Psychological Biases and Democratic Anxiety: A Comment on Little and Meng (2023)

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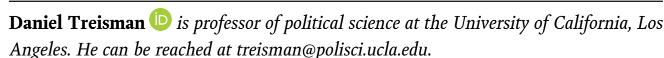
In their timely article, Andrew Little and Anne Meng make an important point. Despite widespread alarm over democratic backsliding, objective evidence suggests that the scale of the phenomenon is much more limited than many seem to think. Recent power holders around the world have not been entrenching themselves more effectively than in the past. Incumbents continue to lose elections about as often as they used to, and those who win have not been doing so by larger margins. Opposition parties are allowed to compete about as frequently today as 10 or 20 years ago. Moreover, there has been no increase in leaders' ability to evade term limits.

Of course, in addition to competitive elections and formal constraints on the executive, many conceptions of democracy include civil rights and political freedoms. It could be that these have been eroded in ways that are difficult to measure. However, at least as captured by a couple of relatively crude proxies, the trend in press freedom is not uniformly bad. The number of journalists imprisoned has soared since the mid-2000s, according to the Committee to Protect Journalists, but the number of those murdered while doing their work has fallen.

All of this is at odds with much recent press coverage and academic research. In the past decade, the notion that democracy is retreating has become a cliché, if not a meme. By marshalling such a collection of contrary evidence, Little and Meng make a significant contribution. Their article adds to a small but growing chorus of skeptics who—although acknowledging the need for vigilance—question whether democracy is truly as fragile as most accounts suggest (e.g., Brownlee and Miao 2022; Carothers and Youngs 2017). Along these lines, I argued recently that even when measured with subjective indicators, global democracy remains near an all-time high (Treisman 2023). Almost all of the deterioration that has occurred can be explained by the lower income and relatively new institutions of many of the countries swept up in the Third Wave. Although many perceive Western governments as threatened by decreasing popular support for democracy and an erosion of elite norms, the evidence that these are significant determinants of democratic survival is anecdotal at best. Furthermore, in any case, support for democracy has been *increasing* in most liberal democracies.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If the evidence is weak, why is the discourse so alarmist?[1] To some extent, differences in perspective could reflect different ways of viewing the data. First, if we combine deconsolidation within democracies with consolidation in autocracies, then dwindling freedoms in China, Russia, and Afghanistan bolster the appearance of decline. Yet, that reveals little about democratic backsliding because none of these countries was recently a democracy. Second, if we weight countries by population, then—as Little and Meng demonstrate in their appendix—objective indicators did fall somewhat in the past decade.

However, this is driven entirely by China and India. Both are important countries but, as noted, China has never had free government and India's political fate is hardly synonymous with that of global democracy. For obvious reasons, the experience of the subcontinent is an uncertain guide to what lies ahead in Western liberal orders. From a methodological perspective, population weighting is useful if we want to see the average fate of the world's inhabitants (Papada et al. 2023). However, if the goal is to analyze trends among countries, then weighting all of them equally makes more sense.[2]

Something deeper seems to be at play. The remainder of this comment suggests a few reasons why people might overestimate the danger of democratic collapse. In short, a number of widely recognized psychological biases and heuristics push in that direction. To be clear, I present no empirical evidence that these are, in fact, the mechanisms underpinning today's anxieties. Rather, what follows are hypotheses that seem to me to be plausible.[3]

A first potential source of bias is the *availability heuristic* (Tversky and Kahneman 1973). When asked how likely an event is, people often judge this by seeing how easy it is to imagine it. We conflate imaginability with probability. Events may come to mind easily for several reasons. Vivid scenarios—for example, a coup, a civil war, and a stolen election—are easier to visualize than dull episodes—for example, the muddled back-and-forth of normal democratic politics. As a result, people overestimate the odds of dramatic outcomes. This may contribute to the alarm of those—mostly in the media—who see a complete collapse as plausible. Many assertions of democratic fragility even use the language of the availability heuristic. A *New York Times* columnist commented recently that she found certain narratives in which the United States slides into civil war "more imaginable" than others in which "America ends up basically OK" (Goldberg 2022). That was hardly

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surprising because she had just read a book about such narratives. However, the apparent implication—that civil war was more *probable* than less-dramatic alternatives—does not follow.

