

The Paradox of Anti-Democratic Arguments: a Defense of Democratic Principles in Debates

Aron B. Bekesi*

Abstract

Conventional approaches in pro- or anti-democratic discourses often scrutinize the efficacy of leadership based on its outcomes, or explore the moral foundations of different systems. Contrary to these approaches, my argument presented in this paper is grounded in the inherent psychological desire to be heard and accepted. I posit that the essence of democracy resides in free discussion — a value even embraced by committed anti-democrats in the context of debates, as their acknowledgment hinges on it. This article presents an argument, developed based on my experience in actual debates called The Paradox of Anti-Democratic Arguments, to counter anti-democratic debaters who question the legitimacy of democratic norms. The article discusses the practical application of the argument in debates and casual discussions, its limitations and highlights the underlying psychological processes that make the argument effective in the context of Leon Festinger's theory of cognitive dissonance.

Keywords: cognitive dissonance; political philosophy; Leon Festinger.¹

* University of Pécs Medical School (PTE-AOK, Pécs, Hungary). Email: aron.b.bekesi@gmail.com.

¹ Received on September 5, 2023. Accepted on December 4, 2023 Published on December 31, 2023. DOI: 10.23756/sp.v11i2.1372. ISSN 2282-7757; eISSN 2282-7765. ©Aron B. Bekesi. This paper is published under the CC-BY licence agreement.

1. Introduction

The purpose of this article is to present an argument that can be used in a debate or casual discussions when democratic ideas are challenged. Today it seems there is a growing trend of questioning democratic principles in favor of totalitarian views in intellectual circles. I was motivated to develop a brief and persuasive argument against challenges to democratic norms after speaking with well-educated individuals from mostly middle- or upper-middle-class backgrounds in the West who expressed doubts about the legitimacy of democratic principles. The disdain for the values and traditions of constitutional democracy prompted me to develop a short yet convincing argument that may serve to succinctly counter arguments that aim to challenge the legitimacy of democratic principles.

The first of these conversations took place in London, United Kingdom in 2010, and since then, I have witnessed an increase in such occasions. For instance, during my time at King's College, I encountered a surprising sympathy among young adults for the left, marked by showcasing communist propaganda, including symbols banned in many Eastern European countries. This was all the more surprising as King's itself is known as a conservative university and London is a financial and political center of West. But instead of encountering skeptical and hostile attitudes towards democracy being an oddity that one could expect to find in a world city, there seem to be a growing trend to question democratic principles in favor of totalitarian answers to the challenges we face. Empirical data supports a growing trend of skepticism in the West towards democratic principles and a preference for totalitarian solutions to contemporary challenges. [1][2] This radicalism includes support for ideologies such as communism, neo-Marxism, as well as nostalgia for past authoritarian regimes and admiration for current dictatorships.

Among the critics of democratic values, I found both academics and students alike. The views held by these critics ranged from an unspecified vague disillusionment in democratic principles to the support of particular ideologies, such as Marxist communism. Others endorsed specific administrations such as Putin's Russia and Xi's China or specific totalitarian leaders like Mao Zedong and Josef Stalin.

Between 2011 and 2012, during my time in the United Kingdom, particularly within academic circles, I experienced a lack of open right-wing sentiment, which I felt was widely condemned. This is not the case in Hungary. Voicing hate speech or discriminatory language against marginalized groups, including but not limited to those based on race, religion, or sexual orientation, especially when presented in a humorous context, is often socially accepted in Hungary. Amongst intellectuals, right-wing

The Paradox of Anti-Democratic Arguments: a Defense of Democratic Principles in Debates

sentiment is rarely accompanied by an open discussion of their political ideology and views. However, the contemporary political reality in 2023, when, for example Prime Minister Viktor Orban along with a number of leading politicians and media personalities openly use racist arguments, makes the normalization of right-wing extremism a valid concern in case of Hungary. [3][4][5] Credible sources, including non-profit political advocacy organization Freedom House [6] and the European Parliament [7] claim that Hungary is no longer a democratic country.

