

HAPSc Policy Briefs Series

Vol 1, No 2 (2020)

HAPSc Policy Briefs Series



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Konstantinos Zafeiris, Vasiliki Zafeiri, Aikaterini Lioudaki

doi: [10.12681/hapscpbs.26472](https://doi.org/10.12681/hapscpbs.26472)

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To cite this article:

Zafeiris, K., Zafeiri, V., & Lioudaki, A. (2020). Democracy at the Beginning of the New Era: Changes and Opportunities. *HAPSc Policy Briefs Series*, 1(2), 10–17. <https://doi.org/10.12681/hapscpbs.26472>

Democracy at the Beginning of the New Era: Changes and Opportunities¹

Konstantinos Zafeiris², Vasiliki Zafeiri³, Aikaterini Lioudaki⁴

Abstract

From the classical Athens of Pericles in antiquity, as this emerged in an impressive way in the 'Epitaph' of this prominent Athenian citizen, general and politician, until today, humanity has changed dramatically. All changes were focused on human and the forms of political organization that would ensure his survival. The implementation of the principles of democracy was a requirement of the times and a demand of the people. As far as the application and guarding of the principles of democracy is concerned, there have been periods of their harmonization with social life, but also periods of their degradation, under-functioning, and even circumvention. The perspective of the whole world belongs to democracy and this requires the effort and mobilization of all, for the implementation of the fundamental democratic principles inherited from our ancestors and which we must pre-serve and pass on to next generations. This article analyzes the new challenges created by the coordinated and intense change of important sectors of our social everyday life, in democracy, demonstrating the attacks on its pillars and highlighting the opportunities that appear for its perfection.

Key Words: Democracy; Health; Immigration; Economy; Religion.

Introduction

Democracy came from the mixture of primitive feminism with the patriarchy that succeeded it. Under different circumstances, this mixture took place only among the Hellenes, while in other people and cultures, similar circumstances did not occur (Kontos, 2004: 142). All the innovations that occurred in the statutes of the city-states, changed the written and unwritten juristic codes that until then were passed down from generation to generation and so, through a process of successive changes that continued for many generations, we have the appearance of the first "Democratic" states with their own peculiarities. The most important factor in configuring this first type of democracy is considered to be the circumstance of the appearance of an economically and militarily independent class of

¹ To cite this paper in APA style: Zafeiris, K., Zafeiri, V., Lioudaki, A. (2020). Democracy at the Beginning of the New Era: Changes and Opportunities. *HAPSc Policy Briefs Series*, 1(2): 10-17. DOI: 10.12681/hapscpbs.26472

² Konstantinos Zafeiris has graduated from the Hellenic Military School in 1998 as a 2nd Lieutenant (Inf) and was trained in all the planned Infantry schools, the School of Administration and Staff and the Supreme Joint War College. He holds a Master degree (MA) in Political Science.

³ Vasiliki Zafeiri studied German Language and Literature at University of Athens (National and Kapodistrian University of Athens). She completed her MA Thesis in Contemporary Bioethics of Philosophy Department (School of Philosophy at NKUA, "The slippery slope argument") under the supervision of Prof. T. N. Pelegrinis in 2009.

⁴ Aikaterini Lioudaki has graduated from the Department of Tourism Business Administration, School of Management and Economics of the Higher Technological Institute of Heraklion at Crete in 2000 and also from the Department of Economics, School of Social Sciences of the University of Crete in 2005. She holds a Master degree (MA) in Economic and Regional Development (Regional Economics), Department of Economic and Regional Development, Panteion University of Social and Political Sciences.

citizens, in relatively small communities, who cultivated a democratic way of life (Held, 2003: 25-26). The moral, political, economic and urban planning principles of democracy, such as the one that determines the whole of citizens, the Popular Sovereignty, that the general principle is the Deme, the mob, which is the highest and most independent state body, in which the total income of the city comes from the taxation of wealthy citizens and is distributed in the poorest classes and concepts, such as freedom, equality, meekness, brotherhood, egalitarianism, equation and self-sufficiency, we meet them in Aristotle's "State" and "Rhetoric", as well as the oath of the Athenian citizens (Kontos, 2004: 143-146).

