

# A Cosmopolitan Case Against World Government

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The debate over world government and “global governance” typically pits cosmopolitan supporters of globalization against nationalist champions of state sovereignty. The latter fear world government because of the threat it poses to nationalism and the autonomy of nation-states. They also typically view free trade and international migration with suspicion.

However, one need not be a nationalist to oppose world government. I am a cosmopolitan supporter of free trade and an advocate of [a strong presumption in favor of open borders immigration](#). In addition, I am [no fan of nationalism](#), which I consider to be one of the greatest evils of the modern world.

Yet I also take a dim view of world government and other similar proposals. These positions are not contradictory; indeed they are mutually reinforcing. Precisely because I see great value in free migration and the opportunity to “vote with your feet,” I oppose the creation of a global state whose authority would be almost impossible to escape.

A world government would close off opportunities for foot voting. It would also undermine valuable interjurisdictional competition and exacerbate some key weaknesses of the democratic process. In the worst-case scenario, it could establish a global tyranny from which there may be no escape. Despite the claims of advocates, it also probably is not necessary to solve the world’s great problems. Indeed, it might even exacerbate those dangers.

## Why the Debate over World Government Matters

Concern about the perils of world government may seem ridiculous at this point in history. Critics of world government always run the risk of looking like paranoid members of the black helicopter brigade who believe that the UN, the Council on Foreign Relations, or the Zionist-Masonic conspiracy is about to take over the world. This may be even more true in light of recent events such as Britain’s vote for Brexit, the rise of right-wing nationalist movements in several European countries, and Donald Trump’s unexpected victory in the 2016 US presidential

election. In the aftermath of these developments, the debate over world government may seem like an irrelevancy that can safely be left to utopians and conspiracy theorists.

It is certainly true that world government is unlikely to be established in the near future, and that recent political events have made it less likely still. No black helicopters are going to land on your lawn any time soon – at least not ones sent by a world government!

But it is important to look beyond the immediate political moment. The nationalist surge may not prevail, and may indeed be cresting even now. Right-wing nationalist parties have suffered defeats in recent elections in France and the Netherlands, and a similar outcome is expected in this fall's German election. [Donald Trump is the most unpopular president \(at this stage in his first term\) in the history of public opinion polling.](#) His brand of xenophobic populism may turn out to be one of the last gasps of a fading past, rather than the wave of the future.

Survey data indicates that younger voters in both the US and Europe are less nationalistic than their elders. The same is true of highly educated voters relative to less-educated ones – an important trend at a time when education levels continue to rise. And many influential opinion leaders and political elites are warming to the idea of world government and strong “global governance” because of fear caused by international problems such as global warming and recurring financial crises. They believe that such institutions are necessary to address the world's most serious challenges.

While the establishment of world government is unlikely in the near future, trends favoring it could easily accelerate over time, while opposition might gradually wane. At the very least, it is an idea worthy of serious consideration.

If we come to a better understanding of its dangers now, we are more likely to avert the peril before it becomes a serious threat. And sadly, that peril is very real – or at least will be if the movement for world government makes significant progress.

In ascending order of gravity and descending order of likelihood, world government poses three major dangers: stifling of diversity and competition; elimination of the possibility of emigration and “voting with your feet”; and the rise of global despotism, perhaps even culminating in totalitarianism. These dangers are exacerbated by the ways in which a world government might exacerbate the impact of a key weakness of democracy at the national level: widespread political ignorance.

### Stifling Diversity and Competition

The whole world is far more diverse than any one nation-state. A world government will necessarily have to trample some of this diversity in order to impose one-size-fits all policies. If it does not do so, there would be no point in establishing a world government in the first place. Given the incredible diversity of the world's people and cultures, it will be difficult to adopt any policy that does not inflict severe harm on at least some groups. The problem of dissident minorities has been difficult to address within individual nation-states. It would be far more severe under a world government.

Stifling diversity might also undermine beneficial competition between nation-states. Currently, national governments compete with each other to attract business, investment, trade, and productive workers. This to some degree incentivizes states to adopt more effective economic policies and reduces their ability to impose excessive taxes and regulations. It also promotes policy innovation, as a successful innovator can get ahead in the economic race. Examples include Britain in the 19th century, the United States in the 20th, and the “Asian Tigers” more recently. A world government would not be subject to this kind of competitive pressure. By definition, it would have little if any opportunity to learn from the achievements of other states.

