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EDITORIAL

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The Decline of Economic and Political Freedom After Covid-19: A New Authoritarian Dawn?

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Abstract

The response to Covid-19 in both democratic countries (adopting tactics of totalitarian nations) and autocracies (ignoring the scope of the problem) posed a grave threat to life and liberty. Are we slouching towards a new authoritarian dawn? Or was the pandemic response an aberration that has corrected itself already? There are no easy answers to these questions but it is apparent that the pandemic was an inflection point for both the West and rogue nations around the world. This editorial gives an overview of the key points surrounding the democratic backsliding globally as a result of the pandemic and introduces the articles in this thematic issue.

Keywords

authoritarianism; Covid-19; democratic backsliding; economic freedom; repression

1. Introduction

Since the global financial crisis (GFC) of 2007–2009 and its aftermath, economic and political liberalism has been in retreat globally (Niblett, 2017). The rise of populist alternatives to mainstream parties, promising radical change and pointing fingers at corrupt elites (Devinney & Hartwell, 2020), has infected not only emerging markets but also developed economies. The seeming lack of response to economic decline, with "solutions" rooted in old-fashioned Keynesian policies of more spending and more government (Vail, 2014) coupled with the promise of cheap money (Rajan, 2015) printed forever (Kelton, 2020), has widened economic inequality globally (Siami Namini, 2022), and generated socio-political unrest (Oetzel & Oh, 2019).

On top of all of the slow recovery from the GFC came a series of additional shocks, including the Eurozone debt crisis, the Arab Spring, the first Russian invasion of Ukraine beginning in 2014, and, most damaging of all, the Covid-19 pandemic. Unleashed on the world by an authoritarian nation that was reticent to let investigators access data regarding the first days of the pandemic, has refused any additional investigations into its own malfeasance regarding the virus' origin, and has been a paragon of censorship regarding the extent of the disease (Chang et al., 2022), Western democracies were at a loss for how to combat the new and novel coronavirus. Once it became apparent in March 2020 that Covid-19 was a major public health threat, what ensued were massive prohibitions on economic activity (colloquially called "lockdowns") and on freedom of movement and speech, embraced by governments globally to fight the disease (Simandan et al., 2024). In the United States, in particular, mandates to take one of the vaccines against the virus were often enforced by employers but cheered on by politicians, as seen in President Joseph Biden's attempt to write Occupational Safety and Health Administration regulations which forced firms with more than 100 employees to institute a mandate and to fire employees who did not comply (Larkin & Badger, 2022). Such draconian measures were adopted in their extremes even by ostensibly liberal democracies, with unlimited duration and the threat of reimposition, generating massive economic uncertainty, turning institutions, and their functioning on their heads (Hartwell & Devinney, 2021).

The effect of the response to the pandemic was to generate substantial backlash in the United States, the UK, Australia, and elsewhere around the world, especially when it appeared that politicians were not following the rules that they had set for others: for example, California Governor Gavin Newsom's dinner at the "French Laundry," one of the world's most exclusive restaurants, came two hours after he discouraged families for traveling for Thanksgiving (Osentoski, 2023), and British leader Boris Johnson apparently had Christmas and other parties within Downing Street, while the rest of the UK was on lockdown (Bowman & Roe-Crines, 2023). Moreover, in addition to politicians behaving badly, it seemed that the rules were being rewritten for specific sub-sectors of the population, granting them exemptions from lockdowns, with protests against lockdown restrictions deemed a public health threat but public protests in favor of racial justice seen as permissible (Diamond, 2020). Similarly, white-collar workers were able to continue working from home, aided by Zoom and Microsoft Teams, while those in the service, hospitality, or construction industries faced furloughs, lay-offs, and an uncertain future. Finally, in the United States especially, entrenched special interests, such as teachers' unions, agitated for school closures to continue long after parents were willing to accept the risk trade-off of exposure versus interrupted learning. In one of the most famous social media missives, the powerful Chicago Teachers Union tweeted on June 12, 2020, that "the push to reopen schools is rooted in sexism, racism and misogyny."

With the removal of lockdowns and the hesitating return to normalcy by 2022, many (but not all) of the Covid-era restrictions had been unwound by governments. Although the pandemic appeared to be something that people wanted to forget in an attempt to return to "real life," echoes of the pandemic continue to reverberate simply because there was no reckoning or even ex-post assessment of what was necessary, what could have been done better, and what was an egregious overreach. Part of this lack of reckoning could be because governments do not want to question the powers that they aggrandized during the pandemic, in case they are needed again. Or it could be that the acceptance of these powers has enabled a shift in politics globally away from liberty and the sanctity of the individual and towards more authoritarian and collective politics.

