



MARTA POSTIGO  
GABRIELLA SILVESTRINI  
MAURO SIMONAZZI  
(eds.)

CONSTITUTIONAL  
DEMOCRACY  
AND THE  
CHALLENGES OF  
ANTI-LIBERALISM

*Lessons from Experience*



# Constitutional Democracy and the Challenges of Anti-Liberalism

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EDITED BY

MARTA POSTIGO – GABRIELLA SILVESTRINI – MAURO SIMONAZZI



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# Beyond Anti-Liberal Political Catastrophism

JAVIER GIL<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract.** In this chapter, two senses in which catastrophism is relevant to democratic politics are discussed. On the one hand, the adversarial attribution of impending catastrophes to political opponents is a usual practice in democracies and a common polarizing tool among extremist positions. On the other hand, actual disasters are often depicted as potential crucial factors for policy and eventually social transformations. Exploiting disasters as an opportunity for major shifts and substitutions also characterizes some illiberal, anti-liberal and authoritarian-leaning strategies to delegitimize democracies as we know them. Liberal democracies might partially tackle this destabilizing catastrophism insofar as they are able to invest in disaster preparedness policies while correcting democratic short-termism as much as possible. The social and political construction of coming catastrophes should thus evolve into a means to build the resilience of existing democracies and to counter internal and external challenges that contribute to their delegitimization.

**Keywords:** catastrophism; disasters; legitimacy; policy; populism; resilience; short-termism.

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<sup>1</sup> Javier Gil, University of Oviedo (Spain), javiergil@uniovi.es.

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## 1. *Introduction*

Disasters are extraordinary and complex phenomena with multiple dimensions of analysis. Disaster studies bring together a wide range of disciplines, including those from fields in the social sciences and humanities, and abound in specialized approaches with sophisticated problem analyses and case studies, forward-looking projections, and applications of human, material and technological resources.

This chapter will focus on a specific aspect whose relevance cannot go unnoticed in political theory and political philosophy: the implications of the political use of mass emergencies, disasters and catastrophes<sup>2</sup>. The point of departure will be a differentiation between two ways of understanding political catastrophism, one that sees it as a common rhetorical device for blaming and discrediting in adversarial politics and the other that approaches it as a complex discursive practice that turns disasters into drivers for changes in policy and eventually in society as a whole. While these two perspectives on catastrophism may appear together in certain contexts, it is the latter that foregrounds the potential political significance of disasters. In this respect, I will offer an overview of a set of theories that take them precisely as focal events that can frame sustained problems and dormant or unexplored solutions and help in this way to set off political dynamics of policymaking. While both types of political catastrophism are tools at the disposal of political actors in liberal democracies, even if

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<sup>2</sup> In the literature on disasters, the notions of mass emergency and catastrophe and even crisis are often used interchangeably with the term disaster. Although they are not synonymous and can be classified according to an intensifying scale of incidents (Birkland 2006; Tierney 2019), in this chapter they will be taken as equivalent.

often offensive and confrontational, I will suggest that they could become especially pernicious in the hands of some illiberal and anti-liberal agents, movements and governments that seek to undermine democratic institutions and ways of life<sup>3</sup>. Finally, I will speculate on whether democracies can make a virtue out of necessity (of having to both confront the disasters that will befall them and remedy the short-termism that is endemic to them) and ultimately be in a position of reinforcing their own legitimacy by leveraging the political construction of the disasters to come.

## *2. Political Catastrophism*

There are at least two senses in which catastrophism is relevant to politics. One of them can be seen as a typical rhetorical resource of adversarial politics, and the other as an articulated practice that takes advantage of disasters as a potential trigger for policy change and occasionally as unchaining transformational societal change.

The first sense comes to the fore in the denunciation of calamitous evils routinely wielded in partisan disputes, electoral contests, and debates between government and opposition. One camp attacks the proposals, policies and decisions of incumbent politicians (or, vice versa, the ruling side devalues the alternative claims and projects of the adversary) on the grounds that they lead to a situation tantamount to a disaster.

