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Democracy's Past and Future

Francis Fukuyama ■ Thomas Sander & Robert Putnam

Philippe C. Schmitter ■ Guillermo O'Donnell

Larry Diamond ■ Marc F. Plattner ■ Andreas Schedler

Steven Levitsky & Lucan Way

Laurence Whitehead ■ Bruce Gilley

Twenty Years of Postcommunism

Ivan Krastev ■ Lilia Shevtsova

Jacques Rupnik ■ Alina Mungiu-Pippidi

Vladimir Tismaneanu ■ Ghia Nodia

Charles H. Fairbanks, Jr.

Democracy's Past and Future

When we informed friends and contributors that we were preparing the twentieth anniversary issue of the *Journal of Democracy*, their reactions tended to be very similar: "I can't believe that it's already been twenty years!" To us as well, the two decades since the inaugural issue of the *Journal* appeared in January 1990 seem to have flown by, but they certainly have not been uneventful. In the first place, death has taken from us four of the five core members around whom we built our Editorial Board—Octavio Paz, Seymour Martin Lipset, Samuel P. Huntington, and most recently Leszek Kolakowski, to whom a memorial tribute appears on pages 184–88 below; only Juan Linz is still with us. It is hard to imagine that worthy successors to this remarkable group are already on the scene, but perhaps we all have a tendency to undervalue those who are closer to being our contemporaries.

But if twenty years is a significant portion of the life of an individual, it is a mere moment in the march of history. Yet what a moment it has been! The period of our gestation and infancy alone held enough drama to fill a century. We began planning the founding of the *Journal* and fundraising for it in 1988, and we were able to open our offices in September of the following year. By that point, the *annus mirabilis* of 1989 had already witnessed the Roundtable negotiations and Solidarity's electoral victory in Poland—the latter on the very same day (June 4) on which the Chinese government sent its tanks into Tiananmen Square to crush the large-scale prodemocracy demonstrations that had transfixed the world for weeks. Just ahead lay the fall of the Berlin Wall, the Velvet Revolution in Czechoslovakia, and the violent demise of Ceaușescu in Romania. The featured articles in our first issue (which also included Juan Linz's much-debated essay on "The Perils of Presidentialism" and Leszek Kolakowski's prescient warnings about the "Uncertainties of a Democratic Age") covered the Chinese crackdown and the Soviet crackup.

We were also taught an early lesson in the unpredictability of political developments by an event of much less world-historical significance. Our very first issue contained an article about Panama's democratic opposition movement entitled "The Struggle Against Noriega." While it was in press, U.S. combat forces invaded the country and brought that particular struggle to a speedy close. The best we could manage was a brief Editors' Note inserted at the "bluelines" stage informing our readers why this particular article might seem a bit outdated.

Democratic change continued to proceed at a prodigious rate. In February 1990 South African president F.W. de Klerk released Nelson Mandela from prison and unbanned the African National Congress, setting in motion the process that would lead to the end of apartheid.

In that same month, a “sovereign national conference” was convened in Benin, initiating what would become an African wave of transitions to multiparty systems. Also in February, Violeta Chamorro was elected president of Nicaragua, defeating incumbent Daniel Ortega and bringing to an end (at least for a time) the rule of the Sandinistas. A month later, Chilean dictator Augusto Pinochet, who had lost his 1988 bid to stay in power by referendum, peacefully turned over power to democratically elected president Patricio Aylwin. Meanwhile, the Soviet crackup accelerated, and by the end of 1991 the USSR had disappeared, and with it the Cold War era.

Thus, by the time of the *Journal*’s fifth-anniversary issue in January 1995, the international landscape had been utterly transformed. As we noted in our introduction to that issue, not only had the number of countries with democratically elected governments soared, but so had the international legitimacy of democracy, as reflected in the numerous endorsements that it had received from multilateral organizations. In introducing our inaugural issue in 1990, we had characterized pro-democratic intellectuals in many countries as “lonely and embattled,” and democrats in the Third World as often feeling “beleaguered and isolated.” In our fifth-anniversary issue, we acknowledged that this was no longer the case, and we hailed the emerging worldwide solidarity among democrats. Indeed, during that short half-decade democracy assistance had gone from being the controversial preserve of a few nongovernmental institutions to being a large-scale, mainstream enterprise supported by major governments and international organizations.

But in 1995, we also offered some strong notes of caution. Among the “worrisome trends” that we cited were the difficulties being encountered in the effort to consolidate new democracies. Many of them, we noted, “seem stuck in a gray area of quasi-democracy, with shaky political institutions and constitutional systems that fail to provide the minimal conditions of democracy.” The remainder of the 1990s witnessed some further (if modest) democratic progress, which we acknowledged in the introduction to our tenth-anniversary issue—a special number on “Democracy in the World” (modeled on Tocqueville’s *Democracy in America*) that appeared in January 2000 at the start of the new millennium. We also emphasized, however, that “the democratic euphoria of the early 1990s, tempered by sobering experience, has given way to a more realistic appreciation of the difficulty of building and consolidating new democracies.”

