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THE FUTURE OF GLOBAL PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION IN THE AGE OF DEMOCRATIC BACKSLIDING

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Abstract

It is ironic that democracy is considered the best institutional arrangement for governing when citizens and their leaders alike accept the rule of law, yet this very system also allows for resistance and disagreement. Indeed, across the globe some (populist) leaders have used democracy's instruments to undermine its very foundations. In this policy brief, democratic backsliding is discussed as a function of a lack of education in civics. It is clear that laws and a constitution cannot defend themselves, and that citizens and their leaders cannot be relied upon as guardrails against populists hijacking the political system for their own gain. The only infallible guardrail is bureaucracy, provided that staffing is on a meritorious basis. Should bureaucracy be populated by loyalists to a regime, democratic backsliding prevails. The study of public administration has never been more important, for it educates the next generation of citizens and career civil servants.

Good government never depends upon laws, but upon the personal qualities of those who govern. The machinery of government is always subordinate to the will of those who administer that machinery. The most important element of government, therefore, is the method of choosing leaders. (Herbert, 2020, p.171)

Introduction

At a conference of the American Society for Public Administration held in the 1990s, Gerald Caiden and I discussed the possibility of a globalizing public administration. He was thinking specifically of a study of public administration that would truly become global. That is, a study of government as a global phenomenon that uses a truly global "language" of theories and concepts. I countered that a global study of public administration was not possible given the differences in governing systems, administrative systems, policies, and (political-administrative) cultures across the globe. Indeed, if anything, the study of public administration is firmly embedded in many countries, with scholars focusing on the challenges, needs, and problems in their own context rather than the development of (global) theory. The study of public administration is thriving in many countries. I have witnessed it in Brazil, Chile, China, Japan, South Africa, South Korea, and now Egypt. However, scholars in those countries are often more focused on addressing and (re)solving local and national issues than on contributing to theory (on South Korea resp. South Africa, see Raadschelders, 2009, 2020b). To advocate for scholarly nationalism is redundant (Roberts, 2022).

Despite my response to Caiden, I set out to write a "global public administration" (Raadschelders, 2003). Colleagues in Western Europe told me that my book was too "American;" my American colleagues told me it was too "European." And, I confess, that book was very Western-oriented. I made another attempt at writing a global public administration with my colleague Vigoda-Gadot, and we agreed that in terms of structure, governments converge on the necessity of external territorial borders and internally layered jurisdictions with bureaucracies.

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We found that this structuring of territory and organization could be described from a birds-eye perspective. In terms of functioning (i.e., decision-, law-, and policymaking, as well as political-administrative systems and relations), however, it was clear that variations between countries were substantial, and that required us to "dip down" and look at the realities on the ground from a frog's perspective (Raadschelders et al., 2015). For the second half of this book, we decided to present public policy and administration cases from 33 countries, with all continents covered, as well as two American states and the United Nations.

This policy brief addresses the topic of public administration's future in the context of democratic backsliding, including in the United States, in seven steps. I first discuss this trend of structural institutional arrangements converging while differences in functioning remain unchanged. Over the course of history, various types of polities existed, but there is only one that survives to this day: the territorial state. While some argue that the state has been hollowed out, it is still the only actor that has the authority to make binding decisions for all people subject to its jurisdiction (section two). Next, I consider the nature of globalization (section three) and the nature of democracy (section four). These four sections provide the context within which a conceptual framework of democracy's guardrails (section five) and thoughts can be developed. And this framework can then be applied to analyze the position and role of the study of public administration in a stressed democracy (section six). In the conclusion, I argue that people can only choose between democracy and autocracy. Kakistocracy [1] should be avoided like the plague (section seven).

Homogenous Structures and Functional Differences in Governing Styles and Content

For most of our species' existence on Earth, people lived nomadic lives in small groups of 30 to 50 members. People started to combine nomadic and sedentary lifestyles some 10,000 to 12,000 years ago. Population size was still small, that is, people lived in physical communities of up to a few hundred members. People knew one another on a personal basis. Social control required no formal institutional arrangement. People knew who to go to for food, for protection, for any kind of help, or for mediation in case of conflict between band members. In these prehistoric times when we lived as semi-sedentary cavepeople, there was very little formal social stratification. Our ancestors knew they could survive only by working together and relying upon one another.

