

Julian Waller

What Happens Next – 08.06.22

Julian Waller:

So I have good news. The United States is simply not on the verge of a fascist takeover and those that counsel imminent democratic death do us a disfavor. That does not mean that politics here in the American Republic are healthy. They very clearly are not. A general political legitimacy crisis has been rumbling through American society since at least 2016 and shows no signs of abating. However, a period of heightened political tension, mistrust and division does not necessitate the full breakdown of political order.

Many scholars, commentators and policy makers have honed in on the perceived threat of democracy's gradual decline, the so-called democratic backsliding framework, which has become popular as a predictive playbook for how the end of democracy comes about. This focus on a gradual approach, usually emphasizes procedural tricks, slow institutional capture and distorted electoral outcomes. It's informed primarily by the experience of certain European countries: Hungary, Russia, Turkey, Serbia are most commonly cited. The problem is working through any convincing account of a gradual slide into electoral authoritarianism in the United States requires considerable leaps well beyond tinkering around the electoral margins by way of House gerrymandering, Senate malapportionment or the electoral college.

The problem with relying on this way of understanding predictions about the collapse of democracy is that we often presuppose that a stable consolidated authoritarian regime inevitably comes next, rather than just short-term political chaos or constitutional crisis. This leads us to the lure of unfortunate hyperbole, where we have all this talk about the authoritarian or tyrannical nature of the Republican party, for example, or the looming dictatorship resulted from populous leader like Donald Trump.

So, democratic breakdown today is this form of gradual slide into what we call electoral authoritarianism. There is another common form of democratic collapse, which is even more evocative. And that is a military coup leading to the suspension of constitutional order and the creation of a military-backed civilian bureaucratic authoritarian regime. Neither of these scenarios are especially likely in the current political and institutional ecosystem of the United States.

Democratic collapse is really, truly genuinely difficult. You have to understand that the lessons we draw from foreign countries -- they have to make sense. We hear a lot about the Hungarian case. It's a very soft electoral authoritarian regime, but this an ethnically homogenous country of 10 million people, the population of Michigan. It experienced the massive discreditation of the current political opposition in the wake of the financial crisis, leaving the now current government very well placed to not only win elections heavily, but to do so while promising to rid the system of what was widely perceived to be a deeply corrupt elite. It has a parliamentary system with a tendency to produce lopsided electoral outcomes in big swing elections. This

allowed the quick capture of all state institutions by the ruling party, enabling them to change the constitution easily.

The United States is absolutely nothing like this at all. Here in America, one must be able to control a vast set of political and economic organizations in order to fashion a genuine stable authoritarian regime. The US is a country of 330 million people spread across an entire continent containing a smorgasbord of overlapping racial, ethnic, and class segments divided into a multitude of powerful state governments whose legitimacy and political authority are centuries old and practically meaningful to the lives of their respective citizens.

We need to be very careful about the lessons we draw from foreign cases and the realities of what authoritarian regimes and their paths to power actually look like in an ideal world. This shouldn't be a particularly controversial opinion, but things are quite heightened and tense these days. And it's very easy to fall into extreme interpretations or even wish casting disaster, which is something we need to be careful to avoid.

Larry Bernstein:

Samuel Huntington wrote a book called *Soldier and the State* in 1957. Huntington explained that the American soldier's oath to the constitution is taken very seriously and that there is no American tradition for military coups. And that the military sticks to fighting wars and staying out of the political realm. What are your thoughts on Huntington's classic work?

Julian Waller:

The professionalization of the US military -- It's one of the reasons America is so exceptional. One of the major takeaways from the Huntington thesis is that the military does not get involved in politics. While the military remains quite a professional organization, there was concern during the transition of power between President Donald Trump and President Joe Biden, when it was not clear that the commander in chief actually was in control of the military, actually in control of the nuclear codes, for example. We did not have a coup. However, that was a very tense moment when it was not clear that the sitting civilian president was actually calling the shots.

Larry Bernstein:

We had Edward Luttwak speak on the podcast, he wrote *Coup d'Etat: A Practical Handbook*. He said January six was not a coup, it was a bunch of yahoos attacking the capital. What is your view of that?

Julian Waller:

The problem is we get into definitions. There's a whole argument in the political science literature about what is a coup. These matter for coding decisions in quantitative research. A lot of my colleagues have come around to the idea that it was a coup. I have not come down to that. The standard definition of a coup involves the military. We had this poorly defined concept of the self-coup. It comes out of Latin American history, and it tends to be elected presidents who suddenly close their legislatures and arrest all their judges. And then they just

rule. And that's happened recently in Peru, under Fujimori. That's not a coup, but we kind of call it a coup. So the definition is really convoluted. I think if you were to pull 10 comparative political scientists, you'd get kind of 10 different answers.