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<sup>3</sup> For the differences between illiberalism and anti-liberalism, see Freedren (2015, 34, 40) and Canihac (2022). In this chapter, such concepts apply to emerging and already functioning political systems and a variety of political agents, as well as to theoretical proposal and ideological views coming from very different fronts.

Accusative doom-laden rhetoric frequently extends to the ideologies and political principles of opponents as giving entrance to all sorts of grave, undesirable and threatening outcomes.

Certainly, overdramatization and overuse cannot but disfigure and trivialize the concepts of catastrophe, emergency and disaster. However, as the political struggle also fought on the terrain of ideas and the gaining of influence, it is not only leaders and the rank-and-file of political parties but also intellectuals with political affiliations, the mass media, interest groups and other stakeholders who take part in the imagery of social disasters as political byproducts. In a sense, this rhetorical device to garner public attention while denigrating the adversary can be found once and again throughout the Western history of political theory and practice. It dates back at least to Greek democracy debates, one of the classic passages being the allegory of the democratic city-state as a sinking ship of fools in Plato's *Republic* (Book VI, 488), and finds one of the critical points in ideological invectives across the world during the Cold War. However, catastrophism-oriented discourse is today a regular resource of politics as usual in Western democracies, largely due to the way in which partisanship and the pressure of electoral dynamics determine the political allocation of blame. As a versatile and recurrent piece of the argumentative kit of party politics, it may easily turn out to be a polarizing tool. Although it is to some extent a practice endemic to party democracies as they have evolved to the present day, it is not surprising that it is all the more toxic and more ingeniously employed as positions become more polarized and that it is skillfully exploited among extremist political actors.

There is another political understanding of catastrophism that, although often linked to the previous one, takes real dis-

asters as providing windows for change that otherwise would not have been opened. Arguably, this other understanding elaborates the idea of “creative destruction” by analogy to the scientific meaning of the term. Catastrophism is the theory according to which abrupt geological and biological changes in Earth history are due to massive natural catastrophic processes. After being popularized in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century by the French scientist Georges Cuvier (1769-1832) and enjoying prestige for a time, this theory fell out of favor, being displaced by an alternative theory with greater explanatory power. However, various versions of scientific catastrophism have emerged since the last third of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. A prominent one derives from the Stephen Jay Gould and Niles Eldredge model of evolution as punctuated equilibrium, which explains speciation and expansionary growth as the aftermath of a huge crisis and mass extinctions driven by major events in earth history. Think also in the “impact event hypothesis” that explains the end of the hegemony of the dinosaurs by the cataclysm caused by a celestial body as an asteroid. Needless to say, popular culture has exploited *ad nauseam* the imagery of the threats and destruction of human race, as the latest hegemonic species, caused by asteroids, meteoroids and comets entering the Earth’s atmosphere, striking the planet, and transforming its living conditions (Clube and Napier, 1990). However, it is neither these scientific hypotheses and their parallels with Marxist and Schumpeterian socioeconomic doctrines (Brooke, 2014) nor the global existential scenario after a disaster of extraterrestrial origin (Bostrom and Ćirković, 2008) that interests us here, but rather some intricacies of the political analogy.

At least two issues are of interest in relation to that analogy. First, many people currently think that humans are no longer an integral part of the natural world but an omnipres-

ent species that dominates it globally and consumes its non-renewable resources running on an unsustainable project of indefinite growth. Even if this is true, nature is not just a supplier of resources at the service of increasingly overpopulated societies. Rather, it also reveals itself as a destroyer of resources and infrastructures that forces human communities to adapt and resist. Notably, so-called “natural” disasters are unexpected, low-probability but high-consequence hazard events that cause major damage to communities and the disruption or alteration of the normal functioning of social structures and processes. Along with death, injuries, disease and other negative effects on human biological, mental and social well-being, their destructive action may include damage of different nature: physical, economic, environmental, etc.

