

# Two Roads Diverged: Democracies vs. Autocracies

Special to The Chronicle by Barb Howe

*Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed, citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.* —Margaret Mead

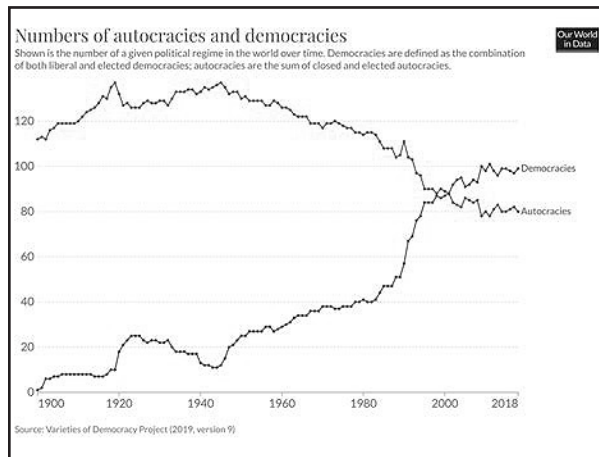


Barb Howe is a Florida-based writer and a doctoral student at the University of South Florida, studying international affairs.

Democracy is a rare and fragile thing. Of all the people who have lived in all the civilizations throughout human history, relatively few have lived in a democracy.

Until recently, most of the world's countries were autocracies. If, in the year 1900, you charted them on a graph—one line representing democracies, another representing autocracies—the two start out very far apart and gradually get closer over several decades. A story unfolds in this graph. It is the defining story of the twentieth century: a push towards more democracy, more freedom, more liberty for more and more people. Here in the United States, the Civil Rights movement began, the U.S. passed the Voting Rights Act of 1965, and voting rights became meaningful for the first time for Black Americans living in the South. Around the world, former colonies shook off their colonial rulers, declared their independence, and formed new governments of their own. The form of government most often chosen: democracy.

The following chart from *Our World in Data* is a powerful visualization of this trend.



Shown above is the number of a given political regime in the world over time. Democracies are defined as the combination of both liberal and elected democracies; autocracies are the sum of closed and elected autocracies.

But this chart only tells us the story of what's past. It does not predict the future. Here in the U.S., the Supreme Court gutted the Voting Rights Act in 2013 and in the wake of the 2020 election, at least nineteen states have passed laws to restrict access to voting. In Europe and the U.S., far right white nationalist movements are small but vocal minorities that employ blatantly racist and xenophobic rhetoric and question the legitimacy of democratic institutions.

The independent non-partisan Freedom House has been documenting the decline of democracy around the world in their annual reports. This year's report is titled "The Global Expansion of Authoritarian Rule."

Now Russia, after weeks of denials, without any provocation, has invaded its peaceful neighbor Ukraine, which has been an independent country since 1991. At the time of this writing it is unknown what the response from the Western countries will be other than sanctions, which will take awhile to have any effect.

The Ukrainian president, Volodymyr Zelensky, was elected in free and fair elections in 2019. While there are pro-Russian separatist groups in the east, most Ukrainians want to remain a free and independent country. Putin, on the other hand, has become more of an autocrat than he was when he was first elected back more than twenty years ago. In recent years he has re-written the Russian Constitution and signed legislation into law allowing himself to remain in office until 2036. He fashions himself as Russia's savior. The country went through difficult times in the 1990s after the Soviet Union collapsed, and Putin has made no secret of his intentions to

regain what he sees as Russia's lost empire. He told the world when he invaded Ukraine that Russia "remains one of the most powerful nuclear states" and that anyone who tries to stop him from invading Ukraine "will face defeat and ominous consequences."

This is not the language of democracy and freedom. This is the language of an autocrat and imperialist. If he succeeds, there is no reason to believe Putin will stop at Ukraine. With an unprovoked invasion of a neighboring country, he is demonstrating that he wants us to return to living in a world where might equals right, where stronger countries invade and annex weaker countries with impunity. This is why European countries formed NATO after World War II.

