

## RECURRING DYNAMICS OF HISTORY (RDH)

### Teacher Information

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#### MODULE 1 (RDH1)

#### *"Democracy is Fragile: It Has Repeatedly Fallen to Authoritarian Rulers"*

**Suggested Grade levels:** secondary and post-secondary

**Suggested Courses:** ancient to modern world history - U.S. history - civics/government

**Instructional Materials:** This teaching module (RDH1) is available both as an online course and in a paper format (by printing the Student Response packet and the Background Information packets in this file.)

Instructors may wish to combine the two formats. Access both formats at [futurefocusedhistory.blog](http://futurefocusedhistory.blog).

#### **Overview:**

This learning module may be inserted into a relevant area of your existing course; for example, when studying Greece or Rome during ancient times, the rise of Nazi Germany in modern times, or present-day challenges to democracy. However, this module can stand alone; it does not require related instruction.

While this module is aimed at secondary and post-secondary instruction, creative elementary teachers may find age-appropriate ways to introduce the concept of democracy to younger students. (See \* below)

**Recurring Dynamics of History (RDH):** Let students know at the outset that they will be studying a Recurring Dynamic of History, but don't identify the dynamic just yet. Perhaps say something like this: "For the next few days, we will be studying an important Recurring Dynamic of History, which is a pattern that has repeated multiple times over the course of human history, a pattern that can help us better understand how the world works and how humans behave. But I'm not going to tell you what that pattern is right now. See if you can figure it out as we go along."

**Important:** Reveal the identity of the recurring dynamic ("Democracy is fragile...") only after students have developed their own version in Activity 3. In your class discussion following Activity 3, reveal the title of this learning module, and ask students if they think this Recurring Dynamic of History is valid. In a later exercise, students will be asked to compare the official RDH to their own version.

**Organization:** This module consists of six activities and an End-of-Module Quiz. Activities have two parts: a background information section and a student response section titled "Check Your Understanding." The paper version organizes the two sections into separate "packets" available below. The online version integrates the two sections within each activity. Some instructors may choose to use printed answer sheets from the Student Response packet in conjunction with the online version.

#### **Activities:**

1. Prediction about democracy in ancient Greece, one page.  
(If studying ancient Greece or Rome in your course, this activity should be presented first.)
  2. Defining terms: democracy versus authoritarian rule, two pages.
  3. A brief history of democracy, three pages.
  4. The political spectrum from far left to far right, two pages.
  5. America divided, two pages.
  6. Future of American democracy (concludes with a discussion similar to a debate), five pages.
- End-of-Module Quiz, two pages (to obtain the quiz, see instructions below).

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\*A primary teacher might, for example, contrast the difference between (a) "the freedom to choose" and (b) being "told what do," as when a group of students chooses which game to play at recess or lunch, as opposed to being told which game to play by an adult. After the class has considered the concept of *government*, the teacher might explain, "Our country's government is called a *democracy*, and it's based on giving the people of our country the right to choose what they want to do." Discussion of the more complex subject of how this right is exercised through elections might need to wait until later elementary grades.

**Activity 6, the culminating activity**

The class is divided into three groups who will consider whether American democracy is likely to fall or survive in the near future: the Scenario 1 group, the Scenario 2 group (approximately 3 to 6 members each) and the Judges. Group members may be volunteers, assigned by the teacher, or names drawn from a hat. Remaining class members serve as Judges of the arguments. For more details about this activity, see Activity 6 Student Response, pages 14 and 15 below.

**End-of-Module Quiz:** Teachers may obtain a copy of the quiz, with answer key, by emailing: [contactsf@studentsfriend.com](mailto:contactsf@studentsfriend.com). Include your name, institution, and the phone number of your school office.

**About the paper version:**

Only in Activity 1 (prediction about ancient Greek democracy) are the background information and the student response combined onto one page.

Only the Student Response packet and End-of-Module Quiz are expendable. The Background Information packet may be reused from class to class to save resources.

Student Response packet: pages 4-11 below

Background Information packet: pages 12-18 below

**Module duration:** This learning module may take several days to complete, depending on the length and frequency of classes, and whether these learning activities will be interspersed with other elements from existing coursework.

**Learning Transfer:** Research has shown that learning is more likely to be retained in long-term memory and transferred to life beyond school when learning is "distributed" over an extended period of time. To this end, instructors may wish to intersperse learning from this module with other coursework. After Activity 3 has been completed (when students formulate their own Recurring Dynamic of History), instructors should frequently emphasize this module's key concepts and recurring dynamic, "Democracy is fragile..." in subsequent class discussions and in future unit and final exams and, ideally, in future social studies courses. The End-of-Module Quiz (see above) provides a quick reference to the module's key concepts.

