Yascha Mounk’s “The People vs. Democracy” offers a sweeping account of the global decline in popular trust of politicians and political institutions and the rise in support for authoritarian alternatives. It is part autobiography, part social commentary, and part clarion call. The overarching message is one of the fragility of liberal democracy, whose once-unquestioned staying power has been called into doubt. As a scholar, advocate, and media personality, Mounk has devoted himself to pushing back against the populist movements whose success he has so vividly chronicled.

Mounk approaches his subject under three headings: The Crisis of Liberal Democracy; Origins; and Remedies. The book’s core empirical contribution lies in Mounk’s analysis, together with Roberto Stefan Foa, of data gathered in the World Values Survey. They assess that, in multiple countries, younger people are attracted to authoritarian alternatives to democracy and to political parties and movements that are willing to disregard basic democratic rules and norms. These observations seem consistent with other survey-based studies of what drives young voters in times of income inequality and economic anxiety. And they push against the narrative that younger people are invariably more politically progressive than their elders.

The result is an increased susceptibility to populist candidates who, in Mounk’s view, have been able to capitalize on three concurrent trends: (1) the rise of the internet and social media, which has “weakened traditional gatekeepers, empowering once-marginal movements and politicians”; (2) greater economic anxiety and a corresponding lack of optimism about the future prospects for increased living standards; and (3) the declining dominance of a single ethnic group in most stable democracies, leading to a “rebellion against pluralism.” These trends have enabled the rise of “a new brand of populists [that] has fused a strong commitment to exclusionary nationalism with an illiberal attack on existing institutions” (Page 201). In Mounk’s view, “the enemies of liberal democracy seem more determined to shape our world than its defenders” (Page 21)—and they are succeeding at an alarming rate.

In addition to exploring these convergent
trends and their destabilizing impact, Mounk offers a vocabulary for discussing the “deconsolidation” of democratic regimes and proposes some measures that could help counteract the conditions conducive to autocracy. On both of these fronts, his contributions will no doubt prompt important discussion and debate, although they are at times frustratingly superficial.

Mounk begins by proposing a simplified set of definitions that enables him to construct a two-by-two matrix of regime types (Page 27). He defines democracy as “a set of binding electoral institutions that effectively translates popular views into public policy.” By defining democracy in terms of its ability to implement “popular views” and to “let the people rule,” Mounk elides the perennial problem of democratic governance—namely, whether it mandates pure majority rule. Governmental institutions are liberal to the extent that they “effectively protect the rule of law and guarantee individual rights such as freedom of speech, worship, press, and association to all citizens (including ethnic and religious minorities).”

By definition, then, if the majority is not willing by its own volition to accord rights to the minority, a polity cannot be both fully democratic and fully liberal under Mounk’s definition. Nevertheless, Mounk defines liberal democracy as a political system “that both protects individual rights and translates popular views into public policy.” The goal is thus to achieve a stable and sustainable balance between these potentially competing imperatives. In Mounk’s typology, Canada represents a liberal democracy, Poland represents an illiberal democracy, and the European Union represents an example of undemocratic liberalism. The only thing separating an illiberal democracy such as Poland from a dictatorship such as Russia is the government’s ability to claim that its policies implement the popular will.

In Mounk’s view, the rise of undemocratic liberalism—including the increasing influence wielded by technocratic elites, wealthy donors, and lobbyists—has fueled a push for more “democratic” institutions, even at the expense of liberal values. The demand for democracy has been filled by a new supply of populists who appeal to those who feel disillusioned by, and disconnected from, the political establishment. Yet this very anti-establishment energy means that, once in power, populists dismantle independent institutions, often with little pushback from their constituencies. As Mounk observes, in the face of the populists’ claim to be the sole representatives of the popular will, politics quickly becomes an existential struggle between real people and their enemies. ... Over time, [populists] come to regard anybody who disagrees with them as a traitor and conclude that any institution that stands in their way is an illegitimate perversion of the people’s will (46).

Moreover, as he told David Frum in an interview in The Atlantic: “Once you’ve said that you alone speak for the whole of the people, any form of opposition to you immediately becomes illegitimate.”

We’ve seen this movie before. In particular, the “exclusionary nationalism” that Mounk associates with contemporary populism has also characterized past movements, reaching as far back as the French Revolution. Mounk describes “coming of age in Germany in the late 1990s” (Page 19) and recounts that

[w]hen [he] left [his] native Germany to go to university in England at the turn of the millennium, [he] thought the way to move on from war and destruction, from ethnic hatred and religious intolerance, was to unite people around other forms of identity—or perhaps to dispense with the need for a collective form of belonging altogether (Page 196).

Coincidentally, at precisely this juncture, I had just published an article entitled “The
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‘False Promise’ of Civic Nationalism” in the course of grappling with related dilemmas. The study of nationalism as a source of identity and political mobilization peaked during this period, as the breakup of Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union prompted students of political science and international relations to question the relationship among different types of identity, loyalty, and political organization. I eventually published my thinking in “The Paradoxes of Nationalism: The French Revolution and Its Meaning for Contemporary Nation-Building,” as the tide of nationalism studies seemed to ebb somewhat.