The centuries that followed the expansion and fall of the Roman Empire from 476 AD to the modern era is a historical period sealed by new systems of governance in Europe and worldwide. The reaction and participation of the people, in different ways each time, to a greater or lesser extent, signaled universal changes. Thus, we have the birth of feudal states during the dark period of the Middle Ages (5th-15th century), with the Church as the supreme power and the guilds as a decisive key element (Reble, 1996: 80). During the Renaissance, which lasted from the 13th century until the 16th century, we have a turn to antiquity, in the fields of science, art and education, with decisive political and economic changes marked by great social struggles (Reble, 1996: 97-98). The Baroque century (16th - 17th century) that follows, as Reble indicates, "is the century of fanaticism and dogmatism, with the strengthening of the authority in both the ecclesiastical and state sectors, as well as changes particularly noticeable in political, economic and social life" (Reble, 1996: 156).

So, we come to the point where, according to the French philosopher Alain de Benoist, *"the greatest problem of democracy is not the degree of freedom or the degree of equality, but rather the degree of participation"*. Democracy is oscillated by five emerging contradictions, intensely at the same time, demonstrating the necessity for changes.

Democracy vs Democracy

*When threatened, the first thing democracy abandons is democracy*⁵

From Aristotle's "Athenian State" until today, the basic principles of democracy are broadly the same for all models applied in all times and countries. Democracy is examined over time through two parameters: its statutory framework and its practical application in everyday life. There have been periods of harmonization of its principles with social life, but also periods of degradation, under-functioning, and even circumvention. The reasons for this can be sought in objective conditions, such

⁵ Mignon McLaughlin, 1913-1983, American columnist.

as the chronological and social circumstances of each era and each country where it was applied, but also in subjective reasons, such as the human factor, which often operated on the basis of the individual and not the collective interest.

Today, perhaps more than ever, the principles of democracy are being violated in the name of democracy itself. From Latin America, which is still the region with the highest social and economic inequalities, the USA with the repeated racist manifestations but also the distrust in the electoral system, to the congenital democratic deficit (Stefanou, 1996: 130) of the EU, with the lack of discrimination of the functions and the inadequate legitimacy of the institutions which are its characteristic elements, we observe that *“the rule of the majority applies only if you take into account the individual rights. Because you can't put five wolves and a sheep to vote on what to eat for dinner”*⁶.

However, the opportunity presented in our time, due to data processing and communication technologies and of course the internet, is called e-Government, which is the channel through which e-Democracy is achieved. This is the case when technological applications are implemented by governments for the benefit of citizens, and vice versa when citizens use similar tools to communicate with the management and decision-making centers (Karadima, 2010). It is important to mention that some surveys have tried unsuccessfully to separate democracy from e-Government. However, according to the Abu-Shanab study, e-Government is closely linked to democracy and social inclusion (Abu-Shanab, 2015). After all, as the Council of Europe stated in its recommendations on e-Democracy: e-Democracy is nothing else but Democracy (STOA, 2018).

Health vs Democracy

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused worldwide a frightening death toll, forcing governments to take emergency measures, such as curfews and quarantines, to curb the spread and pressure to the health system (Tzagkarakis et al., 2020). In the fight against survival and the conservation of basic functions of regularity (feeding, supply of medicines and other necessary items, assistance, physical activity, etc.) states have the help of the use of digital services. However, the need to protect health cannot justify the carte blanche to monitoring people's lives.

In Russia, for example, the government has resorted to using face recognition cameras without sufficient guarantees that such intrusive technology would not be generalized for other purposes. In Azerbaijan citizens are obliged to report their movements to an electronic system via SMS, while in

⁶ Larry Flynt, 1942-, American publisher.

Montenegro the government posted on its website a list of the names and addresses of those who was given the mandate to stay in home isolation. In Poland, the state provides a mobile phone application to the citizens and obliges quarantined people to use it and take selfies several times a day with a timeline and coordinates. In the UK, technology companies process patients' confidential personal data without transparency or accountability. These are the most worrying examples of a wider monitoring trend observed (Allen et al., 2020; Wigley et al. 2020).

