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Introduction

When Democracy Breaks

David Moss, Archon Fung, and Odd Arne Westad

Democracy is often described in two opposite ways, as either wonderfully resilient or dangerously fragile. Curiously, both characterizations can be correct, depending on the context. In a relatively small number of countries, democracy has survived numerous shocks across many generations, while in others it has faltered or collapsed, whether after just a short time or after a long period of apparent strength. Some broken democracies have reconstituted themselves as democracies once again, while others have notably failed to do so.[1]

Democratization around the world has sometimes occurred in waves—such as the so-called third wave of democratization in Latin America and Asia over the 1970s and 1980s. Other periods have exhibited the opposite: in the 1920s and 1930s, several democracies in Europe and Asia fell to fascism. More recently, many indicators suggest that liberal democracy suffered significant retrenchment during the early twenty-first century.[2] This "democratic backsliding," which was especially visible in Latin America, Asia, and Eastern Europe, has dispelled the illusion that democratic institutions, once established, can be taken for granted and that the passage of time brings the inexorable expansion and deepening of democratic practices. Indeed, this reversal has sparked growing interest in the sources of democratic weakness and, in particular, what differentiates democracies that break from those that endure during periods of stress.

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[1] Among the cases treated in this volume, Ancient Athens and India after the 1975 emergency are the clearest cases of broken democracies reconstituting themselves. Weimar Germany and Japan are clear cases where democracy was not reinstated until an outside power installed a new structure after defeating the countries in war. Czechoslovakia in 1948, Chile in 1973, and Argentina in 1976 all endured long periods of authoritarian government, but when democracy did eventually reemerge it was largely driven by forces from within those countries. The cases from the very recent past— Russia, Turkey, and Venezuela—are still unfolding. The United States after the Civil War is a difficult case. If one focuses on the Southern states, the conclusion might be that democratic procedures were installed from outside by a conquering army. If one thinks of the breakage in terms of the United States as a whole, then it arguably becomes an instance of a (proto-)democracy reconstituting itself.

[2] V-Dem Institute, "Autocratization Turns Viral: Democracy Report 2021," March 2021, https://www.v-dem.net/static/website/files/dr/dr_2021.pdf.

This book aims to deepen our understanding of these differences—of what separates democratic resilience from democratic fragility—by focusing on the latter. Specifically, we explore eleven episodes of democratic breakdown from ancient to modern times. Although no single factor emerges as decisive, linking together all of the episodes of breakdown, a small number of factors do seem to stand out across the various cases. The notion of democratic culture, while admittedly difficult to define and even more difficult to measure, could play a role in all of them.

The necessary conditions for a well-functioning democracy have long been a subject of intense examination and experimentation, dating back at least to the Ancient Greeks. Notably, the power of democratic culture has figured prominently along the way. In his mid-nineteenth-century *History of Greece*, George Grote observed that Cleisthenes, one of the fathers of Athenian democracy, had instilled a robust democratic "sentiment" within the citizens of Athens that helped ensure strength and resilience over time:

> It was necessary to create in the multitude, and through them to force upon the leading ambitious men, that rare and difficult sentiment which we may term a constitutional morality—a paramount reverence for the forms of the constitution, enforcing obedience to the authorities acting under and within those forms, yet combined with the habit of open speech, of action subject only to definite legal control, and unrestrained censure of those very authorities as to all their public acts—combined, too, with a perfect confidence in the bosom of every citizen, amidst the bitterness of party contest, that the forms of the constitution will be not less sacred in the eyes of his opponents than in his own.[3]

Over two millennia after Cleisthenes, Americans working to build a republic picked up on a similar theme. James Madison, a Virginia slaveholder and perhaps the principal author of the U.S. Constitution, highlighted the pivotal role of "national sentiment" in America's emerging (white male) democracy. When pressed by his friend—and fellow slaveholder—Thomas Jefferson following the Convention of 1787 about the absence of a bill of rights in the new Constitution, Madison responded that he did not view "the omission a material defect." Among other things, "experience proves the inefficacy of a bill of rights on those occasions when its controul is most needed." He pointed out, in particular, that "[r]epeated violations of these parchment barriers have been committed by overbearing majorities in every State."[4] Of what use, then, was a bill of rights,

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[3] George Grote, *A History of Greece: From the Earliest Period to the Close of the Generation Contemporary with Alexander the Great* (New York: Wm. L Allison & Son, 1882), 2:86.

[4] See especially National Archives, James Madison to Thomas Jefferson, October 17, 1788, https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Madison/01-11-02-0218; National Archives, Jefferson to Madison, December 20, 1787, https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Madison/01-10-02-0210.

and why did Madison ultimately support adding one to the Constitution? His answer: "The political truths declared in that solemn manner acquire by degrees the character of fundamental maxims of free Government, and as they become *incorporated with the national sentiment*, counteract the impulses of interest and passion." In short, a bill of rights is nothing but a set of "parchment barriers" against the will of "overbearing majorities" until, crucially, "they become incorporated with the national sentiment."[5]

Strikingly, Grote suggested that the sentiment of "constitutional morality" Cleisthenes had aimed to establish in Athens could also "be found in the aristocracy of England (since about 1688) as well as in the democracy of the American United States: and because we are familiar with it, we are apt to suppose it a natural sentiment; though there seem to be few sentiments more difficult to establish and diffuse among a community, judging by the experience of history."[6]

In the chapters that follow, we will see again and again that the written rules of democracy are insufficient to protect against tyranny. They are mere "parchment barriers" unless embedded within a strong culture of democracy—a strong democratic sentiment—that embraces and gives life not only to the written rules themselves but to the essential democratic values that underlie them.[7] We will see, in graphic detail, just how far society can descend, into chaos or even madness, when this sentiment supporting a common commitment to democratic process and values breaks down.[8]

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There is of course no universally accepted definition of democracy. For our purposes, we will rely on a highly capacious definition: that democracy requires

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[5] Madison to Jefferson, October 17, 1788, emphasis added.

[6] Grote, *History of Greece*, 2:86–87.

[7] But who must embrace this commitment to sustain democracy? Cleisthenes and Madison both worried that democratic sentiments would not be strongly held among citizens themselves, perhaps at least in part out of a concern that citizens would prove vulnerable to the appeals of demagogues. Prominent recent scholarship, by contrast, has suggested that weak commitment to democracy among political elites may be of central importance. See, e.g., Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die* (New York: Broadway Books, 2018); Juan J. Linz and Alfred Stepan, eds., *The Breakdown of Democratic Regimes* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978). The case studies in this volume offer multiple perspectives on the relative roles of mass and elite commitment to democracy.

[8] While direct evidence of "democratic sentiment" is difficult to obtain, several patterns are plausibly connected to a deep cultural commitment to democracy, including electoral participation; respect for civic institutions, laws, processes, and norms; expressions of faith in democracy and democratic process; willingness to compromise; respect for minority rights; honoring of fair electoral outcomes; and peaceful transitions of power.

both majoritarianism, on the one hand, and meaningful rights to express dissent, to oppose and contest, on the other.[9]

In modern representative democracies, the right to vote is expected to be nearly universal among adult citizens, whereas in earlier times—and until relatively recently in many societies—the franchise was typically limited to a favored group, such as white males in the pre–Civil War United States (or, in the early American republic, propertied white males). Basic political rights, including voting rights, were far too narrowly distributed in Ancient Athens and antebellum America for their political systems to qualify as democracies by modern standards. We have nevertheless chosen to examine both Athens and antebellum America as part of this volume not only because they were recognized as democracies in their own time but also because they represent early exercises in combining majoritarianism with a right to dissent—exercises that broke down in spectacular fashion but that were also ultimately restored in both settings. As such, these early *quasi*-democracies are useful to us in studying the breakdown of *modern* democracies, even though they were a far cry from democracy as we understand it today.[10]