However, the distinction between natural and anthropogenic disasters is becoming increasingly problematic. The distinguishing criterion revolves around the main causes of disasters, whether natural or man-made, resulting in a classification further subdivided into etiological descriptors: on the one hand, climatological, geophysical, hydrological, meteorological, biological, and extraterrestrial disasters are kinds of natural disasters; on the other hand, industrial and transport accidents, impacts of wars and armed conflicts are among the human and technological disasters. However, most disasters often involve both natural and human sources, while damage arising from natural hazards is often interwoven with technological interventions. Indeed, the demarcation between the two types is becoming blurred and even controversial in those “natural” cases when the causal complexity does not exclude decisive human factors and the alleged bad luck due to natural forces is not entirely unrelated to human capacities of control or to failures in these capacities. The normative implications of the indeterminacy of “natural” disasters and the



entanglement of natural and human aspects are remarkable, particularly for disaster preparedness. Among other things, they could reduce the gap with the responsibilities attributed to clearly anthropogenic cases and could mean a reassignment of retrospective responsibilities of prominent agents, such as states and large organizations, including the reparations that may be needed.

Second, disasters have become both social and political issues. Although I will expand on these ideas later, let me now illustrate this point by mentioning the earthquake and tsunami that, along with widespread fires, devastated the city of Lisbon in 1755, a destruction that shocked European societies at the time and sparked profound and influential debates among enlightened thinkers.

It is noteworthy that Rousseau's reply to Voltaire's "Poem on the Lisbon Disaster" already introduced what we now call social vulnerability, when he noted that the outcomes of the earthquake were all the more destructive and the fate of the victims all the more massively unfortunate depending on the ways in which the buildings were placed and constructed and the social behaviors and lifestyles were conducted (Dynes, 2000). Since then, the Western conception of disasters has become increasingly receptive to assessing the social and economic relations behind the exposure of communities and their capacity to resist and respond. Disaster risks are said to be the combination of the hazards that occur as a potential source of harm and the vulnerability levels of the affected communities. It is now widely accepted that particular contingencies and preexisting vulnerabilities of these communities strongly influence the devastating disaster situations and, in particular, that social and economic determinants exacerbate the impacts of disasters so that the latter strike the most disadvantaged the hardest. Those most affected by tragedies are

often those who were already the most vulnerable beforehand. Consequently, Western conception has learned to move from the observation of a misfortune to the reasoning of injustice, primarily regarding the preventable aspects of disasters (Shklar, 1990; Zack, 2009). As Amartya Sen (2009, p. 4) put it, “a calamity would be a case of injustice only if it could have been prevented, and particularly if those who could have taken action had failed to try”.

Indeed, the historical importance of the 1755 earthquake lies mainly in the political management of the social consequences and economic costs for Portugal, then a declining imperial power. In this disaster politics, political leadership was decisive (Jones 2018, Ferguson 2021). The king, Joseph I, who had survived by chance, developed claustrophobia and aversion to living in the city, so he moved the court to the Royal Barraca, a complex of tents and wooden pavilions on the outskirts of Lisbon. In contrast, his prime minister, Sebastião José de Carvalho e Melo, First Marquis of Pombal, leveraged the crisis to strengthen his authority and reshape the balance of forces within the country. He was noted for telling survivors “Bury the dead and feed the living”, the famous statement on which he first concentrated his plan of action. He also centralized power in his hands. Pombal not only organized the immediate response to the victims, restored social order heavily and implemented reconstruction measures for the city, introducing new urban planning as well as architectural improvements and restrictions on rebuilding, known as the Pombaline style. In addition to readily reacting with the humanitarian response and reducing the vulnerability to future disasters, he also took the opportunity to regulate news about the earthquake and curtail the influence of the Catholic Church, dismantling in particular the strategic, commercial and intellectual power of the Jesuits, and, above all, im-

posing a set of important institutional and economic reforms and public policies that reoriented the destiny of both the capital and the country (Maxwell, 1995).

This case can be seen as an exemplar for the way in which communities adapt in the aftermath or in anticipation of disasters is first and foremost political in nature. This is because political institutions are crucial in determining how vulnerable and resilient communities can be and how to distribute resources in them before, during and after disasters. It is also because many other implementations (such as legal, economic, and technological ones) for preparedness, response or recovery depend to a large extent on the capacity of these institutions and communities to rearrange their political instruments to reorganize themselves collectively. Finally, affected communities look to their political leaders to help decipher their future and also to find who to blame.

