

The Need for New Role Model States. How Democracy Must Change to Prevail

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Abstract Just as the great democracies of antiquity were not immune to decline and demise, neither is the democracy of today. Such a failure of modern democracy will inevitably result in setbacks in political civilisation. Therefore, the international community will more than ever need new and innovative democratic role model states. The task of such new model states will be to fundamentally reshape democracy so that it can live up to the unprecedented challenges of a rapidly changing world.

Keywords Systems competition . Constitutional policy . Armaments policy . Migration policy . Ancient democracy

Die Staatenwelt braucht neue Vorbilder. Zum Schicksal der Demokratie im Systemwettbewerb

Zusammenfassung Sowenig die Demokratie der Antike vor dem Untergang gefeit war, so wenig werden es auch gegenwärtige und künftige Demokratien sein. Ein Untergang der Demokratie aber ist unweigerlich mit Rückschlägen der politischen Zivilisierung verbunden. Die Staatenwelt bedarf daher dringender denn je innovativer demokratischer Vorbildstaaten. Deren Aufgabe wird sein, die Demokratie so grundlegend neu zu formen, dass sie den wachsenden Herausforderungen einer sich rasch wandelnden Welt gewachsen bleibt.

Schlüsselwörter Systemwettbewerb . Verfassungspolitik . Rüstungspolitik . Migrationspolitik . Antike Demokratie

1 Introduction

The cradle of democracy was ancient Athens at the beginning of the fifth century BC. There, democracy experienced a vibrant period that is astounding to this day, and there, it eventually came to an end in the third century BC. Thereafter, democracy did not – notwithstanding the Roman Republic – reemerge on an equivalent level until late in the eighteenth century when it was finally revived as the modern, representative party systems of our present times. The demise of Athenian democracy has, thus, hampered the progress of political civilization for about two millennia – likely the most consequential setback in human history.

While the reasons for the demise of Athenian democracy are many, it can be interpreted as a defeat in the competition between political systems. This democracy lacked the efficiency and resilience necessary to expand its realm of power and dominance on a large enough scale. As astounding as its rise and flourishing were, its potential for development was limited.

This fate of Athenian democracy should be a warning. It should remind us never to take democracy for granted and to always be prepared for its eventual failure, even in global and epochal scope. Although modern democracy may be superior to Athenian democracy in efficiency and resilience, in a fundamentally changed and ever faster changing world, its survival is anything but certain. On the contrary, the ongoing fundamental changes in political challenges suggest that modern democracy will not prevail unless the lessons from the failure of ancient democracy are learned. Much like in ancient Greece, the progress of political civilization is at stake.

In the years after the end of the Cold War, it was largely taken for granted that Western liberal democracy, in its present form, would win the global system competition. But soon, it became apparent that democracies would remain exposed to existential external and internal threats. Even in long-established democracies, anti-democratic and autocratic forces are gaining ground. On 6 January 2021, the leading power in the Western democratic world experienced – with wide support among citizens – a coup to overturn the result of a democratic national election. While the coup was unsuccessful, it has nevertheless shattered confidence in modern democratic institutions.

Democracy is also threatened by the fact that, measured in terms of population, long-consolidated democracies still exist only in the smaller part of the world. Even more threatening, the Western democratic world faces two bluntly autocratic military superpowers, China and Russia, with a combined population double the size of the European Union and the United States combined. In decades to come, China will continue to catch up with the West in

economic and military terms, potentially reversing the power balance between the autocratic and the democratic world.

Thus, the fear that history could repeat itself, that democracy could once again vanish from the globe for centuries, is not a baseless concern. Keeping this from happening is the most important task of world politics in this century. But for democracy to assert itself, the world needs democratic leadership: powerful model states behind which other democracies can unite against autocratic threats.

Success in this endeavor, however, requires modern democracy to overcome its deficiencies, or it risks the same downfall as ancient Athens. In this respect, much can be learned from ancient Athens to understand what led to its eventual collapse.

It is also important to identify and understand the policies to which Athenian democracy owed its relatively long survival. In what follows, both questions will be examined, the reasons for the long success of Athenian democracy and the reasons for its eventual failure.

2 Education and Armament – Minimum Requirements for Model States

In a world of nation states, it is essential to have democratic role models. Influential model states give the world political and moral orientation and enhance its ability to avoid political catastrophes, be they wars, internal conflict, ecological disasters, economic decline, and more.

How to define an ideal model state is complex. Traditional political philosophy doesn't offer any clear answers, every form of government has its proponents. Many governments claim to be the superior model, and citizens are—mostly—free to make up their own mind about this. Modern democracy itself is a system shaped by numerous political upheavals (Wehner 1991).