The design, development and use of digital technologies have ethical and legal implications that should not be ignored⁷. If governments do not respect these legal limits, they risk losing the trust and support of citizens, a necessary element in state efforts to protect human life and health. Governments can and should ensure that technology is used to the advantage and not to the detriment of human rights, democracy and the rule of law.

Also, social companies, public and private, their responsibility and participation in a joint project to deal with a crisis can be crucial. The Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), as a concept, has been and is a positive response to the crisis, as seen in Greece, noting, of course, that it is necessary to take a step forward in understanding CSR as a charitable action, in order to turn it into an organized, continuous policy that can lead to a more sustainable and equitable society (Kritas et al., 2020).

Immigration vs Democracy

Global population asymmetry, on the one hand, due to overpopulation, mainly in poor Latin America, Africa and Asia, in relation to the aging in the economically developed North America and Europe, and on the other hand the climate change, create conditions of civil wars, under the pretext of racial - religious - ethnic differences, which in turn lead to huge population movements. This volume of movement, today, in most host countries, is unmanageable, as it causes a sense of threat to indigenous society, xenophobia, and ultimately, the adoption of policies against the post-war democratic culture of the last 75 years. Thus, we end up with the deterioration of democracy, which is increasingly emerging as an essential factor in legitimizing social inequalities and social exclusion (Sakis Karagiorgas Foundation, 1998: 46-50).

It should be highlighted, therefore, that the immigration policy pursued by each country makes multi-layered, long-term and difficult to predict consequences, in addition to those that are evident in the short term. As far as the EU is concerned, what needs to be understood is that it must vigorously

⁷ The retention of telecommunications data is also strictly regulated by the Council of Europe Convention for the Protection of Individuals with regard to the processing of personal information and by EU law.

protect its borders, by rewarding the Mediterranean countries with staff, resources and, of course, political support. Especially in the age of challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, this need has become urgent (Papadakis & Zafeiris, 2020).

However, a joint action plan, after ongoing discussions begins and is based on universal values, in a common asylum and immigration policy based on the principles of non-discrimination, against undeclared work, trafficking, illegal immigration and international crime, in a genuine integration policy to promote a united society, greater assistance to migrant areas and an active and cohesive development policy for poor countries (Kotroyannos et al, 2019).

Economy vs Democracy

Every day, we become spectators of negative news regarding the financial difficulties of international companies, seeking state aid. Most states are facing deficit government balance sheets. Everything that we took for granted and contributed to the prosperity of the humanity is being re-examined. Until recently, unemployment and low wages were largely equated with a lack of skilled workers. All these movements, which contributed to the improvement of the way of life of the people, will no longer have an impact on our today's society, which is called to be reborn from its ashes and ultimately democracy is affected in all its economic, social and other sectors. Social inequalities that have always existed will widen and the notion of solidarity provided by the welfare state policies is being contested (Kotroyannos et al., 2013). Hence, the globalization of financial markets also affects the quality of democracy that each country will implement (Geissel et al., 2016: 572-573).

“The neo-liberal state, as it evolves bureaucratically, becomes even stronger, and as powerful as it becomes, it empties the citizen of its basic power. This experience of misery in Marxist criticism ultimately makes those who are deprived of goods and exploited tend towards a certain solidarity which essentially makes oppression an educational process” (Skoulas, 2013: 58). Solidarity is the word that prevails everywhere and especially nowadays due to the coronavirus pandemic. We are leading a revision plan of labor relations both internationally and locally, and more specifically of democratic, constitutional collective agreements in all sectors of the economy. The main pillars of each country's economy, such as tourism, may be revised. Unemployment in Greece is declining (Greek Statistical Authority, 2020) but at the same time employers in the tourism sector, for example⁸, are already claiming wage cuts.

⁸For further details see: <https://money-tourism.gr/poeet-anoichti-epistolli-ston-prothypoyrgo-zitontas-stirixi-stoys-ergazomenoys/> (In Greek).

However, as it has already been proven, the business sector will rise to the occasion, guided by the fundamental rights of employees⁹. Democracy stems from the balance of power between capital and the state (Mazageri & Monroe, 2018). Finding the middle ground is more imperative than ever, sitting at the table of dialogue wounded but realized.

