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Z+ Liberal democracy

It's slowly dawning

Trump wins, the German government collapses: The crisis of liberal democracy is accelerating. Stop the self-deception, we should look into the abyss.

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Trigger warning: This text assumes no liability for its potentially depressing effect. He will, for once, be neither confident nor constructive. With risks and side effects, you are on your own. But aren't you anyway?

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Donald Trump [<https://www.zeit.de/thema/donald-trump>] has won the election in the USA, he is the democratically elected president of the most important democracy in the world. On the same day, Olaf Scholz de facto dissolved the Ampel government in Berlin. Democracy as a form of government and society is not over with the first, world-politically major event and certainly not with the second. Many in the United States celebrate the thunderous victory of the rule of the people. Many in Germany say to the traffic light-off: Finally!

But both events are signs of an accelerating crisis of what we call liberal democracy. This is more than one election every four or five years. It is a special setting of rights and freedoms, of political and economic equality and participation. Functioning courts and parliaments, freedom of expression and protection of minorities. Compromised governments. This setting has shaped the past 70 years in the so-called West so much that it could be considered normal. Thus, the first Trump victory in 2016 appeared as an industrial accident, and the other triumphs of illiberal forces in other countries were and are usually treated as a deviation from normality. At the latest with the second victory of Trump, the deviation becomes normal.

When, if not now, is it time to deal with the perspective that we are not only dealing with limited crises and interim defeats? But with the fact that something comes to an end here. We are already in the midst of the decline of liberal democracy. And it may not be salvaceary. It is dawning - and that does not change the fact that in the constant turnarounds in many countries not only right-wing populists win, but recently also Donald Tusk, Keir Starmer, Joe Biden or even Olaf Scholz.

Rather, many of these election results show a fundamental dissatisfaction with the political system on closer inspection. Everything should always be completely different, and immediately. Politics commutes so unproductively between extremes. Liberal democracies, however, live by constructively processing distrust and discontent. They live by finding and explaining compromises that are binding beyond the day.

This works worse and worse, even in Germany. The end of the traffic light is by no means on par with Trump's victory, but it is another sign of the lameness, of the lack of power of democratic processes. At the end of his statement on the traffic light break, Olaf Scholz campaigned for compromises that they had "made the country strong". He conjured up the power of compromise so insistently that one could already guess a kind of melancholy behind it, an idea that it might now be over.

Democracies are exhausted. The majority of Germans no longer believe that any of the parties can solve the big problems [<https://www.n-tv.de/infografik/Forsa-politische-Kompetenz-der-Parteien-seit-Januar-2021-Stand-05-11-2024-article25337825.html>]. Instead, she is convinced that politicians do not understand their concerns anyway. These numbers have been constant or rising for years. Dissatisfaction solidifies in resignation.

Call everyone

How are you, Germany?

The traffic light coalition is at the end. What thoughts, worries and wishes for the future drive you?



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The fact that Trump's election is a nightmare [<https://www.zeit.de/politik/ausland/2024-11/wahl-sieg-donald-trump-us-wahl-folgen-europa>] describes on the one hand the situation and the mood aptly, at least in Germany, when it comes to the USA [<https://www.zeit.de/thema/usa>]. But the word also reveals how much we want to understand what is happening as unreal. How much we strive to mark it as a deviation, as a nocturnal horror, from which there can still be and will be an awakening, a return to the bright day. We

believe that liberal democracy must be saveable, civilized discourse, the protection of minorities, the effective separation of powers. That all this cannot go down, because it must not go down.

And in the process it has long been dying in relative silence, even here: In Neubrandenburg, Mecklenburg, the Lord Mayor resigned a few weeks ago. In an interview with the FAZ, Silvio Witt impressively described [<https://www.faz.net/aktuell/politik/inland/neubrandenburgs-buergermeister-silvio-witt-ueber-seinen-rueckzug-110050562.html>] how his own forces and the forces of local democracy were consumed over the years by the misanthropy of the right and the inaction of the majority. He describes how he - the homosexual - was dishonored without contradiction and personally defamed and yet at some point no one came to the expressions of solidarity. But then it apparently urges him to get rid of another appeal. And precisely to the civic sense, whose decay he himself had previously described: It is important to "understand oneself as a citizen," says Witt, and then, as if he were already aware of the fairness himself, to push it: "even if that sounds stuffy."

