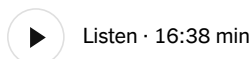


GUEST ESSAY

Is This Liberalism's Last Stand?

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Is liberalism an endangered species?

By liberalism I mean the combination of carefully regulated free markets with individual and intellectual freedom — the liberalism that drove unparalleled growth and prosperity here and abroad.

Under threat from both its left and its right, has American liberalism — once an insurgency challenging corporate monopolists, segregationists, the patriarchy, corrupt politicians and, most broadly, entrenched economic power — been corrupted by its ties to the establishment?

Is the rise of the Democratic Socialists of America less a demand for socialism than a plea for a party of the left that represents the middle and working classes, the precariat and the losers under global competition?

As liberals have gained control over major institutions — universities, major nonprofits, the media, Hollywood — are they no longer insurrectionists but rather ripe targets for insurrectionists? Have their elevated standing and growing affluence turned them into proponents of the status quo?

The ascent of Donald Trump has escalated the salience of these questions, which in turn raises the most important question of all: Have many elite liberals and Democrats who set the left-wing agenda become so attached to their relatively newfound power, status and income that they would battle a return to their insurgent roots tooth and nail?

Fareed Zakaria and Adrian Wooldridge, two prominent essayists — both working journalists who are, in practice, a step above the media hoi polloi — have separately raised pointed questions about liberalism and its American political arm, the Democratic Party.

Modern liberalism since the 1990s advocates “deregulating both economic life and personal life, then treating the consequences as the price of freedom,” Zakaria wrote on June 26 in an essay in The Washington Post, “To Beat Socialists and Populists, Liberalism Must Get Radical.”

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In the case of markets, he continued,

this has allowed corporate consolidation and inequality to run wild. In personal life, liberals have become reluctant to say that certain behaviors are socially destructive.

The result is liberal fatalism. People camp out on city streets, addicted and mentally ill, and liberals often describe this as a housing problem. Millions suffer from obesity-related illnesses, and liberals are more comfortable blaming ‘food deserts’ than taking on the companies that hook their customers on processed food.

A liberal society should celebrate individual rights — and also demand individual responsibility. It should understand that freedom can be destroyed not only by the state but also by addiction, monopoly, crime, ignorance and dependence.

Zakaria cited Wooldridge, a Bloomberg columnist whose new book, “The Revolutionary Center,” is a devastating assault on contemporary liberalism.

“Today’s liberals,” Wooldridge said in his book,

are creatures of the establishment. Their lot in life is not the martyr’s grave or the prisoner’s cell but the tenured job and the index-linked pension. Liberal elites have created caste-like privileges that recall the caste-like privileges of the feudal and clerical elite such as exemption from paying taxes if you are a European working for the International Monetary Fund (I.M.F.) or the World Bank in Washington or exemption from paying fines if you are a diplomat working for the United Nations.

The political consequence?

The conversion of liberals into the establishment has driven a wedge between liberalism and ordinary people. University administrators embrace policies of affirmative action that are wildly unpopular with regular people (including most Black people). ... The European Union pushes forward with its “project” of “ever closer integration” regardless of public opinion.

Liberal triumphalism, Wooldridge argued,

coincided with the fragmentation of liberal thought into several sub-creeds: the managerial liberalism of the people who ran global institutions, the left-liberalism of the universities and the neoliberalism that was promoted by Reagan and Thatcher and institutionalized by Clinton and Blair.

This fragmentation injected extremism into the heart of liberalism as each of these subgroups, concentrated in their respective professional niches, spoke only to people like themselves.

Neoliberals chased after the rainbow of efficient markets. Managerial liberals dreamed of global government and earth-spanning corporations. Left-liberals hunted ever more marginal groups. A creed that had once been defined by opposition to the extremism of both the Jacobins and the Royalists, degenerated into a collection of monomanias.

Zakaria and Wooldridge are by no means alone in their analysis.

Helena Rosenblatt, a professor of history at the Graduate Center, City University of New York, and the author of “The Lost History of Liberalism: From Ancient Rome to the Twenty-First Century,” responded to my questions by email, saying, “Liberals have lost touch with ordinary people; they have become selfish and complacent.”

While Rosenblatt disagreed “with Zakaria when he says that liberalism” was once “‘the most radical force in politics’ (it has generally been centrist and gradualist), I do agree that liberalism has consistently challenged inherited privilege and monopoly power. It has been an optimistic and energetic creed, dedicated to expanding opportunity.”

Democrats, she continued,

have appeared more engaged with cultural controversies than with the practical problems that dominate most people’s lives. Whether or not that perception is entirely fair, it has been politically damaging.

