



Is Democracy Dead or Has It Simply Been Hijacked?

By Patrick Gathara



“Anyone can cook,” declares Chef Auguste Gusteau in the 2007 Pixar classic, *Ratatouille*, one of my favourite animated movies. The film tells the tale of an anthropomorphic French rat with a passion for haute cuisine, who against all odds, makes it from foraging in the garbage to cooking at a high-end restaurant and being declared “nothing less than the finest chef in France”. It is an inspiring story with valuable lessons about bravery, determination and following one’s dreams. Yet it comes with a caveat, as explained by the funeral critic, Anton Ego, at the end of the movie: “Not everyone can become a great artist; but a great artist can come from anywhere.”

Across the world today, democratic societies appear to have taken Gusteau’s maxim but not necessarily with Ego’s qualification. In Kenya, the death of popular Kibra MP, Kenneth Okoth, has occasioned a by-election in which the ruling Jubilee Party has fronted a professional footballer who has spent much of the last decade in Europe and who, until a few weeks ago, had never even registered to vote or expressed any interest in politics.

“The world is going the Wanjiku way,” Mike Sonko, the populist Governor of Nairobi declared recently on the Sunday show, [Punchline](#). “Take the example of the Ukraine. The President of Ukraine is currently is a comedian. They voted for a comedian. Because the Wanjikus were fed up with the leadership of that country. They were fed up with the politicians...Go to Liberia. They elected a

footballer to be their president. Madagascar for the second time have elected a DJ, Rajolina, to be their president”.

He is not wrong. From Donald Trump in the United States to Bobi Wine in Uganda, there seems to be a growing dissatisfaction with and distrust of career politicians and the nebulous “establishment”. In Kenya, this manifests in a contest between the so-called “dynasties” (the wealthy families that have dominated the country’s politics for nearly 60 years) and the “hustlers” (the political upstarts who claim to not be a part of the establishment). It is evident in the “handshake” between President Uhuru Kenyatta and opposition leader Raila Odinga, sons of Kenya’s first President and Vice President, respectively, and their open feud with Deputy President William Ruto, the self-declared head of the “hustler nation”.

The idea that “anyone can rule” is taken by many to be a cardinal tenet of democracy. At its root is a legitimate rejection of the old idea that the ability to govern was only bestowed on some bloodlines, which today has largely been consigned to history’s trash heap.

Yet this democratisation of governance has created fears of its contamination by the unwashed and uneducated masses. A famous quote from the early twentieth century US journalist, Henry Mencken, encapsulates these fears: “As democracy is perfected, the office of president represents, more and more closely, the inner soul of the people. On some great and glorious day the plain folks of the land will reach their heart’s desire at last and the White House will be adorned by a downright moron.” The quote is taken from Mencken’s [piece](#) originally posted in the *Baltimore Evening Sun* in July 1920 in which he rails against the candidacies of Republican Warren Harding and his rival, James Cox, for the US presidency, which he saw as proof of the tendency of democratic competition to result in a race to the bottom.

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“The first and last aim of the politician,” he wrote, “is to get votes, and the safest of all ways to get votes is to appear to the plain man to be a plain man like himself, which is to say, to appear to him to be happily free from any heretical treason to the body of accepted platitudes - to be filled to the brim with the flabby, banal, childish notions that challenge no prejudice and lay no burden of examination upon the mind.”

Arguing that “this fear of ideas is a peculiarly democratic phenomenon,” he goes on to assert that as politicians increasingly pander to electorates, then “the man of vigorous mind and stout convictions is gradually shouldered out of public life” and the field is left to “intellectual jelly-fish and inner tubes” - those without convictions and those willing to hide them.

Populist idiocy

Many recognise the fulfilment of Menckel’s prophecy in Donald Trump’s presidency, though it is notable that it had been [applied to Ronald Reagan and George W. Bush](#) before him. However, it is clear that Mencken had a low opinion, not just of politicians, but of electorates as well. In fact, in his view, it is the ignorance and stupidity of the masses that, in a democracy, makes morons of politicians. And moronic politicians love ignorant voters as evidenced by Trump’s [declaration](#) during the 2016 presidential campaign: “I love the poorly educated.”