Vividness is not the only thing that makes some ideas more accessible. Media coverage and speculation also can boost availability. As Little and Meng document, both press reports and academic studies of backsliding have surged in recent years. Exposure to these may prime readers to see democracy as fragile. Moreover, the *increase* in coverage also may explain why alarm is not only high but apparently growing as well.[4] At the same time, some journalists seem to view it as their responsibility to make dire scenarios more believable. "Nothing has aided Donald Trump more than Americans' failure of imagination," Packer (2021) wrote recently. "It's essential to picture an unprecedented future so that what may seem impossible doesn't become inevitable…. Imagining the worst is a civic duty." The result is a type of Catch-22: if the breakdown of democracy is easy to imagine, we assume it must be likely; if it is difficult to picture, journalists work hard to make it seem vivid.[5]

A second cognitive bias is the *representativeness heuristic* (Kahneman and Tversky 1972). We tend to confuse the probability of A given B with how typical B is in cases of A. That is, we reverse a conditional probability.[6] When the base rates of A and B differ, this can lead to large errors. Throat-cancer patients often experience a persistent cough. Yet, most people with persistent coughs do not have throat cancer. A subtype of this might be called the "warning-signs fallacy." Experts notice current cases of phenomena that preceded past catastrophes. For example, seeing the craven behavior of today's right-wing establishment, they recall that spineless elites once eased Hitler into power. This sets alarm bells ringing. Yet, craven behavior by incumbents is far more common than the rise of genocidal demagogues. Simple attention to base rates suggests that the probability of another Hitler—even given feckless incumbents—is still extremely low.

Civil wars that undermine democracy often follow political polarization. However, most cases of political polarization do not trigger civil war. As Han and Brady (2007) noted, polarization has been endemic to US politics from the start. The "truly unusual historical period" is not the recent time of sharp divisions but rather the bipartisan comity that followed World War II. Exacerbating the fallacy, some people treat *any amount* of a "warning sign" as similarly alarming. Armed militias often exist in countries where civil wars break out (Walter 2022). However, it makes a difference whether the group in question is ISIS or a backwoods gang of weekend warriors. Both may be dangerous, but not equally so.

Both the availability and the representativeness heuristics can explain overprediction of vivid events such as coups or revolutions. Yet, many recent accounts argue that the current threat comes less from such extreme outcomes than from an insidious, gradual dismantling of democratic institutions by insiders: a "subtle, incremental erosion" resulting from a "dangerously deceptive" series of "barely visible steps" that end in "death by a thousand cuts" (Huq and Ginsburg 2018, 78; Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018, 3, 5; Lust and Waldner 2015) Such a path sounds not vivid but rather dull. Moreover, if the mechanisms used to undermine democracy today are different from those in the past, then wouldn't the representativeness heuristic lead us to *under*estimate the threat?[7]

I don't think so. The availability heuristic may lead those unaware of the new style of subversion to overpredict catastrophic failures. However, to scholars—not to mention casual followers of the news—the stories of recent backsliders such as Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, Viktor Orbán, and Narendra Modi have become remarkably vivid. The actions of these leaders—although not rising to the level of the Reichstag fire—are striking in their own way and certainly more than "barely visible." Erdoğan's jailing of tens of thousands of political opponents, Orbán's xenophobic posters and electoral "dirty tricks," and Modi's use of "intimidation by partisan mobs to silence critics" are all familiar to *New York Times* readers (Chowdhury 2022; Gall 2017; Santora 2018). These images spring quite readily to mind—certainly more readily than images of "stable democracy." The abuses of such strongmen—from packing courts to attacking independent media—are no secret. Consequently, when a politician closer to home harangues "biased" journalists or conspires to promote loyal judges, it is natural to see the parallel to Erdoğan or Orbán, forgetting that many politicians in democracies berate the press and back partisan judges without this heralding a system collapse. That the new backsliders often pretend to be democratic only makes this worse—even apparently innocuous steps seem representative of would-be dictators.

Along with the availability and representativeness heuristics, a third source of political anxiety is *negativity bias* (Baumeister et al. 2001). "Negative information has stronger effects on attention, perception, memory, physiology, affect, behavior, motivation, and decision making than does equally extreme and arousing positive information" (Norris 2021, 68). We are hardwired to overreact to

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the bad and underplay the good. Independent of how vivid and accessible items are, people focus more on troubling news than on reassuring reports.[8]

These three biases all fuel political pessimism. Are there psychological mechanisms that push in the opposite direction? Perhaps, but they seem likely to be weaker. *System-justification theory* suggests that people are strongly motivated to deny flaws in the existing sociopolitical order (Jost, Banaji, and Nosek 2004). This could lead to an exaggerated view of its stability. Some individuals also use denial to cope with threats, subjecting unwelcome news to greater critical scrutiny (Ditto and Lopez 1992). Overconfidence is also very common. However, such work emphasizes individuals' view of their own situation rather than their view of society; that is, people are overconfident about themselves *relative to their peers* rather than overoptimistic about their country's future (Taylor and Brown 1988). On balance, psychological effects seem to favor alarmism.

