



Making Better Use of Lessons From Abroad For American Democracy

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Comparative perspectives have traditionally carried little weight in U.S. politics. American politicians routinely invoke the idea of the United States as “[the greatest democracy in the world](#),” and efforts to highlight alternative ideas about how to organize or practice democracy have long faced tough sledding. Even for those Americans who do not embrace the notion of U.S. political superiority, the many distinctive features of the United States and its politics—from its size and relative geographic separateness to the unique U.S. Constitution—often deter them from looking abroad for lessons. Even many academics are disinclined to apply a comparative lens to the United States—political science departments at most universities separate the study of American politics from comparative politics.

But this outlook is changing. An unforeseen effect of Donald Trump’s presidency has been a surge of comparative inquiry, with scholars, journalists, and political commentators increasingly raising examples from abroad in their analyses of the United States’ democratic woes.

The most pressing motivation behind the new search for comparative insights on American democracy is Trump himself. Many unsettled Americans wonder how similar he is to illiberal strongmen in other countries, what the trajectories of these leaders can reveal about the United States’ political fate, and whether there are useful lessons from abroad about how to preserve democracy in the face of a leader with openly antidemocratic instincts and attitudes. The resounding success of [Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt’s *How Democracies Die*](#), an insightful and thoughtful analysis of democratic backsliding across Europe and Latin America, is one testament to this new hunger for comparative perspectives.

But the comparative curiosity extends beyond Trump. Glaring operational deficiencies in U.S. democracy—from poorly administered elections and endless gridlock to partisan power grabs in states that have elected new governors—are fueling interest in wider perspectives on political reform. Maine’s recent adoption of ranked choice voting, for example, was motivated in part by [comparative lessons about electoral systems in other](#)



democracies. Even the U.S. Constitution, traditionally considered sacrosanct, is receiving useful scrutiny. In *How to Save a Constitutional Democracy*, Tom Ginsburg and Aziz Huq bring to bear formidable comparative learning to diagnose how the Constitution is contributing to serious democratic deficiencies and how they could be alleviated.

This opening to the world is welcome—and long overdue. American society and politics certainly have many unusual features, but the laws of physics, metaphorically speaking, apply to U.S. politics as much as to the politics of any other country. Few of America's democratic dysfunctions are unheard of elsewhere. Many other countries have grappled with—and overcome—similar challenges, including flawed election administration, legislative gridlock, surging political corruption, voter alienation, and many other issues confronting the United States.

FOUR GUIDELINES

While interest in comparative insights and lessons is surging, there are still formidable challenges to incorporating them into policymaking and public debate. Comparisons to peer countries like Canada and the United Kingdom are already hard enough for some Americans to swallow. Opening up the national mind to see parallels and draw lessons from countries as diverse as, say, Chile, South Africa, and India is a serious challenge. Based on the authors' recent experiences advancing comparative research on U.S. democracy, adhering to four guidelines will help those who produce or disseminate such analysis most effectively sway skeptics and spark reform efforts.

First, *avoid using the comparative perspective simply to shock Americans.* Yes, Trump does bear a resemblance to various foreign antidemocratic strongmen. But superficial comparisons that highlight troubling parallels without analyzing the full picture, including those institutions and practices that do or don't keep

a particular leader in check, shed more heat than light. Bleak proclamations, such as Masha Gessen's warning after Trump's election that “institutions will not save you,” are less helpful than analyses of both the relative vulnerabilities and strengths of American institutions. And studies should not only enumerate cases of **democratic collapse** but also examine those of **democratic survival and renewal**. Cherry-picking comparisons to paint dire portraits of the current state of U.S. democracy undermines Americans' willingness to think seriously about lessons and experiences from abroad.

Second, *be wary of superficial “solutionism.”* It can be exhilarating to toss out solutions from other countries to problems bedeviling the United States. But it is not helpful to do so without exploring the underlying context of the country where the solution was achieved, and how it resembles or differs from the United States. Political commentators eager to share academic findings about the benefits of a particular political institution or arrangement must be sure also to take note of research that illuminates its likely shortcomings if imported to the United States. For example, **several high-profile authors** have recently called for establishing proportional representation in the United States as a way to encourage the formation of third parties and push the existing parties toward the center. Yet these analyses often fail to examine how proportional representation operates in presidential systems as opposed to parliamentary systems. In fact, the combination of proportional representation and presidentialism tends to **encourage pork-barrel politics, reduce democratic accountability, and even heighten the risk of democratic instability.**

Third, *focus on how, not just what.* Effective comparative research must be grounded in analysis that identifies where opportunities for reform exist in the United States and how particular reforms can be achieved. Even when comparative studies of possible reform packages avoid the pitfalls of superficial solutionism and carefully take context into account, one cannot expect them, in and of themselves, to gain any traction or even attention.

A beautifully elaborated study of options for campaign finance reform based on the experiences of other countries may seem powerful in both its critique and the alternative ideas it offers. Yet if it is not aligned with any actual reform impulse or window, it will simply die on the shelf. The biggest obstacle to democratic reforms in the United States is not the lack of ideas about solutions, but rather the lack of reform consensus and viable reform processes. Comparative research needs to be focused as much on lessons about *how* reform can be generated and advanced as *what* specific reforms should be.

Fourth, *appeal to America's competitive spirit*. One useful result of the [widespread belief in American exceptionalism](#) is that many Americans feel their country can and should top global rankings, whether for Olympic gold medals or policy outcomes, and are upset when it lags behind. Comparative perspectives in public debates over U.S. education policy have surged over the past two decades, reflecting repeated stories about how foreign students are outperforming U.S. students in international tests of key skills. The conversation around U.S. healthcare policy has also embraced foreign comparisons in recent years, demonstrating the blunt force efficacy of highlighting basic facts about the steep costs and poor outcomes of healthcare in the United State vis-à-vis peer countries. Presenting democratic shortcomings through clear, telling factual comparisons—again and again—can help turn the swirl of anxiety and sense of failure into a clear agenda for how the United States can improve the basic functioning of its system, relative to other democracies.

A REFORM MOMENT

The problems facing U.S. democracy are daunting and the obstacles to enacting reform—above all, the debilitating polarization that renders bipartisan cooperation so difficult—are discouraging. Yet the seriousness of these problems is producing some new impetus for political reform, manifested in the Democrats' draft bill [H. R. 1](#), in draft bills in various state legislatures, and in initiatives from various nonpartisan civic groups. Ideas, experiences, and lessons from other countries are not reform panaceas but, if properly researched, disseminated, and discussed, they can help magnify the potential of this new reform moment.

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NOTES

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