However, some fundamental differences in political systems of governance can be objectively evaluated. A model state should aspire to the highest form of political civilization, and there should hardly be any dissent to measuring political civilization by criteria such as peace, freedom, tolerance, the rule of law, protection of minorities, social fairness, and the level of education. It is challenging, if not impossible, to fully achieve all these criteria, but the world's civilizational leader should strive toward superiority in its political practices in ways that maximize these attributes.

Unfortunately, few states, if any, have lived up to this aspiration, their leaders turning out to be too opportunistic, self-serving, weak, irrational, unreliable, short-sighted, or all of the

above. Accordingly, history has been characterized by never-ending cycles of progress and regression in the development of political civilization.

Still, there have been historical bright spots from which to learn, the most inspiring being the pioneering role of ancient Athens. But even democratic Athens, not only because it was a patriarchal class and slaveholder society, was not without its flaws by modern standards. Nevertheless, it was as much ahead of its time in the development of political institutions and decision-making procedures as in the arts and sciences. In some respects, its democratic culture remains unsurpassed to this day.

It is all the more remarkable how long, beginning around 507/8 BC, “little” Athens asserted itself as an independent democracy before succumbing to complete domination by Macedonia after the Lamian War (322 BC), roughly 185 years.

Athens’ relative resilience as an independent democratic city-state was arguably due to three policy pillars: 1) investment in its military capabilities, 2) limiting the scope of its electorate, and 3) broad-based education for its citizens.

Athens was able to bolster and reinforce its economic strength over time, which had been established even prior to the advent of democracy. The city-state maintained formidable land and naval forces, which played a crucial role in securing a prominent position of power and influence within the ancient Greek world. Thanks to its military prowess, Athens, in coordination with other Greek city-states, successfully repelled two attempts at conquest by the expansionist Persian Empire. Its prudent pursuit of consistent arms development ensured that the Athenian democratic system, in one form or another, endured for nearly two centuries, leaving a lasting impact on civilization beyond its borders and its era.

While Athenian defense policy proved indispensable in safeguarding the city-state’s political autonomy against potential hostile invaders, more important was the commitment of Athenians to democracy, a key aspect of its cultural identity. While Athens temporarily succumbed to the advances of its neighbors, Sparta and Thebes, ending the Peloponnesian War (431–404 BC), it was able to restore its democratic institutions a year later, overthrowing the tyrant oligarchy Sparta had imposed on it (403 BC).

While Athens’ military capacity helped to maintain its autonomy, two key policies helped to maintain its democratic institutions. First, Athens limited the scope of the democratic franchise. Athenian democracy was not universal; it only applied to free male citizens of a certain age. This limited franchise helped maintain a manageable scale for participation and decision-making, reducing the risk of chaos or inefficiency that might arise with a larger and more diverse population. Athens also carefully managed its electorate, both in terms of quantity

and quality, ensuring that eligible voters possessed the necessary qualifications to exercise their voting rights responsibly. A key aspect of this policy was the imposition of restrictions on immigration, which limited the number of foreign dwellers in the city-state and their participation in democratic decision-making.

The second policy was the education of its citizenry, particularly of its electorate. A fundamental principle of the Athenian democracy was the high standard expected of the *politai* (Greek: *πολίται*), full citizens who held the right to vote in the legislative people's assembly, the *Ekklesia*, the supreme body for political decision-making. Full citizens had to be well-informed and deeply committed to participating in political decision-making. Such commitment entailed not only active involvement in the *Ekklesia*. Full citizens were also expected to willingly assume responsibilities of military service, the judiciary, and public administration through assigned offices. For a democracy that so heavily relied on citizen engagement, its competence and effectiveness were intrinsically linked to the knowledge and dedication of its participants. Thus, to maintain its stature, Athenian democracy had to consistently prioritize and nurture the political education and development of its voting citizenry.

Athenian democracy endured for a remarkably long time, in part by skillfully managing its eligible voting population in scale as well as in the level of education. For example, immigrant residents were denied full civil rights and participation in political decision-making. The same was true of slaves, who made up well over half of the population. Even Athenian women were restricted from participating in the political process. The *politai* class also shied away from efforts to provide the rest of the population with the same education, possibly to spare resources considered indispensable for other uses.

Of course, these limiting practices would today be considered antithetical to the contemporary understanding of inclusive democracy. But while some aspects of Athenian democracy may raise ethical questions when viewed through the lens of modern values, it is essential to recognize that Athens existed within a specific historical context; societal norms and beliefs significantly differed from contemporary perspectives. This historical context should be taken into account when analyzing the dynamics of ancient Athens as a democratic role model state. Patriarchy and slavery aside, the Athenian principle remains important.

