

◀ CRITICAL COMMENTARY ▶

The Rise of Despotic Majoritarianism

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► **Abstract:** Two maladies that have been incipient in Liberal Democracy since its birth have finally struck at once. The “tyranny of the majority” and “administrative despotism” — first identified by Alexis de Tocqueville almost two centuries ago — have combined in the form of a new, much more threatening democratic mutation. We are witnessing the rise of “despotic majoritarianism,” in which citizens are simultaneously given less and less say in the political process, just as more and more is being done in their name. This new strain of democratic disease threatens not just the United States but societies across Europe, Latin America, and South Asia. This article explores the nature of despotic majoritarianism, its manifestation today, and how we might combat it.

► **Keywords:** administrative despotism, Alexis de Tocqueville, democratic backsliding, despotic majoritarianism, populism, tyranny of the majority

To say that “democracy doesn’t always work” is a truism, but it does rather seem to have been actively malfunctioning as of late. One might be tempted to tie this statement to the recent election-related debacles faced by the United States, but this is but one instance of a far broader, global trend. In fact, the past 14 years of observational data show us that elected politicians are not only seizing more unregulated power but also becoming less attentive to the complex and diverse voices and interests of their citizens (Diamond 2020; Freedom House 2019). The long-dominant “liberal” model of democracy promised to deliver unto citizens a system characterized by regular elections, plebiscites, and other intervals for public input amid a backdrop of inclusive, egalitarian citizenship, with strong — legally or constitutionally enshrined — protections for individuals and clear majoritarian procedures for political participation. And yet, with democracies around the world leaving their citizens less free and less well represented than they have been in decades, it appears that the once heralded “golden age of liberal democracy” is giving way to an era of “despotic majoritarianism.”



A broad spectrum of global political observers has noticed a trend (e.g., Meyer 2021; Norris 2020; Serhan 2020a) – political problems much bemoaned in the United States between 2016 and 2021 bear a startling resemblance to strife in parts of Europe, Latin America, and South Asia. Yet contemporary analyses have focused predominantly on charting “the rise of populism” (Calléja 2020; Cox 2018; DeHanas and Shterin 2018; Inglehart and Norris 2016; Lochoki 2018) and rather fewer have sought to explain how the progressive degradation of democracy has occurred, and why it has done so in such a remarkably diverse array of countries. Even fewer have sought to comprehend the specific changes which democratic societies have undergone, and the direction in which they are headed (see Schäfer 2021).

In what follows, I lay out the case that we are witnessing not merely a widespread degradation of “liberal democracy” – argued convincingly in *Democratic Theory* by Simon Tormey (2014) – but moreover a transition in the form of democracy in many countries around the world, toward a mode of government that I call “despotic majoritarianism.”

Despotic majoritarianism refers to a form of democracy in which powerholders draw on majoritarian victories (such as in elections or referenda) to claim political legitimacy, while engaging in administrative despotism that constrains political expression and participation. In this system, powerholders rely on procedural indicators of majoritarian support to transgress political boundaries (tyranny of the majority), while simultaneously curtailing the political space available to ordinary people by increasing state supervision over individual or community affairs (administrative despotism). This, in turn, creates space for political powers to establish or maintain far-reaching substantive authority over their populations. The reason I call despotic majoritarianism a “form of democracy” rather than a political ideology, or style, is that – although certain regimes may express more or less majoritarian or more or less despotic behaviors – both steadily increase over time, in tandem, to effect the shift in the character of democracy to which we are now bearing witness.

To understand this shift, and why I call it “despotic majoritarianism,” we would do well to begin by revisiting how one of history’s most celebrated observers of democracy – Alexis de Tocqueville – once noticed some very similar problems amid nascent democratic politics.

What Is Despotic Majoritarianism?

