Alexander J. Davies August 8th, 2025

International Relations and Democracy in a Multipolar World – LSE Phelan US Centre Conference Review

From May 15 to 16th 2025, the Phelan US Centre hosted the conference, International relations and democracy in a multipolar world. The conference considered how important democratic discourses and practices are in the broader context of challenges to the US-led international order and the domestic contestation over the future trajectory of US foreign policy. **Alexander Jake Davies** *gives an overview of the presentations and discussions during the conference.*

Assessments of global democracy have grown increasingly fraught in recent years. According to a recent Pew Research Center survey, nearly two-thirds of adults across twelve high-income democracies are dissatisfied with democratic processes in their country, and a 2024 report from the Economist Intelligence Unit suggests that just 6.6 percent of the world's population now lives under what it qualifies as a 'full democracy.' Against this backdrop, a group of scholars gathered at LSE for the conference *International Relations and Democracy in a Multipolar World* to ask: what are the prospects, if any, for democracy in the international system? The conference was organised and sponsored by the LSE Phelan US Centre, and convened by Rohan Mukherjee (LSE Department of International Relations), Luca Tardelli (LSE Department of International Relations), Theresa Squatrito (LSE Department of International Relations), and Mathias Koenig-Archibugi (LSE Department of Government).

Democracy vs. Liberalism

From the outset, participants expressed a shared view that democratic principles were being increasingly challenged. Modern democracy, the opening panellists argued, was reliant on the postwar order, a framework they saw as steadily unravelling. In its place, suggested Professor

Dawisson Belém-Lopes (Federal University of Minas Gerais), emerges a “normative clash of worldviews”: a contest in which liberal democracy no longer assumes automatic primacy.

This initial diagnosis accompanied a broader inquiry that would reverberate throughout the event – what, precisely, do we mean by ‘democracy’? The participants held diverging views along various axes. Was democracy necessarily liberal? Was democracy an umbrella concept covering multiple components – as argued by Professor Alexandru Grigorescu (Loyola University Chicago) – or something more specific? Can it be traced back to Ancient Athens, or is this link unhelpful? These tensions surrounding how, or even if, democracy is bounded revealed not only a plurality of perspectives on democracy but an inherent ambiguity in the term itself. This ambiguity has important implications. If ‘democracy’ is such a broad term, then the question is not whether ‘democracy’ will continue to be practiced and proliferate, but rather *what kind* of ‘democracy’, and to what ends?

Many contributions helped refine these cleavages. Dr Maximillian Afnan (LSE), for example, explored what exactly ‘liberalism’ means. Despite frequently undergirding proposals for democratic governance both domestically and internationally, liberalism, it was argued, is not uniform, with different interpretations of liberalism containing competing internal visions and moral commitments. This prompts a broader question: what does liberalism require, and are those requirements universally desirable or appropriate? One of the most thought-provoking moments of the conference came amid this discussion in the form of a dialogue – sparked by Professor Daniele Archiburgi (Birkbeck, University of London) – on democratic efficacy. While there does appear to be a democratic dividend in terms of healthcare and life expectancy, if good governance was measured differently – say, in terms of economic growth – then is it the case that a high-growth autocratic regime exercises better governance than a slower-growing liberal democracy?

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What democracy means to political leaders

Later panels explored the conference's parallel concept of autocracy, with speakers such as Professor Maria Debre (Zeppelin University) exploring the use of democratic language by authoritarian actors. Her reflections were supported by later observations that democracy retains symbolic appeal even as its institutional substance is hollowed out. Put more colourfully by Professor Tobias Lenz (Leuphana University of Lüneburg), democratic rhetoric and attributes appear to be surprisingly "sticky". The discussion gave way to another point that echoed throughout the conference: that regardless of what 'democracy' contains, the overall container remains important for political leaders of all persuasions. Connected to this, several speakers noted that the ideological breadth of democracy renders it a powerful strategic tool that can be applied differently, and potentially inconsistently (as emphasised by LSE's Dr Rohan Mukherjee), between domestic and international settings.

Another division emerged during a panel exploring the role of civil society when participants debated the prospects of a global parliament. Are states and global elites likely to create such an institution and impose it on the international system, or is it necessarily a bottom-up endeavour requiring open information environments and following citizens' preferences? An array of impressive survey data from panellists Dr Farsan Ghassim (The Queen's College, University of Oxford) and Dr Agnes Yu (LSE) enriched this discussion. A similarly engaging dialogue took place during the final roundtable, this time on the social consolidation of democratic norms, the role of technological change, and assumptions of inevitable progress. In a world of artificial intelligence and biotechnology, is it possible to continue to democratise at the same pace of the past? Mixed conclusions were drawn on this point.

Defining democracy

I turn to two reflections to conclude this review, beginning with the necessity for a clear definition of democracy. As explored earlier, the concept of democracy was heavily contested among participants. To many, democracy could not simply be treated as a stable or self-evident good, using the resulting conceptual malleability to study 'democratic' traditions across divergent contexts with, at times, contradictory aims. From a normative standpoint, however, this is precisely the problem. To be worth defending, democracy must rest on fixed moral principles centred on individual liberty and limited government. If the term can be stretched to accommodate authoritarian regimes that simply adopt democratic language or procedures, it not only legitimates autocratic actors but also strips the concept of substantive meaning.

At the domestic level, this lack of a shared understanding may even actively degrade democratic culture. Consider how polarised conceptions of the term enabled both Donald Trump and Kamala Harris to label each other 'threats to democracy' in the 2024 US presidential election. Under such conditions, political discourse turns into a zero-sum game, with each loss signalling that democracy is failing (and that the opponent is illegitimate) rather than representing a natural part of a pluralist

system. Such framing legitimates destabilising actions. Recent data from the NCRI, for example, shows that 59.6 percent of surveyed 'left of centre' respondents in the United States consider it morally justifiable to destroy Tesla dealerships, with 56 percent believing it is morally justifiable to assassinate President Trump and, to a lesser extent (50.2 percent), Elon Musk. While this is just one case, such trends reveal the alarming consequences that arise from the lack of a shared moral and conceptual language.

Democracy survives through power

Finally, amidst such a rich and wide-ranging set of discussions, one is struck not only by what was said but by what remained marginal. Most notably, the question of military power received surprisingly limited sustained attention outside of the first panel and its discussion, yet it is ultimately the foundation upon which any political system rests. To speak of democratic governance without acknowledging the material foundation of order, particularly under conditions of rising geopolitical tension, risks abstraction. Ideals are carried or crushed by the movements of those who wield force and, to this end, global democracy depends just as heavily on strategic interests and hard power as it does on persuasion. This is not to reduce democracy to the exercise of violence, but rather to recognise that universal rights do not enforce themselves. Much in the same vein as the abolition of slavery was made possible through British naval might and the democratic innovation of the post-Cold War era was enabled by the dominance of the United States, today's contraction of democratic space cannot be understood apart from the resurgence of authoritarian actors willing to use force and a declining Western appetite to meet them. Democracy survives through power, not despite it. Recognising this anchors democratic principles more securely in the realities they must endure.

Watch the International Relations and Democracy in a Multipolar World Conference Opening Session

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- *More information about the International relations and democracy in a multipolar world conference is available on the Phelan US Centre's website.*

- *Listen to the Phelan US Centre's conference podcast recording, featuring Rohan Mukherjee and Theresa Squatrito and conference participants, Agnes Yu (LSE Department of Government), Farsan Ghassim (University of Oxford), and Tim Murithi (University of Cape Town).*
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