As mastery over the domestication of plants (grains) and animals (livestock) increased and people were able to produce more than was needed for immediate sustenance, they started living in imagined communities. In these imagined communities, people no longer knew one another directly and needed some kind of framework to help them manage their interactions as well as assure order and safety. Formal institutional arrangements for governing imagined communities of people emerged when it became clear that one could no longer rely on fellow human beings based solely on interpersonal relations.

Human settlements grew, and about 6,000 years ago the first city-states emerged with more or less clear boundaries. From this point on, people began experimenting with various types of territorial polities: city-states, counties, duchies, principalities, kingdoms, and empires. The larger the jurisdiction, the more subnational jurisdictions were created (e.g., province, municipality, township). Imagine the landmasses of the globe being very sparsely populated with small concentrations of people amidst enormous expanses of unoccupied land. Humanity's imprint on our planet's landmass expanded when people migrated from Africa and the Middle East to other parts of the globe. Slowly but surely, all land on Earth became part of a jurisdiction. In the early Holocene and Antiquity, there were likely thousands of human settlements (i.e., not only nomadic bands) around the globe. Over time, these settlements coalesced into larger entities. The process of incorporating all land into "administered space" was completed sometime in the middle of the twentieth century (Scott, 2009).

All countries have structured their territories and organizations in similar ways. They have divided their territory into jurisdictions from the local up to the national level. Organizationally, bureaucracies largely replaced the collegial organizations, which oversaw various administrative duties. [2] The territorial state, however small or large, is the only type of political system left that has clear domestic and international standing. It should be acknowledged that certain polities internal to the territorial state, such as indigenous groups, may enjoy some degree of sovereignty, but these polities do not have the same position and role as the state in the domestic and international arenas.

[1] From the Greek 'kakistos', meaning 'worst.'

[2] Collegial organizations are those in which a college or body of people fulfil one task or job (think of Rembrandt's *The Sampling Officials*, or the "fathers" and "mothers" of local public orphanage). Nowadays, only legislatures and a handful of other bodies (e.g. the US Supreme Court) are structured as colleges.

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How polities within the state operate varies, and the comparative public administration literature is full of examples concerning the interaction between, for example, elected officeholders and career civil servants, different styles of intergovernmental interactions, and different styles of decision- and policymaking. Policies concerning similar issues may be, and often are, dealt with in different ways befitting the societal and organizational culture of a country. Even in countries that are considered to belong to one administrative tradition (e.g., Germanic, Napoleonic, or Islamic), the differences between, for instance, health policies, education policies, or public transport policies, for example, can be substantial.

The State as Prime Actor: Hollowed Out, Repatrimonialized?

It is impossible to predict the future, yet some observers (whether scholars or social commentators) believe the state has been "hollowed out" from above by supranational and intergovernmental organizations, from below by local governments and regional jurisdictions entertaining direct relations with sovereign countries, and sideways through the increased influence of internal and external societal actors. To varying degrees, countries have also deregulated, contracted out, and even privatized a variety of services. It is true, that the position and role of the state is always in flux, but that does not mean that (a) the state abrogates its legal responsibilities or (b) that it is no longer the only societal actor invested with the authority to act upon the interests of its sovereign people.

Obviously, the latter obligation of the state is more important in democracies. In this context, it is also important to ask for the evidence that a hollowing out has taken place. We cannot simply rely on statements about it and must keep in mind that the development of the state and government in society is an extremely complex phenomenon that can only be understood when considering a multitude of factors.

More insidious than the hollowing out of the state is the possibility of the state and the government being repatrimonialized. This claim was made by Francis Fukuyama in his monumental two-volume study of political order through time (2014, p. 28). For much of history, the state and government were treated as if they were "patrimony," meaning property inherited from a parent or passed on via relational ties. With the emergence of democracy, the people elected and appointed in state and government positions were increasingly enveloped in a rule-of-law framework. Is the right-wing swing in many democracies evidence of that state being increasingly captured by powerful elites? When trying to answer that question we must consider Adam Smith's warning against the "tribes of monopoly," meaning business interests seeking favors from a legislative body, and Robert Michels "iron law of oligarchy." In other words, wealthy and powerful elites have always exercised influence and flexed their muscles. There is no empirical evidence yet of repatrimonialization in Western democracies. However, under the second Trump administration in the US, it appears that efforts are being made to restructure the country's federal government as a patrimonial system. At the time of writing, it is entirely unclear for how long the Republican majorities in the House of Representatives and the Senate will allow non-elected and non-career civil servants, such as Elon Musk, to access private data.

