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How Do Democracies Fall Apart?

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How do democracies fall apart? The truth is that they never do. Falling apart implies a process devoid of will, driven by gravitational forces. Regime change is always the result of deliberate action. Democracies only become dictatorships when one set of actors attempts to disassemble democratic institutions and another set of actors fails to marshall an appropriate defense. Democracies don't fall apart, they are taken apart by counter-elites.

Will counter-elites succeed in taking apart democracy in the United States? As every morning's news sets our heads spinning, it's natural to try to steady ourselves with historical parallels and to try to predict the future with an eye to the past. As a consequence, a broad range of commentators has drawn ominous parallels between the rise of interwar fascism and the rise of Trumpism. Are these parallels appropriate? More important, do they foretell tragedy here in the United States? Believing we have as much to learn from success as from failure I'll briefly outline a case of each-- tracing the trajectory of failed democracy in interwar Italy and the trajectory of enduring democracy in interwar Finland. Putting our current democracy in comparative perspective reveals some troubling similarities and some consoling contrasts.

Italy: A Capital-Fascist Alliance, Ill-conceived Invitations and an Absent Defense

The interwar years would have had a different hue had they not begun with the victory of the Bolsheviks in Russia. The successful communist assault on Russia's first elected assembly proved inspirational for many and horrifying for many more. When a provisional government in Hungary ceded power to Bolsheviks in 1919 before elections could even be held, the specter of a spreading revolution haunted capitalists and elected assemblies everywhere. The Hungarian initiative failed in a matter of months but similar attempts in other European states were constructed as proof of a constant threat and justification for preemptive coercion and constraints on civil liberties.

The hopes and fears inspired by the Bolsheviks' success in Russia played a pivotal role in the breakdown of Italian democracy in 1922. Hordes of Italians mobilized rapidly into red and anti-red movements which engaged in extra-parliamentary activity of all sorts. Dramatic labor mobilizations, including the seizure of factories and farmland help explain why Italian democracy lasted less than three full years: Mussolini was spectacularly successful in using the threat of red revolution as a means of mobilizing support for a counteroffensive. Landowners

and industrialists joined Mussolini in common-cause as his fascist squads provided the property protections and the coercion of the left that the new democratic order failed to provide. Panicked by revolutionary mobilization the business community allied with fascism and helped to undermine the liberal state. [1]

The alliance between propertied elites and Mussolini's Fascist movement helps explain why Italy's Liberal Prime Minister, Giovanni Giolitti, invited the Fascist party to join the electoral lists of the National Block, a coalition of Liberals, Nationalists, Democrats and Social Reformists united by their opposition to socialism. The invitation gave the Fascists an air of legitimacy and eventually 6% of the seats in the National Assembly. It was followed by a second, even more consequential, invitation when King Victor Emmanuel asked Mussolini to form a government. As S.J. Wolf reminds us, the Fascist March on Rome was "unnecessary" because Mussolini was called to power in "a more or less constitutional manner" by the king himself. [2]

The elected elite who should have defended Italy's democratic institutions failed miserably. Indeed their rampant corruption and inefficacy alienated broad sectors of the Italian citizenry and provided Mussolini and his fascists with "a ready audience for their promises of a new, clean, and effective kind of politics."[3] Key leaders simply beat a retreat as the Fascists grew stronger. Giolitti resigned and stayed outside of Rome during the entire crisis. His replacement, Luigi Facta, resigned on the night of infamous March on Rome and simply went home to bed. But long before Mussolini and the counter-elite took control, the democratically elected parliamentarians distinguished themselves by their absence during votes of confidence and key debates. The rate of absenteeism went as high as 45% - increasing steadily in the regime's final months. [4] Marshal Diaz, the nation's chief military commander, refused to commit his officers to resistance when the King asked whether he could depend on the military to repel Mussolini's advance. [5] Italian democracy was left defenseless.

