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In many ways, this is the abiding and overarching question of our times: does democracy work? Democracy has never been without its detractors, and specific critiques based on messiness, slowness, or torturous progress by half-measures and unsatisfying compromises are hardly new.

Happily—at least for those of us who believe that the benefits of liberal democracy outweigh the costs—democracy has proved itself remarkably resilient throughout history. The flame kindled in ancient Athens burns on, and its light has gradually expanded to encompass many people whom those early democrats never considered enfranchising. While those lights may feel as though they are flickering today, they remain a very reasonable bet. Democracy will prevail.

Democracy’s Detractors

The charge that democracy is incapable of meeting the challenges of the present day is hardly a new one. Democracy was introduced in the United States before the Industrial Revolution, to say nothing of the communications revolution of the twentieth century or the digital revolution emerging in this century. Though the American Founders surely felt the
world was moving plenty fast, information in their day moved at the speed of a horse or a ship. Today, of course, it moves at the speed of a tweet—that is, at the speed of light.

The enormous increase in the speed and volume of communications over the past two and a half centuries could reasonably be expected to have strained the always-ponderous processes of governmental decision-making to begin with. Today, our on-demand culture only adds to the challenge: when many of us take for granted the ability to buy something with one click and receive it on our doorstep within two days, it is entirely understandable that potholes that go unfilled for weeks and months are all the more frustrating. When we can purchase, read, or watch virtually anything so effortlessly, it begs belief that jobs as basic as road maintenance only add to the challenge: when many of us take for granted the ability to buy something with one click and receive it on our doorstep within two days, it is entirely understandable that potholes that go unfilled for weeks and months are all the more frustrating.

DEMOCRACY’S ADVANTAGES

The line of thinking sketched out above has a certain seductive power. This is true both in the abstract, as when headlines proclaim democracy in worldwide retreat; or in the petty frustrations of daily life, when it seems that no parking meter ever expires without a traffic officer waiting to dash off a ticket, while the roads themselves are perpetually poorly maintained. Especially when so much of life moves so fast, efficiency has a powerful appeal—particularly as represented in the public imagination by the private sector in general, and the high-tech sector in particular.

Before succumbing to that appeal, however, it is worth pausing to examine it in greater detail, and to ask if it is really so desirable as it might appear.

It is an oft-repeated truism that nobody captains a ship by committee, after all—least of all in stormy seas. In times as turbulent as these, might it not then make sense to streamline the public administration in order to make it more responsive to citizens’ desires and the demands of the fast-changing international arena.

A second consideration is the sheer scale and complexity of a democratic government’s work. Unlike a business, a democratic government cannot really choose to serve only a specific niche of its citizens. Instead, it has to negotiate and juggle between competing visions of which policy programs will best serve all of its constituents. In practice—especially in a two-party system like that of the United States—this means that only crablike progress is achieved, with lots of scuttling sideways for any forward movement.

The first issue we should consider in this respect is the old tension between efficiency and effectiveness. Our culture tends to strongly prefer efficiency; we are drawn to what is fast, shiny, and new. We demand that commerce be as frictionless as possible; we insist that automakers substantially redesign their entire product lines each year.

Sometimes, however, this preference causes us to conflate efficiency with effectiveness. In that case, we not only look for what is moving fast, but also assume that anything moving fast must naturally be moving in the right direction. In real life, as anyone who has ever missed an exit on the highway knows all too well, this is frequently not the case. And, when pointed in the wrong direction, speed quickly goes from an asset to a liability. Democracy forces us to have a second look at the trade-offs, because there are competing voices at play.

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eyes. This back-and-forth is an essential part of democratic governance, however, and is rooted in an important insight about the way people function.

One of the fundamental premises of democracy is that no one person or group has, or can ever have all the answers. Checks and balances are not only enshrined between the different levels and branches of government; they have also evolved between political parties such that a government may drag a country in one direction for some years, and the next will often drag it back towards the center. Slow and difficult as this method can be, it remains the best hedge yet devised against the inherent flaws of any governing party, as well as the general population's tendency toward boredom and frustration with whomever is in power at the moment.

In this way, democracy protects both people and governments from themselves and each other, and provides important safety valves for dissent and change. It was a long time coming, and that it required enormous outside pressure before the government was willing to take some steps that appear downright basic today. At the same time, though, we also have to appreciate, first, that change was in fact possible and, second, that the legislative achievements of 60 years ago did not close the conversation once and for all. We need look no further than the push for equal rights for transgender individuals or the Black Lives Matter movement in our own time to see that the language and logic of civil rights are still alive and well in the land, pushing us to construct a “more perfect union” than the one we have inherited.

**Democracy in Time**

Beyond its accurate presumptions about the character of both citizens and government, democracy’s greatest advantage might well be its accurate reflection of government’s relationship to history. The idea of forming “a more perfect union” is planted deep in the American psyche, deposits left by our founding fathers. The same impulses came from the Enlightenment in Europe. That unusual syntax (“a more perfect union”) contains a striking insight into how governments work over historical time. With enough hindsight, even the most progressive government will almost always be seen later as having been behind its own times. The contradictions and compromises laced through the American experience illustrate the point: the Founders certainly brought forth a new and “more perfect” form of government than the one they had been born into; but, more than two centuries later, they can rightfully be criticized for having been so badly wrong on slavery, for failing to enfranchise women, or for setting the new country on course to obliterate the native population of North America.

