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Democracy Was Never the Goal

Most people fighting for democracy have forgotten what democracy is for. Democracy is a tool. It has value insofar as it protects something more fundamental: the freedom of every individual to live as they see fit. When democracy becomes the goal rather than the instrument, it stops serving that purpose — and the drift toward the very tyranny it was meant to prevent begins.

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"Democracy is the worst form of government, except for all the others." — Winston Churchill

Everyone quotes the line. Almost no one finishes the thought. "The worst form of government, except for all the others" is not praise. It is an honest admission that democracy has no virtue of its own, only a comparative advantage over everything else people have tried. Read it that way and the whole argument shifts. Democracy is a tool, and a tool exists for something outside itself. What it exists for is individual liberty, and the moment that gets forgotten the tool starts working against its purpose.

The thinkers who built the free world understood this and built it accordingly. The American Founders never used the word democracy; they wrote a constitution that borrows democratic methods to choose representatives and then chains those representatives with limits a majority cannot vote away. The chaining was the point, not the voting. Somewhere along the way the order got reversed, and people began fighting for democracy as a sacred end while losing all interest in the end it was supposed to serve. A system that forgets what it is for does not stop working. It works for someone else.

Liberty is the end, democracy is the means

Individual liberty means one thing: every person may live as they choose so long as they do not harm others. The reason it has to come first is not sentiment but information. People want different things and weigh them differently, and no government and no majority can know what is good for a given person better than that person does. A system that respects that fact leaves individuals free to choose and to bear the consequences. A system that does not has to pretend the knowledge exists somewhere central, and it never does.

The case is moral and practical at once, and the two have never come apart in the record. The freest societies have been the most inventive and the most prosperous, and the acceleration is not a

coincidence of timing. Since the Enlightenment put the individual rather than the king or the church at the center of decision-making, progress has run faster than every prior century combined. Liberty is the engine. Democracy is one of the casings built to protect it, and a casing is worth exactly what it protects.

Why democracy, and which democracy

Democracy earns its place for one reason: when every citizen has an equal say, no single person or faction can seize permanent power over the rest, and a government that fails can be removed without anyone reaching for a gun. Peaceful removal is the rarest achievement in political history, and democracy is the only arrangement that has made it routine. That alone would justify it.

But democracy is not one thing, and not every version protects anyone. Athens called itself a democracy and excluded women, slaves, and foreigners as a matter of course. A pure majority vote can strip a minority of its rights as cleanly as any king, and holding an election guarantees nothing about whether liberty survives the count. The version that works is liberal democracy, majority rule fenced in by a constitution that fixes hard limits on what any majority may decide. An independent judiciary, a genuine separation of powers, and authority pushed down close enough to the governed that no single office becomes untouchable. These are the fences that keep a democratic system from eating the freedom it was built to guard. The Founders built fences first and let the voting happen inside them. That is the model worth defending.

Four ways it fails

To defend democracy seriously one has to know where it breaks. There are four fractures worth naming.

The tyranny of the majority. Majority rule answers one question (what do most people want) and leaves the dangerous one wide open: what stops most people from crushing the rest? Without binding limits, nothing does. The Jim Crow laws carried democratic majorities. So did the early years of the regimes that went on to commit the century's worst crimes, and the public records show the populations knew. A majority can criminalize dissent and disarm a minority of its rights with full legitimacy and a clear conscience. The smallest minority is always the individual.

Tocqueville saw a quieter version of the same danger. The majority rules not only through law but through opinion, and opinion needs no statute to enforce itself. People self-censor to avoid the cost of standing out, and over time they trade their freedom for comfort and convenience and slide into what he called soft despotism, a citizenry that has stopped participating and become a clientele, consumers of government services rather than authors of their own government. Mill named the same pressure the tyranny of opinion. Certain views become untouchable, and the cost of speaking against them climbs high enough that most people stay quiet. Genius, Mill warned, can only breathe in an atmosphere of freedom, and an atmosphere thick with the fear of being unpopular produces conformity and calls it consensus.

Public choice. Democracy does not convert self-interested people into selfless servants the instant

they take office. Politicians want reelection. Bureaucrats want bigger budgets and safer jobs. Voters, whose single ballot moves no outcome, have no rational reason to master complex policy, so they stay rationally ignorant and no one can blame them. Into that vacuum step the organized interests, who lobby hard for concentrated benefits while the diffuse cost lands on a public too dispersed to fight back. The result is rent-seeking dressed as policy and regulatory capture dressed as oversight: the regulated agency comes to serve the regulated industry, and short-term majorities pass what feels good now and bill the future for it.