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[9] Our expectation is that the word in this definition that is most fraught, at least in academic circles, is "majoritarianism." We use the term broadly to mean a shared *belief* that in democratic decision-making the will of the majority should, all else equal, win out. We do not mean to follow the narrower usage of some political scientists who treat majoritarianism as one extreme on a spectrum of democratic forms. In this narrower usage, majoritarianism is contrasted with democratic regimes that limit majority rule or impose heightened requirements upon it, including supermajority requirements for certain types of decisions. See, e.g., Arend Lijphart, *Democracies: Patterns of Majoritarian and Consensus Government in Twenty-One Countries* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984). Our sense, meanwhile, is that all democracies, across any relevant spectrum, demonstrate some significant commitment to majoritarianism, broadly defined. If there is not a widely shared belief that a majority vote, whether by citizens themselves or their elected representatives, typically carries special weight or legitimacy in the selection of candidates or the enactment of policies, then the regime is not meaningfully democratic. The second half of our definition—regarding rights to express dissent, to oppose and contest—often stands in dynamic tension with the majoritarian requirement, and ensuring these rights has long been seen as a legitimate justification for certain limits on pure majority rule. See, e.g., James Madison, *Vices of the Political System of the United States* (1787), esp. §11; Jon Elster, "On Majoritarianism and Rights," *East European Constitutional Review* 1, no. 3 (Fall 1992): 19–24. To the extent that limits on (or departures from) majority rule are seen as necessary to sustain meaningful rights to dissent, to oppose, and to contest, those limits should not be thought of as antidemocratic under our definition. Indeed, this is the essence of *liberal* democracy. Notably, in his introduction to a foundational collection of case studies on democratic failure, co-edited with Alfred Stepan and published in 1978, Juan Linz offered a widely cited and far more precise definition of democracy, which he himself acknowledged was highly restrictive (and which we concluded may be too restrictive for this volume): "Our criteria for a democracy may be summarized as follows: legal freedom to formulate and advocate political alternatives with the concomitant rights to free association, free speech, and other basic freedoms of person; free and nonviolent competition among leaders with periodic validation of their claim to rule; inclusion of all effective political offices in the democratic process; and provision for the participation of all members of the political community, whatever their political preferences. Practically, this means the freedom to create political parties and to conduct free and honest elections at regular intervals without excluding any effective political office from direct or indirect electoral accountability. Today 'democracy' implies at least universal male suffrage, but perhaps in the past it would extend to the regimes with property, taxation, occupational, or literacy requirements of an earlier period, which limited suffrage to certain social groups" (Linz and Stepan, *The Breakdown of Democratic Regimes*, 5).

[10] These qualifiers on the scope of democracy in Ancient Athens and the antebellum American South are not meant to suggest an absence of significant limitations on participation in the more

Scholars of democratic failure often classify two types of breakdown based on the speed of decline. Democracies may appear to break down either quickly or slowly—to be the victims of either shock or slide. Democracy in Weimar Germany, for example, is often said to have come to a sudden stop when Adolf Hitler, whose National Socialist (Nazi) Party had won a plurality in the November 1932 parliamentary elections and who himself had been appointed chancellor in late January, seized emergency powers soon after the mysterious Reichstag fire of February 27, 1933. One additional election allowing opposition parties was held in Germany in early March, but it was the last one, and conducted in the shadow of Nazi terror. Opposition to the Nazi Party was completely banned in all subsequent elections under the Nazi regime. In the chapters that follow, we'll see many other sudden shocks to democracy, including in Ancient Athens (411 BCE), the United States (1860–1861), Czechoslovakia (1948), Chile (1973), India (1975–1977), and Argentina (1976).

Not all democratic breakdowns proceed this way, however. The democratic crisis in modern-day Venezuela, for example, occurred more gradually, beginning mostly after Hugo Chávez was elected president in 1998. From that point forward, multiparty elections were still held, but other core democratic institutions, including those safeguarding dissent, regularly came under attack, and opposition parties were increasingly constrained and sidelined. Sometimes referred to as "illiberal" democracy or democracy with other adjectives such as "controlled," "restrictive," or "electoral," the model of democratic breakdown that Venezuela has experienced retains an ostensible commitment to majoritarianism and multiparty elections, but with ever fewer political protections for minority and opposition groups, until democracy as we know it disappears.[11] Democratic breakdowns in interwar Japan as well as modern-day Russia and Turkey (highlighted in Chapters 4, 10, and 11) showed similar characteristics.

Although in principle it should be easy to distinguish a democracy that collapses suddenly from one that slides into oblivion as key protections are gradually dismantled, in practice there is almost always a long period of democratic erosion preceding any breakdown. Democracies that ultimately collapse typically face multiple but differing forms of erosion over preceding years and even decades. All of the democracies covered in this volume experienced the rise of antidemocratic political actors prior to breakdown; all experienced significant degrees of political violence; and all experienced intense political polarization. Most faced losses of legitimacy as a result of economic, security, or other crises,

modern cases we consider. As the cases will show, even where formally given suffrage, religious and ethnic minorities (including ethnic Germans in Czechoslovakia, Muslims in India, and Kurds in Turkey) frequently had their ability to fully participate in democratic governance circumscribed.

[11] David Collier and Steve Levitsky, "Democracy with Adjectives: Conceptual Innovation in Comparative Research," *World Politics* 49, no. 3 (1997): 430–451.

widely perceived as failures of democratic governance, and some, but not all, failed to receive support from other democracies at crucial moments. Beyond problems of democratic erosion, moreover, many of the democracies examined in this volume were compromised, often from the start, by weaknesses of institutional design or failures of political inclusion.

Germany. Frequently presented as the classic case of abrupt democratic collapse, Weimar Germany had in fact suffered democratic weakness and erosion from the very beginning. As Eric Weitz shows in his masterful chapter, conservative groups that were actively hostile to democracy remained deeply entrenched in the German power structure, even after the Revolution of 1918/19. Social Democrats tolerated them in the pursuit of stability, but the presence of antidemocratic elements throughout the ministries, and especially their dominance within the military and other security services, ultimately proved catastrophic. Although the new republic experienced a surge in democratic spirit and an extraordinary cultural renaissance, the conservatives' violent assault on the far left—up to and including high-level political assassinations—destabilized Weimar politics and profoundly undercut democratic legitimacy. When the Great Depression struck and the German economy collapsed, the republic's already weakened legitimacy collapsed with it. "In some ways," Weitz writes, "the Republic was already overthrown in 1930." From 1930 to 1932, Germany experienced a presidential dictatorship after President Paul von Hindenburg invoked emergency powers under Article 48 of the Weimar Constitution. When traditional conservatives around Hindenburg joined in support of the newly ascendant radical right (the Nazi Party) and the appointment of Hitler as chancellor in January 1933, this effectively marked the death of Weimar, even before the Reichstag fire and all that followed.

Nor was Weimar exceptional in this respect. In case after case, the seemingly sudden collapse of a democracy—typically the result of a coup or declaration of emergency powers—was itself made possible by deeper vulnerabilities, including institutional weaknesses and flagging democratic commitment from many political actors that long preceded the moment of reckoning.

