

3.17 How fragile is democracy in the 21st century?

Instructions: Working with your teammates, your goal is to:

1. Decide on a working definition of democracy.
2. Describe what you consider to be “democratic values” at the core of any democratic society.
3. What is the mistake that Rawnsley believes puts democracy at risk in the 21st century?
4. Explain why you believe democracy is or is not at risk in the 21st century.



Neo-Nazi marchers at a rally in Dresden, Germany in January 2018 (BBC)

Background: The first problem with deciding on the fragility of democracy in the 21st century is coming up with an effective definition. Is it solely a process for selecting representatives and making decisions, or must it also include a commitment to “democratic values” and the rights of individuals.

European Enlightenment philosophers John Locke, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and Thomas Jefferson never wrote about or used the term democracy, although Thomas Paine believed a representative democracy was a more efficient form of government than monarchy and aristocracy. James Madison feared that in a democracy the mass of people would be subject to manipulation and a nation risked decline into tyranny. Writing in the 1830s, Alexis De Tocqueville argued that democracy for the white majority in the United States rested firmly on the enslavement of Blacks and he believed as a democratic society it would never grant full equality to a racial, religious, or ethnic minority. Abraham Lincoln, in his Gettysburg Address is credited with the definition of democracy as “government of the people, by the people, for the people,” but he did not use the word. Woodrow Wilson, in the early 20th century, was probably the first American President to describe the United States as a Democracy. Winston Churchill is credited with the statement that “Democracy is the worst form of government, except for all the others.”

In the 21st century, Viktor Orbán, the Prime Minister of Hungary, who has suppressed many of the civil liberties associated with a democratic society, describes his country as an “illiberal democracy.” Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, President of Turkey, who has a history of authoritarian behavior, made it clear that in his country “democracy is a means to an end.”

In a January 2018 op-ed column, Andrew Rawnsley, the chief political commentator for in the British newspaper *The Guardian*, argued that democracy was definitely at risk in the world today, but he did not believe it was doomed. In the essay, Rawnsley made four key points. For much of the 20th century democracy was triumphant; anti-democratic appeals to discontented populations have a basis in reality; it was a mistake “to think that this trend was so powerful it could not be reversed”; and recognizing that democracy is fragile may be necessary to ensure its survival.

Democracy is more fragile than many of us realized, but don't believe that it is doomed

By Andrew Rawnsley, *The Guardian*, January 20, 2018

Source: <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/jan/21/democracy-is-more-fragile-than-many-of-us-realised-but-do-not-believe-that-it-is-doomed>

A. The end of the Cold War accelerated what is sometimes referred to as “the third wave” of democratisation in the late 20th century. The peoples of eastern Europe were liberated to choose their own governments. African presidents-for-life were sent into retirement. Much of Latin America, once a grisly tableau of coups, insurgencies, juntas and death squads, embraced the tenets of democracy. India was no longer a shining exception to autocracy in developing Asia, as more of the world's most populous continent followed the democratic path. By the turn of the century, more than 100 countries could be reasonably classified as democracies, albeit often flawed ones. A hundred years before, you could barely find 10 democracies on the world map.

B. Democracy won the 20th century. The hubristic mistake was to think that this trend was so powerful that it could not be reversed. The size of that error is illustrated by the latest report from Freedom House, a non-partisan think tank that conducts an annual audit of freedom. The fundamentals of democracy, particularly regular and honest elections, a free media, the rule of law and the rights of minorities, are under attack around the world. Last year [2017] was the 12th consecutive one in which the number of countries becoming more free were outnumbered by those becoming less so. The report's authors conclude that “democracy is in crisis”.

C. Populists have profited at the ballot box by telling voters that democracy is a sham or a scam rigged in favour of outsiders or an elite or both. The populist prescriptions are nearly always snake oil, but their diagnosis has resonance with many voters because the economic discontents are real.

D. Democracy is not doomed. The lesson of the past decade is the subtler one that democracy is more fragile, vulnerable and contingent than many liberals have often complacently supposed. The arc of history is not irreversibly bent in favour of freedom. The case for it has to be renewed and reinvigorated for each generation. The biggest mistake we make about democracy is to take it for granted.