Voters are understandably less interested in cultural debates when they cannot afford housing and struggle with the rising cost of living.

Despite the hurdles, Rosenblatt remains cautiously optimistic that liberals and Democrats can revive their reformist spirit, citing “recent books such as Ezra Klein and Derek Thompson’s ‘Abundance’ and Marc Dunkelman’s ‘Why Nothing Works: Who Killed Progress and How to Get It Back’” suggesting that liberalism “can improve people’s lives in ways that really matter to them.”

While Zakaria, Wooldridge and Rosenblatt press for a restoration of liberalism’s commitment to ordinary working men and women, others point out that certain liberal tenets have lost legitimacy, especially in the rapidly changing universe of international trade.

In an essay posted last month on the Liberalism.org website, “Liberalism in the Age of Weaponized Interdependence,” Paul Dragos Aligica, a professor of governance at the University of Bucharest, argued that “the classical doctrine of gains from trade” no longer apply.

Instead of the post-World War II logic of progressive integration, which says that deepening cooperation gradually erodes “the conditions for conflict” as “complex interdependence raises

the costs of disruption and creates structural incentives for cooperation,” the question for liberals is “how to think about cases where gains are seen and acted upon as asymmetric, where structural position confers coercive leverage and where the most integrated actors are also the most exposed.”

In place of mutually beneficial cooperation, international trade is now governed by what Aligica called “Mutual Assured Dependence.” In it,

no major actor can fully weaponize its position without severe self-damage, and all are well aware of that fact. The United States, for example, cannot aggressively sanction without triggering dollar-replacement initiatives; China cannot weaponize its manufacturing centrality without disrupting the export model that sustains its growth.

Underlying all these issues is the question: Does contemporary liberalism have the wherewithal to undergo major surgery?

Whether or not it’s revolutionary or reformist, one key factor in declining liberal zeal is demographic. Over the past four-plus decades, liberals and Democrats have moved rapidly up the socio-economic ladder — a sure way to defang radicalization.

In a June 10 report, “Beyond Red vs. Blue: The Political Typology,” Pew Research found that the two core left-leaning groups, which Pew calls “leftward progressives” and “loyal liberals,” are “highly educated, largely white groups.” Just over half of leftward progressives, 51 percent, have college degrees; 61 percent of loyal liberals do.

In an April 2024 study, “Changing Partisan Coalitions in a Politically Divided Nation,” Pew found that from 1996 to 2023, the share of Democratic and Democratic-leaning voters with college degrees doubled, to 45 percent from 22 percent.

Why does this matter? College-educated voters, except those in the precariat, are not likely to take to the streets, either metaphorically or literally, to reform liberalism.

A second hurdle facing those seeking to revive liberalism is that moderation and compromise lie at its core, with the central policy conflict over where to draw the line between free-market capitalism and government intervention to prevent exploitation.

At a time when polarization pushes voters to extremes, liberalism is the antithesis of extreme — insufferably boring for those seeking ideological excitement.

It is, however, a leap of judgment to conclude that a governing philosophy that has dominated much of the West since the Enlightenment could in a matter of a few decades implode — a philosophy calling for constitutional government, representative democracy, the rule of law, independent courts, protection of minorities, civil liberties, market economies (with differing levels of state intervention), peaceful transfer of power, pluralism and tolerance.

Despite my reluctance to take that leap, when I look at the case Zakaria and especially Wooldridge make, I have my doubts about the ability of liberals to somehow pull out of their nihilistic nosedive.

When you try to evaluate the survivability of liberalism from the other side of the aisle, the first point to acknowledge is that Donald Trump’s two victories demonstrated that there is a large

bloc of the electorate willing to vote for a man who is the living antithesis of all things liberal and democratic.

Almost everyone I contacted for this essay, however, including Zakaria and Wooldridge, argued that all is not lost, that liberals must exercise concerted effort and willpower to once again speak to ordinary working- and middle-class voters.

In a wide-ranging response to my questions, Edmund Fawcett, the author of “Liberalism: The Life of an Idea,” argued that

liberals could recover if they became, as once, inclusive, democratic. If, that is, they made their promises for everyone, not just a few. They’d also need to relearn how to talk of their principles as if they mattered and we should care about them.

That brings in D.S.A. Name aside, they’re what for years we called progressives or social democrats. They want liberal promises for everyone. They want revenue or debt to spend on improving well-being and public services. To a left liberal (e.g., me), that’s appealing.