Finland: A Dearth of Fascist Allies and a Show of Successful Exclusion

Finnish democracy endured the assault of a movement inspired by Italian Fascism, though the outcome was far from a forgone conclusion. Like many of the states where democracy collapsed, Finland's new regime was born from the remnants of a disintegrated empire. It ranked with Romania in terms of basic structural indicators and its Communist Party was as large as any in Europe. Most ominously, Finland's communists and nationalists were still recovering from fighting a brutal civil war when the Great Depression hit. The extreme Right Lapua Movement emerged when anti-Communist farmers, reeling from the depression, rioted in 1929. The movement swept the country so quickly that it made the breakdown of democracy "a real possibility."[6]

At first, political elites made concessions to the group: a newly elected parliament arrested communist deputies, passed anti-Communist laws and sometimes allowed extreme-right lawlessness to go unpunished. Politicians rationalized these actions as attempts to "prevent the growth of anti-Parliamentary feeling."[7] But by the autumn of 1930, as the movement failed to dissipate, concessions ended and a crack-down began. The courts meted out harsh punishments for movement violence and even convicted the movement leader's son of "political murder." Politicians from across the spectrum condemned the movement harshly but also eschewed extra-legal retribution. Even when the movement kidnapped the first president of the Republic, party leaders claimed that "the good of the Fatherland" required "an end to mob action" of any sort.[8] The movement's attacks on the moderate political figures provoked a schism within the Right as differences between conservatism and fascism emerged in sharp relief. The conservative Agrarian Union Party turned decisively against the movement in 1930 and allied with the Social Democrats, the National Progressives and the majority of the Swedish People's Party. The resulting Lawfulness Front effectively ended any competition for the votes of the violent. With the communists cowed, the movement lost nearly all of whatever support it initially had from commercial and industrial elites.[9]

When Lapua leaders organized a revolt in Mäntsälä in 1932 they inadvertently brought about the movement's demise. As they tried to use the force of numbers and arms to justify a power grab, the conservative president, P.E. Svinhufvud declared a state of emergency, demanded the arrest of movement leaders, and made a personal radio appeal urging the movement's rank-and-file to go home. As a well-known nationalist hero from the Civil War who had once had strong support within the Lapua movement, Svinhufvud might have played a role like that of King Victor Emmanuel (or Von Hindenburg) and handed the movement power. Instead, he outlawed the movement altogether and called out the Army to block the march. The commanding general of the armed forces, the minister of the interior, and the minister of defense gave these initiatives their full support. [10] Working in concert, Finnish political, military and economic elites effectively "clipped the wings of the Lapua movement"[11] and kept Finnish electoral democracy alive.

Lessons?

What does this comparison teach us? And how might its lessons help us understand US democracy today? Finland's democracy endured because its political elites marshaled what I've referred to elsewhere as "distancing capacity."[12] By this I mean the capacity to distance one's self and one's organization from acts of lawlessness or violence. It involves condemning and prosecuting all those who engage in violence or lawlessness (or violations of the Constitution) even when they present themselves as allies. In Finland, distancing was initially delayed. But soon, *political parties* distanced themselves from the disloyal opposition through a broad

coalition. *Courts* distanced themselves from the disloyal movement by invoking the rule of law. *Capitalists* gradually distanced themselves as well, backing mainstream conservative forces instead. Finally, a conservative war hero succeeded in distancing the Right and the armed forces from the movement and dismantling it altogether.

Might we see a similar process of distancing here? I won't push a parallel between Svinhufvud and John McCain. Though McCain and other Republicans have distanced themselves from Trump, McCain wasn't wielding presidential power when the distancing began. Trump has already been invited to rule. And we often see the very opposite of distancing in Congress. The muted reactions to the possibility that Roy Moore may soon be the Senator from Alabama, is a case in point.

This said, there might be reasons to expect more successful distancing in the future. Latent distancing capacity is already becoming evident. A first consoling fact is that the separation of powers gives the system more space for distancing and opposition than the Parliamentary governments of the interwar years allowed. A second consoling fact is that our judiciary is more independent than its interwar counterparts. State and Federal courts are already showing themselves to be spaces where distancing might occur. [SLIDE Courts]

Violent Pendular Mobilization?

More important than these institutional differences are the major contextual differences between what we saw in the interwar years and what we're seeing today. Distancing proved impossible in Italy because a critical mass of capitalists and politicians came to believe that an anti-system movement was needed. They came to believe that it served their short-term interests in a way that the liberal order did not. They faced violent pendular mobilization on the left and the right. Fascists offered to restore order as the pendulum threatened property relations.

We see no violent pendular mobilization today. The left poses no direct threat to property relations. Trade unions have been so weakened that they hardly pose a threat to profitability much less property. Anarchists are few in number. Mobilizations in defense of minority rights have, surprisingly, involved only minimal violence, despite blatant provocations. The poor continue to be patient (or paralyzed.) The oppressed continue to adhere to peaceful protest (or remain demobilized.)