Globalization is somewhat Cultural, not at all Biological

Homo Sapiens has been around for some 200,000 to 300,000 years. As a species, we have always been quite conflicted in our psychological and behavioral make-up. I am not at all convinced that we are reaching an age of global citizenship, as anthropologist Joseph Henrich claimed (2016, p.318). I am also not at all convinced that that nation-state no longer "drives" and that wars are becoming less and less profitable, as archaeologist Robert Kelly believes (2016, p. 6, 112). Biologically and psychologically, we are still a human animal that was perfectly suited for living a nomadic life in small groups sheltering in caves. Humanity's cultural evolution over the past 12,000 years has far outpaced biological and psychological development. Globalization is real, and it is manifest in the structuring of public territory in layered jurisdictions and bureaucratic organization, in technology, in the increasing interdependence of countries' economies and global financial markets, in the pursuit of defense through intergovernmental military alliances, in the growth of English as the lingua franca in the public and private sectors, and in communication via social media and other channels. Regarding social media, the "width of social time" has decreased from days and weeks to mere seconds. That is, people thousands of miles apart can communicate within seconds.

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Do people "communicate" over social media or are these interactions nothing more than a shallow exchange of clicks on "like" and "love" icons? As argued above, I do not think the state is hollowing out. But what may be hollowing out is a society based on caring and sharing, on face-to-face interaction, and on thoughtful debate. Corinne Gibbs has argued that in the past, "hidden hierarchies" in different fields, such as journalism, law, higher education, medicine, and politics, worked to filter out extremist opinions (Stillman, 2017, p.920). Since the advent of social media, however, anyone can post anything and do so with great intensity and fierceness. This has never been possible before. Could it be that social media is driving us apart?

We have also experienced a globalization of challenges and issues that individual countries can no longer manage alone. Such issues include global warming, pollution, waste management, the emergence of artificial intelligence (which requires international regulation), mass migration, international terrorism, human trafficking, and so on and so forth.

Despite such evidence of globalization, we cannot lose sight of the fact that there are considerable differences not only between countries but also within them. Wilson (1993) reminds us that the human animal is still trying to catch up to living in a world that is more complex than that of our prehistoric ancestors. Whether humans will succeed in this endeavor depends upon the ability of citizens and their leaders to transcend territorial interests and, in the case of autocrats, kakistocrats, and kleptocrats, personal interests. While I am an optimist by nature, I do not see this success on the horizon because many people cannot or do not want to rise beyond their national and personal interests. But then, the future is difficult to predict.

Democracy: Rule of Law or Rule by the Mob?

In this section, two understandings of democracy are discussed. Plato regarded democracy as the perversion of the polis, or rule by the mob. Some observers in the US suggest that this is exactly what we have now with Trump 2.0. However, the current situation in the country is not really rule by the mob, but rule by decree, with support from the mob. Using the word "mob" in this context suggests a somewhat elitist evaluation and perception on my part, akin to Hillary Clinton's use of "deplorables" during her 2016 presidential campaign. However, many people lack a strong education on the position and role of citizens and their government in a democracy. These people do not know how to focus their political choices on the issues that are important to them and instead simply follow their "gut." The public is not stupid. People have just not been informed about the position and role of citizens and their government in a democracy, nor have they learned about the "stamps, flags, and coins," meaning the description of the structure, of democratic government. What it means to be a citizen in a democracy, rather than a subject in an autocracy, has seldom – if ever – been part of K-12 and higher education curricula in the US. The "stamps, flags, and coins" were taught in secondary schools up to the 1970s. This has stopped in many countries for reasons unknown. But the result has been that many people lack education about citizenship and the structure and functioning of government. This level of citizen illiteracy can – at least in part – be blamed for the proliferation of extreme right-wing parties and support for them.

Democracy in its contemporary meaning is understood as rule by, for, and with the people (cf. Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg Address) under the law. In a true democracy in which the rule of law is respected, no one is above the law. Right-wing extremists in numerous Western democracies flame the emotions and fears of many without providing evidence to support many of the arguments that they champion about, for example, migrants taking away jobs from citizens, turning "our" country into something "we" no longer recognize, or committing dangerous crimes against citizens. Modern large-scale democracy, first attempted by the US Founding Fathers, has survived various shocks in all countries that have embraced it. Have we now begun to retreat into a pre-modern, patrimonial style of governance? It is too early to tell, but I place my trust in the multi-party systems of most continental European countries in which it is almost impossible for one party to gain an absolute majority.

