

# **Democracy in the Twenty-First Century: *Can We Be Optimistic?***

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# Democracy in the Twenty-First Century: *Can We Be Optimistic?*

What are the prospects for democracy in the new century that we have just entered? I should like to distinguish two aspects of this question. First, is democracy likely to spread further across the globe and perhaps cover the entire globe by the end of the twenty-first century? Second, what is likely to happen to the *quality* of democracy in countries that have already been democratic for many decades in the twentieth century, such as the democracies of Western Europe and North America? In order to emphasise these two facets, I toyed with an alternative title for this lecture, namely: “Democracy in the Twenty-First Century: More and Better?” That is, are we likely to see *more* countries become democratic, and are we likely to see *better* democracy in already democratic countries? Let me begin with the first part of the question – the spread of democracy in the new century.

## More democracies?

At first glance, it seems very difficult *not* to be optimistic about the spread of democracy around the world. At the beginning of the twentieth century, there were already many countries with free elections but only one that had not only free elections but also universal suffrage as well as all of the necessary civil liberties such as freedom of expression and association and that could therefore be regarded as a true democracy: New Zealand (since 1893). At the end of the twentieth century, according to the authoritative count of Freedom House (1999), there were 86 democratic countries. From 1 to 86 is obviously a huge jump. The pace of conversion to democracy also intensified during the twentieth century. Samuel P. Huntington (1991, 13-26) distinguishes three “waves” of democratisation: the first one began in the nineteenth century and ended in 1926; the second wave lasted from 1943 to 1962; and the third wave began in 1974

with the overthrow of the dictatorship in Portugal and was still going strong when Huntington was writing his *The Third Wave* in the early 1990s. Of these three waves, the third was the most powerful and affected countries in many parts of the world in the 1970s and 1980s – in Southern Europe, Latin America, and East Asia – and it continued in the 1990s, after Huntington had published his analysis, especially in Eastern Europe as a result of the collapse of Communism and the breakup of the Soviet Union but also in Central America and Africa; Renske Doorenspleet (2000, 399) describes the early half of the 1990s as a period in which an “explosion of democratisation” occurred. Moreover, the two main ideological enemies of democracy, Nazism and Communism, were defeated in the twentieth century, and by the end of the century democracy had become the reigning political ideology.

Finally, as the number of democracies in the world has increased, they have also been studied more thoroughly. Comparative analyses, especially in the 1980s and 1990s, have led to greatly improved knowledge about the viability and vitality of democracy. We now know a great deal about which institutional forms of democracy work well and which work less well. This aspect will be the main focus of my lecture today.

However, a closer look at these developments must temper our optimism. One problem is the crucial difference between liberal democracies and electoral democracies. The latter have some of the trappings of democracy, such as universal-suffrage elections, but their elections are not free and fair because the necessary civil liberties are lacking. This problem is related to the ideological victory of democracy, and also to pressures exerted by the rich and economic aid-dispensing Western democracies, both of which now make Third World countries eager to appear *democratic*. The 86 liberal democracies that Freedom House counts (countries that are “free” in its terminology) are counterbalanced by 59 countries that are mere electoral democracies, and 49 that have completely undemocratic, authoritarian regimes. The high number of 86 liberal democracies also presents too rosy a picture because it includes so many extremely small countries with populations of less than half a million, such as Kiribati, Saint Lucia, and San Marino. As Larry Diamond (1999, 117-19) convincingly demonstrates, being a mini-state strongly helps a country become and stay a liberal democracy – a finding that confirms the 1960s slogan “small is beautiful”. Excluding the roughly 25 mini-democracies leads to a more realistic estimate of about 60 liberal democracies at the end of the twentieth century.

Moreover, most of the countries that are electoral democracies or non-democracies are poor and have deep ethnic divisions. The example of India, which is both poor and ethnically divided, shows that these conditions are not absolute obstacles to the development of liberal democracy, and democratic institutions can be designed in such a way as to ameliorate ethnic tensions – a subject to which I shall return below – but it is clear that both factors are very unfavourable factors. Surveying the trends toward and away from liberal democracy at the end of the 1990s, Diamond (1999, 60-63, 261-78) reaches the conclusion that the third wave of democratisation has ended, and his further survey of the characteristics of the electoral and non-democracies makes him fear that it may be followed by a third reverse wave away from democracy – just as the two earlier waves were followed by reverse waves.<sup>1</sup>

Lastly, as I mentioned earlier, we have gained a great deal of practical knowledge about which democratic institutions work well and which work less well, or even disastrously. But politicians are often unaware of these findings or choose to ignore them – and hence their practical relevance is very limited. When democratic constitutions and basic laws are written, lots of important choices have to be made: between presidential and parliamentary forms of government; on the system of elections to be used; between federalism and unitary government; between centralisation and decentralisation; between unicameralism and bicameralism and, if a bicameral legislature is chosen, on the respective composition and powers of the two houses; whether judicial review of national legislation should be instituted and, if so, whether this function should be entrusted to a special constitutional court; on the degree of independence to be given to the central bank; and on how rigid or flexible the new constitution should be.