### *3. Liberal and nonliberal uses of catastrophism*

Disasters happen when human-made and naturally occurring hazards intersect with the social vulnerability of the affected communities and typically result in needs and demands that exceed the available resources of these communities. The shortage of provisions can be technical and temporary or rather structural and in the longer term. Certainly, disasters have become major concerns among states and societies as there has been a widespread awareness that their number, frequency, intensity, severity and socioeconomic cost have risen worldwide and will increase in the coming decades. However, presumably there is another reason fueling these concerns when we look at the electoral dynamics of attaining and retaining political power: many historical cases show that dis-

asters threatened past rulers and regimes and, more temporarily, electorates' retrospective assessments of democratic governments have often punished incumbent politicians for changes in their well-being due to calamities and disaster damages (Achen and Bartels, 2016, pp. 116-145).

In what follows, attention will be drawn to the fact that disasters that have truly occurred – and not those that are merely attributed to political opponents – can not only have an impact on election outcomes but also develop into a decisive catalyst for social, legal and political reforms in democratic regimes. Put otherwise, the exogenous shock of natural and man-made hazards on political processes may eventually lead to transforming effects in democratic societies if it first successfully evolves into a driver for policy change. Certainly, the relevance of disasters on social and policy change has been a prominent theme in disaster studies since Samuel Henry Prince argued in this sense in his pioneering dissertation on the 1917 explosion of a French munitions ship in Halifax harbor (Scanlon, 1988). Therefore, it is not at all surprising that this topic figures conspicuously in various theories of policy change in liberal democracies, such as John Kingdon's multiple streams approach (Kingdon, 1984), the punctuated equilibrium model (Baumgartner and Jones, 1991), the advocacy coalition framework (Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith, 1999), the public policy transfer approach (Dolowitz and Marsh, 2000), and Thomas Birkland's contributions on disasters as agenda-setting potential focusing events (Birkland, 1997, 1998).

These theoretical frameworks have spawned a rich literature on policy change that seeks to explain how disasters may come to activate, as it were, a sort of Overton window able to accommodate neglected and overdue issues and in turn open a short "window of opportunity" (Kingdon, 1984, pp. 173-

204) to push through reforms that might previously have been unfeasible or unthinkable. In reacting to some disasters, especially the large-scale ones, political agents and other stakeholders (interest groups, the media, experts, intellectuals) engaged in a competition to frame and define the unexpected events in ways that advance their political goals, be it to introduce reforms or rather to contain them on behalf of the status quo. In other words, they fight for problem definition and agenda setting (DeLeo, 2018, pp. 72-75; Nohrstedt 2022, pp. 432-435). Consequently, political actors and organized interests advocating substantial changes seek to capture the attention of other agents and ordinary people and direct it to new problems and previously dormant and unnoticed issues, to policy and management failures, and to solutions to those problems and alternatives to these policies. When disasters turn into potential focusing events entering and altering the media and policy agendas and citizens' discussions, the public thematization of disasters may come to nudge and expand criticisms of previous decision-making processes and the ineffectiveness of existing policies. It can also end up sparking and aggregating the demands from different sectors for more or less radical change of these public policies. Pro-change political actors politicize the exogenous impact by reframing and reappraising the flaws and problems in the existing policymaking and articulating the demands on the need for deep reforms. In this respect, disasters are social and political constructs.

Even if disasters reveal social injustices and policy failures, they may well not be conducive to significant changes. On the one hand, they may highlight unequal distributions of power and resources among affected populations but fail to move political agents and communities to address the long-lasting differential effects of inequality and launch initiatives to re-

duce risk and existing vulnerabilities. Instead of fostering community resilience, postdisaster interventions may intensify prior distributional inequalities. On the other hand, “rarely is policy change a forgone conclusion” and rather policy stability often prevails (DeLeo, 2018, p. 73). Despite narratives of “never again” and temporary awareness of collective lesson-drawing (Birkland, 2006), postdisaster scenarios may move away from the distribution of political responsibilities, policymakers may derive the wrong lessons or restore old recipes, and reformed policies may at times increase hazard risk and existing vulnerabilities.