An enduring democratic model state requires politically active citizens who must be sufficiently trained and educated but also, crucially, have the time and resources necessary for political engagement. However, guaranteeing both for the entire population presumably exceeded the economic capacities at that time. Athens' *politai* could fulfill the political commitments imposed on them only because other tasks were largely taken over by women and

slaves – the inglorious dark side of its democratic legacy. As extraordinary as Athenian democracy was in its time, it could not be a democracy for all – even in the absence of social hierarchies abhorred in modern societies.

With the above qualifications, Athens was able to maintain its prominence in the Greek world for an impressive run by ancient standards, as well as in the popular imagination through to today. This was possible because Athenian citizens spent extensive time and effort on educational and armament development while imposing strict regimes for citizenship and franchise, thus keeping direct democracy manageable.

3 Lessons for the Present

What initial lessons from Athens' policies hold for potential democratic states in the present? Are only democratic countries that invest extensively in the education of their citizens and maintain strict regimes of franchise and citizenship capable of forging enduring democratic institutions? How important is defense policy?

Education policy is paramount as education and civic engagement must be cultivated through extensive collective effort. The rank of a state in political civilization ultimately depends on the level of political sophistication of its citizens entitled to vote. A democracy with universal suffrage must provide all citizens with a superb education in order to qualify as a role model for the rest of civilization.

However, to maintain such a superior level of education and civic acculturation over the long run, governments must be mindful of the resources and policies required to maintain the appropriate composition of the electorate. In states with superior civilization, immigration from other states always carries the risk of a reduction in the average level of education of its populace and civic knowledge. In such states, a sustainable democratic model requires immigration to be implemented in a restrictive and selective manner consistent with the requirements of its democratic institutions.

While selective immigration practices have their difficulties for enforcement, they can be all the more problematic for the countries the migrants are migrating from. Allowing only highly educated migrants to migrate can precipitate a “brain drain”, weakening the country of origin over time; this can make it more difficult for democratic model states to influence the countries of origin to the extent such migrant outflows lead to economic, institutional, and even political instability. Only model states that engage in strict yet humane immigration policies—

which may require providing economic and financial support to the countries of origin—will be better able to maintain institutional stability and trust over time.

A modern model state must, of course, be equally consistent in its defense policy. International conflicts will invariably arise from less politically civilized aggressors, i.e., autocratic and potentially more violent regimes. For the model state, this entails a moral obligation to maintain a superior military to as many other states as possible. Therefore, defense policy deserves the same political priority as education and civic institutional integrity.

4 Ideological Complications

Since the great world wars, policies concerned with building up military capacity and immigration restrictions have long been met with widespread ideological reservations, particularly in Europe. Aggressive military and armaments policies have been perceived by many as contributing to the arms race and global instability, and strict immigration control as a sign of cultural or ethnic arrogance and xenophobia. Resolute policies on both fronts seemed unbecoming of a role model state for the world. Moreover, opposing ideological and political party camps were formed, with mostly supporters of both strong military and restrictive immigration policy in one camp, traditionally right-wing parties, and opponents of both in the other, traditionally left-wing parties.

The reservations about rearmament after the Second World War were particularly pronounced in Germany due to widespread doubts about whether Germany was capable of responsible use of military power at all. Many also wondered whether Germany was morally entitled to an exclusionist immigration policy after so many Germans fled to the open borders of other states during the Nazi regime. The proponents of rearmament and strict immigration policy, it was argued, had not learned the lessons of history.

In a more evenly civilized and peaceful world, military armament and demographic exclusion could indeed become unnecessary. In such an ideal world, a model state could lead the way with disarmament and open borders. After the end of the Cold War, expectations spread that the world would actually become more peaceful with time and that countries – through adaptation into highly developed democracies – would become more homogeneous in terms of civic institutions, governance, and prosperity. Immigration pressure on the wealthy democracies would, accordingly, decrease, and armament and exclusionary immigrant policies would become increasingly obsolete.

Unfortunately, none of these expectations materialized. Instead, the number of people trying to flee from arbitrary rule, war, and economic misery continued to grow, and so did, as a consequence, the migratory pressure on wealthy countries. Generous immigration and asylum policies became ever more difficult to implement politically. The European Union, the United States, and many other wealthy countries have been forced to adopt increasingly restrictive migration policies.