The story may be different in two-party systems, such as that of the US, which is now experiencing the greatest challenge yet to its democracy. Perhaps this challenge is possible because, in general, the institutional arrangements of democracy have the possibility of resistance and disagreement baked in (Rice, 2017).

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That leaves the leaders among the people. Democracy can thrive only when these leaders subject themselves to the rule of law and transcend their personal interests. The possibility that "constitutional democracies are being deliberately highjacked by a set of legally clever autocrats [using] constitutionalism and democracy to destroy both" (Scheppele, 2018, p.547) likely did not enter the minds of many people half a century ago.There are certain defining features of the US which have introduced challenges to the durability of its democracy over time:

America was formed […] not only without a state, but with a hodgepodge of competing beliefs, doctrines, principles, myths, and postulates, often in conflict with one another that make fitting in any stable administrative state at a later date difficult at best and most likely an impossibility. Taken together, these elements serve to continuously pulverize administrative effectiveness and to negate possibilities for any consistent administrative design (Stillman, 1999, p. 33).

When government operates under the rule of law, lawmakers are expected to carefully balance the needs of efficiency, effectiveness, and economy on the one hand with those of fairness, equity, due process, and justice on the other. Furthermore, lawmakers should not only focus on administrative reforms but also have the courage to engage in reforms of the political system. That element, the possibility of reforming the political system, is also possible only in a democracy. It is easy to come up with ideas for reforming the administrative system, and political officeholders are always quick to point to bureaucracy's "failings" rather than to their own shortcomings. Additionally, officeholders are not very considerate of the historical circumstances that have shaped the political-administrative system in which they operate. There is no shortage of ideas (cf. Burgat, 2025), there is just lack of courage.

Democratic Backsliding and Bureaucracy: A Conceptual Framework

The optimism felt and written about in the late 1980s and 1990s concerning the inevitability of democracy began to wane in the late 1990s. In Western Europe, state-making happened from the Middle Ages on, nation-building was an eighteenth and nineteenth century effort, and democratization is something that emerged in the nineteenth century and became population-encompassing in the twentieth. Bureaucracy preceded democracy by centuries in Western Europe, while in the US, democracy preceded bureaucracy by at least a century (Nelson, 1982).

A case has been made (Berman, 2021, p.391) that state-making, nation-building, and democracy expansion best work in this sequence: first a state with a bureaucracy is built, then a national identity is developed (Fisch, 2008), and finally, the franchise is expanded.

The challenge of managing state-making, nation-building, and democratization simultaneously is highly difficult, as many emerging democracies in central and eastern Europe and the developing world have experienced since the late twentieth century (Berman, 2021, p.383, 394). In fact, in various countries, efforts have been made by extreme right or left political officeholders to challenge democracy to the point that scholars have expressed deep concern about its future and have begun to speak of democratic backsliding (Yesilkagit et al., 2024; see also Bozeman et al., 2024, and Koliba, 2025).

Undoubtedly, there are multiple ways in which democratic backsliding can be evaluated, but I suggest a simple conceptual framework that consists of four guardrails protecting, as Liu and Hanauer (2011) called it, the "garden of democracy." These guardrails are as follows: a) a constitution document providing an overarching public institutional arrangement; b) laws and regulations which either are prescribed by the constitution or written within the framework of the constitution; c) public institutions and organizations populated by elected and appointed public servants (non-uniformed and uniformed); and d) the people electing leaders who are able to transcend personal interests.

Of these four guardrails, the constitution and the laws and regulations cannot defend themselves. Ideally, public institutions and organizations should be structured in a way that allows for checks and balances between the three branches of power (legislative, executive, judiciary) as well as various government departments and agencies. The quality of the work these institutions and organizations do depends solely upon the extent to which those who work within them accept the rule of law. That leaves the people and their leaders to protect the garden of democracy. The people as collective sovereign are not a reliable guardrail, simply because many people are ill-informed about the extent to which their lives and lifestyles are dependent upon certain public services and regulations. The extent of government's penetration into all aspects of life and society (Skowronek et al., 2022, p. 4) is very much under-appreciated and ill-understood.

