

Introduction



That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness.

- US Declaration of Independence

It's sometimes thought that we haven't cracked the problem of governance in complex societies because the answers lie buried within too many variables—complex societies are *too* complex.

I propose a different answer: our problems only become too complex when encountered too far 'downstream'. That is, we need to address the challenges of environmental breakdown, war, inequality—farm failure, surveillance, debt—at the appropriate level: the level of democratic design. Attacking them singly, within an impossibly skewed system, has not gone well.

Under an onslaught of large problems, numerous problems, and limitless data, we've been paralyzed by a forest of signposts—and have not spotted the well-defined, navigable path lying at our feet.

Redesigning democracy will require lengthy debate and complex design work—but not so lengthy or so complex as building a rocket that can leave the solar system, halving the global birth rate, or wiping out smallpox—all of which we've done.

Threats to entrenched power can be identified by the aura of silence that surrounds them. For the last half-century, the premise of the media-government network seems to be that democracy's evolution has reached its natural limits. The expansion of democracy is never broached out loud, let alone acted on. Accordingly, ordinary people see the constitution as immovable—like a vast national monument. There is ceaseless analysis of daily politics, and none of the rules and institutions that make it what it is.

Our environmental, social and economic issues are, at bottom, a democratic issue. Until we address them at the level of the system that gives them their shape, we're combating consequences, not causes.

COVID has shown us that new thinking is possible. In the pandemic's all-but-forgotten early days, the sense of being one world seemed—very

briefly—closer to the surface than at any time since the ‘blue planet’ photos of 1969. Whole countries mobilized in a way not seen since World War Two. Social divisions and polarization dropped sharply.¹

The pandemic was a dress rehearsal for the true crises coming our way: a foretaste of the states of emergency, shortages, economic depressions and lifestyle disruptions that will follow the various, pending crunches that environmental overshoot and misgovernment are walking us toward.

But the post-pandemic world will require much more than the inspired troubleshooting of hand-sewn surgical gowns and 15-hour shifts. It will require architecture.

Constitutional obduracy

Contemporary democracy seems conceptually exhausted.²

- Irfan Ahmad (Indian author)

The ‘COVID Recession’, the Global Financial Crisis that preceded it, and the Dotcom Bust before that, were named after their precipitating events. But whilst our recurring economic crises may have diverse and unconnected triggers—the IT industry, New York banks, a virus—triggers are not causes. Recurring crises with similar symptoms have their roots in the system.

These crisis-prone systems of ours are often characterized in economic terms, but the first cause is political: leaders and regulators who no longer govern in our interests. Our economic crises arise from a policy regime (cheap money, rentierism, monopoly, deregulation, designed-in middle class debt) that merely awaits a credit crunch, a sector downturn—a pandemic—to blow down the Potemkin village.

Ultimately, this occurs because our constitutions—those documents that suggest our national character, and spell out the rules by which our decisions are made—are products of their era. They don’t address the modern world because they know nothing of it. A constitution’s growing ignorance of the present means that time can transmute it into a Pandora’s box, releasing ‘strife, care, pride, hatred and despair’ on society—or, more correctly, polarization, inequality and war. It’s worthy to go after these ‘plagues’—but our real attention should be on the box.

The divisions and depressions of the 21st Century are not cosmic mysteries: they arose on the back of a democratic withering. Our nations' founding documents are rooted in a world no living person can remember. Most enshrine hard-won liberties, a separation of powers and regular elections—all of which should be jealously guarded. But in the gaps—what they don't describe—an unseemly raft of afflictions has sprung up.

Democracy has been captured proactively. But it has also been left almost untouched by the treasury of knowledge on human nature that has accumulated since 1789. The result of these twin deficits is not pretty.

Seventy-five percent of Americans believe that 'corruption is widespread throughout government in this country'.³ As Gallup CEO Jim Clifton emphasized, 'Not incompetence, but corruption'.⁴ (One could add: Not occasional, but widespread.)

The same perception is shared throughout the world's democracies—France (64%), Israel (74%), Taiwan (77%), Poland (78%), Czech Republic (83%), Spain (84%), Portugal (86%) and Lithuania (90%).⁵ This is a broad hint that the problem is the reigning democratic model, not the policies of any one country.