Witt's interview is typical. What is meant to be combative and hopeful seems helpless.

There are democracy defense routines, especially in Germany, that only have a sham: After state elections, SPD state general secretaries are supposed to explain on the radio how they want to stop populism. At book fair galas, ministers of state for culture and tabloid publishers are holding signs with "Choose democracy. Now!" High. And the many experts who are supposed to help save democracy recommend things like: Joining parties. Citizens' councils loose. Better argue. And beware of fake news!

Every fight is worth it

None of this is wrong. And no one deserves ridicule less than people who use their strength for good. Every little fight, every stage victory, is worth it. People need confidence. But they also need a clear look into the abyss. We must first understand where we stand and what lies ahead, without embellishment, before we can behave appropriately.

Does she really stabilize herself?

A mostly unspoken and therefore all the more powerful belief of liberal democratic consciousness so far is that democracy is stabilizing itself and getting better and better on its own. The political theorist Veith Selk calls this "progression thesis". We believe, to put it simply, firstly, that the liberal extension of civil rights and opportunities for participation in democracies cannot be reversed because people are getting used to it and no longer want to give it away. Secondly, we believe that only liberal democracy is able to adequately solve all the problems of modernity, and thus the state of the world, so to speak, with the mode of its processing, the political system, grows.

The third, and perhaps most important, is a positive image of man: citizens are becoming more and more educated and competent, which is why they can deal with all the upheavals, demands and losses that the present demands of them, confidently and democratically. The hope is that they are able and willing to see themselves as citizens, as the mayor of Neubrandenburg begged.

The US election result shatters this belief with the greatest possible *bang*. And it symbolically testifies to Selk's opposite, dark thesis of the "twilight of democracy". One has to do, he writes in the book of the same name [<https://www.zeit.de/kultur/literatur/2023-12/veith-selk-demokratiedaemmerung-demokratiethorie-politologe-rezension>], with an "anachronistic becoming of democracy in the context of progressive socio-evolutionary development". Simply put, time does not play for liberal democracy, but against it.

Over-demanding politics and its processes

Receipts? Politics is moving away from the elected parliaments because the time pressure (financial crisis!) and the complexity of the problems is too high for the slow deliberation. The power of unelected experts and bureaucrats is increasing, the promise of a truly representative democracy with elite control, accountability and popular sovereignty is being undermined. In addition, there is the end of the promise of economic progress that children will have a better time; digitization with its many new counter-publicities, which make a common public opinion-forming process impossible; an accelerating ecological catastrophe that acts as the final proof of the overstraining of politics and its processes. [<https://www.zeit.de/kultur/2024-10/naturkatastrophen-klimawandel-einfluss-mensch-verschwoerung>]

All this is not new. It is all the more irritating that until now we have so far mainly strove to reconcile these everyday experiences of political decline and our belief in the

survival of liberal democracy. With the help of "reinterpretation efforts and rationalization services", as Selk calls it.

More polemically, we waste our time with self-deception. And we are surprised when every small victory is followed by a great defeat, when after every moment of hope the backlash reliably whips through the country, when the big demonstrations against the right disappear, when everything that was well-intentioned only creates reaction in the end.

At the latest here, the question arises as to what follows from this. And the time would have come for appropriate advice, ideas, solutions. Readers expect this from the media, at least many journalists believe that. But now and here, after years of rather fruitless advice and ideas, and on day one after this ground-stopping choice - wouldn't it be more appropriate to first dare a fundamental shift in one's own perspective?

We stand at the abyss and finally look into the middle.