

Literary Review

Introduction:

Few subjects of study are more widely researched by political scientists than the many shapes and sizes of democracy. What democracy is and why it flourishes in some states but fails in others are constant academic curiosities. Many studies examine the failure of democracy in unconsolidated regimes that were lacking the necessary development or public commitment for this form of government to thrive. This paper is taking the less traveled path of asking the important question: Why do well established democracies fall to authoritarianism? It is imperative that scholars understand common weaknesses within democratic regimes to preserve them for future generations. There are clear patterns that indicate strong democracies fail when they endure a pattern of poor leadership refusing or unable to uphold their state's constitution. There may be multiple reasons for this dereliction of duty such as state economic instability and elite driven pressures. Leaders who are meant to stand by constitutional rules eventually fail to guard against a demagogue's advancement of power, and may even join in the effort to subvert democracy. This paper will explore democracy for its strengths and weaknesses; the role elected leaders play in preserving it, would-be authoritarians who seek to destroy it and how voters can be manipulated to set the course for a dictatorship. The goal here is to show the responsibility elected leaders carry to protect democracy and uncover why consolidated as well as those democracies on their way to consolidation can buckle under the pressure of antidemocratic principles.

What is a Consolidated Democracy?

In order to reflect on what may go right or wrong in a democracy, it is important to understand what it is conceptually and functionally. There are many philosophical and structural contributions that have mutated over time to formulate what most people living under a strong democratic regime believe it to be. James Madison (1788) understood that left to their own devices, humans would struggle to act in a way that facilitated a nation with freedom at its core. Men would always seek power if they had an opportunity which is why he helped develop what is referred to as Madisonian Democracy. Via the Federalist Papers No. 51, the concept of separation of powers and the protection of citizens from other citizens was documented for all time (Madison, 1788). This ability of state institutions to hold one another accountable is called *horizontal accountability* today, and, although in varying degrees, is present in most consolidated democracies (Chenin, 2014).

David Beetham (1999) believes democracy is more than a collection of institutions that profess prodemocratic mottos and fly a flag of freedom on their doorstep. It is more than a bright idea that a group of privileged white landowners first brought to fruition over two hundred years ago. He suggests democracy is system of collective decision-making that is only as good as the two main principles that define it: *popular control* and *political equality*. Popular control means that the regime is controlled by its members while political equality puts all of the members on an even playing field to choose how to make decisions (Beetham, 1999). This is where some of the staples of democracy begin to enter in to the equation. Free and fair elections are part of the popular control principle which must be protected because this is how

citizens hold their elected leaders to account. This ability of individuals to hold state institutions accountable is called *vertical accountability* and is a central part of every democracy on the planet (Chenin, 2014).

When a country has maintained a democratic regime for a substantial period of time in order to establish its *sovereignty*, *legitimacy* and *bureaucracy* within a defined territory, it is a consolidated democracy. All of these elements need solid economic stability to ensure there are resources to provide them as well. Sovereignty is a state's internal sole authority to make laws and enforce them as well as its external ability to defend itself and stand on its own two feet (Linz & Stepan, 1996). A country has established its legitimacy when its citizens recognize the state's right to rule over them. For a consolidated democracy, this can involve all three forms of legitimacy simultaneously: rational-legal, traditional, and charismatic. The most important of these within a democracy is rational-legal legitimacy which is the accepted process of leadership selection based on laws that all citizens, including leaders, fully commit to. Traditional legitimacy is also critical because it is measured by the length of time a society has established the practices that determine the right to rule. Charismatic legitimacy is not essential to democracy but often comes into play during elections because it is based on the personality of a leader (Linz & Stepan, 1996). Last on the list of consolidated democratic attributes is a well-functioning bureaucracy. This means that the institutions developed within the regime work efficiently to deliver substantial political goods to its citizens. This is how a state can ensure civil, political and social rights which is the heart and soul of a democratic regime (Marshall, T. H., 1969).