Athens. The breakdown of Athenian democracy in 411 BCE—and its restoration in 403 BCE—provides a particularly telling example. As Federica Carugati and Josiah Ober argue in their marvelously original chapter on the Athenian saga, the abrupt conversion from democracy to oligarchy in 411 BCE, in which the democracy "in effect, voted itself out of existence," was the result of three intersecting factors: (1) a devastating military defeat in Sicily in 413 BCE, which put the regime under tremendous economic and political pressure; (2) the existence of an antidemocratic elite that feared popular expropriation of their wealth to fund continued war against Sparta, and that was willing to utilize political violence to prevent the demos from taking such action; and (3) a democratic

order that, by putting virtually no checks or constraints on the demos, invited erratic and inconsistent decision-making, particularly in times of stress, further undercutting democratic legitimacy. Although this combination of factors was enough to convince (or perhaps frighten) the demos into empowering an oligarchy at an extreme moment of crisis following the defeat in Sicily, it was apparently not enough to destroy the deep underlying commitment to democracy—Grote's "constitutional morality"—that had grown strong outside of certain elites and that would ultimately drive the return to democracy, briefly in 410 BCE, and then on an ongoing basis (for the next eighty years) beginning in 403 BCE. Notably, as Carugati and Ober point out, the new democracy launched in 403 corrected the key design flaws of the prior democratic regime, imposing a range of checks and constraints on the demos that helped ensure more consistent policymaking and, ultimately, greater legitimacy even in times of crisis.

United States. In their chapter on the breakdown of American democracy in 1860–1861, Dean Grodzins and David Moss also find that extended decay preceded a sudden democratic break. Specifically, they reassess the question of why so many Southern states rejected the outcome of the 1860 presidential election, deciding to secede from the Union rather than recognize Abraham Lincoln's electoral victory. Moving beyond the standard explanations for this remarkably risky choice, Grodzins and Moss suggest that at least part of the answer is that Southern secession grew out of a long process of democratic erosion and distorted decision-making over the previous thirty or more years. As fears of slave insurrections began to grow among white Southerners, especially following publication of David Walker's abolitionist *Appeal* in 1829 and Turner's Rebellion in 1831, many Southern states began enacting statutes aggressively limiting speech that was critical of slavery. In time, even a book suggesting that the institution of slavery was undercutting Southern economic performance was banned as seditious. Most strikingly, the Republican Party itself, when it emerged in the mid-1850s, was effectively prohibited across much of the South for the same reason, because of the critique of slavery that the party invoked. Meanwhile, political violence against those with unpopular views, particularly about slavery, was becoming increasingly common in the South, from North Carolina to Texas. With virtually all dissent against slavery and its consequences silenced, many Southern political leaders apparently began to believe their own propaganda about both the moral and economic superiority of the Southern social system, rooted in slavery. Indeed, this belief became so all-consuming that it ultimately superseded their commitment to electoral institutions. So when the Republican Lincoln won a plurality of the popular vote and a clear majority of the electoral college in November 1860, it didn't seem like such a large leap for many of these Southern leaders simply to reject the outcome of the election and to call for secession, strangely confident that they would prevail against a larger and far more

industrialized North on the basis of the South's slave-centered social system and its principal economic product, cotton.

Czechoslovakia. Nearly a century later, the Communist coup in Czechoslovakia in 1948 constituted another abrupt democratic breakdown. Once again this sudden development was deeply rooted in an already troubled democratic system. "Democracy did not simply collapse," writes John Connelly in his riveting chapter on the subject: "it had been eroded in a process extending backward, to before the war." Connelly argues that already by the dawn of the first Czechoslovak Republic in 1918, the nation was well positioned for success as a liberal democracy, with relatively high incomes, high education levels, low inequality, and a well-developed civil society. The democracy that took shape, however, was contorted by the desire of Czechs to dominate the political system in a multiethnic state. This was accomplished through the formation of a united front of Czech parties and select Slovak allies, which left Germans, Hungarians, Communists, and many Slovaks with virtually no influence at all. When Czechoslovak democracy was reconstituted after World War II, it retained a strong nationalist (and even stronger anti-German) bent, but now Communists were part of the National Front government rather than outside of it. The trauma of Munich in 1938 and the war itself had turned allegiances eastward, away from the liberal democratic West, which had abandoned Czechoslovakia, and toward the Soviet Union, which had liberated it. Despite having received only 10% of the vote in elections of the 1930s, the Communists met no resistance from their National Front partners when they sought control of key ministries immediately after the war, including the Interior Ministry, which gave them authority over the police. With Communists taking the lead, and again with no resistance from their political partners, the National Front government quickly undertook the mass expulsion of Germans and Hungarians starting in 1945–1946, trampling over individual rights, rule of law, and basic human decency in the process. In some ways, it was a warm-up to the coup in 1948, when Communists seized full control of the government—and the country—without firing a shot. Czechoslovakia's democracy died in 1948, but the truth is that it had been far from healthy before the war and was essentially on life support afterward.

Chile. The long-term roots of democratic breakdown were also visible in Chile, where democracy was extinguished in 1973. At the time, Chile's democracy was the oldest in Latin America, having been continuously in place since the 1930s. Yet, as Marian Schlotterbeck explains in her notable chapter on the subject, its longevity masked deep-seated weaknesses. Political tensions exploded in the late 1940s, following an experiment in coalition politics involving the left and center-left known as the Popular Front. Turning on his former Popular Front partners, President Gabriel González Videla of the middle-class Radical Party sent in the military to shut down strikes by copper and coal miners,

forcibly deported thousands of Communist workers to internment camps, and outlawed the Communist Party. Although multiparty elections continued (with Communists excluded until 1958), Schlotterbeck suggests that political stability rested on an implicit—and highly tenuous—bargain protecting elite interests, rather than on democratic legitimacy per se. "Chile's democracy endured," she writes, "as long as social relations in the countryside, particularly on the large landed estates (*haciendas*), remained unchanged." Passage of the Agrarian Reform Law of 1967 and the election of Salvador Allende, a Socialist, to the presidency in 1970 effectively shattered the bargain. The political right organized a far-reaching campaign to delegitimize Allende, especially in the eyes of the middle classes, while the Nixon administration in the United States was secretly mobilizing American resources to achieve the same ultimate objective, the removal of Allende, even if it meant destabilizing Chile and destroying Chilean democracy in the process. When Christian Democrats, who had long occupied the center of Chilean politics, "[threw] their support behind the antidemocratic right to destabilize the Allende government and call[ed] for military intervention," the game was nearly up. If the center and right had had enough votes to impeach Allende, they would have; failing that, they turned to the military, which was itself now highly politicized and fully aligned with the right, for an extraconstitutional solution. As is well known, the coup, led by Augusto Pinochet, came on September 11, 1973, setting up Pinochet as the nation's military dictator for the next seventeen years.

Argentina. Chile's neighbor, Argentina, saw its democracy collapse three years later, and for similar reasons. Unlike Chile, Argentina had not experienced a long-lived democracy, having suffered democratic breakdowns in 1930, 1951/55, 1962, and 1966. Scott Mainwaring writes in his deeply insightful chapter on the Argentine coup of 1976 that the country was "one of the world champions of democratic breakdowns in the twentieth century." In explaining why democracy failed yet again in Argentina in 1976, just three years after it had been reestablished, Mainwaring emphasizes three principal causes: (1) the existence of violent extremist actors on the right and left, both with "complete disdain for democracy," which sought to destroy each other through "bombings, kidnappings, politically motivated assassinations, factory seizures," and countless other violent acts; (2) the democratic regime's inability to effectively manage either these pervasive public security threats or the severe economic challenges then plaguing the nation, which together "generated a widespread sense of chaos"; and (3) indifference and even outright hostility to democracy among top political leaders in the government, including Juan Perón, whose active collaboration with extremist, antidemocratic forces "helped forge the cauldron in which democracy died." When Perón himself died on July 1, 1974, he was succeeded as president by his third wife, Isabel Martínez de Perón, whom he had handpicked as vice

president. Describing her as "ill-prepared to become president," Mainwaring observes that Isabel Perón's term "marked a sharp but erratic turn toward the authoritarian far right." The nation was soon plunged into an orgy of political violence, including that sponsored by the government itself. Mainwaring concludes that any real semblance of democracy was gone by the second half of 1975, even before the military finally seized power from Isabel Perón in a widely anticipated coup on March 24, 1976.