Western voters now understand that the currency in which the wealthy support politicians is money, and the currency in which they are repaid is policy. The result is a disenchanted populace, and a professional political class that rules the democratic void. Strongman plutocrats, masquerading as populists—who promise to 'burn down the system'—are gaining increasing vote-shares where there are free elections.⁶

The same trend to plutocracy is underway in the 'socialist' states such as China—governed now by wealthy families and Communist Party 'princelings'—and the Indochinese nations, where an ocean of blood spilt for national sovereignty has resulted—two generations on—in rule by small groups of kleptocrats.

Both types of jurisdiction—democratic capitalist and party-run communist—have devolved into plutocracy because there are insufficient 'brake' institutions to prevent it: feeble checks and balances, token democratic cultures, information cornered by the few. Generally, there is only the ideology of the market or the party. Missing is the capacity to evolve, arising from the all-important mechanics of popular control.

If we are to survive the 21st Century, our task is to fashion a system that

confers power without selling it, facilitates information without creating it, efficiently subtracts bad leaders from the political equation, and tethers the mutability of our era to a series of dynamic constitutional experiments.

Interlocking reforms

This book rests on these premises:

- Our daily politics is a kind of neurosis—a 'displacement activity'—substituting for the system redesign that can resolve our crises. War, inequality and environmental overshoot are insoluble within the current framework.
- Power is deployed more adroitly, more fairly and more safely when it is dispersed.
- For a well-functioning society, we need not to swing right or left: we require a political system by which informed majorities can craft a policy mosaic.
- Our present, inefficient form of democracy is likely to be replaced by authoritarianism, which is increasingly efficient. Reinventing democracy is not only desirable: it's a condition for its survival.

Popular institutions are the key to making these things a reality. Their absence—whether in a G20 member or a poor Asian country—makes plutocracy inevitable. The best constitutions have always pre-empted clamorous attempts at cure with the sweet silence of prevention.

Democracy is not a single thing. It's not 'voting'; it's not 'free information'; it's not 'civic engagement'. Because it's a web with many threads, reform, too, must be a web. Change that survives requires reforms that protect and strengthen each other.

I would argue that four spheres—monopoly media, political money, skewed electoral machinery and civic alienation—are democracy's present-day choke points. They're not the only impediments to a happy society; they may not even be the most important. But they're at the top of the chain of causation—the ones we need to fix first if anything downstream is to be fixed.

Democracy, civilization's flower, has an historical timetable that can be extended. If the Athenian legal architecture of the 6th Century BC was our first shot, and the democratizations of the last century or two were our second, we might call the new model 'third draft democracy'.

At the core of the third draft is the Bill of Change—a set of articles of constitutional law that relate to each other via an underlying principle.

What is the principle?

It is that the power of special interests has expanded, and democracy has not: that new institutions are required to undo the plutocracy that has grown up around our democracy, like the brambles round Sleeping Beauty's castle.

The Bill is designed to shape a society that satisfies progressives and conservatives alike with its stability, its faith in itself, and its equality of political opportunity. Our present factionalism will not be resolved by one side winning—but by the arrival of decision-making that all respect. Division ends with the birth of a new idea.

¹ “Polarization and the Pandemic: How COVID-19 Is Changing Us” (More in Common, April 3, 2020). https://www.moreincommon.com/media/3iwfb5aq/hidden-tribes_covid-19-polarization-and-the-pandemic-as-released-4-3-20.pdf

² Saif Khalid, “Q&A: ‘India Is Heading towards a Full Ethnic Democracy,’” *Al Jazeera*, May 3, 2019. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/5/3/ga-india-is-heading-towards-a-full-ethnic-democracy>

³ “75% in U.S. See Widespread Government Corruption,” *Gallup*, September 19, 2015. <https://news.gallup.com/poll/185759/widespread-government-corruption.aspx>

⁴ Jim Clifton, “Explaining Trump: Widespread Government Corruption,” *Gallup*, January 6, 2016. <https://news.gallup.com/opinion/chairman/188000/explaining-trump-widespread-government-corruption.aspx>

⁵ “75% in U.S. See Widespread Government Corruption.”

⁶ Peter Mair, *Ruling the Void: The Hollowing of Western Democracy*, 2nd ed. (London; New York: Verso, 2023).

Glenn Greenwald, “Lessons for the West From Jair Bolsonaro’s Victory in Brazil,” *The Intercept*, October 29, 2018. <https://theintercept.com/2018/10/29/the-lessons-for-western-democracies-from-the-stunning-victory-of-brazils-jair-bolsonaro/>