Bequeathing to us the dream of a “more perfect” union certainly does not absolve the framers of their mistakes, but they do deserve credit for recognizing that they would make mistakes and leaving the responsibility to correct them to future generations. Even if American history (or that of virtually any other nation) can be uncomfortable, healthy democratic governments (and their citizens) are like boats making their way along the stream of time rather than rocks planted against the current. The river of history is full of rapids, and those can make for an uncomfortable ride.

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As a result, one of the great false hopes dangled by autocrats (and some unhealthy democrats) across time has been an offer to get off the raft and onto the rocks. Knowing people are tired of being tossed along by the current, the would-be autocrat offers easy answers and promises to restore a comfortable, numbing sense of consistency. Over time, this has failed again and again to be a sustainable system of governance.

Of course, the river of time cannot be made to flow backwards, nor can anyone build something completely impervious to erosion. No leader can restore to us the life we remember, which is never the way it actually was in the first place. But autocracies have a tendency to make the bold claims of Ozymandias in Percy Bysshe Shelley’s famous and deeply ironic poem:

*My name is Ozymandias,*

*King of Kings;*

*Look on my Works, ye Mighty,*

*and despair!*

The king (and autocrat) and his works no doubt appeared impressive in their day; but Shelley’s poem pricks the absurd pretension that an authoritarian rule either would or could last forever. Recalling the ruined statue that bore the defiant blazon, the poem’s narrator concludes:
Nothing beside remains.  
Round the decay  
Of that colossal Wreck,  
boundless and bare  
The lone and level sands  
stretch far away.

**The Long Throw of History**

Ultimately, democracy succeeds because it is better suited to withstand the buffeting winds of history. A healthy and functioning democracy may live long enough to pull down some of its own statues as perspectives on history change, but this itself is testament to democracy’s ability to tolerate and adapt to the changes of history. As long as the great conversation continues between competing visions of the future, and progress continues to be made (however haltingly), democracies should both eschew Ozymandias’s pretensions of immortality and escape his desolate fate.

At the moment, of course, the river of history seems to have hit an especially rough patch—one that will test democracies and autocracies alike. But we need to keep at least one eye fixed firmly on the distant horizon: just as the stock market can move dramatically from day to day and yet show unparalleled growth over the long term, democracy will endure the present stress test and emerge plenty viable on the other side. And, any time an autocrat touts the efficiencies of his system, we should critically examine its trajectory. We should also realize that the acceleration of events and transparency of action, both driven by the internet, will over time prove more of a challenge to conservative authoritarian regimes.

Democracies, for all their messiness, have a built-in flexibility that permits them to sway in the wind. Authoritarian regimes, stiff and unyielding, will eventually fall like the statues of Ozymandias.

Even in difficult times, democratic countries tend to offer dramatically better quality of life than any putative competitors (even given some exceptions). Russia and China are certainly fast-moving global players, and both have made impressive gains in recent decades, but they remain woefully behind democracies large and small on the metrics that really matter.

For example, Russia and China rank 49th and 90th respectively in the UN Human Development Index (HDI), a good composite metric for national quality of life. For comparison, Norway and Australia lead the table; Canada and the United States hold ninth and tenth positions, respectively. China might have achieved more than five times the average annual HDI growth of the United States from 1990–2015, but it still has a long way to go before it can credibly offer a better...
THE GREAT QUESTIONS OF THE DAY

In conclusion, let us return to Bismarck and ask whether his methods were indeed successful in addressing the great questions of his day. In our view, the answer depends on whether we limit the scope of judgment to his own lifetime. On the one hand, it would be true to say that Bismarck rapidly and almost single-handedly righted the Prussian ship of state, and indeed found an answer to the problem of German unification that had eluded generations of his predecessors. Having successfully remade the international system in Europe, he spent the rest of his time in government directing the system he had built with similar dexterity and decisiveness.

On the other hand, Bismarck’s success contained the seed of Germany’s ruin. The prospect of failure hove into view even within his own lifetime: after Wilhelm I’s death, Bismarck found himself out of favor and soon out of power, and he spent the rest of his life darkly warning that his less-competent successors’ clumsy operation of the Bismarck system would lead to calamity. Two world wars later, Germany was shattered and divided once again—and Bismarck and his balance-of-power diplomacy remain in the conversation as contributing causes of World War I. And after a long period of war and trials, the 2,000 years of Germanic history have landed firmly within the democratic camp—Chancellor Angela Merkel is clearly the value-driven democratic leader in the world, and the ideological leader of modern Europe.

The clear lesson is a common one in history: it is always worth being careful what we wish for, and never more so than in times when some purposed Ozymandias comes along peddling a one-person solution to all of our problems. All forms of government involve trade-offs, and, in the long run, democracy’s preference for speeches and majority decisions is far preferable to—and far more sustainable than—the in-the-moment decisiveness of autocracy. Admitting that a “more perfect” world is always possible might mean that none of us will live to see the great questions of government settled in our own times. Yet this provides each of us with the freedom and responsibility to seek the best answers we can in our times and trust that those who follow us will do even better in theirs. The odds are strongly in favor of democracy. 

A decisionmaking process tends to more closely reflect the flaws of a leader as it becomes more closely controlled by that leader.