

Opinions on democracy

SIR – Regarding “What’s gone wrong with democracy” (March 1st), the Swiss would argue that the problem is not democracy, but its constant dilution. Local government has been emasculated in other European countries, and power has been appropriated by a single stratum of society (epitomised by the front bench of Britain’s House of Commons). This is underpinned by a view that the people as a whole are too short-sighted or ill-educated to take responsibility for their long-term interests.

Switzerland’s experience suggests the opposite. Our system of direct democracy coupled with strong local government has yielded decades of unparalleled stability, prosperity and fiscal prudence. To be sure, it is a slow process to build not only the institutions but also the values and attitudes that constitute a democratic order. But direct democracy is the best system yet designed and I am willing to bet that the Swiss franc will beat the Chinese yuan over the next ten years at least.

BRUCE MATHERS
Zug, Switzerland

SIR – You highlighted the injustice of majoritarianism, but also the paralysis created by the checks and balances needed to constrain it. The source of both problems is the failure of standard democratic institutions to account for the differing importance of various collective choices to diverse individual interests.

We have called for an alternative form of voting, quadratic voting, which operates in a similar way to a market economy in that it leads to collective decisions that are efficient in the same way that the market allocates goods. This might be an appealing solution to the governability and stability problems of liberal market democracies.

ERIC POSNER
School of law
GLEN WEYL
Department of economics
University of Chicago

SIR – Another reason why democracy is losing its forward momentum is the erosion of the mainstream media. With newspapers in decline and traditional radio and television news audiences shrinking, common ground is harder to find. The commons of public opinion established by mass media, moderated by professional journalists and based on trusted sources, is being replaced by highly fractured social media.

This is leading us to the Babelisation of opinion and the Balkanisation of social intercourse.

LLOYD TRUFELMAN
President
Trylon SMR
New York

SIR – In many Latin American countries corruption is the main reason for weakened democratic institutions. Much political time is spent on denouncing and questioning, which slows down decision-making. Parliament, parties and politicians become discredited. The national agenda slips away from their hands and towards global bodies such as the IMF, or towards protesters on the streets. The result is democracy fatigue. The solution is not less democracy, but less corruption.

OTTÓN SOLÍS
Former presidential candidate
San José, Costa Rica

SIR – At times your essay treated liberal and democratic values as identical, at others it silently recognised a clash. Liberalism and democracy are distinct, as Joseph Schumpeter and Friedrich Hayek richly understood. Liberalism is about how people are to be shielded from undue power, be it political, economic or social. Democracy is about who belongs in that happy circle of voice and protection.

Schumpeter and Hayek grasped that voter democracy was commonly at odds with economic prosperity. Both sought ways to insulate economic decision-making from popular pressure. Frank acknowledgment of the tensions between liberalism

and democracy could have unknotted some of your article’s odder puzzles: free and fair elections welcomed on one page, pressure-group politics and voter short-termism reprobated on the next; empowering technocrats when they limit spending, tut-tutting when they draft a European currency.

Liberalism is a doctrine of limits. One of its lessons is that not all political goodies—freedom, equality, prosperity, for example—need be simultaneously achievable. In the democratic marketplace, that lesson is a hard sell. Ought not *The Economist*, which is impeccably liberal, be more forthright and tough it out?
EDMUND FAWCETT
London

SIR – Taiwan is an example of a democratic success. Until 1987 it was a brutal, authoritarian dictatorship ruled by martial law. Its jails were full of prisoners championing democracy. Its media were closely censored and controlled, but are now among the freest in the world. Hand-picked members of the now-defunct national assembly “elected” the president; today he is directly elected. Many countries would like to emulate what Taiwan has achieved.

WILLIAM SHARP
Hawaii Pacific University
Honolulu

SIR – International observers do indeed have an important role to play in the May 25th presidential election in Ukraine. However, it is misleading to say that their role is to “ensure” that the election is “clean, and seen to be” (“Saving Ukraine”, March 1st).

The role of election observers is to report accurately on what they see. They are asked to look into all aspects of the electoral process. Those observers will be not only “Western”, but drawn from across the 57 states in the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe. Together with other international missions, our observers will assess whether the election meets OSCE commitments and other

international standards for democratic elections. We will make the initial findings public the day after the vote.

However, it is ultimately up to the Ukrainian authorities, including its institutions and courts, as well as electoral contestants, the media and, ultimately, the voters to ensure that the presidential election meets those standards.
AMBASSADOR JANEZ LENARČIĆ
Director
OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights
Warsaw

SIR – You suggested that the American revolution created a “sustainable” democracy. Yet the Founding Fathers were as suspicious of democracy and the rule of the mob as they were of the king. They looked to the Roman republic for their inspiration. Alexander Hamilton wrote that “of those men who have overturned the liberties of republics, the greatest number have begun their career by paying an obsequious court to the people; commencing demagogues, and ending tyrants.”

GREG PLATT
Singapore

SIR – John Adams observed that “Democracy never lasts long. It soon wastes, exhausts and murders itself. There never was a democracy yet that did not commit suicide.” Though maybe Abraham Lincoln contradicted that with “Government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.”

VALAL SEKARAN DHARMAKUMAR
Gurgaon, India

SIR – Perhaps George Bernard Shaw put it best: “Democracy is a device that ensures we shall be governed no better than we deserve.”

ANURAG CHATRATH
Mukteshwar, India ■

Letters are welcome and should be addressed to the Editor at The Economist, 25 St James’s Street, London SW1A 1HG
E-mail: letters@economist.com
Fax: 020 7839 4092
More letters are available at:
Economist.com/letters