Biden calls Summit just when democracy is at the crossroads

Mark Evans and Gerry Stoker

> *Trust is at a breaking point. Trust in national institutions. Trust among states. Trust in the rules-based global order. Within countries, people are losing faith in political establishments, polarization is on the rise and populism is on the march.*

–Antonio Guterres, United Nations Secretary General, 25th September 2018.[i]

President Biden's recent proclamation that 'the challenge of our time is to demonstrate that democracies can deliver by improving the lives of their own people and by addressing the greatest problems facing the wider world' brings assurance to citizens around the world that democracy is the key to our past, present and future prosperity.[ii] But participants at the Biden Summit for Democracy need to be reminded that democracy is a living, fragile thing that needs to be nurtured and protected on an ongoing basis.

The current pressures on our democratic settlements are significant. Citizens worldwide continue to be distrustful of politicians, sceptical about democratic institutions, and disillusioned with democratic processes. As Antonio Guterres, states, there is evidence from many countries of a loss of confidence in the executive, legislative and judicial branches of national governments, as well as political parties, the news media and interest groups, some of the core institutions linking citizens and the state. These decaying institutions provide the connection to our understanding of how democracies could end, as they are no longer as effective at connecting governors and the governed.[iii] They also provide some of the focus for the three challenges the Biden Summit hopes to address: fighting corruption, promoting respect for human rights and reinvigorating democracy.

The risks of democratic backsliding and authoritarian resurgence are such that many observers see democracy in 'retreat', 'recession', or in a 'reverse wave' around the world, losing the war of ideas compared to the Chinese governance model or a newly assertive Russia.[iv] Some fear that weak commitment to the democratic norms and rules of the game by political leaders means we are entering an era in which 'democracies die'.[v]

As author Larry Diamond, who has spent a career defending and promoting democracy, concludes:

> *In every region of the world, autocrats are seizing the initiative, democrats on the defensive, and the space for competitive politics and free expression is shrinking. Established democracies are becoming more polarized, intolerant, and dysfunctional. Emerging democracies are facing relentless scandal, sweeping citizen disaffection, and existential threats to their survival.*[vi]

There are significant challenges to democracy from the threat of Russian aggression, Chinese power and the failings of the leader of democracy, the United States of America and these challenges have been brought into sharp focus by the pandemic.

Democracies confront a diverse range of problems. *The Global Satisfaction with Democracy Report 2020* found that the share of people who express dissatisfaction with the performance of democracy had risen by 10 percentage points to 57.5 per cent, from 1995 to 2019.[vii] In the past, most citizens in countries in North America, Latin America, Europe, Africa, the Middle East, Asia and Australasia were satisfied with the performance of democracy but this is now no longer the case. Some of the most populous countries in world have seen the steepest decline in satisfaction as in the USA, Brazil, Mexico and Nigeria.

The experience of the COVID-19 pandemic has added to the sense of democracy being at a crossroads which could lead to further decline or spark a renewal. The challenges created by the pandemic have been immense and many predict it will be followed by years of economic dislocation and recession. The fear of the spread of the virus has forced a rethink of safe public spaces and led to stagnating business activity and economic growth. And yet many governments around the world are rising to the challenge and rediscovering their raison d'etre – collective problem-solving in the national interest.

We have witnessed a renaissance in public faith in science and evidence informed policy-making. Even the media has enjoyed renewed confidence in its reporting, particularly public broadcasters. Most significantly, after a decade of disappointment with digital democratic innovation, governments and citizens around the world are beginning to embrace opportunities for digital participation.[viii] While civil society has shown its capacities and provided both practical help and social care and psychological support especially in long periods of lockdown.[ix]

COVID-19 has reminded voters that national governments are necessary and that with systemic renovation they can be made to work. Political leaders around the world have begun to talk about new thinking on the other side of the pandemic. Earlier references to a 'snap-back' have given way to a realization that what is needed is a much more root-and-branch approach, to taxation, transfer payments, industry policy, regulation, and across all these areas, the relative roles of governments and markets.

It is helpful when talking about 'democracy' to recognise that it is a practice not a utopian ideal and will always fall short of achieving all that people might want it to accomplish. The 'protective power of democracy', as Nobel prize winner Amartya Sen calls it, is made from a mix of four components and different countries may have more or less of each of these elements in practice.[x]

The first two of these features are the 'electoral component' –which measures how open, free and fair, elections are– and a 'participatory component' which asks how many legal channels of participation a country offers its citizens, from the local to the national level? And, how easy is it for citizens to use these channels? In combination these components provide a measure of political participation and freedom in democratic life.

The third, 'liberal values component' judges how embedded civil rights (including minority rights) and duties, are in a country, as well as the effectiveness of checks and balances in limiting the excessive concentration of power in any one institution of government, social group or actor. And the fourth component refers to the instrumental importance of political incentives in keeping governments responsible, accountable and free from corruption.

