

Two days in Adam Przeworski's Diary

Is democracy dying in the United States?

Tuesday, February 11, 2025

I have spent a good part of my life, 50 years, thinking about political regimes, categorizing them, studying their dynamics, and their effects. And I find myself at a loss. I am trying to find categories in which to place the current situation and historical precedents from which one could draw some enlightenment. I fail in both.

Trump was elected in fair elections, having actually won a majority of votes. Perhaps to the surprise of some of his supporters, he is implementing his campaign promises. He continues to be supported by a narrow majority in the polls, as are most of his announced measures. Hence, nothing he has done thus far disqualifies the current political regime in the United States as democracy. At the same time, tens of his measures, some only announced but several already implemented, violate the extant laws. Moreover, the government is pursuing some of them even if they have been temporarily stopped by the courts. I am not the only one who does not know what categories to apply to it: Paul Krugman thinks it is an "attempt at an autogolpe," *Le Monde*, in an editorial of today, sees it as "Imperial Presidency." The word "personalistic" has been used by political scientists to categorize autocracies, but not democracies.

The measures, announced or already adopted, add up to a revolutionary change of the relation between the state and society. The immediate aim of Trump's administration is to reduce the size of the government and to use loyalty as the exclusive criterion of public service: total control of the State apparatus, by the way, is the instrument of all revolutionary governments. The second aim is to drastically curtail the scope and the magnitude of government services to private institutions and individuals. These two offensives are to serve the goal of reducing taxation without increasing government deficit. I cannot find a historical precedent of a transformation of this scope resulting from elections. I thought of Thatcher, who succeeded in decimating unions, but even she did not reduce social expenditures. Milei, in Argentina, is another candidate and he may be closer.

Over the years, I developed a theory of the conditions under which democracies process whatever conflicts that arise in society in liberty and peace. Indeed, my name is associated with one sentence I wrote some 35 years ago, namely that "democracy is when parties lose elections." The conditions, I thought, required for elections to peacefully process conflicts are that elected governments do not make the electoral defeat too costly to temporary losers, so that they are "moderate," and that they do not foreclose the possibility of being removed in elections, so that losing is temporary. Elections fail to maintain peace when they generate revolutionary transformations and, as the absence of precedents indicates, they never do. Unless the government use physical force, that is.

There is also statistical research which shows that democracies survive in countries with high per capita income and countries accustomed to peaceful alternation in office through elections. When I apply this statistical model to the US, with its income and its past 23 partisan alternations in the office of the president, I find that the probability that democracy would die in the US is 1 in 1.8 million country-years, zero.

Hence, neither my analytical nor statistical results equip me to understand the events that unravel hour-by-hour. I just cannot think of either some theoretical framework or of historical precedents that could serve to form expectations about what is about to happen. Is democracy dying in the United States?

Revolutions may destroy, but need a project

Tuesday, April 1, 2025

Marine Le Pen, the leader of the French right-wing party, Rassemblement National, was rendered illegible to run in the forthcoming presidential election by a decision of a court. She was convicted for diverting funds she received as a deputy to the European Parliament, about 2.9 million Euros, to support her party in France. The Right already claims that the conviction was made by "Left-wing judges." That she was guilty there is no controversy but how much discretion the judges had, given the law for which she had herself voted, is controversial. The issue for me is whether courts should have the authority to remove someone from electoral competition. I raise this issue because it has become a subject of controversy in Turkey, Brazil, and the United States. In Turkey, a court ordered the arrest of Erdogan's leading opponent on charges that are transparently frivolous and politically motivated, with hundreds of thousands protesting. In Brazil, the supreme court ruled that Bolsonaro can be prosecuted for an attempted coup following his electoral defeat. In the United States, Trump was actually convicted of felony in one of his trials but his role on January 6 and his attempt to steal votes in Georgia were not adjudicated before he won reelection. Should voters be able to vote for someone convicted on criminal charges? Should they be able to vote for someone who attempted to undermine democracy? Clearly, normative and legal considerations lead to the conclusion that such persons should be, at least temporarily, removed from electoral politics. Moreover, there is also the argument that punishing such acts would dissuade others in the future. But if such offenders represent a significant portion of the electorate, the danger is conflicts would spill outside the institutional framework, to the streets, and perhaps become violent. I cannot make up my mind: Turkey is clearly a case of politically motivated prosecution by a President who controls the courts; in contrast, Brazil may be a case of a triumph of the rule of law which will not have disastrous political consequences. Somehow I wish that the French judges would have found a way to punish Le Pen without suspending her political rights, just to avoid yet another conflict. And I find it difficult to imagine what would have happened in the United States had Trump been illegible to run in 2024.

As I read about Trump actions, the words that occur most frequently are "target," "dismantle," "cut," "eliminate," "fire," "expel," "bar," "deregulate," "eliminate" and other near synonyms of "destroy." Where are "create," "build," "construct," "develop," "establish"? Revolutions must destroy but they are successful only if they offer some project, some vision, of a common future of peace and prosperity. Hate is an ingredient of every revolution but hope is necessary for it to succeed. What is the future offered by Trump? Most I could find was in his first Executive Order, where he claimed that dismantling everything would release the creative power of American citizens. The idiocy of releasing creative power by destroying scientific research is glaring. But I think the ideological poverty of the project to Make Great Again goes deeper. People are sometimes, perhaps often, willing to suffer costs but only if they are convinced that these

costs are necessary to reach a glorious future. They may tolerate high prices of eggs but only if they believe that eggs will become abundant once the ideological project is accomplished. I think Trump's ideological project will fail because it is oriented toward destruction rather than construction.

Dow Jones is -2.75% over the last month, S&P is -4.07%, Nasdaq -5.73%. Pharma stocks fell sharply last Friday.

Columbia was left hanging on its own when it became the target. But now it gained a powerful companion, Harvard. Both Harvard and Yale were trying to defuse the attack by dismantling their Middle East centers. It did not work. I used to joke that Harvard's Department of Government was in fact a department of government. So becoming a target must be a profound shock for this institution. Will it finally solve the collective action problem of the elite universities or will they surrender one by one? The government has so many instruments with which it can destroy them: cutting research funds, taxing endowments, putting visa restrictions on full paying foreign students, all the way to withdrawing accreditation and criminal persecution for "harboring" students who dare to speak out. If Trump, or Vance, really want to destroy universities, they can. Hence, I am not surprised that they all cave in. But will they survive? What will be left of them?

The Wisconsin Supreme Court election is today. Tomorrow is the tariff day.