The Dual Maladies of Democracy

A little less than two hundred years ago, American politicians sought to refashion their republic along democratic lines. A charismatic president,

Andrew Jackson, widely expanded suffrage, strengthened executive power, and introduced a litany of elected offices to public life. Amid these reforms, a young Frenchman, Alexis de Tocqueville, made passage to the United States and composed one of the most enduring and important critiques of Western-model democratic life in the history of political thought.

Tocqueville's account of *Democracy in America* was largely exuberant about the novel experiments being conducted in the New World, but his enthusiasm was marred by two latent political forces, which the budding political sociologist feared would spark a shift from democracy to dystopia: majoritarian tyranny and administrative despotism.

Most famously, Tocqueville expressed fears about a “tyranny of the majority,” through which democratic politics would cease to serve the interests of all citizens but instead only advance the interests of the majority of citizens. This problem was – in Tocqueville's view – fundamental to the makeup of (then) modern democracy: it was embedded in the majoritarian voting systems on which democracies depended and thus posed a perpetual danger for their citizens. While majoritarianism was endemic in all democratic life, Tocqueville observed that at its most extreme, this tendency could manifest as outright tyranny: total omnipotence afforded to politicians ruling in accord with the majority of voters, paired with the total disregard for the political, civil, and moral rights of electoral and demographic minorities. As Tocqueville (2012a [1835]: 417) put it: “There is no monarch so absolute that he can gather in his hands all of society's forces and vanquish opposition in the way that a majority vested with the right to make and execute laws can [at will, vested with the right and the force].”

Majoritarian tyranny was not the only evil that Tocqueville thought might befall the fledgling democracy he had encountered in America. He also feared the emergence of “administrative despotism,” in which voters would willfully equip regimes with extensive coercive power over society, inspired by rulers' promises to provide citizens with bulwarked protection from internal and external affairs – ranging from international security to domestic well-being. Over time, citizens would become desensitized to government encroachment and grant greater incursions into their personal liberties while giving up more democratic autonomy. The most dangerous consequence of this phenomenon, for Tocqueville (2012b [1840]: 1258), was the total regression of democratic society into something resembling an authoritarian dictatorship, in which citizens “who have entirely given up the habit of directing themselves ... would soon return to stretching out at the feet of a single master.” Concerns about this kind of despotism have been less frequently raised than critiques

of majoritarian tyranny but have nonetheless represented an increasing concern as of late. A little over a decade ago, the historian and political theorist Paul Rahe (2010) pronounced on the back cover his book *Soft Despotism*¹ that “such an eventuality, feared by Tocqueville in the nineteenth century, has now become a reality throughout the European Union, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and the United States.” More recently, John Keane (2020: 239–240) has complained of how “in countries such as India, Britain, France, Japan, and the United States, the style and substance of [Tocquevillian] despotic power are evidently alive and well ... with just a touch of exaggeration, we could say that democracies are beginning to resemble proto-despotisms.”²

In the wake of the American democratic experiment, subsequent decades saw similar systems of democracy adopted in a variety of forms throughout the globe, often complemented by principles of modern liberalism: full suffrage for all adult citizens, diverse representative institutions, a balance of powers, and an independent judiciary. Such a model has been widely exported and promoted by Western powers for almost a century and persists as the backbone of global democratization discourse (Dryzek and Holmes 2002; Huntington 1991; Olimat 2011). This liberal democratic order was not without its political tumult, and following each global democratic wave, there arose steadily recurrent relapses into one, or another of democracy’s Tocquevillian woes. At their most untamed, democracies have slid into majoritarian excess, legitimizing persecution, discrimination, and civil injustice. This has been frequently evidenced by the periodic rise of populist and nationalist politics in countries around the world. Sometimes, this shift has been relatively mild, yet at others, it has underpinned the engineering of democratic “apartheid states” in which majorities enjoy enshrined rights far beyond minority groups (seen in Canada, the United States, and countless European countries at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries). At its most extreme, such lurches have culminated in wholesale ethnic cleansing, as documented in Michael Mann’s (2004) comprehensive study of the phenomenon in Armenia, Rwanda, Cambodia, Yugoslavia, India, and Indonesia – as well as Europe.