Menckel's view is also echoed by a common maxim [spuriously attributed to Winston Churchill](#): "The best argument against democracy is a five-minute conversation with the average voter." So, is the slide into populist idiocy the inevitable fate of democracy? Can *anyone* cook? Or is Ego right that while good governance can come from anywhere, not everyone can be a great leader?

"Democracy is hard," [notes](#) Kenyan academic and author, Nanjala Nyabola. It "requires constant vigilance—something that we now see is difficult to achieve even under the most ideal circumstances." For most voters, this constant vigilance is a tough ask. In fact, for most, getting to grips with the issues and personalities is not worth the hassle.

As Ilya Somin, Professor of Law at George Mason University, [puts it](#), "If your only reason to follow politics is to be a better voter, that turns out not to be much of a reason at all... there is very little chance that your vote will actually make a difference to the outcome of an election."

And that's not all. Even if one were inclined to be immersed in the policy debates and to investigate candidate platforms, the sheer size of modern government and the scale and impact of its activities means that one could not hope to monitor more than a tiny fraction of what the state gets up to.

Since voters are unwilling to get their hands dirty, they take short cuts, which often means relying on someone else to tell them what's going on in the kitchen. For instance, when asked, during the 2005 and 2010 referendum campaigns on a proposed new constitution, whether they had read the drafts, a section of Kenyan voters were reported to have responded with "*Baba amesoma*" (Father has read it). Baba is a reference to Raila Odinga, perhaps the best known politician in the country and the voters, many of whom had little knowledge of constitutionalism, were opting to take their cue from him. Others chose to follow the musings of pundits and other self-appointed "experts" or journalists or even comedians. The problem here, as with following politicians, is you do not know whether what you are getting is the truth, the real truth and nothing but the truth.

However, that turns out to be less of a problem than one might at first suppose. Truth (shock, horror!) is not always the reason one follows politics - or politicians. Prof. Somin notes that political supporters tend to behave very much like sports fans - less interested in the merits of arguments or how well the game is played than in whether their side wins. This is perhaps best illustrated by the phenomenon of electorates voting against their own interests. For example, in the US, older voters tend to support the Republican Party, which takes a dim view of government entitlement programmes like Medicare and Social Security that primarily benefit the elderly.

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Even the few neutrals out there tend to talk only to like-minded others or follow the game through like-minded media. In either case, there is little scope for voters to have their views challenged or their horizons expanded. As the former British Prime Minister put it, "The single hardest thing for a practicing politician to understand is that most people, most of the time, don't give politics a first thought all day long. Or if they do, it is with a sigh... before going back to worrying about the kids, the parents, the mortgage, the boss, their friends, their weight, their health, sex and rock 'n' roll."

A civic ritual

If voters don't care about politics, why do they even bother to vote? According to Prof Somin, "The key factor is that voting is a lot cheaper and less time-consuming than studying political issues. For many, it is rational to take the time to vote, but without learning much about the issues at stake."

Voting has thus become a civic ritual, much like going to a football game and cheering your favourite team. It provides the satisfaction of participation – one can brandish a purple finger as a marker of having fulfilled one's duty without actually doing the hard work of wrestling with the issues. Voters pick their teams based less on ideas than on arbitrary considerations, such as ethnicity or place of birth.

The media exacerbates this trend in two ways; both in the content of their reporting and in the manner they do so. By far, the mainstream press is the most important avenue through which people access and organise information about what is happening in the world. Despite the growth of the internet, which has enabled many more people to get in on the act, news is still largely what the media says it is, whether it is an earthquake or a war in some far-off place or the latest tweet by Donald Trump.

However, as Prof Cas Mudde of the School of Public and International Affairs at the University of Georgia [writes](#), the media tends to report the news, rather than analyse and explain it. The addiction to scoops and "breaking news" and the competition to be first even when every outlet will have the story in the next few minutes and though social media means there is less attention paid to "trends behind the day-to-day news". Further, in order to attract a larger audience and sell more advertising space or more newspapers, the media prioritises what is sensational over what is important and stays away from anything that cannot be reduced into a soundbite or squeezed into a two-minute news segment.

It also propagates and perpetuates false notions of "objectivity", presenting itself as a reliable neutral observer rather than as an active participant. Yet through its curating and shaping functions, the media wields tremendous influence not only on how events unfold but also on how they are perceived. Like a chef, the media takes events and fashions out of disparate events, to be served up to audiences in bite-sized chunks on its many channels.