**Instructional strategies:** These are some approaches the teacher may wish to consider.

Grading opportunities include:

- Student responses ("Check Your Understanding")
  - May be assigned as homework, or completed in class.
  - May be checked for completion only, or for correct answers.
- Exit tickets: see below
- End-of-module Quiz

Homework: Teachers might wish to assign the background readings and their corresponding student response sheets as homework, with the teacher checking at the beginning of class to see that homework was completed (and perhaps assigning a completion grade).

Class discussion: The class and the instructor review student answers from the student response sheets. One or more students may volunteer, or be called on, to offer their responses to open-ended questions.

The teacher uses this discussion time to clear up any student misconceptions or questions, and students use this opportunity to correct any incorrect answers on their student response sheets. This would be a good time for the instructor to present any supporting materials or lessons such as visuals, video clips, primary-source readings, artifacts, poetry, etc.

Key concepts: Working alone or in small groups, students identify (2 to 5) main ideas presented in the background reading and in today's discussion. Students write these key concepts on a sheet of notebook paper, which students will retain for the duration of the RDH1 module

Exit ticket: The instructor may require each student to submit an "exit ticket" at the end of class. The exit ticket consists of the answer to a question posed by the teacher relating to one of the key concepts discussed during today's class. Students may use their response sheet and today's notes to help them answer the exit-ticket question. Because students don't know which concept will be featured on the exit ticket, they would be wise to take good notes about all of them. (The exit ticket can serve as another opportunity to assign a student grade.)

### **Controversial subjects**

This learning module touches on current issues that might be considered controversial.

Research has shown that the study of controversial subjects in school can produce benefits including

- Deeper student understanding of the student's world
- Improved capacity to make thoughtful judgments and decisions
- Greater trust in society
- Greater political interest
- Greater political confidence<sup>1</sup>

Moreover, it is the fundamental mission of schooling to provide students with knowledge that can help them and society to function effectively in the future. Hardly any knowledge could be more relevant to the future than knowledge of our nation's system of government and the challenges it faces. Schooling has an ethical obligation to present truthful, evidence-based knowledge, even if this information doesn't always portray our nation or its historical figures in a favorable light.

Nonetheless, instructors may be faced with concerns about the content of this learning module. Here are a few questions that teachers may ask to help clarify concerns.

Is it appropriate for students to learn about America's democratic system of government?

Is it appropriate for students to learn about major challenges facing our system of government?

Is the information in this learning module based on verified, factual evidence?

Are America's two main political parties treated in an even-handed manner?

(Both Democrats and Republicans are identified as violating five norms of democracy each.)

If the answers to the above questions are "yes," is there sufficient reason to object to content in this learning module?

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### **More about Recurring Dynamics of History**

from Mike Maxwell

- [futurefocusedhistory.blog](http://futurefocusedhistory.blog)

- *Future-Focused History Teaching: Restoring the Power of Historical Learning*, (<https://amzn.to/3DnrczJ>)

- *The Student's Friend Concise World History: Parts 1 and 2*. (<https://amzn.to/3iJYeCd>)

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<sup>1</sup>Mary Soley, "If It's Controversial, Why Teach It?" *Social Education*, Vol. 60 Number 1, National Council for the Social Studies, <https://www.socialstudies.org/sites/default/files/publications/se/6001/600101.html>, 1996

**RECURRING DYNAMICS OF HISTORY (RDH)**

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**MODULE 1 (RDH1): Democracy**



**Student Response packet**

8 pages

Pages 4-11

Course \_\_\_\_\_

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

### Activity 1: PREDICTION ABOUT DEMOCRACY IN ANCIENT GREECE

We're traveling back in time...centuries back... before the time of our grandparents...before the middle ages...before the birth of Jesus...to ancient Greece in the year 435 BC, where we will meet two young people about your age. Damon is attending school and will later join the military. His sister Astra is learning how to read and run a household from her mother.

They live in Athens, a city-state that includes the city of Athens and surrounding territory. A city-state is like an independent country with its own government. Athens is a special place: It is the center of arts and learning in ancient Greece, and it has an unusual form of government.

Athens is a democracy, which means rule by the people. In Athens all male citizens can vote on new laws. This approach is very different from other ancient societies ruled by kings who wield absolute power over their people, and where the people are separated by class into a small group of the rich and a large group of the poor.