Perspectives on military policy have also been undergoing rapid change in Europe of late. Since the end of the Cold War, the world has not become more peaceful. The cycle of conflict around disputed state borders (the origin of what the author has termed the creeping third world war) continues in many regions, with the Russian invasion of Ukraine being the most recent example. In addition, China is increasingly perceived as a serious security threat. As a result, we have seen an abrupt reorientation in arms policy, spurring a revival in defense spending by the U.S. and its allies including Germany.

With these developments, one might argue that leading democratic powers have found themselves in a situation similar to ancient democratic Athens, which was threatened by its oligarchic and militarist neighbor Sparta and aspiring Persian world power and still wanted to assert itself as a model state. Armament and exclusionary policies have likewise increasingly been pursued more actively in Western democracies, even in wealthy countries assumed to be of the top tier of civilizational powers.

5 Democratic Role Model States of the Present – Do they Exist?

What constitutes a true democratic role model state in such a world? A state can become a role model usually due to an advantage in political civilization, but it can lose this status through stagnation, the erosion of political institutions, or the advancement of other states. Although ancient Athens was a role model in its time, it is not – also for being a small city-state – an applicable role model today. But what role model states have emerged in the world since the fall of Athens?

In the course of history, there have always been states with comparatively advanced political civilizations, but this was not always due to their form of government per se. Even an autocracy, whether hereditary monarchy or otherwise, can temporarily serve as a role model state if led by a wise and well-intentioned autocrat. Yet the wisdom and goodwill of an autocrat is not a sustainable resource of governance. From a historical perspective, once Athens had

emerged with a functioning democratic system, no autocratic state could be given credit as a true role model anymore. But it would take two millennia before democracy would arise anew as a convincing model in the modern era.

It is common to view the United States as the progenitor of modern democracy and, therefore, a potential role model for democracy in the world. But like the first democracy of antiquity, it was also plagued by dark legacies as a slaveholder state for the first century of its existence, and it withheld basic human rights and civil rights from slaves, women, and indigenous peoples. These institutional legacies have had a lasting influence on minds and attitudes.

But as long as more credible role model candidates are lacking, one cannot be picky. Possible candidates need to be economically and politically powerful enough to have an outsized impact on political civilization. And for the sake of global civilizational progress, the most democratically sophisticated states in the world should also be the most powerful in military terms.

Though perhaps a controversial statement, humanity was fortunate it was the U.S., one of the most advanced democratic countries in the world, that rose to become the dominant superpower in the twentieth century. It was U.S. military might and leadership that prevented, among other things, the most ominous states of the last century, Nazi Germany, Stalin's Soviet Union, and Mao's communist China, from amassing greater regional power and establishing global supremacy. So, naturally, the U.S. has been viewed as the leading candidate for advancing the democratic model of governance for the world.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, no other advanced democracies aspired to challenge the U.S.' global leadership. For one, the U.S.' military capacity was virtually impossible to match, and relying on the U.S.' military leadership had put other countries in a comfortable economic and fiscal position. However, it has become apparent that the U.S., given China's enormous advantage in terms of population and economic growth rates, may not be able to uphold its status as the undisputed leading global power for much longer, both economically and militarily. In addition, it has become increasingly clear that the U.S. is not willing to act as a principled moral role model in foreign policy, neither in terms of goals nor in terms of means. This was evidenced by its presumable instigation of coups and civil wars in democratic countries (e.g., Iran, Chile, Greece, Brazil), the outright invasion of Iraq in the absence of international support, and the refusal to subject itself to international accountability through institutions like the International Criminal Court. The U.S. has been a powerful world

policeman but has also claimed too many exemptions for itself from international law, justice, and morality.

Some argue that the world's policeman, however well-intentioned, sometimes has to get its hands dirty to preserve the current international order. However, the political rhetoric of Donald Trump has taught us better by making explicit what had mostly been an implicit modus operandi of U.S. foreign policy: "America first." Trump's election exposed the cracks in the American system and, with it, discredited any claim to a role as a moral model state. The 6 January incident, after Trump failed to win a subsequent second term, further revealed the precarity of democracy even in the leading power of the Western world.

A world power aspiring to a role model status must always ask whether its policies best serve political civilization. The U.S. has fallen far short of this principle, however indisputable its impact on the development and spread of modern democracy.

Who might be the alternatives? What present democracies would be better to fill the role free from lingering colonialism, imperialism, and racism, with a mostly clean record in foreign policy? Who could advocate for democracy-enhancing policies at home and abroad? What country, if any, could have sufficient global influence in this role?

