



Coronavirus and the Contagion of Illiberal Democracy

By Jared D. Larson

One thing that the Coronavirus pandemic has reminded me is that we take for granted, carelessly, things that intimately affect our lives. Take, for example, democracy. What is it? What are its fundamental characteristics? When we used to teach in a classroom, I would ask my students these questions and, while responses varied, “voting” frequently topped the list. We often think of democracy as a process, but this is incomplete, and we see this most clearly in moments of crisis. Democratic institutions exist to protect us from politicians who, now more than ever, usurp them, eroding liberal democracy ([Zakaria 1997](#)). If we do not, collectively, begin to think about how to protect the structure of democracy, democratic backsliding will become another existential threat that we will have to confront ([Bermeo 2016](#)). I do not want to be sensationalist, but our willful ignorance of democratic structures threatens the liberal democratic model and, thanks to COVID-19, unfortunately, we are not without examples from around the world.

Beginning close to home for me, President Trump is a populist who has long ignored traditional norms and institutions. But the “Trump phenomenon” is not the sickness but rather a symptom of an uncared-for democracy ([Sullivan 2016](#)), evidence

of a preexisting condition if you will. Trump is a product of the weakness of a decentralized, biparty system; institutional ambiguities of the U.S. Constitution; and largely uninformed, more-than-latently racist, and xenophobic swathes of an electorate sick of the establishment. Trump has taken advantage of these realities to consolidate his authority during this pandemic to further his anti-immigrant agenda ([Guttentag and Bertozzi 2020](#)). Flouting the rule of law, summary deportations are the new normal (albeit nothing more than an intensification of the old normal), many forms of immigrant visas are on 60-day (perhaps indefinite) hold, and the United States Citizenship and Immigration Service has suspended in-person services. Having married an H1-B visa holder in December 2019, this last measure has us in legal limbo. As we cannot complete her change of status without being interviewed by USCIS, we are uncertain as to whether my spouse will be able to work in the U.S. after October 2020. But we are comparatively privileged.

A member of the European Union since 2004, Hungary has become the poster child for illiberal democracy ([Biró-Nagy 2017](#)). Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, an admirer of Trump, xenophobe, and Eurosceptic, is a strongman who never misses a chance to capitalize on a crisis. He did so in the summer of 2015 by attempting to close Hungary's borders and caging migrants who managed to cross them when the "refugee crisis" emanating from the Syrian Civil War and the wider Middle East filled world headlines ([Goździak 2019](#)), and he is doing it again now. The unicameral parliament, controlled by his Fidesz party, has allowed him to legislate by decree, cancel elections, and punish those who spread "fake news" about the Coronavirus

[\("The Orbán way"\)](#).

In India, the world's largest democracy, Hindu nationalist, strongman, and another Trump pal, Prime Minister Narendra Modi has taken advantage of social discontent, religious fissures, and fatigue with traditional parties since before he was elected PM in 2014 ([Mukhopadhyay 2019](#)). He has abandoned constitutional norms and social traditions to treat Muslims, about 14% of some 1.4 billion people, as second-class citizens, blaming them for the spread of COVID-19 in the country ([Frayser 2020](#)). And the Coronavirus crisis has come months after the bicameral parliament passed the Citizenship Amendment Act of 2019 which, in conjunction with strict application of the National Register of Citizens, may well render millions of impoverished Muslim citizens stateless if they are unable to prove their Indian citizenship ([Mehta 2019](#)).

My wife's home country, Venezuela, offers a classic case study in democratic backsliding. Once a stable and robust democracy, the Venezuelan Constitution is now a dead letter. For whatever hopes one might have had for the late, and initially democratically-elected, Hugo Chávez's Bolivarian Revolution ([Nelson 2011](#)), it is now a country whose president and Chávez protégé, Nicolás Maduro, won a rigged reelection in 2018 and spends most of the time deriding the self-proclaimed interim president, Juan Guaidó, and verbally blasting the U.S. ([Trinkunas 2019](#)). It is a country with one constitutionally-sanctioned unicameral National Assembly, led by Guaidó, and a parallel Constituent National Assembly, created through a rigged referendum and packed with Maduro loyalists after the regime lost legislative elections in 2016 ([Economist 2017](#)).

Once a country open to immigrants, predominantly from the Americas, Europe, and the Middle East ([Faiola 2018](#)), as democracy and all institutions save the military have eroded to nonexistence, the country has bled emigrants in recent years ([Deutsche Welle 2019](#)), my wife and her two siblings. At present, it is not clear whether COVID-19 will serve Maduro. Venezuela is under strict lockdown. No one can be outside beyond 6 am to noon. But in this petrostate where no one can buy gasoline, thanks to sanctions, corruption, and plummeting oil prices, the Maduro regime fears the populace, yet the opposition is now conveniently paralyzed-in-place ([Briscoe 2020](#)).

In each case, economic and demographic changes aggravate other social problems, such as inequality and corruption, all of which will return with a vengeance once we overcome the virus, as other preexisting social ills will not have gone away because we have stayed inside ([Packer 2020](#)). When traditional parties fail to fix problems, electorates democratically explore their options ([Abrams 2020](#)). Superficially, nothing is wrong with this. As my students know, this is how democracy works. The problem is that many electorates have chosen deficient leaders who selfishly employ the institutions of the state to demagogically play on social fears, to protect their allies from the rule of law, and punish their enemies, not to better the lives of their constituents. When elected powers do not respect the rule of law, civil society suffers. This is the slippery slope that leads me to sound the alarm: while democratic processes provide us the means to collectively face problems if we do not elect wisely, we end up damaging the structure of democracy from the inside. And this was the case even before the Coronavirus turned the world upside down ([“COVID-19 and autocracy”](#)).

Until we realize that democracy implies much more than simply voting and we learn to make informed decisions, sometimes placing our immediate self-interests aside, democratic backsliding poses a real danger. This further threatens the vulnerable, less-privileged, and excluded within any society. While we rightfully focus on COVID-19, with our lives in the hands of a political class who could be replaced by even more mendacious, malevolent, and inept leadership, this danger will not recede.



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