Damon and Astra are proud to be from Athens, where they have a comfortable home; and where they can enjoy feasts and celebrations; music and theater; a colorful marketplace featuring products from all over the known world; and lively debates in the town square about important issues of the day. Damon and Astra have lived their whole lives under Athenian democracy, and they expect it to last forever.

What does the future hold for Damon and Astra and their descendants? Which of the following two predictions do you think is most likely to come true: Prediction (A) or Prediction (B)?

#### **PREDICTION (A): Democracy will flourish**

Democracy will spread from Athens to other Greek city-states and become the dominant form of government in Greece throughout the remainder of the ancient period (about 900 more years). Democracy will expand from Greece to nearby regions including Rome, where it will continue in modified form—as a republic—down to the present day.

#### **PREDICTION (B): Democracy will fall**

Within a hundred years, a military strongman will conquer all Greek city-states, ending their independence and their democracies. Likewise, the Roman Republic will fall to a military strongman.

#### **Make your choice.**

Which prediction do you think will come true: Democracy will flourish in ancient Greece and Rome, or democracy will fall? In a few sentences, state the reason(s) for your choice. (Use back if needed.)

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Course \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

Name \_\_\_\_\_

1. Can a theocracy be an oligarchy? (circle one)    Yes    No

2. Can a monarchy be an autocracy?                      Yes    No

3. Can an autocracy be an oligarchy?                      Yes    No

4. What is the biggest difference between authoritarian rule and democratic rule?

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5. The government of the United States may best be described as (circle one):

direct democracy              representative democracy              It has elements of both.

6. What is the main difference between authoritarian government and totalitarian government?

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7. Which system of government is likely to provide the greatest personal freedoms to its people?

autocracy      representative democracy      oligarchy      totalitarian rule      authoritarian rule

8. In your opinion, which system appears to be the better form of government (it provides the greatest good for the greatest number of people): democracy or authoritarian rule? **Why?** (Use back if needed.)

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Course \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

Name \_\_\_\_\_

1. Did your prediction about the future of democracy in ancient Athens and Rome come true?

Yes      No

2. During which three major eras of world history have we seen the appearance of democratic forms of government?

a. \_\_\_\_\_

b. \_\_\_\_\_

c. \_\_\_\_\_

3. Please summarize how Russia recently lost its democracy.

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4. A "Recurring Dynamic of History" is an important pattern that has repeated multiple times over the course of history. Based on your knowledge of the history of democracy, compose your own, one- or two-sentence, recurring dynamic of history that describes a pattern repeated by democracies down through the ages. (Continue on the back if necessary.)

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Course \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

Name \_\_\_\_\_

1. Authoritarian governments tend to emerge from which part of the political spectrum?  
(Circle all that apply.)

far left          center          far right

2. Where on the left/right political spectrum do we traditionally find the two main political parties in the United States? (Circle all that apply.)

far left          center          far right

3. Which group favors limited government and is less likely to support new government programs to help disadvantaged Americans? (Circle all that apply.)

Republicans      Democrats      conservatives      liberals

4. Which group believes government can be a force for good and is more likely to support new government programs to help disadvantaged Americans? (Circle all that apply.)

Republicans      Democrats      conservatives      liberals

5. Which group is more likely to believe that all Americans should have access to good quality, affordable medical care? (Circle all that apply.)

Republicans      Democrats      conservatives      liberals

6. Which group is more likely to oppose raising the minimum wage for workers? (Circle all that apply.)

Republicans      Democrats      conservatives      liberals

7. Above the line on the political spectrum chart below, identify the general locations of authoritarian governments and democratic governments. Below the line, identify where we tend to find fascism and communism, liberals and conservatives, Republicans and Democrats.

**far left** \_\_\_\_\_ **center left** | **center right** \_\_\_\_\_ **far right**



Course \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

Name \_\_\_\_\_

1. The Background reading for Activity 5 identifies this Recurring Dynamic of History: "Democracy is fragile; it has repeatedly fallen to authoritarian rulers." Compare this Recurring Dynamic of History to the one you developed earlier, after you read about the history of democracy. (May use back if needed)

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2. Why might it be said that democracy is both fragile like an egg and strong like a rock? (May use back.)

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3. The Republican Party and the Democratic Party and their supporters have been moving farther apart in recent years. What is this movement called?

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4. What two changes in American society might have pushed the political tribes farther apart?

