



Round table on the Future of Democracy: Challenges & Opportunities



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Democracy is under siege. Traditional bastions of liberal democracy are faltering. Young democracies are reverting to their authoritarian pasts. Populism, corporatization of the media, fake news, retreat from globalism, oligarchy, corruption and other perils are undermining fairness, effectiveness and truthfulness. Just when it appeared that the world was converging on a universal set of values and standards for governance at the national and international level, fundamental questions are being raised regarding the viability and sustainability of democratic institutions. Recent events raise fundamental questions regarding the institutions of governance and also about the underlying social, psychological, cultural and evolutionary processes that determine how these institutions function.

Is democracy in its current form really the most viable and effective system of governance? Are human beings sufficiently rational and selfless to govern themselves justly and effectively? Is the future of democracy at the national level compatible with the persistence of non-democratic institutions at the international level? By what process has the distribution of social power shifted from army, monarchy, aristocracy to democracy and how is that process likely to evolve further in future? To what extent are the institutional problems confronting democracy today reflections of underlying social, psychological and cultural factors and processes? What proven and potential safeguards and remedies are available to address the failures and insufficiencies of contemporary democracies? Is democracy the best possible system or merely a stage in the evolution of governance toward something more stable, an effective and equitable system? These are a few of the questions to be explored during this three-day meeting.

Following the end of the Cold War and the collapse of communist regimes in Eastern Europe and elsewhere, it appeared that democracy had finally established itself as the unquestioned victor in the governance contest, both in terms of acceptability and efficacy. Recent developments are challenging both these claims. The phenomenal developmental achievements of state capitalism coupled with authoritarian rule in China, the unashamed retreat from democracy in Turkey, the backlash against social democratic principles in Eastern Europe, the resurgence of populism, the rising power of corruption and legally-sanctioned oligarchy and plutocracy in the republics of the former Soviet Union, state capture in South Africa, the tension between national and regional interests and priorities in the European Union, and the dramatic deterioration of democratic practices in USA are posing heightened challenges to the acceptance, effectiveness and resilience of democracy.

This three day roundtable will explore the evolutionary origins of democratic forms of government; their strengths and weaknesses in promoting stable inclusive societies, human welfare and well-being; the continued struggle over the distribution of power, rights and benefits in modern societies; the challenges posed by globalization, immigration, technological advances, money power, social media and resurgent nationalism; available policies and proven mechanisms to enhance their effectiveness and reinforce underlying democratic principles; and evolutionary alternatives that might gradually supplant the forms of democracy prevalent today.

The meeting will consist of facilitated discussions centering on 10 major groups of issues plus an introductory session and a final discussion to frame conclusions and next steps. The format will be highly interactive: short presentations combined with open discussion. Each session will be

introduced by a moderator making brief opening remarks and posing fundamental questions to be explored during the session. The remainder of each session is reserved for moderated discussion among all participants. The program is open to participants from all disciplines and occupations. The conclusions of this session will be drawn upon to identify key issues for systematic examination in future programs of WAAS and WUC.

Session Topics (Tentative List)

The following is a tentative list of topics for discussion during the roundtable. The issues are broadly framed in order to permit a wide latitude for exploration. The list will be finalized based on feedback from participants regarding the critical issues they would like to explore.

- 1. Evolution of Democracy, Human Rights & Rule of Law – Past and Future:** What factors contributed to the gradual rise of democracy as the political system of choice in the modern world? By what process did political and social power shift from military rulers, hereditary monarchs, aristocrats, dictators, autocrats, economic imperialism and colonial regimes to rule of law, human rights and democratically elected governments? What were the factors that have driven this evolution? What factors may drive the evolution of political systems in future?
- 2. Foundations of Democracy:** What are the principles and premises regarding human nature and social existence on which democratic institutions are expected to function effectively? How and to what extent are they realistic and realizable in practice? How have the foundational systems of law and governance changed over time as society evolved from feudalism, monarchy and aristocracy to democracy? What are the characteristics of these foundations today? Is there an essential relationship between peace and democracy? What is the relationship between liberal culture and democracy?
- 3. Democracy and Social Power:** How has the exercise and distribution of power in society evolved over time and what is its likely future direction? What role has democracy played in the legitimization and wider distribution of power in society? What is the role of social, psychological and cultural factors in determining the functioning of democratic institutions and the turmoil we are witnessing today? What is the role of economic and other forms of social power in the evolution of democracy and how can they be governed for the benefit of the whole society? What is the relationship between economic and political development and how essential is it to the promotion of human welfare and well-being?
- 4. Achievements of Democracy:** What have been the principal contributions of democracy to human well-being and social progress over the past few centuries? What is the relationship between liberal democracy, universal education and economic progress? What are the primary factors responsible for the achievements of democracy?
- 5. Known Failings of Democracy:** What are the standards by which to judge the efficacy of democracy as a system of governance? What are the most common weaknesses and failures associated with democratic forms of governance? What are the underlying problems or sources of these failings and the factors that limit or prevent addressing them effectively?
- 6. Known Remedies for Problems of Democracy:** What policies and institutional mechanisms have been or can be introduced at the national level to safeguard democratic systems from various forms of abuse? How effective are these mechanisms in protecting human rights and promoting social cohesion? What mechanisms have been or can be introduced at the international level to foster or preserve democracy at the national level?

7. **Illiberal Democracy:** What accounts for the fact that in so many countries democratic processes and mechanisms are readily subverted to serve the interests of powerful elites? What is the relationship between democracy and neoliberal economics? How can these limitations be addressed?
8. **Technology, Media and Social Media:** What has been the impact of technology, the mainstream media and social media on the development and practice of democracy? What role are these factors playing in governance today? What measures should be considered to maximize the beneficial and minimize their detrimental impacts?
9. **Globalization, Nationalism and Democracy:** What has been the impact of globalization on the spread of democracy? What challenges do globalization and global governance pose to the future of democracy at the national level? What implications does democracy have for the future of governance at the global level?
10. **Envisioning a Better System:** What alternative models exist or can be conceived of to more effectively pursue the democratic ideals of freedom, security, prosperity, social equality and social harmony?

Organizers

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