

OMANARP INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF ART AND SOCIAL SCIENCES



<https://acadrespub.com/index.php/oijass>

Vol. 2, Issue II, Pp. 51-56; August, 2025

BEYOND LIBERALISM? THE ASCENDANCE OF ILLIBERAL DEMOCRACY AND THE FUTURE OF POLITICAL NORMS

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ARTICLE INFO

Received Date: 9th July, 2025

Date Revised Received: 30rd July, 2025

Accepted Date: 4th August, 2025

Published Date: 19th August, 2025

Citation: Obire, H.E & Nwana, A.P (2025): Beyond Liberalism? The Ascendancy of Illiberal Democracy and the Future of Political Norms: OMANARP INTER. J. Art & Social Sciences Vol.2, Issue II, Pp. 51-56, August, 2025.

ABSTRACT

This paper interrogates the concept of illiberal democracy as an emergent political phenomenon that challenges the normative ascendancy of liberal democratic models. While liberal democracy is grounded in pluralism, constitutionalism, and the protection of individual rights, recent global and regional developments reveal a discernible erosion of these foundational values. Drawing from historical, philosophical, and comparative perspectives, the study explores the contradictions inherent in liberal democracy and the conditions that enable its drift toward illiberalism. It examines how institutional decay, populism, weak rule of law, and the manipulation of electoral processes foster governance structures that retain democratic procedures but hollow out substantive freedoms. By situating illiberal democracy within contemporary political discourse, the paper highlights its implications for governance, human rights, and international order, particularly in fragile democracies. The authors argue that the rise of illiberalism does not merely represent a deviation from democratic norms but signals the possibility of a post-liberal paradigm in global politics. The study concludes that addressing the crises of legitimacy, representation, and accountability is essential to reversing democratic backsliding and ensuring the resilience of democratic institutions.

Keywords: Illiberal Democracy, Constitutionalism, Normative Ascendancy, Political Phenomenon

Introduction

Liberal Democracy, a form of democracy in which the power of government is limited, and the freedom and rights of individuals are protected, by constitutionally established norms and institutions. Like the broader concept of democracy, liberal democracy is what the Scottish philosopher and political scientist W.B. Gallie (1912–98) called an essentially contested concept, about which no final consensus can exist. Nonetheless, the following underlying principles are broadly recognized as fundamental to liberal democracy: pluralism and toleration (that is, the dispersal of political power among a variety of interest groups and the acceptance of conflicting political viewpoints or priorities between groups); the resolution of political disagreements, where possible, within a constitutional framework and through the rule of law; the separation of powers (including the operation of an independent judiciary); and the protection of individual civil rights.

The origins of liberal democracy can be traced in part to a series of historical events and theories circumscribing the role of the state and limiting its powers, in tandem with the development of the idea of individual rights. Liberal democracy in the West is generally thought to have originated in the European Enlightenment and the American and French revolutions of the late 18th century although some of its foundational principles, such as limited government, harken back to earlier events, such as the signing of the Magna Carta in 1215.

Following the end of the Cold War in the late 20th century, many political observers were highly optimistic about the prospects of liberal democracy. The American political theorist Francis Fukuyama, for example, famously announced the “end of history” that is, the victory of liberal democracy as the final form of human government and “the total exhaustion of viable systematic alternatives to Western liberalism.” However, liberal democracy continued to be challenged in subsequent decades. Autocratic leaders notably, Xi Jinping of China and Vladimir Putin of Russia continued to rule in powerful countries, thus presenting an alternative model of governance. Liberal democracy was also challenged within several countries by the emergence of (predominantly right-wing) populist leaders in the first decades of the 21st century including Prime Minister Viktor Orbán of Hungary and Pres. Donald Trump of the United States who tended to dismiss key liberal-democratic ideals such as pluralism, the rule of law, and the need for institutional checks on governmental power.

Varying Definitions of Democracy

In the most basic sense, democracy means “rule by the people.” Attempts to elaborate on this definition in ways

useful to policymakers and political scientists are longstanding and contested. Conceptions of democracy may vary across cultural contexts and across time, and ideological biases (conscious or otherwise) as well as the broader “political zeitgeist” of the times may play a significant role in influencing what features are considered essential to the definition of democracy (Mudde, 2017).