These are all important choices, but social scientists have found that the first two – presidentialism vs. parliamentarism and the electoral system – are especially important, even crucial, for the survival and successful operation of liberal democracy. Most experts have concluded that parliamentary government is preferable to presidential government and that proportional representation is preferable to majoritarian electoral systems. Expert opinion contrasts sharply with

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<sup>1</sup> In Diamond's (1999, 60) judgment, the third wave came to a halt in the year 1997. Doorenspleet (2000, 397) shows that Huntington's second reverse wave was a period of "trendless fluctuation" instead of a genuine reverse wave.

prevailing political practice. Both presidentialism and majoritarian elections are still being introduced in many new democracies; in the 1980s and 1990s, for instance, all of the new democracies in Latin America and Asia chose presidentialism, and about three-fourths of the approximately 25 countries in Eastern Europe and the area of the former Soviet Union also adopted presidential forms of government (see Stepan and Skach 1994, 120).

## **The flaws of presidential democracy**

Let me turn first to the question of presidential and parliamentary government and let me begin by defining these basic forms of government. There are three basic differences between them. First, in a *parliamentary* system, the head of government – who may have such different official titles as prime minister, premier, chancellor, minister-president, *taoiseach* (in Ireland), or, rather confusingly, even “president” (in South Africa and Botswana), but to whom I shall generically refer as prime minister – and his or her cabinet are responsible to the legislature in the sense that they are dependent on the legislature’s confidence and can be dismissed from office by a legislative vote of no confidence or censure. In a *presidential* system, the head of government – always called president – is elected for a constitutionally prescribed period and in normal circumstances cannot be forced to resign by a legislative vote of no confidence (although it is usually possible to remove a president for criminal wrongdoing by the process of impeachment).

The second difference between presidential and parliamentary governments is that presidents are popularly elected, either directly or via a popularly elected presidential electoral college, and that prime ministers are selected by legislatures. The process of selection may take a variety of forms. For instance, the German chancellor is formally elected by the Bundestag, the Irish *taoiseach* by the Dail, the Japanese prime minister by the House of Representatives, the South African and Botswana “presidents” by the National Assemblies, and the Papua New Guinea prime minister by the House of Assembly. In Italy and Belgium, cabinets emerge from negotiations among the parties in parliament and especially among party leaders, but they also require a formal parliamentary vote of investiture. In the United Kingdom, the queen normally appoints the leader of the majority party to the prime ministership, and in many multiparty systems, too – for instance, in the Netherlands – the cabinets that emerge from inter-party bargaining are

appointed by the heads of state without formal election or investiture; these cabinets are assumed to have the legislature's confidence unless and until the legislature expresses its lack of confidence.

The third fundamental difference is that parliamentary systems have collective or collegial executives whereas presidential systems have one-person, non-collegial executives. The prime minister's position in the cabinet can vary from preeminence to virtual equality with the other ministers, but there is always a relatively high degree of collegiality in decision-making; in contrast, the members of presidential cabinets are mere advisers and subordinates of the president. The most important decisions in parliamentary systems have to be made by the cabinet as a whole, not just by the prime minister; the most important decisions in presidential systems can be made by the president with or without, and even against, the advice of the cabinet.

Because parliamentary and presidential systems of government are defined in terms of three dichotomous criteria, eight combinations are theoretically possible but, in practice, almost all democracies can be classified either as purely or mainly parliamentary, or as purely or mainly presidential. Most West European democracies are parliamentary; France is the major exception; parliamentarism is also the usual form of government in democracies that are former British colonies. Presidential systems are found mainly in the Western hemisphere – in the United States and Latin America – but other prominent examples are the Philippines, Korea, and the countries that were formerly part of the Soviet Union.

Why is it that presidential systems perform so poorly? The most comprehensive theoretical argument can be found in the book *The Failure of Presidential Democracy* by Juan Linz. The first problem of presidentialism is what Linz (1994, 6-8) calls "dual democratic legitimacy". In parliamentary systems, only the legislature is popularly elected and is the clear and legitimate representative of the people, but in presidential systems both president and legislature are popularly elected and are both legitimate representatives of the people – but it is quite possible and even likely that the president and the majority of legislators have divergent political preferences, even if they nominally belong to the same party. There is no democratic principle to resolve such disagreements. The practical result tends to be stalemate – and a strong temptation for the president to assume extraordinary powers or for the military to intervene. It is ironic that presidential government was originally designed, as explained in the *Federalist Papers*

(Hamilton, Jay, and Madison, 1788), to *limit* the power of the executive by means of a strict separation of powers between president and legislature and by separate election of the two, but that the practical result has frequently been *too much* presidential power – which in turn has led to constitutional provisions in almost all presidential democracies to limit presidents to one or two terms of office.