Authoritarian Designs:

As noted above, democracy was born with the Madisonian understanding that there will always be some power-hungry humans trying to corrupt the purity of democratic principles. Well intentioned constitutions are designed to subvert these attempts but they are not always successful. In a democracy that has been partially or even entirely consolidated, would-be authoritarians can use the electoral system to gain power and dismantle institutions. This process is often so subtle that citizens, who might otherwise rise up to protect their freedom, do not even see it coming (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2019). This is a process taken in steps, not always in the same order but always intended to confuse the people and manipulate the leadership.

The first step any would-be authoritarian must take is to sow division within a society by playing off the people's grievances. This is how citizens can be duped into supporting dictators because not everyone has time in their day to keep apprised of daily politics. Even though a liberal democracy is built on the concept that the will of the people should rule and all people are capable of knowing what is in their own best interest, they can still be conned into voting against those interests (Beetham, 1999). Yves LeTerme (2018) wrote about new challenges to ensuring a level playing field in the electoral process with "cyberhacking" and the incredible impact that "fake news" can have on a society. When political actors intentionally manipulate information that voters depend on to make informed decisions, democracy becomes exponentially more difficult to get right.

Would-be dictators have found that it is easier to go the route of inciting divisions and winning an election based on false promises than to overthrow an established democracy via a coup. Adolph Hitler found this out the hard way when he led an unsuccessful attack on Munich municipal buildings, attempting to take over the government. What has become known as Munich's Beer Hall Putsch of 1923 was thwarted by authorities and Hitler spent 9 months in prison, where he wrote the infamous *Mein Kampf* and calculated his next steps. Hitler knew then that if he were to come to power, he would have to do it democratically (Levitsky & Kiblat, 2019). Hugo Chavez of Venezuela learned the same lesson almost seventy years later when he led a failed coup with a group called "Bolivarians" against then President Carlos Andres Perez. Chavez also went to prison for treason but was released with the idea that it would help calm the waters and bring people together. Instead, Chavez used it to dismiss his previous actions and rally the people to eventually elect him democratically (Levitsky & Kiblat, 2019).

It may seem impossible to understand how citizens could ever vote for these men we now know to be ruthless dictators. They often use an event or some form of perceived instability within the democratic regime to incite the people to join their plight. Hitler, as well as Peru's Alberto Fujimori, used a strained economy to ignite a call to action which led to their rise to power (Levitsky & Kiblat, 2019; Kenney, 2006). Economic instability is the most common governmental criticism used to formulate divisive rhetoric in an effort to hinder democratic consolidation (Svolik, 2015). This directly plays to the grievances of the general public who is always first to feel economic hardships within any regime and is very effective.

Once in power, those leaders with a flair for the authoritarian model begin their unraveling of democratic norms. Some dictators do not seek leadership for the explicit purpose of taking over, it just finds them. As in the case of Peru's President Fujimori who, as a political outsider, surprised even himself by winning the 1990 election. There is no indication he set out to be an authoritarian but because congress was made up almost entirely of opposition leadership, Fujimori failed to get through his signature reforms in the beginning. This sparked an all-out attack on democracy as he began ruling via decrees and rejecting any collaboration with congress. As political leadership and the judiciary tried to reel him in, he just railed against their efforts publicly in the most venomous ways. In just a two-year period, Fujimori announced he was dissolving congress and the constitution (Huq & Ginsburg, 2018; Levitsky & Kiblatt, 2019). This is a dramatic example as some leaders do this in much more subtle ways.

Vladimir Putin is, without a doubt, one of the most adept executives at gaining authoritarian power while still pretending the constitution and electoral process matter to him. That makes what he has done to subvert democracy in Russia the best modern example imaginable. Since being appointed to take office by Boris Yeltsin in 1999, Putin was able to gain popularity by using the bombing of a Russian apartment building to stir up divisions and win the 2000 election (Hug & Ginsburg, 2018). From that point he was able to begin seizing control of the media, major businesses, imprisoning opponents. When he began to lose popularity, Putin started manipulating elections and rewriting the constitution to give him an unfair advantage (Levitsky & Kiblatt, 2019). These are textbook tactics for squashing democracy which, when used methodically, play heavily on the fall of all levels of democratic regimes.