In contrast to instances of majoritarian tyranny, at their most restrained democracies have instead become gently despotic, leaving ordinary citizens much more detached from political life and giving way to smothering governmental authority. Alongside Keane and Rahe’s various contemporary examples detailed in the prior paragraphs, some other recent cases include the curtailment of civil society enacted by neoliberal administrations in the 1970s and 1980s, the Italian Ciampi government of the 1990s, the highly surveilled security states that took form during

the War on Terror, and the Greek, Italian, Czech, and Tunisian episodes of technocratic democracy in the wake of the 2008–2011 period of global political-economic instability (Busch 2015; Sanders et al. 2016). In these instances, tremendous power was afforded to administrators and governing powers, while the rhythms of democratic accountability or active citizenship were encouraged to take a backseat. Such an arrangement seldom sat quietly with those exposed to it once the perceived necessity of their gently despotic elements faded: popular protest, political challenges, and electoral demands were liable to swell in response.

The Hybrid Malady of Despotic Majoritarianism

At first glance, what is occurring today looks neither wholly identical to the “tyranny of the majority,” nor entirely akin to “administrative despotism.” Accordingly, many commentators have been successfully tempted to instead think of contemporary challenges to democracy in acutely “populist” terms, and “the rise of populism” has been decried by commentators speaking about autocratizing regimes around the world (Bröning 2016). Indeed, populism has historically proven an effective vehicle for all sorts of majoritarian appeals, and such appeals can and often do play a partial role in what I call despotic majoritarianism today. However—as we shall see—claiming that the serious political peril in which democracy finds itself is simply yet another instance of populist politics conceals the complexity at the heart of the issue.

While it is not untrue that many troubled democracies today can be categorized as having populist politics in a broad sense, to identify them exclusively as such would be something of a category error. Accounting for populism in its many forms means that we must also concede that populist politics presumes very little about the authority demanded by the governments, and in no way necessitates an authoritarian agenda. A rising trend of left anarcho-populism (Gerbaudo 2013), for instance, fundamentally rejects not only the entire electoral hypothesis but also the notion that popular power should bolster the legitimacy of the state. Instead, its model assigns much greater popular legitimacy to instances of mass-mobilization and direct action. Likewise, while a populist mode of politics holds a great affinity to the majoritarian political demands made by the leaders of many democracies in retreat, this too is only one potential form of populist articulation. While in many forms of populism electoral majorities often stand in for “the people” in an abstract sense, other sorts of populist ideologies (such as revolutionary populism) consider those very same majorities to be an irrelevant calculation, alleging that the true “people” cannot be effectively represented electorally (Brock 1977).

Setting the applicability of the “populism” diagnosis to one side gives us space to reexamine the virtue of a Tocquevillian model – albeit with one notable amendment. Democracy’s two malicious Tocquevillian tendencies have generally been regarded by analysts as opposing dangers, corrected by either tempering or reasserting the popular sovereignty of the democratic citizenry (Schleifer 2000). This has long been envisaged as a balancing act between two kinds of democratic liberty: the participatory liberty associated with democracies in classical antiquity and the civil liberties more conventionally associated with modern democracy (famously described by Tocqueville’s intellectual precursor Benjamin Constant (1819) as the liberties of the “ancients” and the “moderns,” respectively). Yet, when we cast our eye across democracies today, this is indeed not the case. Rather, in countries such as the United States, Hungary, Poland, Brazil, and India, we see each of Tocqueville’s worst fears simultaneously coming into view: the dual threats of majoritarian tyranny and administrative despotism proceeding hand in hand. It appears that we are on the cusp of a more peculiar democratic transformation: an age of despotic majoritarianism, in which citizens are increasingly excluded from political life, while elected officials simultaneously claim more power in their name. In this new arrangement, even when the procedural structures of democracy remain in place, neither civil nor political liberties are guaranteed.

