Democracies Don't Die, They Are Killed

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How Democracies Die
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The death of American democracy is a whodunnit, even if the crime is still in progress and the outcome is uncertain. There are many suspects, each of whom has motive, means and opportunity. Donald Trump, his allies and his enablers are at the top of the list. But populists like Trump have been around a long time, so it is also worth asking who fell asleep on the watch. There, perhaps, we should point a finger at political parties – democracy's gatekeepers. Somehow the Republican Party seems to have lost that critical function. As we look more closely at who did what and when, we uncover a gallery of rogues stretching back to the Nixon administration (if not earlier) who conspired to bend political institutions to their own designs. If Republicans let a few populists like Trump in through the back door, that was more by self-distraction than intent.

Look closer still and even the 'good' guys in the Democratic Party have backstories that are less than pleasant, to put it mildly. They may be on the side of the angels now, but they were terrible villains back in the day. Consider the shameful role played by Democrats in the disenfranchisement

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of former slaves in the South during the post-Reconstruction period. Even in their efforts to make good on past misdeeds, the Democrats broke tacit agreements across the political spectrum and so unleashed the whirlwind. If Nixon made appeals to white nationalism, that was only possible because the Democrats failed to sell their civil-rights agenda to their own core constituencies. Everyone is complicit in this investigation. The wonder is not that democracy is dying but that it ever lived. Only enormous collective effort can save it.

Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt offer one of the best forensic accounts available of the crimes against democracy in America. The first two paragraphs of this essay only summarise the highlights. Moreover, Levitsky and Ziblatt build their argument by tackling America's greatest weakness head-on. Their book is a powerful indictment of the myth of American exceptionalism and the religion that has grown up around the US constitution as a founding document.

The United States is exceptional in many ways, not the least of which is the depth of American commitment to democracy and the rule of law. The people of other countries would have overturned their political systems or allowed those systems to be subverted under similar strains and stresses – and have, repeatedly, in other eras or parts of the world. So far, the United States has remained resilient. The constitution played an important role in that resilience by providing a framework for Americans to support their commitment to democracy and to check the power of government.

Nevertheless, it is important for Americans to realise that they can learn a lot from the experience of other countries. That experience suggests we should not take American commitment to democracy and the rule of law for granted. Indeed, if Americans could peer over their rose-tinted glasses, they would also realise that the constitution needs constant care and attention. Even the best political arrangements can be broken if the people who control the institutions of government do not want them to function.[1] The norms that define how Americans act outside the formal requirements of the

constitution are arguably even more important than what the framers wrote or intended. Indeed, and whether or not they recognise it today, Americans have learned the hard way over the last two centuries and more that they must tolerate disagreement, accept that opposition is not enmity and exercise power with self-restraint, if they are not to transform the constitution into a mockery of democracy.

Levitsky and Ziblatt do a great service by helping us understand who is responsible for the political problems Americans face, why they played the roles they did and what the implications are for the United States if Americans do not take remedial action. In their forward-looking scenarios, they paint a stark future of polarisation and dysfunction in which the great resilience of American institutions and even American commitment to democracy and the rule of law will be tested. This argument should be read alongside excellent recent work by Edward Luce on the crisis of Western liberalism, and Ivan Krastev on the travails of democracy in Europe.[2]

However, where Levitsky and Ziblatt try to point the way out of the current mess, although the strength of their diagnosis is overwhelming, the remedies they offer are unconvincing. Democrats, they argue, should resist the temptation to join in the polarising tactics developed by members of the Republican Party; instead, they should work to build a broad-based coalition in defence of American democracy. Along the way, Republicans should abandon appeals to white nationalism while the Democrats recast themselves as the supporters of an inclusive, multi-racial, European-style universalistic welfare state. It is hard to disagree with these recommendations in principle, particularly for anyone whose political instincts tend toward the centre-left. Nevertheless, if the experience of other democracies under stress is any guide, that formula is not going to work and any efforts to implement these remedies may prove counterproductive.

Political parties, gatekeepers and populists

Political parties make terrible gatekeepers, particularly when the enemy is 'populism'.[3] The reason is simple: political parties do not exist to keep populists out; they exist to mobilise voters, train and socialise elites, contest elections and gain power. When political parties are good at these core

tasks, they tend to monopolise the democratic process by raising barriers to entry for newcomers. It does not matter whether these newcomers are rude and ill-mannered, or elegant and charming. Any office-seeker that does not belong to the party is a threat that the party will try either to co-opt or to keep away from political power. If this notion of political parties sounds exclusive and at least potentially undemocratic, that is because it is. That is also why James Madison wanted to design the US constitution to avoid the politics of 'faction', which is eighteenth-century jargon for political parties.[4]

Alas, individuals have a hard time beating institutionalised groups at mobilising voters, training and socialising elites, contesting elections and gaining power. Political parties may not be democratic, but they are good at working the democratic process. Moreover, the advantages of having an institutionalised group to compete in a democracy tend to grow disproportionately as the electorate increases in size. It is not surprising, therefore, that the heyday of political parties coincided with the rapid expansion of democratic electorates. Popular political entrepreneurs such as Charles Lindbergh, Oswald Mosley and Pierre Poujade may have tried to seize power by moving outside the existing party system or creating their own political movements, but the political parties operating in the United States, Britain and France were strong enough to hold them at bay.