Self-destruction. No external force guarantees that a democracy stays free. People are left to their own judgment, which means a majority frightened or seduced enough can vote the whole system away, and voting it away is perfectly consistent with the system, while voting it back almost never is. This has happened. It can happen again. Weak institutions and a captured or cowed press are the preconditions; binding constitutional limits and a real separation of powers are the only defense, and they hold only while the political culture treats them as binding.

Inefficiency. Democratic decision-making is slow, and authoritarian regimes are faster. But speed was never the question. The question is whether a government acts in the interest of the people it governs, and the friction that makes democracy slow, the debate and the procedural drag at every stage, is what guards against the catastrophic mistake made fast and unaccountably. Government is the most powerful instrument in any society, and a sledgehammer should never move quicker than a scalpel.

Popper: democracy is for fixing mistakes

Karl Popper gave the cleanest account of what democracy is actually for, and it begins by throwing out the usual question. Political philosophy has always asked who should rule, and every answer (Plato's philosopher-king, the vanguard of the proletariat, every benevolent all-knowing elite) assumes someone is wise enough to hold power without check. Popper rejected the question. No one is that wise, so no one should rule in any final sense. The right question is how to arrange institutions so that bad or incompetent rulers can be removed before they do too much damage.

That single move turns democracy from an ideal into a mechanism. As a way of choosing good rulers it is mediocre and probably always was. Its real value is that it lets the bad ones go without bloodshed. Elections are correction mechanisms; a free press exists to expose failure early, while course-correction still costs something less than collapse. Popper drew the line through the contrast between open and closed societies. In an open society criticism is tolerated and a mistake gets caught while it is still small. In a closed one dissent is silenced, so errors have nowhere to go but forward, compounding in the dark until they surface as famine or massacre. The Gulag and the Cultural Revolution are what that looks like: shut down every critic and failure does not stop, it kills on a scale that becomes undeniable. The suppression and the atrocity were never two things. One produced the other.

This is also why Popper warned against revolution and trusted the slow ballot instead. Revolutions run on the certainty that a perfect society waits on the far side of enough destruction, and because no such society is possible the gap between the promise and the result has to be blamed on someone.

The someone is always an enemy, a wrecker, a counterrevolutionary, and the violence follows from the logic as surely as the bust follows the boom. France got the Terror and then Napoleon. The communist revolutions got systems that killed by the tens of millions. Gradual reform through working institutions is slower and far less likely to hand you a fresh tyranny in place of the old one. Democracy's whole worth is bound up with its fallibility: because judgment is imperfect, you need machinery that corrects mistakes, and because power corrupts, you need machinery that removes the people who hold it. That majorities are not especially wise is beside the point. The point is that the error can be found and undone.

What this demands now

Faith in democratic institutions is draining across the West, and the standard response has been to defend democracy more loudly, to warn about authoritarianism and call for reform. All of that is warranted and none of it is enough. People have good reason to lose faith. The systems have repeatedly failed to deliver the things that made the bargain worth making: economic opportunity and the honest sense that their choices carry weight. Into that gap walk the populists, with one simple answer and one face to blame. Reasserting the value of democracy at people who have watched it fail them is an answer to a question no one asked. The fight has to be about what democracy is for.

If the purpose is error-correction, then the work is making the institutions correct errors again instead of protecting the interests that have learned to live inside them. A system that transfers wealth upward through regulatory capture and shrinks participation to a periodic choice among pre-approved options is not correcting anything; it is laundering its failures through a ballot. The constraints that should check this have been weakened or captured, and the populist reaction, wrong as its prescriptions usually are, is a response to a real failure. Treating it as pure stupidity forfeits any chance of fixing what produced it.

Individual liberty means economic freedom as much as political freedom. It means a person can build a life without watching it quietly dismantled by a structure tuned to the powerful. Power that drifts to the national or supranational level tends to pool there, and the organized interests with the resources to shape policy are best positioned at exactly that height. Decentralization works against this. A government close to the people it governs is harder to capture and easier to correct when it goes wrong. Constitutional limits are the necessary complement, and they bind only as long as the culture treats them as binding. A procedure that gets set aside whenever the cause feels urgent enough is not a constraint at all. The urgency is always sufficient for someone.

The danger is forgetting

Democracy is the best tool ever found for protecting individual liberty. It reflects human imperfection in every dimension, and it is still the only system that has let power change hands peacefully and let a country correct its course before the mistake became a grave.

The danger is forgetting what it is for. Make democracy the goal and you lose the ability to say when it is working and when it has failed, and that confusion is the open door for anyone who promises to save democracy while quietly stripping out the freedoms it was built to keep. The man dismantling

your liberty will do it in democracy's name, and if democracy is the thing you were taught to worship you will not see his hand move.

The fight has always been for the right of every person to live as they see fit. Democracy, properly understood and properly defended, is the most powerful instrument anyone has for that fight. It is an instrument. Keep sight of what it is for.

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