One \_\_\_\_\_

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Two \_\_\_\_\_

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Course \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

Name \_\_\_\_\_

1. (Fill in the blank.) Because the framers of the U.S. Constitution were unable to anticipate every procedure that would be necessary for operating a large democratic nation into the future, the proper functioning of American democracy depends on adhering to established \_\_\_\_\_ of democratic behavior developed over the years.

2. Which political party violated the norm that American presidents should serve no more than two terms in office? (Circle all that apply.)

Republicans      Democrats

3. Which political party violated the norm that presidents should not be impeached unless substantial support exists for the president's removal from office? (Circle all that apply.)

Democrats      Republicans

4. Which political party violated the norm that the Senate shall take under consideration a president's nomination to fill a vacancy in the U.S. Supreme Court? (Circle all that apply.)

Democrats      Republicans

5. (Complete the sentence.) Republican president Donald Trump was the first president in American history who refused to

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6. How do you think American democracy would be affected if future candidates for political office commonly refused to accept verified election results? Explain. (Use back if needed.)

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Course \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Which is your assigned discussion group? (Check one.)

\_\_\_ **Scenario 1 Group**: American democracy will fall.

\_\_\_ **Scenario 2 Group**: American democracy will prevail.

\_\_\_ **Judges** of the arguments (Try to base your judgments on the strength of the arguments,  
not on your feelings about the person doing the arguing.)

**BEFORE THE DISCUSSION:**

**Scenario 1 and 2 Groups:**

What are the two best arguments supporting your group's position?

Argument #1 \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Argument #2 \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

**Judges:**

What question do you want to ask the Scenario 1 group? \_\_\_\_\_

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What question to you want to ask the Scenario 2 group? \_\_\_\_\_

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\_\_\_\_\_

Course \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

Name \_\_\_\_\_

### AFTER THE DISCUSSION:

Which scenario do you believe is more likely to happen during the next decade or two? (Circle one.)

American democracy will fall.

American democracy will prevail.

On what did you base your judgment? Which arguments were the most persuasive?

Cite evidence from both history and recent events to support your opinion.

**RECURRING DYNAMICS OF HISTORY (RDH)**

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**MODULE 1 (RDH1): Democracy**

♦ ♦ ♦

**Background Information packet**

7 pages

Pages 12-18

## **Activity 2: DEFINING TERMS, Democracy versus Authoritarian Rule**

### **DEMOCRACY**

**Democracy** is a form of government in which supreme power lies with the people who exercise that power by voting in elections.

Essential elements of democracy include: Majority rule; all adults have equal rights under law including the right to vote in free, fair, and regular elections; the peaceful transfer of power to newly elected leaders following elections; freedom of speech; freedom of the press (news media); and freedom of peaceful assembly (the right to join groups to protest or to promote any lawful cause).

**Related term: Republic.** The term *republic* is often used interchangeably with the term *democracy*. In the United States, the two main political parties are called the Republicans and the Democrats (written with a capital R and a capital D). The term *republic* implies representative democracy, rather than direct democracy.

**Direct democracy:** The people exercise power directly as they did in ancient Athens where all citizens could vote on new laws. In the United States, citizens may participate in direct democracy when they vote in elections to approve or disapprove proposed state laws or state constitutional amendments.

**Representative democracy:** The people exercise power indirectly by electing representatives to make laws on behalf of the people. The United States is a representative democracy in which voters elect senators and representatives to represent the wishes of the voters at the national and state levels. The people also elect leaders for their local communities, including mayors, city council members, and county commissioners.

### **AUTHORITARIAN RULE**

**Authoritarian rule** is essentially the opposite of democracy. Under an authoritarian system, one person or a small group rules the country without approval from the people through elections. Freedoms such as freedom of religion, freedom of the press, freedom of speech, freedom of assembly, and the right to vote in free and fair elections are typically limited or eliminated under authoritarian rule.

**Related term: Totalitarian rule.** This term implies an extreme form of authoritarian government that exercises nearly total control over people's lives. Examples from history include the Soviet Union under Joseph Stalin and Nazi Germany under Adolph Hitler.

#### **Types of authoritarian rule:**

**Autocracy:** Power is concentrated in one person.

**Monarchy:** Supreme power lies with a hereditary monarch such as a king, queen, or emperor.

**Dictatorship:** One person takes control of government, often with help from the military.

**Oligarchy:** Rule by a small group of powerful people.

**Theocracy:** Rule by a religious leader or leaders.

### **Activity 3: A BRIEF HISTORY OF DEMOCRACY**

*(Here you can learn if your prediction about Damon and Astra's future in Athens came true.)*

As democracy was emerging in Athens around 500 BC, democratic ideas spread to other Greek city-states and to Rome, which established a republic with a law-making body called the senate.