Influence of Leadership:

It may seem that authoritarian masterminds are the obvious cause of dead or dying democracies around the world. While it is true that authoritarianism can answer “how” democracies fall, it does not explain “why”. The true strength of a democracy is only as powerful as the congressional leadership the people elect. As mentioned above, consolidation means that a democratic regime remains intact over a substantial period of time and many obstacles. Leadership positions within the executive, legislature and judiciary traditionally take an oath to uphold the constitution of a democracy. Even though the process of oath taking has become somewhat arbitrary and monotonous, the promises made are among the most important for the life and longevity of a democratic republic. The leaders must reinforce the constitution and do everything they can to protect it knowing there will be grave consequences if they fail. Nearly all modern democracies incorporate political parties in order to create a group of voters with similar governmental priorities and beliefs. Those parties nominate candidates to run for various levels of office and it is here that the protection of democracy begins. Sometimes, people run for office who have authoritarian tendencies and it is the responsibility of the political party elites to filter out those who may threaten democracy. This may mean that members of opposing parties who hold public office have to work together in some ways to put the well-being of the state above the political aspirations of the party (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2019). There are many ways this can be achieved.

One may wonder how we could possibly know a person running for office has authoritarian intentions. There are traits that are easy to detect and difficult to hide if those charged with defending democracy are paying attention. Juan Linz (1978) wrote

his “litmus test” for antidemocratic politicians so that all citizens, especially those in leadership positions, could recognize a would-be authoritarian and stop him before he gained too much power. He said a democracy has cause to worry when a politician: (Linz, 1978, pp. 29-30)

1. Rejects the democratic rules of the game either with actions or language.
2. Denies their political opponent's legitimacy.
3. Encourages or tolerates any level of violence.
4. Is willing to subvert the civil liberties of the media or opponents.

The reasons for failure or success of political leadership to hinder those who would destroy a state's democratic way of life can be complex to weed out. The job of leadership in a democracy is to always put the people first but that can be easier said than done. Whether a politician is corrupt or miscalculating, they and the power of their parties are at fault when a consolidated democracy falls to authoritarianism.

Leadership Successes:

Nancy Bermeo (2003) referred to “distancing” as a means for political parties to thwart would-be dictators within a democratic regime. This is not necessarily an easy task because it sometimes requires alliances to be built between parties or candidates that are in opposition to save the republic as a whole. Parties can begin by rooting out extremists from their ranks before they are able to get close to power. That means keeping them off the ballots entirely by whatever means possible. The United States has a long history of this with backroom deals amongst party leadership to make sure they were putting forth candidates that could win and extremists were the least likely to

do that. Henry Ford is an example of an extremist figure who was very popular among the people but whose hopes for presidency were squashed early on by a lack of congressional support. If there had been a primary process for nominating candidates at the time, history might look very differently with a President Henry Ford on the books (Levitsky & Kiblatt, 2019).

Another means for protecting democracy from within is for prodemocratic parties to not only avoid alliances with antidemocratic parties but to also, as mentioned above, join forces with other parties otherwise in opposition with them. We can look to history for a perfect example of this in 1930s Belgium. The extreme rightwing Rex Party was on the rise and when given the choice of aligning with them, the Catholic Party opted to actively refuse. This decision was in spite of some similar positions but the conservative party saw what had happened in Germany and Italy and would not support a subversion of their democracy. To stop the Rex Party leader Leon Degrelle from advancing to power, they joined with the Socialists and Liberals to secure their candidate Paul van Zeeland won instead (Wouters, 2004). Sometimes, parties are the only line of defense and they must work together to save democracy.

