

Positive Engagement: A Democratic Response to Overlapping Crises

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Living in a “majoritarian moment” reinforced by overlapping crises

A series of overlapping crises (2008, 2014, 2019, 2022, 2025) → uncertainties that weakened trust in institutions at a time when institutions are needed for security, predictability, “time horizon”

- Covid-19 reasserted the nation-state, amplified boundaries (Prerna Singh, 2022), accelerated the “epistemic crisis” (Brubaker, 2021)
- Russia’s full-scale invasion in 2022 brought irredentist war back to Europe
- Trump 2.0 created “tectonic shifts” in the international system

→ Majoritarian nationalism is on the rise

The tension between majoritarianism and democracy in a highly securitized environment

Majoritarianism and democratic equality are in tension in societies with persistent minorities (Abizadeh, 2021).

Political community -- belonging to a state, commitment to common purpose – can emerge in culturally diverse countries (e.g., Canada, India before 2014; Stepan, Linz, and Yadav, 2011).

But how can a sense of political community be created and sustained in such environments in times of major crises?

Specifically, **how does a highly securitized environment shape democratic inclusion in majoritarian states?**

The appeal of ethnic majoritarianism

“Majoritarian nationalism has become a defining feature of twenty-first-century democracy” (Kanchan Chandra, 2024, “Majoritarianism Without Majorities,” *Journal of Democracy* 35(4): 46)

Majoritarian nationalism promises a comfortable “core” majority (Mylonas and Tudor, 2021)

- Easier to maintain state stability without persistent minorities that mobilize for special interests and claim institutions -- especially without **minorities associated with activist “kin-states”**
- Easier to govern, easier to build unity of purpose on shared cultural affinities → **the appeal of ethnic majoritarianism**

The risks of choosing ethnic majoritarianism: Democratic backsliding and minority alienation

Ethnic majoritarianism is no guarantee for political unity -- democratic backsliding and deep polarization over the fundamentals of democracy can happen despite high degrees of ethnic homogeneity (e.g., Hungary, Poland).

Efforts to strengthen the ethnic core has contributed to democratic backsliding in many long-established multiethnic societies (e.g., the U.S., India).

“Majoritarian nationalism is now seen as a primary cause of that other defining feature of the twenty-first century: democratic backsliding” (Kanchan Chandra, 2024, “Majoritarianism Without Majorities,” *Journal of Democracy* 35(4): 46).

Research reveals the link between increased ethnic majoritarianism and minority alienation.

The advantages of positive engagement with minority actors and organizations

Where democracy requires reinforcement, mainstream/majority democratic actors can often rely on ethnic minorities to act as “circumstantial liberal” allies (Rovny, 2024).

Minorities, in turn, cannot become democratic actors without majority allies and institutional channels for political agency.

- Institutions extend the political “time horizon,” structure conflict, and provide space and resources necessary for democratic participation – conditions that help prevent alienation from democracy and the state.
- Strong consensus in democracy literature on the significance of meso-level institutions (intermediary institutions) for the quality and stability of democracy (O’Donnell, 1994) →
- Sustainable minority inclusion requires organizations that foster both intra-minority *bonding* and minority-majority *bridging* across social domains.

Sustainable democracy builds on political agency

“Democracy is not a state. It is an act.”

(John Lewis, “Together, You Can Redeem the Soul of our Nation. NYT, July 30, 2020.

Political agency = Authority to decide about one’s conditions in life; about the rules by which we live and how we practice them.

“It is morally important – both important to individuals and morally valuable in an objective sense –that individuals have control over the collective conditions of their lives, and control in the relationships that give meaning to their lives, including their relationships with each other and with place.” (Moore, A Political Theory of Territory, 2015:6).

Thank You!