Democracy in ancient Athens ended about 170 years after it began, when Philip of Macedon—a king from the mountainous Macedonia region of northern Greece—built a powerful military machine that conquered Athens and took control of all of Greece. Philip's son, Alexander the Great, extended the Macedonian empire all the way to India.

The Roman Republic lasted for more than 400 years until a successful general, Julius Caesar, marched his armies out of Gaul (present-day France). He seized control of Rome during a time of conflict and political violence when the republic was no longer functioning effectively. Caesar was declared dictator for life in 44 BC, and his successors took the title of emperor.

After the early democracies of Greece and Rome fell to authoritarian rulers during ancient times, democracy ceased to exist for over a thousand years. Then, during the late middle ages, several Italian city-states established independent republics, which adopted the democratic principles that political offices should be filled through elections, and that officials should hold office for a limited period. The independence of the Italian republics ended in the early 1500s when Italy fell under the authoritarian rule of a monarchy, the Hapsburg royal family.

Democracy went dark for another two-and-a-half centuries until American colonists rebelled against the English monarchy in 1776 and created the new nation of the United States, which established the first national democracy since ancient times. The young republic in America demonstrated that a modern nation could be ruled with democratic principles. The American Revolution inspired additional revolutions against ruling monarchies in France, South America, and Mexico, but functioning democracies were difficult to establish, and they often failed.

Democracy got a boost after World War I when defeated European empires were split into smaller countries that adopted democratic governments. However, the years between World War I and World War II proved to be a difficult time for democracies all over Europe as war was followed by the major economic downturn called the Great Depression. Most democracies of eastern and central Europe fell during this period. Fascist dictators replaced democratic governments in the major western European nations of Italy, Germany, and Spain.

From the ashes of World War II, two “superpowers” emerged as the world's most powerful nations: the democratic United States and the communist Soviet Union, each equipped with a growing arsenal of terrifying nuclear weapons. Much of the world became divided into two “camps”—democratic governments led by the U.S., and totalitarian states led by the Soviets. This grim 45-year competition between democracy and authoritarianism was called the Cold War, because it (fortunately) never turned into a hot, shooting war between the two superpowers.

The community of democracies grew in 1947 when India gained independence from Britain and became the world's largest democracy. Even America's enemies from World War II—Japan, Italy, and Germany—eventually joined the democratic nations, as did fascist Spain.

With the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the number of democratic nations increased again as Russia and 14 eastern European countries gained their independence and established democratic governments.

After some 2,500 years of struggle and many failures, it looked like democracy had finally triumphed over authoritarian rule. In 1992, an influential book declared “the end of history<sup>1</sup>,” meaning that democracy had become the final form of human political development.

But this celebration of democracy was premature. As we have seen from history, democracy can be a difficult system of government to establish and maintain, and in our day democracies continue to fall to authoritarian rulers. After the Soviet Union fragmented into 15 independent republics, only three still functioned as democracies thirty years later, in 2021.<sup>2</sup>

We might be accustomed to thinking that democracies typically fall to men with swords, as happened in ancient Greece and Rome, or to men with guns, as in fascist Spain. But democracies can die slowly from within as democratic principles are gradually eaten away. This happened in Nazi Germany under Adolph Hitler during the Great Depression financial crisis, and it’s happening today in Russia, which provides a current example of how democracies can die gradually at the hands of their own elected leaders.

After the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, and Russia became an independent country, it adopted a democratic constitution that named the Russian people as “the sole source of power<sup>3</sup>,” with that power to be exercised through free elections. Russia’s constitution promised freedoms similar to those guaranteed in the U.S. Constitution, including the freedoms of speech, press, religion, and assembly.

The new Russian constitution called for the election of a president every four years to lead the country, with the president limited to two consecutive terms in office. In the midst of a deep Russian financial crisis, Vladimir Putin was elected president in the year 2000. He led an economic recovery that made him so popular with the Russian people that he easily won election to a second term.

When his second term expired, Putin stepped aside as president, but he took the title of prime minister (head of government) and continued to exercise political power alongside his hand-picked successor, Dmitry Medvedev. When Medvedev’s single presidential term expired, he and Putin exchanged jobs, and Putin again became president of Russia, but now with six-year terms due to a constitutional amendment. Midway through his fourth term as president, Putin signed a law allowing him to run for president two more times, potentially extending his control over Russia’s government to 40 years, something that no legitimate democracy would allow.