Presently, of course, there are no individual Western democracies that can completely meet these criteria. At best a handful of smaller democracies in Europe and elsewhere might come close. Thus, the world may be in for a long period without a true role model state of significant power or influence. We may be in for an era of political regression.

In the very long run, opportunities may open up for a new association of European nations to gradually grow into a powerful leadership role in political civilization beyond the European Union. To this end, the most advanced European and potentially some non-European nations would have to fully unite their military resources in addition to close cooperation in other policy areas. Such an alliance could then – provided the political will can be found – form a military world power to rival the U.S. Supported by its combined economic strength, at the very least, it could easily gain military superiority over Russia.

It is questionable, though, how coherently even such a novel type of European Union could present itself. Even for the most highly developed European countries, populism, extremism, and authoritarian currents threaten democracy. Increasingly, lawmakers engage in undignified and uncivilized behavior, and political debates are regularly characterized by heated rhetorical sham fights between political parties. Citizens are losing faith in conventional democratic institutions, which appear increasingly unresponsive to their demands, fostering

doubt in whether parties and institutions of democratic governance are still up to the political challenges of our times.

All this is evidence of an erosion of democracy. The rise of a democratic role model state, whether in Europe or elsewhere, would inevitably be limited in its function by this systemic weakness more broadly. Therefore, the ultimate purpose of a future role model state cannot be simply to preserve democracy in its existing form. There is a need for a more far-sighted vision.

6 The Fate of Democracy: Life Extension or Unlimited Life?

Ancient Athens was able to preserve its democratic institutions for a remarkably long time but, ultimately, was unable to prevent its demise. While some of the important lessons from Athenian democracy's longevity have been discussed above, more important are the lessons we can draw from its failure.

Why did democracy virtually disappear after the fall of Athens to Macedonia? Why did the Athenian model of democracy not have a more pervasive and lasting impact on the world? Why was it not adopted by larger states of antiquity? As inspiring as the Athenian model was, its lack of adoption indicates at least an inability to scale appropriately.

One is tempted to look to the Roman Republic as a form of democracy that befits larger states, a scalable evolution of the Athenian model. The Roman type of government, however, despite many democratic features with advanced political checks and balances and even elements of direct democracy, was still strongly influenced by pre-democratic conceptions. Although ahead of the rest of the world for centuries, Rome neither reached the civilizational and cultural rank of Athens nor its institutional finesse. It was not, for example, on a par with Athens in the separation of powers, and it largely neglected the inspiring potential of sortition (i.e., drawing lots for the allocation of offices), thereby making itself more susceptible to nepotism, corruption, demagoguery, and ideology. Instead of being a pioneering role model, Rome embodied an institutional and civilizational step backwards compared to Athens.

Yet the Roman political system, unlike the Athenian, was scalable, partly accounting for its astounding longevity and geographical growth. The Roman Republic survived for half a millennium and scaled to be one of the largest empires known to man. In the end, though, it could not reconcile its state order with the Empire's changing geographic and demographic structure. In this process, it failed largely due to its excessive expansionism. The Roman

Republic became too large and its population too heterogeneous, which strained its political institutions before culminating in its collapse. Insofar as Rome was a democracy before descending into autocracy under Julius Caesar, this democracy destroyed itself. From this perspective, Rome is another tragic instance of the failure of democracy.

The successor model to Athens and Rome, which would also meet the requirements of large territorial states, has been the modern democratic republican system we have today. In many respects, however, including the abandonment of direct referendums (as equivalent to the people's assembly) and sortition in the allocation of political offices,¹ modern democracy has fallen short of the Athenian benchmark. So even though modern democratic political systems have progressed beyond some serious limitations of Athenian democracy, they have not evolved to a more advanced level. The two-and-a-half millennia since the emergence of Athenian democracy was a long era of stagnation and regression in terms of political order and civilization.

How did this happen? How could democracy decline and disappear for so long rather than evolve and adapt to changing historical conditions? One possible explanation is that the rest of the world was not ready for the kind of political consciousness Athenian-style democracy required. In a prosperous city-state like Athens, located on a small peninsula well-endowed with resources and a civically minded and well-educated citizenry no more than a couple hundred thousand strong, the conditions for the development of democracy were exceptional. It is difficult to imagine that, for example, Slavic, Germanic, or Celtic tribes could have maintained, let alone developed, a comparable democratic order at that time. This made a proliferation of democracy originating from Athens highly improbable.