If all four of these components are present in sufficient quality, then that country can be defined as a liberal democracy.[xi] By 2020 there were about 40 countries that met these criteria sufficiently. But a further 50 countries that are substantially democratic but fall short in some way of meeting the third test. Combining liberal and electoral democracies gives us coverage of about half the countries in the world. The other half of countries fall into the category where rulers are not accountable to citizens to any great degree.

In these countries there is broad distinction between 'open' and 'closed' autocracies.[xii] In the former, elections take place and leaders and other representatives are elected but limits to levels of party competition, media freedom and the rule of law take away much of the power of the electoral process. In 'closed' democracies, open elections are not part of the governing process.

The motivation for Biden's Summit is the recognition that democracy needs to find ways to renew itself in these four areas. The protective power of democracy remains clear in principle, the challenge is to deliver it more effectively in practice. Most of the problems of democracy that we encounter stem from the persistence of social, economic or political inequality of one form or another. In contrast, effective democracy is shown to be most firmly embedded in creating empowering political and socio-economic conditions that make people both capable and willing to engage in democratic practice as critical citizens.

We remain confident in the adaptive capacity of liberal democracy and its citizens to renew our democratic settlements, restore and strengthen the 'protective' power of democracy. In research in both the UK and Australia we have explored the democratic reform preferences that people support.[xiii] It is a challenging exercise because many of the reform options that we have considered are not that well-known to members of the public. So, asking them about the changes they would like to see is best phrased in general terms. Broadly though the message from our research efforts is that the majority of citizens would like to see reforms to the way that representative politics works and operates even more than new opportunities to directly engage themselves. Historically, reform decisions have been presented as a binary choice between those that strengthen the representative system of government and reforms that extend greater public participation. It is increasingly evident, that citizens think that it is the mixture of reforms that restore and strengthen the protective power of democracy that will matter most in the next chapter of our democratic story. We agree with them.

Notes/links

[i]   His full speech is available at https://www.ndtv.com/world-news/world-suffering-from-trust-deficit-disorder-united-nations-chief-antonio-guterres-1922131 [accessed 22 November 2021].

[ii] The White House Briefing Room, 'President Biden to Convene Leaders' Summit for Democracy, 11 August 2021, https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/08/11/president-biden-to-convene-leaders-summit-for-democracy/ [accessed 22 November 2021].

[iii] David Runciman, *How Democracy Ends* (London: Profile Books, 2018).

[iv] See, for example, recent annual reports by: Freedom House (https://freedomhouse.org/), the Economist Democracy Index (https://www.economist.com/graphic-detail/2020/01/22/global-democracy-has-another-bad-year), Reporters without Borders (https://rsf.org/en), the Electoral Integrity Project (https://www.electoralintegrityproject.com/), and the Varieties of Democracy project (https://www.v-dem.net/en/. All accessed 22 November 2021.

[v]   For example, see: Larry Diamond and Marc F. Plattner, eds., *Democracy in Decline?* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2015); Joshua Kurlantzick, *Democracy in Retreat* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014); Edward Luce, *The Retreat of Western Liberalism* (Boston, Little Brown, 2017); Yascha Mounk, *The People vs. Democracy* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 2018); Levitsky and Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die*; and Sunstein, ed., *Can it Happen Here?*

[vi] Larry Diamond, *Ill Winds. Saving Democracy from Russian Rage, Chinese Ambition and American Complacency* (New York: Penguin Books, 2019), p. 11.

[vii] See Robert Foa *et al.*, 2020, *The Global Satisfaction with Democracy Report 2020*, https://www.bennettinstitute.cam.ac.uk/publications/global-satisfaction-democracy-report-2020/ [accessed 22 November 2021].

[viii] For evidence on all these positives see Célia Belin and Giovanna de Maio, 'Democracy after Coronavirus: Five challenges for the 2020s', *Foreign Policy*, August (2020).

[ix] Guanlan Mao, Maria Fernandes-Jesus, Evangelos Ntontis and John Drury, 'What have we learned so far about COVID-19 volunteering in the UK? A rapid review of the literature', medRxiv, November (2020).

[x]   Amartya Sen, 'Democracy as a universal value', *Journal of Democracy*, 10, 3 (1999), pp. 3–17.

[xi] See *Varieties of Democracy Project* at https://www.v-dem.net/en/ [accessed 22 November 2021].

[xii] A classification undertaken by Anna Lührmann, Marcus Tannenberg and Staffan I. Lindberg reported in 'Regimes of the World (RoW): Opening New Avenues for the Comparative Study of Political Regimes', *Politics and Governance* 6, 1 (2018), pp. 60–77.

[xiii] For Australia see Gerry Stoker, Jinjing Li, Max Halupka and Mark Evans, 'Complacent young citizens or cross-generational solidarity? An analysis of Australian attitudes to democratic politics', Australian Journal of Political Science, 52, 2 (2017), pp. 218-235, p. 230, and Mark Evans, Gerry Stoker and Max Halupka, *How Australian federal politicians would like to reform their democracy*. For the UK see: Gerry Stoker and Colin Hay, 'Understanding and Challenging Populist Negativity towards Politics: The Perspectives of British Citizens', *Political Studies,* 65, 1 (2017), pp. 4–23, p. 23.