

Marvel Heroes: Defenders of Democracy

How stable is democracy in a post-Brexit, post-Trump world?

When the UK goes to the polls, its public is presented with an opportunity to vote in a government that will be broadly representative of one of a number of political and economic ideologies: liberal, conservative, nationalist, socialist, capitalist, green... No matter who's elected, what doesn't change are the democratic principles underpinning our system of governance.



Thankfully elections in the UK don't give the victor the right to dismantle our democratic parliament.

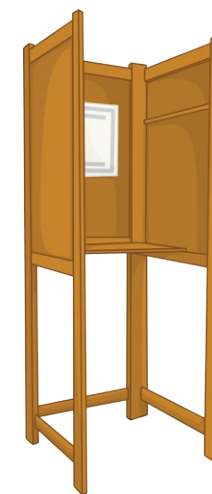
It would be a grave mistake, though, to take democracy for granted. Our political parties can bicker and squabble as much as they like, as long as the system makes them accountable to the people they ostensibly serve by allowing us to decide who's wrong or right, in favour or out. It seems a simple policy but at various times in recent history and quite close to home, political tensions have escalated to the point that they have required force rather than democracy to resolve them.

In 1936, novelist and political essayist George Orwell – who was an outspoken supporter of socialism, a belief system that advocates the market economy working for the benefit of society as a whole – travelled to Spain to join the Civil War, fighting on the side of the Socialists against the Fascists. American writer Henry Miller informed him that his ideas about 'combating Fascism, defending democracy, etc., etc., were all baloney'. And so it proved.

Not only was Orwell extremely fortunate to survive being shot in the throat by a sniper, his faith in socialism was shaken by being charged

with espionage and treason by the Soviet-backed Communists who he had mistaken as allies! With in-fighting on the left side, it should come as no surprise to learn that the fascist right emerged victorious in Spain. The absurdities of the situation are documented in his 1938 treatise 'Homage to Catalonia', but Orwell's questioning of political motives and machinations, given further ammunition by the events of the Second World War, more famously gave rise to the 1945 novel 'Animal Farm'. The fairy tale style story of greedy pigs seizing control of their animal comrades' utopian estate is actually an allegory for Soviet dictator Joseph Stalin's betrayal of socialist ideals.

Despite its roots in Ancient Greece, democracy is not the entrenched form of governance in many civilizations. Not even in "Great" Britain. At least not if we assume that the basis of democracy is the egalitarian vision of one person = one vote.



Democracy as we know it today only really started with the Reform Act of 1832, which brought about a much-needed remodelling of the voting system. Until this time, the anomalies of earlier feudal statutes meant that our democracy was hopelessly skewed. There existed what were called “rotten boroughs”, of which Old Sarum in Salisbury – consisting of seven voters with the right to elect two members of parliament and containing not a single habitable building among its acres of rolling fields – was perhaps the most notorious. Rapidly growing centres of industry such as Birmingham and Manchester were awfully disenfranchised in comparison

to the landed gentry. And the idea of a secret ballot was deliberately disregarded; votes could be bought and landowners openly victimised tenants who failed to vote for their favoured candidates. The Romans on the other hand had learnt to conceal their vote as early as 139 BC when, rather than choices being recorded orally by “tellers”, it became common practice to mark a tablet and place it in an urn.

The Economist Intelligence Unit Democracy Index map for 2016. The higher the ranking (blue), the stronger the democracy.

