

## The Resilience of Democracy

By Eduardo Posada-Carbó

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After the euphoric “third wave” of democracy came the pessimism. The peak time of illusion was short, marked by the fall of the Berlin Wall and the proclamation of the “end of history.” During the last two decades, the intellectual tendency—notable among Latin Americans—has been to ruminate upon the “authoritarian tradition.” An essay by Marc Plattner—coeditor of the *Journal of Democracy*—invites us to pay more attention to the other side of the coin and to reevaluate the “the resilience of democracy.”

The publication of Plattner’s reflections is very timely. It is certainly timely in commemorating the twentieth anniversary of the *Journal of Democracy*, celebrated yesterday with an important event in Washington, D.C. The birth of the *Journal* coincided with those moments of optimism when the frontiers of freedom were expanding. Since its founding—under Plattner’s and Larry Diamond’s leadership, and an editorial board that included such major figures as Octavio Paz and Juan Linz—the *Journal of Democracy* has become what it is today: perhaps the principal global academic forum for the discussion of democracy. But beyond contributing to a well-deserved celebration for the *Journal*, Plattner’s article is timely because of its relevance for today’s affairs.

Plattner does not underestimate the obstacles—new or old—that democracies have had to face during the “third wave.” Those problems have led to what his colleague Larry Diamond has called a “democratic recession,” a term indicating how little democratic progress there has been seen since the end of the twentieth century. Despite this situation, the transformation since the 1970s has been extraordinary. Its durability has enormous significance. If we analyze the history of democracy during the last 200 years, what should surprise us in recent developments is not the continuity of authoritarian tendencies, but the survival of democracy.

How to explain, then, this democratic resilience? Part of the answer, according to Plattner, lies in democracy’s high level of legitimacy. In the past, alternative regimes—like the Soviet Union—enjoyed the support of intellectuals and academics from the West. Nothing like that exists today with regard to China or Iran, or, to mention a case closer to home, Venezuela. Looking for a more comprehensive explanation, Plattner invites us to explore the “dual nature” of democracy—an exercise that requires particular attention in Latin America. In our surroundings, it is not yet fully appreciated that democracy is not only the rule of the majority. It is also a system that “protects the rights of individuals and minorities”—the civil liberties that must be safeguarded from majorities as well. Thus Plattner notes that today we call democracy by a more complete name: liberal or constitutional democracy.

The “dual nature” inherent in liberal democracy is reflected in a constant tension and requires constant negotiations. Its success depends on a delicate balance that can be broken by an extreme manifestation of either of its two components: the democratic disorder called populism or the liberal disorder that Plattner labels “radical pluralism.” Both, however, can reciprocally correct each other; their mutual cancellation may explain democratic resilience.

It is easy to identify the elements of the formula. But, how can one explain its successful functioning? Plattner warns the supporters of a liberal democracy of the dangers of complacency. In any case, he tells us, nothing can substitute for the support and commitment of the citizenry needed to guarantee the long-term survival of democracy. This requires intellectual clarity, which is possible only through the kinds of debates offered in the pages of the *Journal of Democracy*, whose 20 years of publication we have reason to celebrate.

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