

How Democracies Fall: Exploring Historical Collapses and The Popular Appeal of Dictatorship

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Abstract. For the past few centuries, democracy has become increasingly dominant as a political system, especially in the West, and has projected itself to the rest of the world, with many believing that it is the best available model that provides economic development and stability. However, democracies have collapsed in the past and given way to autocracy, raising the question of why such failures occur and how sometimes people, through the electoral process, voluntarily enable the rise of dictators. This paper will thus examine historical cases of democratic collapse, particularly the Weimar Republic, and suggest that these failures were not solely due to factors like economic crises or political extremism, but due to the inherent contradictions within its basis of ideologies that make democracies hard to defend during times of crisis as opposed to autocracies. Exploring the reasons behind the failure, this discussion will, at last, apply itself to the current political climate and suggest that although today's democratic institutions are more resilient and trusted, the potential risks of collapse remain deeply rooted.

Keywords: Democracy; dictatorship; populism.

1. Introduction

For most of human history, empires and kingdoms under dictatorships ruled the planet, a system that historian Yuval Noah Harari describes as “the most stable form of government,” rarely overthrown from within [1]. However, in the past century, the world witnessed a shift in governing systems, with democracies gradually replacing autocracies all over the globe. Francis Fukuyama optimistically declared after the end of the Cold War and the dissolution of the USSR that an “end point of mankind’s ideological evolution,” had been reached, suggesting that liberal democracy had become the final and rightest form of government [2].

However, alarming recent trends seem to challenge this notion: a 2018 report from Freedom House warns of twelve consecutive years of declining global freedom, with over 71 countries facing democratic backsliding [3]. This raises the question of why this is the case as countless examples from the past demonstrate the risks of democratic backsliding and the atrocities dictators have caused. Therefore, this essay will explore the inherent contradictions of democracy that make it vulnerable, why populist leaders appeal to the masses in times of crisis which undermine democracy, and at last refer to modern democracies to see how they show signs of warnings from the past.

2. The Self-Contradictory Nature of Democracy

Democracy, though praised as a system that promotes equality and freedom, contains contradictions that may raise conflicts in its very foundation. Robert Dahl, in his book *On Democracy*, defines that despite the diversity in the structures of democratic constitutions, all democratic governments adhere to one core principle: “All the members are to be treated (under the constitution) as if they were equally qualified to participate in the process of making decisions about the policies the association will pursue [4].” This safeguards political equality among citizens which is a foundational concept to democracy that makes it appealing and fair. However, this principle of equality often opens the door to those who wish to exploit the system for their authoritarian political ambitions.

The Weimar Republic serves as an important historical example of a democracy undone by its contradictions. Established in 1919, it was one of the most progressive governments of its time, with universal suffrage for all men and women above 21 and proportional representation. However, this very mechanism that enabled representation and pluralism also led to its downfall, as the feature of “tolerance” of the Weimar democracy gave extremist leaders chances: the Nazis gained power through the democratic system and then dismantled it [5, 6]. Therefore, democracy itself invites pluralism which serves as a risk factor for the system, yet pluralism and the willingness to tolerate different opinions is one of the most important values through which democracy stands.

Weimar democracy’s tolerance was further exemplified in the trial after the Munich Putsch in November 1923. The fact that Hitler was only sentenced five years in which he served nine months for high treason shows how democracy is so very tolerant of those who not only turn against the ruling party but the system itself. The ban on the Nazi party was even lifted in 1925 despite its attempted coup, which allowed it to run in elections and gain national attention, eventually becoming the majority party in 1932. This serves as an example of which democracy’s tolerance makes it vulnerable to opposition, which does not happen in autocracies.

In autocracies, the main objective is based on maintaining order and control over the population, therefore dictators use what they see fit to keep the opposition quiet. For example, in Nazi Germany, Hitler’s autocratic rule faced very little effective resistance, even when war shattered the promise of “bread and jobs”. This is because the Gestapo, SA, and concentration camps suppressed most opposition into submission and the banning of parties ruled out the possibility of political pluralism, making Nazi Germany mostly unified from within, so only when the Soviets marched into Berlin in April 1945 did the regime finally collapse.

However, it is important to acknowledge that democracy’s tolerance, despite its risks, also contributes to long-term stability. Unlike autocracies, where dissatisfaction with the status quo often leads to violent uprisings, democracies allow for peaceful transitions of power through elections. Citizens dissatisfied with the current ruling party have the option to vote for a different one, reducing the likelihood of political violence. Especially with proportional representation which expands representation, it can reduce the chance of conflicts as it reduces the spillover outside the system [7]. In this sense, democracy’s openness to opposition ensures that governance remains flexible and adaptable, offering a safety valve for societal discontent that may resort to violence.