Such term limits, however, have further undesirable consequences. One is that they violate the democratic principle that the people should be able to elect their most preferred candidate. It also often means that presidents who cannot be re-elected turn into completely ineffectual “lame ducks” in their final years in office. Presidents may also spend inordinate proportions of their time, energy, and political capital to change the term limit rule or to have it interpreted in such a way as to allow re-election after all; recent examples are Argentina, Brazil, and Peru. The contrast with parliamentarism is revealing: there is not a single parliamentary democracy in the world in which it has been found to be necessary to limit the prime minister’s tenure to a specified number of terms or years in office.

The second problem of presidentialism is what Linz (1994, 8-10) calls its “rigidity”: presidents are elected for fixed periods of time which cannot be extended, even if a president continues to be popular and successful, because of term limits, and which cannot be shortened even if a president proves to be incompetent, or becomes seriously ill, or is beset by scandals of various kinds. The only two remedies are very imperfect remedies: presidents can and do resign, of course, but most presidents resist this option as long as they can; and they can be impeached, but this process is almost always both very time-consuming and ultimately unsuccessful because extraordinary majorities are required to effect removal. It cannot be compared to the ease and swiftness of a regular parliamentary majority voting its lack of confidence in a prime minister and the rapidity of prime ministerial resignation under the threat of a vote of censure. Remember, for instance, how quickly prime minister Anthony Eden was removed after the fiasco of the Suez crisis in 1956. Parliamentary systems can usually also react flexibly to changed political or social circumstances by scheduling early elections.

The third serious problem is the “winner take all” nature of presidential elections (Linz 1994, 14-16). The winning candidate wins all of the executive power that is concentrated in the presidency and it is “loser loses all” for the defeated candidate

who usually ends up with no political office at all and often disappears from the political scene altogether. Parliamentary systems may also have a “winner take all” element if one party gains more than half of the parliamentary seats and can therefore form a single-party cabinet under its leader as prime minister. However, the winner in this case is a party instead of one person and the office won is a collegial cabinet instead of a one-person presidency. Moreover, the losers can still play important roles in parliament, such as in the United Kingdom the role of “leader of the opposition”. Multiparty parliamentary systems are free of this defect, of course. The “winner take all” problem makes presidentialism especially dangerous for countries with deep ethnic or religious divisions because the winning candidate is necessarily the representative of one group to the exclusion of all other groups. On the other hand, the collegial cabinets of parliamentary systems offer excellent possibilities to include representatives of different groups in the government.

A fourth serious drawback of presidential government is that presidential election campaigns encourage the politics of personality – with an emphasis on the personal weaknesses and alleged character flaws of the candidates – instead of a politics of competing parties and party programmes. In representative democracy, parties provide the vital link between voters and the government. Seymour Martin Lipset (2000) has recently emphasised this point again by calling political parties “indispensable” in democracies and by recalling E. E. Schattschneider’s (1942, 1) famous pronouncement that “modern democracy is unthinkable save in terms of parties”. The democratic ideal is to have strong and cohesive parties with clear programmes.<sup>2</sup> Anything that detracts from this ideal detracts from the viability of democracy.

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<sup>2</sup> There are two exceptions. First, Dag Anckar and Carsten Anckar (2000) have shown that six very small Pacific island states have been able to function admirably as democracies without any political parties. Second, Diamond (1999, 97) emphasises that it is possible for parties to become *too* strong; for instance, in Venezuela, political parties “have monopolised the political process and thus so pervasively penetrated state and organisational life that they have robbed interest groups and other political institution of their autonomy and left little space for the incorporation of new, marginal, or alienated constituencies into democratic politics”. This “partyarchy”, he correctly argues, “has been a central factor in eroding the effectiveness, legitimacy, and stability of democracy in Venezuela”. However, while both of these situations are clear exceptions to the need for strong parties, they are also rare occurrences.