The liberal centrism of Zakaria and Wooldridge, Fawcett wrote,

feels ambiguous to me. Is it a meritocratic fight against cosseted advantage? Or a democratic fight to extend fairer shares to all?

It sounds more the first. In which case, yes, it does leave ground to the left for D.S.A. to win.

The D.S.A., Fawcett added, “might replace the Democratic Party (unlikely given first-past-the-post, bane of insurgents). Or its zeal and confidence might nudge Democrats leftward. I’d like to see that, but I’m not betting my pension on it.”

Fawcett’s argument is premised on his belief that there are four basic liberal principles:

Unchecked power can’t be trusted (whether of state, wealth or conventional opinion); life for people can get better; society is never harmonious but always in conflict; and everyone merits respect whatever rank, status, group, etc. they’re put into or they choose — the democratic seed in otherwise undemocratic creed.

While these principles, Fawcett continued, are hiding in plain sight,

the snag with those is they’re so worn down or travestied in public argument, so fine ground in the academy that liberals have trouble recalling why we care so about the ideals that those words name.

Liberals need to sound angrier, less patient with their detractors, yes. They also need to talk as if what they believe in mattered.

Sheri Berman, a political scientist at Barnard, put her finger on a core internal conflict facing those seeking to restore liberal credibility:

We still live in a world built on liberal principles: our main political, economic, and social institutions — democracy, markets, universities — are based on its principles.

The problem is that as more people have come to see these institutions as corrupt, dominated by out-of-touch elites, and no longer delivering for them, liberalism and in the United States the Democratic Party, which is most associated with it, has come to be seen as the embodiment and defender of an inept, ineffectual status quo.

While critics on the far left and right argue that the “fault lies with liberalism itself,” Berman wrote,

others including Zakaria and Wooldridge (and myself) disagree. We recognize today’s economic, political and social problems but see them as the consequence not of liberalism’s inherent flaws but of its poor implementation.

Liberals have long supported market economies because they rest on individual choice and reward individual effort, and since they are suspicious of concentrated power, they have viewed too much government control over economic life as dangerous.

But during the late 20th and early 21st centuries, liberals and the parties associated with them fell prey to a warped version of this view, promoting free markets above all else and forgetting that without careful government intervention, markets can threaten rather than support individual liberty and societal thriving.

Berman’s list of liberalism’s errors doesn’t stop there:

Rather than striving for government of, by and for the people, liberals allowed democracies to become dominated by out-of-touch elites and moneyed and organized interests, and producing policies that reflected their preferences rather than those of average citizens.

Key societal institutions, most notably, K-12 schools and universities, came to be seen as dominated by elites promoting ideas many of their fellow citizens do not share, and by diversity bureaucracies that too often judge people by group identity rather than individual character, rather than by a meritocratic ethos and a commitment to cultivating democratic citizens.

In other words, if liberalism began as a reformist movement challenging aristocracy, entrenched power and a social order favoring the few, it now faces a tougher challenge: itself.

“So where does that leave liberals?” Berman asked.

Liberalism can once again become a radical, progressive force but only if it is again willing to take on established power and the status quo, even though today that status quo is largely of its own making.

Liberals must show they recognize where the system they created went wrong and are willing and able to use their own distinctive principles to fix it: building a fairer, more just and more productive economy; a democracy responsive to average citizens rather than moneyed interests, organized minorities and out-of-touch elites; and civil society and cultural institutions that constructively engage dissent rather than censoring or punishing it.

As an inveterate pessimist, I am drawn to the notion that liberalism is on its last legs, but in this case, I don't trust my own instincts.

Instead, I find the argument Aurelian Craiutu, a political scientist at Indiana University, made to me in a detailed email more credible. Craiutu readily acknowledged that all is not well with liberalism, noting that he agreed with

Wooldridge's book that liberals should relearn the virtues of modesty, gradualism, moderation and pragmatism in order to avoid the errors which they have sometimes made.

For example, liberals closer to the classical liberal tradition must acknowledge that market pathologies such as monopolies and the political reinforcement of gross inequalities require the attention of political leaders.

But, superseding all that, Craiutu wrote,

these early death certificates are not only premature but deeply mistaken. It has often been proclaimed exhausted, nefarious or simply dead, but it is still with us today, while fascism and communism, two of its past fierce enemies, have almost entirely lost their appeal and their records speak for themselves.

Matthew Tobin contributed research to this article.

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Thomas B. Edsall has been a contributor to the Times Opinion section since 2011. His essays on strategic and demographic trends in American politics appear every Tuesday. He previously covered politics for The Washington Post.