In contrast to the more mixed phenomenon of populism, despotic majoritarianism’s programmatic attributes are characterized exclusively by the pursuit of far-reaching substantive authority for the governing entity. This program is underpinned by two intertwined means of legitimation. First, electoral or national poll victories backed by some plausible majority, and second, the need to shield citizens from political complexity. Its ultimate consequence is to simultaneously restrict citizens’ participation in the political process while also extending the power that governments have over them.

The encroachment of despotic majoritarianism poses a much more substantial threat to citizens than democracy’s past – often temporary – lurches toward one Tocquevillian ill or another: cases that have often been successfully combated or curtailed by civil rights movements, conscientious elites, or international pressure. By contrast, the double nature of despotic majoritarianism’s core attributes problematizes the otherwise straightforward solutions that the lessons of history instruct us to adopt. Simply reasserting popular sovereignty by means of renewed elections or referenda would do little to assuage the tide of majoritarian rule. Promoting efforts to curtail the democratic space, meanwhile, would only further solidify the position of potentially despotic political

elites. In other words, democratic citizens find themselves increasingly in a double bind, in which they are trapped between actively legitimating majoritarian governments and passively accepting them.

Despotic Majoritarianism Today

Returning American Ailments

Almost two centuries after Tocqueville's visit to the United States, the rise of despotic majoritarianism in the country since became entirely palpable, but fortunately not fully concrete during the tenure of President Donald Trump. Trump's attempts to assert that his administration represented the will of the American people have been extensively recorded by observers across the world. This majoritarian rhetoric has been coupled with sweeping reforms aimed at enclosing democratic space, and great efforts to delegitimize any opposition or resistance to his administration. The former has been seen in Trump's personalization of presidential decision-making, refusing to consult with congress, staffers, or public opinion before making radical trade and foreign policy decisions (Goldgeir and Saunders 2018). This trajectory was furthered by declarations of spurious national emergencies throughout the Trump presidency, a move that potentially offered the president more than one hundred different special powers, available by executive order, the leader's favorite policy device.

Meanwhile, Trump's attempts to marginalize alternative political expression have been seen in his attempts to discredit the results of all three national elections between 2016 and 2020; his successful efforts to ideologically bias the judicial branch of government, right the way up to the Supreme Court; and the possible obstruction of investigations that threatened his presidential power or personal interests (Berke et al. 2018). He has also engaged in extensive attacks on journalists and press freedoms and publicly praised violent right-wing extremists backing his presidency. With his defeat in the 2020 presidential election, Trump took desperate steps to cling to power, claiming not only to represent an overwhelming majority of Americans whose votes he alleged were defrauded but to also have the legal right to overturn the results anyway. "We won this election, and we won it by a landslide. This was not a close election," Trump insisted, at the Washington, DC, "Stop the Steal" rally on 6 January 2021, just one hour before the certification of election results was set to take place. Trump had a proposed solution readily to hand: "All Vice President Pence has to do," he declared, "is send it back to the states to recertify, and we become president." When Pence was not forthcoming, Trump directed a rally of his supporters to march on the Capitol building, at which organized bands

of Trump loyalists erected a makeshift gallows on the steps of the Capitol and directed the crowd to storm the building and disrupt the vote by force, some of them wielding handcuffs, firearms, and even explosive devices.

A Global Malady

Casting our eyes beyond the United States, perhaps the most recognizable and indeed advanced manifestation of despotic majoritarianism lies in self-professed “illiberal democracies” of Eastern Europe, increasingly referred to as being at the forefront of a “third wave of autocratization” (Luhmann and Lindberg 2019). In Hungary, Viktor Orbán (2014) has explicitly styled his governance as constituting a new form of democracy, one that prioritizes the government’s right to overstep “usually acceptable behavior” in order to serve “the interests of the nation.” Orbán has claimed that this increased authority is a necessary measure, drawn up to protect Hungarian citizens from the “era of anything can happen,” an age of global uncertainty that requires strong stewardship from elected leaders. When Orbán’s prophesized uncertainty came to pass in the form of the global Coronavirus pandemic, his administration completed its despotic majoritarian turn, using the pandemic to approve a raft of new powers “removing any oversight and silencing any criticism of the Hungarian government” and enabling Orbán to “rule by decree for an indefinite period of time” (Serhan 2020b). The Orbán regime has used these powers not simply to fight the pandemic but to end legal recognitions for minority groups and rob opposition-controlled local councils of tax revenue and economic oversight powers. These transformations in Hungarian society have led to the nation’s reclassification by Freedom House (2020) as a “hybrid regime” – not quite a democracy, but not yet resembling classic authoritarianism.

