

Democracy one hundred years hence

A view from the future

Danny Dorling

How hard it is to explain times before our own. They called the early twenty-first century the age of democracy when it was in reality the age of dictatorship. Rather like those old English public schools that were a very long time ago originally public, earlier democracies had been more democratic.

People fought for the vote (in 1819 in St Peter's fields in the UK). Revolutions took place. Wars of Independence resulted in amendments to constitutions so that being Black was technically no legal bar to voting (in 1869 in the United States). In 1913 at Epsom racetrack in England a woman died under the hooves of a horse owned by a King – all for that right to vote. And yes, there really were Kings and the richest people on the planet really did spend a lot of their money buying very expensive horses to race them.

The rich had far more money than sense back then. Horses were a substitute – exclusively owned by the most affluent of all – to make it look as if they had physical prowess. The rich have not been allowed to buy people for several hundred years now; but they resisted the original extensions of democracy and

then subverted the entire process. Today, in 2115 it is hard to imagine; but look back a century and then look back a century again and the speed of change and thinking appears breathtakingly fast.

Full voting equality was not won until 1928 in the UK, 22 years after Finland had become the first country in the world to allow anyone of any race or sex to vote and stand for election. It took far longer for the civil rights movement in the US in the 1960s to strike down racist laws that implicitly prevented many African-Americans from voting; people whose grandparents were often bought and sold.

By the end of the 20th century across Europe proportional voting systems were brought into play; and around the world people were increasingly encouraged to vote – hardly anywhere did not periodically have the vote. In the rich world only the archaic City of London and Vatican City were still de-facto permanent dictatorships by 2015, places in which almost none of the residents had any right to vote.

So why do we now call 2015 the age of dictatorship if there were so many democracies?

It was during 2015 that it became clear that how you voted didn't matter that much. Perhaps it was the story of Greece that firmed up so many people's hearts and minds. The Greeks tried to use democracy to save themselves. They voted in different government after very different government. Entire established political parties disappeared: new parties and coalitions appeared, apparently out of nowhere, although there were always precursors. Fascists re-emerged under the label "Golden Dawn"; the broad left coalition, which had been created in 1989, and given the label *Syriza* in 2004 (an acronym for "Radical Coalition of the Left"), swept to power in 2015. They promised the people salvation if only they voted for them.

When salvation could not be delivered in Greece, *Syriza* offered the people another vote: A referendum with a question whose implications almost no one could be sure

about. It took place on July 5th 2015. That day was a test of Europe as to whether voting was enough; a majority voted “No” to the demands of the bankers and other creditors. The elite of Europe ignored yet another democratic vote, claiming that they were in power due to voters from the rest of Europe. At first there was stalemate, then acrimony. Those who thought they were owed money were not ready to listen to any majority.

Ancient Greece was not the first place in the world to experiment with democracy – but it was the place that gave the idea a name that would stick. Along with democracy and the demos – meaning the common people – the Greeks also invented the word ‘idiot’. In Greek *idiotes* means a private person, one not taking part in public affairs, an ignorant person, an *idios*, someone who would not engage in democracy, or public life – someone who only wanted a private life. Thus the Greek word for a very private person who does not care for or share responsibility with others is, in effect, an “idiot”. Someone who did not take part in the collective government of Athens was thought of as an idiot.

Ancient Athens was originally just a small city, taking part involved simply shouting across a crowd. Despite the slaves and sexism, it was far more democratic than the Athens of 2015, where the populace was presented with the choice of only ‘Yes’ or ‘No’ in 2015 (and where they voted ‘No’ to an agreement in early July and got ‘Yes’ by the end of that month). Democracy is extremely old, but has never included everyone. We have never had real democracy, even in the supposed democratic heyday.

Before the Athenian democracy there were numerous urban democracies in what is now China and India, where the vast bulk of the world’s population lived. None of these are now remembered because of the age of dictatorship, and earlier colonization, imperialism, and then the imposition of a particular kind of democracy through warfare. “Regime change” became a legitimate reason to send troops into another country, as long as you promised ‘democracy’. People around the world were to have voting – and political parties and party funding and political corruption

introduced to mirror US democracy – imposed upon them, whether they liked it or not, through the application of force.

Just over a century ago, the ten most democratic countries in 2014, according to the then most respected index on *Wikipedia*, all small countries by population: 1) Norway, 2) Sweden, 3) Iceland, 4) New Zealand, 5) Denmark, 6) Switzerland, 7) Canada, 8) Finland, 9) Australia and 10) Netherlands, and they were all rich. Even then that index described only 24 countries as full democracies, compared to 51 labelled flawed democracies, 40 hybrid regimes and 52 authoritarian regimes. And there were three or four dozen small nations not even described as being any kind of democracy; while many smaller islands were, in practise, prisons, military bases, spy centres and/or torture chambers. Some military drones (named widow-makers) were remotely controlled from such places, but also from remote military bases in places such as North Yorkshire in England, in the heart of what were supposed to be democracies.

In the UK in May 2015 a government was elected with a majority in what was then called the House of Commons ('commons' named after the Greek *demos*). The politicians of that Conservative government had only received the support of one in four of the electorate. This was even lower than the support received by the least popular US president, who tended to be voted in with the support of a just a little more than a quarter of all US voters.

Half of all voters chose not to vote in the USA back then; but there are almost always only two serious candidates and a huge amount of serious money. In what was ironically called the United States a century ago voting had ceased to make a great difference, but the money did. That had not been the case earlier.

So how did this age of dictatorship come to an end? Ironically it was through voting. People began to fight or vote to divide up countries and to separate themselves from less democratic super-entities, trade agreements and corporate captured states. New countries were created in what had been Yugoslavia, in

Sudan, in Spain and in Scotland they tried to create a new country in 2014. Your votes could not do much but they could gain you a smaller state – and so the number of states began to rise. Each story was different, particular and often peculiar – but the world got more places and more autonomy rather than less and less.

Voting for traditional “mainstream” political parties declined. The young increasingly refused to vote. Electoral systems became highly volatile. If people do not vote in very predictable ways (and in large numbers) democracy becomes hard to maintain. Politicians began to pass power and choices down to smaller and smaller areas, but kept hold of the purse strings. Not least because the rich world was becoming less rich, so they passed down the blame but not the money. The president of the United States of America could sing Amazing Grace when black people were slaughtered, but he could not take away a single gun, despite winning two elections.

Pretend Democracy at the so-called nation state level reached its peak in 2015. A century earlier again gunboat diplomacy had reached its own zenith during World War One. It was only in the aftermath of that war that so many of the straight-line boundaries of the map of states we see today were drawn up. Nations and states rarely coincide; both are different kinds of fiction.

Today, in 2115, we have a very different idea of what is fair when it comes to power. Voting became a religious act a century ago – something you should do and be seen to be doing – but today the idea of presenting people with a slip of paper to vote on every five years is seen as insulting – perhaps even worse than pretending that if they go into church and pray to an imaginary being then all will be all right. Today decisions are made in more time consuming ways, but then we have far more time – as we have stopped doing so many of the things that so called democracies used to make us spent so much of our lives doing.

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Danny Dorling is the Hafford Mackinder Professor of Geography at Oxford University. He is the author of numerous books, including *Inequality and the 1%* published by Verso Books.