This can be seen once again in the United States, for example, where the 2024 Presidential election has no explicit pro-liberty party, merely different combinations of the use of government power, from tariffs to gun control to abortion to speech. Republican nominee Donald Trump has jettisoned many of the traditional Republican proclivities towards freedom-enhancing policies, instead embracing economic interventionism and anti-immigrant sentiment in all its forms. And even though the theme of "freedom" was appropriated during the Democratic National Convention with the elevation of Kamala Harris to the presidential nomination, uneasy questions settled around her vice-presidential pick, Minnesota Governor Tim Walz, and his commitment to "freedom." Though Walz (as cited in Bennett, 2024) famously said during the convention that personal choices (limited to abortion) were to be respected and neighbors should "mind your own damn business," he was instrumental in setting up a "snitch line" during the pandemic that allowed these same neighbors to report one's movements to the police if they were violating the lockdown he instituted.

This issue examines the global shift that the pandemic accelerated, furthering the decline in political and economic freedom since the GFC to explore how authoritarian governance and economics have come back into vogue. Is democracy in retreat? Is the growth of authoritarianism and does this wave harken back to earlier increases in authoritarianism? Do liberal democracies have their heart in maintaining liberalism or has a fetish been made of "democracy" to cloak deeper ambitions for power? The purpose of this issue is to explore these and other questions related to the unprecedented measures taken during the pandemic and whether or not they signal a major change in the way in which both the advanced and emerging world approach freedom.

2. The Articles in This Issue

To that end, the eight articles that make up this issue examine the democratic backsliding globally from several different angles. The first contribution from Perini and van Schie (2024) examines the uses and misuses of the term "conspiracy theory," a pejorative that gained credibility during the pandemic even when the theories it was hurled against later turned out to be true or at least subject to debate (such as the origin of Covid-19, i.e., whether it was from a lab leak or animal sources). A prime example of the mobilization of state and media apparatuses to attempt to quash undesirable speech, this article does not dispute that conspiracy theories exist nor that they can be harmful, but it arrays this understanding against the harm that can come in a democratic polity with restricting speech. The authors rightly note that academics have a role to play in fighting forces of disinformation—including those who label everything they disagree with as a conspiracy theory—by fostering open dialogue and forcing people to dismantle their inherent biases.

In a similar vein, the next two articles examine the role of technology in democratic backsliding during the pandemic. Firstly, Malagocka (2024) focuses on the issue of digital privacy worldwide and its evolution before and after the pandemic. Highlighting the tradeoffs between new technologies that can foster better health outcomes and their possible misuse by unsavory regimes, this article shows how the usage of these technologies during the pandemic reduced privacy across several dimensions. In particular, the use of contact tracing and digital surveillance used people's own locations and actions against them, and Malagocka argues for the need for clear and effective guidelines going forward to minimize the abuse of such powerful advances.

The second article to delve into the dark side of technology comes from Kneuer et al. (2024), who examine how closely governments monitored and controlled the internet during Covid-19. Focusing on the pressure

that governments exerted on digital media, this article finds that democracies and autocracies alike used the same tools to gain influence over media sources, with many democracies not letting go of these mechanisms once the pandemic had concluded. Perhaps most surprisingly, they also find that for democratic governments, the pandemic apparently constituted a catalyzing event for information manipulation, a potentially worrisome result that shows how difficult it is to rein in government no matter what its form is.

Shifting our view to the international realm, the next contribution by Feldman et al. (2024) examines how the emergency of Covid-19 changed diplomacy and relations between countries, allowing countries (much as national governments did) to set aside obligations and niceties in favor of naked preferences. Exploring the world of "disaster diplomacy," the authors show how crises tend to reinforce the selfishness of state actors while also playing into autocratic tendencies, using the examples of the Maldives and the EU during the pandemic. Importantly, the authors note that institutional quality before a crisis is no guarantee that democratic backsliding will occur but that its absence virtually guarantees that such backsliding is likely.

The next article focuses on a region that had been afflicted with democratic backsliding and the rise of populism even before the Covid-19 pandemic. Alexandrescu and Stoica (2024) focus their lens specifically on Central and Eastern Europe, using data from Hungary, Poland, and Romania to examine the drivers of support for authoritarian policies. Like Feldman et al. (2024), this article shows the importance of quality institutions—or rather, the danger of poor quality institutions—which can become doors that allow populist policies into power. Building a model of authoritarian demand, Alexandrescu and Stoica (2024) conclude that the stories in Central and Eastern Europe are complex and multifaceted, but have at their heart worries about economic security. For a region that had a state guarantee employment and security just 35 years ago, the shift towards personal responsibility has been too much for some to bear.