A kindred trend is underway in Poland, where the ruling Law and Justice (PiS) party has attempted to advance a similar agenda in their efforts to reorder the nation’s legal, political, and educational systems to the backdrop of majoritarian legitimacy claims (Kalan 2018). When an attempt to unlawfully hold elections without oversight failed, PiS sought to use the COVID-19 pandemic to shore up social control and repress political expression (Bialek 2020). Even in countries such as Czechia and Romania, where democratic institutions are in somewhat ruder health, leading politicians have spent recent years readily snapping at the heels of democracy in an all too similar fashion to their Polish and Hungarian counterparts (Kalan 2018).

In Latin America, events in Brazil began striking similarly despotic majoritarian tones following the election of the country’s new president, Jair Bolsonaro, with a 5.2 percent majority. Having long decried Brazil’s

“irresponsible democracy,” Bolsonaro’s campaign promised a popular uprising against progressivism, underpinned by resurgent military authority, a move for which he claimed overwhelming popular support (Brooke 1993). When Bolsonaro’s term had only just begun, his administration spared no time in initiating excessive surveillance on social movements, progressive causes, and even the Catholic Church (Monteiro 2019). Bolsonaro’s ministers have since even encouraged schoolteachers to institute a new morning routine, in which children are expected to stand in awe of the country’s flag while singing the national anthem, as part of a new “policy encouraging the valorization of national symbols” (Ministério da Educação 2019). Even more chillingly, it was requested that these morning activities be recorded and emailed directly to the offices of the education minister and the president. Over the last year, the administration has used the nation’s COVID-19 emergency aid payments as a means of establishing government fealty among ordinary Brazilians and saw a corresponding surge in political support (despite Bolsonaro having in fact opposed the generosity of the payments; see Phillips 2020).

In India, meanwhile, Prime Minister Narendra Modi has made remarkable majoritarian shifts, claiming to represent the entire Indian population on the basis of his dwindling majority support (Mehta 2018; Miglani 2019). Modi’s majoritarian appeals have been paired with a distinctively despotic streak, with a series of raids and arrests conducted against human rights activists being coupled with informal repression carried out by militant Hindu nationalist mobs (Manjari 2018). These steady efforts to curtail freedom and civil liberties, justified by a need to solve important national problems, have led observers in India to liken Modi to a political “god man,” ridding Indians of their “civic anxieties – those associated with our positions as citizens of a country or even global citizens,” in a manner reminiscent of the despotic tyrants of classical antiquity (Raghavendra 2019). The pandemic in 2020 proved just the setting for Modi to stretch his powers, coupling the nation’s harsh lockdown with new constraints on India’s journalists that required any coverage relating to the pandemic to restate the government’s “official” account of the matter. Meanwhile, old “Disaster Management” laws were used to legitimize the widespread arrest, assault and detention of journalists, protesters, and political activists (Komreddi 2020).

Defending Democracy?

While populist politics has recently dwindled in its appeal, democracy’s worldwide mutation into despotic majoritarianism is still gaining pace.

Indeed, if – as Tocqueville feared – its constituent parts are intrinsic to Western-liberal model representative democracies, then the potential for such a trajectory has always been structurally preordained. At the very least, by reflecting on the character of this new danger, we might be able to chart a provisional agenda for those seeking immediate measures for the regeneration and fortification of democracies globally, and thus stem the tide enough to build a better democratic system in the longer term.