On the Right we do see some destructive mobilization. Charlottesville is the most discussed example. But overall, violent protest is lower than before the election [Slide Protest]. We don't see Brown Shirts marching repeatedly in the streets.

Trump might bear some resemblance to Mussolini. But Trump himself does not have a movement. He has "a base" instead. This is consequential because his base is literally hard to move. His base gathers for rallies of course but the dynamism we saw in the interwar years, even the dynamism we've seen more recently with leaders such as Chavez, or Erdogan or Correa are simply not there. The abysmal turnout for his inauguration provides evidence of my point.

And note that Trump's charisma is not transferable. His attempt to oust Paul Ryan by backing a candidate known as the Mini-Trump failed miserably. His attempt to reframe Putin was met by sweeping anti-Russian sanctions backed by both parties. His more recent backing of Luther Strange in Alabama failed as well. Trump's supposed supporters and allies have often been fickle friends.

A Capital Alliance?

The mention of allies brings us to another difference that should enable distancing in the future. The anti-democratic right in Europe benefited from a firm alliance with capital. Capitalists and even other people with lesser amounts of wealth faced a credible threat from a vibrant left. They were easily convinced that the liberal order would not serve their interests so they backed a movement and counter- elite which promised to do so.

U.S capital faces no threat from the left today. They've done spectacularly well under liberal democracy. So they don't need Trump or any form of thuggery. Rather than colluding with Trump, many of the most dynamic and powerful sectors of our capitalist elite have emerged to oppose his policies. These sectors don't fear a redistributive left. They fear the implications of Trump's ill-conceived economic and social policies instead. They fear tariff walls that will raise their cost of production. They fear losing market share if their association with Trump's racism or anti-Semitism leads to consumer boycotts. And they fear losing valuable members of their workforce because of xenophobic immigration laws. [SLIDE on OP from Capital]

The protectionist component of Trump's nationalist agenda might appear to serve the interests of small businesses-But here too the parallels with interwar fascism peter out because, in the globalized US economy, small businesses have been out maneuvered by big businesses for decades now. Are there any signs that this will change?

Can Politicians Distance Themselves?

If powerful sectors of our economy can distance themselves from Trump, can political elites do so as well? Can they muster the distancing capacity that their counterparts in Finland mustered? Or do they think (like party elites in Italy) that they need Trump's supporters to win elections?

There are certainly reasons to conclude that distancing is impossible. We read that "establishment" Republican elites are "running scared" and that Bannon and the Mercers are waging a successful war on the Republican establishment.

But a closer look at recent political opinion trends reveals that the capacity for some form of distancing might still exist. Unlike their counterparts in the interwar years, elected officials today do not have to rely only on media constructions or visible mobilizations to gauge popular feelings. They can use polling data to determine whether alliances can be cut or cultivated and a close look at what the American people seem to want suggests that distancing just might be possible. Three trends motivate this conclusion.

The first is that positive opinions of Trump himself are declining. According to Fivethirtyeight, Trump's popularity peaked on January 25, 2017 (when it was 47.8%) but it has dropped around 10 % points since then. Disapproval became higher than approval back in February and has been rising ever since.[13] A Pew survey conducted in mid-August found that; 1) only 33% of all Americans agreed with "many or all of his positions" 2) that a full 30% of *Republicans* (and Republican Leaners) said that they agreed with him on *no issues* or only a few issues and 3) that only around a third of Republicans (and Republican leaners) say "they like the way Donald Trump conducts himself as president." [14] Trump is vulnerable.

With Breitbart looming large in our consciousness, we might easily conclude that Trump's personal popularity has dropped mostly because the American public stands to his Right. Ultra-conservative votes are needed and must be cultivated. Thus, distancing is impossible because Republicans face a population that's moved to the far right itself. But here too, a closer look at the data offers possible consolation. American public opinion has certainly polarized over the years. In 2004, just 11% of Americans were either consistently liberal (8%) or consistently conservative (3%). Today 23% have consistently liberal or consistently conservative views. But the figure for conservatives is still only 10%. [15] They simply seem more numerous because they are so visible in the media and so visible in primaries.