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Doubts about democracy's staying power are nothing new. Indeed, they have recurred regularly, often climaxing shortly before another global upsurge. In 1984, the French writer Jean-François Revel published a book titled, *How Democracies Perish*, which suggested that free government might soon disappear in the West. The age of democracy, he wrote, could well turn out to be "a historical accident, a brief parenthesis that is closing before our eyes." In the 10 years following publication, the number of democracies increased by 35.[9]

This is not to say that democracy has not faced—and does not today face—any dangers. In the 1930s, the crisis was very real. However, the high rate of false alarms suggests that something remains to be explained. It could be that the recurring fear of democratic collapse is exactly what has kept this from happening. Political panic might seem superfluous only because it is effective. Indeed, some writers may think accentuating the threat is useful to rally democracy's supporters.

If so, various research suggests that they may be wrong. Anxiety can mobilize people to action—but not despair. Apocalyptic visions tend to breed resignation (O'Neill and Nicholson-Cole 2009). A useful parallel is the campaign to combat global warming, in which many fear-based appeals have proved "ineffective or even counterproductive" (Smith and Leiserowitz 2014). On global warming, catastrophic scenarios lead viewers to disengage or dismiss the issue (ibid.). People are less likely to act when they feel helpless or fatalistic (Mayer and Smith 2019). Exaggerated warnings, perceived as sensationalistic or biased, often backfire (Lorenzoni, Nicholson-Cole, and Whitmarsh 2007). In one study, dire messages about extreme weather actually reduced belief in climate change (Feinberg and Willer 2011). If improving democracy is comparable to saving the environment, then the most effective way to promote action may be to define problems that are "difficult, yet solvable" and to outline concrete ways that individuals can make a difference (Mayer and Smith 2019).

Even knowing which concrete steps will strengthen democracy presupposes an accurate assessment of its current weak spots. In this regard, the careful examination of relatively objective indicators is crucial—along with efforts to find more concrete and transparent measures of those elements that currently are captured by expert surveys. Little and Meng's article points toward a further research program of great potential scholarly and practical value.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The author declares that there are no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in this research. ■

NOTES

1. Of course, not all studies have characterized the threat in existential terms. In addition to the already-noted skeptics, many who do see a danger of backsliding are careful to not overstate the case and offer quite measured conclusions.
2. Little and Meng note that equal weighting of countries has been the general practice in political science.
3. I also want to make clear that I share concern about democracy's prospects in various places. However, correctly diagnosing current problems requires a careful consideration of concrete evidence and a resistance to overgeneralizing across dissimilar contexts.
4. If readers were aware that coverage had increased because of either changing editorial policies or information availability, they could take this into account. However, as Little and Meng point out, studies suggest that people rarely adjust adequately for selection even when they know sources are selective. Kahneman (2011) called this the "what you see is all there is" effect.
5. Of course, availability cannot explain why the first writers became so convinced of democratic fragility. For that, the other two cognitive tendencies discussed in this article may be important. In the United States, journalists may have been sensitized by Donald Trump's (*very* vivid) attacks on the media. *New York Times* stories containing the phrase "fake news" increased from only three in 2013 to a peak of 1,611 in 2017 before decreasing gradually to 224 in 2022 (based on a search using Nexis Uni).
6. This is a slight simplification: for B to be "representative" of A requires not only high probability of B given A but also that B is similar to or captures salient features of A.
7. I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for highlighting this possibility.
8. If backsliders conceal their antidemocratic actions or cast them as legal and democratic, citizens might not even view these as negative. Indeed, in a country as polarized as the United States, supporters of a given backslider may underestimate the danger he or she poses. However, negativity bias should magnify the suspicions of opponents of the backsliding incumbent. Even supporters of the incumbent may suspect that the *other* party is eroding democracy and overweight this negative information. In the United States, a Marist poll in December 2022 found that 83% of respondents believed that American democracy was under "serious threat" (https://maristpoll.marist.edu/polls/a-new-session-of-congress). Yet, 48% perceived the Republican Party as the bigger threat, whereas 45% pointed to the Democrats. It is plausible that negativity bias could inflate both views.
9. Using V-DEM's "regimes of the world" measure (v.13).

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