The example effect of freer societies often helps stimulate liberalization in more oppressive ones. To take the most obvious case, the example effect of the West played an important role in the fall of communism in Eastern Europe. The example of democratization in Spain and Portugal probably helped inspire the spread of democracy in Latin America during the 1980s and 1990s.

The threat that world government poses to diversity and competition might be mitigated if the government in question had a federal structure, with strong constitutional constraints on the expansion of centralized power. But such constraints often tend to deteriorate when push comes to shove. The history of federations such as the United States, Canada, and Australia shows that central government power greatly expands over time.

Constitutional safeguards routinely buckle and break in the face of crises that seem to demand greater centralization. In day-to-day politics, federalism often falls prey to partisan agendas that subordinate constitutional structure to short-term political considerations. “[Fair weather federalism](#)” is ubiquitous in American politics and could well emerge in a federal world government, as well.

Perhaps constitutional structure can keep world government within strict federalist bounds. Yet history gives only modest grounds for optimism on that score. Federalism at the national level has had its share of successes, and in many cases has kept government from becoming as centralized as it might have been under a unitary state. But constitutionally limited federalism is not easy to maintain over time.

### Exacerbating the Perils of Political Ignorance

The enormous size and complexity of world government would also exacerbate one of the already serious flaws of democracy at the nation-state level. Recent events have awakened many to the dangers of [widespread political ignorance](#). The [role of voter ignorance in the rise of Donald Trump](#) has led more people to start [taking this problem seriously](#). In reality, however, widespread ignorance is a problem that long predates the 2016 election. It is not limited to the United States, but [actually ubiquitous in other democracies around the world, including many of the most advanced](#).

For the most part, political ignorance is not the result of stupidity or lack of information. It is a predictable consequence of the insignificance of individual votes to electoral outcomes. Because there is so little chance that any one vote will make a difference, [it is rational for most people to pay little or no attention to government policy](#). And that is exactly what most voters do. They are

“rationally ignorant,” often unaware of even basic facts about government and public policy, such as which party controls the legislature, or which officials are responsible for which issues. The danger is [exacerbated by the enormous size, scope, and complexity of modern government](#), which makes it difficult for voters to keep track of more than a small fraction of its activities.

In a democratic world government, public ignorance is likely to be an even more serious menace than it is now. It is even harder for rationally ignorant voters to understand government policy for the entire world than to grasp what is happening in their own country. How well are American voters likely to understand the problems of the Chinese, and vice versa?

No Exit: The Danger of Losing the Ability to Vote With Your Feet.

Throughout history, the option of emigration has been a tremendous boon to people forced to live under corrupt, backward, or oppressive regimes. The United States has taken in millions of such migrants from all over the world. Other relatively free societies have also served as important refuges for the oppressed, including Australia and Canada, among others.

“Foot voting” is, in crucial respects, [a better mechanism of political freedom than ballot box voting](#). Unlike ballot box voters, foot voters can make a meaningfully decisive choice about the kind of regime they wish to live under. In most elections, an individual voter has only an infinitesimal chance of affecting the result. By contrast, foot voters make decisions that are highly likely to make a real difference. For that very reason, [they also have much stronger incentives to make well-informed decisions](#), as opposed to rationally ignorant ones.

If a world government becomes oppressive, falls victim to corruption, or adopts economic policies that stifle opportunity, *there will be nowhere else to go*. We will all be stuck with that regime, perhaps for a long time to come.

This danger may be somewhat mitigated if the world government is democratic. If we cannot exercise exit rights against it, we can still resort to “voice” and “vote the bastards out.” But, as discussed below, there is no guarantee that a world government actually will be democratic or that it will stay democratic over time even if it is initially set up that way.

Moreover, even democratic regimes can and often do adopt pathological policies for a variety of reasons, including the widespread political ignorance discussed above. It is dangerous to trust even a democratic government so much that we are willing to forego any possibility of exit if things go wrong. We should not put all of humanity’s eggs in a single political basket, no matter how enticingly democratic it might seem.

