

# Liberal Democracy's Advantage in Addressing COVID-19

COMMENTARY

By [Peter Berkowitz](#) - RCP Contributor  
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“While in Beijing, the WHO Director-General Tedros Adhanom [Ghebreyesus] extolled China as a model in the war against SARS-CoV-2, better known as ‘coronavirus,’” [reports](#) Josef Joffe in The American Interest. “According to China’s state media, he [the director-general] gushed that ‘China’s speed . . . and efficiency . . . is the advantage of China’s system.’”

Don’t bet on it. The smart money should be placed on liberal democracies -- governments based on consent and devoted to securing citizens’ rights -- to most effectively weather the storm.

Owing to employment of new artificial-intelligence technology and the ability to monitor and command its population, the Communist Party of China [may](#) have arrested the spread of the new and highly contagious virus within its own borders. But it has been in suppressing information about the coronavirus – which originated late last year in the city of Wuhan -- that the CCP has truly demonstrated speed and efficiency. That baleful accomplishment, which owes everything to China’s autocratic system, has had calamitous worldwide consequences.

By punishing doctors and journalists who sought to warn about the virus born in Wuhan, the Chinese government ensured the swift spread of disease in the city, then throughout central China’s Hubei Province, and soon around the globe. The pandemic, which has shut down great swaths of public life and of the private sector in a multitude of nations, is a direct result of the CCP’s despotism, which polices speech, punishes dissent, and promulgates rank propaganda.

Despite these characteristic features of autocracy, World Health Organization Director-General Tedros’ praise for China reflects a common conviction about autocracy’s strong points. As New York Times columnist Thomas Friedman [opined](#) in 2009, “One-party autocracy certainly has its drawbacks. But when it is led by a reasonably enlightened group of people, as China is today, it can also have great advantages.” The singular advantage of what Friedman refers to as “one-party autocracy” -- contrary to his suggestion, there is no other sort -- is its ability, he asserted, to simply “impose the politically difficult but critically important policies needed to move a society forward in the 21st century.”

Over the last hundred years, [Carl Schmitt](#) -- “the ‘Crown Jurist’ of National Socialism” -- has advanced the most learned arguments for autocracy’s advantages. In “The Concept of the Political” (1927), Schmitt maintains that it is a mistake to believe, as the American political

tradition teaches, that the purpose of government is to secure unalienable rights -- those rights inherent in all persons. Properly understood, asserts Schmitt, politics is grounded not in what human beings share but in the fundamental distinction between friend and enemy: that is, those who are willing to risk their lives by fighting at your side and those who wish to kill you and those at your side. In Schmitt's view, only a sovereign dictator -- unhobbled by the conviction that all human beings are by nature free and equal -- can draw the distinction between friend and enemy accurately and resolutely act on it to defend the nation.

That autocracy possesses advantages in undertaking the decisive, ruthless and far-seeing action that politics demands at home and abroad borders on conventional wisdom. Even liberal democracy's loyal proponents are given to wondering whether the very principles and institutions that enable governments grounded in freedom and equality to safeguard human rights impair their ability to handle domestic emergencies and hold their own in foreign affairs against autocratic powers unfettered by respect for the dignity of the individual.

In an era of heightened great-power competition, the question of how liberal democracy stacks up against autocracy takes on heightened significance.

Matthew Kroenig thinks that the conventional wisdom that gives the advantage to autocracy is deeply mistaken. In "The Return of Great Power Rivalry: Democracy and Autocracy From the Ancient World to the U.S. and China," he advances a "democratic advantage thesis." According to Kroenig, "democracies enjoy a built-in advantage in long-run geopolitical competition."

They outperform autocracies, moreover, not despite their distinguishing commitments -- to religious liberty and free speech, private property and free markets, separation of powers and checks and balances -- but because of them. "The very constraints on government power and a strict rule-of-law system that some may see as signs of democratic weakness are, in fact, democracy's greatest strengths," he asserts. Drawing on political philosophy, empirical political science, and history, Kroenig makes a compelling case.