A rather popular strand that maintains a distant affinity with the aforementioned literature tries to unmask how the capitalist system profits from dooms of various kinds, even if they were mainly caused by the system itself. According to Naomi Klein and other defenders of the “disaster capitalism” thesis (Klein, 2007; Žižek, 2011; Loewenstein, 2015), political powers and complex networks employed by corporations have repeatedly pounced the opportunity presented by certain man-made or supervening disasters to eliminate paralyzing social constraints and push forward a neoliberal agenda of economic policies that otherwise would have faced resistance. Predatory agents thus have imposed neoliberal measures as alleged solutions to disasters thanks to the political strategy known as the “shock doctrine”, consisting of guiding the reconstruction processes after the effects of military interventions and natural disasters by taking advantage of the disoriented populations. In fact, some crises are said to be deliberately unleashed and the shock purposely induced.

The exploitation of disasters as an opportunity to instigate political changes belongs to the repertoire of some illiberal, anti-liberal and authoritarian uses of political catastrophism. The constant performativity of crisis figures as a typical fea-

ture of populist actors (Moffitt 2016) and, in contrast to them, some discourses about environmental calamity and civilization collapse are willing to write off democracy.

In a sense, populists are not so different from the rest of democratic agents in this point: they learn their own lessons from past disasters, address the effects of recent and current ones, and decipher beforehand the sense of coming crises. As with other political agents, they assign blame and ask for accountability among the incumbent positions and other democratic players. However, in the current era of democratic regression worldwide (Diamond, 2021), anti-liberal populists do not hesitate to take advantage of extreme events and subsequent corrective measures to recreate and deepen sustained institutional crises, gather followers and political claimants among outraged and disenchanting populations, and offensively obtain nondemocratic ends beyond reformatory interventions. When they are in power, crisis and disasters are occasions for gaining popular support for centralized leadership and decision-making.

Moreover, a varied arsenal of coercive measures is at their disposal. Depending on the political cultures and constellations of political forces, they may curtail fundamental rights and civil and political liberties, incriminate opponents and dissidents, hinder the vigilance of the press and, more than that, disable independent media's watchdog role, dismiss or suspend monitoring by autonomous agencies and interfere in the independence of the judiciary and especially in the nature of the constitutional courts and the process of judicial review. Whether it is claimed that liberal institutions do not respond to the urgent demands of the authentic people at risk or that they are not prepared to face the threats ahead and the real needs that national fellows will confront or, by raising the bet, that they are themselves generators and facili-

tators of past and future disasters, anti-liberal populist catastrophism can thus be deployed as a tool in the service of the broader aim of political backsliding and as an additional strategy to delegitimize democracies as we know them.

On the other hand, a number of authors who theorize around the view of the Anthropocene or who defend degrowth and postgrowth as an alternative or substitution for the capitalist economy also advocate for overcoming the central institutions of current democracies. Some argue from the projective view of a civilizational and environmental collapse due to the exhaustion of natural resources and the complexity of multiple, interdependent, and cascading threats or from the expectation of countless disasters that will be caused by climate change and that future generations will suffer. Even if they try to avoid millenarianism and defeatism by referring their epochal diagnosis to scientific evidence and reasonable predictions, many advocates of the more or less imminent collapse of the capitalist economy and our consumerist ways of life put the democratic institutions that have actively collaborated in the advent of said collapse on the bandwagon of the irremediable losses.