Organizations that monitor world governments report that Russia has been transformed from a democracy to an authoritarian state<sup>4</sup>. Russia under Putin has been widely accused of rigging elections, barring rival candidates, suppression of the news media, and jailing or killing political opponents.

Watchdog organizations have reported a rise in authoritarian governments worldwide in recent years. The *Economist Democracy Index* has identified 55 percent of the world’s nations as authoritarian or partially authoritarian, and only 45 percent of nations as democracies. The *Index* has downgraded the United States from a “full democracy” to a “flawed democracy.”<sup>5</sup> Today, authoritarian nations include the world’s largest country by size, Russia, and the world’s largest country by population, China.

In contrast to the heady days of the early 1990s, when democracy appeared to be the world’s most dominant form of government and the wave of the future, a recent book by a prominent American historian bears the title *Twilight of Democracy: The Seductive Lure of Authoritarianism*<sup>6</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Frances Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man*, Free Press, 1992.

<sup>2</sup> *Democracy Index 2020*, The Economist Intelligence Unit, 2021, p.33.

<sup>3</sup> *Russian Federation’s Constitution of 1993 with Amendments through 2008*, Russian Federation, 1993 (rev. 2008), p.3.

<sup>4</sup> Sources that have identified Putin’s Russia as an authoritarian regime include *The Economist Democracy Index*, Freedom House’s *Freedom of the World* index, and the *Journal of Democracy*.

<sup>5</sup> *Democracy Index 2020*, p.3, 4.

<sup>6</sup> Anne Applebaum, *Twilight of Democracy: The Seductive Lure of Authoritarianism*, Doubleday, 2020.



## Activity 4: THE POLITICAL SPECTRUM

### Figure 1 - The Political spectrum from far left to far right

Totalitarian and authoritarian governments tend to cluster closer to the ends of the political spectrum, while democratic governments tend to cluster closer to the center.

AUTHORITARIAN		DEMOCRATIC		AUTHORITARIAN	
far left		center left	center right	far right	
communist	socialist	liberal Democrats	conservative Republicans	ultra conservative	fascist

**The far left:** Authoritarian rule may emerge from the political “left,” sometimes called the “left wing.” Examples include the former Soviet Union and present-day North Korea, both of which were founded as communist states. *Communism* is a far-left form of government that prohibits private ownership of property; businesses and industries are controlled by the state in the name of the people. Communist nations have usually had totalitarian governments.

**The far right:** Authoritarian rule may emerge from the political “right” or “right wing.” Examples include Nazi Germany (a fascist state) and present-day Saudi Arabia (a monarchy). *Fascism* is a far right and usually racist government ruled by a dictator who demands total obedience to the state. Fascism emerged between the world wars, but fell out of favor when fascist governments in Italy and Germany were defeated in World War II. However, elements of fascism may exist in authoritarian states today; for example, total obedience to the state in North Korea.

**Mixed systems:** Often governments are not purely democratic or purely authoritarian; they may have elements of both. For example, an authoritarian government at the national level might allow elections of low-level officials at the local level.

**Misleading labels:** Countries are reluctant to admit to limiting the rights of their people; authoritarian governments may try to present themselves as more democratic than they are. Two examples are the People’s Democratic Republic of Korea (North Korea) and the Democratic Republic of Congo, countries that have been identified as the two most authoritarian nations in the world.<sup>1</sup> Actual democracies tend to be proud of their freedoms and never claim to be authoritarian.

**In the United States,** the two main political parties—the Democrats and the Republicans—have traditionally been located near the center of the political spectrum: the “center left” and the “center right.”

**Democrats** are considered to be on the left, or *liberal*, side of the political spectrum. They tend to believe that government can be a force for good and are generally more willing than Republicans to support new government measures to promote the social welfare of the people and equality in society.

**Republicans** are considered to be on the right, or *conservative*, side of the political spectrum. They tend to favor limited government and are generally less willing than Democrats to support new government measures to promote the social welfare of the people and equality in society.

**Reversing positions:** Curiously, Republicans were once the liberal, or progressive party in America, and Democrats were the conservative party. As the party of Abraham Lincoln, Republicans fought to end slavery during the Civil War and promoted equality and voting rights for ex-slaves after the war, while Democrats did the opposite. The parties began to reverse their positions on the political spectrum in the 1960s.