Religion vs Democracy

Religion has played an important role not only in the foundation of civilizations throughout history, but also in modern international relations and in numerous important events on the world stage. In Europe, the transition from 18th century Piousnessism¹⁰ to the spiritual movement of the Enlightenment¹¹ marks a new era in which the autonomy - freedom and dignity of the individual is confronted with the totalitarianism and authoritarianism of the church, thus transforming the individual's relationship to society and state. The centralized state of the Baroque era is gradually changing into a state of prosperity and law in the Enlightenment, and through a series of reforms in the internal administration of the state Europe passes from totalitarianism, and through enlightened domination, to the French Revolution. The theoretical approaches in the sociology of religion can be divided into those that see the roots of religion in the needs and predispositions of individuals and those that believe that its roots lie in social procedures and "grow" in the characteristics of society and social groups (Hamilton, 2001)¹².

In the effort for religious liberalization, the acceptance of modernity and secularism created fundamentalism as a response to the imposition of the new thought with the basic feature the idea of the infallibility of the sacred texts and the sacred tradition of the faith. The economic crisis has led to the dangerous collapse of social complexity and the symbolic prevalence of Manichaeism or polarized oversimplifications of reality, creating suitable conditions for the development of all kinds of stereotypes, prejudices and extreme ideologies and beliefs (Tsekeris, 2018: 44). By separating the process of secularization from that of sanctification, religion moves away from its purely religious character, taking a more secular dimension (Woodhead et al., 2009). It is a fact that we are living in a time of general uncertainty (Tsekeris, 2018: 229-236) that challenges and delegitimizes democratic institutions and values and leads to "a deep conservative and dangerous for democracy immersion in

⁹ For further details see: <https://www.hhf.gr/2020/11/26/%ce%b4%ce%b5%ce%bb%cf%84%ce%af%ce%bf-%cf%84%cf%8d%cf%80%ce%bf%cf%85-26-11-2020/> (In Greek).

¹⁰ A mutiny within Lutheranism that was active from the late 17th to the mid-18th century and advocates a return to religious thought and is deeply wary of human nature.

¹¹ An 18th century mutiny that sets a more optimistic attitude towards the world and man.

¹² The former is further divided into those who emphasize cognitive processes (intellectualism) and those who emphasize emotions (sentimentality).

introversion, conspiracy theories and hostility" setting religion to function as a dynamic platform for ideological, social and cultural conflicts. At its entrance, in a postmodern course, religious mobility will have the opportunity through more reflectivity, individuality and autonomy to follow a democratic path in favor of structural changes and reforms with fewer contradictions, contradictions and exclusions.

In entering this postmodern course, religious mobility will have the opportunity through more reflection, individuality and autonomy to follow a democratic path in favor of structural change and reform with fewer contradictions, contrasts and exclusions.

Conclusion

“Never before has the task of philosophical reflection been as heavy and difficult as nowadays. This is probably the reason why our era is in a hurry to declare the end of philosophy, the impasse of metaphysics or the need for us all to submit to the Law revealed by an inaccessible Other” (Kastoriadis, 1992: 2)

Democracy refers to a complex mixture of higher levels of morality, religion, education, technology, philosophy, art and possibly other sectors. So, living the beginning of the new era, we observe the changes and look for opportunities. Many times, we can understand very well the pieces of an image, but we find it difficult to see the whole. We walk confidently from tree to tree, but are surprised when we discover that we are lost in the forest.

Summarizing, therefore, the joint action on the one hand, public, private, religious and transnational bodies, which is based on universal values and stems from the balance between capital and state but also structural religious changes and reforms with fewer contradictions, contrasts and exclusions and the new electronic means, on the other hand, which can achieve what the traditional structures of modern democracy cannot, namely the direct participation of citizens in the commons, are the ones that will promote the perfection of democracy. *“Oh Democracy, where will you lead us?”*¹³.

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¹³ Aristophanes, 445-386 BC, Ancient Greek comedian (Ornithes): «δημοκρατία, ποι προβιάς ημάς ποτε;»

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