India. In India, meanwhile, President Fakhruddin Ali Ahmed, at the request of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, had declared a state of internal emergency under Article 352 of the Constitution on June 25, 1975, effectively suspending the nation's democracy. The emergency, lasting nearly two years, provided cover for countless abuses, including the imprisonment of more than 100,000 political opponents, dissenters, and activists. In their chapter on the emergency, Sugata Bose and Ayesha Jalal consider the immediate reasons why Article 352 was invoked (deteriorating political support, a growing economic crisis, mounting unrest and dissent, and a serious legal challenge to Gandhi herself). But they devote greater attention to exploring why Article 352 was added to the Indian Constitution in the first place. There was certainly sharp criticism of the provision (originally numbered Article 275) when the Constitution was being drafted in the late 1940s. Hari Vishnu Kamath, for example, declared in August 1949 that he had "ransacked most of the constitutions of democratic countries of the world" and that the only comparable provision he could find in any of them was Article 48 of the Weimar Constitution—the very provision Hitler had used to secure emergency powers in 1933. The chair of the drafting committee of the Indian Constitution, Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, acknowledged that the emergency powers provision could conceivably be abused but expressed hope that it would "never be called into operation and . . . would remain a dead letter." While Bose and Jalal are careful not to reach beyond the documentary evidence in interpreting why Ambedkar supported a provision he hoped would never be used, they suggest that part of the reason may be that he worried about the Indian people's readiness for democracy. Remarkably, after first citing Ambedkar quoting Grote on the importance of "constitutional morality" and democratic "sentiment," they next quote him announcing, "Constitutional morality . . . is not a natural sentiment. It has to be cultivated. We must realize that our people have yet to learn it." And just in case there was any doubt, they also quote Ambedkar saying, "Democracy in India is only a top-dressing on an Indian soil, which is essentially undemocratic." The irony, then, may be that Gandhi was able to suspend democracy in 1975 not because the Indian people lacked the proper democratic sentiment, but because their political leaders in 1949 thought they did. In any case, when Gandhi finally called elections in early 1977, apparently willing to end the emergency because she was certain she would win the vote, she and her party were instead decisively

rejected at the polls. "The resort to overt authoritarianism," Bose and Jalal write, "had been emphatically repudiated by India's electorate." Perhaps democratic sentiment in India was more than just topsoil after all.

If sudden democratic breakdowns, from Athens to India, are typically rooted in deficiencies that date back much further, it is also true that not all democratic breakdowns even appear to occur suddenly. In this volume, we examine four cases—interwar Japan and modern-day Russia, Turkey, and Venezuela—where democratic shortfalls cumulate gradually to breakdown rather than manifesting as a sudden shock.

Japan. The story of interwar Japan is different from the other three. In fact, it is different from all of the other cases covered in this volume. As Louise Young argues in her remarkable chapter on the rise and fall of Japan's Taishō democracy, the nation's democratic breakdown "did not occur suddenly or through institutional rupture." It was the product of "an authoritarian slide," but unlike other cases of slide, in Japan there was no strongman at the center who won election and then gradually dismantled the guardrails of democracy. Instead, the Japanese military, often provoked or goaded by isolated cliques of junior officers, gradually expanded its power over virtually every aspect of the state and society until, in the end, democracy was replaced by dictatorship—and mostly with broad support from the Japanese people. To the extent there was a turning point, it was the Manchurian Incident of 1931–1933, which began when "conspirators" within the Japanese army framed Chinese troops for an attack on a Japanese railway that they themselves had staged. This became "the pretext for Japanese forces on the spot to launch an invasion of Manchuria, acting without authorization from the high command." Particularly against the backdrop of the Great Depression, when public faith in the democratic government's capacity to address the nation's massive economic challenges was collapsing, the invasion—wildly successful in both military and economic terms—proved enormously popular with the Japanese public. Within Japan, meanwhile, "groups of junior military officers joined hands with civilian organizations to enact a rapid-fire series of violent conspiracies aimed at reclaiming command over the state." These actions included attempted coups as well as assassinations of major business and political figures. Although members of the military leadership had mostly not been involved, they quickly exploited these situations, "work[ing] hard to gather the levers of power in their hands." This involved the exclusion of political parties from forming cabinets in 1932 (and the elimination of independent political parties in 1940); far-reaching censorship and brutal punishment of dissent that ultimately gave rise to "a de facto police state"; steadily increasing military control of the bureaucracy; and full economic mobilization for war that concentrated economic power in the military's hands. Young maintains that "Japan was a military dictatorship for all practical purposes" by the time of the attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941. This was

accomplished, she explains, not by the abrupt overthrow of existing institutions, as in Germany and Italy, but by the gradual "repurposing of existing institutions" and the "voluntary, if reluctant, relinquishing of influence" by political leaders, who too often made "Faustian bargains" with the military simply to gain short-term advantage over political rivals, but ultimately at the expense of the democracy as a whole.

Russia. Although Russia's democratic breakdown at the start of the twenty-first century, like Japan's in the interwar period, is best characterized as a slide into authoritarianism, there was (unlike in Japan) a strongman at the center of the process in Russia. In his revealing chapter on the subject, Chris Miller suggests that Vladimir Putin leveraged his close relationship with the nation's security services to destroy the oligarchs' hold on Russian politics. By eliminating his political competition, Putin rebuilt the one-party state around himself. Miller emphasizes that prior to Putin's becoming president in 2000, Russia's political system was only marginally democratic, but at least its elections were competitive, mainly as a result of competition between the oligarchs. All of this began to change once Putin took charge. All media came under state control, meaningful political opposition became pointless or even suicidal, and election outcomes became entirely predictable. Notably, Putin's antidemocratic moves generated little opposition. Partly this was because there was only minimal public support for democracy to begin with, given both the relentless anti-Western propaganda under the Soviets and the country's poor economic performance when democracy was tried in the 1990s. Among those who did support democracy, moreover, there was widespread fear of a Weimar-style putsch from extremist elements, and Putin's assertion of strength in the center proved reassuring in this context. The result, however, was that Russian democracy was destroyed not by a shock, as befell Weimar Germany, but by an insidious slide into authoritarianism. As Miller observes, "rather than being overturned in a coup or a rebellion, Russian democracy was degraded steadily over time."

Turkey. Democratic breakdown in Turkey has also revolved around a strongman, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, who, after first taking power in 2003, steadily dismantled checks on his authority and degraded (even destroyed) the capacity for meaningful political opposition or resistance. As Lisel Hintz demonstrates in her highly evocative chapter, Erdoğan's first step was to neutralize the principal institutional threats to his power, including the military and the judiciary, under the guise of strong democratic reforms needed for EU accession. Historically, these institutions—especially the military—had fiercely defended the Republican Nationalist identity (secular, modern, and Western-oriented, derived from the nation's "founding father," Mustafa Kemal Atatürk) against Ottoman Islamist parties and other threats. Indeed, Erdoğan himself, as a member of one such party (the RP), had spent time in jail in 1999

for referencing a poem that was said to incite religious hatred. In founding a new party, the AKP, in 2001, Erdoğan denied it was Islamist (instead preferring the label "conservative democrat"), which helped provide room for his highly effective—and ostensibly pro-democracy and pro-EU—maneuvers against the military, the judiciary, and other bastions of Republican Nationalist identity. From there, Hintz maintains, Erdoğan and the AKP were able to create "space for marginalizing opposition actors with a reduced fear of recrimination through institutional checks." While the AKP pursued many avenues for silencing opposition and dominating the political space, from control of the media to large-scale political patronage, Hintz focuses particularly on Erdoğan's strategy of "rhetorical vilification," which he has deployed against opponents. By regularly belittling, defaming, and demonizing opponents through derogatory language (calling them everything from "hooligans" and "looters" to "provocateurs" and "terrorists"), and by focusing attention on isolated or manufactured incidents of violence associated with them, Erdoğan and the AKP have largely succeeded in delegitimizing many of their opponents. This in turn has provoked a firestorm of nationalist anger and violence, which has been used to justify such steps as incarceration of opponents and, in the case of many Kurdish mayors, removal from democratically elected office. "The AKP's vilifying rhetoric," Hintz writes, "has gained tremendous momentum, targeting many different forms of opposition and cementing antagonistic us-versus-them relations along multiple identity lines." Ultimately, in deploying these methods, Erdoğan has managed to suppress political competition and free expression, forcefully assert an Ottoman Islamist identity for Turkey (despite earlier denials), and, in Hintz's words, "secure his place as the most powerful individual in Turkey since Atatürk—indeed, openly challenging the founder's legacy by putting in place a 'New Turkey' undergirded by a fundamentally different understanding of what it means to be Turkish."

