

# Democracies in an Age of Uncertainty: A Long-Term Perspective

**An interview with Helen Milner & Daniel Treisman**

*By Jules Naudet*

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**In spite of the rise of far-right parties and of the adaptation of dictatorships to international pressures, political scientists Helen Milner (Princeton University) and Daniel Treisman (UCLA) are confident in the future of Democracy. Looking at global historical trends, they argue that it is the only political model suited to accommodate the fast-paced innovations that are driving capitalism.**

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**Helen V. Milner** is the B.C. Forbes Professor of Politics and International Affairs at Princeton University and the director of the [Niehaus Center for Globalization and Governance](#) at Princeton's School of Public and International Affairs. She was president of the International Studies Association (ISA) for the 2020-2021 term and was president of the International Political Science Association (IPSA) from 2012-14. She is a member of the National Academy of Sciences, the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, and the Council on Foreign Relations. She has written extensively on issues related to international and comparative political economy, the connections between domestic politics and foreign policy, and the impact of globalization on domestic politics. She works on topics related to globalization and development, such as the political economy of foreign aid, the

"digital divide" and the global diffusion of the internet, the resource curse and non-tax revenues, and the relationship between globalization and democracy, in Africa and the Middle East.

Some of her writings include [\*Resisting Protectionism\* \(1988\)](#), [\*Interests, Institutions and Information: Domestic Politics and International Relations \(Print\)\* \(1997\) \(ebook link\)](#), [\*Votes, Vetoes, and the Political Economy of International Trade Agreements\* \(2012\)](#), [\*The Political Economy of Economic Regionalism\* \(1997\)](#), and [\*Internationalization and Domestic Politics\* \(1996\)](#). Her newest book is [\*Sailing the Water's Edge: Domestic Politics and American Foreign Policy\*](#), coauthored with Dustin Tingley (Princeton University Press, 2015). It won the 2016 [\*Gladys M. Kammerer Award\*](#) for the best book published in the field of U.S. national policy.

**Daniel Treisman** is a professor of political science at the University of California, Los Angeles and a research associate of the National Bureau of Economic Research. In 2021-22, he was a visiting fellow at Stanford University's Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences. He has been a Guggenheim Fellow and a visiting fellow at the Hoover Institution (Stanford) and the Institute for Human Sciences (Vienna), and has received fellowships from the German Marshall Fund of the US and the Smith Richardson Foundation.

His research focuses on Russian politics and economics as well as comparative political economy, including in particular the analysis of democratization, the politics of authoritarian states, political decentralization, and corruption.

His latest book, co-authored with Sergei Guriev, [\*Spin Dictators: The Changing Face of Tyranny in the 21st Century\*](#), was published by Princeton University Press in Spring 2020. [\*The Return: Russia's Journey from Gorbachev to Medvedev\*](#) (The Free Press, 2011) was one of the *Financial Times'* "Best Political Books of 2011."

Since 2014, he has been the director of the [\*Russia Political Insight\*](#) Project, an international collaboration funded by the Carnegie Corporation of New York, to investigate political decision making in Putin's Russia. This resulted in the publication of [\*The New Autocracy: Information, Politics, and Policy in Putin's Russia\*](#) (Brookings Institution Press 2018).

### ***Books& Ideas: How would you characterize the political moment we live in today?***

**Daniel Treisman:** Well, globally, I'd say we're in a time of turbulence. In a way, it's a bit like the early 1980s: at that time, the world had been battered by a financial crisis, the OPEC oil price shock. Inflation was soaring and all that destabilized the old political establishment. And we saw the emergence of right-wing outsiders who had a more populist appeal: Ronald Reagan, Margaret Thatcher. On the left, socialists were defying the constraints of international markets. I'm thinking of Mitterrand in France. And today we have people on the left, Thomas Piketty in France, calling for extreme wealth taxes, and in the US, modern monetary theory, arguing that we can print money without limit. Also, like today, the West back then was militarily threatened by a declining aggressive nuclear power in Moscow.

Today, of course, we have China as well. Then as now, people were very worried about the future of democracy. In 1983, Jean-Francois Revel published a book titled *How Democracies Perish*. What he and others at the time didn't know was that the third wave of democratization was just taking off. And in the following 35 years, the number of democracies would double, the Soviet Union would collapse.