While competing conceptions of democracy vary in numerous ways, many can be differentiated by their relative “thickness” or “thinness.” Relatively “thin” definitions generally emphasize minimum elements of electoral political competition and participation, such as free and fair elections, universal suffrage, and the right to join political organizations. More expansive “thick” definitions may include these minimum elements as well as broad protections for individual rights and civil liberties (and corresponding constraints on government power and majority rule), the rule of law, well-functioning and transparent government institutions, and/or a democratic political culture, among other elements. These more expansive definitions reflect the notion that democracy consists of more than just basic elements of democratic political competition, such as elections, a contention that is now generally accepted even as the outer boundaries of the concept of democracy remain unsettled. Thus while minimalist, “thin” definitions may suffer criticism for excluding elements that are thought by many to be essential to democracy, broader “thick” definitions may conversely be criticized for including elements that to some are beyond the bounds of its core conception (Mudde, 2017).

Various adjectives are also frequently employed to denote different conceptions or levels of democracy. The term *electoral democracy*, for instance, is typically understood to align with more minimalist conceptions of democracy, while *liberal democracy* refers to those minimalist elements plus elements found in more expansive definitions. As well, while democracy is frequently understood in contrast to authoritarianism or dictatorship, many modern definitions and measures recognize that political systems often exist in middle zones, and are therefore referred to using concepts such as hybrid regimes. Attempts to identify political systems on a continuum of a broader spectrum of concepts in this way may nonetheless require the use of relatively arbitrary divisions between these concepts, given that, as one scholar has argued, “democracy is in many ways a continuous variable,” as are many of its key elements (Schedler, 2006).

Illiberal Democracy

Illiberal democracy refers to a system of governance where democratic institutions and processes exist, but the principles of liberalism, such as protection of individual rights, rule of law, and checks on power, are weakened or undermined. In an illiberal democracy, elections may still be held, but they often lack the freedom and fairness that characterize liberal democracies.

The government may restrict civil liberties, manipulate information, and concentrate power, all while maintaining a veneer of democratic legitimacy through electoral processes. The term "illiberal democracy" was popularized by Fareed Zakaria in his 1997 article "The Rise of Illiberal Democracy" in *Foreign Affairs*. Zakaria argued that many newly democratizing countries were adopting democratic forms without the substance of liberal democracy (Zakaria, 1997).

Illiberal democracy is a growth industry. Seven years ago only 22 percent of democratizing countries could have been so categorized; five years ago that figure had risen to 35 percent. And to date few illiberal democracies have matured into liberal democracies; if anything, they are moving toward heightened illiberalism. Far from being a temporary or transitional stage, it appears that many countries are settling into a form of government that mixes a substantial degree of democracy with a substantial degree of illiberalism. Just as nations across the world have become comfortable with many variations of capitalism, they could well adopt and sustain varied forms of democracy. Western liberal democracy might prove to be not the final destination on the democratic road, but just one of many possible exits.

Global trends and shifts in democratic governance

Widespread concerns exist among analysts and policymakers over the current trajectory of democracy around the world. Congress has often played an important role in supporting and institutionalizing U.S. democracy promotion, and current developments may have implications for U.S. policy, which for decades has broadly reflected the view that the spread of democracy around the world is favorable to U.S. interests.

The aggregate level of democracy around the world has not advanced for more than a decade. Analysis of data trend-lines from two major global democracy indexes indicates that, as of 2017, the level of democracy around the world has not advanced since around the year 2005 or 2006. Although the degree of democratic backsliding around the world has arguably been modest overall to this point, some elements of democracy, particularly those associated with liberal democracy, have receded during this period. Declines in democracy that have occurred may

have disproportionately affected countries with larger population sizes. Overall, this data indicates that democracy's expansion has been more challenged during this period than during any similar period dating back to the 1970s. Despite this, democratic declines to this point have been considerably less severe than the more pronounced setbacks that occurred during some earlier periods in the 20th century.

Numerous broad factors may be affecting democracy globally. These include (but are not limited to) the following:

The growing international influence of nondemocratic governments: These countries may in some instances view containing the spread of democracy as instrumental toward other goals or as helpful to their own domestic regime stability. Thus they may be engaging in various activities that have negative impacts on democracy internationally. At the same time, relatively limited evidence exists to date of a more affirmative agenda to promote authoritarian political systems or norms as competing alternatives to democracy.

The state of democracy's global appeal as a political system: Challenges to and apparent dissatisfaction with government performance within democracies, and the concomitant emergence of economically successful authoritarian capitalist states, may be affecting in particular democracy's traditional instrumental appeal as the political system most capable of delivering economic growth and national prestige. Public opinion polling data indicate that democracy as a political system may overall still retain considerable appeal around the world relative to nondemocratic alternatives.