When is it just political violence? There is violence that happens at national legislatures in countries, and we tend not to call those coups. Chilean parliament was caught on fire. Serbian parliament was attacked. Sri Lanka parliament just got raided by a mob of people. I wouldn't call it a coup. There's a prudential reason to not nail yourself to a very specific word for these sorts of things, unless you're in an academic discipline where you need a tight conceptualization.

My own view is it's more like a riot that got out of control and is deeply disturbing, than that it is a proper coup that was planned and executed. But people disagree on that.

Larry Bernstein:

We've had a number of very close elections that reflect a divided electorate. Is that an example of success? And how do you view close electoral results in the context of fears of increasing polarization?

Julian Waller:

Polarization is the norm of most of American history. We have this golden sense of how things used to be very pleasant, and it used to be just basic policy distinctions. That's kind of a figment of the postwar consensus. We had these 30 glorious years, which Western Europe also experienced.

And people assume that's the American baseline and that's not true at all. Our political history has always been contentious. There's usually been some political violence actually. And we also forget even our recent past. It's not just the Republican party that has said that election were illegitimate. If you look at the early two thousands: "George W. Bush isn't real president" and trying to find procedural ways through dirty tricks to get around it. That was very much so part of the dissident left at the time.

Larry Bernstein:

Anti-elitism and anti-experts are fundamental to the new populism. And there is a frustration with the media, how does these views relate to fears of authoritarianism?

Julian Waller:

So the trouble with populism is that it describes normal politics too frequently to be a useful concept that determines whether or not you have democratic decay. For as long as we've been alive, one of the best things to run on is how the beltway is terrible, and we need to get back to the average American. And that is true for both parties. I certainly wouldn't make a causal claim between the rise of this viewpoint, which is the norm, and some sort of sudden democratic threat.

You can have a tighter understanding and a better sense of populism. It's not just the capital is bad and the establishment or the status quo is bad, but it is that uniquely the elites, which are a singular and coherent whole, are bad. They're trying to destroy you. And that only by overthrowing them and the places they sit in, the institutions that they run, will you be able to have greater outcomes. It's a higher bar than just saying DC is a swamp. Everyone knows DC's a swamp. But that doesn't mean there's a cabal of elites that are running the show and that they are unitary. They're also non-national. They're not part of the people; they're somehow different.

It's a different kind of politics. Insofar as the anti-institutionalism is followed through by a populist who's been elected, then there's going to be a degree of chaos. It doesn't mean that there's going to be an authoritarian regime that follows afterwards, but it does absolutely mean that there's going to be discord, because this upsets the system in major ways. But what we found very interestingly was that Donald Trump did not govern really as a populist.

Larry Bernstein:

How would you compare 2020 with 1968 when we had political violence especially surrounding the Democratic Convention?

Julian Waller:

People deeply underestimate the degree to which political violence was pervasive in the 1960s and 1970s, even into the eighties. Just easy examples are major assassinations of political figures. John F. Kennedy, Robert Kennedy MLK. In terms of major riots, the riots at the democratic convention, all the sort of domestic terrorist groups and pipe bombings. Things like the Black Panthers, variety of right and left wing extremist groups or radical groups -- however you want to phrase them -- committing acts of violence. Again, the reason why January 6th is such a big deal, is that it's this really clear evocative sense of political violence that you've gone beyond words to action.

We haven't had assassinations and God help us, we haven't had this degree of political discord that we had in the sixties and the seventies, where people were willing to put their actions behind their words. It ushered in a new era, in which you have very non-violent political ecosystem, Reagan onwards, that has probably gone through its lifespan.

And now we're in a different era. I would be very concerned about further political violence in the coming decade or so.

Larry Bernstein:

How do you think about Howard Zinn's interpretation of the democratic process, where he viewed political parties as a charade and that the two major parties were too similar and didn't offer real choice?

Julian Waller:

First of all, there is a very, very strange, naive view of what democracy is for a lot of people. There's this view that all my rights are democracy. All my policies are democracy. All your policies are dictatorship. There's a conflation between a given view of the world and democracy when democracy is not that. Democracy is a system of government in which the apex political offices are chosen through a competitive struggle for the people's vote by way of multi-party elections, in which outcomes are uncertain and suffrage is broad. Democratic system is a way of choosing leaders and choosing their successors. It has a benefit of kicking out elites when you stop liking them and putting in a different group of elites. It has a benefit of a very good track record of not having things like coups. It has a decent track record of creating its own legitimacy, that tangible sense the political system is at least semi responsible to me and that I matter in this political system. It's not the end all be all. It is a specific system of government. And the United States is the oldest and greatest democratic experiment the world has ever seen. And it's still an experiment. And for most countries, democracy is less than a hundred years old for many countries. It's less than 50, or less than 30, in many countries.