The Position and Role of Public Administration when Democracy is under Pressure

People have lived in socially stratified, sedentary, imagined communities for almost 6,000 years (unless indicated otherwise, this section is based on Raadschelders, 2020a). The elites governed, and people were subjects. The non-elites in government worked in low-level jobs, often as day laborers or seasonal workers. Most public positions were filled based on nepotism and patronage. Mid- and upper-level positions could be sold to the highest bidder and even inherited. Government was by and for the elites, and members of the bureaucracy served the interests of these elites rather than the people. No wonder people distrusted those in power and the bureaucracy. I know of no stereotypes of bureaucrats in these pre-modern times, but they must have existed.

This situation changed fundamentally in the decades surrounding the American and French revolutions. Countries drafted constitutions and separated politics and administration, the public and the private, the church and the state, and the office from the office holder constitutions. In particular, the separation of politics and administration is of vital importance for the emergence of a merit-based rather than a kinship- or friendship-based bureaucracy. Already in the early nineteenth century, Hegel (1991 [1820]) convincingly argued for a neutral and content-competent career civil service; Weber argued along similar lines.

Unlike Hegel, Weber lived at a time of unprecedented growth in the size of the bureaucratic workforce, and this change made him apprehensive about the possibility that bureaucracy would overwhelm democracy. Old stereotypes about lazy, pencil-pushing, officious, and self-centered bureaucrats interested only in their own careers are present in Kafka's novels and in Erik Satie's Sonatine Bureaucratique. And these images have not died. Just look at Ian Norbury's wood sculptures carved in the early twenty-first century. The Bureaucrat is the image of a court jester, while Red Tape serves as metaphor of bureaucracy, with people wrapped in tape. And then there is the 2016 book by Don Kettl on Jurassic government, with the title suggesting that government is a Leviathan. In fairness to Kettl, he presents a very positive view of government (2016, p.5) and argues that ideologues have fueled the distrust in government that has grown since the 1980s in many democracies (2016, p.10). How easy it is to blame the career civil service for what goes wrong in society. This perception of bureaucracy is rampant in the US and its in-bred distrust of government (Wills, 1999).

However, and in contrast to these stereotypical images, the career civil service in established democracies has been very responsive to societal needs and trends prompted by industrialization, rapid urbanization, and unprecedented population growth. It is career civil servants who have developed solutions which have then been supported by the political elites. Beginning in the 1880s, career civil servants developed the public administration curricula needed to educate and train a new generation of civil servants to deal with multiple and varied demands for support. These civil servants were so successful because they had vision and were appointed based on relevant educational and experiential background, or merit. A meritorious civil service guarantees high-quality policymaking and service delivery because it contains substantive expertise, and members have taken an oath to the constitution or office. This oath and expertise, rather the partisan loyalty, drives their work.

Despite the successes of government in managing many complex and collective challenges, the stereotype of inefficient bureaucracy remains. The extent to which this perception reigns across democracies is unclear, but it certainly is deeply engrained in US culture. Could it be because the historical experience of an oppressive British bureaucracy during colonial times is so engrained in the American collective memory? Or could it be that it is easier to think in stereotypes than to be nuanced? A case can be made for more bureaucracy (Meier, 1997) even when recognizing that career civil servants can and have made mistakes (Podger & Kettl, 2024). But let us not generalize these mistakes to the point that we perceive all members of the bureaucracy as making mistakes all the time. In fact, the contrary is the case. It is just not reported because it is boring and lacks sensation. Also, bureaucracies have ways of assuring that political decisions are within the boundaries of the law (O'Leary, 2006) and that political desires can be thwarted by elected officials and uniformed and non-uniformed career civil servants (Wu, 2020). As suggested in the introduction of this section, it is bureaucracy that is the final guardrail standing against the current wave of populism. Bureaucracies still develop policies, deliver services, and execute tasks daily without prejudice.