Nondemocratic governments' use of new methods to repress political dissent within their own societies: Tools such as regulatory restrictions on civil society and technology enhanced censorship and surveillance are arguably enhancing the long-term durability of nondemocratic forms of governance.

Structural conditions in non-democracies: Some scholars argue that broad conditions in many of the world's remaining non-democracies, such as their level of wealth or economic inequality, are not conducive to sustained democratization. The importance of these factors to democratization is complex and contested among experts.

Democracy promotion is a longstanding, but contested, element of U.S. foreign policy. Wide disagreements and well-worn policy debates persist among experts over whether, or to what extent, the United States should prioritize democracy promotion in its foreign policy. Many

of these debates concern the relevance of democracy promotion to U.S. interests, its potential tension with other foreign policy objectives, and the United States' capacity to effectively promote democratization.

Recent developments pose numerous potential policy considerations and questions for Congress. Democracy promotion has arguably not featured prominently in the Trump Administration's foreign policy to this point, creating potential continued areas of disagreement between some Members of Congress and the Administration. Simultaneously, current challenges around the world present numerous questions of potential consideration for Congress. Broadly, these include whether and where the United States should place greater or lesser emphasis on democracy promotion in its foreign policy, as well as various related questions concerning the potential tools for promoting democracy (Diamond, 2015).

Characteristics of Illiberal Democracy

Illiberal democracy combines democratic elements, such as elections, with authoritarian tendencies that undermine liberal principles. Characteristics include:

1. Elections without genuine competition: Elections may be held, but opposition is restricted or manipulated.
2. Limited protection of individual rights: Individual freedoms, such as speech and assembly, are curtailed.
3. Concentration of power: Executive power is often concentrated, with limited checks and balances.
4. Media manipulation: Government control or influence over media outlets restricts free speech and independent reporting.
5. Suppression of opposition: Opposition parties, activists, or critics are often harassed, intimidated, or silenced.
6. Nationalism and polarization: Illiberal democracies often exploit nationalist sentiments and polarize society.
7. Weakened institutions: Institutions, such as the judiciary and electoral commissions, are undermined or politicized.

Examples of illiberal democracies can be seen in various countries, where democratic processes are used to legitimize authoritarian rule.

Factors Contributing to the Rise of Illiberal Democracy

The rise of illiberal democracy can be attributed to various factors, including:

- 1.

2. Economic insecurity and inequality: Economic instability, inequality, and dissatisfaction with globalization can fuel support for illiberal leaders.
3. Nationalism and identity politics: Exploiting nationalist sentiments and identity politics can create divisions and undermine liberal values.
4. Distrust in institutions: Loss of trust in democratic institutions, such as governments, parliaments, and judiciaries, can pave the way for illiberal alternatives.
5. Polarization and social media: Social media can amplify polarization, creating an environment conducive to illiberal politics.
6. Weakened checks and balances: Erosion of institutional checks and balances can enable illiberal leaders to consolidate power.
7. External factors: Global events, such as migration crises or geopolitical shifts, can contribute to the rise of illiberal democracy.
8. Populist leadership: Charismatic leaders who exploit popular discontent and promise simplistic solutions can drive the shift towards illiberal democracy.

Liberalism

Liberalism is a defining feature of modern democracy, illustrated by the prevalence of the term „liberal democracy“ as a way to describe countries with free and fair elections, rule of law and protected civil liberties. Liberalism contains a variety of concepts and arguments about how institutions, behaviors and economic connections contain and mitigate the violent power of states. When compared to realism, it adds more factors into our field of view – especially a consideration of citizens and international organizations. It is a political and moral philosophy based on the rights of the individual, liberty, consent of the governed, political equality, the right to private property, and equality before the law (McLean et al., 2010).

Liberals espouse various and often mutually conflicting views depending on their understanding of these principles but generally support private property, market economies, individual rights (including civil rights and human rights), liberal democracy, secularism, rule of law, economic and political freedom, freedom of speech, freedom of the press, freedom of assembly, and freedom of religion. Liberalism is frequently cited as the dominant ideology of modern history (Adams, 2001).

Liberalism became a distinct movement in the Age of Enlightenment, gaining popularity among Western philosophers and economists. Liberalism sought to replace the norms of hereditary privilege, state religion, absolute monarchy, the divine right

of kings and traditional conservatism with representative democracy, rule of law, and equality under the law. Liberals also ended mercantilist policies, royal monopolies, and other trade barriers, instead promoting free trade and marketization. The philosopher John Locke is often credited with founding liberalism as a distinct tradition based on the social contract, arguing that each man has a natural right to life, liberty and property, and governments must not violate these rights. While the British liberal tradition emphasized expanding democracy, French liberalism emphasized rejecting authoritarianism and is linked to nation-building (Eddy *et al.*, 2017).

