

Progressives See Extremism Only on the Other Side

COMMENTARY

By [Peter Berkowitz](#) - RCP Contributor
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Sweden's Sept. 11 elections [shocked](#) intellectuals throughout the West. The Sweden Democrats – a nationalist-populist party founded in 1988 with neo-Nazi allegiances but which turned away from fascism in the early 2000s and now explicitly rejects it – gave the country's right a governing majority by earning the second-largest number of votes. The intellectuals' shock, however, shows that they have not been paying attention. Had they been examining voters' discontents in Europe, the United Kingdom, and the United States, and giving thought to the destabilizing consequences for liberal democracy in the West posed by elite imperiousness, overreach, and underperformance, they would have seen the right-wing reaction brewing.

As in Britain's vote for Brexit in 2016 and Donald Trump's victory in U.S. presidential elections that year, working-class, small-town, and rural voters in Sweden last month delivered a striking reproach to well-educated urban and suburban elites. And for similar reasons. Leaning left on economics and right on culture, the new national-populists in Sweden united in opposition to the surge in crime and drug-gang-fueled violence that swept the nation in the aftermath of the government's decision in the mid-2010s to take in more migrants per capita than any other European Union country. Meanwhile, numerous working-class, small-town, and rural voters in the U.K. and the U.S. reject policies such as open borders and lax law enforcement as well as the identity politics and cancel culture associated with progressive elites.

The wave may not have crested. Last week, Italy gave its own nationalist-populist party the opportunity to form a new government. Brothers of Italy is headed by Giorgia Meloni, a 45-year-old mother who [defends](#) God, country, and family because she believes they are under attack by those who want to convert people into “the perfect consumer” and “slaves” who are “at the mercy of financial speculators.”

Distrust and resentment of elites drive populist politics throughout the West. Many people believe that elites don’t listen to their opinions, don’t take their problems seriously, don’t respect their way of life, and don’t share their understanding of the nation.

[“A Crisis Coming: The Twin Threats to American Democracy,”](#) by Pulitzer Prize winning New York Times journalist David Leonhardt, unwittingly corroborates these beliefs. The Times featured Leonhardt’s long, ambitious essay only days after the populist turn that rocked Sweden in mid-September. Those who rely on his analysis to understand the constellation of forces roiling the United States are likely to be caught off guard again.

Despite his dulcet tones, insights into extremism in right-wing strongholds, and astute observations about how the American constitutional system shapes the distribution of power in government, Leonhardt offers a skewed analysis. He amplifies the threats to the country stemming from the right while minimizing or passing over those from the left. He promulgates a fundamental misunderstanding of the purposes of American constitutional government that bolsters his indictment of conservatives. In the process of emboldening prejudices against the right indulged by many loyal Times readers, Leonhardt fuels a threat to America’s political cohesiveness that he studiously overlooks: the left’s propensity to vilify the right as an existential danger to the nation.

“American democracy is facing two distinct threats,” according to Leonhardt, “which together represent the most serious challenge to the country’s governing ideal in decades.” The first, he

maintains, “is acute: a growing movement inside one of the country’s two major parties – the Republican Party – [to refuse to accept defeat](#) in an election.”

Leonhardt reports that “Hundreds of elected officials around the country falsely claim that the 2020 election was rigged.” This heightens the risk, he believes, that they will “overturn an election in 2024 or beyond.” While providing scant evidence that those who believe that the 2020 election was defective are prepared to reverse a lawful election in 2024, he does cite in support of his doomsday forecast the dark speculation of Johns Hopkins University political scientist and democracy expert Yascha Mounk: ““There is the possibility, for the first time in American history, that a legitimately elected president will not be able to take office.””

Notwithstanding valid worries about the incendiary rhetoric emanating from sectors on the right, Leonhardt’s dire warnings are based on flawed analysis. For starters, he conflates recognition that Joe Biden is the lawfully elected president and agreement with progressives that the conduct of the 2020 election was unexceptionable. But the election was fraught with opportunities for abuse because government officials invoked COVID-19 concerns to loosen procedures [to allow for](#) early and mail-in voting. The election was also marred by journalistic malpractice and government misconduct. In October 2020, the mainstream media suppressed the New York Post’s accurate [story](#) of Hunter Biden’s abandoned laptop and the FBI [prodded](#) Facebook to collaborate in covering up the drug use and apparent Biden family influence peddling that the laptop revealed.