Venezuela. A third example of a country sliding into authoritarianism through the emergence and machinations of a democratically elected strongman is modern-day Venezuela. As Javier Corrales argues in his chapter, however, Venezuela fell further than almost any other country on record: "No other cases in Latin America except Nicaragua, and few cases of democratic backsliding worldwide, end up undergoing this degree of autocratic intensification. Few cases of democratic backsliding worldwide started from such a high level of democracy and ended so low." Although backsliding had already started before Chávez, most of it took place afterward. Indeed, Corrales maintains that Venezuela's especially long descent from democracy occurred mainly in two stages. Under Chávez, who served as president from 1999 to 2013, democracy deteriorated steadily but only reached a status of "semi-authoritarianism," according to Corrales, before 2010. Month after month and year after year, Chávez chipped away at core democratic institutions—dramatically expanding the

powers of the president, significantly restricting who could compete in elections, ensuring partisan control over election administration and the courts, limiting what topics the press could cover, and so forth. Although Chávez initially attacked institutions of liberal democracy while seeming, at the same time, to *expand* the scope of participatory democracy, before long Venezuela was seeing democratic backsliding on all fronts. The process reached a new level after 2010, especially once Chávez died and was succeeded by Nicolás Maduro in 2013. In what Corrales describes as a second wave of autocratization, Maduro carried the country into "full-fledged authoritarianism," comparable to Cuba. Notably, whereas Chávez took most of his steps away from democracy when he was politically strongest (and his opposition was fragmented and weak), Maduro pursued even more far-reaching authoritarian measures, from militarizing the cabinet to suspending elections, when he faced a series of potentially regime-crushing crises and the opposition was relatively unified and posed the largest threat. Against this backdrop, Maduro was able to draw on a remarkably deep reservoir of autocratic options inherited from Chávez to suppress the opposition and maintain his grip on power.

* * *

The eleven cases of democratic breakdown explored in this volume are far from exhaustive. A great many democracies, mostly nascent ones, have failed over time—too many to document in detail in a single volume. Still, the eleven case studies presented here cover a great deal of ground, reflecting many of the core themes flagged in the academic literature on the subject, while also suggesting new insights into democratic fragility that could help deepen understanding going forward.

The existing scholarly literature highlights a number of factors commonly associated with democratic breakdown. Poor macroeconomic performance is one such a factor, potentially raising doubts about governmental effectiveness and undercutting democratic legitimacy. Scholars have also found, at various times, that high levels of economic inequality are associated with democratic breakdown; that highly polarized democracies are more vulnerable to collapse than less polarized ones; that racial or ethnic divisions provide opportunities for political leaders to foment polarization; that presidential as opposed to parliamentary democracies show a somewhat higher risk of failure; and that new democratic states (perhaps not surprisingly) break down more frequently than old ones.[12]

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[12] On macroeconomic performance and democratic breakdown, see Mark Gasiorowski, "Economic Crisis and Political Regime Change: An Event History Analysis," *American Political Science Review* 89, no. 4 (Dec. 1995): 882–897; Stephan Haggard and Robert Kaufman, *The Political Economy of Democratic Transitions* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997); Christian

The degree of academic consensus surrounding these factors varies greatly. Researchers have shown a reasonably high degree of consensus about the adverse effects of poor macroeconomic performance (such as negative GDP growth), though even here the most recent research has suggested that negative economic shocks were more of a factor in twentieth-century democratic breakdowns (which tended to be more sudden, Weimar-style) than in twenty-first-century breakdowns (which have tended to be more gradual, as in Chávez's Venezuela). In fact, Matthew Singer has argued that favorable economic performance can bolster the antidemocratic activity of an elected strongman like Chávez. It may be that good economic performance generates "output legitimacy" that supports existing regimes, whether democratic or authoritarian (e.g., China in recent decades). Notably, Adam Przeworski and his coauthors have shown that the *level* of per capita income also matters—that it is negatively correlated with democratic breakdown (i.e., lower-income democracies are more likely to break

Stogbauer, "The Radicalization of the German Electorate: Swinging to the Right and to the Left in the Twilight of the Weimar Republic," *European Review of Economic History* 5 (Aug. 2001): 251–280; Jørgen Møller, Alexander Schmotz, and Svend-Erik Skaaning, "Economic Crisis and Democratic Breakdown in the Interwar Years: A Reassessment," *Historical Social Research* 40, no. 2 (2015): 301–318. On inequality and democratic breakdown, see Ross E. Burkhart, "Comparative Democracy and Income Distribution: Shape and Direction of the Causal Arrow," *Journal of Politics* 59, no. 1 (Feb. 1997): 148–164; Adam Przeworski, Michael E. Alvarez, José Antonio Cheibub, and Fernando Limongi, *Democracy and Development: Political Institutions and Material Well-Being in the World, 1950–1990* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), esp. 117–122; Daron Acemoglu and James A. Robinson, *Economic Origin of Dictatorship and Democracy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006); Stephan Haggard and Robert R. Kaufman, "Inequality and Regime Change: Democratic Transitions and the Stability of Democratic Rule," *American Political Science Review* 106, no. 3 (Aug. 2012): 495–516; Luca Tomini, *When Democracies Collapse: Assessing Transitions to Non-Democratic Regimes in the Contemporary World* (New York: Routledge, 2018), 14. On polarization and democratic breakdown, see Giovanni Sartori, *Parties and Party Systems: A Framework for Analysis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976); Juan J. Linz, *The Breakdown of Democratic Regimes: Crisis, Breakdown, and Reequilibration* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1978); Alan Siaroff, "The Fate of Centrifugal Democracies: Lessons from Consociational Theory and System Performance," *Comparative Politics* 32, no. 3 (Apr. 2000): 317–332; Jennifer McCoy, Tahmina Rahman, and Murat Somer, "Polarization and the Global Crisis of Democracy: Common Patterns, Dynamics, and Pernicious Consequences for Democratic Polities," *American Behavioral Scientist* 62, no. 1 (Jan 2018): 16–42; Dan Slater and Aries A. Arugay, "Polarizing Figures: Executive Power and Institutional Conflict in Asian Democracies," *American Behavioral Scientist* 62, no. 1 (2018): 92–106. On presidential regimes and democratic breakdown, see Linz, *Breakdown of Democratic Regimes*; Juan J. Linz, "The Perils of Presidentialism," *Journal of Democracy* 1, no. 1 (Winter 1990): 51–69; Scott Mainwaring, "Presidentialism, Multipartism, and Democracy: The Difficult Combination," *Comparative Political Studies* 26, no. 2 (July 1993): 198–228; Abraham Diskin, Hanna Diskin, and Reuven Y. Hazan, "Why Democracies Collapse: The Reasons for Democratic Failure and Success," *International Political Science Review* 26, no. 3 (July 2005): 291–309. On new democracies and breakdown, see Jack A. Goldstone, Robert H. Bates, David L. Epstein, Ted Robert Gurr, Michael B. Lustik, Monty G. Marshall, Jay Ulfelder, and Mark Woodward, "A Global Model for Forecasting Political Instability," *American Journal of Political Science* 54, no. 1 (Jan. 2010): 190–208; Milan W. Svolik, "Which Democracies Will Last? Coups, Incumbent Takeovers, and the Dynamic of Democratic Consolidation," *British Journal of Political Science* 45, no. 4 (Oct. 2015): 715–738; Tomini, *When Democracies Collapse*, 15.