Political parties also must be cautious not to normalize the behavior of demagogues. Finland had its own bout with the extreme right Lapua Movement from 1929-1932. Initially, the center right Agrarian Party was inclined to align with them because the Lapua's anti-communist rhetoric was good for them politically. In 1930, Pehr Evind Svinhufvud, a Lapua Movement ally, became president and the group turned more radically violent, even targeting the moderate Social Democrats with kidnappings and a 1932 failed putsch to replace the government. This was too far for

the Agrarians so they created the Lawfulness Front with other opposition parties and even President Svinhufvud denounced the violence rather than normalize the behavior. Isolated, the Lapuas lost ground and eventually dissolved (Abonen, 1993).

Political Leadership at its best will do whatever it takes to protect democratic principles and reject authoritarianism entirely. When that does not happen, one must seek answers as to why they failed and what powers were at work.

Leadership Failures:

There are just as many examples of leadership failing to either recognize the danger of a potential dictator or allowing themselves to be co-opted and bought off. Sometimes leadership fails out of fear and makes the false calculation that it is just easier to allow some rules to be broken in order to save themselves. No matter the intention behind the failure to thwart a dictator's advances, the resulting fall of democracy remains the same.

Looking back to the rise of Adolph Hitler, we can identify the massive miscalculation of noblemen, like Franz von Papen, who knew they were making a deal with the devil by aligning with him. With Hitler gaining popularity with his populist message and Germany in the throws of vast political unrest, conservative leadership decided to back Hitler for the chancellor position. The mistake they made was believing they could put Hitler on a leash and control him once in power. Instead, he used the Reichstag fire of 1933, an event similar to that of the Russian apartment bombing, to begin the systematic dismantling of Germany's democracy (Levitsky & Kiblatt, 2019).

Inadvertently legitimizing would-be authoritarians has been proven just as detrimental to democracy as partnering with them. In the case of Hugo Chavez in Venezuela, then ex-President Rafael Caldera legitimized his behavior, even after he led an attempted coup. Caldera did this by embracing the rebel cause for his own short-term political gain. Instead of denouncing any attempt, no matter the popularity of Chavez, to topple their democracy, he offered sympathy. Then Caldera seemed to advance Chavez's agenda even further by abandoning his own political party and winning the presidency as an independent candidate. The party system, which has been established as the most critical line of defense against dictators in this paper, collapsed. In 1994, then President Caldera pardoned Chavez for treason charges which further elevated his standing and just four years later, President Hugo Chavez was elected (Levitsky & Kiblatt, 2019).

Co-opting government officials by advancing their careers or just outright bribing them in exchange for support brings us to an even darker underbelly of failed leadership. The Fujimori government became very good at buying the support of critics whether they were political opponents or media outlets. By far, media figures made the most money but when Fujimori struggled to gain political support, opposition party legislators were paid to skip votes. This tactic gave Fujimori the power to pack the courts and throw away the constitution that allowed him to take office in the first place (Levitsky & Kiblatt, 2019). Clientelism and corruption can run rampant in all regimes but they are most detrimental to the principles intended to be upheld in a democracy (Svolik, 2015). These acts take away the power from the people, which is contrary to basic tenants of a democratic regime (Beetham, 1999).

Conclusion:

Why ask “why” when it comes to the fall of consolidated or well-established democracies. For those living in democratic regimes that have come to be known around the world as beacons of freedom, like the United States; understanding “why” democracies fall is more critical than knowing “how”. Aziz Huq and Tom Ginsburg (2018) have asserted that the founders of the original American “democratic experiment” knew the regime would eventually invite corruption and serious challenges. Knowing why younger yet substantial democracies have succumbed to authoritarianism in the past helps all prodemocracy advocates understand the weaknesses that may be hiding in their own states. Even with so much thought and so many fail-safes included in the United States Constitution, it is just as vulnerable to extremist executives, co-opted officials and clientelism.

This paper has shown that the most important factor to upholding democracy comes from within its institutional leadership. Whether it be elected legislative officials, members of the judiciary, or professional bureaucrats, their duty is always to uphold the rules of the game no matter how an executive may try to subvert them. In the previous pages, there are multiple examples of fallen democracies and some saved by the actions of the political party leadership when confronted with antidemocratic challengers. Those regimes that fell under the pressure of dictators did so because party members put their own interests ahead of their country. The democracies that held strong did so because those parties decided compromise with ideological opponents was better than losing their way of life altogether. This evaluation is not meant to dismiss the power of the people but liberal democracies are generally

representative systems of government. Politicians are often in a position to guide the messaging and with the rise of social media and “fake news”, it is difficult to blame so many citizens for being grossly misinformed. People often vote based on feelings rather than facts, so helping citizens engage more informatively may help offer more protection in the future.

