

1 Introduction

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The relative robustness and fragility of political orders is a central concern of scholars and political elites alike. What factors account for broad political shifts, sudden ruptures, and gradual processes, through which orders decline, break down, and are replaced by new ones? How do fledgling political orders, especially democratic ones, consolidate themselves and become more robust over time? Our volume focuses on an underexplored aspect of these questions by studying assessments of robustness and fragility made by both scholars and political actors. The core argument we develop and explore throughout the different chapters in this volume is that such assessments have important implications for how leaders behave and that their behavior feeds into processes by which political orders change. Assessments of fragility and robustness of political orders, we argue, is intimately associated with ideas of what is politically prudent and feasible, and equally important, which actions are not. This also prompts us to ask questions regarding how these understandings among political elites develop, how they influence each other, and how scholarly ideas shape the outlooks of political actors.

Our contributors explore these questions in the context of national, regional, and global political orders, collectively developing a multifaceted perspective on political orders at these respective levels. Our focus on leaders' assessments relies on a common perspective that underlines the highly context-dependent nature of scholarly and leader understandings of robustness and fragility. Here we provide an alternative view to prevalent perspectives in political science and international relations research that aim to develop objectivist measures of fragility and robustness. Our interpretive perspective instead relies on the fundamental assumption that assessments are shaped by recognized role models, historical lessons, political commitments, and the broader *Zeitgeist* in which leaders and analysts are embedded. We do not argue that external factors, be they slow-moving shifts in broad material conditions, sudden technological leaps or crises, are inconsequential. We do argue, however, that leaders' assessments of such factors and their potential impact on

political orders will be highly uncertain and that such processes need to be studied from the horizon of the actors that engage in them. Contextual factors shape assessments of fragility and robustness as well as responses to these assessments. The contributors to this volume will help identify patterns of assessments and responses in an effort to balance the general against the particular, allowing us to establish analytically general insights regarding these dynamics.

Political Orders and Leaders' Assessments

Our authors, while offering a broad set of perspectives on robustness and fragility share a set of assumptions that are foundational to our arguments and important to foreground in this introduction. First and foremost, we accept political orders as the units of our analysis. Political orders can be seen as assemblages of formal as well as informal institutions and procedures that work to regulate collective life and understood as serving the purpose of governing the social orders on which they ultimately depend. Political orders also exist at the regional and international levels. They are admittedly thinner, but increasingly important to regional and international relations. Our contributors address all three levels of order.

Regimes and political orders are increasingly synonymous in common parlance. Regime is a term usually applied to a type of government. In democratic states we can effectively distinguish between governments and regimes.¹ The former can come and go while the latter may endure. Our focus in this volume is on how leaders assess the fragility or robustness of their political orders. These are units, like the Soviet Union, the Ottoman Empire, Great Britain, the European Union (EU), or the United States, that are imbued by particular ways of organizing political life. They appear, change, and break down much less frequently than governments change. But when they do, it is often associated with momentous consequences. A case in point is Hungary's termination of its union with Austria and the declaration of independence by Czechs in October 1918, followed quickly by that of South Slavs, Slovaks, Ukrainians, and Poles that led to loss of control of peripheral territories to new breakaway states. Emperor Karl was encouraged to abdicate in November, the monarchy collapsed, and a new Austrian Republic emerged, effectively redrawing the political map in Europe.²

In some circumstances, the collapse of a regime leads to the collapse of a political order. This happened to the ex-communist-run countries of Eastern Europe, Libya after Gaddafi's overthrow, and Iraq after the defeat of Saddam Hussein. Much less commonly, the end of a regime and order can result in the collapse of a country as well, as it did for the Soviet

Union and Yugoslavia in the aftermath of the Cold War. The weakening of communist regimes in both countries encouraged component provinces or republics to declare and ultimately make good on their independence.³ How do leader's assessments of the order's fragility and robustness feed into such processes of change?

We start off from the observation that assessments of robustness and fragility wax and wane in often unpredictable ways. If there seems to be widespread agreement on the general robustness of political orders, fears of their fragility can emerge abruptly and unexpectedly. Such shifts are evident irrespective of whether political orders are organized according to autocratic principles or democratic ones.