Nevertheless, as political theorists like Plato suggest, too much tolerance can jeopardize the long-term stability of democracies. Plato in *The Republic* warned that excessive freedom in democratic systems enables unqualified and self-serving individuals to seize power, using Socrates’s analogy of an unskilled captain being voted into power that leads to a sinking ship [8]. Therefore, Weimar Germany’s proportional representation system, which led to multiple parties with no majority may have proved to be less sustainable than Britain’s parliamentary. Britain’s system, which led to dominant political parties of the Whig and the Tory at first, and then the Labour and Conservative in modern times, reduced the risk of extremist factions destabilizing the system. Thus, the balance between representation and stability is critical for the durability of democratic regimes, as excessive freedom in the choice of democratic parties can lead to internal collapse.

3. The Appeal of Populist Leaders in Times of Crisis

Populist leaders often rise to power by capitalizing on the weaknesses of democratic systems, particularly during periods of crisis. This is shown by both Adolf Hitler and Napoleon Bonaparte’s rise to power, who turned democratic institutions into autocratic regimes by capitalizing on public disillusionment. By presenting themselves as the sole figures capable of restoring stability, they manipulated the desperation of the masses to seize control. Therefore, this section of the essay will attempt to explore the appeal of populist leaders to the wider population during times of economic crisis and suggest the reasonings in why people believe in their grand promises.

Adolf Hitler's rise during the early 1930s illustrates the appeal of a populist leader. Initially, the Nazi Party had limited electoral success, but the economic collapse of the late 1920s, exacerbated by the Great Depression, created fertile ground for Hitler's populist rhetoric. His slogans of "bread and jobs" were simple yet effective, gaining his support with a population devastated by unemployment, hyperinflation, and social instability: at the height of the crisis, six million Germans were unemployed, and deflation crippled the economy. In this context, Hitler's centralized promises of job creation appeared as practical solutions, especially compared to the indecisive and incompetent coalition governments of Brüning and Müller, who executed policies of austerity and deflation which added to the desperate situation.

Moreover, Hitler exploited deep-seated anti-Semitic and nationalistic sentiments, using Jews and the Treaty of Versailles as scapegoats for Germany's economic and political woes. His 25-point Program, which included anti-Semitic policies and the determination to overturn the treaty, gained traction as people sought simple explanations for their sufferings. Therefore, Hitler's ability to offer clear and emotionally charged answers to complex problems made him particularly appealing during the economic and political upheavals. This is because, in times of crisis, democratic institutions often seem slow and ineffective, making authoritarian figures like Hitler appear as decisive leaders who can bypass bureaucratic delays.

Napoleon Bonaparte followed a similar path. After the French Revolution, which dismantled the old monarchy and experimented with various forms of democratic governance, France descended into political chaos. The Directory, which ruled from 1795 to 1799, was seen as weak and ineffective, leading to widespread dissatisfaction, whilst Napoleon's military victories, particularly during the Italian and Egyptian campaigns, earned him national fame and popular support. By presenting himself as a stabilizing force in the chaos, Napoleon justified his seizure of power, offering the French people a return to order and national glory. Like Hitler, he capitalized on a desperate populace's desire for strong leadership and simple solutions, a contrast to the perceived inefficiency of democratic processes at the time.

This appeal of populist leaders during crises is not a new phenomenon. As Socrates warned in "The Republic", democracies are vulnerable because they allow power to be claimed by those who are skilled at appealing to the masses, disregarding their competence to rule or their moral integrity [8]. Populist leaders thrive in crisis environments, as they can sway public opinion with charisma and simplistic promises, offering emotionally satisfying but often unrealistic solutions. Recent studies, such as one published in the *Journal of Business Ethics*, provide the reasons why people continue to support authoritarian leaders in contemporary times.

Agata Mirowska and her colleagues argue that cultural, religious, and societal factors play a significant role in shaping our preference for "strongman" leaders, particularly during times of instability [9]. The study identifies several traits that make these leaders appealing—domineering, manipulative, selfish, and loud, among others. Although these traits appear negative, they resonate with individuals who feel threatened by external crises and perceive such leaders as protectors of their interests. Jonathan Haidt's Moral Foundations Theory helps explain this phenomenon: individuals who prioritize group cohesion over individual needs are more inclined to support authoritarian leaders [10]. In times of crisis, people seek a sense of community and are drawn to leaders who, despite their harshness, are seen as more capable of restoring order and stability in dangerous, unpredictable environments.

