



A REPUBLIC, If We Can Keep It

Social Structures and Political Regimes

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MEMO PREPARED FOR CONFERENCE: A REPUBLIC, IF WE CAN KEEP IT

On April 12-13th, 2018, researchers, scholars, journalists, and policymakers came together at New America in Washington D.C. to address questions about the health and resiliency of American democracy. This conference considered questions such as: Can a liberal democracy and representative government persist in the United States? Are we experiencing a breakdown of democracy? Are checks and balances that are built into the political system and the mediating institutions that link citizens and government strong enough to sustain liberal democracy?

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For comparativists, the United States has always been something of a difficult case. It is a presidential regime with rising levels of economic inequality and a history of slavery that has produced enduring social cleavages. How such a country could sustain political competition has always been something of a puzzle, although the division of labor within political science consigns this question to the field of American politics—which for too long has just taken American democracy as a given. The question of democratic stability in the “advanced industrial democracies” is also one that I believe had begun to take a back seat within comparative politics more generally prior to the election of President Trump. When I was completing my PhD in the mid-2000s, among regime theorists, the question of what drives democratization and what sustains democratic consolidation had been surpassed by the question of what sustains authoritarianism.

It is time now to ask once again what sustains democracy, and here, comparativists have insights to share. Some recent analyses such as Yascha Mounk’s *The People vs. Democracy* have focused on questions of democratic values, trust in government, and so forth to explain the crisis of democracy in the United States and elsewhere. As my colleague Ken Roberts just observed, we might also look at how presidential institutions interact with high levels of partisan polarization. I find it productive to ask, as comparativists long have, what are the preconditions for democracy, to invert the question from why democracies deteriorate to where democracies come from. My own interest is in thinking about social structures, which I think can give us

some insights into whether or not the preconditions for democracy that comparativists have identified still apply to the United States. I see reasons for concern.

There are two broad ways that comparativists have thought about social structures and democracy: economic inequality, and racism and other forms of social prejudice. Over the past twenty years comparativists have shown that economic inequality is a big driver of democratization and of democratic breakdown. The headline finding is that economic inequality has direct implications for the stakes of maintaining a particular regime. As inequality rises, the stakes for those benefiting from that regime become larger, and so incentives to defend the incumbent system become stronger as well. But we must also remember that the stakes for the losers rise too. The losers from high levels of inequality may find themselves asking “is the system itself worth defending at all?” As inequality rises, it thus undermines the value of the system that produces that inequality.

There are many ways through which increasing inequality matters politically, beyond the simple direct effect that the winners have more resources to devote to lobbying for their preferred policies than others do. Increasing inequality, in other words, has indirect sociopolitical effects. It creates barriers to political participation for the left behind, making it harder for them to engage in the very things that democracy requires—some as simple as voting, but also participating in politics through parties or other political organizations. Inequality also discourages people—what does it do to one’s emotions, to the feeling that there are things out there worth defending, that there is value in participating in the system that produces such inequality? And of course, economic inequality also has a way of interacting with other things—it contributes to residential sorting, it facilitates epistemic closure. And comparativists are starting to realize that it is not just income inequality that matters, ~~but also~~ but also inequality in

assets, including housing. High levels of inequality—either in income or in assets—are not propitious conditions for democratization or democratic consolidation, and we should not assume that American democracy is immune to the corrosive effects of inequality on democratic stability.

Racism and other kinds of social divisions are a second aspect of social structure that comparativists have identified as a barrier to democracy. This goes beyond the observation that racism or other forms of prejudice are normative problems on their own. It also goes beyond the observation that racial or other kinds of social divisions feed into polarization, inequality, residential sorting, epistemic closure, or other kinds of divisions that are challenges to democracy—racism makes these other divisions worse. The broader idea is that racism and other forms of group-based prejudice make it difficult for citizens to agree on what the political community is. If there is a single prerequisite for democracy, it is this: there must be consensus about who is empowered to participate in democratic politics and who is not. The classics of comparative politics and empirical democratic theory recognized this: Robert Dahl used the term “inclusive citizenship,” and Dankwart Rustow argued that consensus on the bounds of the political community is the single prerequisite for democracy to emerge.

Imagine a world in which that consensus about the bounds of the political community does not exist. In that world, citizens may ask whether or not it is legitimate to restrict the rights of out-groups who are not imbued with the capacities of democratic citizenship. It may not rise to the level of formal disenfranchisement, it can simply be that some citizens face differential barriers to political participation that effectively undermine their full participation in democratic political life. Allegations that there are illegal voters do not just undermine the legitimacy of an electoral outcome, they also raise the possibility that there are members of the political

community whose democratic citizenship is in question. What sorts of restrictions are permissible against these non-citizens? And most chillingly, what happens when you lose an election to those whose democratic citizenship you do not recognize?

Democratic regimes rely on agreement about who the *demos* because only the *demos* may allocate legitimate authority through elections. As comparativists have long emphasized—but today with new urgency—populists attempt to construct a vision of “the people” that defines them against an unresponsive or unrepresentative elite. Racism and other forms of social divisions can work in analogous ways by framing the out-group—blacks, immigrants, Jews, Muslims, “deviants”—as outside of the political community. In the understanding of comparative politics, this kind of exclusion does more than just sustain racial injustice and partisan polarization, it undermines the premise of democracy itself.