Why can bureaucracy be the only guardrail left? First, people like to have the services governments provide, and these services are visible especially at the local level. Second, people also like the predictability of entitlements that have been established by law, such as social security and unemployment insurance. Third, people may complain about government, but when probed, they profess to be disenchanted primarily with political leadership. People, often intuitively, feel that political leaders manipulate truth and information, but they also recognize the need for social workers, police officers, firefighters, judges, schoolteachers, soldiers, city planners, water engineers, and other workers providing essential public services. Fourth, and perhaps most important, bureaucracy is very much a pluralist institution populated with expert civil servants of all political, religious, and educational stripes (Hammarén, 2020). In the vast universe of public organizations, career civil servants can and do hold each other accountable. Meanwhile, since the 1980s, the attention of political officeholders has been very much on controlling the bureaucracy (Dahlström & Lapuente, 2017, p. 202) through "agencification," a process by which political appointees are placed at the top of bureaucracies, work is contracted out, and loyalty to the top executive is valued over expertise and merit (see Peci, 2021 on Brazil's Bolsonaro; Morelli, 2021 and Sasso & Morelli, 2021, as well as Bellodi et al. on Italian mayors; see Ventriss et al., 2019 on contracting in the US). These instruments of agencification may not be very effective for controlling bureaucracy, especially when loyalty or patronage appointments slow down economic development (Halligan, 2021), increase the chances of corruption (Dalhström & Lapuente, 2017, p. 127), or undermine the standing of government at large. There are many conditions under which people in societies enjoy social mobility and a good quality of life, but having a good government is essential, as political economist avant-la-lettre Antonio Serra recognized as early as 1613 (Raadschelders, 2022).

Undermining or even abolishing a meritorious civil service is among the most harmful thing populists can do to democracy (Raadschelders & Sanders, 2024, 2025). It is by virtue of its size, expertise, and loyalty to the rule of law that bureaucracy can – and so far has been able to –stem the tide of democratic backsliding (Yesilkaget et al., 2024).

A second action that populists, such as Trump and Musk, take involves attacking independent regulatory agencies that were established to serve as a check on business practices (e.g., the Securities and Exchange Commission) and assure free and fair elections (e.g., the Federal Election Commission) (Mystal, 2025).

But this is not enough for populists. Legislators may also find cause to attack the "leftist" universities that advocate for freedom of thought. And there is one political scientist who targets the study of public administration that, in his view, has "miseducated bureaucrats" over the last century. This scholar equates professors of public administration to the Jacobins of the French Revolution (Gilley 2025)!

Instead of blindly attacking bureaucracy by playing on people's prejudices, political officeholders could consider taking a different tack. Instead of attacking bureaucracy based on simplistic stereotypes, they could use managerial instruments, such as strategic planning, quality management systems, and management of objectives and results, as alternative channels of control (Bach et al., 2020, p.17). Political officeholders could also have the courage to consider reforming the political arena to assure a fairer democracy. In the US, this could involve actions such as reallocating voting districts in a fair way, reducing the role of money in political campaigns, introducing stricter ethics rules for legislators and judges/justices, curbing lobbyism, introducing automatic voter registration, and making election day a holiday (Klaas, 2017, p.252; Burgat, 2025).When political officeholders challenge or ignore the rule of law, the door is wide open for a government of the incompetent in which the worst, the least qualified, and the most unscrupulous actors have power. Countries have been run as kakistocracies throughout history. There are many countries where this type of rule is common, and the will of the people is trampled upon. Examples include Russia under Yeltsin and Putin, the Philippines under Duterte and many more across the world (Rice, 2017, p.349; Scheppele, 2018, p.553).

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When analyzing political systems, we can simply use Plato's contrast of good and perverted types. The table below contrasts the unitary and republican types of administration.

Table 1. Two Types of Administration

	Unitary	Republican
Design	Hierarchical	Insulated
Executive power	Personal	Collaborative
Authority	Direct	Mediated
Constitutional disposition	Formalistic	Pragmatic
Outlook on depth	Encumbrance	Asset
Legitimacy	Plebiscitary	Prudential
Principal liability	Arbitrary imposition	Bureaucratic subversion

Source: Skowronek et al., 2022, p.61.

Readers can recognize that the above descriptions are ideal types that, in Platoist fashion, can take both positive and perverted forms. Under the theory of a unitary executive, the chief executive rules by top-down decree based on personal beliefs and arbitrarily imposes decisions upon bureaucratic departments and agencies. The legitimacy of this type of rule very much depends upon people acting as subjects and followers. In the republican type, bureaucracies operate as somewhat insulated from political control, and they collaborate with nonprofit and private actors to develop policy (cf. Durant, 2020), regulation, and service. The legitimacy of republican government can be challenged when bureaucracies disregard political direction and are intentionally unclear about their intentions and responsibilities. So far, the civil servants that comprise bureaucracies have acted as the final guardrail of democracy because most of these personnel are meritoriously selected.