If anything, political parties were too successful at dominating the democratic process and, by monopolising positions of power for themselves, they prevented new groups or interests in society from finding expression. This is true particularly in those countries such as Belgium, the Netherlands and Italy where elites across the whole party system conspired, more or less openly, to prevent anyone else from gaining access to political power. They even had a name for this elite condominium: 'consociational democracy' in Belgium and the Netherlands, and 'partitocrazia' in Italy. The result in all three cases was to exclude ever larger numbers of individuals and groups from the political process, and so to create ever more favourable conditions for political entrepreneurs to mobilise voters against the system.[5]

The new groups that emerged in Belgium, the Netherlands and Italy in response to traditional party elites ran the spectrum from language nationalists such as the Flemish Block to regional separatists such as the

Northern League, and from post-materialist, pro-democracy groups such as Democrats '66 (now called D66) to post-democratic, pro-materialist groups such as Silvio Berlusconi's Forza Italia. Probably the most eclectic of the lot was the Dutch firebrand Pim Fortuyn. Fortuyn gained notoriety for his stand against immigration, but he gained followers for his stand against consociationalism. The Dutch politicians who have sought to capitalise on Fortuyn's inheritance include the socialist Jan Marijnissen on the left as well as Geert Wilders on the right.

These stories about the revolt against party dominance matter because they shed light on how voters are likely to respond when confronted by grand coalitions. Voters who go to the polls to choose between left and right only to find themselves confronted with a post-electoral coalition of the two alternatives have good cause to feel disillusioned. When the explicit purpose of that post-electoral coalition is to preclude new voices from gaining access to power, then the disillusionment is only enhanced. This is the lesson from Austria's long experience with broad centrist coalitions; it is something that German political parties are also learning.[6] The more political parties emphasise their role as gatekeepers, the more they create the conditions for what we might think of in very broad terms as 'populism', or a mobilisation against those in power. That is why almost all European democracies with proportional electoral systems have party systems that are increasingly volatile and fragmented.

First-past-the-post electoral systems do not defend hegemonic political parties indefinitely. Where new voices cannot find expression through the creation of new political movements, they will seek to penetrate and, they hope, dominate one of the mainstream political parties instead. This is what happened in the United Kingdom. The divisions now evident in the Conservative Party and the Labour Party are an evolved reaction to the cross-party consensus that prevailed in Great Britain from the end of the Second World War through the early to mid-1970s. Of course, Britain's two great parties did not agree on everything; but they did agree on economic policymaking and on European integration. Those who disagreed on these issues were shut out – and subsequently found a way to make themselves heard.[7]

Levitsky and Ziblatt tell a similar story about the United States. In their account, however, the focus for exclusion does not centre on economics or on Europe but on race. The cross-party consensus depended in many ways on preventing African Americans from exercising their democratic rights. The civil-rights movement emerged as a long-overdue reaction to this all-white monopolisation of democratic institutions. And the unintended consequence of the success of that movement was to break the cross-party consensus and sow the seeds for polarisation instead. The first-past-the-post electoral system not only failed to insulate America's more moderate political establishment but, through the expansion of political primaries within the two main political parties, it exacerbated the polarisation.

Multiculturalism, identity politics and the welfare state

The politics of race in the United States is unique in many ways because of the country's long association with a racialised form of slavery. Nevertheless, it would be a mistake to believe that the US experience has no parallels in other countries. The basic building blocks exist wherever established political parties hold readily identifiable groups away from the institutions of power, and the trigger for conflict arises wherever one or more of those established parties decides to open itself up to the group that is excluded. This is the paradox of multicultural democracy. Each time political elites extend access to some new group, those who previously enjoyed a monopoly of representation either retreat into a reactionary crouch or rebel against the system.

The instabilities of multiculturalism stem again from the nature of political parties. The focus is on 'mobilise' and 'compete', and the insight is simple: no expansion of the electorate is perfectly symmetrical, so any party that seeks to benefit by making itself attractive to newcomers will find itself facing an opposition that positions itself as the defence of the old regime. This pattern is as old as Labour and Conservative (or left and right), and it explains why Levitsky and Ziblatt have such success finding useful parallels between moments of democratic polarisation in the past and the polarisation we face in the present. From this perspective, the question is not why democratic systems tip into conflict but, rather, how they find accommoda-

tion. Levitsky and Ziblatt stress the role of informal rules and attitudes in making that transition. Parties have to stop seeing one another as enemies, tolerate disagreement and show self-restraint in their use of political institutions. These are the norms that protect the constitution from abuse.

What Levitsky and Ziblatt do not explore enough, perhaps, is the role of identity and culture in underpinning those norms. Tolerance and forbearance help to foster cross-party consensus and cooperation, on a good day, or cartelisation and collusion, on a bad day. In other words, they are part and parcel of the learned relationship that evolves among established political parties and politicians. Deep down, they rest on a mutual recognition of membership in the group and hence a fundamental acceptance of the need for equality of opportunity among those who participate in the political process. This is the domain of culture and of identity politics. The politicians who embrace these norms not only share the same values but are 'the same' in important respects. Hence, when political parties make their appeals to the electorate, they never put these values into play.