Brought up on this fast news diet, Prof Somin says, voters come to "mistakenly believe that the world is a very simple place [requiring] very little knowledge to make an informed decision about politics". And this leads to the embrace of simplistic panaceas for complex problems, and to a preference for populist politicians who deny complexity. If the world is so simple, then fixing it requires no specialised knowledge. Anybody can cook.

It is no wonder then that today there is a lot of angst about the state of democracy and fears that the ship of liberal democratic constitutionalism is floundering on the rocks of populism. The emergence of right wing populist governments and movements in countries as far removed as Brazil, Italy and the Philippines, and [in Western countries](#) once thought to hold the high ground for liberal democracy, such as the UK (which is steeped in a constitutional crisis over Brexit) and the US (where President Trump is facing an impeachment inquiry) has many thinking that democracy's days are numbered.

William Galston has [called](#) populism an internal challenge to liberal democracy. Populists, he says, weaponise popular ignorance "to drive a wedge between democracy and liberalism". Liberal norms, institutions and policies, they claim, weaken democracy and harm the people and thus should be set aside.

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Populism, though, is less a *cause* of democracy’s demise than it is a *consequence* of it. Democracy has been crumbling from within for a long time. Galston blames this on immigration which, he says, has not only upset the “tacit compact” between electorates and elites – where the former would defer to the latter as long as they delivered economic growth and prosperity – but has also profoundly challenged existing demographic and cultural norms, leaving many feeling dislocated in their own societies.

However, it is that compact that is at the root of the crisis, transforming as it does the understanding of democracy from a system where people participate in governance to one where they elect others to govern them. Further, the gnashing of teeth over [historic decline](#) in voter turnout blinds many to the fact that, like populism, it is also a symptom and not the problem.

As Phil Parvin notes in his paper, [Democracy Without Participation](#), the decline in political engagement and deliberation by ordinary citizens and the eclipse of broad-based citizen associations by professional lobby groups have resulted in a model of democracy where “politics ... is something done by other people on behalf of citizens rather than by citizens themselves”.

In Africa, the “wind of change” that toppled many dictatorships in the 1990s and early 2000s did not result in the empowerment of local populations to do anything other than participate in the ritual of periodic elections. Participation in governance in the periods in between elections is actively discouraged. Those who are dissatisfied with government policies are routinely [told to shut up](#) and await the opportunity to do something about it at the next election.

This model of democracy as reality show, where elites compete on who gets a turn at the trough (with the media providing a running commentary and the public choosing the winner) is at the root of the malaise. The professionalisation of democratic participation – outsourcing it to politicians and activists – leads to an increasing polarisation and tribalisation, with everyone claiming to be the authentic voice of the silent and silenced population. Alienation, as political debate focuses on the problems of elites rather than those of the people, becomes inevitable.

It is into this void that the populists have stepped, claiming to do away with the edifice of “the establishment” when in fact, they are seeking to entrench elite rule by doing away with even the appearance of popular consultation. This is what they mean when they evoke the idea of a “strong leader” – one who is not bound by the charade of democratic politics and can thus instinctively channel a pure form of the people’s will. But, as the Mayor of London, Sadiq Khan, [says](#), this is to ignore the lessons of history. Strongmen, as Africans know from bitter experience, tend to reflect, not the aspirations of their people, but their own.

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The solution may be [to do away with elections](#) altogether as a means for selecting decision-makers. In any case, what is required is not less popular participation, but more. We can no longer afford to continue to treat governance as something voters get to participate in once every election cycle, to

pretend that democracy is a fire-and-forget proposition. Constant vigilance requires citizens at all levels willing to get their hands dirty, learn about issues, debate openly and engage with representatives - citizens who collectively insist on being heard and who demand accountability from those in power, not simply wait for someone else to do it on their behalf.

Paradoxically, the internet has dramatically lowered the costs of participation and it has never been easier for people to access information, to express opinions, to participate in petitions and to organise outside the parameters set by the elite or by the state. The question for societies with democratic aspirations should be how to make the voices and concerns of ordinary folks, rather than just their votes, count and not be drowned out by the din of elite politics. How do we truly get to the public interested in the ideal of “government of the people, by the people, for the people”?

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