Below are some accounts of conversations I had with individuals who questioned the value of democratic systems. These instances demonstrate the prevalence of skepticism towards democratic values. One young woman I spoke with expressed her admiration for contemporary authoritarian regimes, such as those in Russia and China, citing their ability to address important issues more effectively than democratic systems. In her view, democracy often leads to indecision, which prevents the government from effectively addressing critical issues while totalitarian or hybrid regimes are more potent at addressing important questions because they can take swift and decisive actions without having to worry about the constraints of democratic procedures. Another of my acquaintances expressed her sincere renown for Joseph Stalin, totalitarian leader of the Soviet Union. In a more extreme case an established professor, notably not a historian, greeted me in his London office which was decorated by Soviet and Chinese communist memorabilia including a large painting of Mao Zedong, late leader of the People's Republic of China. Returning to Hungary I witnessed a professor publicly expressing nostalgia for Janos Kadar's authoritarian regime, which ruled Hungary until 1989. This professor posited Kadar's regime as a better alternative to the democratic governments that followed, citing the Kadar's regime ability to maintain social and economic stability despite political oppression and corruption.

A common element in the aforementioned instances is that intellectuals or young people who at the time of our conversations were studying in strong academic programs, thus who were destined to become intellectuals themselves, challenged the legitimacy of democracy. Most of these people, except in case of a Chinese and a Russian student, were from Western countries that endorse democratic tradition. Moreover, even the non-Western students received, in part, a Western education and by virtue of living abroad, had the opportunity to gain firsthand experience with different systems, enabling them to draw comparisons.

Driven by my commitment to democratic principles, I felt an obligation to defend these values. With this goal in mind, I sought to develop a simple and persuasive argument capable of effectively countering anti-democratic views that works in both casual discussion and in more formal debates as well. Consequently, these discussions led to the

creation of this paper and the argument I propose to call the Paradox of Anti-Democratic Arguments, aimed at standing up for democratic principles when their legitimacy is questioned.

2. The argument

- a) The essence of democracy is the free discussion of our problems.
- b) If someone argues for their views despite not believing in free discussion, then they are implicitly accepting the value of free discussion.
- c) Therefore, any argument made for the superiority of anti-democratic values over democratic values, even by someone who does not believe in free discussion, is self-contradictory.

When properly presented, this contradiction can effectively defend democratic principles when their legitimacy is challenged in debates or casual discussions. The first premise establishes the foundational principle of democracy as free discussion. The second premise explains why a scenario in which someone who does not believe in free discussion challenges the superiority of democracy is self-contradictory, based on the value of free discussion. From these premises, we can infer that any argument made against democracy, even by someone who does not believe in free discussion, is inherently flawed. In essence, this argument suggests that anyone who argues against democracy while employing the tools of democratic persuasion, such as rational reasoning in a debate, in doing so contradicts themselves, and their argument should be viewed with skepticism.

The argument implies that free discussion is an essential component of democracy and that anti-democratic values are not compatible with it. In a debate, when anti-democratic speakers engage in free discussion, they implicitly endorse democratic values, thereby inadvertently demonstrating the superiority of democratic principles. Consequently, one could build a case asserting that democratic values are preferable to anti-democratic values.

Possible ways for the practical application of the argument in a scenario where someone challenges democracy could take shape in several forms. One of these may be as follows: we present arguments to agree on the first premise. Then, we may proceed by stating: “You question the legitimacy of democracy. I am happy to debate that with you.

The Paradox of Anti-Democratic Arguments: a Defense of Democratic Principles in Debates

If you cannot present any arguments on your behalf, you have lost the debate. However, if you wish to present any argument, then you are conceding to the importance of fundamental democratic norms. Consequently, regardless of your choice, you have lost this debate.”

3. Discussion

3.1. The soundness of the argument

The above argument is seemingly a valid deduction, but whether the argument is sound or not depends on the truth of the premises, which itself may be a subject of debate or interpretation. [8] The first premise is based on a simplification. Modern democratic thought stems from two sources: the tradition of debate, which is the basis for the practical application of the democratic decision making process [9] and the constitutional tradition which provides the philosophical grounding for establishing individual rights and a government that protects these rights. [10] A convenient example here, among others, would be to make a reference to the parliamentary system, where the parliament functions as a forum for debate, the word itself coming from Old French, meaning “discussion, discourse”, from *parler*, meaning “to talk”. [11] The rationale behind basing the argument on the tradition of debate is as follows:

