



We Have to Undo the Attack on the Middle Class That Started With Reagan If We Want Our Democracy Back

Thom Hartman

October 2, 2019

The destruction of the middle class is destroying democracies and paving the way for authoritarian rule.

In 2016, Roberto Stefan Foa and Yascha Mounk published a paper in the Journal of Democracy showing how, in the era since Reagan led America out of classical economic policy and into neoliberalism (aka “trickle-down” and “supply-side” economics), many Americans have ceased to value democracy.

“In the United States,” they write, “among all age cohorts, the share of citizens who believe that it would be better to have a ‘strong leader’ who does not have to ‘bother with parliament and elections’ has also risen over time: In 1995, 24 percent of respondents held this view; by 2011, that figure had increased to 32 percent.” By the time the paper came out in 2016, fully 49 percent of Americans thought elites should make decisions, rather than “government.”

And the growing disillusionment with democracy as a way to protect the interests of average voters doesn’t just push them toward solutions hatched by the Heritage Foundation or the Cato Institute; increasingly, Americans would even consider a military junta ruling America, something that would shock the founders.

“In the past three decades,” Foa and Mounk write, “the share of U.S. citizens who think that it would be a ‘good’ or ‘very good’ thing for the ‘army to rule’—a patently undemocratic stance—has steadily risen. In 1995, just one in sixteen respondents agreed with that position; today, one in six agree.”

And it’s not just in the United States; democracies across the world are falling to the power of right-wing strongman leaders. Just in the past few decades we’ve seen this happen in Hungary, Poland, the Philippines, India, Russia, Turkey, Egypt, Indonesia and, most recently, Brazil. Arguably, it has happened here in the United States with the Electoral College’s selection of

Donald Trump as president. Meanwhile, hard-right groups seeking such autocracy are rising fast across Europe, particularly in France, Italy, Germany, Sweden and the United Kingdom.

In a recent [article for the Washington Post](#), Fareed Zakaria notes this trend, along with Foa and Mounk's research, and tries to analyze its cause.

“Why is this?” Zakaria [writes](#). “The best I can guess is that we are living in times of great change — economic, technological, demographic, cultural — and in this swirl, people feel insecure and anxious.”

America and the world have been in the midst of “great change” many times before, including during and after two world wars, but this trend toward authoritarianism has been happening uniquely since the 1980s.

But America and the world have been in the midst of “great change” many times before, including during and after two world wars, but this trend toward authoritarianism has been happening uniquely since the 1980s.

That decade saw the adoption of the radical economic and political ideologies of Thatcherism and Reaganism—neoliberalism—which have since swept the world's democracies. Even the [European Union](#) (with the [Maastricht Treaty in 1993](#)) has adopted neoliberal “reforms” that benefitted wealthy elites while forcing austerity on its poorer member nations, [inflicting massive pain](#) and inciting right-wing movements in Greece, Spain and Italy, among others.

In the United Kingdom, Margaret Thatcher led the way in 1978. She rejected government ownership of parts of the commons like railways, busted unions, and later [argued](#) that, “There is no such thing as society... [only] individual men and women, and... families.”

Reagan came to power in 1980 with the help of vast amounts of money from corporations and the morbidly rich, made possible by the twin 1976 and 1978 Supreme Court decisions of [Buckley v. Valeo](#) and [First National Bank of Boston v. Bellotti](#), which said that billionaires and corporations owning politicians was “free speech.”

With a nod to his oligarch funders, in his inaugural address, his first day on the job as president, [Reagan famously said](#), “[G]overnment is not the solution to our problem; government is the problem.”

When Reagan flipped our economic system on its head, rejecting two generations of classical Adam Smith economics and replacing it with the Laffer Curve and “supply-side” economics, [almost a third of Americans had union jobs](#) and around 60 percent of American families lived in the economic “middle class.” But starting in 2015, as [NPR noted](#), reporting on a [Pew study](#), “middle-income households have become the minority.”

Since David Koch's failed 1980 run for VP on the Libertarian ticket, American oligarchs have invested billions of dollars in the message that government is bad and can't be trusted. The most obvious example was the faux-grassroots Tea Party “movement” funded by Koch front groups, causing thousands of Americans to protest “government-run” health care with [slogans like](#), “Keep your goddamn government hands off my Medicare!”

Koch and his oligarch friends suggested, through their surrogates and think tanks, that instead of a functioning democracy we should have a government both owned and run by them and their billionaire buddies.

And that's largely what we have now, with the Trump administration. As former Labor Secretary Robert Reich recently tweeted, "A corporate lawyer runs DOL, a pharma exec runs HHS, a coal lobbyist runs EPA, an oil lobbyist runs DOI, a Raytheon lobbyist runs DOD, a steel lobbyist is the US trade rep, and a banking exec runs USDT." I'd add that a former Verizon lawyer runs the FCC, and midlevel positions across the federal government are now filled with lobbyists and lawyers from industry.

Prior to the Reagan Revolution, Americans usually got what they wanted from the government.

The successes of LBJ's Great Society programs during the 1960s are a great example: Medicare, Medicaid, Voting Rights Act, Civil Rights Act, cutting poverty in half, Head Start, the National Teacher Corps, hundreds of billions in student college aid, PBS and NPR, Air Quality Act, Water Quality Act, Wilderness Act, National Trails System Act, creating the Cabinet-level Department of Housing and Urban Development, Community Action Agencies, Consumer Product Safety Commission, Child Safety Act, mandating warning labels on cigarettes, the Immigration Act that ended race-based immigration quotas, food stamps, and massive investments in public schools and hospitals... among other things.

In the 1970s, Jimmy Carter followed up by creating the Department of Energy and passing energy programs that would have moved 20 percent of America's electricity generation to solar by 2000 (it was ended by Reagan), establishing the Department of Education, massively expanding Head Start, passing major laws to regulate coal mining and make it safer, forcing polluters to clean up superfund sites, and doubling our public lands in Alaska. Not to mention winning the Nobel Prize for working out a peace deal between Egypt and Israel that holds to this day.

Before the 1980s, Western Europe and other democracies saw similar expansions of people-based government programs. But nearly all of it came to a screeching halt—and much was even reversed—with the neoliberal Thatcher and Reagan Revolutions.

Today's standard-bearers for neoliberalism are the Republicans (and a few corporate-owned Democrats), and, as Americans figure out that the probability today of legislation passing that's supported by the majority of Americans is today equivalent to random chance, they're revolting.

And the oligarch billionaires have been waiting for just this moment, funding massive voter suppression, right-wing media, politicians who tell us that up is down, and efforts to keep their colleague, billionaire Donald Trump, in office. While the outreach to "very fine people" in the neo-Nazi and white supremacist movements is a bit less visible, it's there, too.

So long as the governments of America and other countries are captives of oligarchs and big corporations, and hang onto anti-worker, anti-middle-class neoliberal policies, citizens will continue to drift toward hard-right "populist" politicians.

Democracies will only begin to revive when we reverse the Reagan Revolution and return to the classical economic and political systems that existed in the Western world before the neoliberal 1980s.

And if that reversal doesn't happen soon, the trend toward autocratic oligarchy will continue to speed up. As Foa and Mounk note in the conclusion of their research paper, “[W]hat was once unthinkable should no longer be considered outside the realm of possibility.”