Had Athens been able to maintain its democracy a few centuries longer, more powerful imitators might have taken up and refined its exemplary practices, and world history might have turned out very differently. But this was hampered not only by hostile neighboring states. The crucial limiting factor in Athens' development to a more long-lived influential power was the institution of the *Ekklesia*, the legislative people's assembly that collectively decided matters of state. Athens kept this institution feasible by constraining the electorate to about 40,000 rather well-educated citizens of which hardly more than 6,000 mostly took part. Nevertheless, the *Ekklesia's* decision-making was notoriously plagued by demagoguery. This was a clear indication that even in a relatively small city-state, this institution could assume a critical if not unfeasible size. This explains why even such brilliant minds at the time as Plato and Aristotle

¹ For a more advanced concept of allocating political offices by lot, see Wehner (1995, Chap. 6 „The logic of citizen participation“) and the draft constitution in Neokratieverfassung.de (n.d.).

did not consider democracy to be the best possible form of government. They saw the citizens overextended in their role as direct political decision-makers and were, thus, more inclined towards an enlightened monarchy or aristocracy. Had it not been for the assigning of public offices by sortition, a procedure that doesn't give room for demagoguery, democracy might have been considerably more short-lived in Athens and other ancient Greek republics.

Given its political system and the challenges of the time, Athens was, in the very long term, unable to assert itself as a city-state of the given size. In order to grow substantially in terms of both territory and population, it would have had to question, if not entirely abandon, foremost the role of the established institution of the *Ekklesia*.

With its system being as it was, Athens achieved no more for its self-assertion as a leading power than to form – and eventually control – the Delian League, a military and political alliance of many small Greek states around and in the Aegean. Athens also helped and urged many of these states to adopt democratic features. However, all this was by far insufficient to assert a leading and widespread role for Greek political civilization in the longer term.

Though the central inherent shortcoming of the Athenian model gradually became more apparent and ever more threatening over time, this failed to incite robust and innovative reformist movements. Athens could not muster again the same inventive force that had fueled the creation of its democracy. The question of how this democracy should evolve to accommodate a larger state or federation of states remained unaddressed.

This may be surprising in retrospect since the transition from Athenian direct democracy to a representative democracy more similar to the modern type would have been a much less fundamental transformation than the initial establishment of democracy. But in the crucial phase of history, Athenians lacked the reformist vigor and openness needed to take such a step and thereby enhance their democracy's efficiency and longevity.

The fact that even Athens, a highly developed society, failed to conceive and implement such a reform underscores the powerful obstacles that hindered fundamental political innovations in antiquity. One of the most formidable barriers was – and in our times still is – the institutional inertia ingrained within an established political order. Overcoming such inertia demanded exceptional circumstances and individuals, and tragically, these factors were absent. Consequently, the Greeks remained dispersed among numerous smaller states with limited influence beyond their borders.

Aristotle believed that had the Greeks united, they could have largely dominated the world. This notion alone could have naturally led to adapting the democratic concept for larger states, enabling a Greater Greek democratic state and actualizing Aristotle's vision. In this

scenario, a well-organized federal democracy could have united the Greeks on a grand scale, allowing them to wield substantial global political and civilizational influence.

Regrettably, this outcome did not materialize, and it was only Alexander the Great, the imperialistic ruler from the neighboring state of Macedonia, who briefly achieved a Greek-dominated world empire.² Aristotle's vision of cultural progress emanating from Athens and spreading beyond the Greek realm remained a mere dream thwarted by the inability to question and adjust established institutions. The fact that even a previously innovative state like Athens, along with influential thinkers such as Aristotle and Plato, failed to formulate such a fundamental reform concept underscores the universal problem of institutional inertia.

Throughout history, the decline of states that once served as – however morally imperfect – influential model states has not been an uncommon occurrence. Often, these collapses resulted from the inability to embrace reform. This pattern applies to monarchies, autocracies, and theocracies as well as the Soviet Union and other communist states. Ancient Greek (and Roman) history teaches us that democracies are not exempt from this tendency. As a result, one must acknowledge that without fundamental adaptation, modern democracy, too, possesses limited durability and could potentially vanish from the world for centuries or longer.

So far, modern democracy has survived for two and a half centuries – substantially longer than Athenian democracy. Given the much faster change and growth of political challenges in modern times, this is, perhaps, much longer than one might expect. But we cannot afford to be complacent. The less seriously we consider this, the greater the risk that modern democracy will eventually falter under its own systemic inertia.

7 Decreed Reformability: Constitutions on Probation

The downfall of Athens can be attributed to its inability to accomplish significant systemic reforms. It lacked flexibility in constitutional matters, thereby contributing to its demise. While Athens maintained its reputation as an exemplary model through its military prowess, immigration policies, educational initiatives, and more, it struggled to advance its intricate yet in some respects cumbersome and fragile political procedures, even when confronted with existential threats.