This way of thinking seems to conform to an instrumental justification of democracy, which makes the value of democratic practices and procedures dependent on their outcomes. As Elizabeth Anderson (2009, p. 225) put it, “if democratic elections regularly resulted in policies catastrophic to the electors – and worse than what alternative systems of governance would deliver – they would not be justified”. In this vein, there are renowned figures (Jørgen Randers and James Lovelock among them) that sooner or later declared to be willing to reorganize democracy on the basis of ecological priorities or even circumvent the fecklessness of democracy to solve the severe environmental crisis. It is well known that a



somewhat antidemocratic perspective was common to the eco-survivalists of the 1970s. William Ophuls, Robert Heilbroner and Garrett Hardin held the imposition of limits through coercive and authoritarian rule and prized expert knowledge for global environmental policy (Humphrey 2007). The authoritarian strand within environmentalism has not disappeared from view. A number of current thinkers, despairing at liberal democracies' impotence in effecting solutions to a range of protracted environmental problems, particularly climate change politics, call for more authoritarian but focused alternatives, including a severe government by experts (Westra, 1998; Shearman and Smith, 2007).

Finally, others recommend paying attention to authoritarian regimes that, as China does, claim and propagandize that they possess a superior and more successful governance model than decadent and dysfunctional Western democracies, including presumably not controversial standards and policies for short- and long-term disaster preparedness and the aspiring project of addressing environmental problems (Beeson 2010; Bell 2015, pp. 19, 53-54).

#### 4. *Reframing catastrophes*

To recapitulate what has been said thus far, political catastrophism can be understood – among others – both in terms of *politics as usual*, as when engagement in partisan fight drives certain parties and social agents to play with the connotations of alleged disasters, and in terms of *relatively unusual politics*, as when organized interests make sense of the nature and scope of disasters that have actually taken place. While the first understanding identifies a common practice of adversary politics that cheapens the symbolic meaning of disaster and catastro-

phes and performs it as something endogenous to political discourse, the second one gains larger political and policy implications, as framing and describing the social meaning of actual exogenous hazards turn them into a key element of the political process itself. The moment of the politically unusual is generally played out through the reassessment of a series of salience issues (for instance, needs and demands of public health or carelessness in infrastructure investments) and the devaluation of those public policy frameworks that unsuccessfully responded to the crisis.

Both uses have different but contingently concurring aims: the search for a polarizing effect may be integrated into the postdisaster cultural and political struggles to advance transformative effects, and the partisan rhetoric of blaming the adversary can develop into a literal and effective assignment of blame and responsibility when disasters materialize. Both uses practice the political construction of disasters in their own way, although the merely attributed disaster as a byproduct of wrong political ideas, positions and policies may come to be in fact reviewed as an inevitable outcome when the happened disaster finds a convincing narrative that frames the causes, the responses, and the consequences.

In a sense, both uses are inherent to the prevailing development of existing democracies. Obviously, they are also susceptible to being creatively and aggressively exploited by actors, movements, organizations, and governments claiming that liberal democracies themselves fail to satisfy the pressing demands of real people or that they are incapable of dealing with the coming threats and needs that future generations will further suffer. Given that such claims, rather than merely seeking to reform, may well aspire to transgress, erode or even replace democratic institutions, exploitations of political catastrophism may seek to contribute to the backsliding of po-

litical freedoms and legal guarantees and the delegitimization of our imperfect democracies in the medium and long run. Ultimately the aim would be to re-establish domestic polities and not only to reshape public policies. This kind of aspiration behind illiberal, anti-liberal and authoritarian-leaning performances of catastrophism may be possible and plausible because, to a large extent, established democracies are often insufficiently prepared for disasters to come. In turn, this inadequacy in preparedness may be partly explained by the fact that our democracies have a weak flank in a seemingly endemic short-termism that captures the minds and hearts of voters and politicians and is reinforced by the dynamics of electoral systems.

#### 4.1 Are democracies ill-equipped to prepare for disasters?

In principle, it would seem that democratic states are better equipped than other political systems to both anticipate and cope with the occurrence and recurrence of bursting disasters and mass emergencies and, therefore, to protect their citizens from such events. Famously, Amartya Sen argued that raging famines were caused by lethargic and unaccountable governments and market failures rather than by food supplies, that they could be prevented through state intervention on the situation of the most disadvantaged groups and on the dysfunctions of the economy, and that democracies proved to be superior to other forms of government because “democratic governments have to win elections and face public criticism, and have strong incentives to undertake measures to avert famines and other such catastrophes” (Sen, 1999, 16). Certainly, this kind of argument has been extended to other types of disasters, such as earthquakes and floods (Smith and Quiroz, 2010). As in the case of famines and mass crimes,