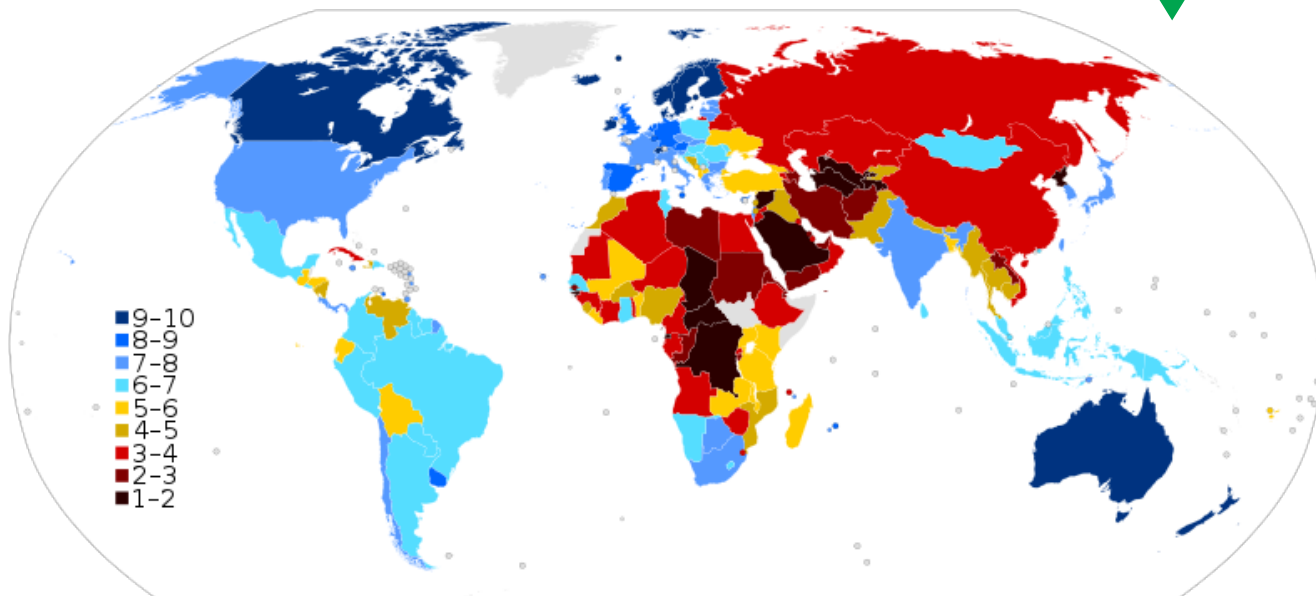


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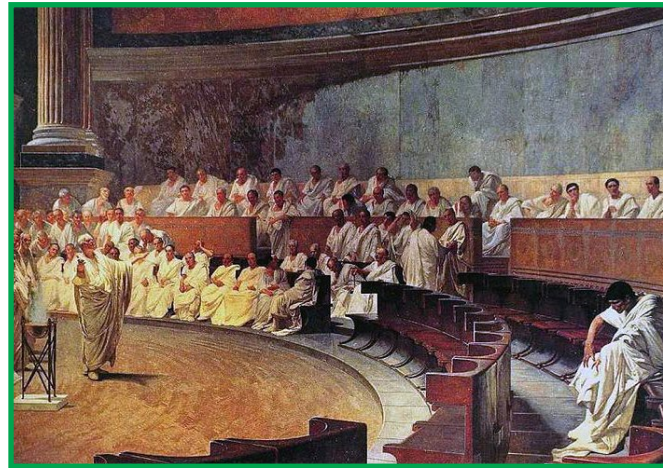
When the reformed UK parliament assembled in January 1833, it might not have looked radically different to the common man but the Duke of Wellington was moved to comment on the lowered standards of gentleman present, claiming that he had ‘never seen so many shocking bad hats’. If the seas of change did not immediately sweep away the old guard (the prominence of Old Etonians in twenty-first century government will lead many to argue that it never has), the Reform Act certainly constituted a turning tide. Even though you still needed to own property to qualify to vote, the growing middle-class had swollen the electorate to 813,000. Universal suffrage, however, remained distant – at this stage not even the extremists alarmingly contending that everyone should have the right to vote were including women in their argument!



It would be interesting to know where the United Kingdom of 1832 ranks on the Democracy Index, a scale that has been used since 2006 to measure the state of democracy across the globe. Devised by the Economist Intelligence Unit, nations are scored on sixty factors beginning with 'are elections free and fair?' and are then categorised as full democracies, flawed democracies, hybrid regimes or authoritarian regimes and placed in a league table.

And how did the United Kingdom of 2016 fare? Of the 19 countries classed as full democracies, we sat 16th. Just outside the top tier, in the considerably larger group of flawed democracies, were the United States, France, Italy and Belgium. Anyone surprised at the positioning of the US, the supposed champions of democracy, should be directed to the headlines surrounding the election of President Trump and the alleged involvement of the Russians in rigging the election in his favour. Russia, by the way, are placed 134th, below Iraq, Ethiopia, Vietnam and Togo, but above Iran, Uzbekistan and, bottom of the heap, North Korea. Of the world's population, a paltry 4.5% live under full democracies, as opposed to 32.7% living under authoritarian regimes.

It would be fascinating to hear Orwell's take on the politics of Planet Earth 2017...



The birthplace of democracy – spot the women and the working class.