1. The tradition of debate captures more of the practical aspects of democracy than its theoretical groundings embodied by the constitutional tradition.
2. Appealing to the tradition of argumentation makes for a more succinct argument than an account of the constitutional tradition would allow.
3. The tradition of argumentation implicitly embodies the source of values that are included in the constitutional tradition. For example, in the *Two Treatises of Government* John Locke argues that “natural rights” can be discerned by logic through “rational thought”. Natural rights refer to those rights that are inherent to every individual by virtue of their being human and are considered as core concept of democratic thought. Examples of natural rights include the right to life, liberty, and property. These rights are considered universal and inalienable, meaning they cannot be taken away by any government or authority. [12][13] Rational thought refers to the use of logic and reason to arrive at a conclusion. Locke's argument in the *Two Treatises of Government* that natural rights can be discerned through reason suggests that democratic values and practices can be logically derived. [14] Since

debates foster objective understanding through the use of logic, it could be reasoned that following the tradition of debate may lead to conclusions established by the constitutional tradition. Therefore, by appealing to the tradition of free debate, we also lay the groundwork for the introduction of the constitutional tradition. This line of argumentation allows us to seamlessly transition from simpler to more complex topics should the context call for further elaboration of our views.

Conversely, appealing to the tradition of debate has its limitations. For example, a case could be made that free discussion can have its place in anti-democratic systems. While free discussion is unlikely to be the norm or a fundamental value of anti-democratic systems, the theoretical possibility that such systems may feature forums for free discussions could provide grounds for challenging the pro-democratic argument. If such a challenge is successful it undermines the first premise of the argument.

Additionally, the second premise implies that engaging in free discussion entails a value judgment on the part of the anti-democratic opponent. The assumed value judgment automatically commits the opponent to the norms of rational discourse, including the use of evidence and reason, as well as the willingness to consider alternative viewpoints. Under usual conditions, this can be reasonably expected of someone; however, there could be numerous exemptions. For example, the anti-democratic speaker may engage in free discussion for strategic reasons, such as to gain legitimacy or influence public opinion. Anti-democrats may not value free discussion for its own sake but rather see it as a means to an end. An argument could be made that such strategic opponents are not in contradiction with themselves when they challenge democracy in free discussions. Any such case would undermine the second premise of the argument.

Since these cases illustrate that both the first and the second premise of the argument can be challenged, it could be argued that the Paradox of Anti-Democratic Arguments is a valid, but unsound deduction. In other words, if we accept that the premises of the Paradox of Anti-Democratic Arguments are true, then the conclusions of the argument must be true, making it a valid argument. However, it could be argued that at least one of the premises is not true; therefore, the argument can be viewed as unsound. Despite these technical limitations, I believe the argument holds value.

From a practical perspective, in the context of an actual debate or debate-like discussions, and assuming we are engaging with someone not devoid of emotional capacity, it is reasonably anticipated that our opponent, by participating in the discussion, implicitly accepts the value of free and rational discourse, as required by the second premise of the argument. It then falls to the pro-democratic debater to structure the

The Paradox of Anti-Democratic Arguments: a Defense of Democratic Principles in Debates

argument in a way that establishes mutual agreement on the first premise. Once this is achieved, the argument should work as described below.

3.2. Psychological aspects of the argument

Psychological evidence suggests that people not only desire to have their opinions prevail, but also have an innate desire to believe that their views are correct. [15] We tend to collect evidence that supports our views, often in a biased manner, as if preparing for a debate. Social psychologist Leon Festinger discovered that encountering information that contradicts our ideas creates mental stress and coined the term “cognitive dissonance” to denote the phenomenon. [16] The level of mental stress, in Festinger’s terms “magnitude of dissonance” is determined by two factors: (a) the level of discomfort that is acceptable for the individual and (b) the “importance of cognitions.” [17] The importance of cognitions entails that higher valued dissonant ideas become a source of increased mental stress compared to less valued dissonant ideas. The ensuing mental stress prompts people to restore “psychological consistency” or achieve a state free from contradicting ideas. According to Festinger's theory, people respond to restore psychological consistency and reduce dissonance in four main ways. They may:

1. Change their ideas and/or actions.
2. Justify their ideas and/or actions by relieving the contradictory ideas.
3. Justify their ideas and/or actions by adopting new ideas or actions.
4. Ignore or deny information that conflicts with their ideas and/or actions. [18]