Shifting perceptions of democracy's robustness or fragility in the period after World War II offer an example. From about 1950 on, the robustness of democracies was all but taken for granted. Democracy seemed to be developing roots in Germany, Japan, and Italy, only a few years after being ruled by fascist regimes. In the course of the next couple of decades in Europe there was some threat of backsliding that quickly passed, as in the attempted General's Putsch in France in 1961, a failed left-wing coup in Portugal in 1975, and an unsuccessful military putsch in Spain in 1981.⁴ Portugal and Spain had only recently put authoritarian regimes behind them so their ability to withstand these shocks was regarded as that much more impressive.⁵

These successes helped to spawn a large and optimistic literature that linked democratization to economic development, the growth of a middle class, and desire to emulate Western Europe and the North America.⁶ This literature spoke of waves of democratization and reached its high point in the aftermath of the collapse of communism and the Soviet Union.⁷ Some Americans celebrated what they described as unipolarity and the end of history.⁸ Thomas Friedman, among others, insisted that globalization would usher in a world of peaceful, liberal trading states.⁹ Relatively few voices warned that it was the harbinger of vast disparities in wealth with far-reaching social and political consequences.¹⁰

In the last decade, the pendulum has swung in the other direction. Optimism has given way to pessimism as democracy appears threatened, even in its core regions of Western Europe and North America. The collapse of so many democracies in Europe in the interwar period generated a considerable literature on democracy's fragility.¹¹ These discussions were largely shelved with the apparent spread and consolidation of democracy across the globe.¹² At the present juncture, the literature on fragility is undergoing a revival and receiving considerable attention in the media. Popular and academic debates are replete with warnings

related to the possible collapse of democracy.¹³ It is far from obvious that these assessments rely on any unambiguous evidence that would prompt such an analysis, but they have quite suddenly emerged as the dominating perspective on contemporary democracies.

In the United States, specifically, there is growing concern for the survival of democracy for the first time since the Great Depression. To some it seems that a political order that appeared for a long time unshakeable is threatened with collapse. Some 70 million people voted for Donald Trump in 2020 and there was a widespread belief among liberals that democracy in America would not have survived his second term.¹⁴ Propaganda, fake news, and nationalist voices find growing audiences, and hate crimes and paramilitaries are more frequent. Trust in government and politicians is in decline, and political systems are routinely depicted as secretive, uncaring, and inefficient, if not downright evil, even by politicians themselves.¹⁵ This kind of rhetoric generates fears among those that perceive it as a threat to democratic institutions. It may also prompt a greater willingness to violate norms among those that see such rhetoric as cues to restore the perceived former glory of the country. In the run up to the 2020 American presidential election, the liberal media carried almost daily stories about President Trump refusing to accept defeat if he lost the election.¹⁶ One of his former aides, the convicted and pardoned Roger Stone, publicly urged Trump to declare martial law and arrest the Clintons among others, if Biden were to win.¹⁷ Trump was impeached a second time after leaving office for inciting a mob assault on the capitol building that led to the deaths of five people and the hospitalization of many others.¹⁸

In September 2020, when we wrote the first draft of this introduction, the American presidential election was six weeks away. The media was full of speculation about what would happen if Trump was defeated. Would he leave office gracefully, as all his predecessors had, or dismiss the election as a fraudulent attempt to stay in power? If the latter, how would others respond? Would the Secret Service or the military physically remove him from the White House, or stand aside? What would Biden and his supporters do, and how would those actions be perceived by those who supported Trump? Would there be violence in the streets?¹⁹ In this instance, fears, or even expectations of preemption, had important consequences for voter turnout and plans for possible counter-preemption. We know now that Trump did his best to delegitimize the election, compelled many Republican representatives and senators to pretend that he had only lost because of alleged voter fraud, and encouraged a mob to storm the capitol.²⁰ His behavior also appears to have prompted the massive turnout of voters that led to his defeat, and

his postelection behavior to the victory of two Democratic senatorial candidates in Georgia. The Democrats have the presidency and control of both houses of congress, but democracy does not look more robust to many.²¹ In the immediate aftermath of the occupation of the capitol building, American faith in democracy dropped, although it recovered after Biden's inauguration.²² No doubt, it will continue to rise and fall in response to on-going events now that survival of democracy has become a question in the eyes of many.