democracies have also tended to do better than dictatorships and autocratic regimes at limiting the damage occasioned by man-made and natural hazards, not least because political leaders need the support of voters to stay in office, and citizens and organizations are given the opportunity to monitor bad management and, if necessary, punish their leaders at the ballot box accordingly. Unlike autocratic and authoritarian rulers, democratic decision-makers are not always in a position to be insensitive to the victims and damage of disasters. In addition to providing relief if disasters occur, at times they have to bow to pressure from citizens, organizations and other political agents and take timely measures to prevent and mitigate them. Even if democracies were largely inhabited by ignorant and incompetent citizens, as an influential trend of contemporary political theory is keen to point out, voters are unlikely to be unaware of the consequences of large and visible disasters and to retrospectively overlook whether the impacts of these disasters were foreseeable or preventable (Somin 2013, pp. 103-104; but see against this view Achen and Bartels, 2016).

The working of democratic institutions and of political rights can give rise to better outcomes than totalitarian and authoritarian alternatives in reacting to disasters insofar as they have both a supervisory and critical public sphere that mobilizes open critical debates on government policies and actions, as well as other mechanisms that enable and institutionalize – horizontal and vertical – accountability. Precisely because of this institutional framework, politicized disasters can eventually become the catalyst for political transformation. As discussed above, substantial policy changes can be undertaken in the aftermath of a disaster only when a constellation of stakeholders succeed in reshaping the political agenda, building a counternarrative and launching a collec-

tive reaction to a sequence of decision-making and public policies that failed to prevent losses to the economy, properties, infrastructures, environment, etc., and often also losses of human life that are judged, in retrospect, to be unnecessary and intolerable.

However, challenging the sequences of public policies that have exposed citizens to high risk and have made inefficient use of resources does not always involve that the attention of communities and their political actors is effectively redirected toward disaster preparedness or that, in case that attention is indeed redirected in this sense, proper preparedness policies and practices are sustained over time. It has been argued that democracies do not always seem to be particularly poised to deal with the disasters that befall them: “democratic institutions by themselves are far from a sufficient safeguard against disasters of all kinds” (Ferguson, 2020, pp. 175-212, here 192). Very often, the latter are largely a consequence of shortcomings in preparedness and mitigation strategies and contingency plans for which administrations are primarily responsible, such as setting and reviewing building codes, revising critical infrastructure, prohibiting construction in high-risk areas, reinforcing vulnerable structures, and maintaining warning systems. Even though it is known that preparing for emerging hazards saves both lives and money, democracies stubbornly favor reactive responses to upcoming crises and systematically neglect many preparedness tasks that are proactively required to ensure. It is not uncommon that inadequate preparations for disasters that eventually occur prove remarkably ineffective in the long run, resulting in disproportionate cost overruns over the years compared to the estimated costs that good and timely preparedness would have incurred (Healy and Malhotra, 2009; Shreve and Kelman, 2014).

One of the main reasons why liberal democracies sometimes fail calamitously in preparedness to disasters lies in the prevalence of short-termism at different levels. Short-term bias and intertemporal myopia lead not only voters and interest groups but also politicians and decision-makers to subject themselves to a perverse dynamic of electoral politics that tends to devalue those policy domains that have an extended timeframe and typically require costly action in the present with benefits only to be expected in the long run (González-Ricoy and Gosseries, 2016). Public choices pertaining to preparedness to disasters are among these policy domains.

On the one hand, individuals' short-sighted preferences relegate or ignore future benefits or discount them for the sake of near-term benefits. According to a number of studies, citizens tend to overvalue politicians for reactive disaster relief and assistance policies and overlook their public policies of risk preparedness. Thus, voters also tend to reward spending on immediate disaster relief much more highly than spending on disaster prevention, even though the latter may be much more effective in minimizing the loss of life and property (Mulligan, Taylor, DeLeo, 2022). While spending on relief is far more visible to low-informed voters who realize the exogenous impact on the economic and local status quo, spending on prevention must often be done long before this shocking experience, perhaps at a time when few voters appreciate the potential salience of the issue and when the near-term costs may be highly unpopular given the margins of uncertainty and given other, more urgent needs and pressing demands.