So today too, I see the fear about the future of democracy as a little exaggerated, a little hyped up. Some measures suggest that democracies have an all-time high. The polity index tells us that 61% of countries around the world are democracies today. Some other measures from [Freedom House](#) and [V-Dem](#) suggest that maybe the proportion of democracies has fallen by about 4%, so some slight decline.

But that's hardly surprising, given the unprecedented increase during the third wave, the massive increase in the number of democracies, and the fact that a good number of the countries that got swept up in that wave were relatively poor and had little experience of free government. So, the democracy recession may have a bit further to go, but I don't see a deep, fundamental threat to the future of democracy.

Democracy remains overwhelmingly popular around the world. The [World Values Survey](#) polled in 83 countries, from 2017 to 2020. And in every single one of them, a large majority, more than 57% said that democracy was either very good or rather good. There was no country where any other political system was preferred. I think there are very few people around the world who want to live under Islamism or in a China style dictatorship of corrupt princelings.

Now we see, very recently, that the war in Ukraine has really united the West very visibly. And the UN vote condemning Russia shows that there are very few leaders around the world who believe that strong countries should be allowed to invade and annex their neighbors. Within the West, I'd say we have a crisis of the elite. All the elites have come under attack.

The old political parties are not as strong as they were. They're being challenged from outside. In Europe, EU bureaucracy is under attack. Economic elites were discredited by the global financial crisis. The mainstream media has been challenged also by independent media, new media and the unedited Internet. And so, it no longer controls public discourse in the way that it used to do.

So, we're seeing this turbulent attack on elites, which at times has a kind of anarchic, sometimes crude character. I think that's really the nature of the moment that we're currently in.

**Helen Milner:** Much like Dan, I think we are in a moment of turbulence and one of real challenge to democracy around the world. We've seen that democracies have risen and fallen over time. The global share of democracies came much higher in the up to the 1920s, the interwar period, a vast decline in democracy and then the sixties, with decolonization, a rise again; a decline in the seventies and then a rise starting in the eighties, and as Dan has mentioned, an extreme rise from that period on.

So, democracy has faced challenge before, it has risen and it has fallen. I think the situation today is similar but different from those earlier periods. Some of the things that have caused rises and declines in the past, such as wars, economic crises, we have all of those now. Some things that are different focus on both internal challenges to democracy and external challenges to democracy that are faced today.

The internal challenges: I think one of the things that's different is that in the past we've worried about coups and popular rebellions as the main ways in which democracies fall. Nowadays, it seems like the pattern is different, and we've moved into a pattern where people talk about backsliding. That is, you have normal elections in a democracy, a party and a leadership wins, but all of a sudden they start taking control of the political system and making changes, eroding freedom of the press, ending assembly of the public, eroding the independence of courts and the legislature and slowly transforming the democracy into a single party system where other parties basically disappear or can't form or are unable to basically have their programs seen by the rest of the public. And that one party system then locks itself in and you have a sort of democracy, an electoral democracy, where alternation of parties is very difficult, which is an important element of democracy.

And these internal challenges, this backsliding is the real worry, I think, these days, and you see it in countries like Hungary and Turkey and Russia, and you worry, especially when far right parties come into power, that they're the most likely to turn to this kind of scenario of trying to restrict democracy, contain it, strengthen the executive, and move forward in a system in which you have very little actual democracy.

So, those are the internal challenges, and the external system is also a challenge. So, democracies tend to do better in a world in which there are other democracies, in which democracy is thriving. They tend to do better in a world where there are no wars, they tend to do better in a world where the global economy is working well. Right now, we have problems on all those fronts. Obviously, the war in Ukraine and conflict in other places is not good for democracy and puts real pressure on them. And the spread of autocracy and the sort of rebuilding of autocracy in places like China, again, is, I think, propelling a lot of challenges to existing democracies.

So, on those fronts, you have both internal and external challenges. The last point I would mention about external challenges is that we have innumerable transnational problems now that confront all countries. Climate change, pandemics, transnational crime, an economic global crisis, these are problems that are very difficult, that are very hard for any single country to solve.

They need to cooperate with each other. There are also things that often require a lot of change internally. And these types of transnational problems, I think, are posing a real problem for democracy because people feel like the major problems they're facing are not being solved, and perhaps can't be solved by democracies. And this is a grave worry.

***Books& Ideas: How has the liberal globalization and financialization of the world economy impacted the evolution of political regimes over the last 70 years?***

**Helen Milner:** This is a big question and one I'm very interested in; I think that globalization has had a big impact on countries internally and on the international system. By globalization, I mean a whole group of different kind of processes: international trade, migration, capital flows, and technological change. I think all of those are kind of a package of globalization, and they're a package of changes that have really accelerated over the last 30 or 40 years.

