

THE CASE FOR CONSERVATIVE DEMOCRACY

Posted on February 22, 2022

The EUROPEAN CONSERVATIVE



It is time to discuss a conservative replacement for liberal democracy.

Category: [COMMENTARY](#)

Tags: [authoritarianism](#), [conservatism](#), [democracy](#), [elections](#), [liberal democracy](#), [Sven R. Larson](#)

Ever since World War II ended, parliamentary democracy has been known as the supreme form of government. Often referred to as "liberal democracy," it was hailed as an integrated part of the political model that won the Cold War. An often-heard point at the time was that if only liberal democracy would spread around the globe, all of mankind would eventually live in freedom.

Since then, liberal democracy, although superior to every version of authoritarian rule, has proven less than robust in its protection of our liberties. Its ailments were put on full display during the COVID pandemic, when governments across the Western world usurped virtually unlimited powers to restrict individual and economic freedom.

Those eruptions of power, sometimes outright tyrannical in nature, were of course benevolently motivated, but they were made possible by the weakness that of late has come to characterize liberal democracy.

We rarely discuss the structural weaknesses of liberal democracy, possibly out of fear that any questions asked about it will imply an argument for less democratic forms of government. Such worries, however, only serve to delay a long-needed conversation; the unbalanced power grabs during the pandemic—eventually provoking convoys of uprising from frustrated citizens—have made this conversation urgent.

It is time to put the ailments of liberal democracy on full display, and to propose reforms

that will reinvigorate both our democratic institutions and our freedoms.

It is time to discuss a conservative replacement for liberal democracy.

Reliance on atomistic self interest

In its stylized form, liberal democracy is a system of government where the popular majority, technically 50% plus one vote, is in full charge of governing a country. Legislation is passed in a unicameral parliament and there is no clear separation of the legislative, executive, and judicial functions of government.

Real world examples of liberal democracy are more complex, but they all place heavy emphasis on popular majority as the deciding legislative factor. Herein lies the seed of the ailment: the system is built on the implicit notion that universal suffrage cannot threaten the freedoms that the democratic government is charged with protecting.

People, it is said, will not vote themselves into tyranny.

History has, to varying degrees, proven this to be false. From the Weimar Republic, where democratic elections yielded the Third Reich, to the election of Hugo Chavez as Venezuela's president, democratic protection against tyranny has been inadequate. The reason is as compelling as it is simple: the notion that people will not vote away democracy and freedom rests on the false premise of aggregated self interest.

Voters are always motivated by self interest in one form or another; elections are simply aggregations of that self interest. If a majority of individuals vote to do away with democracy because they think it is in their own self interest, then the election will aggregate the decision to do away with democracy.

Again, in reality, liberal democracies are not as pure as our theoretical reasoning suggests. The measures applied to prevent a totalitarian transformation of a democracy are almost always brakes, not stop blocks. To take one example, qualified majorities for constitutional changes are little more than enhanced versions of the same majority principle that liberal democracy was built around.

The aggregate outcome of the atomistic decisions by self-interested individuals will still be the same as the majority of those atomistic decisions intended.

Corrupting universal suffrage

It is assumed that as long as every voter is rational (given that rationality is democratically inclined), people will not vote themselves into tyranny.

The problems amass when liberal democracy corrupts through individual self interest. This corruption appears to the outside observer as the willful surrender of freedom to government; what the individual sees as beneficial to him or her will in reality lead to the loss of what the individual sought to gain.

This corruption exists today and is at work in liberal democracies around us. Todd Huizinga [refers to this](#) phenomenon, with reference to Polish writer Ryszard Legutko, as the "seemingly inexorable tendency" of liberal democracy "to expand into all areas of life."

Another observer of the same phenomenon, U.S. Senator Barry Goldwater, explained in his book *The Conscience of a Conservative* (1960), how the corruption of individual self interest exhibits itself as government powers being used to restrict freedom. The same government that can be used to achieve the desirable ends of peace, law, and order,

can be the instrument for achieving undesirable ends—that government can,

instead of extending freedom, restrict freedom.

The "can...restrict freedom," Goldwater adds, "quickly becomes 'will' the moment the holders of government power are left to their own devices." Alternatively, if citizens can be motivated to gradually vote away their freedom under liberal democracy, those who wish to advance totalitarianism only have to turn the individual's self interest into an instrument for that purpose.

There is a considerable advantage to this method for advancing totalitarianism, compared to, say, the violent overthrow of a democratic government. If atomistic, self-interested voters can be corrupted into using democracy as a tool for totalitarianism, then its rise will be perceived as democratic—not totalitarian.

Many writers have insightfully exemplified the mechanisms of this psychology behind the corruption of self interest. One of them is Balint Vazsonyi, a Hungarian-born American conservative writer, whose essay "'Allowed' to be free: socialist mind-set" (available in his volume [*America on my Mind*](#), 2003) mercilessly shines its spotlight on the corrupting psychology of totalitarianism.

