

DEM-DEC Research Update Editorial: Global Democracy and the Fierce Urgency of 2020

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Latest Global Research Update Just Issued

The first Global Research Update on the global platform Democratic Decay & Renewal (DEM-DEC) for 2020 is [now available here](#), covering late December 2019 to early February 2020. In each Update I write an editorial on key themes to help users to navigate the Update, and to provide some limited commentary, especially on very recent research.

1 The Fierce Urgency of 2020

In January 2017, in my [inaugural column for the ICONnect Blog](#), I urged an end to the complacency bedeviling any real effort to address threats to democracy worldwide. Borrowing a phrase from Martin Luther King, I spoke of “the fierce urgency of now”, insisting that “failing to act and adopting a ‘wait and see’ attitude is to court disaster.” Three years later, I – and many colleagues worldwide – feel that urgency with even greater intensity and frustration. Global reports continue to warn of the ongoing global democratic crisis – in January alone the [Economist Intelligence Unit's Democracy Index](#) for 2019, a report from the [newly-launched Cambridge Centre on the Future of Democracy](#), and the [Human Rights Watch's World Report 2020](#) warn of everything from plummeting public satisfaction with democracy to the “existential threat” posed by the Chinese government to human rights frameworks worldwide. Articles for the [Journal of Democracy's thirtieth anniversary edition](#), by heavy-hitters such as Francis Fukuyama and Yascha Mounk, address the multiple threats facing liberal democracy and whether it can rebuild itself. Technology looms large in our fears, with talk of its use as [a tool of ‘sharp power’](#) by authoritarian governments, and, elsewhere, the [impending threat of ‘deep fakes’](#) threatening an exponential acceleration of truth decay and distortion of democratic discourse.

Political developments so far in 2020 have fed the sense of ever-higher stakes in the global democratic crisis. President Trump's impeachment trial featured [starkly undemocratic argument](#) (albeit later narrowed somewhat) that anything the President does to further his reelection in the public interest cannot be an impeachable offence – a timely article by [Andrew Pardue](#) is a useful analysis here. Across the Atlantic, the Polish government's assault on judicial independence has induced constitutional chaos, with battle lines drawn between captured and independent courts on the legality of so-called reforms (read more [here](#)). From Malta's downgrade in the EIU Index to a “flawed democracy”, to the [breaking of political taboos in Germany](#) with the attempt to install a new Thuringian premier with the aid of far-right AfD votes, there is a sense of intensifying threat. [Sumit Ganguly](#) in the *Journal of Democracy*

argues that India's claim to be a liberal democracy is "increasingly dubious". In Australia, [John Keane](#) offers that the "grand political lesson" from the devastation of the recent bushfires is that the current democratic model has failed and we need a new, ecologically viable, model.

Yet, complacency still abounds. Alongside ongoing inaction by national and international political actors, the leading US philosopher Martha Nussbaum recently offered that talk of democratic crisis is little more than "[an academic fad](#)". This is an all-too-common refrain, one I have heard for years. "But!", the critic will say: democracy has always been contested; all democracies suffer some level of dysfunction; liberals are obsessed with procedure and civility, and fail to understand the injustice of the *status quo ante*. There is of course some truth in this: there is no real 'golden age' of ideal democracy; the trend of decay is not entirely universal (e.g. some countries' scores actually improved in the EIU Index); today's challenges are deeply rooted; and we inevitably see analysts 'bandwagon jumping' on the current hot topic. Yet, to dismiss the mounting evidence of serious threats to liberal democracy in states worldwide – not least that collated since mid-2018 by DEM-DEC – as a form of 'moral panic' or collective delusion is truly dangerous. Even if well-intentioned, it becomes a form of continual gaslighting that feeds complacency and saps resolve, and lends succour to those who really wish to end accountable government and pull power away from the people they are meant to serve. In the impeachment trial, Senator Adam Schiff decried the "[normalization of lawlessness](#)", and this is precisely what is at play: as [Robert Sata and Ireneusz Pawel Karolewski](#) observe in the case of Hungary and Poland, a central ploy of wannabe authoritarians is to frame radical changes as "politics as usual", when in fact they challenge the very essence of liberal democracy. If we cannot assess – based on significant evidence and an appreciation of degree – certain measures as 'abnormal', we are lost.

2 Civil Society Pushback Clicks into High Gear

Whereas governments and international organisations seem to remain somewhat unequal to the task of pushing back against the myriad threats to democracy worldwide, civil society worldwide appears to be stepping up the pushback for 2020. The billionaire philanthropist George Soros – much reviled by authoritarian leaders worldwide – has pledged \$1 billion to fund a [new Open Society University Network \(OSUN\)](#) to combat the "twin challenges" of authoritarian governments and climate change. Two new centres have been launched: as well as Cambridge University's new [Centre for the Future of Democracy](#), mentioned above, a new [Chicago Center on Democracy](#) at the University of Chicago aims to provide a space for both researchers to further their work on democracy, and to host [Bright Line Watch](#), an initiative to monitor democratic practices, their resilience, and potential threats. In Asia, the [Asia Democracy Network \(ADN\)](#) just announced its #2020Pushback Campaign "calling all democracy advocates to unite and begin fighting back against threats and attacks to democracy."

