



BY DAVID BOAZ

“  
Across  
the Western  
democracies  
the percent-  
age of people  
who say it  
is ‘essential’  
to live in a  
democracy  
has plum-  
meted.  
”

EDITORIAL

# Defending Liberal Values

**I**lliberalism and authoritarianism seem to be on the rise worldwide. Of course, most of history is characterized by authoritarianism and illiberalism. But a democratic wave that began in the 1970s and peaked around 1989 seems to have reversed lately. Nearly 75 percent of the world’s people live in a country that faced a decline in freedom in 2020, and that trend continues.

I don’t have space to list all the authoritarian or illiberal countries—Russia and China are no surprise, though it’s disappointing that what seemed like progress in both countries is now being reversed. Saudi Arabia and many Central Asian and African countries have been mired in authoritarianism for decades. Perhaps more worrisome is the rise of authoritarianism in countries like Turkey, Hungary, Venezuela, Mexico, the Philippines, and India.

American libertarians have usually identified the left as the biggest threat to ordered liberty, especially since the defeat of fascist powers in 1945. But now we see rising illiberalism and authoritarianism on both the right and the left.

We used to talk about the struggle between capitalism and communism; an important struggle it was and remains; but there are other ways of dividing the world. The British journalist Michael Hanlon in 2013 suggested a “morality gap” among the nations—those built on post-Enlightenment human rights, and the other half of the world that follows “a different moral code: might is right, all men were not created equal and there is a right and a wrong form of sexual orientation.” He wrote that “attitudes to homosexuality show the morality gap in sharpest relief. . . . Across a swath of northern Europe, much of the US and Canada, Latin America, Israel and much of east Asia,” there’s growing tolerance and legal equality. But not everywhere, and some parts of the world are actually regressing.

Sadly, it’s not just the “rest of the world” where retrograde attitudes can be found.

Across the Western democracies the percentage of people who say it is “essential” to live in a democracy has plummeted, and it is especially low among younger generations. In a 2014 U.S. survey, 32 percent said it would be better to have a “strong leader” who does not have to “bother with parliament and elections.”

So what does this mean for the Cato Institute? To begin with, it reminds us that our defense of liberal and libertarian ideas matters more than ever. Liberal values

from free markets to free speech are under assault, and they need a strong and principled defense. We won’t be alone in this effort. When we think of liberal values in the broad sense, we can find allies among free-market conservatives, free-speech liberals, and people who are often described as “fiscally conservative and socially liberal.” In the past few months, two prominent Democratic economists, Lawrence H. Summers and Jason Furman, spoke at Cato and demonstrated that most economists agree on a number of microeconomic reforms as well as on the broader necessity of private property, market exchange, and free trade. But part of our job is to persuade people of the value of a more robust commitment to individual rights and strictly limited government.

We combine our policy analysis with an emphasis on basic economic principles for average citizens. Libertarianism.org has published several short books on free markets, Austrian economics, and trade. We’ve added new experts and capabilities in the Herbert A. Stiefel Center for Trade Policy Studies and the Center for Monetary and Financial Alternatives. Ryan Bourne joined us as our first R. Evan Scharf Chair for the Public Understanding of Economics.

As conservatives have become less committed to free markets, so progressives have lost their commitment to free speech. At Cato we believe in the Bill of Rights, including the First Amendment, and we are working to protect and extend freedom of speech on campus, in the media, and in election communications. We oppose efforts to use the power of government to punish people for expressing dissenting opinions.

Around the world people look to the United States as a shining city on a hill, a beacon of “Liberty Enlightening the World,” the formal name of the Statue of Liberty. And liberals around the world look to the Cato Institute, which George Will called “the foremost upholder of the idea of liberty in the nation that is the foremost upholder of the idea of liberty.” So our job for 2023 and beyond is to stick to our principles, improve our defense and presentation of those ideas, and work to ensure that the United States improves its own commitment to individual rights and limited, constitutional government.