down) and that no democracy with a real per capita income above Argentina's in 1975 has ever broken down.[13]

Although high levels of political polarization are also widely seen as connected with democratic breakdown, the types of polarization that scholars highlight vary considerably. Some focus mainly on the positioning of parties within a multiparty system, whereas others have stressed polarization among elites, irrespective of the number of parties, or so-called affective polarization—the antipathy that political partisans feel toward those who support their opponents. Still others, more recently, have shown how democratically elected strongmen have actively provoked us-versus-them polarization to isolate their opponents and strengthen their own positions.[14]

While the evidence showing that presidential democracies break down more frequently than parliamentary democracies appears strong, Mainwaring has suggested that perhaps the most vulnerable presidential democracies historically were multiparty presidential systems. Mainwaring and Shugart, moreover, pointed out in 1997 that parliamentary democracies had tended to be more stable than presidential democracies, at least in part because the former frequently had a heritage of British colonial rule, which had itself been identified as a factor correlated with the successful adoption of democracy at least in some regions.[15]

In exploring these various correlations, it is essential not to lose sight of what is arguably the most important question that stands behind them: *Why, in certain democratic countries, does dissatisfaction with the status quo lead to breakdown of democracy itself, rather than simply provoke punishment of incumbents and potentially a change of government through standard electoral means?* Why, for example, did the Great Depression seem to precipitate the rise of Hitler and the collapse of democracy in Germany, while merely leading to a shift in power from Republicans to Democrats, via the ballot box, in the United States?

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[13] Larry Diamond, "The Impact of the Economic Crisis: Why Democracies Survive," *Journal of Democracy* 22, no. 1 (Jan. 2011): 17–30; Matthew Singer, "Delegating Away Democracy: How Good Representation and Policy Successes Can Undermine Democratic Legitimacy," *Comparative Political Studies* 51, no. 13 (Nov. 2018): 1754–1788; Przeworski et al., *Democracy and Development*, esp. 98.

[14] Sartori, *Parties and Party Systems*; Linz, *Breakdown of Democratic Regimes*; Nancy Bermeo, *Ordinary People in Extraordinary Times: The Citizenry and the Breakdown of Democracy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003); McCoy, Rahman, and Somer, "Polarization and the Global Crisis of Democracy"; Marc Hetherington and Thomas J. Rudolph, *Why Washington Won't Work: Polarization, Political Trust, and the Governing Crisis* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015); Jennifer McCoy and Murat Somer, "Toward a Theory of Pernicious Polarization and How It Harms Democracies: Comparative Evidence and Possible Remedies," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 681, no. 1 (Jan. 2019): 234–271.

[15] Mainwaring, "Presidentialism, Multipartism, and Democracy"; Diskin, Diskin, and Hazan, "Why Democracies Collapse"; Scott Mainwaring and Matthew S. Shugart. "Juan Linz, Presidentialism, and Democracy: A Critical Appraisal," *Comparative Politics* 29, no. 4 (July 1997): 449–471.

Notably, if we try to address this last question drawing only on the variables most frequently highlighted in the academic literature on democratic breakdown, we don't necessarily gain a great deal of clarity. On the one hand, by the start of the Great Depression, Germany almost certainly faced higher levels of political polarization compared to the United States, and Germany's democracy was clearly younger than America's.[16] Greater polarization and a newer democracy both would suggest that Germany faced a *higher* likelihood of democratic breakdown. On the other hand, inequality was lower in Germany than in the United States, and Germany had (arguably) a parliamentary system, whereas the United States had a presidential system.[17] These differences, according to much of the literature, would suggest Germany faced a *lower* likelihood of breakdown. Additionally, while income per capita was higher in the United States than in Germany at the time, both countries' per capita incomes were below the Przeworski cutoff, suggesting that both democracies were vulnerable to failure.[18] So, focusing on these variables alone, some considerable uncertainty would remain why, as the Great Depression drove up unemployment and drove down incomes in both countries, democracy would collapse in one while surviving in the other.

Against the backdrop of this question, one of the main themes to emerge from the case studies in this volume—that democratic breakdown is very frequently preceded by years or even decades of democratic erosion—takes on particular significance. As we will see, it is possible that these periods of erosion represent not only warning signs of breakdowns to come, but also critical first phases of the breakdowns themselves. Many examples of democratic erosion—such as using violence to achieve political ends, suppressing political speech, and jailing political opponents—involve active assaults on democratic values, processes, or institutions, potentially weakening the political system and its legitimacy and increasing the likelihood of a full breakdown later on. At the same time, even if it

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[16] On political polarization in Weimar, see, e.g., Benjamin Carter Hett, *The Death of Democracy: Hitler's Rise to Power and the Downfall of the Weimar Republic* (New York: Henry Holt, 2018). Hett writes, "Divisions, increasingly bitter, increasingly irreconcilable, in matters of politics, religion, social class, occupation, and region, were the hallmark of the Weimar Republic" (66).

[17] On inequality in Germany and the United States during this period, see Tony Atkinson, Joe Hasell, Salvatore Morelli, and Max Roser, *The Chartbook of Economic Inequality*, 2017, https://www. chartbookofeconomicinequality.com/inequality-by-country/; the full data set is available as an Excel file at http://chartbookofeconomicinequality.com/wp-content/uploads/DataForDownload/AllData_ChartbookOfEconomicInequality.xlsx.

[18] For GDP per capita estimates for Germany and the United States during the relevant period, see Maddison Project Database 2020, https://www.rug.nl/ggdc/historicaldevelopment/maddison/releases/maddison-project-database-2020. The Maddison Project presents real per capita GDP figures in 2011$. Corrected for inflation using the CPI, the Przeworski cutoff would be about $12,700 in 2011$, which is higher than the per capita GDP of either Germany ($5,359) or the United States ($8,381) in 1932 (in 2011$). Prior to the depression, Germany had peaked at $6,519 in 1928, and the United States had peaked at $11,954 in 1929 (both in 2011$).

is not clear whether particular instances of democratic erosion contribute to subsequent breakdowns, they may reflect a less visible—though no less important—deterioration in the underlying commitment to democracy, which could be the most dangerous development of all.

One of the most powerful lines of defense within a democracy—arguably *the* most powerful line of defense—derives from the refusal of regular citizens and political leaders alike to sacrifice democratic institutions or values, even for the chance to get their way on pivotal issues of public policy, legal arrangements, or government personnel. Among scholars who subscribe to this view, some argue that democracy primarily requires commitment to democratic processes and norms among political leaders.[19] Others argue that democratic commitments must be more broadly shared, among citizens and leaders alike. Supporting this latter view, Rousseau wrote more than two centuries ago, "As soon as any man says of the affairs of the State *What does it matter to me?* the State may be given up for lost."[20]

But however one comes out on this question, it is essential that such commitment not be restricted to one party or one portion of the political spectrum. As Grote observed, ostensibly channeling Cleisthenes, "It was necessary to create . . . a perfect confidence in the bosom of every citizen . . . that the forms of the constitution will be not less sacred in the eyes of his opponents than in his own."[21] In other words, although participants in a democracy can safely disagree about nearly everything, they must share a deep and overriding—even sacred—commitment to democratic process and the outcomes it yields. By extension, the success and survival of democracy depend fundamentally on the willingness of citizens and their political leaders to *lose*, whether elections or other political battles, even to those with whom they most vehemently disagree, because of their abiding faith in the legitimacy of the democratic process and their abiding belief that their opponents are equally willing to lose when the votes turn against them, for the same reasons.

