

IMPROVING ADAPTABILITY IN DEMOCRATIC SYSTEMS

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Abstract

States survive if they are adaptable. Political systems must be capable of reinventing themselves to meet new threats. Adaptable systems are adept in four tasks: anticipating threats and subsequently developing, legitimating and executing response strategies. According to conventional wisdom, Western-style democracies are more adaptable than authoritarian systems. However, there is reason to be skeptical about the superiority of the Western model. Recent trends may have compromised their adaptability. One challenge for scholars of public administration in coming years will be to demonstrate that systems can be adaptable while also respecting democracy and human rights. Or maybe "anticipating threats and subsequently developing, legitimating and executing response strategies."

History teaches us that no political system lasts forever. Eventually, every system will be overwhelmed by circumstances and subsequently replaced by a new one or absorbed into another. This is true of modern states, just as it was once true of empires. We might even say that one of the main objectives for leaders in any modern state is simply to put off the final day of reckoning for as long as possible. Of course, leaders have higher aspirations too. For example, they usually want to promote prosperity and some notion of social justice. However, these higher goals are only feasible if the state itself survives.

In a forthcoming book, *The Adaptable Country*, I argue that the key to state survival is adaptability. This term refers to the capacity of a political system to overhaul its core institutions in response to new circumstances and ideas. Adaptability is not the same as resilience, which is often defined as the capacity of a system to preserve its core purpose and functionalities in the face of new conditions. An adaptable system must do something more than preserve itself. It must be capable of reimagining goals and reconstructing functionalities to meet new conditions. An adaptable state is adept at shapeshifting.

This idea has a long intellectual pedigree. More than two thousand years ago, the Indian statesman Kautilya warned that rulers should be attentive to dangers and ready to adjust quickly to new threats. In the 15th century, Niccolo Machiavelli gave the same advice. He warned Florentine rulers that inflexible regimes would soon die. Four hundred years later, the American theorist John Dewey said that the design of government ought to be regarded as a never-ending "experimental process." In Dewey's view, a constant stream of new challenges requires the unrelenting reconstruction of public institutions.

The notion that states must be capable of continual reinvention may seem self-evident. In fact, it is not. There is a substantial body of thought which denies the importance of shapeshifting. For example, many American legal scholars regard the United States constitution, a document drafted a quarter-millennium ago, as inviolable. In the 1990s, reformers associated with international institutions such as the World Bank also promoted a package of government reforms designed to work in all circumstances and at all times. Some of these reformers believed that we had reached the "end of history," and that, as a result, it was possible to establish "the final form of human government."

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The experience of the last quarter century has demonstrated that history is definitely not over. Countries have encountered a series of powerful shocks: waves of terrorism, financial and economic crises, invasions and civil unrest, and pandemics. We have been reminded about the importance of nimble governance. Every one of these crises has required a dramatic reconstruction of governmental capabilities.

The need for adaptability will not abate in the coming decades. The severe weather events of the last several years demonstrate that the climate emergency has finally arrived. The climate situation will worsen in the coming decades. Governments will have to respond to developments including radical evolutions in artificial intelligence and other technologies; demographic shifts and mass migration; political instability within some of the world's major powers; and rising tensions among those powers.

If adaptability is an essential quality of government, what does it require? At a high level of abstraction, we can define four functions that must be performed if a system is to remain adaptable:

-- The system must be capable of *anticipating dangers*. That is, people within the system must be capable of thinking about the future and foreseeing dangers that might arise. Whether a system is adept at anticipating dangers is determined by culture and institutional design. Decisionmakers and the public at large must have a mindset that orients them toward the long term and sensitizes them to risks. Decisionmakers must also be supported by experts with the skills and resources necessary to identify and appraise risks successfully.

--The system must also be capable of not only apprehending dangers but also *inventing strategies to manage them*. Moreover, dangers cannot be addressed in isolation, as their effects are usually intertwined. A master strategy for managing multiple dangers is required, and crafting one requires skill and creativity.

-- Next, the system must be effective at *legitimizing strategies*. That is, the system must be capable of building support for different strategies among politically influential constituencies. There must be some degree of agreement within the leadership group of a state, and within the public at large, that a plan for political transformation ought to be adopted.

-- Finally, the system must be skilled at *execution*, or translating strategy into action. The implementation of any strategy will require the substantial overhaul of important institutions. Even the best-designed strategy might be mangled by incompetent or corrupt public servants, or by public agencies that refuse to coordinate their work.

A critical question that will have to be answered in coming decades is whether so-called "Western" systems of government are capable of performing these four functions well. Western systems are those that fill key positions through free elections, separate the three branches of government, provide guarantees of individual rights, and sometimes divide sovereignty between central and sub-national governments.

Conventional wisdom about Western systems emphasizes several points. As power is widely shared, and people enjoy free speech, it seems more likely that warning flags will be raised about looming dangers. Political freedom might also allow more creativity in crafting strategies for addressing those dangers. Open political competition allows for reform ideas to be examined closely and helps build broad support for action. Federalism also allows sub-national governments to act as laboratories for potential reforms.

All of these arguments have merit. However, we should not take the adaptability of Western systems for granted. For example, academics have worried for decades about the short-term bias of Western politics. Politicians have an incentive to worry more about the next election rather than the long term. The intensification of political competition in several countries may aggravate this short-term bias.

Another potential danger is the decay of public institutions that have a long-term focus. Long-term planning went out of fashion in the West after the 1980s. In some countries, agencies that were responsible for thinking about the future were shut down. Policy offices within government departments were downsized as governments tried to control spending.

The capacity of Western systems to build agreement about long-term strategies may also have been damaged by recent developments. In the United States, for example, political polarization appears to be intensifying. There is increasing evidence that technological change is undermining the quality of public discourse. The decline of old media and rise of social media have had several adverse effects. This transformation has destabilized the public agenda, encouraged a fixation on passing controversies, and coarsened public debate.

Added to this are worries about the capacity of Western systems to execute major reforms effectively. Systems such as that of the United States, with strict divisions of power between branches and levels of government, have always been prone to gridlock and miscoordination. Some observers believe that the performance of Western bureaucracies has also decayed due to mounting red tape within government, underinvestment in people and systems, and declining public respect for expertise.

Of course, we should avoid sweeping statements about the adaptability of Western systems. They are not all the same. Some are federal, while others are not. Some are strict about the separation of powers between branches, while others are not. Some have a long tradition of public service, while others do not.

Still, the broad point is that the adaptability of Western systems cannot be taken for granted. Some observers think that the COVID-19 pandemic has provided evidence of the vulnerabilities of the Western model. In some places, the pandemic response was marred by a lack of preparedness, confusion among agencies and governments, and widespread public resistance to government directives. In the initial phases, China's authoritarian government seemed to do a better job than several Western states of protecting public health and the economy.

Authoritarian regimes such as China's offer a different approach to adaptability. The functions of anticipation and strategy-making can be performed by technocrats working under party control. The task of building political support is simplified because leaders can use propaganda and repression. Centralized control simplifies execution, allowing the rapid mobilization of resources in the face of new threats.

In practice, China's model has its own pitfalls. Still, there are some observers who worry that the world will lurch toward the authoritarian model as crises multiply in coming decades. If Western systems prove incapable of preparing for and responding competently to new challenges, the appeal of strong central control -- the "strongman" model -- may grow.

One of our challenges, as scholars in the field of public administration, is to work to prevent a slide toward authoritarianism. The coming decades will be tumultuous. Our priority should be to build governmental systems skilled at navigating rough waters while also respecting democracy and human rights. We want to show that adaptability can be achieved without sacrificing freedom.

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