However, it is crucial to recognize that dictatorships also fail when they are unable to deliver on their promises, especially during economic crises. Therefore, it is often that people do not seek authoritarianism because they prefer an absolutist leader, but rather as an alternative to a disappointing democratic government. This can be seen in the Russian February Revolution of 1917. Initially, the Russian populace supported Tsar Nicholas II during World War I, but as the war dragged on and food shortages and transport dislocation became severe, public opinion turned against the regime. The soldiers, once loyal to the Tsar, eventually joined the protesters. The revolution called

not for authoritarian rule, but for democracy, showcasing the fact that people's loyalty to any system depends on its ability to meet their needs.

Ultimately, populist leaders appeal to the public not only because of their rhetoric but because of the broader failures of democratic institutions during crises. The sense of disillusionment with slow-moving, complex democratic processes drives people toward leaders who promise swift action and decisive leadership, even at the cost of democratic norms. Similarly, when authoritarian regimes fail to provide necessities, they also face opposition. However, absolutist regimes often last longer than expected and only lose their coercive power when they lose control over key instruments of violence, such as the military. This can be evident in the case of Tsar Nicholas II: it was only when his soldiers abandoned him that his rule collapsed in 1917, since during the 1905 Russian Revolution, the Tsar managed to quell the uprising by maintaining control of the military.

4. Findings and Application to Modern Societies

From the weaknesses of democracies this essay has discussed, one can conclude that democracies rely heavily on the trust that citizens place in their institutions and leaders. Once this trust erodes, the democratic system becomes vulnerable to collapse or extremist takeovers, more so than authoritarian regimes, as absolutist regimes have oppressive measures and the army to prolong their rules.

In the case of the Weimar Republic, trust in democratic governance was severely undermined by economic hardship and political fragmentation. The hyperinflation of the early 1920s, followed by the Great Depression, created widespread frustration. In this climate, Hitler's simple, populist solutions became appealing because people no longer trusted democratic institutions to address their needs. This serves as a precaution as the economic crises that facilitated Hitler's rise to power were not unique to Germany; they represent a recurring theme in the collapse of democracies worldwide. In the case of our contemporary society, populist leaders such as Donald Trump have also capitalized on public dissatisfaction with the economic situation and unemployment. Trump's appeal was similarly built on simple solutions to complex problems: blaming immigrants for economic stagnation, promising to restore national greatness, and portraying himself as the sole saviour who can fix the system. His slogan "Make America Great Again" parallels populist rhetoric from history, where leaders claim to "truly" represent the people against corrupt elites.

Despite these challenges, modern democracies have demonstrated resilience. For example, the U.S. withstood Trump's authoritarian tendencies during his presidency, highlighting the importance of maintaining trust in. This is because the U.S. Constitution, which has been in operation since 1789, is the world's longest-surviving written charter of government. Therefore, America's long-standing democratic tradition means citizens of America have deep-rooted faith in the system, as it has led to great economic and diplomatic successes in the past.

However, the global rise of populism and the shift towards the right suggests that trust in democratic institutions may not be as strong elsewhere. In countries with shorter democratic histories, such as Brazil, which experienced democratic backsliding under President Jair Bolsonaro, or Hungary, which was part of the Soviet sphere of influence, this trust is more fragile. Therefore, if democratic governments fail to address economic and social discontent, they may find themselves increasingly vulnerable to collapse.

5. Conclusion

To conclude, while democracy is often celebrated for its inclusivity and adaptability, it is far from immune to collapse. Its core values of tolerance and political equality can also make it self-contradictory and inefficient at times, especially in periods of crisis, when populist leaders offer simplistic solutions to complex problems. On the other hand, although autocracies may appear more decisive and appealing during crises, they too face collapse when they fail to meet citizens' needs or lose control over their monopoly to violence. Therefore, both systems are susceptible to collapse in

times of crisis, but where autocracies collapse from the concentration of power and are overthrown by coups or invasions, democracies can crumble from internal discord through the electoral system.

However, despite its many limitations, democracy has evolved. It is no longer an experimental concept but a system that people have grown to trust. Therefore, as Winston Churchill famously remarked, "Democracy is the worst form of government, except for all the others that have been tried." The key to its survival lies in finding a balance: allowing democracy to be flexible but not excessive, inclusive yet not easily subverted.

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