Several attempts have been made to test Linz's arguments about the weaknesses of presidential democracy. These differ in terms of the periods that are analysed, the countries that are included, the exact definitions of presidential and parliamentary government (and hence the classification of countries in these categories), and the definition and measurement of "success" of the different types of democracies or how long they have to endure in order to qualify for "survival". Nevertheless, these tests have generally supported Linz's ideas. Fred W. Riggs (1988) was the pioneering scholar in this respect, and he found presidentialism to be extremely prone to failure and hence a highly "problematic regime type". Of the many later studies that have come to the same conclusion, the two by Alex Hadenius (1994) and by Alfred Stepan and Cindy Skach (1994) are the best known. On the basis of a multivariate statistical analysis, Hadenius (1994, 81) concludes that "the positive effect of parliamentarism ... emerges as the key institutional precondition for the upholding of political democracy".

Stepan and Skach (1994, 132) similarly find that parliamentarism presents "a more supportive evolutionary framework for consolidating democracy" than presidential government, and they explain this major finding in terms of a series of positive tendencies of parliamentary government that both confirm and expand on Linz's overall argument: "the greater propensity [in parliamentary systems] for governments to have majorities to implement their programmes; [parliamentarism's] greater ability to rule in a multiparty setting; its lower propensity for executives to rule at the edge of the constitution and its greater facility at removing a chief executive who does so; its lower susceptibility to military coup; and its greater tendency to provide long party or government careers, which add loyalty and experience to political society". There have also been a few empirical studies that have shown no significant differences between the two types (for instance, Power and Gasiorowski 1997). But, very significantly, not a single study has been produced that shows that presidentialism actually works better than parliamentarism.

Let me also mention the numbers that I encountered in my own worldwide comparative study of stable liberal democracies, defined as all countries (with populations of at least 250,000) that had been continuously democratic from 1977 to 1996, a period of almost twenty years (Lijphart 1999, 48-55). I found that of the 36 countries that fit these criteria, only five were presidential: the United States, France, Costa Rica, Colombia, and Venezuela – a very small percentage (less than 15 percent) that contrasts sharply with the roughly 3:2 ratio of

presidential to parliamentary systems in the world (Derbyshire and Derbyshire 1996). Extending the period to the year 2000 and following the criteria of Freedom House, my set of democracies would have dropped to 34, and, significantly, the two democracies to be dropped are Colombia and Venezuela. That is, now there are only three presidential systems in the total set of 34 – less than 10 percent!<sup>3</sup>

The fact that there are still three presidential systems – the United States, France, and Costa Rica – that have performed reasonably well as democracies could be cited as evidence contradicting Linz’s theory. However, Linz only argues that presidential democracies are inherently fragile, not that it is completely impossible for them to survive; his theory is probabilistic, not one of absolute differences. Moreover, the kinds of problems of presidentialism that Linz points out are clearly noticeable in the recent political histories of both France and the United States: for instance, President Mitterrand’s failure to resign in spite of his grave illness in the last years of his presidency and President Clinton’s involvement in a personal scandal which seriously weakened his effectiveness during his second term of office. The most significant and striking fact is that there are merely three presidential democracies among the more than 30 long-term, stable democracies.

Scholars thrive on controversy and disagreement, and I cannot claim complete scholarly unanimity in favour of parliamentary government. However, I can confidently assert that it has strong majority support. I, for one, find the sum total of the theoretical arguments and the empirical evidence against presidential government completely convincing.

## **Electoral systems**

For reasons of time, I must be much briefer about the second crucial element of constitutional design: the electoral system. This is not a problem, fortunately, because while the subject matter is very complicated – and highly technical – the

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<sup>3</sup> India and Papua New Guinea also slipped from “free” to only “partly free” status in the early 1990s, but only temporarily; they were readmitted to Freedom House’s “free” countries by the end of 1998 (Lijphart 1999, 51-52).

practical conclusion for democratic constitutional design is simple and straightforward.

The major contrast is between systems of *proportional representation* (of which there are many varieties) and *majoritarian* election systems (of which the most important and prevalent form is the system that uses single-member election districts in which the candidate with the most but not necessarily the absolute majority of votes wins, as in Great Britain). What is clear is that majoritarian systems suffer, by definition, from the same “winner take all” problem that bedevils presidential government. For divided societies, therefore, the choice should be easy. Larry Diamond (1999, 104) regards this generalisation as the most sustainable of any that have been formulated about the institutional design of democracies: “majoritarian systems are ill-advised for countries with deep ethnic, regional, religious, or other emotional and polarising divisions. Where cleavage groups are sharply defined and group identities (and intergroup insecurities and suspicions) deeply felt, the overriding imperative is to avoid broad and indefinite exclusion from power of any significant group”.

This description fits quite a few of the current liberal democracies, such as India, Canada, Belgium, Israel, and Trinidad and Tobago, but it also fits almost all of the countries in the world that are not, or not yet, liberal democracies. For countries that are relatively homogeneous in ethnic, religious, and other respects, proportional representation is less of an imperative, but it cannot hurt; it also has some other desirable consequences such as the stimulation of higher voter participation and better representation of women than majoritarian election systems (Lijphart 1999, 278-86).