In a very real sense, democratic erosion—in nearly all of its forms—reflects a creeping rejection of such a willingness to lose or compromise, and thus a creeping rejection of democracy itself. The resort to political violence, for example, is implicitly an acknowledgment that the same objectives might not be achieved peacefully, through electoral or other democratic means. It is also an acknowledgment that the objectives at issue supersede the democratic principles

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[19] For a sampling of leading democracy scholars who focus on the role of political elites, rather than the citizenry more generally, in upholding democratic norms, see especially Linz and Stepan, *The Breakdown of Democratic Regimes;* Bermeo, *Ordinary People in Extraordinary Times*; and Levitsky and Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die.*

[20] Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract* (1762), Book III, Chapter 15.

[21] Grote, *History of Greece*, 2:86.

being trampled, at least in the eyes of those willing to commit the violence—as well as those not directly involved but willing to look the other way. Similarly, the rise of explicitly antidemocratic political actors almost definitionally indicates a decline in democratic commitment, among both the actors and their most ardent followers, at a minimum, and perhaps among many of their less ardent followers as well.

One additional factor that deserves special consideration, political polarization, represents a special case of democratic erosion. Unlike political violence or the rise of antidemocratic actors, which are worrisome even in small amounts, some degree of political polarization is normal in a democracy. In fact, in many contexts, intense partisanship is associated with productive—even highly productive—democratic governance, surfacing new ideas and policy approaches in much the same way that intense competition in the economic marketplace can generate vital innovation in commercial products and processes.[22] Intense political polarization can of course also prove highly destructive—in the lead-up to the American Civil War, for example. So we're left with the question of what leads political conflict and polarization to be either productive or destructive. High polarization can strain the commitment to democracy because losing in the face of moderate disagreement is less painful than losing in the face of vehement disputes, when the stakes seem existential.[23] Political polarization can prove especially dangerous when it infects core institutions, such as the military, leading these institutions to be clearly identified with one political side or another. This was plainly the case in Chile in 1973, for instance, when the military became strongly aligned with political opponents of the president. Another possibility is that even intense partisan conflict can prove productive when set against the backdrop of a strong culture of democracy—a deep commitment to democratic process, institutions, and values—but can quickly turn destructive when that commitment fades, as it apparently did in the pre–Civil War American South.[24]

[22] David Moss, *Democracy: A Case Study* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017), esp. 6–8.

[23] Archon Fung, "Afterword: Does Deliberative Democracy Have a Role in Our Time of Political Crisis?," *Journal of Deliberative Democracy* 16, no. 1 (2020): 75.

[24] See, e.g., Moss, *Democracy*, 682, characterizing a strong culture of democracy as "a sort of societal glue, binding people together even in the face of intense political disagreement." Institutions that enable productive negotiation between strongly opposed factions can also preserve democratic sentiments, though scholars disagree about what institutional structures most facilitate such productive negotiation. In his book *Breaking the Two-Party Doom Loop* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), for example, Lee Drutman argues that multiparty democracies are more likely to be stable in the face of strong disagreements than the fully sorted two-party system in the United States in the early twenty-first century. Yet Scott Mainwaring, in "Presidentialism, Multipartism, and Democracy: The Difficult Combination," *Comparative Political Studies* 26, no. 2 (1993): 198–228, argues that the combination of presidentialism and multiparty systems can be especially conducive to democratic breakdown. Giovanni Sartori, *Parties and Party Systems: A Framework for Analysis* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1976), meanwhile, argues that the number of parties in a

Either way, this idea that political conflict and polarization can be associated with a well-functioning democracy, or with a democracy on the verge of collapse, depending on the precise circumstances, points to a larger challenge both for this volume and for our collective understanding of democratic fragility and resilience. While we can say with a high degree of confidence that democratic erosion often precedes democratic breakdown, we cannot say with an equally high degree of confidence that erosion doesn't also precede democratic survival. In fact, some degree of democratic erosion, in this or that part of the political system, is likely present at nearly all times in all democracies. To what extent, then, is democratic erosion a meaningful warning sign or simply an inevitable fact of democratic life?

And this brings us back to the question of why the Great Depression seemed to provoke or accelerate democratic collapse in Germany, while provoking or accelerating only an electoral realignment in the United States. What role, if any, did democratic erosion play in all of this? Certainly, we saw significant signs of democratic erosion in Weimar Germany, even well before the depression took hold. This included not only intense political polarization but also significant political violence and the rise of explicitly antidemocratic political actors. It seems reasonable to infer that these developments may have contributed to—or at least signaled—the full breakdown to come. Yet the analysis cannot end there, because even a cursory look at the United States would reveal significant signs of democratic weakness or erosion prior to the Great Depression, including everything from modest electoral corruption to brutal political violence directed against Black Americans, particularly in the American South. Since American democracy survived, how can we be sure that democratic erosion or weakness is in fact a precursor to democratic collapse? This volume focuses on the path from erosion to breakdown, but it is important to recognize that other trajectories are possible as well.

Ideally, to better understand these varying trajectories, we would like to have quantitative measures that allow us to compare democratic strength or weakness across countries and across time. Various efforts along these lines have emerged over past decades (and, in some cases, over just the past few years), offering quantitative measures of everything from freedom of the press to electoral integrity. V-Dem's composite liberal-democracy index allows us to compare the overall quality of liberal democracy, according to V-Dem's measure, across countries and time. Looking specifically at Germany and the United States from 1900 to the early 1930s, we see that the United States consistently scored well above Germany until 1918 (with the United States averaging 0.386 vs. Germany

multiparty system is an important factor in determining whether parties will have incentives to negotiate responsibly.

0.216, on a scale of 0 to 1), and that Germany then rose rapidly with the birth of the Weimar Republic, actually overtaking the United States by 1920, according to the index (Germany 0.495 vs. U.S. 0.385 in that year). Over the next decade, the United States gradually rose while Germany gradually declined, such that by 1930 the United States had again taken the lead by a small margin (U.S. 0.485 vs. Germany 0.430).[25] The index suggests that while both democracies were very far from perfect (i.e., well below a perfect score of 1), the Weimar Constitution was quite advanced for the time (delivering a score above that of the United States for most of the 1920s); it also suggests that Germany experienced at least some degree of democratic erosion over the 1920s, while the United States saw the quality of its liberal democracy modestly improve, on net.

Although in some ways the V-Dem data are broadly consistent with what one might have expected (namely, that both democracies were imperfect and that Germany's democracy deteriorated prior to its collapse), the differences in the two countries' liberal-democracy scores over the 1920s and early 1930s hardly seem large enough to explain the radically different political outcomes these two countries experienced. By 1932, immediately before its descent into fascism, Germany's score was still significantly higher than America's had been in 1920 or even 1925. Looking beyond the Weimar period itself, one can see from the longer path of Germany's V-Dem scores—as well as from literally any relevant textbook—that its democracy was still very young by the early 1930s, and this may be part of why the Weimar Republic proved so vulnerable to an economic shock like the Great Depression. As we have seen, the academic literature suggests that newer democracies are more likely to fail than older ones. This seems obvious enough—but why, exactly? And why would the liberal-democracy scores themselves not reflect this deeper weakness?

Weimar's "model" constitution ensured that, at least on paper, its democracy rivaled or exceeded the best democracies in the world at the time, which helps to explain why Weimar Germany initially emerged as a bastion of personal freedom and also, perhaps, why its liberal-democracy score was higher than America's through most of the 1920s.[26] Still, Madison's observation that constitutional provisions are little more than "parchment barriers" unless "incorporated with

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[25] Michael Coppedge et al., "V-Dem Dataset v10," Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Project, 2020, https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3557877. See also Michael Coppedge et al., "V-Dem Codebook v10" Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Project, https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3557877. Notably, Germany's score rose sharply to 0.472 in 1931, but only for a single year, and returned to 0.430 in 1932 (before collapsing to 0.089 in 1933, when Hitler took power, and 0.021 the following year).

