CAN DEMOCRACY SAVE ITSELF?

Over the past two centuries, the spread of democracy has been driven by the forces of modernization:

- Urbanization and industrialization—people began working together in factories.
- Allowed them to communicate and organize.
- Economic growth made them healthier and wealthier.
- Security led them to place more emphasis on intangible values such as freedom of expression, making them more likely to want democracy.
- Economic growth—more education, more articulate, skilled at organizing, effective in pushing for democracy.
- Industries matured, jobs shifted from manufacturing to knowledge sectors. Less routine, more independence. Workers had to think for themselves. Spilled over into political behavior.
- Democracy has a major advantage over other political systems: it provides a nonviolent way to replace a country’s leaders.
- It enables people to choose their leaders so it reduces the need for repressive rule.
- These advantages have helped democracy survive and spread.

The shifts between democracy and authoritarianism can be explained by the extent to which people feel that their existence is secure. In rich countries, many people after WWII grew up taking their survival for granted thanks to
unprecedented economic growth, strong welfare states, and peace between the world’s major powers. That security led to an intergenerational shift in values, as many people no longer gave top priority to economic and physical security and no longer felt as great a need to conform to group norms. Instead, they emphasized individual free choice. That sparked radical cultural changes: the rise of antiwar movements, advances in racial and gender equality, and greater tolerance of the LGBTQ community and other traditional out-groups.

- Those shifts provoked a reaction among older people and those holding less secure positions in society who felt threatened by the erosion of familiar values.
- During the past three decades, that sense of alienation has been compounded by an influx of immigrants and refugees.
- All this dislocation has polarized modern societies.
- Since the 1970s, surveys in the US have revealed a split between “materialists,” who stress the need for security, and “post-materialists,” who take that security for granted and emphasize less tangible values.
- This cleavage has had a major influence on voting patterns, dwarfing the effects of other demographic traits, such as social class.
- The split became a canyon when Trump, an openly racist, sexist, authoritarian, and xenophobic candidate ran against Hillary Clinton, a cosmopolitan liberal. Materialists were 3.8 times as likely to vote for Trump as they were for Clinton, and post-materialists were a
stunning 14.3 times more likely to vote for Clinton than Trump.

Researchers disagree on many issues about weakening democracy, but one point draws almost unanimous acceptance: extreme inequality is incompatible with democracy. It is not surprising that the rise in support for authoritarian parties over the last three decades roughly parallels the rise in inequality.

Although inequality in almost all developed countries has followed a U-shaped pattern, there are striking differences between them that reflect the effects of varying political systems.

- Sweden’s long-dominant Social Democrats introduced the advanced welfare state that is largely responsible for the country’s low inequality.
- Conversely, the neo-liberal policies of Reagan and Thatcher in the 1980s weakened labor unions and sharply cut back regulation, leading to higher levels of income inequalities.

Rising inequality and a stagnant working class are reflections of a society’s stage of development. The transition from an agrarian to an industrial economy creates a demand for large numbers of workers, increasing their bargaining power. Moving to a service economy has the opposite effect, undermining the power of organized labor as automation replaces humans. The first reduces the bargaining power of industrial workers and then, with the transition to a society
dominated by artificial intelligence, that of highly educated professionals.

The problems of cultural change and inequality in rich democracies are being compounded by the rise of automation, which threatens to create an economy in which almost all the gains go to the very top. The move toward artificial intelligence is not generating large numbers of secure, well-paid jobs. 

**Proposition:** Whether this latest democratic setback proves permanent will depend on whether societies address these problems, which will require government intervention.

- Unless new political coalitions emerge that represent the 99%, the economy will continue to hollow out and most people's economic security will continue to decline.
- The political stability and economic health of this society require greater emphasis on the redistributive policies that dominated much of the twentieth century.
- The social base of the New Deal coalition is gone, but the reappearance of extreme wealth concentrated in the top one per cent has created the potential for new coalitions.
- Moving toward a more progressive income tax becomes perfectly reasonable, but powerful conservative interests are moving the US in the opposite direction, sharply reducing taxes on the rich and cutting government spending.
• Government's top priority should be improving the quality of life for society as a whole, rather than maximizing corporate profits.
• Democracy has retreated before, only to recover, but today's retreat will be reversed only if we address the growing inequality of recent decades and manage a transition to the automated economy.
• If citizens can build political coalitions to reverse the trend toward inequality and preserve the possibility of widespread, meaningful employment, there is every reason to expect that democracy will resume its onward march.

Note: The transitions that have propelled the onward march of democracy include the rise of Progressivism circa: 1890–1916, the New Deal coalition circa: 1936–1968, and ?????