Admittedly, a world government could potentially expand foot voting opportunities by breaking down barriers to migration currently enforced by nation-states. In this scenario, a world state could increase opportunities for foot voting on issues that remain under the control of national and regional governments. But even this is far from certain, since many governments tolerate or even enforce barriers to internal migration. A world government might well follow in that

tradition rather than in the footsteps of more liberal states that promote internal freedom of movement.

Moreover, there are strategies to expand migration rights without taking the risks associated with world government. Much can be done to reduce barriers to immigration, both at the national level and by expanding international agreements that protect the rights of migrants and refugees.

### The Menace of Global Despotism

As problematic as a democratic world government might be, things will be even worse if it becomes a dictatorship, or even a totalitarian state. A world government might well start off as some sort of democracy, and is at the very least highly unlikely to begin as a totalitarian nightmare. But history shows that authoritarian and totalitarian political movements can seize power in a previously relatively free society, especially during a crisis.

In the early twentieth century, totalitarian movements exploited crises to seize power in Germany, Italy, and Russia (relatively free during the last years of czarism, when political rights were greatly expanded), and elsewhere. More recently, democracy has been subverted by authoritarians in states such as post-communist Russia, Turkey, and Venezuela.

The likelihood of a descent into autocracy may be very low at any given time. But over decades or centuries, the cumulative risk that it will happen sooner or later rises. Consider a democratic world government that has only a 1% chance of succumbing to dictatorship in any given year. Over the course of a century, there is a 37% chance that the state in question will become despotic.

Moreover, the odds of succumbing to dictatorship are much higher in a society where liberal democratic norms are relatively weak, and much of the population is poor and ill-educated. In such a society, the odds of degeneration may well be much higher than one percent per year.

That gives us still more reason to worry about the potential degeneration of world government. Any world government established in the next few decades or so is likely to preside over a population most of which has never lived in such a democracy at all, or has only experienced it relatively briefly. The average level of political development in the world is a lot closer to 1920s Germany or 1917 Russia than to the modern US or Western Europe. And it is likely to remain that way for a long time to come.

Even if the average level of political development in the world were higher than it is, there might still be cause for concern. Some scholars argue that even well-established democracies can become vulnerable to “[deconsolidation](#)” of liberal democratic norms. That is what seems to have happened in Poland and Hungary over the last few years, admittedly states where democracy is not as established as in the West. It is not yet clear whether deconsolidation is a serious prospect in wealthier and longer-established democratic polities. But the fact that such a scenario is even plausible should decrease our confidence in the prospects for stable democracy in a world government.

The widespread political ignorance that is likely to undermine the quality of day-to-day governance in a world state is also likely to increase the danger of degeneration into despotism. Demagogic authoritarian movements can use public ignorance to their advantage, as has actually happened in many of the democratic nation-states that descended into authoritarianism.

In the worst-case scenario, a world government would not only degenerate into dictatorship, but become a full-fledged totalitarian state. And that totalitarianism could potentially be far worse and more long-lasting than any oppressive regime we have seen before.

Historically, the greatest threat to the longevity of totalitarian regimes has been the presence of rival, relatively free societies. Such rivals might forcibly overthrow the totalitarian regime (as happened with Nazi Germany). Even if they do not do so, their example might lead to restiveness among the totalitarian state's subjects and to the adoption of reforms that bring the system down, as happened in the Soviet bloc in the late 1980s.

Once established, a global totalitarian regime would not face either of these risks. There will be no rival government that could overthrow it or provide an example of a successful, relatively free society. For that reason, a worldwide totalitarian state could easily last longer and be more oppressive than any we have seen before. As economist Bryan Caplan explains in [an excellent article](#), the combination of world government and future technological developments could greatly increase the likelihood of a global totalitarian state.

Is this scenario actually likely to happen? Even given the initial establishment of world government, I would guess that the probability of global totalitarianism within the next century or two is far less than 50%. Nonetheless, the consequences are so catastrophic that even a relatively small risk of global totalitarianism should give us pause.