## **Lessons not learned**

The overall conclusion is therefore that the combination of parliamentarism with proportional representation and with a multiparty system – since proportional representation almost inevitably leads to multipartyism – is optimal. The problem is that this proposition is not recognised or understood by many politicians. The conventional wisdom is still that democracies need “firm and vigorous” leadership and that such leadership can best be provided by one-party cabinets in parliamentary systems, as in Great Britain, or by powerful presidents in presidential systems. The assumption underlying this conventional wisdom is that

concentrating political power in the hands of one party or one person can promote unified, decisive leadership and hence coherent policies and fast decision-making.

This argument appears to have considerable merit, but there are several strong counter-arguments. Presidents and one-party cabinets may be able to make decisions faster than multiparty governments, but fast decisions are not necessarily wise decisions. In fact, the opposite may be more valid: sound decision-making requires a careful consideration of all of the alternatives and extensive and unhurried deliberation.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, the supposedly coherent policies produced by one-party cabinets and presidents may be negated by the alternation of these governments; this alternation from left to right and vice versa may entail sharp changes in policy that are too frequent and too abrupt. In particular, British political scientist S. E. Finer (1975) has forcefully argued that successful macroeconomic management requires not so much a *strong* hand as a *steady* hand, and that proportional representation and coalition government are better able to provide steady, centrist policy-making; this consideration made him a supporter of introducing proportional representation in the United Kingdom. Policies supported by a broad consensus, furthermore, are more likely to be carried out successfully and to remain on course than policies imposed by a “decisive” government against the wishes of important sectors of society. Finally, for maintaining civil peace in divided societies, conciliation and compromise – goals that require the greatest possible inclusion of contending groups in the decision-making process – are much more important than making snap decisions.

What I have just said does not mean that politicians are not aware of the alternatives. One striking difference between democratic constitution-making in Huntington’s second wave and that in the third wave is that, in the second wave, most new democracies were former colonies and that they simply adopted the main outlines of the constitutions of their former colonial masters; that is, for instance, how the Westminster model travelled around the world and how the former Dutch and Belgian dependencies started out with constitutions resembling those of the Netherlands and Belgium, respectively. In the third wave, constitution-writers have been much more aware of the principal alternatives,

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<sup>4</sup> A nice example is Frank Hendriks’ (1999) comparative study of traffic policy in two cities in Great Britain and Germany: Birmingham’s decision-making process was much faster than Munich’s, but Munich’s slow and ponderous ways produced much better and more effective policies in the end.

including the alternatives of presidential vs. parliamentary forms and majoritarian vs. proportional election rules. But, in addition to the continuing appeal of the conventional wisdom, three tendencies have tended to keep them from making optimal decisions. One is that old traditions are too strong to be changed; the best example is Latin America where presidentialism has worked disastrously in the past and where Linz's arguments are well-known and also widely supported, at least in the abstract, but where a change to parliamentarism is regarded as out of the question because of long presidentialist traditions.

Because such traditions are very strong and important, the recent proposal by Joschka Fischer, the German foreign minister, is very surprising. One of his suggestions for the federal European Union that he advocated on 12 May, 2000, was to establish a presidential system with a popularly elected president heading the federal government (*Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* 2000). This contrasts with the parliamentarist traditions of all but one of the members of the European Union; the one exception is France. In the light of all of the disadvantages of presidential government that I have discussed, I feel that it would be a major mistake for the European Union to follow Fischer's suggestion and to adopt a presidential form of government

A second problem has been that constitution-writers are not just thinking in terms of the general interest of their countries but also of the special interests of their parties or other groups that they represent; for this reason, for instance, constitutional designers in Eastern Europe representing parties that are weak but have leaders that are more popular than their parties and have broad name recognition have been strongly tempted to opt for the presidential alternative.

Finally, especially in the 1990s, there has been a strong tendency to avoid the problem of choosing between the alternatives by trying to fashion intermediate solutions: semi-presidentialism instead of either presidentialism or parliamentarism, and mixed electoral systems instead of purely majoritarian or proportional systems. The problem with semi-presidentialism is its instability in the sense that it either operates mainly as a presidential system or tends to evolve into a mainly parliamentary system. Examples of the latter are Poland and Portugal. France is the best-known example of the former, but other examples are Russia and Sri Lanka, and similar semi-presidential proposals have been seriously debated in Brazil and Argentina: not a mixture of presidentialism and parliamentarism but an alternation between presidential and parliamentary

*phases*, in which the presidential phases tend to predominate. I therefore classify France as a presidential system, as I have indicated earlier. The September 2000 referendum decision to change the seven-year term of the French president to a five-year term, combined with the probability that future presidential and parliamentary elections will be held simultaneously or almost simultaneously, will strengthen the tendency for the system to operate like an almost purely presidential democracy.