Concluding Remarks: Democracy or Autocracy, not Kakistocracy and Kleptocracy

We may believe that democracy is, in the words of Abraham Lincoln, a government of, for, and by the people, but as Adam Smith and Robert Michels have pointed out, wealth and power have always been concentrated in the hands of the few. Michels' contemporary, Max Weber, believed that an elite-dominated democracy (Best & Higley, 2010, p.1), essentially a leader-democracy in the image of Plato's philosopher king, is the most one could hope for. The economist Joseph Schumpeter conceives "thin" democracy as an institutional arrangement that combines time-limited mandates to govern set by the people with governance by elites and leaders who accept the rule of law and think about and act upon the common good (Best & Higley, p. 2).

Schumpeter prefers this arrangement over a "thick" democracy which not only embraces the rule of law, but also protects minorities, advances civil liberties, respects due process, operates with institutional checks on power, has elected civilians controlling the military, and accepts a pluralistic civil society. Perhaps this idea of a "thick" democracy has become utopian, as some people suffer from xenophobia and struggle to accept that civil society in many countries is multi-ethnic and pluralistic.

It is this "thick" conception of democracy that I had as a teenager and took for granted growing up.

Now I recognize that the guardrails around the garden of democracy can easily crumble or even be demolished by a few power- and money-hungry elites while, at least in the case of the US, many elected officeholders and the people look on from the sidelines, waiting to see how far these elites are willing to go. Hence, perhaps a "thin" democracy is preferable to autocracy. But then again, whether "thin" or "thick", democracy depends upon everyone – people and leaders – accepting the rule of law.

Just as we should examine the historical circumstances that existed when the political-administrative system was established (see above), we should also recognize that "democratic backsliding" is not a phenomenon only of the past ten years or so. It started decades ago in many countries as people began losing trust in public institutions. Also, backsliding and crumbling have occurred throughout history. Alexis de Tocqueville was correct in his observation that the French Revolution could only have happened because the ancien régime had been hollowed out for decades and possibly longer (as mentioned in Scheppele, 2018, p.569).

People can quibble about when democracy's "illness" began and what caused it, but this illness is characterized by "radical political polarization, […] increasingly bad electoral choice, the inability of party systems to handle shifts in voter preferences, the resistance of economic policy to the rotations of ordinary elections, political fallout from traumatic economic shocks, the politicization of the judiciary, [and] corrupt agreements among political elites…" (Scheppele, 2018, pp.579-580). However, keep in mind that "democratic backsliding" is only possible when the people allow it to happen. What the people can do in the short term is not clear, but the "water and pain have to rise beyond the eyeballs" before they rise up.

However, there is one action that should be taken but is very difficult, and another that could be easy to implement. What will prove difficult, if not impossible, is forcing elected officeholders to take a long hard look at how they (via redistricting, voting access laws, and other actions) and private corporations (via unrestricted campaign contributions) manipulate the political system and then identify ways to constrain this behavior. It is easier, and just as important, to reinforce the civic education of the people. The basic understanding of civics has dropped significantly in the US (SDOI, 2024; USCCF, 2024) and around the globe (Raadschelders & Chitiga, 2021; Sparks, 2023). Such education not only includes attention to the "stamps, flags, and coins" of democracy or the checks and balances between branches of government. Civic education also includes an emphasis on the position and role of citizens and democracy in society, and for, pace Scheppele (2018, p. 583), the importance of the rule of law. Civics education can be improved by, for instance, making the curriculum developed by the Educating for American Democracy (EAD, 2021) project mandatory in K-12 schools in the country. Similar programs can be introduced in any democracy.

We should avoid kakistocracy and kleptocracy like the plague but must ask ourselves: if "thick" democracy is difficult and "thin" democracy is somewhat difficult, since both depend on a combination of altruistically inclined leaders and a majority of the people understanding the rights and duties that come with citizenship, what is the alternative? Both leaders and the people must accept the rule of law. If they do not, will they turn to autocracy or worse? How long will they accept kakistocracy and kleptocracy? It remains to be seen.

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