By contrast, when politicians make appeals to cultural distinctiveness and engage in divisive forms of identity-based political mobilisation, they implicitly also challenge the norms of tolerance and forbearance. This is the logic of difference as opposed to sameness. That logic becomes all the more compelling when what is at stake is access to economic resources and public services. This is a fundamental insight that Cas Mudde revealed in some of his earliest work on what were then called 'new radical right' parties in Europe. Such parties were only anti-immigrant insofar as immigrants were an obvious source of difference to use in underscoring the 'sameness' of the political groups these parties promised to represent. Moreover, the new radical-right parties were uninterested in traditional right-wing economic objectives. Instead they promised to restrict access to public services so that they could preserve the welfare state for their core constituency. And the more other parties tried to liberalise access to public services, the more strongly the new radical-right parties would emphasise welfare chauvinism as part of their electoral mobilisation.[8]

This is not an argument for restricting access to public services pre-emptively. It is just an observation about the difficulties involved for any

political party that embraces a multicultural and universalistic welfare state. The same argument also explains why any effort to extend equality of opportunity to previously excluded groups depends so heavily on active state intervention to succeed. The protection of civil rights in America is not simply a matter of legislation. Given the many opportunities for groups to mobilise around restricting access to public services and political institutions, the state must play a prominent role in ensuring that newly enfranchised groups receive what they have been promised.[9] Moreover, such active state involvement must continue so long as political parties rely on the politics of identity for their mobilisation strategies. The problem, of course, is that active state promotion of multiculturalism and civil rights is fuel to the fire of identity-based political mobilisation.

No obvious solution

The challenge is to neutralise this reinforcing spiral of polarisation and discrimination before one group or another captures the democratic process and then re-engineers it to ensure there is no further alternation. Levitsky and Ziblatt highlight the plight of North Carolina, where the national Republican Party is sheltering authoritarian behaviour at the state level. They could just as easily have pointed to the relationship between the European People's Party and Hungary.[10] Unfortunately, it is hard to imagine how this challenge can be successfully faced.

Traditional political parties seem unable to arrest the death of democracy; indeed, wherever they band together to hold on to power they seem to make matters worse. Efforts to promote greater inclusiveness and to widen access to public services – no matter how well-intentioned – also seem self-defeating if the goal is to prevent political polarisation from going from bad to worse. Here just think of Tony Blair's decision not to restrict freedom of movement for workers from Central and Eastern Europe, or Angela Merkel's decision to suspend the Dublin regulations for the treatment of asylum seekers. These were bold, progressive gestures with profound unintended consequences.

The only way to save democracy is to start by building or rebuilding a sense of shared democratic community. There is no easy formula for

achieving that objective. I find myself – like Levitsky and Ziblatt, I suspect – out of my depth. The diagnosis is compelling, and their book is essential, even compulsive, reading. Now we just need to figure out a solution to the problem they have articulated.

Notes

1   See also Erik Jones and Matthias Matthijs, 'Democracy without Solidarity: Political Dysfunction in Hard Times', *Government and Opposition*, vol. 52, no. 2, 2017, pp. 185–210.

2   See Edward Luce, *The Retreat of Western Liberalism* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2017); and Ivan Krastev, *After Europe* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017).

3   I want to be careful how I use the term 'populism' here. There is an important body of literature mapped out by writers such as Cas Mudde that has made great strides in helping us to understand what 'populism' is. I do not need to engage with that literature to make my argument, but I do not want to deny their important accomplishments either. See, for example, Cas Mudde, *On Extremism and Democracy in Europe* (Abingdon: Routledge Focus, 2016).

4   James Madison, 'The Same Subject Continued: The Union as a Safeguard Against Domestic Faction and Insurrection', *Federalist Papers*, no. 10, 1787.

5   Erik Jones, 'The Decline and Fall of Three Hegemonic Parties in Europe', *SAIS Review*, vol. 37, no. 1S, supplement 2017, pp. S71–S87.

6   Wade Jacoby, 'Grand Coalitions and Democratic Dysfunction: Two Warnings from Central and Eastern Europe', *Government and Opposition*, vol. 52, no. 2, 2017, pp. 329–55.

7   See, for example, Matthias Matthijs, *Ideas and Economic Crises in Britain from Attlee to Blair* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2011).

8   See, for example, Cas Mudde, 'The Single-Issue Party Thesis: Extreme Right Parties and the Immigration Issue', *West European Politics*, vol. 22, no. 3, 1999, pp. 182–97.

9   Desmond King, 'Forceful Federalism against American Racial Inequality', *Government and Opposition*, vol. 52, no. 2, 2017, pp. 356–82.

10 R. Daniel Kelemen, 'Europe's Other Democratic Deficit: National Authoritarianism in Europe's Democratic Union', *Government and Opposition*, vol. 52, no. 2, 2017, pp. 211–38.