Five years later, in introducing our fifteenth-anniversary issue, Marc F. Plattner suggested that “the mood among supporters of democracy is perhaps more somber than it has been since we began.” He cited three key factors behind this mood: the problems of democracy-building in Iraq, Russia’s regression to autocracy, and the global rise of anti-Americanism and the “collateral damage” that it had inflicted on democracy

promotion. At the same time, he argued that “the underlying trends are not nearly as negative as the current mood suggests.” During the remainder of the most recent decade, these trends have become slightly more negative; there now may even be grounds for speaking of an erosion of freedom over the past few years, though its dimensions are very slight. In any case, there certainly has been no “reverse wave” of substantial democratic decline.

So where does that leave us as we enter the second decade of the twenty-first century? We hope that the essays we have gathered here on “Democracy’s Past and Future” will shed light on this question, although they do not provide any uniform characterization of what is a complex and hard-to-define situation. Our coverage begins with an essay by Tom Sander and Robert Putnam that revisits Putnam’s famous essay “Bowling Alone: America’s Declining Social Capital,” which was featured in the *Journal*’s fifth-anniversary issue and touched off a lively debate on the state of civil society in the United States. The new essay suggests that the decline in civic engagement and social capital that Putnam identified may have been reversed by the impact of 9/11, especially on the young, though they also warn of growing class differences within the 9/11 generation.

Next, Philippe Schmitter and Guillermo O’Donnell, the coauthors of the seminal 1986 book *Transitions from Authoritarian Rule*, offer their sometimes conflicting reflections on what they have learned about democratic transition and consolidation in the 25 years since their original study was written.

Transitions to (electoral) democracy have largely been a success story—the consolidation of democracy much less so. Part of the reason is that many new democracies have found it very difficult to establish the rule of law. In a groundbreaking essay, Francis Fukuyama explores why “Transitions to the Rule of Law” have proven so much harder than transitions to multiparty elections.

In the following essay, Laurence Whitehead examines the impact of the 2008 economic crisis on democratization. So far, the crisis does not seem to have had clear or decisive consequences for the struggle between democracy and authoritarianism, but Whitehead points to other ways in which the crisis is likely to alter global patterns of influence and the future behavior of democracies.

The next two essays, by Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way and by Andreas Schedler, address the question of electoral authoritarian regimes, a subject first broached in the *Journal of Democracy* that has become a focal point for scholars of democratization. Levitsky and Way show how such regimes manage to stay in power without obvious fraud or repression by securing for themselves the advantages of an unlevel electoral playing field. Schedler examines the “menus of manipulation” through which these regimes often succeed in maintaining control over not only

elections but also such institutions as legislatures, judiciaries, the media, civil society, and local government.

The Levitsky and Way and Schedler essays help to explain “authoritarian resilience.” Marc F. Plattner, by contrast, focuses on why democracy has proven so resilient, especially in countries with advanced economies. His account stresses the ways in which the principal disorders to which democracy is prone—populism and radical pluralism—tend to counteract each other. One conclusion that might be drawn from this and the three preceding essays is that we are now in a period marked by a kind of standoff between democracy and authoritarianism. As 9/11 and the crash of '08 make clear, our new century has not been lacking in dramatic historical events, but it may be a long time before we again experience the avalanche of regime changes that characterized the late 1980s and early 1990s.

Next, Larry Diamond addresses the most striking regional anomaly in the global pattern of democratization, exploring the question “Why Are There No Arab Democracies?” The explanation he offers is not rooted in religion and culture but rather in patterns of political institutions and cleavages, in geopolitics, and in the heavy presence of oil-rich regimes in the Arab world. There follows a set of shorter articles that seek to draw out the lessons of “Twenty Years of Postcommunism.” Written by seven leading analysts of the region—Jacques Rupnik, Ivan Krastev, Alina Mungiu-Pippidi, Vladimir Tismaneanu, Ghia Nodia, Charles H. Fairbanks, Jr., and Lilia Shevtsova—these essays provide broad coverage of both the successes (and disappointments) of democracy in Central Europe and its failure across most of the former Soviet Union.

Finally, the issue concludes with a review essay by Bruce Gilley that assesses some of the past two decades’ leading books and articles on democratization. Gilley calls attention to the sometimes unnoticed pessimism that suffuses most of these works, despite their being written during a period of democratic advance, but he concludes in a distinctly upbeat fashion: “The world is set for a continued advance of democracy, an advance that we may one day be willing to call a triumph.” We wish we shared his confidence, but we certainly hope that he is right.

—*The Editors*