3 The International Face of Pushback

It is striking, too, how much action and thought regarding democratic defence is taking place at the international level. Indeed, the Council of Europe has just introduced a [new sanctioning mechanism](#) for “the most serious” violations of the Council’s Statute (which includes democracy and the rule of law), separate to its existing review mechanisms under the European Court of Human Rights and other bodies. In this Update, Tom Carothers in the *Journal of Democracy* discusses [the need to rejuvenate democracy promotion](#), by tackling both new and established democracies; strengthening the economic dimension; and bringing technological issues centre-stage. Pacifique Manirakiza, writing in a special collection to mark the 10th anniversary of the African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance, argues for the existence of a subsidiary [right to resist “gross undemocratic practices”](#) by governments who deny meaningful political participation. For a comparative perspective, a scholar to watch is [Cassandra Emmons](#), who has just completed a PhD at Princeton on ‘Regional Organizations as Democracy Defenders: Designing Effective Toolkits’. Elsewhere, [Anna Meyerrose](#) in *Comparative Political Studies* (January 2020) contends that membership of democracy-promoting international organisations can be detrimental to democracy – a stance which will prompt much discussion.

4 Democratic Innovation Goes Mainstream

While pushback is crucial, it alone is not enough: for many analysts, if we are to protect democracy we must re-make democracy. Last Friday I was among 20 experts invited to attend a special roundtable as part of the [Australian Senate’s inquiry into nationhood, national identity and democracy](#), and it was striking how many experts around the table were in favour of experimenting with deliberative mechanisms, such as a citizens’ assembly or even a Citizens’ Senate. 2020 seems poised to be the year when such experimentation goes fully mainstream worldwide, with bodies proliferating – and academic and policy attention increasing. Key items in this Update include: the landmark [Handbook of Democratic Innovation](#) edited by Stephen Elstub and Oliver Escobar; Cristina Lafont’s monograph [Democracy Without Shortcuts](#) arguing that we can only achieve better outcomes through the long road of deliberation and “changing hearts and minds”; and articles in [Policy Sciences](#) on experts and evidence in mini-publics, as well as how politicians and others view the place of such bodies in decision-making. The first weeks of 2020 have already seen a range of events on democratic innovation (including a [major conference in Manchester](#)), and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development ([OECD](#)) [has just launched Participo](#), a digest on their work on innovative Citizen Participation. Details of future events for 2020 can be found in the DEM-DEC [Events Database](#).

5 Democracy 2020: Announcing a Stock-Taking Roundtable

Current crises have diverted much intellectual energy toward potential solutions. Beyond deliberative innovations, we see for instance a [new collection in the Drake Law Review](#) contemplating radical ways of amending and fine-tuning the US Constitution. As a way of bringing together the discourses on democratic decay and democratic renewal in a meaningful way, DEM-DEC has teamed up with the

International Association of Constitutional Law (IACL) to organize a 2-day roundtable on 10-11 December, on the theme 'Assessing Constitutional Decay, Breakdown and Renewal Worldwide'. Co-organised by myself and Prof. Wojciech Sadurski, the roundtable aims to convene a group of leading and emerging scholars to engage in a global 'stock-taking' exercise, aiming to map the health and trajectory of key democracies worldwide, pin-point gaps in analysis, and push the research agenda forward. You can find the [Call for Papers here](#) (deadline: 1 May 2020).

6 Taking the Long View

While today's democracy defenders and innovators feel the fierce urgency of the present moment, we also risk being swamped by the sheer speed of the news cycle, especially in our hyper-connected global 'firehose' information economy that can leave little mental space for reflection. Many items in this Update help to put today's trends in a broader context. A new book from our DEM-DEC partner V-Dem (Varieties of Democracy), [Measuring Two Centuries of Political Change](#), offers a user's guide to their vast data collection project. Also looking backwards, see Susan and Hennessy and Benjamin Wittes' new book [placing the US presidency in historical context](#); and an [excellent piece by Jill Lepore](#) in the *New Yorker* on 'The Last Time Liberal Democracy Almost Died'. Looking forward, the [Centre for the Future of Democracy](#)'s research mission aims to explore three areas: 'Democracy and Climate Change'; 'The Generational Divide'; and 'Technology and Democracy'. Also on climate change (and issues such as biodiversity), John Dryzek and Jonathan Pickering's 2018 book [Politics of the Anthropocene](#) (suggested for addition by a DEM-DEC user) dovetails with John Keane's analysis, arguing that our Holocene-era democratic political structures need adaptation to a new reality. **Get Involved**

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