From a psychological perspective, the Paradox of Anti-Democratic Arguments works by creating a contradiction between two highly valued ideas of the anti-democratic speaker. In the context of a debate our opponents are expected to attribute high value both to excelling in their argumentation and to proving the inferiority of democratic practices. Based on the first premise of the argument, which claims that debates and free discussion are defining hallmarks of democratic systems, this presents an implicit self-contradiction for the anti-democratic speaker. When this self-contradiction is brought to light, it likely gives rise to cognitive dissonance in the anti-democratic speaker. Consequently, the anti-democratic speakers may experience mental stress when presented with the Paradox of Anti-Democratic Arguments. The experienced mental stress may prompt the anti-democratic speakers to restore their psychological consistency by arriving at a mental state free from contradictory ideas. According to Festinger's theory the drive to restore psychological consistency might lead the anti-democratic speakers to change their views. Therefore, by creating a contradiction between two highly valued ideas, the Paradox of

Anti-Democratic Arguments has the potential to increase anti-democratic speakers' mental stress while also facilitating persuasion.

We can reasonably assume with some degree of confidence that, at least during the course of a debate, the anti-democratic speaker also holds the values of free discussion in high regard. That is, our opponent aims to convince us and the potential audience of their anti-democratic ideas being right by reason. However, taking the concept of the formerly described strategic opponent to an extreme, one who does not value free discussion for its own sake, but rather sees it as a means to an end, might not experience any mental stress from the argument. Therefore, the argument may not be effective against such an individual. On the other hand, if the aim of the strategic opponent is to convince others of anti-democratic ideas, and assuming that there is an audience following the debate, the argument could still be used to persuade the audience.

In summary, from a psychological perspective, the paradox creates a tension between fundamental desires. We want to be right, but we also want to hold on to our views. The argument presented here works by creating a contradiction between what our opponents feel is right and their views. Festinger's theory explains the underlying mechanism that makes the Paradox of Anti-Democratic Arguments an effective tool in debates.

3.3. A tool that invites further debate

It could be argued that a practical application of the paper's argument would exclude people holding anti-democratic views from free discussion. I do not agree with this; on the contrary, I hold that the argument made here invites counterarguments and rebuttals to those counterarguments, calling not for less but for more debates. From the view of the pro-democratic thinker, this is a good thing.

The practice of free and rational argumentation is essential to the success of democratic systems. Through open and honest debate with individuals holding different views, members of democratic systems can gain much insight and make better decisions. This is because such discussions allow for the exchange of ideas and the uncovering of both objective facts and subjective desires, which ultimately lead to greater understanding and increased ability to overcome problems. [19]

It is important to note that those who hold totalitarian or anti-democratic views may be less likely to engage in such discussions, as free deliberation undermines their principles. However, democratic values and traditions dictate that we remain open to inviting these critics for discussion when the opportunity arises. The Paradox of Anti-Democratic Arguments can be used to invite counter arguments and encourage further debate, which is ultimately beneficial for fostering the tradition of our democratic values.

3.4. Limitations

My argument presented in this paper has many limitations. By challenging the premises of the argument, its soundness can be questioned, thereby weakening its persuasive effect. Furthermore, in certain cases, free discussion may be limited in both democratic and anti-democratic systems. Based on this, one could argue, ironically in a similar way to the logic followed by the argument of this paper, that democracies are self-contradictory because they endorse anti-democratic ways, thereby proving the superiority of anti-democratic methods. Although the contradiction of intolerance in a democratic system has been previously discussed in the literature, most notably by philosopher Karl Popper, [20] this possible rebuttal needs to be considered prior to using the argument.

4. Conclusion

The Paradox of Anti-Democratic Arguments is a deductive argument I developed during the course of several debates and discussions. When I tested the argument, it succeeded in challenging anti-democratic views, and I believe it also contributed to promoting democratic values. In my experience, the argument had a strong impact on the speakers, who gave the impression of being perplexed by it. In one memorable case, using the argument led to my opponent's immediate resignation. Two important features of the argument are that it is short and can be easily presented in a humorous way. Therefore, the argument can also be applied in informal social situations where it is in our interest to secure agreement in a light-hearted way. From a technical aspect, the argument may be considered as valid but unsound. However, from a practical perspective, the argument can function as a powerful tool in debates and contribute to the promotion and advancement of the democratic tradition.