Beyens and Brummel (2024) follow with an interesting piece examining the politics of change in the Netherlands during the pandemic, highlighting the activities of caretaker governments in a crisis. Using as a case study the caretaker government of Prime Minister Mark Rutte, who resigned during a critical moment in the pandemic, their article shows how a crisis can allow a caretaker government to actually extend and expand its mandate. The Covid-19 pandemic did precisely this for the Rutte government, as the exigencies of parliamentarism brought support for the caretaker government from potential suitors for a coalition, while those on the outside were even more vehement in their criticism of the prime minister. A cautionary tale of democratic legitimacy, this article shows how even a government that has resigned can be given a new lease on life due to a crisis.

Our penultimate article, from Marmefelt (2024), looks at the conduct of monetary policy and in particular the attempts of central banks globally to establish digital currencies. Using the tools of fiscal sociology, Marmefelt asserts that central bank digital currencies intrude on an area properly reserved for the market and would eventually overwhelm private digital currencies. We were already given a preview of this during the Covid-19 pandemic, which forced payments into a digital realm (via the "lockdowns" and fears of handling cash); however, the associated fiscal and monetary responses to the pandemic, including massive stimuli, may hasten the development of central bank digital currencies as a way to facilitate more quantitative easing. This article makes a compelling case that such a reality will create the conditions for digital authoritarianism.

Given the doom and gloom of our analyses to this point, we finish the issue with an article that offers some hope for the future. Behnke (2024) uses the concept of polycentric governance as a possible safeguard against authoritarianism in the wake of the pandemic, showing how, in Germany, various strata of governance were able to generate decentralized crisis management which remained effective. Challenging the notion that crisis management needs to be centralized, Behnke's article offers a resilience perspective, a welcome change from the "sky is falling" era of crises that have dominated the 21st century. In other words, since crises are commonplace, what can we do to enable our abilities to resist their effects? And can we do it without extreme centralization and trampling of civil liberties? On a hopeful note, Behnke answers affirmatively.

3. Conclusion

The answer to the question if the world is entering a new authoritarian dawn is perhaps moot, as personal, economic, and political freedoms have been on a downward drift since the heady days of the 1990s. This drift has been accelerated by economic crises (especially the GFC) and seized on by those who would wish to expand the power of the state to intervene in all facets of an individual's life—as former President Barack Obama's Chief of Staff Rahm Emanuel (borrowing from American radical activist Saul Alinsky) said amid the GFC, "never let a crisis go to waste" (as cited in Seib, 2008). The Covid-19 pandemic sent the powers of the state into hyperdrive and, famously, utilized institutions of liberal democracy precisely to shut down aspects of liberal democracy it was meant to enable: freedom of speech, freedom to peaceably assemble, freedom of movement, freedom of commerce, and freedom to be left alone. While the most draconian lockdown measures have disappeared, there is now a precedent for how a state can behave in an emergency.

Autocracy thrives in crises, and the Covid-19 pandemic was no exception: we now see autocracy cutting deep into the global liberal order internationally and democratic values internally. The aftermath of the global financial crisis and especially the pandemic is being exploited by autocracies in an attempt to remake the global landscape, using the West's abdication of the pursuit of freedom and adoption of autocratic tactics as a springboard to spread influence. Rising autocratic powers such as Russia (shown through its long-running invasion of Ukraine), Iran (by supporting terrorist groups such as Hamas and the Houthis in Yemen), and China (with constant threats towards Taiwan) are taking advantage of this situation to reshape the world from a liberal order to a multipolar one. While former President of the Czech Republic Vaclav Klaus pointed out that a "third way is the quickest way to the Third World" (said in Davos in 1990 but reiterated in Kalus, 1998), the allure of autocracy compared to the messiness of democracy is on the rise in a way not seen since the 1920s.

In that sense, authoritarianism is already dawning across the globe. The articles in this issue hope to call our attention to the different ways and locals in which it is dawning, understanding the mechanisms behind the re-embrace of authoritarian measures and how political institutions may have been changed by the pandemic. The research streams elucidated should be picked up by other researchers in political science, economics, business, and other affiliated professions to highlight where the scourge of authoritarianism is making headway, what channels it operates through, and—perhaps most importantly—how it can be counteracted. In that sense, this issue is not just a scholarly examination of an already-existing phenomenon, but the beginnings of a blueprint on how to reverse a trend that has demonstrably deleterious consequences for the world.

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Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

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