Advocates of world government claim that it is needed to cope with a variety of potential catastrophes, many of which also have a relatively low probability of occurring (e.g. – an environmental disaster so severe that it might destroy modern civilization). The point cuts both ways. If it is valid at all, the [precautionary principle](#) should apply to political risks no less than to environmental ones. In the words of George Orwell in *1984*, global totalitarianism would be "[a boot stamping on a human face – forever.](#)" We should think long and hard before accepting even a small risk of that kind.

The risks of world government are also relevant to strong forms of "global governance" that fall short of officially establishing a world state. The more powerful and centralized the institutions of global governance become, the more likely they are to turn into a world state in all but name.

In one sense, a world government that does not initially label itself as such might even be a greater menace than one that openly proclaims its true nature. The former is less likely to alert rationally ignorant voters to the potential danger, and thus make it harder to mobilize opposition.

Do We Need World Government to Solve the World's Problems?

Even if world government poses grave risks, perhaps we have no choice but to take them. That may be true if world government is the only way to overcome even worse dangers than the ones it is likely to create.

The upsurge of concern over climate change, the 2008 financial crisis, and other international perils, has given ammunition to advocates of world government who claim that it is the only way to solve global problems that cross state boundaries. Left to themselves, individual states might "free ride" on the efforts of others, and the issue in question might remain unaddressed.

This case for world government is superficially appealing, but seriously flawed. Even if world government advocates are right to assume that some global problems are too big for any one nation to solve, it does not follow that world government is needed to address them. The problems in question can be addressed equally effectively through cooperation between a few major powers. For example, the United States, the European Union, India, Japan, and China produce the lion's share of the world's greenhouse emissions. An agreement between these major powers could greatly reduce emissions, even if other states sought to free ride. Similarly, these major powers have the vast majority of the world's banks and other financial institutions, and could therefore cooperate with each other to address future financial crises (assuming, for the sake of argument, that such international regulation is necessary).

Both economic collective action theory and basic common sense suggest that cooperation between a small number of like-minded actors is not difficult to achieve and is not likely to be plagued by free-riding. Free-riding would be inhibited by the fact that each of players knows that the whole arrangement is likely to fall apart if they don't do their share (i.e. each is big enough for its failure to contribute to have a decisive impact). In other words, efforts at free-riding would be prevented by the knowledge that if they are attempted, there will be nothing left to free-ride on. John McGinnis and I explain the logic in more detail in [this article](#) (pp. 1241-43).

Obviously, cooperation might be prevented not by free-riding but by honest disagreement over the nature of the problem, the kind of action needed to address it, and whether or not the costs of action exceed the benefits. But such disagreement can also arise even within the confines of a single worldwide government. Unless that government takes the form of an absolute dictatorship or a narrow oligarchy, it too will sometimes be prevented from acting by internal disagreement.

And we cannot assume that the advocates of stronger action are necessarily right. In cases where action is likely to cause more harm than good, the possibility that disagreement might block it is actually a good thing.

In sum, there is no a priori reason to believe that a world government can act to solve global problems more effectively than a consortium of the world's major powers. To the extent that honest disagreement might inhibit the actions of a concert of great powers more than those of a world government, that is as likely to be beneficial as harmful.

It is also important to recognize that a world government might exacerbate some of the very dangers it is meant to curb. For example, advocates claim that world government will avert the danger of nuclear war between nation-states. This is indeed a genuine peril. But it is worth

remembering that, since 1945, the use of nuclear weapons has been prevented in large part by deterrence: governments fear retaliation by other states armed with similar weapons - including nuclear-armed allies of non-nuclear states that might otherwise be vulnerable to atomic coercion.

Such deterrence would be eliminated if nuclear weapons were under the exclusive control of a world government. If such a state descended into tyranny, there would be little to deter it from using its monopoly over nuclear arms to suppress potential dissent. For example, it could be tempted to incinerate a recalcitrant city or region as a warning to other would-be rebels.

We cannot definitively rule out the possibility that world government will turn out to be the only possible solution to some grave danger. But we should be far more skeptical of such claims than global government enthusiasts tend to be. And we should carefully weigh them against the very real dangers posed by world government itself.

Over time, I hope that humanity will overcome, or at least constrain, its dangerous nationalistic impulses. But even cosmopolitans who repudiate nationalism have good reason to be wary of world government.