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Democracy Moves

Democracy At Risk

It is a dark time for democracy throughout the world. In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, many leaders are increasingly turning towards authoritarianism, ruling by decree and stifling civil society. There are governments claiming long-term emergency powers, and curbing democratic norms by placing free and fair elections, debate and checks and balances on indefinite hold. Civil liberties and freedom of expression are in decline, and political polarisation is surging, leading to a combination of governmental stagnation and oppression. Some of this executive action may have been necessary in the short-term, but as the pandemic continues to ravage, it is clear that democracy itself is one of COVID-19’s primary victims throughout the world.

Statistics back up the reality of the sorry state of democracy worldwide. The Economist’s Intelligence Unit’s Democracy Index 2020 report indicates that less than nine per cent of the world’s population currently lives in what it calls a ‘full democracy’. More than a third of the world's population lives under authoritarian rule. These trends are moving downward: the index’s average global score fell to its lowest score ever since the index was first produced in 2006.

In the wake of this democratic decline, there is a worry that young people are turning away from democracy. The Bennett Institute for Public Policy at the University of Cambridge recently conducted a global survey focused on young people and democracy that combined data from over 4.8 million respondents across 160 countries between 1973 and 2020. The results were striking. Globally, youth approval of democracy is declining, both in absolute numbers and also relative to the opinions of older generations. In emerging democracies of Latin America, sub-Saharan Africa, and southern Europe, the study found significant signs of ‘transition fatigue’: younger generations no longer remember the old dictatorships that preceded them, or the fight for democracy waged by their parents.
This distrust of democracy for young people seemingly stems from deep frustration with governmental inaction around critical issues. A recent survey conducted of 10,000 young people across the world by the University of Bath, NYU Langone Health, Stanford Medicine Center and others, found that, especially in the wake of governmental inaction to the pandemic, young people’s frustration with politics is increasing. The study found that only 21 per cent of Americans said that the government could be trusted, the worst showing of any country; nearly 75 per cent of Indians said that humanity is doomed; 78 per cent of Brazilian young people believed the government frequently lies; and 92 per cent of Filipino young people called the future frightening.¹

A Youth Democratic Renewal

As worrisome as these statistics seem, there is the possibility of a new, more democratic future if we invest in and listen to our youngest generations. Rather than potential catalysts for a new more equitable form of democracy, too often, young people are seen as the problem- stereotyped as apathetic and not invested in politics. Many formal democratic renewal efforts are focused on political parties, adult civics education, and elections – with young people often a footnote to reform efforts. Relatedly, international development efforts are largely focused on youth empowerment and education, without comprehensively exploring the role of young people in electoral and political governance.

Yet, while leaders are grasping for expanded power and civic spaces are closing, young people are fighting back. Refusing to accept the status quo in an age of unprecedented inequality, younger generations are re-envisioning a new, more equitable democracy. This activism is manifesting itself through an emerging global, transnational youth movement for democratic change. These movements are elevating common challenges, like fighting authoritarianism and climate change, promoting solidarity between like-minded groups, and exploring best practices, like bringing attention to issues through digital activism and the arts.

We saw this type of transnational youth activism throughout the Arab Spring, when young people throughout the Middle East captured stories of government brutality and shared them on social media, broadcast a common message, and shared techniques of non-violent resistance. We see it currently with #EndSARS, a Nigerian youth movement protesting police brutality in Nigeria.
Rather than serving as solely a Nigerian campaign, the effort has gained trans-national attention, combining forces with #BlackLivesMatter protests across the US. In Canada, Germany, and New Zealand, young people have used legislative and judicial processes to lower the voting age to 16. We are seeing it with a growing movement to end vaccine nationalism. These transnational movements are not just about shared experiences, but about shared demands. The cumulative effect is pressure that was previously unimaginable. The solutions, from climate to suffrage to global access to vaccines, are similarly transnational in nature.

Redefining Democracy

This burgeoning trans-national, global youth movement for democracy counters the narrative that young people are apathetic towards democracy itself. Democracy Moves is a new organisation that aims to connect youth activists around the world pushing for democratic change in their own communities and countries. We are learning that young people are not apathetic and do not distrust democracy itself, but rather, fundamentally do not trust existing formal political institutions. Instead, young people can and are providing a necessary antidote to the authoritarianism that has run rampant during the pandemic. Instead, youth are redefining democracy by insisting that it is more than just a governance topic, engaging with politics in creative ways, and taking action on oft-ignored critical long-term issues.

First, for young people, democracy cannot solely be a governance concept. It needs to be cultural: an ideal infused in political parties, companies, school, and government alike. WeLead is an organisation focused on youth leadership and development across Zimbabwe. Namatai Kwekweza, the young activist who founded WeLead at the age of 18, indicates that there is a deep distrust that the country’s opposition party is actually aligned with democratic values. Namatai notes that the opposition members themselves ‘stick around for too long’ and are generally older activists that do not heed the perspectives of the younger generation.

Namatai believes that democracy must be a ‘way of living’ rather than just a system of governance. She notes that many movements for democracy in Zimbabwe are exclusionary and sexist, dominated by men who assert their philosophy and decision-making approach. This youth-led push for a more democratic culture in Zimbabwe intersects with similar efforts in countries throughout the world, including in the United States. Young people are not satisfied with
a governmental system that insists it is democratic because it holds elections. Rather, all facets of society can ensure that young people’s voices are included, welcomed, and heard.

Secondly, young people are engaging in innovative ways to engage politically outside of formal governmental systems. There is an opportunity to listen to young people engaging outside of institutional means: they are ready to be part of the conversation. The need to engage in creative ways has been augmented by governments increasingly closing civic spaces during the pandemic. In Venezuela, for example, government authoritarian policies often make it difficult for young people to engage in formal political processes, like voting. In response, according to Armando Armas, a deputy of the activist group Venezuelan Assembly, young people are using mechanisms like flash mobs, public gatherings, and art displays to protest the exclusion of the youth voice from democratic processes.

Similarly, student activists that are part of La Federacion de Estudiantes de la UC (FEUC) in Chile, are responding to pandemic-forced closing of civic spaces in their country by organising forms of dissent like the ‘cacerolazo’, a balcony-bound banging of pots and pans to indicate their frustration with the government’s lack of socially-responsive policies. Similarly, during the pandemic, FEUC social media accounts brought attention to the ways that being home-bound have exacerbated issues such as femicide and wealth inequality. The creative actions in Venezuela and Chile should not be silenced, but rather, elevated. These types of informal actions necessarily circumvent institutional formal politics, like voting or participating in political parties, providing the opportunity for a new, more vibrant type of democratic engagement.

Finally, young people are coalescing around issues that they feel the generations behind them have ignored, like climate change, economic inequality, and racial inequities. Young people feel that the government is not taking the issue seriously: and are responding in kind with actions like Fridays for the Future, a trans-national movement of student activists who skip school on Fridays to protest for expanded governmental action.

It is easy to be fearful about the future of democracy, and perhaps we should be fearful. But, we can also look to our young people for a road map to a better equitable future, one that espouses democratic values, like inclusion, voice, and responsiveness, as true organising principles, recognises informal action, and takes vital steps on long-term issues.

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