In the name of liberation from authority, liberalism imposes an amoral, secular, and nonmetaphysical model on nations in which God has no official role. This model entered modernity without being voted upon or chosen by populations. It is an assumed mentality that all must adopt outwardly to be considered part of the modern world. Woe to the person who dares challenge it. The crisis inside liberalism has prompted many to admit its numerous problems. However, most people accept liberalism as a default because they find nothing better to replace it (Zafirovski, 2007).

The basics of Liberalism

Liberalism is based on the moral argument that ensuring the right of an individual person to life, liberty and property is the highest goal of government. Consequently, liberals emphasize the wellbeing of the individual as the fundamental building block of a just political system. A political system characterized by unchecked power, such as a monarchy or a dictatorship, cannot protect the life and liberty of its citizens. Therefore, the main concern of liberalism is to construct institutions that protect individual freedom by limiting and checking political power. While these are issues of domestic politics and the realm of IR is also important to liberals because a state's activities abroad can have a strong influence on liberty at home. Liberals are particularly troubled by militaristic foreign policies. The primary concern is that war requires states to build up military power. This power can be used for fighting foreign states, but it can also be used to oppress its own citizens. For this reason, political systems rooted in liberalism often limit military power by such means as ensuring civilian control over the military. Liberalism is a political and moral philosophy that emphasizes individual rights, freedoms, and autonomy. Core principles include:

1. Individual Liberty: Protecting individual rights and freedoms, such as freedom of speech, assembly, and religion.
2. Equality: Promoting equal opportunities and treatment under the law.
3. Democracy: Supporting democratic governance and participation.

4. Rule of Law: Upholding the rule of law and protecting individual rights through an independent judiciary.
5. Free Markets: Advocating for free markets and economic freedom, while often acknowledging the need for some government intervention to address social and economic issues.

Liberalism can take various forms, such as:

1. Classical Liberalism: Emphasizing limited government intervention and individual freedom.
2. Modern Liberalism: Supporting a more active role for government in addressing social and economic issues.

Liberalism has shaped modern politics, influencing democratic systems and human rights movements worldwide.

What comes after Liberalism?

Looking at what comes after liberalism, Philosopher John Gray envisions a future after liberalism that resembles a new Middle Ages, where plural jurisdictions coexist and find a *modus vivendi* among clashing conceptions of the good life. This perspective emphasizes the diversity of human values and interests, suggesting that Liberalism's Universalist aspirations are flawed. Gray critiques liberalism for:

1. Failing to Account for Human Diversity: Liberalism assumes a universality of human interests and values, which doesn't hold true in reality.
2. Overemphasizing Individual Rights: The focus on individual rights can lead to conflicts and undermine social cohesion.
3. Ignoring the Role of Politics: Liberalism attempts to remove contentious issues from politics, but this can lead to further polarization.

Potential Alternatives to Liberalism

1. Pluralism: Embracing diverse values and interests, and finding ways to negotiate and compromise.
2. *Modus Vivendi*: Focusing on practical agreements and accommodations that allow different groups to coexist.
3. Contextualized Governance: Recognizing that governance models should be tailored to specific contexts, rather than adhering to universal principles.

Some critics of liberalism, like Patrick Deneen, argue that it has led to:

1. Income Inequality

2. Cultural Decline
3. Atomization
4. Nihilism
5. Erosion of Freedoms

Zafirovski, Milan (2007). *Liberal Modernity and Its Adversaries: Freedom, Liberalism and Anti-Liberalism in the 21st Century*. Brill. p. 237. ISBN 978-90-04-16052-1

Others, like Vladimir Putin, claim that liberalism has become obsolete, citing issues such as multiculturalism, immigration, and LGBTQ+ rights. Ultimately, the future of liberalism will depend on its ability to adapt to changing societal needs and values.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the rise of illiberal democracy marks a significant shift in the global political landscape, challenging the dominance of liberal democratic values. As liberalism faces criticism and erosion, alternative ideologies and systems are emerging. Which liberal democracies may adapt and reform to address societal concerns and challenges. And the future of democracy will likely be shaped by complex interactions between various factors, including economic, social, and technological changes.

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