<sup>1</sup> *Democracy Index 2020*, The Economist Intelligence Unit, 2021, p.13

## Activity 5: America Divided

Roughly two million years ago, a very odd animal appeared on the earth. It walked upright and had a brain that could think up amazing new ideas like spoken language and the use of fire. These creatures came to call themselves *humans*.

About 10,000 years ago, as the earth warmed after the last ice age, humans came up with the clever idea of planting crops to eat, and agriculture was born. Humans no longer had to follow the wandering animal herds; they could settle in one place and build villages, towns, and cities.

Large groups of people living together required governments to provide an orderly way to make decisions and to maintain public order. Governments were headed by authoritarian rulers, usually kings.

Then, around 2,500 years ago, a few groups of people living on the northern shores of the Mediterranean Sea had a different idea: *Maybe people could govern themselves*. Their pioneering experiments in democracy glowed brightly for a few hundred years and then flickered out.

But the idea of democracy didn't die. It smoldered beneath the surface for more than a millennium before it flared up again—once more on the northern shores of the Mediterranean—before it fell to a ruling monarchy. But, still, the idea of democracy refused to die.

More than two centuries passed before democracy flamed to life again in a new nation on the far side of the world. This flame burned so intensely that it inspired other nations to join America's bold experiment in democracy. Since then, generations of Americans have fought and died to defend their democratic way of life.

Countless people in other societies—in Europe, Asia, Africa, Latin America, the Middle East, Russia, China—also struggled to bring democracy to their homelands. Often they failed, and often they paid with their lives.

There is no doubt: History shows us that democracies are fragile; they have fallen repeatedly to authoritarian rulers. This is a Recurring Dynamic of History. But history also shows us that the *idea* of democracy is strong. It has refused to die because something in the human brain and human heart longs for the powerful virtues of freedom and equality.

Today, many Americans are afraid their democracy might be slipping away; not due to a foreign threat, but due to divisions within our own country.

### Polarization

The United States has been breaking apart politically. Politics that used to be *partisan* (people choosing to firmly support one political party or the other) have become *tribal* (our tribe **good**; your tribe **bad**). The two opposing tribes are the *liberals* (also called *progressives*) represented by the Democratic Party and the *conservatives* represented by the Republican Party. The tribes are pushing farther apart from one another, and moving closer to the poles of the political spectrum. Thus, the term *polarization*.

Changes to American society may be contributing to polarization. People of color are becoming a larger share of the U.S. population, which can make some white people uncomfortable. And social media companies like Facebook and Twitter have been spreading large quantities of divisive content that includes sensational and false information (which has helped the companies to make lots of money).

Many members of both tribes seem no longer willing to view members of the other tribe as honorable opponents who differ about what's best for America—but as evil, frightening enemies out to destroy America. Polarization threatens democracy by pushing Americans toward the political extremes where authoritarian governments live.

In the next section, we'll examine how the political parties have been weakening American democracy.

## **Activity 6: The Future of American Democracy**

### **Breaking norms**

The United States Constitution is the basic law of our land, but America's founders couldn't possibly have anticipated every aspect of running a great democratic nation far into the future. To a large extent, the proper functioning of our democracy depends on following certain "norms" of democratic behavior that have developed over the years. A good example is the norm established by America's first president, George Washington, when he chose not to seek a third term as president, a norm respected by every American president of all political parties for the next 143 years.

Democrat Franklin Roosevelt violated this norm in 1940 when he ran for a third term as president.\* With America facing the twin crises of the Great Depression and World War II, voters gave Roosevelt a third and a fourth term in office. Also, in violation of democratic norms, Roosevelt's government sent Japanese-American citizens to prison camps during the war, and Roosevelt tried to increase the number of Supreme Court justices, but Republicans and Democrats joined to block this move in Congress.

After the crisis of war had passed, the U.S. didn't experience such blatant norm-breaking behavior until recent times, when America's two competing political tribes became more willing to violate long-standing democratic norms. To many observers, the tribes now appear more concerned about staying in power than maintaining America's democratic system of government.

Following are additional examples of norm-breaking behavior by America's two main political parties.

### **Impeachment of the president**

The power to impeach a president of the United States is one of the most formidable powers granted to Congress by the U.S. Constitution. If the House of Representatives votes to impeach a president, the trial is held in the Senate, which can vote to remove the president from office. During the first 210 years of the Constitution's existence, Congress invoked the power to impeach a president just one time.