Mixed electoral systems became the rage of the 1990s (see Shugart and Wattenberg 2000). There are two main forms. One is the German model, later also adopted by Bolivia, Venezuela, and New Zealand, which combines single-member district plurality elections with proportional representation, but in such a way that the overall outcome is proportional. This “mixed” system is therefore not really mixed but a form of proportional representation. The other type is the so-called “parallel” system, in which the majoritarian and proportional elements operate side by side without influencing each other, as in Japan, Russia, Ukraine, and Mexico. In these systems, minorities have a better chance to be represented than in purely majoritarian systems, but they are necessarily underrepresented. I therefore regard them as more closely akin to majoritarian than proportional systems. A true mixture of the two systems is impossible to obtain. An additional serious problem with both attempts at mixing is that they result in overly complicated rules and therefore violate the second cardinal rule of electoral law design – the first rule being the need for proportional representation in divided countries that I mentioned earlier – namely that electoral rules should be simple and straightforward (see Taagepera 1998).

All of the knowledge we have gained about optimal constitutional design appears to be a strong reason for optimism, but this knowledge can do little good if it is not recognised and used – a strong reason for pessimism. Let me emphasise that I am not arguing that the right choices *guarantee* democratic success; but I am saying that the wrong choices make success much less likely.

## **Better democracies?**

What are the prospects for democracy in the 21 old and well-established democracies that have been democratic for at least half a century – mainly in Western Europe and North America, but also including Japan, Israel, Australia, and

New Zealand? Here, too, our initial judgment has to be highly optimistic. Generally speaking, the longer a democracy has been in existence, the more likely it is to stay democratic. In these 21 “veteran” democracies, democratic failure now seems completely inconceivable. Moreover, these democracies have performed extremely well for their citizens, who are more secure, more prosperous, and better educated at the beginning of the twenty-first century than ever before.

Unfortunately, the news is not uniformly good. Democracy may not be in danger of failing in these older democracies, but it does appear to be in danger of losing a great deal of its vitality. Many observers have called attention to the “erosion of confidence” among the citizens of these countries (Dogan 1997), their decreasing interest in politics, their declining participation in elections and other political activities, their declining membership in political parties, and, as a result, the serious weakening of political parties (Norris 1999, Mair and van Biezen, forthcoming). Studies of political behaviour have shown that these phenomena tend to occur together, that is, citizens who participate in one type of political activity like voting are also likely to participate in other political activities, to be interested in politics, and to be confident about their own political influence and the operation of core democratic institutions like parliaments and parties. The fact that they have *simultaneously* declined is therefore no great surprise.

The decline in voter turnout is especially disconcerting because it is gradually undermining the democratic legitimacy of representative institutions. I believe that a critical threshold occurs when fewer than half of the eligible voters participate. This happened in the United States in the 1990s when turnout in presidential elections fell below 50 percent and mid-term congressional elections (i.e., in years in which there is no presidential election) were attracting only about one-third of eligible voters. Turnout in Swiss legislative elections has been below 50 percent for several decades – as has turnout in local and regional elections in many other countries. The second reason why declining voter participation is so troubling is that voting turnout tends to be socio-economically biased: privileged citizens – those with greater wealth, higher incomes, and more education – tend to vote in greater numbers than less privileged citizens. Unequal participation spells unequal influence: “whoever doesn’t vote, doesn’t count”, as the saying goes. When overall turnout goes down, the inequality in voting and in influence further increases. Thirdly, declining voter turnout is rather surprising because citizens of Western countries are more prosperous and better educated than ever before, which, according to the proposition I have just stated, should mean that

they would be expected to participate more instead of less. That it is the other way around is therefore another reason for concern.<sup>5</sup>

Of the massive evidence of declining voter turnout, let me cite just one example: the five European Parliament elections held from 1979 to 1999 (Teasdale 1999, 436). The average for all member states declined in each election – from 63.0 percent in 1979, to 61.0 percent in 1984, 58.5 percent in 1989, 56.8 percent in 1994, and finally even below the 50 percent mark, namely 49.4 percent, in 1999. These averages are not fully comparable because they are based on different numbers of member countries in each election, but the pattern is repeated when we compare turnout in the first European election (occurring between 1979 and 1996) in each of the fifteen member countries with turnout in 1999: it was lower in 1999 in all countries except Denmark where it went up modestly from 47.1 to 50.4 percent. The Netherlands provides a final striking example: turnout declined in each election, from 57.8 to 50.5, 47.2, 35.7, and 29.9 percent – with the last percentage being only slightly more than half of the turnout twenty years earlier and even falling below the turnout rate in American mid-term congressional elections! One well-known general characteristic of voter turnout is that it is lower in less important elections and higher in more important elections such as national parliamentary elections and presidential elections. The downward trend in the European elections is therefore even more striking: turnout has declined while the European elections have actually become *more* important as a result of the substantial growth in the European Parliament's powers since the early days.<sup>6</sup>