Yet in recent years, the concept of “white nationalism” has become firmly entrenched in our political vocabulary, and interest in the social and political salience of tribalism has grown. As Andrew Sullivan wrote in an essay that touches on many of the themes Mounk explores, “[t]he incentives for cross-tribal compromise have been eviscerated, and those for tribal extremism reinforced.” And Donald Trump is, in Sullivan’s words, “[t]he most powerful tribalist among us.”

The idea of democracy as the political expression of the will of the people seems to presuppose, at least at some level of abstraction, a unitary will. This renders it particularly susceptible to the trope of authenticity deployed by demagogues. Sen. Bob Corker recounted the palpable effects of this development, to which some observers attribute the failure of Republicans in Congress to enact legislation that would curtail the president’s ability to shut down the special counsel’s investigation into Russian interference in the 2016 U.S. election. Corker said:

The president is, as you know — you’ve seen his numbers among the Republican base — it’s very strong. It’s more than strong, it’s tribal in nature. ... People who tell me, who are out on the trail, say, look, people don’t ask about issues anymore. They don’t care about issues. They want to know if you’re with Trump or not.

Like Fareed Zakaria, Mounk uses the term “illiberal democracy” to describe the regime that has taken hold in Poland and Hungary, and that Donald Trump’s core constituency would like to see established in the United States. Yet others like Jan-Werner Müller strongly resist using this term, and for good reason. Mounk rightly notes that, in the United States, the Founding Fathers “did not believe a representative republic to be second best; on the contrary, they found it far preferable to the factious horrors of a democracy” (Page 55). However, the more capacious and less literal definition of democracy adopted by various indices, such as the Economist Intelligence Unit, the Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, and Freedom House, would categorize functioning, non-corrupt electoral systems based on principles of representation as democratic, and regimes such as that being constructed in Poland as undemocratic. If democracy is something towards which we should aspire, then it seems counterproductive to allow illiberal leaders to cloak themselves in the mantle of democratic values. After all, as Mounk observes, “[r]hetoric matters” (Page 210).

Mounk perceptively diagnoses Western democracy’s ailments. Yet, to a perhaps surprising degree, he also adopts the very “us/them” mentality that populists embrace, speaking about populists as “our adversaries” (Page 266) and forecasting that “by fighting off the current infection, [Americans] might just build up the necessary antibodies to remain immune against new bouts of the populist disease for decades to come” (Page 260). To the extent that populism captures a widespread feeling of being left behind by self-interested elites, it seems that its authoritarian and exclusionary strands are more objectionable than the fact of populism itself. For example, extending the disease metaphor, Mounk writes that if the current
erosion of democratic norms continues apace, and the deep partisan divide continues to fester, the American immune system will have become even more compromised at that point. The virus of authoritarianism could then ravage the body politic without meeting much resistance” (Page 261).

The alternative scenario requires some fairly fundamental changes. Mounk’s prescription includes reducing citizens’ sense of lack of control by taming the technocrats and subjecting them to greater political accountability; reining in the expansive role that courts have assumed in overturning legislation; creating a “sense of pride” in jobs that form part of the gig economy rather than traditional trades or careers; approving more permits for residential construction to create affordable housing; taxing people who “live off accumulated wealth” rather than “placing the burden of financing the welfare state predominantly on wage-earners”; and overturning the U.S. Supreme Court’s Citizens United decision that protects certain independent expenditures by corporations as political speech and thereby “threatens the working of American democracy” (Page 244). Perhaps most importantly, he calls for attention to “civics education [as] an essential bulwark against authoritarian temptations” (Page 245)—something that remains sorely lacking at all levels of education.

As for the anti-immigrant rhetoric of today’s authoritarian populists, Mounk advocates “forg[ing] a new language of inclusive patriotism” (Page 208) that is “capable of winning popular support without being populist” (Page 210). With respect to what degree of inclusivity he thinks would be tenable, he suggests that an appropriate balance would include “a streamlined process for identifying and removing immigrants who pose a security threat” (Page 214) and systems such as Canada’s that he lauds as “a model of tolerance” by virtue of admitting mostly “highly qualified” immigrants (Page 215).

These and other recommendations, however, appear vastly to underestimate the deep value and policy trade-offs involved in designing, let alone implementing, such measures. More usefully, one of the most interesting empirical sections of Mounk’s book synthesizes work showing that “[a] lot of the anger at immigration is driven by fear of an imagined future rather than by displeasure with a lived reality” (Page 174). Far-right groups exploit “the belief that people from the majority group will eventually be in the minority” (Page 174), as evidenced dramatically by David Rothkopf’s experience retweeting a Census Bureau projection that groups once thought of as minorities will make up a majority of the U.S. population by 2045. This suggests that a central focus ought to be on combatting the mobilization of fear.

If you didn’t already believe America was facing an existential crisis, you will after reading Mounk’s book. Unless we take significant steps to reduce income inequality and address the disaffection afflicting large swaths of the population in the United States and other Western countries, the ascendancy of liberal democracy might prove shorter-lived than any of us care to imagine.

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