Conservative Parties and the Birth of Democracy

How do democracies form and what makes them die? Daniel Ziblatt revisits this timely and classic question in a wide-ranging historical narrative that traces the evolution of modern political democracy in Europe from its modest beginnings in 1830s Britain to Adolf Hitler’s 1933 seizure of power in Weimar Germany. Based on rich historical and quantitative evidence, the book offers a major reinterpretation of European history and the question of how stable political democracy is achieved. The barriers to inclusive political rule, Ziblatt finds, were not inevitably overcome by unstoppable tides of socioeconomic change, a simple triumph of a growing middle class, or even by working class collective action. Instead, political democracy’s fate surprisingly hinged on how conservative political parties – the historical defenders of power, wealth, and privilege – recast themselves and coped with the rise of their own radical right. With striking modern parallels, the book has vital implications for today’s new and old democracies under siege.

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Preface

There is often a moment when a scholar’s perspective is shocked into a new awareness of the problem he is working on. That moment struck me when I found myself on a detour from the basement archives of Hatfield House, a grand Jacobean-era home in Hertfordshire. I wandered down a long hallway with marble floors and high ceilings, the walls lined with oversized oil portraits depicting four centuries of ancestors. These were the Cecils, who had helped rule England since at least the reign of Queen Elizabeth I. There, standing amid the trappings of immense social power, I asked myself: How did the historical owners of this home and others like them, who had so much to lose and so much power at their disposal, ever come to terms with political democracy without fatally preventing its birth in the first place?

This question has absorbed me ever since. I became convinced that if I could answer it – if I could understand how and why powerful old-regime elites hand over political power with so much at stake – then I could begin to unscramble a great historical puzzle that bears far-reaching implications: how European societies themselves democratized over the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. I have sifted through a century of archival and quantitative historical evidence in two countries, Germany and Britain, and analyzed the histories of a wide range of other European countries. Along the way, I have discovered the narrative of one of the most critical political phenomena in the contemporary world: how political institutions of accountability and representation are created and what makes them endure even through periods of uncertainty and crisis.

The answer I have arrived at is that the historical stabilization of European democracies required a long-run shift, spanning the mid-1800s to the mid-1900s, in the type of political parties representing conservative social forces. This finding may come as a surprise, as there is little doubt old-regime groups represented by conservative political parties were the most recalcitrant opponents of mass democracy. Yet, this is exactly why it is important to
concentrate on the sources of their reluctant acquiescence to a new political order that they had initially resisted. European democracy’s birth and its survival relied on an underappreciated earlier political rupture in the mid-nineteenth century: conservatives discovered the mobilizing power of modern political parties, which allowed them to protect their own interests, in turn ironically smoothing the way for a more stable path of democratization. Political systems endured when conservatives organized their own political parties and embraced the virtues of pragmatic political action – what nineteenth-century critics decried as “political wirepulling.” By contrast, in the many countries where conservatives delayed this transition, the resulting legacy of rightist weakness and fragmentation was devastating in two ways. First, it left governments repeatedly susceptible to extreme right-wing groundswells that were chronically destabilizing; second, it meant there was little to rein in institutional strongholds, such as the military, Church, and powerful economic interests. These groups felt freer to insert themselves into politics directly, with gravely disruptive consequences.

Today, political democracies, new and old alike, are under siege, and Europe’s past seems freshly relevant. For new, democratizing countries, Europe’s experience reveals that old-regime elite party organization can help alleviate a key obstacle of democratic transitions, no matter whether old regimes elites are aristocrats, single-party rulers, or modern-day tyrants. Durable democratic transitions depend on the buy-in of groups opposed to democratic changes. And, robust political parties representing old regime successors can serve this role, easing democracy’s opponents into new political regimes.

By the same token, Europe’s past offers insight into the sources of resilience and decline in today’s older democracies as well. Many contemporary advanced democracies – including my own – face a ferocious right-wing populist politics, which threatens to swallow older, self-identified conservative political parties. A historical view makes clear that this development is ominous. As I argue in this book, democracy required a long tradition of robust, organized and pragmatic conservative parties in order to be viable. If this type of conservative political party fails to develop, or falters, a key buttress supporting democracy is undermined, making it more fragile. The age of democracy’s birth may serve as a vital and cautionary warning for our current age of democratic crisis.
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