As with regard to the prospects of the spread of democracy around the world, we know a great deal about what can be done to improve the vitality of democracy by stimulating voter participation. And the message is partly the same: proportional representation and parliamentary government work better than majoritarian elections and presidentialism. Proportional representation tends to

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<sup>5</sup> Until the 1960s, it was often argued that the failure to vote could be interpreted as a sign of satisfaction with the democratic system; based on this assumption, for instance, W. H. Morris Jones (1954) wrote an essay entitled "In Defense of Apathy". Since then, however, survey research has clearly shown that it is not satisfied citizens who tend not to vote but those who feel dissatisfied and disaffected – and who have good reasons to be dissatisfied because they belong to the less privileged strata of society.

<sup>6</sup> Anthony L. Teasdale (1999, 437) argues that "the last decade has seen a spectacular growth in the legislative power of the European Parliament ... [Now] positions adopted by the Parliament can shape directly the content of much European law."

stimulate voter participation by giving the voters more choices and by eliminating the problem of wasted votes – votes cast for losing candidates or for candidates that win with big majorities – from which majoritarian systems suffer; this makes it more attractive for individuals to cast their votes and for parties to mobilise voters even in areas of the country in which they are weak. Comparative studies that control for the influence of all other factors have estimated that the turnout boost from proportional representation in national elections is between 9 and 12 percentage points. Similarly, turnout in national legislative elections in parliamentary systems tends to be higher than in presidential elections in presidential systems. In my study of 36 democracies from 1971 to 1996, the average percentages were 76.5 versus 63.9 percent – a difference of well over 12 percentage points.<sup>7</sup>

Another effective measure for increasing turnout is compulsory voting in spite of the generally low penalties for non-compliance and generally lax enforcement in the countries that have it (such as Australia, Belgium, Greece, and several Latin American countries): all other factors being equal, it can boost turnout by 7 to 16 percentage points in national elections. Compulsory voting is a major, and controversial, subject about which a great deal more could be said – but, for reasons of time, not today. (I have devoted entire lectures to this topic on other occasions.<sup>8</sup>) Let me merely state here that the basic normative justification for compulsory voting is that voting presents a collective-action problem: we cannot have representative democracy without people participating in electing representatives, and voting is therefore a collective good. However, it is also a burden, albeit not a very heavy one, for each individual citizen, and the chances that one vote will determine the outcome in a mass election is infinitesimal; individual citizens therefore have a strong incentive not to vote and to become so-called “free riders”. The general remedy for problems of collective action – such as paying taxes – is to counteract free riding by means of legal sanctions and

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<sup>7</sup> The bivariate correlation between presidentialism and voter turnout is -0.33, statistically significant at the 5 percent level. When proportional representation, compulsory voting, the level of social and economic development (all of which tend to increase turnout), and the frequency of elections (which depresses turnout) are controlled for, the negative effect of presidentialism on voter turnout becomes even stronger and is now nearly significant at the 1 percent level.

<sup>8</sup> Lectures at the University of Nijmegen, the Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association in San Francisco, and the University of Vienna (see Lijphart 1995, 1997, 1998).

enforcement. For the collective-action problem of voting, this means that citizens should not be allowed to be free riders – that is, that they should be obligated to turn out to vote (Feeley 1974, Wertheimer 1975).

An effective measure for strengthening political parties is for governments to provide direct subsidies. Many, but by no means all, Western democracies – the Netherlands is a notable exception – already do so, often in proportion to the votes received or the seats won by the different parties. Individual citizens could also be given stronger inducements to join political parties, perhaps by making party dues a tax-deductible item; this would provide a strong signal that the society at large favours and urges individual membership in political parties.

There are also social science findings that provide lessons about what *not* to do. In particular, proposals to stimulate political interest and participation by giving individual citizens more voting choices and opportunities – by instituting primary elections, referendums, more elective offices, and intra-party voting choices – tend to do more harm than good.