Moreover, given that in seven of the last eight presidential elections Republicans have lost the popular vote, as Leonhardt himself points out, renegade Republicans would be unlikely to enjoy the public backing needed to overturn a close election. An additional consideration is that nullifying a duly held election requires substantial support well beyond ordinary voters, but, as in 2020, there is every reason to suppose that in 2024 the military, police, Wall Street, Silicon Valley, Hollywood, mainstream media, and universities would vigorously oppose right-wing efforts to set aside a

properly certified election. Finally, contrary to Leonhardt's contention that challenging election results is a right-wing innovation in American politics, Democrats in this century – from Al Gore's attempt in November 2000 to overcome Republican George W. Bush's apparent victory in the presidential election by asking Florida courts to order partial recounts in carefully selected Democratic-majority counties, to Hillary Clinton's persistent characterization of Donald Trump as an "[illegitimate president](#)" – have made major contributions to eroding the people's confidence in the nation's electoral system.

"The second threat to democracy," Leonhardt writes, "is chronic but also growing: The power to set government policy is becoming increasingly disconnected from public opinion." His most telling observation is that the equal representation that the Constitution gives each state in the Senate has combined with demographic changes to create imbalances favoring conservative minorities. Progressives, he notes, increasingly live in big cities and inner suburbs and conservatives in the outer suburbs and beyond. In addition, large states have grown much faster than small states: "In 1790, the largest state (Virginia) had about 13 times as many residents as the smallest (Delaware)," according to Leonhardt. "Today, California has 68 times as many residents as Wyoming; 53 times as many as Alaska, and at least 20 times as many as other states." America's ideological sorting and the entrenchment of a few highly populated blue states and several lightly populated red states have improved the ability of Republican national minorities to block congressional legislation.

Then again, constraining majority will to safeguard basic rights and fundamental freedoms is a leading feature of the Constitution. Leonhardt gestures in this direction: "Instead of a direct democracy the founders created a republic, with elected representatives to make decisions, and a multilayered government, in which different branches checked each other." But he muddies matters by misleadingly citing James Madison in [Federalist 51](#) and Alexander Hamilton's [May 1777 letter](#) (written 10 years before the Constitution was drafted) to support the proposition that "the founders [believed that majority will](#) — defined as the prevailing view of enfranchised citizens — should generally dictate national policy."

Within constitutional limits, majority will should prevail, but Leonhardt's majoritarianism reflects several confusions. First, the principal aim of American constitutional government is not to ensure that the majority's every passing fancy and consuming passion will become the law of the land, but to protect freedom by securing individual rights. Second, while the just powers of government derive from the people, Madisonian constitutionalism emphasizes institutional remedies for democracy's propensity to tyranny of the majority. As Madison states in [Federalist 51](#): "If a majority be united by a common interest, the rights of the minority will be insecure." Third, Hamilton explains in [Federalist 78](#) that the Supreme Court – which Leonhardt criticizes for recent "rulings on abortion, climate policy and gun laws that seemed to be inconsistent with majority opinion" – is designed as a counter-majoritarian institution. Its job is not to ratify popular preferences but to ensure that government operates within its constitutional boundaries.

While exaggerating threats to constitutional democracy in America from the right, Leonhardt neglects serious ones from the left. These dangers include the weaponization of the [IRS](#), the [FBI](#), and the [Department of Justice](#) against conservatives; the chummy relationship between the federal bureaucracy, the Democratic Party, Big Tech and the media – all disposed to censor news that reflects badly on their side; a sprawling and frequently unaccountable administrative state that makes, executes, and adjudicates controversies over the law; and an educational system that pushes progressive ideology.

To preserve liberal democracy in America – and throughout the West – progressive elites must address not only the other side's extremism but also their own.

Peter Berkowitz is the Tad and Dianne Taube senior fellow at the Hoover Institution, Stanford University. From 2019 to 2021, he served as director of the Policy Planning Staff at the U.S. State Department. His writings are posted at PeterBerkowitz.com and he can be followed on Twitter [@BerkowitzPeter](https://twitter.com/BerkowitzPeter).

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