Acknowledgements

I would like to extend my heartfelt gratitude to Csenge B. Baranyai, a fellow medical student and true friend, for her invaluable assistance in proofreading this paper. Her keen attention to detail and thoughtful feedback greatly contributed to the final work. I am grateful for her support and dedication, which made a significant impact on the completion of this paper.

References

- [1] Herre, B. (2013). *Democracy*. Our World in Data. Retrieved on March 18, 2023, from <https://ourworldindata.org/democracy?insight=the-world-has-recently-become-less-democratic#key-insights>
- [2] Foa, R.S., Klassen, A., Slade, M., Rand, A. and R. Collins. (2020). “The Global Satisfaction with Democracy Report 2020.” Cambridge, United Kingdom: Centre for the Future of Democracy. Retrieved on March 18, 2023, from https://www.bennettinstitute.cam.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/DemocracyReport2020_nYqqWi0.pdf.
- [3] Kürti, L. (2020). Orbánism: The Culture of Illiberalism in Hungary. *Ethnologia Europaea*, 50(2). <https://doi.org/10.16995/ee.1055>
- [4] European Parliament. (July, 2022). *EP leaders condemn Prime Minister Orbán’s recent racist declarations*. Retrieved on March 18, 2023, from <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20220730IPR36709/ep-leaders-condemn-prime-minister-orban-s-recent-racist-declarations>
- [5] Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty. (2022). *European Parliament Leaders Condemn Orbán For “Openly Racist” Remarks*. RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty. Retrieved on March 18, 2023, from <https://www.rferl.org/a/european-parliament-orban-racist-remarks/31966820.html>.
- [6] Gehrke, L. (2020). *Hungary no longer a democracy, Freedom House says*. POLITICO. Retrieved on March 18, 2023, from <https://www.politico.com/news/2020/05/06/hungary-no-longer-a-democracy-report-239807>
- [7] European Parliament (September, 2022). *MEPs: Hungary can no longer be considered a full democracy | News | European Parliament*. Retrieved on March 18, 2023, from <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20220909IPR40137/meps-hungary-can-no-longer-be-considered-a-full-democracy>
- [8] Morrison, R. G., & Holyoak, K. J. (Eds.). (2005). Deductive reasoning. In *The Cambridge Handbook of Thinking and Reasoning*. Cambridge University Press. ISBN 978-0-521-82417-0.
- [9] Habermas, J., Lennox, S., & Lennox, F. (1974). The Public Sphere: An Encyclopedia Article (1964). *New German Critique*, 49–55. <https://doi.org/10.2307/487737>
- [10] Hayek, F. A. (1990). *The Constitution of Liberty*. Psychology Press. pp. 162-193.

The Paradox of Anti-Democratic Arguments: a Defense of Democratic Principles in Debates

- [11] "Parliament." *Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary*, Merriam-Webster, Retrieved on Dec. 6, 2023, from <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/parliament>.
- [12] Tuckness, A. (2005). Locke's Political Philosophy (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy). *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Retrieved March 18, 2023, from <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/locke-political/>
- [13] Locke, J. (2002). *The Second Treatise of Government and A Letter Concerning Toleration*. Courier Corporation. Sect. 6.
- [14] Locke, J. (2002). *The Second Treatise of Government and A Letter Concerning Toleration*. Courier Corporation. Sect. 135.
- [15] Epley, N., & Gilovich, T. (2016). The Mechanics of Motivated Reasoning. *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, 30(3), 133–140. <https://doi.org/10.1257/jep.30.3.133>
- [16] Festinger, L., & Schachter, S. (2013). *When Prophecy Fails*. Simon and Schuster.
- [17] Festinger, L. (1962). *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance*. Stanford University Press. pp. 93-102.
- [18] Festinger, L. (1962). *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance*. Stanford University Press. pp. 93-102.
- [19] Sunay, R. (2012). The Importance of Public Debate in Democratic Regimes. *European Scientific Journal, ESJ*, 8(9), 34-45. <https://ejournal.org/index.php/esj/article/download/144/149>
- [20] Popper, K. (2012). *The Open Society and Its Enemies*. Routledge. p. 581.