We've had countries joining the world economy since the 1970s with China liberalizing its economy first, the fall of the Soviet Union and all of those countries that came out of that joining the world economy and Russia joining the world economy, and then the developing countries increasingly liberalizing their markets and joining the world economy as well, with trade and capital flows and migration of people booming around the world in the last 30 years.

So, we've had this big move in globalization and it's gone along with structural transformation in many economies where we've had de-industrialization. By this I mean that the manufacturing component of the economy has declined; the service sector has increased. And this is kind of a natural process that economies go through. But it means an enormous transformation in the kind of jobs and occupations and types of firms that we have in the economy.

And this, I think, has created... In addition to rapid technological change, which we've seen so much with the Internet and social media, but also automation of all sorts, AI and things like this, just [changing the economy and society in very, very dramatic ways](#), linking countries more and more as they can see what's going on within each other. And these types of processes [are] really changing the internal politics of countries, people [are] becoming increasingly insecure as their jobs change, as unions decline in advanced industrial countries, as people face new skills that they need to learn and new types of livelihoods that they have to find.

This insecurity, I think, has grown. I think status anxiety has also grown, especially among sort of white working-class, middle-class types who've really seen their jobs and their job prospects change very dramatically.

I think this has created an opening then for parties who will come on and basically argue for sort of protectionism, for nativism, for kind of blaming outsiders, blaming groups that don't sort of look like you, whether they be foreigners or other ethnic groups, religious groups that aren't you. And so, what I think has happened is that these profound economic changes have led to a series of psychological changes in people that have then made programs often produced by the far right in countries much more appealing.

And over time, this is kind of led to the problems that we talked about initially with democracy and the challenges to democracy, people seeking greater security, more protection and turning to parties that seem to offer this. But we're not sure that, actually, in the end they do. But I think that globalization as I said, has had an enormous effect and will continue to have an effect.

It's a slow run change that accumulates over time, that really makes for long run political and social change.

**Daniel Treisman:** You asked about the last 70 years and, as Helen said, the world has really been transformed in that time, both through economic modernization

and through globalization. There have been massive increases in income and education, soaring trade and international investment, and, also, the emergence of global media and dense networks of NGOs promoting things like human rights, environmental protection and many other things.

So, I would argue that this had at the macro level two related effects. First, it has led to this very market expansion in democracy. We've seen authoritarian regimes transition to democratic government. Since 1950, the proportion of democracies in the world has increased from about 30% to 61%, according to [Polity](#). So that's the first change and the second change is that among the remaining authoritarian governments we've seen a shift in the dominant model by which they operate, by which they control the population, from the very brutal and openly repressive authoritarianism of, say, Mao or Stalin or even Idi Amin or Pinochet, to a model that's more sophisticated, that in a recent book with Sergei Guriev we call "[Spin Dictatorship](#)". And this model, instead of terrorizing the population into submission, manipulates information to ensure the popularity of the regime. I'm thinking of leaders like Hugo Chavez, Rafael Correa in Ecuador, the early Putin, the early Erdogan, Viktor Orban, Singapore's leaders since Lee Kuan Yew. These leaders pretend to be democratic. They hold elections, but they ensure that they always win these elections.

And they distort the information available to voters, marginalizing the opposition media, and they don't allow real competition. So, it's a very different model. We argue that this style is more compatible with a world of open borders, where Amnesty International is looking over the shoulder of every dictator, and CNN correspondents are always around to capture what's going on, and where judges in the West are asserting the right to prosecute dictators or dictator's associates or ex dictators, wherever they may be found in the world.

This style of spin dictatorships is also more compatible with economies based on knowledge, on information and on innovation. So, we see this transition from one mode of authoritarianism to another among non-democratic leaders – we did some analysis in the book, I mentioned Spin Dictators. We came up with a way to measure this in data, and we claim that the proportion of spin dictators, rather than what we call fear dictators, in the population of non-democratic leaders, has increased from about 10% in the 1970s cohort to more than 50% in the 2008 cohort.

So that's how I would see the macro effects of the economic development and globalization of the last 70 years. It has supported this very broad spread of democracy and simultaneously it has led dictators to change the way they operate. Of course, it's

not absolute, there remain very brutal, old-fashioned fear dictators like Bashar al-Assad or the leader of North Korea.