² The extent to which Macedonia and Alexander belonged to the Greek world in terms of language and ethnicity is, however, disputed.

In contemporary times, it becomes pertinent to question the extent to which historical evolution has moderated this deficiency in reform capacity. Have modern democracies successfully mitigated or defused the rigid nature of political frameworks, thereby ensuring the sustainability of democracy? Have substantial strides been made toward achieving this objective?

Regrettably, the answer is disheartening: Little progress has been made. What exacerbates this situation is the fact that political institutions and processes, driven by an escalating array of intricate tasks, are progressively becoming more complex over time. Consequently, these institutions accumulate ever more formidable inertia. This phenomenon transcends national politics; even increased integration into international institutions reinforces institutional rigidity, making substantial political overhauls increasingly improbable. An illustrative case is the integration of European nations into the European Union and consequently European law. Another example is international law's emphasis on territorial integrity which solidifies rigid state borders and impedes the democratic adaptation of state boundaries guided by pertinent regulatory processes.³ If any single state were to attempt such innovative democratic restructuring of national borders it would find itself legally and politically isolated on the global stage.

Historically, institutional inertia has impeded systemic political reforms. In recent times, this problem has been compounded by the rapidly evolving nature of political challenges, both domestically and internationally, from climate change, peacekeeping, migration (economically and climate-driven), healthcare, population (de)growth, international trade, and more. As a result, politics are outpacing the problems which the existing political order was designed to resolve. The intricacies of these challenges in nearly all policy domains are deepening, suggesting a need for frequent reassessment, adjustment, supplementation, or even complete reconstruction of political systems. The mounting institutional inertia makes these necessary updates increasingly elusive.

In such a world, the primary purpose of true role model states is to be a leader in political reformism, i.e., in scrutinizing, correcting, and rebuilding established political orders. As such, they could demonstrate how institutional reforms can help overcome the mental overload in politics caused by increasingly complex tasks.

It is paramount that role-model democracies take the lead in confronting this dilemma, embracing institutional adaptability and flexibility. Yet the constitutional regimes that

³ For a more democratic framework for dealing with national borders, see Wehner (2019), Wehner (2020) and Wehner (2023).

predominantly shape the political order in most democracies make fundamental reforms difficult. Furthermore, such reforms are met with substantial ideological resistance. In established democracies like the U.S., for example, the constitution is largely considered sacrosanct in institutional matters, making it notoriously difficult, if not de facto impossible, to pass fundamental constitutional amendments.

While there are valid reasons for constraining everyday politics from delving into foundational constitutional matters, imprudent implementation of such constraints can undermine democratic innovation and survival. Therefore, to enhance the capacity for innovative constitutional changes while safeguarding core democratic principles, novel rules and procedures will have to be established for managing constitutional affairs.

Improperly conceived, such new rules might subject constitutions to the same sort of short-sighted, superficial, and incompetent populist disputes that overshadow much of day-to-day democratic politics. But this could be easily precluded by creating a novel political authority, namely a “Constitutional Council”, that would be given the sole responsibility in constitutional matters.

Such a Council’s design should emphasize two essential qualities: 1) independence from other political authorities and day-to-day party politics, and 2) specialization in democratic reform focused on the long-run sustainability and adaptation of democratic processes. Furthermore, to warrant the Council’s uncompromised autonomy, its members would have to be designated in a sophisticated hybrid procedure preferably with elements of sortition, election, and cooption.⁴

A Constitutional Council would not be an ad hoc institution for one-time reform; instead, it would stand as a permanent fixture. Its primary mandate would entail regularly conducting referendums to assess the performance of the prevailing system. Should such referendums yield inadequate approval, the Constitutional Council would then initiate the prescribed protocols for reconstructing the political framework.⁵

This process of legitimation would perpetually counteract the obsolescence of the political system and allow institutions to evolve to meet the changing needs of the time. Only such an institutional arrangement could shield modern democracy from eventually facing a similar fate as ancient democracy.

⁴ For such a proceeding, see also the draft constitution in Neokratieverfassung.de (n.d.).

⁵ The author suggests the term „iterative legitimation“ for this procedure, see Wehner (1993). An abridged version is available online at Wehner (n.d.).

8 Endgame in the Systems Competition?

In both antiquity and the present day, democracy finds itself in competition with systems of autocracy. The most potent adversary to today's democracy is China, analogous to the Kingdom of Macedonia in antiquity, which Athens eventually succumbed to. If contemporary China, alongside other autocracies, were to gain dominance in the global arena, this would result in another cycle of democratic decline. As has historically been the case, such a state of affairs can prevail for a very long time, all the more so as autocracies have the advantage of using repressive methods to ensure their survival.