In the first stage, Vazsonyi explains, the corrupting forces inject their values into the language itself. New terms and phrases "creep into every-day use," stealthily bringing ideological preferences into our everyday lives. With socialism as his totalitarian example, Vazsonyi points to terms like "exploitation" and "economic justice." Another often used term is "inequality."

The corruption of language facilitates the second stage. This is where the forces of democratic corruption create a "growing preoccupation" with insoluble problems. Vazsonyi again:

Tangible and useful work in the community is replaced by blustery slogans that

lead to inaction and the early emergence of megalomania, such as eight-year-olds who want to save the Earth instead of learning to write their names.

A citizen who is rendered helpless in front of overwhelming problems, craves government protection from these very problems.

The aggregation of fear

Another psychological method used to corrupt self interest and habituate people to accept the diminution of their freedom is offered by Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn in his essay "Our Muzzled Freedom" from 1975. His focus is on the rise of open tyranny, but his chilling account of how Communism sank its fangs into the life and blood of the Russian people has universal applicability.

Solzhenitsyn highlights more pointed examples of corrupting psychology than those presented by Vazsonyi. However, the goal is the same: to convince people that "voluntary" surrender of their freedom is in their own best interest. Perhaps the foremost item on Solzhenitsyn's long list of corrupting methods is the creation of a low level of constant fear among people. Fear, he explains, takes many forms; a case in point, in the context of the social-media era is the fear of not living virtuously, or—with reference to Vazsonyi—what translates today as the worry about saying the wrong thing on Facebook or Twitter.

Social media, in fact, demonstrates how these forms of fear do not have to come directly from government. Private interests aiming to corrupt our self interest find abundant opportunities in online forums; our time is perhaps the most convenient in history for anyone interested in creating a collective desire for compliance. The means are abundant: fear of the consequences of using the wrong pronoun, or a word that has been tagged as offensive, can build a low but unrelenting presence of fear and—again—an urge to comply.

Once the fear of becoming a social outcast has engulfed the mind, people start worrying about associating with the wrong community or otherwise breaking imposed norms. Solzhenitsyn points to how many fears of various missteps, even minor ones, aggregate into "a correct consciousness of one's own insignificance." An individual who realizes his own insignificance knows that he is expendable, further incentivizing self-interested confinement within the boundaries of compliance.

Adherence to the collective becomes a virtue; individualism becomes a vice.

The welfare state and loyalty to government

British journalist Roland Huntford adds another example of how the individual is made insignificant. In his book *The New Totalitarians* (1971), he dissects the mechanisms by means of which the Swedish people were made to accept a rapid, total transformation of their own country. Over a period of 20 years, in the 1940s and 1950s, the socialist government turned a traditional, socially conservative European nation state into an experimental, socialist welfare state.

As I explain in *Democracy or Socialism: The Fateful Question for America in 2024* (2021), the transformation was so powerful that the socialist government even attempted to gradually eliminate private property. In the early 1980s, when half of the economy had been placed under government control, the Swedish social-democrat party launched a step-by-step plan to transfer ownership of large corporations into government hands.

Voted into power by a reconfigured individual self interest, the socialists opened the door and for a few years, Sweden stared into the communist chasm. The door was shut again after the socialist government lost the 1991 election, but the new center-right government never made any effort to change the underlying mechanisms that conditioned the Swedish people into voting for such a radical government in the first place.

Huntford identifies those mechanisms. He explains that while the Swedish people became loyal to the government that, in their view, had provided them with the opportunities to build material wealth, that loyalty will not endure when a totalitarian government wants to expand its power. Prosperity built from work is burdened by a defect: it is the product of "personal initiative" and therefore inadequate as a loyalty base. It does not work, Huntford explains, "for the subtler forms" of self-interest corruption. To bring about "a supine frame of mind," the corrupting force needs a "more vigorous and profound" measure.

That measure is the welfare state. It provides ample, tangible reasons for people to vote themselves into dependency on government. Once dependent, the fear of losing benefits secures their loyalty. That loyalty grows as more of their personal needs come under government control.

The welfare state is not in itself totalitarian, but it can elegantly serve as a tool for conditioning the citizenry into accepting totalitarianism.

Loyalty becomes a virtue; individualism becomes a vice.

As corrupting psychology gradually transforms the mindset of individuals in a free society, their resistance to open tyranny becomes weaker. When it is weak enough, the incumbent government, or even an inter-party power structure with a shared goal, will no longer fear the next election. The outcome is entirely predictable.

With the mechanics of corrupting psychology at hand, it is clear that liberal democracy cannot withstand the forces that corrupt atomistic self interest. But how does a society protect itself from this ominous yet subtle slide into totalitarianism?

The answer to this question resides in the architecture of conservative democracy. That is the subject of a coming article. Kindly stay tuned.