A professor of government and foreign service at Georgetown University and deputy director of the Scowcroft Center for Strategy and Security at the Atlantic Council, Kroenig understands democracy not merely to be rule by the people, but also a regime in which the people elect representatives to serve in government and in which freedom flourishes because government sets limits on the will of the majority. Consequently, liberal democracy coupled with a market economy appears to be, from Kroenig's perspective, the fully developed form of democracy.

Thanks to their freedom, argues Kroenig, democracies are better than autocracies at fostering the industriousness, innovation, and entrepreneurship, and promoting the commerce and international trade that generate economic growth. Democracies fare better in diplomacy because they are more dependable allies. And democracies surpass autocracies in military might because their more diversified and efficient economies enable them to produce more, and more sophisticated, weapons, and because, unlike autocracies, democracies are not compelled to divert military resources to the domestic sphere to defend the regime from its own, typically repressed and resentful, population.

According to Kroenig, Machiavelli -- no stranger to the harsh realities of politics -- grasped the logic of the democratic advantage. In "The Discourses on Livy," he advises the wise prince to establish a republic. By promoting the well-being of the people, Machiavelli explains, a prince can gain the security and glory to which he rightly aspires: "For it is seen through experience that cities have never expanded either in dominion or in riches if they have not been in freedom."

Empirical research confirms Machiavelli's assessment. Kroenig presents data about the international system covering 1816 to 2007 indicating that democracies tend to acquire more economic, diplomatic, and military strength than autocracies. They "are also more likely to rank among the 'major powers'" and "are more likely to become the most powerful state in the system." The results are all the more striking, Kroenig notes, considering the limited number of democracies: "Democracies' strangle-hold on global hegemony occurs despite the fact that, throughout this time period, democracies have been rarer than autocracies, making up only about 35 percent of all the observations in the data."

History provides still more dramatic evidence for Kroenig's democratic advantage thesis. Case studies are limited because until the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, democracies were rare. Nevertheless, Kroenig identifies seven seminal great-power rivalries stretching across more than two millennia pitting democracy against autocracy: classic Athens against Persia and then Sparta; the Roman Republic against Carthage and then Macedon; in the Middle Ages and stretching to the dawn of modernity, the Venetian Republic against the Byzantine Empire and then the Duchy of Milan; the 16<sup>th</sup>- and 17<sup>th</sup>-century Dutch Republic against the Spanish Empire; the 19<sup>th</sup> century clash between Great Britain and France; and, in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the United Kingdom against Germany and the United States against the Soviet Union.

With the exception of Sparta's triumph over Athens in the Peloponnesian War, the democracies prevailed in these landmark confrontations. In each instance -- including Athens' defeat of Persia -- victory was owed to free and open political institutions, which produced a more prosperous economy, a more extensive and reliable network of allies, and a more formidable military force. When democracies do lose their great-power status, Kroenig's case studies suggest, it is the result of departure from their principles or breakdown of their defining political institutions.

The lesson for the United States, concludes Kroenig, is the importance of nurturing "its greatest source of strength." That source is not "its innovative economy" or "its global network of alliances" or "its military dominance." Rather, these critical strengths are themselves the product of liberal democracy in America.

Kroenig's analysis also suggests that it was dedication to free and democratic political institutions at home that, in the post-World War II era, enabled the United States to take the lead in building a free and open international order that favors nations devoted to democracy and human rights. And that such dedication will be critical to preserving the U.S.-led international order in the face of 21<sup>st</sup> century threats and opportunities.

The worldwide pandemic unleashed by autocratic China does not alter the analysis of liberal democracy's advantages in dealing with global challenges. If anything, it redoubles the significance of the analysis.

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Links:

<https://www.the-american-interest.com/2020/03/17/on-coronavirus-beware-the-totalitarian-temptation/>

<https://asiatimes.com/2020/03/chernobyl-moment-or-chinese-ascendancy/>

<https://www.nytimes.com/2009/09/09/opinion/09friedman.html>

<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/schmitt/>