Congress was adhering to the norm that a president should be subjected to impeachment proceedings only when substantial support exists for the president's removal. That first impeachment trial came in 1868 when President Andrew Johnson avoided removal from office by a single vote in the Senate. This case for removal clearly had considerable support among senators.

The next presidential impeachment came 130 years later, in 1998, when President Bill Clinton, a Democrat, escaped Republican attempts to remove him from office by a margin of 17 votes in the Senate (67 required for removal). Then, in 2019 and again in 2021, Democrats impeached President Donald Trump, a Republican. The first trial failed to produce a conviction by 19 votes, and the second trial fell short by 10 votes. In all three of these instances, sufficient support for conviction was clearly lacking.

In 210 years, there was only one presidential impeachment. In just 23 years, there were three more, after America's warring political parties became willing to abandon long-established democratic norms.

### **Appointment of Supreme Court justices**

In April of 2016, a Supreme Court justice died during the last year of Barak Obama's presidency. He nominated a replacement to fill the vacancy—a power granted to the president by the U.S. Constitution—but Obama was a Democrat, and Republicans controlled the Senate. In violation of democratic norms, the Senate refused to consider the president's nominee.

Republicans said the winner of the upcoming presidential election, more than seven months away, should pick the new justice. Republican candidate Donald Trump won the 2016 election, and the Senate confirmed his choice for the Supreme Court.

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\* Shortly after World War II, Congress approved the 22<sup>nd</sup> Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, which limited presidents to two terms in office. It was ratified by the states in 1951.

However, when another Supreme Court justice died just over a month before the 2020 presidential election, the Republican-controlled Senate reversed their previous position and swiftly confirmed the nominee of Republican President Trump—violating the norm they had established only four years earlier. With their willingness to change democratic norms to achieve immediate political goals, Republicans successfully denied Democrats two appointments to the U.S. Supreme Court and intensified the war between the tribes.

### **The Trump presidency**

Norm-breaking behavior continued under the presidency of Donald Trump, who claimed that the U.S. Constitution gave him “the right to do whatever I want as president.”<sup>1</sup> One example: The Constitution guarantees freedom of the press to ensure that the news media will always remain an independent watchdog over the actions of government. However, Mr. Trump repeatedly called the news media “the enemy of the people,”<sup>2</sup> and he praised a Republican congressional candidate for physically attacking a newspaper reporter.<sup>3</sup>

President Trump's most significant violation of democratic norms came when he refused to accept the results of the 2020 presidential election, which he said was undermined by widespread voter fraud. He claimed that he had actually won the election by a landslide. According to polling,<sup>4</sup> Donald Trump's claims of voter fraud were supported by a majority of Republicans, who included many Republican members of Congress.

These claims were refuted by Republican and Democrat election officials across the country who verified the election results, and the charges of widespread voter fraud were rejected by multiple courts in multiple states including the conservative-leaning U.S. Supreme Court with three Trump-appointed justices. The official election results showed Democrat Joe Biden winning the 2020 presidential race by over seven million votes.

Following President Trump's claim of a stolen election, some Trump supporters stormed the U.S. Capitol building in Washington D.C., which resulted in five deaths and disrupted the constitutional process of certifying the presidential election. For the first time in American history, the peaceful transfer of presidential power had been broken.

Refusing to accept the results of a presidential election is more than a violation of democratic norms; it challenges the fundamental operating principle of a democracy: the peaceful transfer of power following elections. If it becomes common for politicians to refuse to accept legitimate election results, democracy can no longer function.

### **What does the future hold for American democracy?**

With tribal passions running high in a divided country, not all Americans may still be committed to preserving America's democratic system of government. Some might be willing to trade democracy for authoritarian rule if the ruler supports their tribe's political beliefs.

Democracy in the United States may follow one of two basic paths: It may fall to authoritarian rule as many democracies of the past have done. Or it may rise to meet the challenges posed by difficult crises and a divided citizenry—as America has done in the past.

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Brice-Sadler, “While bemoaning Mueller probe, Trump falsely says the Constitution gives him ‘the right to do whatever I want,’” *Washington Post*, July 23, 2019.

<sup>2</sup> Brett Samuels, “Trump ramps up rhetoric on media, calls press ‘the enemy of the people,’” *The Hill*, April 5, 2019.

<sup>3</sup> Christal Hayes, “Trump praises GOP congressman who assaulted reporter,” *USA Today*, Oct 18, 2018.

<sup>4</sup> Alison Durkee, “More Than Half Of Republicans Believe Voter Fraud Claims And Most Still Support Trump, Poll Finds,” *Forbes*, April 5, 2021.