



A REPUBLIC, If We Can Keep It

Introduction

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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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Introduction

Many of us who study American politics have had some concerns for years that aspects of democracy seemed to be fraying, or were threatened by emerging trends such as polarization and inequality. The 2016 election took developments to a new level, as our political and social fabric seemed to become more deeply torn, long-term trends converged, and have been, ever since, wreaking havoc on our political system.

During the fall of 2016, when the presidential campaign was at a fever pitch, I was teaching my large undergraduate lecture class at Cornell, “Introduction to American Government and Politics.” It was challenging, pushing me to rethink fundamental aspects of how I approached the course. To gain perspective, I sought out colleagues at Cornell who are experts on regime change, democratization, and the rise and decline of authoritarianism around the world. Their insights were simultaneously clarifying and deeply disturbing. “This is all very familiar to us,” they would say. They would invoke comparisons with nations where democracy has been replaced by a hybrid regime—retaining the outward guise of representative government and free elections, but where these were increasingly combined with authoritarian practices. One colleague shrugged and said simply, “Democracies don’t last forever. They come and they go.” And that was just October 2016.

By 2017, I began to think that in order to assess whether and how democracy is imperiled in the United States today, we need to engage in broader discussions than have been the norm. We who are scholars of American politics need to learn from those with expertise in regime change around the world. We also need to probe American political history and development, examining previous periods when the United States has encountered crises. I am very thankful to my collaborators, Ken Roberts and Tom Pepinsky, for bringing the comparative dimension, and Rick Valelly and Robert Lieberman, for the historical dimension.

Our purpose in “It’s A Republic, If We Can Keep It,” is to broaden the conversation still further. The study of American politics is typically divided into small communities of scholars who each study just one part of the political system (say, the courts, or parties, or public opinion) and do so in great depth and with great sophistication. Despite the obvious advantages of this approach, it can prevent us from looking *across* the political system, from noticing shifts that might be occurring in several institutions and political processes, trends that might be affecting the entire polity over time, or important interactions between institutions and the citizenry. Without adjusting our gaze, we will remain unable to know whether democratic backsliding or deterioration—not to mention more fundamental regime change—might be possible at this historical juncture, or might even already be underway.

We've gathered a group of scholars and journalists together to facilitate such inquiry. The key question is: how well is our political system functioning today to protect liberal democracy and representative government? We will hear from presenters who are Americanists specializing in particular dimensions of the political system, with responses from comparativists who study regime change, and can tell us whether we are asking the right questions and looking in the right places. How effectively are the institutional arrangements of checks and balances operating? How well are the mediating institutions that link citizens and government performing? Should we be more concerned about some processes or areas than others? Might some long-term trends reach a tipping point that endangers the political system? In addition to paying attention to formal procedures, we want to know how established norms are holding up, providing "guardrails" for democracy. Finally, we want to summon ideas about how American democracy can work better, going forward.