Faced with these developments, political leaders and analysts today, as in the past, are assessing the strength of democratic political orders, not on the basis of any objective, or even consensual metrics of robustness or fragility but in relation to evolving and uncertain understandings of what is at stake and how their political order might be saved or strengthened. Among democratically minded actors, there is something of a consensus that the principal threat is from right-wing, nationalist opinion and would-be authoritarian leaders. Their opponents, by contrast, see the threat to democracy as coming from the woke, socialist, left.

There is no agreement about what actions to take, or even what the developments before and after the US election tells us about the robustness or fragility of the political order. Some observers contend that the Trump presidency constituted a stress test of democratic institutions and that their survival demonstrates the fundamental robustness of the political order. Others are less optimistic and see Trump as a manifestation of slow but steady, and still ongoing, erosion of democratic institutions. These competing assessments imply different perspectives on fragility and robustness and also imply different avenues of political action that leaders may embark upon. Some propose reforms that would make politics more open and inclusive. Others demand structural changes in the economy and tax structure. Still others fear that either of these responses will strengthen the right, promote a violent reaction, and put democracy at greater risk. These assessments as well as the likely consequences of the responses that they prompt are uncertain.

The historical record suggests that such consequences can be far-reaching. In the 1920s, there was misplaced confidence in democratic robustness combined with exaggerated fears of left-wing revolution.²³ Many fragile democracies in southern and eastern Europe were considered more robust than they turned out to be. In Britain and the United States, a desire to outflank and defuse the left strengthened workers' rights and prompted other social reforms and programs. At the same time, the focus on threats from the left led many in Western political elites to discount the gravity of the rise of fascist and authoritarian regimes on the continent. Even many sensible Germans erred at the

outset of the Nazi regime by dismissing Hitler as an *Irrtum* [error] of history that would soon pass.²⁴

The post hoc assessments of democracy's collapse in the interwar years led after the war to a reevaluation of the conditions required for ensuring the robustness of democratic political orders. For many, the so-called Weimar lesson encouraged fear of mass involvement in politics and highlighted the fragility of democracy.²⁵ Karl Löwenstein described Hitler's appointment to *Reichskanzler* and the subsequent destruction of democracy as in no little part facilitated by "the generous and lenient Weimar republic." The problem he identified and that came to shape the perspective of many analysts was a constitution that allowed for the dismantling of democracy through legal means.²⁶ This specification of democracy's inherent fragility led to a reconceptualization that focused more on ensuring stability than on deepening public participation. As Norman's chapter argues, these understandings also shaped how political elites throughout Western Europe, organized international cooperation after the war.

By the 1970s, faith in democracy's stability was restored. So much so, we noted, that estimates of its worldwide robustness were increasingly rooted in a liberal teleology that made analysts less sensitive to possibilities of democratic breakdown. In the current decade, democracy is again perceived under threat and upbeat teleological thinking rarely rears its head. This concern may be realistic; large right-wing, antidemocratic parties are evident almost everywhere in Europe and have come to power in Hungary and Poland. It is possible that analysts are exaggerating the threat, just as they did with prior expectations of democracy's universal triumph. Either way, the beliefs of political actors – and sometimes, even of analysts – matter as they may have far-reaching consequences.

The misreading of tea leaves is not a peculiarly democratic phenomenon. Stalin imagined nonexistent wreckers and anticommunist conspiracies within the Soviet Union, leading to the enactment of repressive measures on a colossal scale. Khrushchev was unreasonably optimistic about the Soviet Union's future, which encouraged his reforms, including his exposure of Stalin and his crimes. Arguably, the Soviet Union never recovered from Khrushchev's de-Stalinization; Brezhnev and his circle were probably right in worrying about the survival of their political system and country.²⁷ Gorbachev exaggerated the robustness of the Soviet Union, and initially his ability to democratize while preserving the leading role of the communist party. His views evolved and he came to recognize that he would have to jettison the communist party. In the months before the attempted coup he moved toward the concept of a voluntary union with a different name and minus the Baltic republics and

possibly several other components of the USSR. In practice, he and his opponents set in motion the events that led to the collapse of communism and the breakup of the Soviet Union.²⁸ KGB Chairman Vladimir Kryuchkov and his coconspirators worried that *glasnost*, *perestroika*, and the new Union Treaty that decentralized power would promote the disintegration of the Soviet Union. The assessment of the conspirators was undoubtedly accurate but their poorly conceived and failed coup proved to be the catalyst for the country's rapid unraveling.²⁹