Despotic majoritarianism relies on overemphasizing the importance of the procedural moments in democratic life (elections, referenda, etc.) to legitimate political action, while simultaneously enacting substantive increases in governments' administrative power over populations. This “dual-track” form of despotism imperils conventional solutions to majoritarian tyranny or administrative despotism – in which “one path to democratic despotism ... [is] blocked, but another ... opened wide” (Schleifer 2000: 269) In view of this, the most effective antidote to such a political tendency is likely to be one that enriches the substantive power of citizens while simultaneously calling politicians' procedural mandates into question (Fawcett 2014). It is thus imperative that citizens seeking to defend their democracies do more than merely return to the ballot box and hand a potentially despotic majoritarian mandate to their favorite political force. Citizens, politicians, and NGOs can and should go further, working to invigorate the more substantive, plural elements of their democracies, such as civil society, social action, and public debate. Bolstering and restoring these elements of modern democracy may well hold the key to defending societies against this era of democratic decline in the short run, and “recouple” citizens and the state (McCaffrie and Akram 2014).

In the longer run, however, inoculating democracy against lapses into despotic majoritarianism demands that we address the constitutional conditions that have allowed it to flourish. While contemporary democratic theory offers a veritable smorgasbord of options to choose from (for an indication of its scope, see Elstub and Gagnon 2015; Fayemi 2009; Goodin and Spiekermann 2018; Kioupkiolis 2017; Saward 2019; Tangian 2014), recruiting sufficient adherents to any single theory as to it globally would entail a world-historical project of tectonic proportions. This seems unlikely. In the interest of expediency, a preferable solution is to consider more minimalist interventions, even if they may appear unimaginative compared to our own preferred models.

The most minimal intervention on the part of the politician, educator, or activist entails reframing the sovereignty of democratic peoples in a way that stretches beyond their role as mere accessories in the political process, cultivating the rich and diverse substance of a more plural and participatory democracy over and above the authority granted by

majoritarian electoral structures. If this is to successfully occur, democracy's defenders must go beyond simply resisting antidemocratic incursions, and instead actively pursue a wave of redemocratization, explicitly articulating and defending democratic citizenship on improved terms. This entails drawing from diverse theories and conceptions of democracy's substantive components, and "fleshing out" contemporary democracies by working to develop and entrench these traits. This might entail implementing novel democratic innovations such as citizens' assemblies, positive abstention, community planning, or local devolution (for a thorough analysis of potential innovations, see Smith 2005). In other circumstances – where regimes are hostile to such notions – grassroots initiatives such as the formation of co-operatives, mutual aid groups, trade unions, issue-based networks, public-interest groups, and grassroots people's assemblies prove more propitious.

Ultimately, democracy's advocates must demand that citizens be offered a far greater role than that of a legitimizing majority for elite political projects, and advocate for a vision of "the People" as a diverse political community which persists beyond the electoral moment. Rather, it is a political community continuously entitled to sustained recognition and accommodation by powerholders, even as it deliberates and disagrees among itself. As a great many theoreticians have stressed, the will of this sovereign "People" contains not only that of the majority but also a diverse array of minority political opinions entitled to recognition and accommodation. Even where the tide of public opinion may periodically give shape to a society's political elites, the will of the most can never erase their duty to the rest.

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► NOTES

1. A direct reference on Tocqueville's description of Administrative Despotism as despotism *plus doux*.
2. It is worth noting that what Keane (2020: 236) terms "the new despotism" refers not to the recurrence of Tocquevillian despotism in democratic societies observed in this paragraph but rather to a separate phenomenon found in what he calls phantom democracies: "countries otherwise as different as Turkey, Belarus, Russia, Vietnam, Brunei, and Singapore," who exercise "a form of extractive power with no historical precedent": a version of despotic rule that uses democratic procedures as theatrical displays to solidify and defend entrenched authoritarian structures of control.

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