[26] Herbert J. Spiro, *Government by Constitution: The Political Systems of Democracy* (New York: Random House, 1959). According to Spiro, "[a]t the time of its adoption, the Weimar Constitution was widely hailed as the very model of modern constitutionalism" (421). In this volume, Eric Weitz writes, "Globally, the Weimar Constitution was probably *the* most democratic constitution of its time."

the national sentiment" seems especially pertinent here. How strong was democratic sentiment in Weimar Germany, and how did it compare with sentiment in the United States? Unfortunately, in the absence of relevant public opinion surveys from the time, reliable quantitative data on the nature of democratic sentiment from bygone eras—about how wide or deep commitment to democracy ran in Weimar Germany or interwar America, for example—are simply not available.

In this context, historical case studies can prove especially valuable. The newness of democracy in Germany after World War I might vaguely suggest weaker democratic commitment relative to the United States, but careful historical examination can provide us with more precise clues, even when quantitative survey data from the period are lacking. Weitz's chapter on Weimar Germany provides an excellent illustration. As he argues, politics in Weimar Germany were shaped by two powerful traditions: a "150-year-long humanistic and democratic tradition," on the one hand, and a "highly authoritarian" tradition, bringing together elements of both conservative traditionalism and "right-wing populism," on the other. Descendants of the authoritarian tradition, Weitz maintains, proved "not just anti-Socialist but fundamentally antidemocratic as well." All of this indicates that democratic sentiment ran deep in certain quarters, contributing to "the vast expansion of democracy, social reform, and cultural efflorescence in the Weimar years," but also that it was far from universally held in Germany and even actively resisted, including from bastions of authoritarianism within the state itself.

In the pages that follow, in one chapter after another, portraits emerge of weak or weakening democracies. Individuals and groups with the strongest democratic leanings struggle against antidemocratic forces but ultimately succumb, sometimes in the face of extreme violence or superior force but in many cases without a shot being fired. One apparent lesson is that although circumstances vary greatly from one country to the next, the destruction of democracies typically comes with years of warning, as in the case of Weimar, but that these warnings often go unheeded or at least largely unheeded in many quarters, as citizens and their political leaders seem to grow increasingly inured to each successive insult to democratic values or institutions. One might conclude that democratic commitment softens or wavers long before democracy itself collapses.

We say "apparent lesson" because this volume aims to generate insights about democratic fragility on the basis of individual case studies, rather than to test existing hypotheses using quantitative methods. We know that while the list of polities where democracy has failed is long, the variation across them—including variation in institutional context—is so large that it often confounds meaningful statistical analysis. We also know that some of the variables of greatest interest, such as democratic commitment, are among the most difficult to capture in consistent ways. And, of course, we have focused in this volume on cases of

democratic breakdown, without developing comparable cases on polities where democracy survived, uninterrupted.

Our expectation is that in countries where democracy fails, prior democratic erosion is likely to have been more pronounced—and the level and breadth of democratic commitment lower, among both the general public and political leaders—than in countries where democracy survives, despite equivalent shocks. Of course, this remains only a hypothesis, for all of the reasons highlighted in the previous paragraph. Although our focus on individual case studies is not conducive to rigorous hypothesis testing, it does provide visibility into the antecedents of democratic breakdown that may not be available any other way.

The last time a collection of this kind was put together was more than forty years ago, in 1978, when Juan Linz and Alfred Stepan (and their many co-authors) published *The Breakdown of Democratic Regimes*. A monumental contribution, this work has helped to shape understanding of democratic fragility in the decades since and has offered a foundation on which many other scholars have built. In the meantime, the field has progressed quite considerably, even as a dangerous new wave of democratic backsliding and breakdown has become reality, particularly in the twenty-first century. In fact, the amount of new, book-length work published on democratic failure over just the past few years is striking.[27] Much of this work, including Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt's widely acclaimed *How Democracies Die*, provides vital insight into the latest mode of autocratic assault on democracy. As Levitsky and Ziblatt explain:

> This is how elected autocrats subvert democracy—packing and "weaponizing" the courts and other neutral agencies, buying off the media and the private sector (or bullying them into silence), and rewriting the rules of politics to tilt the playing field against opponents. The tragic paradox of the electoral route to authoritarianism is that democracy's assassins use the very institutions of democracy—gradually, subtly, and even legally—to kill it.[28]

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[27] See, e.g., Bermeo, *Ordinary People in Extraordinary Times*; Larry Diamond, Marc F. Plattner, and Christopher Walker, *Authoritarianism Goes Global: The Challenge to Democracy* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2016); Jan-Werner Müller, *What Is Populism?* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016); Timothy Snyder, *On Tyranny: Twenty Lessons from the Twentieth Century* (New York: Tim Duggan Books, 2017); Barry Eichengreen, *The Populist Temptation: Economic Grievance and Political Reaction in the Modern Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018); William A. Galston, *Anti-Pluralism: The Populist Threat to Liberal Democracy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018); Tom Ginsburg and Aziz Z. Huq, *How to Save a Constitutional Democracy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018); Hett, *The Death of Democracy*; Levitsky and Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die*; Yascha Mounk, *The People vs. Democracy: Why Our Freedom Is in Danger and How to Save It* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018); Frances McCall Rosenbluth and Ian Shapiro, *Responsible Parties: Saving Democracy from Itself* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018); Tomini, *When Democracies Collapse*; Sheri Berman, *Democracy and Dictatorship in Europe: From the Ancien Régime to the Present Day* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019).
[28] Levitsky and Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die*, 8.

Levitsky and Ziblatt, among many others, have done a superb job documenting and analyzing this "electoral route to authoritarianism" (or "illiberal democracy"), which has been so characteristic of democratic breakdown in the twenty-first century up until this point.[29] All of the contributors to this volume—and perhaps especially the authors covering the most contemporary cases on Russia, Turkey, and Venezuela—have benefited a great deal from this growing body of work, and there are many points of agreement.

At the same time, the main goal of this volume is to widen the aperture, to explore democratic failure across a broad range of cases, recent and long past, with the aim of exposing not only notable commonalities but notable differences as well. When it comes to differences, some relate to the fact-patterns of the cases themselves (abrupt vs. gradual seizure of power, for example), while others relate to diverging interpretations among contributing authors and editors. As a case in point, some contributors to this volume, following Juan Linz, see strong democratic commitment as being especially vital among political elites, even as others believe political leaders can be counted upon to adhere to essential norms only if democratic commitments remain strongly held throughout the citizenry at large.

We see this diversity, of both cases and viewpoint, as a core strength of the volume. Especially at a time when democracy appears to be under very significant stress around the world, having as broad a perspective as possible on the history of democratic breakdown seems particularly valuable. The next threat that emerges could look a great deal like what we have seen most recently in Turkey or Venezuela, but it also could look closer to what unfolded in America in the lead-up to the Civil War or in India in 1975 or even in Germany in 1933. We need to continue thinking hard about why democratic crises of the twenty-first century seem so far to have taken a particular path, mostly following the "electoral route to authoritarianism" and "illiberal democracy," but without assuming that new threats, following very different patterns, cannot or will not emerge. History is by no means a perfect guide to what's possible, but it is one of the best guides we have—and this, to be sure, has been a principal motivation for the volume.

Above all, we believe that history, and especially the history of democratic breakdown, can provide new insight into the line separating democratic resilience from democratic fragility. We hope that the chapters that make up this volume contribute to that project and serve as an ongoing reminder not only of what can go wrong, but of what is at stake.

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[29] On an early use of "illiberal democracy," see Fareed Zakaria, "The Rise of Illiberal Democracy," *Foreign Affairs* 76, no. 6 (Nov.–Dec. 1997): 22–43. See also Collier and Levitsky, "Democracy with Adjectives," 438–440.