A Democratic Global Polity is More Feasible and Desirable than Many Think

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A spectre is haunting political philosophy—the spectre of world government. Theorists argue passionately about what a just world order would look like, with some endorsing demanding obligations of solidarity across borders and others favouring a clear-cut distinction between what people owe to compatriots and what they owe to foreigners. They also disagree about how the world should be governed, with opinions ranging from a staunch defence of national sovereignty to advocacy of stronger and more democratic global institutions. What most participants in this debate share, though, is the aversion to the idea of a political unification of humankind under a world state. Such a prospect is a step too far even for resolute advocates of cosmopolitan ethics such as Kwame Anthony Appiah, Seyla Benhabib, Jürgen Habermas and Martha Nussbaum.

Diffidence and outright hostility toward the idea of world government have deep roots. Immanuel Kant, the Enlightenment philosopher who continues to inspire many contemporary accounts of global political justice, held that the establishment of a 'world republic' was demanded by reason, but eventually, he settled for what he called a 'negative surrogate', that is a purely voluntary association of free states that would promote peace among its members without wielding coercive powers itself. Some key elements of this Kantian vision are enshrined in the founding charters of the United Nations and other multilateral organizations. However, the obvious limitations of these organizations also highlight the downside of a global governance system based on the principle of state consent and the lack of central enforcement. Major wars still break out, and conflicts between nuclear-armed powers are troubling to people who live well beyond their borders. It is simplistic to maintain that all would be well if only every country was

governed democratically: as Jean-Jacques Rousseau acknowledged a long time ago, even well-governed democracies can start unjust wars.

Moreover, today global governance needs to address a wider range of problems than just preventing and ending wars. Mitigating climate change, averting and responding to pandemics, protecting biodiversity and reducing the dangers of artificial intelligence are only some of the additional tasks that require international cooperation. The high degree of interdependence and mutual vulnerability that we see in the world today, combined with the weaknesses of existing international institutions, should prompt us to reconsider the age-old question: why not world government?

Two answers to that question are often heard. The first is that, as the prominent scholar of international relations Kenneth Waltz put it, the prospect of world government would be an invitation to prepare for world civil war. The second is that, even if a world government came into being, it would be—in the memorable words of Hannah Arendt—a forbidding nightmare of tyranny. In other words, even if a world state were achievable, a *democratic* world state would not. And few political philosophers would be willing to sacrifice democracy and basic liberties for the sake of the hypothetical benefits that a world state might bring.

These are powerful objections to the idea of world government. But are they enough to settle the issue? Probably not. The argument that a world state could not survive as a democracy and that it would be bound to degenerate into tyranny or global civil war vacates the terrain of philosophy, which is the natural home of controversies about the relative importance of values such as freedom and community, and hinges instead on a series of factual assumptions about how politics works—now and in the foreseeable future. The sceptics' attempt to be 'realistic' is commendable, but we should ask what exactly makes them confident that things would end badly if world government advocates managed to persuade citizens and world leaders of the soundness of their cause. In short: what is the relevant evidence, and what does it tell us?

My recent book *The Universal Republic: A Realistic Utopia?* tackles this question. Among the themes addressed there is whether a world state could be democratic and remain so for a long time, given supposedly unfavourable conditions such as the world's extreme diversity in terms of ethnicity, religion and language, high levels of economic inequality, and other features that are emphasised by the sceptics. I leverage the fact that today we have access to a wealth of data on these cultural and economic features in nearly two hundred countries over several decades as well as data on the survival and breakdown of democracy.

As a first step, I trained a machine learning algorithm to identify patterns in the relationship between demographic, cultural, economic, and political features of countries on the one hand and the likelihood that democracy will survive in those countries over time on the other. This machine learning procedure assessed the relative ability of different combinations of features to predict democratic survival and selected the most informative ones. The second step consisted of applying the resulting models to the demographic, cultural, economic, and political features of a hypothetical state encompassing the entire world and estimating the likelihood that such a state would maintain a democratic form of government in the long run. In other words, I checked

whether an initially democratic world state would be destined to collapse into the forbidding nightmare of tyranny or world civil war feared by some. The result of these analyses will surprise many: if a world state were established, the probability that it would maintain a democratic form of government in the long run is rather high, and similar to the average likelihood of democracy surviving in the countries that were democratic at some point since 1900. In other words, global democracy would not be more fragile than existing national democracies.

Attentive readers will have noticed a crucial proviso in the previous paragraph: "if a world state were established..." Perhaps world government would not be such a nightmare after all, but to debate its desirability may be a waste of time if it is plainly unachievable. My book presents some evidence about that aspect as well. For starters, I rule out coercion as a feasible (let alone desirable) route to world state formation: in a world with nine nuclear-armed powers, several other candidates for nuclear-power status, and 27 million active-duty military and paramilitary personnel, resistance to imposed political unification would be insurmountable. Such unification could only come about through the voluntary pooling of sovereignty agreed by state representatives, similar to the process that led to the United States of America in the eighteenth century, the Commonwealth of Australia in the nineteenth century, and the European Union in the twentieth century. Such a development requires that favourable windows of opportunity open across the world at the same time—admittedly, that is unlikely. But is it impossible?

Governments may well be reluctant to relinquish power, but for many sceptics, the problem runs even deeper: citizens around the world value national sovereignty and will stop any politician bent on diminishing it. This view is certainly plausible, not least in light of the electoral performance of nationalist parties in many countries. However, the idea of world government is surprisingly popular among both citizens and civil society leaders, as shown by multiple surveys conducted around the world. My book presents plenty of evidence of that, but the findings of a recent study by Farsan Ghassim and Markus Pauli deserve special attention. Having surveyed around 42,000 citizens in seventeen countries across the world, they find that majorities in all countries support a democratic world government, with the exception of the United States. To be sure, expressing support for such a major political change in a survey is not the same thing as campaigning for it or voting for political parties that endorse the idea. Many people may demur after considering the implications carefully. The evidence does not show that a democratic world state is inevitable or even probable. But it shows that its emergence can be the result of politics as we are used to it in other settings: the complex interaction of activists campaigning for or against it, citizens evaluating proposals in the light of their interests and their values, and politicians taking shifts in public opinion into account as they formulate policies and negotiate with one another.

No one can tell for sure how world politics will look like in fifty or a hundred years. The world may still be divided in almost two hundred independent states, or humanity may govern itself through common representative institutions, or a global catastrophe may turn the clock back by hundreds of years. Positions about how we should deal with shared global challenges should not be dismissed by appealing to ostensibly factual statements about what is and is not possible in

the political world, when those statements have not been subjected to systematic empirical scrutiny. Sometimes political science provides a salutary antidote to excessive optimism. In the case of world government, however, its main contribution is to show why the topic is worthy of serious debate.