The mention of primaries and elections brings me to a second set of data that might reveal incentives for distancing. The most recent ANES Data suggest that the strongest predictor of Trump support was not economic dissatisfaction, or political disaffection but right-wing ideology. (Slide P05) But if we look over time, the trends in right-wing ideology are actually decreasing. (Slide P06) Political disaffection is at an all-time high, but economic satisfaction has rebounded and surprisingly, anti-immigrant sentiment has gradually declined. (Slides PO7-9) These trends might make distancing possible if politicians are can only succeed in exploiting them.

The third aspect of public opinion that should incentivize distancing is the fact that, support for basic democratic institutions remains strong in the population as a whole. The vast majority of Americans (74%) still believe that the "rights of people with unpopular views" should be protected. 79% still believe that "people have the right to nonviolent protest;" 83% believe that a strong democracy requires "a system of checks and balances dividing power between the president, Congress and the courts." And 89% agree that strong democracy depends on "national elections that are open and fair." (SLIDES PO 10-13)

Even though popular dissatisfaction with Congress is high—even though accusations of dysfunctionality in the legislature might ring as true as they did in Italy under Giollitti—An overwhelming majority of Americans reject the idea of a strong man executive: A full 77% of Americans reject the idea that "problems could be dealt with more effectively if presidents didn't have to worry about Congress and the courts." SLIDE PO 14.

This sort of data make me think, that at the national level at least, elected elites still have distancing capacity. They can distance themselves from Trump and marshall an effective defense of democratic institutions and still keep their parties alive. And if I'm right in assuming that Trump's base is largely populist and not literally fascist, the challenge of keeping the base voting Republican is diminished. The key is to get a broader sector of the electorate to vote in primaries and then, in elections. Improving the miserable 55% turnout we saw in the last presidential election is a place to start.

Conclusion

A quick return to the interwar comparisons will highlight a tentative conclusion. The actions of the most dynamic sectors of American capital plus at least some core aspects of current American public opinion make me think that the parallels with Finland are much stronger than those of Italy. Our economic and political elite have ample distancing capacity and capitalists are already using it. Trump's support among the most dynamic sectors of the business community is precarious and it is possible that their mobilization may bolster moderate politicians.

I'll conclude by noting (with apologies to Tolstoy) that every unhappy democracy is unhappy in its own way and thus, that the scripts for transitions to dictatorship are myriad. It's possible that identity politics (or some other factor I have neglected entirely) will enable Trump to stave off distancing and further backsliding. But for now, I find the contrast with Interwar Italy consoling. The Playbill I see today features a different set of actors on a different stage and foretells a different, less tragic, outcome.

[1] Erminio Fonzo, "A Path towards Fascism: Nationalism and Large-scale Industry in Italy (1910–1923)" *Journal of Modern Italian Studies*, 2016 Vol. 21, no. 4, 545–564http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/1354571X.2016.1207316 p. 545

[2] S.J. Woolf, "Italy" in *European Fascism* ed. S.J. Woolf (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1968) p.39

[3] Margaret MacMillan "Stability and Democracy in Europe will hold Fast Against Populism" FT October 21, 2016

[4] Paolo Farneti, "Social Conflict, Parliamentary Fragmentation, Institutional Shift, and the Rise of Fascism: Italy" in Juan Linz and Alfred Stepan, eds. *The Breakdown of Democratic Regimes: Europe* 30 – 31.

[5] Adrian Lyttelton, *The Seizure of Power: Fascism in Italy 1919 – 1920* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1973)

[6] Risto Alapuro and Erik Allardt, " The Lapua Movement: the Threat of Rightist Takeover In Finland" in Linz and Stepan 125.

[7] Marvin Rintala *Three Generations: the Extreme Right Wing and Finnish Politics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Publications, 1962) 19 – 20

[8] Rintala 178

[9] Alapuro and Allardt 133

[10] Rinatala 133 and 194 – 95

[11] Alapuro and Allardt, "The Lapua Movement" 139

[12] Here and in the comparison of Italy and Finland I draw on my book, *Ordinary People in Extraordinary Times The Citizenry and the Breakdown of Democracy* Princeton University Press , 2003

[13] https://projects. fivethirtyeight.com/trump-approval- ratings/

[14] Pew Research Center survey conducted August 15-21, 2017

[15] http://www.people–press.org/interactives/political–polarization –1994–2015/ Pew Research Center 2015 Report on Political Polarization