The rise of China to a persistent world superpower is not inevitable, however. China's political system is even more plagued by systemic inertia. The country faces significant challenges, from social instability and demographic shifts to a more aged society to transitioning its economy to a model allowing for faster growth of wages and private consumption, among many others. China's government has shown a willingness and capacity to address crucial challenges such as environmental pollution and poverty reduction. However, whether the political system under the comprehensive control of the communist party can navigate the evolving demands of a dynamic future while maintaining social stability and sufficient economic growth is more than questionable. In the longer run, the Chinese government will face equally complex political challenges as Western democracies, but it will do so with rigid post-communist institutions and political elites entrenched in old ideologies. Without fundamental and even revolutionary reforms, China's political system may be even less capable of coping with future complex political challenges than conventional democracies. Its regime will likely become increasingly overburdened by its tasks and all the more desperate to cling to power.

One of the increasingly anachronistic features of conventional political orders is the presumption of politicians, parties, and parliaments to bear responsibility for virtually all policy areas at once. This all-encompassing responsibility inevitably leads to ever more excessive demands on politicians and institutions, and these growing demands result in increasing weaknesses in the performance of politics.

The system of all-encompassing responsibility also overburdens the citizens themselves, who with their electoral ballot cast votes on politics as a whole. Such votes are inevitably based on vague notions of a complex, all-encompassing, virtually inscrutable bundle of political issues. Such voting is increasingly divorced from substance or facts as citizens must seek refuge

in simplistic explanations, ideologies, and party polarization and fetishize personalities. In such an increasingly underperforming democracy, ideologization and personalization pave the way for populism, extremism, and nationalism.

The overwhelming demands in politics necessitate a fundamental restructuring of political responsibilities. This restructuring should prioritize the transfer of responsibilities from universally accountable entities and individuals to specialized authorities that possess all the more specialized expertise in their respective domains. However, as this reorganization contradicts the vested interests of established institutions, political parties, and decision-makers, fierce resistance to such changes must be expected. Creating an independent political authority with the motivation, courage, and competence for profound systemic reforms is, therefore, imperative. This authority would manifest as a politically autonomous and permanent Constitutional Council specializing in matters of the political order.⁶

This envisioned Constitutional Council would be a perpetual sentinel, evaluating democracy's performance and reform capabilities. It could also assess whether a state is losing its reform potential through intergovernmental agreements, international organization memberships, and adherence to a rigid international law. It would wield exclusive authority over these reforms, deciding – and involving citizens in decisions – regarding the institutional structure and democratic rules within the state. Furthermore, it could be active in matters such as recognizing innovative democratic decision-making processes for delineating state borders, thereby contributing to the establishment of a new global peace framework.⁷ Thus, the Constitutional Council would be the catalyst for all upgrades to the political order, ultimately determining a state's qualification as a role model on the international stage.

In the course of such upgrades, a Constitutional Council could address the following issues with priority: 1) Progressing specialization – resulting in higher competence – of legislative and executive authorities, political parties, politicians at large, and voters; 2) newly defined roles for voting, sortition, and cooption in the selection of political personnel; 3) a new and extended, carefully delimited role for referendums in political decision-making on constitutional, territorial, demographic, and migration issues, among others.

As elucidated earlier, a democratic model state can maintain its role for a considerable period through policies centered on armament, migration, and education tailored to this end. However, sustaining exemplary status over the long term necessitates the capacity for profound

⁶ On the concept of the so-called neocratic state order, see Wehner (1991, 2006), an abridged version can be found under Wehner (n.d.b) and further introductory texts in Reformforum Neopolis (n.d.).

⁷ For such a peace framework, see Wehner (2020) and Wehner (2023).

systemic reforms, for which a permanent autonomous Constitutional Council is indispensable. In the long term, a role model state can scarcely exist without such an authority.

Whether any democratic state will ever establish such an entity is highly uncertain; present ideology remains a barrier. Yet, it is undeniable that the ability to undertake systemic reforms will grow increasingly pivotal in the competition of political systems. Establishing an autonomous Constitutional Council could lay the foundation. Initiated by one or more prominent Western democratic states, such reform might catalyze a growing systemic and civilizational advantage over autocratic regimes, potentially determining the outcome of the global systems competition.

Far from the end of history, we are at the early stages of democracy's development. We live in the age of democracy 2.0; democracy 3.0 lies ahead of us.

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