There are multiple avenues of research that would help to further answer the question of “Why” democracies fall to authoritarianism. More studies that track the impact of early education on Civics and the importance of political engagement may help inspire the public to seek better information sources. This could be done in long-term case studies with two groups of children, those undergoing outside Civics lessons and those who do not. Another aspect of Social Science research that is imperative to understand this question is tracking the impact of the massive amount of false information the public is exposed to via various media sources. How does it impact the outcome of elections and the possibility of elevating authoritarians into power? Finally, more Political Science research should be conducted to determine what constitutional protections may be written to ensure leadership is held accountable in real time for upholding the rules of the game. These measures could impose real consequences to legislators for allowing authoritarians to break the law without oversight. Even though it is usually Congress’s job to alter the constitution, research to determine what, if any, measures may offer better democratic protections could be educationally useful in future congressional sessions.

We are living in a time that many of those who study politics never thought would come. The United States has allowed into the office of the presidency a person who

exhibits every one of Linz's authoritarian warning signs. As a two-party system, one entire party has abdicated to the desires of this one man unlike any time in history (Levitsky & Kiblatt, 2019). Rules have been broken, norms dismissed and the republic left shaking; waiting for what happens when November, 2020 comes. Will those in power break even more norms and laws to stop the peaceful transfer of power if the election calls for it, or will our nation be spared such a vicious blow? America's democracy was made strong because everyone participating knew that the constitution came first and must be followed no matter the electoral outcome. No one can predict the future, but there is strength in asking "Why do established democracies fall?", so those who strive to preserve democratic principles are more empowered to resist tyranny.

References

- Ahonen, P. (1993). Domestic turmoil and diplomatic isolation: The Lapua movement and Finnish foreign policy, 1929-1932. *East European Quarterly; Boulder*, 26(4), 499-524.
- Beetham, D. (1999). Democracy and human rights. *Cambridge, U.K: Polity Press*.
- Bermeo, N. (2003). Ordinary people in extraordinary times: The citizenry and the breakdown of democracy. *Princeton University Press*.
- Chinen, M. (2014). Complexity theory and the horizontal and vertical dimension of state responsibility. *The European Journal of International Law*, 25(3), 701-732.
- Huq, A. & Ginsburg, T. (2018). How to lose a constitutional democracy. *University of California, Los Angeles Law Review*, 65, 78-169.
- Kenney, C. D. (2006). Fujimori's coup and the breakdown of democracy in Latin America. *Latin American Politics and Society*, 48(3) 211-214.
- LeTerme, Y. (2017). Elections in international democracy assistance. *The Brown Journal of World Affairs*, 24(2), 81-91.
- Levitsky, S., & Ziblatt, D. (2019). How democracies die. London: *Penguin Books*.
- Linz, J. (1978). The breakdown of democratic regimes: Crisis, breakdown, and re-equilibration. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

- Linz, J. & Stepan, A. (1996). Toward consolidated democracy. *Johns Hopkins University Press*, 7(2), 14-30.
- Madison, J. (1788). The Federalist #51 - *Constitution Society*. Retrieved June 2, 2020, from <https://www.constitution.org/fed/federa51.htm>
- Marshall, T. H. (1969). Reflections on Power - Retrieved June 2, 2020, from <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/003803856900300201>
- Svolik, M. (2015). Which democracies will last? Coups, incumbent takeovers, and the dynamic of democratic consolidation. *Cambridge University Press*, 45(4), 715-738.
- Wouters, N. (2004). New order and good government: Municipal administration in Belgium, 1938-1946. *Contemporary European History*, 13(4), 389-407.