Primary elections mean that the voters, instead of the parties, decide who are the parties' candidates in the upcoming general election. Primary elections have two serious drawbacks. One is that the nomination of candidates for public office is the most important task that political parties have traditionally performed; parties are gravely weakened when this crucial function is taken away from them. Second, as already indicated earlier, voting turnout declines when the number of elections and the number of voting choices increases. Among Western democracies, the United States and Switzerland have by far the most frequent elections – and also the lowest rates of voter turnout. Primary elections require an extra election preceding each general election, and hence they double the number of elections that have to be held. Similarly, referendums may have some advantages, but they also mean that citizens have to go to the polls more frequently and/or have to make more choices on each election day. Moreover, referendums mean direct legislation by citizens, which bypasses political parties and necessarily weakens them.

More elections to be held and choices to be made, and hence the likelihood of lower voter participation, are also the consequence of attempts to increase the number of elective offices, such as directly electing the prime minister – instituted in Israel in 1994 and on the Dutch political agenda since the late 1960s – and

directly electing the president in a parliamentary system, even though such presidents have a mainly ceremonial function – as in Austria and Ireland, and as supported by many Australians for the eventuality that their country becomes a republic. Finally, proposals to give voters more influence by enabling or even requiring them to cast a preferential vote for individual candidates in addition to voting for a party, as in the Finnish and Irish systems of proportional representation, make the voters' task more complex and hence provide a disincentive to vote – as in the case of combined majoritarian-proportional systems mentioned earlier. More important, however, is that intra-party preferential choices mean that candidates of the same party have a strong incentive to run against each other instead of campaigning for the party as a whole – thus seriously weakening political parties.

## **The American and Dutch democratic models**

My native country, the Netherlands, and my adopted country, the United States, provide almost perfect examples of the more and less desirable institutional features that I have been discussing. The United States is a presidential democracy with majoritarian elections at all levels, primary elections preceding nearly all general elections (which also imply a high degree of intra-party choice for voters), frequent referendums at the state and local levels, and large numbers of elective offices at every level of government. The Netherlands is a parliamentary democracy that uses proportional representation for election at all levels of government, relatively few elective offices, infrequent elections, and some but not strong intra-party choices, and that lacks primaries and referendums.

I strongly believe that my native country provides the better model for viable and vital democracy. But, of course, the American model is the much more visible and better known model – and strongly advocated as the ideal model by many of my fellow American citizens. A good, although admittedly extreme, illustration is Steven G. Calabresi's (1998, 22) statement that the American constitution "has proved to be a brilliant success, which ... parliamentary democracies all over the world would do well to copy". He gives most of the credit for the economic and military prowess of the United States to the American form of government, and continues: "The rest of the world is quite rightly impressed with us, and it is thus no accident that the United States of America has become the biggest single exporter of public law in the history of humankind. Almost wherever one looks,

written constitutions, federalism, separation of powers [that is, the presidential system], bills of rights, and judicial review are on the ascendancy all over the world right now – and for good reason. They work better than any of the alternatives that have been tried.” I agree with Calabresi that the American model has been extremely influential and also that parts of it – the concise written constitution, federalism, bill of rights, and judicial review – have been beneficial. But, of course, I strongly dissent from his praise for presidentialism (see also Ackerman 2000). A curious omission from Calabresi’s list is the majoritarian electoral system, but I confidently assume that he favours this feature of the American model, too – and I dissent just as strongly.

Parenthetically, let me praise one small aspect of the Dutch democratic model that worked particularly well: the rule for compulsory voting that was established in 1917. The main objection to mandatory voting is that it is said to violate the individual right *not* to vote. This right is never at risk, however, because the secrecy of the ballot means that a citizen cannot be compelled to cast an actual, valid vote. Compulsory “voting” is therefore a misnomer: all that can be required in practice is attendance at the polls. In the Netherlands, this was also made into the official rule, the beauty of which was that it was minimally intrusive and objectionable: citizens were required to appear at the polls on election day without any further duty to mark a ballot or even to accept a ballot. Very few citizens made use of the latter opportunity – proving that, in the final analysis, almost nobody cherishes the right not to vote! Unfortunately, this attractive system of compulsory voting in the Netherlands was abolished in 1970 – which proves another proposition, namely that even the Dutch are not perfect!

After this brief detour, let me return to my original question: Can we be optimistic about the prospects for democracy in the twenty-first century? My conclusion is that these prospects could be much better if we would accept the clear lessons that can be drawn from the experience of democracy in the twentieth century. These lessons apply by and large to both new democracies and the older democracies. Especially important for both are the lessons concerning the danger of presidential government and majoritarian elections. Making the right institutional choices does not offer a democratic panacea, but the wrong choices make the outlook for democracy much worse. All of the knowledge about democratic institutional design that is now available may well start having an effect in the next few decades; this possibility should inspire at least some optimism.

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