The Soviet case reveals how policies that may have appeared reasonable in the short term had longer-term consequences that could not easily have been imagined at the time. It further indicates how leaders can delude themselves about the prospects of policies they are committed to pursuing and motivated to make quite unreasonable judgments about the relative fragility of their political order and what might best strengthen it. Different political actors would almost certainly have behaved differently.³⁰

In Eastern Europe, some leaders made different assessments, more attuned it seems to the fragility of their regimes and well aware that radical reformist change in Moscow would destabilize them. None, however, recognized until early 1989 that they and their political orders were about to go under.³¹ In some instances, assessments can exacerbate fears and even encourage preemptive action. Had their assessments of the relative fragility of their orders been different, we would expect their responses to have differed as well. Whether they could have saved their regimes is another matter. In his chapter, Archie Brown is inclined to think not.

A characteristic where authoritarian political orders differ from democratic ones concerns their response to dissent. While the use of repression against perceived anti-systemic threats is not foreign to democracies it dominates the authoritarian playbook. Their greater reliance on repression implies that authoritarian leaders may be more concerned with their orders' fragility. In China, for instance, leaders seem to share an enduring sense of their fragility. The post-Maoist leadership has been extremely sensitive to challenges and willing to use brute force against dissidents, as they did in the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre or against independent social movements not initially antagonistic to the regime, as in their continuing vendetta against Falun Gong.³² Under President Xi Jinping, crackdowns against political dissidents and Muslims in Xinjiang and elsewhere have increased, as have efforts to suppress political liberties and expression in Hong Kong.³³ The Chinese leadership appears convinced that such actions will make their political order more robust and not provoke costly international opposition.

What are the long-term consequences of these policies? Are China's leaders acting wisely in terms of making their political order more robust? History offers no clear guidance. Sometimes suppression has succeeded, or has at least bought time for regimes. It has also been a contributing cause of their collapse. In some countries, it has done both, as was arguably true for the Russian and Austro-Hungarian empires; it bought time but made their downfall more likely in the longer term.³⁴ The Western literature on China is divided on the question of repression, although the majority of commentators, rooted in the Western liberal tradition, are disinclined to believe that a repressive regime can survive in the long term.³⁵ Leninist-Stalinist regimes depend on bureaucracies that enforce conformity. Once self-doubt takes root within these institutions, their confusion, disillusionment, and uncertainty ultimately undermine the system. The intelligentsia that populate the higher levels of the bureaucracy gave rise to the most effective critics of the Soviet Union and Eastern European communist regimes because they were better educated, better able to turn the official ideology and sanctioned texts against the political order, and the general public was used to the idea of them taking the lead.³⁶ Only time will tell if this – or something else as yet unforeseen – happens in China.

We also encounter concerns about survival in regional and international organizations.³⁷ Here too we need to be aware of how the specifics of such political orders inform assessments of fragility and robustness and how diverse the consequences of particular responses might prove to be. Assessments will invariably be influenced by different perspectives on the more general conditions for cooperation between states. They are likely to differ considerably among actors who subscribe to *Realpolitik* versus those who stress the binding features of shared norms, values, and identities.³⁸

It is important to recognize that actors populating international political orders will also be influenced, like domestic actors, by lessons derived from previous successes and failures. The United Nations long lived in the shadow of the League of Nations and its failure in the 1930s. European postwar cooperation and its institutional design were heavily influenced by the perceived weaknesses of prewar arrangements and the perceived fragility of democracy. Leaders and supporters of the European project have from this perspective worried about its fragility from the outset.³⁹ Douglas Webber tells us in his chapter that one of the striking features of today's European Union is how repeated successes and survival have not reduced widespread fears of its vulnerability among political actors. Scholars, by contrast, have, until recently, tended to take its survival for granted.