In order to buy into democracy, you have to accept that sometimes your political enemies are going to run your country. If you can't get that into your head, you have a huge problem because that means you can never relinquish power. If you genuinely believe that the other side cannot take power, then only you can. And you've just convinced yourself into a dominant party authoritarian regime, because you're just going to prevent the other side from happening.

Larry Bernstein:

Let's talk about norm changes in the political process. Recently, the Senate has been questioned as an institution on whether or not it's fair that each state has two votes when populations differ so much. Also, the desire to pack the supreme court. The filibuster has been challenged with opposition to bipartisan compromises to pass legislation. There's been threats of adding new states to pack the senate. Do these attacks on democratic norms have anything to do with the argument that we are backsliding?

Julian Waller:

The court is deemed to be really off kilter by one party. And the other side also has deemed the court to be off kilter in a variety of ways. This is going to provide a political opportunity to open up new ideas. It's an Overton window kind of argument. The court's not going anywhere in the short term. It's going to be meaningful to people's lives. It's going to be a part of the political system. And there are going to be hard, genuine political questions over its future. And that's going to be measured in decades. It's not going to be measured next year. Institutional changes are always iterative processes.

It's a similar situation with the Senate. The Senate has a very strong basis for existing, because of the federal structure. In fact, all federal systems have upper chambers that represent states, not people. And most large countries like the United States are federal systems. So, people talk about abolishing the Senate and that's never made any sense to me. It's a huge country and states are very meaningful. They are real political entities. We were reminded in the pandemic

that states mattered. Crossing a state line mattered a ton for whether you were locked down or not, whether you were forced to vaccinate depending on your occupation.

Adding states -- hey, we've always done that. We've always gerrymandered the Senate. 19th century American history is adding states for political purposes, usually to prevent the spread of slavery and packing whatever party was running the country at the time. So adding states for political reasons is a valued American tradition.

There's an increasing realization in the American public that you cannot assume that anti-politics or technocratic solutions are going to save you. Politics is the only way through. Politics is the democratic process; that's representative government. It can be very hardball. You should be careful about one side stacking the deck too much. You should be very aware of that and you should be fighting against it, whatever side you're on. But at the end of the day, Americans are realizing that, only through politics, are they going to get what they want because the dreams from the 1950s onwards of managerialism -- of just solving all policy problems through scientific method, through properly educated elites -- it just doesn't work.

Larry Bernstein:

In the Supreme Court case *West Virginia vs. the EPA* that came out this term, the court decided that the bureaucracy could not make laws, that this power resides solely with Congress. Is this a victory for more politics?

Julian Waller:

It's absolutely a victory for politics. At the end of the day, the administrative state is very big. You can't run a complex, modern political system without it. So there has to be a degree of presidential discretion. But we have to remember that Congress is the locus of political sovereignty. It is the representation of the people in all their diverse forms. And so the degree to which the court has pushback against executive aggrandizement, further taking of major policy decisions away from the bureaucracy, brought it back to Congress -- I think that's a good thing.

It is missing something, what we would call we call post legislative scrutiny, the idea that after legislature, parliament passes a law, a parliamentary committee is then obligated to check in five years down the line and maybe even reaffirm. So this is a question of creating institutional incentives for oversight. And the US Congress is extremely good at theatrical oversight. Congressional hearings are not about learning things. They're about playing to the population. That's extremely important to be able to showboat and showcase to your constituents, what you're doing, who the people to trust, who the people not to trust, that you're active.

This is a genuine form of oversight. Oversight is grandstanding. Oversight is sticking the finger in the eye. That's what real oversight is because oversight translates into the political process, by which the population then elects new people.

So to get back to the point, it would be extremely useful if Congress started writing in more of the legislation that it passes that certain committees must review. It's going to cause difficulty in long-term planning. It's going to increase the workload of Congress, but at the end of the day, that's our political system.

Larry Bernstein:

We have a major tax and spend reconciliation bill coming in front of the Senate this weekend. And the expectation is that all 50 members of the Democratic Party will vote for this bill. And all 50 members of the Republican Party will vote against this bill. Is political party coherence and agreement a sign of success or failure?

Julian Waller:

This bill that's coming across the Senate floor right now that should pass is exactly this sort of compromise that a legislative institution is designed to do. It's not a bureaucracy, right? Where your outcome is little widgets that you produce in terms of policies and regulations and texts, and there is coordination and consensus within the bureaucratic institution whose membership is chosen by an opaque process that has nothing to do with popular inputs, right? Whose leadership is chosen by the singular executive? No, it's a legislature, and you compromise on things. And you push together a package that will work given the senators there who have this plan.