On the other hand, policymakers and public officers who balance public budgets are more willing to invest in responding to existing crises than in spending on preparedness and prevention of emerging hazards. Electoral pressures provide politicians with perverse incentives. Serious efforts to pass

ambitious programs to plan, prevent or prepare for future threats may be far from being electorally beneficial. Rather, they can take a burdensome toll on incumbents. Due to the dynamics of electoral cycles, good politicians may fail to convey the relevance of those programs to voters who do not notice the importance of the problems to be solved in advance. Alternatively, they may be punished after quiet work without popularly recognizable results, while the success of these measures will only be reaped in the future and when these results are likely to increase the credibility of other government teams, which may well be those of political opponents. In contrast, bad decision-makers can claim credit for reacting in time and declaring a state of emergency. In addition, if things go wrong several decades from now, the government at the time will take most of the blame.

#### 4.2 Destabilizing catastrophism and the democratic construction of disasters

However, there is reason to believe that it is not a doomed enterprise for well-established democracies to be able to cope with current and future catastrophist attacks launched by agents of delegitimization in an anti-liberal vein. Whether this stabilizing defense is likely to succeed or not will depend to a large extent on the ability of these democracies to fight the short-termism and temporal myopia that function as a kind of latent cause of their delegitimization, while they politically rearrange the areas of public risk as societal priorities. At both levels – those of correcting the pervasiveness of democratic short-termism and guiding public policies for disaster preparedness – it should be assumed from the outset that the social and political construction of impending disasters and catas-

trophes entails reassessing the viability of our ways of life and the legitimacy of the democratic regime itself.

Regarding the first task, representatives and decision-makers, as well as political communities, must put long-term issues and concerns onto political and media agendas, put regulations for enduring resilience in place, design independent future-oriented institutions and discuss and approve tailored constitutional amendments. In addition to being democratic instruments to protect the long-term interests of society, these institutional measures might additionally function as a means to counter the aforementioned delegitimization that existing democratic regimes themselves feed. However, political alignment with long-termism is hardly feasible if democratic societies do not integrate the horizon of coming disasters and intergenerational coexistence into ordinary political concerns. This, in turn, implies promoting culturally effective ways of thinking collectively in the long term and fostering substantial changes among dominant social and political values. An indispensable component of these far-reaching transformations lies in the resilience building that communities themselves have to undertake. Therefore, all this goes far beyond regular voting and partisan shortcuts and embraces the real challenges of an evolving democratic culture and the coupling of “democratic resilience” (Merkel and Lührmann, 2021) on the patterns of social reproduction.

It is noteworthy that there is a worldwide trend to address disaster preparedness through the development of emergency plans and prevention measures that enable communities to be in a position to activate response procedures should a disaster materialize. Since the *Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015-2030* was launched, an increasing number of countries and territories have adopted national and local risk reduction strategies. The *Sendai Framework* urges states and



societies to engage in coordinated efforts and multi-institutional and cross-sectoral approaches and to understand the duty to cooperate internationally as an integral part of states' responsibility for disaster risk reduction policies. The cooperation strategy is particularly stable and intense among European democracies (Widmalm, Parker and Persson, 2019). According therefore to the second task, the social and political construction of disasters to come requires that democratic states, both individually and collectively, invest in effective disaster preparedness and risk reduction policies and programs and coordinate their joint efforts through transnational cooperation, rather than blindly deferring to free-standing markets and technological solutionism or delivering to the defeatism in the face of irremediable hazardous futures.

Even if these are not sufficient conditions, it is reasonable to believe that further social democratization backed by far-sighted institutional designs and the internationalization of preparedness policies could be among the strengthening conditions of the resilience of democracies and their capacity to counteract and tackle the onslaughts of trending and potentially destabilizing catastrophism.

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