There is understandably great interest in regime survival among political actors and scholars. Both appear to hold strong opinions about the relative robustness or fragility of their own and other political orders. For different types of orders, democratic and authoritarian, national and international, assessments are often influenced by what has recently occurred elsewhere in the world and is refracted through underlying assumptions about the nature of political order. These assessments help shape how leaders behave. Success and failure of efforts to shore up political orders in turn influences assessments others make of their orders and possible responses to challenges.

These fluctuations and overall uncertainty about robustness do not stop leaders and analysts from making judgments, nor should they. But it ought to make them cautious, more willing to hedge their bets, and on the lookout for information at odds with their expectations. More often than not, we believe, the opposite occurs: leaders and analysts stick with their judgments and dismiss or explain away information that appears to contradict them. Misjudgments of both kinds – the over- and undervaluation of the robustness of regimes demonstrate just how difficult it is to make such assessments and frame appropriate responses.

Robustness and Fragility

We assume that actor assessments of robustness and fragility bear only a passing relationship to the actual state of affairs. In the next chapter, Ned Lebow will elaborate this argument and offer evidence in support of our claim that robustness and fragility really only become fully apparent in retrospect. What we offer here are provisional starting points for thinking about leaders' understandings of robustness and fragility, their assessments of the robustness and fragility of their own and other orders, and the implications of those assessments for their behavior.

It is tempting to frame robustness and fragility as polar opposites of a continuum. This only makes sense if we conceive of these poles as ideal types. No political order is ever fully robust, and fragile orders invariably collapse before they lose all their support. All orders are arrayed somewhere along this continuum, but we suspect, closer to the fragility than the robustness end as entropy, decline, and collapse are default states. All political orders have ultimately collapsed and a handful at best has endured more than a couple of 100 years.

Fragility, in contrast to robustness, has an endpoint: the collapse of a regime, order, or political unit. This does not make assessments of fragility any more straightforward. Fragility is a condition whose

existence and degree may only become known when a catalyst comes along that brings about an actual collapse – or might be expected to and does not. Their condition is known with certainty only *ex post facto*. The same is true of many other phenomena that rely on a concatenation of underlying causes and immediate causes or triggers. Ned Lebow has argued that this is true of war; even when underlying conditions make it likely it will not occur in the absence of an appropriate catalyst. Studies of war – especially those that focus on underlying conditions – unreasonably assume that catalysts are like streetcars and that one will come along if you wait long enough. However, catalysts are often independent of underlying causes.⁴⁰

Robustness and fragility are similar in the sense that movement in the direction of either is more often than not gradual, and almost always so in the case of robustness. Political orders can become more fragile as a result of shocks of various kinds. Political orders can also undergo phase transitions from robust to fragile and from fragile to collapse. The latter kind of transition happened in the Soviet Union, Romania, and East Germany. Moving in the other direction, political orders take time to consolidate. The construction of legitimacy, and with it regime robustness, is a gradual process. There are no instances in which robustness can be described as an overnight phenomenon.

We want to emphasize that fragility and robustness are difficult to theorize and even more difficult to assess. Because they are reifications, they can be defined in different ways and different markers for them devised. Assessments of them by analysts and political actors depend very much on the markers used. Their choice of markers may influence, if not determine, their assessments of robustness and fragility but also the responses they think appropriate.

Consider contemporary debates about the fragility of Western democracy. Some attribute it to increasing economic disparities and diminishing prospects for social mobility.⁴¹ Others focus on how political parties have evolved from mass movements into something similar to political cartels, producing governments that are unable to respond effectively to popular discontent in a productive way and thereby generating support for anti-system parties.⁴² These diagnoses, as Peter Briener demonstrates in his chapter, lead to different assessment and policy prescriptions.

Another crucial aspect of actor assessments is priming. Political leaders are arguably aware of how they and their states are evaluated, ranked, and perceived by scholars and the myriad of other analysts in the business of providing measures on the performance of states.⁴³ International rankings of health, education, crime, corruption, and