonial struggles.

But these bargains, by their very nature, produce electoral democracies rather than liberal democracies. The dispossessed minorities who have the strongest stake in civil rights play no role during the democratic transition for the simple reason that they cannot normally bring anything to the bargaining table. So the democratic bargain yields property and political rights, but only rarely civil rights as well.

Viewed from this perspective, the puzzle is not why democracy so often turns out to be illiberal. It is that liberal democracy can ever emerge.

One set of circumstances that favors liberal democracy is the absence of clear-cut ethnic or other identity cleavages among the non-elites. Cultural and social homogeneity means that there is no identifiable minority against which the majority can discriminate. Scandinavian countries historically, and Japan and South Korea more recently, approximate this prototype.

A different situation that produces a similar outcome is the presence of multiple and overlapping cleavages. If there is no clear-cut majority-minority distinction, each group in power may be willing to recognize the rights of others for fear that it may face a period out of power in the future. This is the kind of precarious balance on which, for example, Lebanon's "consociational" democracy rested – until differential population growth and external intervention undid it.

A third possibility is that society's most distinctive ethnic or racial cleavage aligns with the divide that separates the masses from the propertied elite. In South Africa, for example, whites were both the elite and the racial minority. When the apartheid government negotiated with the African National Congress prior to the 1994 democratic transition, it demanded (and received) property and civil rights for the white minority in exchange for political rights for the black majority. The bargain has survived remarkably well, despite the tough times that South African democracy has experienced since then.

Alternatively, perhaps liberal democracy has little to do with the balance of power among social groups and their strategic motivations. Maybe it requires instead, the development over time of a culture of tolerance and civil liberties. Or maybe both are needed to sustain institutions that uphold property, political, and civil rights in the long

term.

Whatever the reason for the emergence of liberal democracy, we should not be surprised by how uncommon it is in practice. Only rarely do political forces align to produce a sustainable version of it.



DANI RODRIK

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Dani Rodrik is Professor of International Political Economy at Harvard University's John F. Kennedy School of Government. He is the author of *The Globalization Paradox: Democracy and the Future of the World Economy*, *Economics Rules: The Rights and Wrongs of the Dismal Science*, and, most recently, *Straight Talk on Trade: Ideas for a Sane World Economy*.



SHARUN MUKAND

Writing for PS since **2015**

1 Commentary

Sharun Mukand, a member of the Institute for Advanced Study, is Professor of Economics at the University of Warwick.

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