The U.S. and other NATO allies are right to be beefing up their security forces in Eastern Europe. They are right to be imposing severe sanctions on Russian banks and oligarchs. Germany was right in stopping approval of the Nordstream 2 gas pipeline that would've provided cheap natural gas to Europe while also bringing in much needed income to prop up Russia's weak national economy. But these things are long-term solutions. None of these actions will save Ukrainians in the short term and millions have fled the country. The bombs are falling now and soon the world may have one less democracy.

But the possible loss of Ukraine is not the only reason to be concerned about the democratic (or non-democratic) future. The threat to democracy goes deeper than Putin, deeper than populist blowhards. The threat to democracy is epistemic.

The American Heritage Dictionary defines epistemic as "of, relating to, or involving knowledge; cognitive." Modern democracies have a particular epistemic foundation which makes them viable political systems. Historian Sophia Rosenfeld's book, *Democracy and Truth: A Short History* (2019), provides an excellent discussion on both.

In medieval times people believed in divine wisdom. Knowledge was handed down by God to certain people, namely kings and clergy. Regular people, it was thought, could not access knowledge themselves so, of course, under such a system the only possible form of government was a monarchy. The concept of self-rule that underlies modern democracies would have to wait until people developed a different understanding of knowledge and who could access it.

That different understanding came about as a result of the Protestant Reformation and the Enlightenment. Doing away with the idea that knowledge was inaccessible to non-clergy and non-royals was the crack in foundation of absolute rule. It took centuries to develop, but eventually it led the way to the possibility that people could rule themselves. While it co-existed alongside hypocrisies in who was determined to be human enough to have all the rights humans are entitled to, these social movements eventually paved the way to the possibility of modern democracy. After centuries of struggle led by formerly enslaved African Americans, women, and the working classes, the human race slowly inched closer to the dream of freedom and equality for all. All this happened because of how we conceived of knowledge and who could access it.

Now that particular conception of knowledge is under attack. Conspiracy theories abound suggesting that the world is actually run by a secret cabal of insiders who

have duped the entire world except for the discoverers of the conspiracy who claim to be silenced in their attempt to reveal the truth, but who nonetheless are able to promote their beliefs freely on the internet. The rhetoric of populist leaders on both the right and the left echo such conspiracy theories. Nicholas Maduro of Venezuela is an example. Here is an excerpt of one of his speeches to the United Nations in 2018:

*"Today we know that plans have been made for an international military intervention to control our country. A case against our country has been constructed in the global media, alleging the existence of a humanitarian crisis and using United Nations concepts to justify permitting a coalition of countries, headed by the government of the United States and its satellite governments in Latin America, to get its hands on our country."*

If you don't remember the U.S., Colombia, Peru or Argentina invading and taking over Venezuela in 2018, or the years thereafter, that's because it didn't happen. Where it is happening, as mentioned above, is in Russia doing that to Ukraine, and it is hardly being done in secret.

The idea that we the people cannot access knowledge because most of us are duped by corporate media or the government is dangerous to democracy. If only a privileged few have access to "the truth" then the only viable political system is rule by those few. In other words, an autocracy, an oligarchy, a dictatorship. A shared foundation of knowledge is the foundation for a political system based on the idea of self-rule. If this foundation is eroded, the democratic moment of the 20th century becomes just an aberration, and humanity will return to its more common form of government: rule by autocratic governments in which might equals right, stronger countries invade weaker countries, and democracy is just a distant memory; a quaint form of government for happier times.

With apologies to Robert Frost—since this isn't exactly what his original poem, "The Road Not Taken" was about—in the present context, it can be read this way:

*Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,  
And sorry I could not travel both  
And be one traveler; long I stood  
And looked down one as far as I could  
To where it bent in the undergrowth...*

*...knowing how way leads on to way,  
I doubted if I should ever come back.*

*I shall be telling this with a sigh  
Somewhere ages and ages hence:  
Two roads diverged in a wood, and [we]—  
[We] took the one less traveled by,  
And that has made all the difference.*

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*Progress is impossible without change,  
and those who cannot change their minds cannot change anything.*

—George Bernard Shaw