Also in China, you could say that the strategy is still very much oriented towards spreading fear, sending a clear message to the public, especially in places like Hong Kong, that their participation in government is not required. But combining that with a more sophisticated approach, at least some of the time, to propaganda and media control and Internet control.

So, we see combinations of a strategy of basically intimidation and repression with modern information technology and techniques. But looking across the whole range of authoritarian governments, we see far more cases of spin dictatorship, where the goal is really to persuade the ordinary citizen that they're living in a democracy and that their leader is doing a good job, and to persuade them in that way by manipulating what information they receive, by marginalizing opposition media and by preventing genuinely independent opposition politicians from organizing it.

***Books& Ideas: Is autocracy the natural fate of democracies in a globalized capitalist world?***

**Helen Milner:** Let me make a couple of points. I mean, first of all, I think agency really matters: what people do and how people choose to take actions and things like that, I think are going to really matter. I don't think it's a structural fact of the world economy that we're going to end up with all autocracies. So, first of all, agency matters.

Second of all, it's not clear to me that capitalism is very compatible with autocracy, in general. So, if you think about it this way, if the autocrats often feel very afraid of what the capitalists are going to do in the economy, capitalists, owners of big businesses can become very powerful through employing a lot of people, through making a lot of profits, through having a big impact on economies in different parts of the country. And autocrats will fear this and they will do things to increase state intervention in the economy. And those things tend to be not good for capitalism and capitalists. And I think you've seen in a number of contexts such as China and Russia recently, where the government increasingly intervenes to produce regulations that stop capitalists from doing the things that they want to do, or basically expropriate the businesses of capitalists and turn them over to the cronies of the regime.



These things are not good for capitalism, and they're certainly not good for innovation. And innovation is another thing that autocrats fear because they simply don't know who's going to win, what groups in society are going to win from that innovation. So, I don't think that autocracy is very compatible with a robust capitalism. It might be compatible, very compatible, with crony capitalism. But that's not a very good capitalism at the end of the day.

The next point really is that autocrats and autocracies right now are having problems. Look at Putin and Russia. The decision making there about the war doesn't seem to have been a very good set of decisions. China and Xi [Jinping] seem to be having some issues with the COVID, how to deal with COVID these days, not to mention countries like North Korea and Iran.

Which seem to be having lots and lots of problems socially, economically, in addition to politically. So, it's not clear that autocracies are doing all that well.

Finally, democracies historically have done better than autocracies. They have delivered. The data we have suggest that democracies have higher growth rates than autocracies on average, that democracies deliver better results for the people in them in terms of health, in terms of education, in terms of well-being, in all sorts of ways.

Democracies are more peaceful; democracies are more open. Democracies solve problems better. One of the things that I noticed before was that we have these big transnational problems. And the way to solve these problems is going to take lots of people thinking lots of new ideas and bringing those to the fore. And the way to do this is through collective intelligence, which is gathering lots of different people together, getting their ideas, getting their criticisms, and fusing all these things together to find a new pathway through things. And collective intelligence works in open societies. It works in democracies. Autocracies just don't have this. And it's very hard for them to have this again because of the concerns of leaders about maintaining their position. And so I think at the end of the day, autocracy is not the natural path. And the question is, 'How are democracies going to evolve to deal with these new problems that they face, to deal with these new economic and social situations and ideas that they face? And what kinds of changes are they going to adopt - and have to adopt, to improve the collective intelligence [necessary] to solve these large transnational problems that we face?'

**Daniel Treisman:** Is autocracy the natural fate of democracies in a globalized capitalist world? I'll be brief. No, and I'm not sure I even understand the premise of

the question. The world has globalized dramatically since 1980, and the proportion of autocracies in the world has fallen from 73% in 1980 to 39%, according to polity. A globalized capitalist world has proved much more conducive to democratization than to dictatorship.

In fact, I'd say it's not globalization, but autarchy, as in the 1930s, that has been associated with autocracy. And it's not capitalism, but communism that more often supports dictatorship. It's a deglobalized world that we should fear. Some people think that we're on the verge of that, that globalization has gone into reverse. I doubt that that's what actually faces us.

But in any case, I don't see any reason to think that capitalism is a long run threat to democracy, although, of course, it creates problems that I think, as Helen was suggesting, democracy is the best suited system to deal with, to innovate around, and ultimately to solve.

Published in *booksandideas*, 30 September 2022.