Throw Out the Rascals Not the System: What Can We Learn for Democratic Survival From the Great Depression?

Ekkart Zimmermann

Dresden University of Technology, Dresden, Germany

The analysis refers to the interwar years in Europe. We distinguish four types of coalitions here: (a) Coalitions with other democratic parties, led by a predominant party and most common in multi-party democratic states. (b) Bringing in ideological opponents on the parts of overarching highly credible national figures such as King George V did in Britain in 1931 in calling upon the charismatic Labour Party leader MacDonald to form a coalition with the still dominant but ailing Conservative Party. (c) The outbidding of more radical political parties by former center parties towards the right or left. One such outcome comes about when this is having a temporary effect only, until the next election is won within the family of democratic parties. Yet, when outbidding is trump the electorate easily might go for the hardest outbidding contender not to be taken over by even greater extremist parties. This process for the analysis of political terrorism and its intention to instigate fear amongst the "neutral" population explains to a large extent why considerable portions of the population are going to side with the most extreme challengers. This is for two reasons, one is pure fear to be out-mastered, the other one is rational choice just to avoid this. (d) The other outcome as to outbidding occurs when the democratic national consensus formation that is still underlying all these processes in normal times is wiped out in times of crises. Democratic national consensus is being lost vis-à-vis a new anti-democratic national consensus formation. Several other theoretical arguments and historical experiences are touched upon.

Keywords: outbidding, democratic national consensus formation, power transition, center parties, transient democrat, populism, types of coalition, siding with most extreme challenges

Introduction

Since Heraclitus at least, we know that history does not repeat itself. We also know that learning from failures can be highly effective, although often the opposite is true. What then is going on in the current world of democratic failures and authoritarian political challenges?

Here are a few more than stylized facts: (1) Authoritarian political regimes, contrary to simplistic beliefs, do not perform better economically than democracies (Przeworski & Limongi, 1993). For the few mainly South-East Asian success stories there are many more absolute failures all over the world. (2) Communist autocracies, e.g., were sometimes excelling in formal mass education, in particular driven by communist or other ideology. In some cases, basic medical provision for the masses was also notable (Zimmermann, 1990). (3) In terms of personal and economic freedom, political repression, and political violence, they are an utter failure. In

Ekkart Zimmermann, Ph.D., Professor emeritus of Macrosociology, Institute of Sociology, Dresden University of Technology, Dresden, Germany.

autocracies rulers are almost exclusively interested not in the production of public goods such as division of power, legal rule, and personal freedom, but in the acquisition of private goods for the selectorate only, the group of power-wielders, and oligarchs deciding on who is to be *selected*, *not elected* by free votes as in democracies (Zimmermann, 2024).

Focusing on the safeguards almost built into democracies, if well-functioning, we focus selectively on political responses to great economic and political challenges in the interwar period of the 1920s and 1930s in selected mainly European countries.

Assembling Some Basic Analytical Elements

First, the electorate can be divided into system-adherents and radical segments aiming at overturning and perhaps even destructing the prevailing political institutions. (Following Wright, 1976, there is actually a large mostly apolitical buffer mass between the consenters and the dissenters that usually protects the consenters.) Ideally, a loyal and competent political opposition watches over and controls the government or governing coalition, ready to step in when supported by the electorate. Power transition occurs in a peaceful and regulated way. Ideally, political opposition and peaceful transition of power allow for political changes, for political reforms before mass discontent builds up to even revolutionary challenges. In short, opposition and power transition in a set of rules are to preempt the explosion of further discontent and thus more likely disorders. *Reformstau* (postponing reforms), as the German word goes, aggravates the problems to even greater proportions and can only be a strategy in modest times. Otherwise it is to intensify a highly risky game within polities and in foreign conflict relations. Thus, preparedness and competence are asked for and not timidity and incompetence, these days extremely aggravated by distorting mass media and their consumption.

In situations of economic and political crisis, one turning point, perhaps the most dangerous one, arises when the parties in the democratic middle dwindle, due to economic failures, corruption and ideological disorientation, or simple incompetence, perhaps even too much moderation and naivete. The center parties are the gate-keepers to extremist parties. The power of such a theoretical perspective can be grasped when looking at the success of the second German democracy, the Federal Republic, incorporating first the nationalist right-wing parties or dwindling them to less than five per cent of the vote. The same occurred on the left during the second half of the 1950s and the 1960s when the Social Democratic Party turned into a people's party left-of the middle, with considerable appeal on part of their middle-aged party leaders.

From on the student revolt in the second half of the 1960s paired with the economic crisis in 1966, both radicals on the left side and on the right with the National Democratic Party (NPD) gained considerable ground. The final outbreak of dissent occurred, first, on the left with the emanation of the ecological green and peace party and later a revival of the orthodox communist party being re-baptized after German unification. On the right the breakaway of voters, also equally massive on the left side of the electorate, occurred with the incompetent handling of the migration issues after 2015 through the Merkel government. Thinking beyond giving asylum was not in the books and mind, and still is not. Thus, here we have a cycle from a dissolution of the party wings at first, then a consolidation, and in recent years a massive dissociation with strong current effect on the extreme rightist AfD ("Alternative for Germany"). A look at a fourfold table of party adherents and protest voters is helpful.

Type 1, the democratic party adherents, and type 4, the anti-system party adherents are easily to depict. The difficulties arise with the mixed types of democratic basic orientations but still going for an "antidemocratic" protest vote, type 3, and type 2, voters whose attitude is anti-system, and yet still they go for a protest vote, maybe for a democratic party.

Table 1

Party Adherents and Protest Voters

	Democratic orientation	Anti-democratic orientation
Vote for democratic parties	1 Consistent Democrat	2 Transient Democrat
Vote for anti-democratic parties	3 Protest Voter	4 Consistent Anti-democrat

Successful populist campaigning as with Orban in Hungary blurs those lines and implies hope for the usual benefits of charismatic appeal: doing away with traditional lines of political orientation and segmentation. Elements of populism also appear on the part of "democratic" politicians bidding for power. The numerous volts of President Trump provide evidence for many shades here.

Populism as a political tactic and strategy occurs in both spheres, inside democratic politics as well as from outside. Orban provides a current example, Hitler one of the most prominent historical ones. After his failed coup attempt in 1923 he tried to win support both at the polls and through violence on the street. In the end, as with Mussolini's example in Italy, power was handed over to him from within the system in January 1933. Populism implies going for direct access to the people on the part of political leaders and, vice versa, on the part of the broader population erroneously believing of having direct influence on the leaders. The other basic feature squaring with these is giving way to general and simplifying polar beliefs about society, the economy, the international world, and about nature in general. Often this is tied to degrading population segments and cultivating racial stereotypes against minorities and foreigners in general. All this was masterly demonstrated by Hitler in betting on anti-semitism, in doing away with other institutions, checks, and balances, and in developing a grossly simplified vision of the world and behavior in international affairs. There are further elements to populism beyond this article. Also there is a strong link to the theory of mass society (Kornhauser, 1959) which maintains the importance of filtering and balancing intermediate institutions.

With outside intervention either via infiltration, ideological indoctrination, monetary support, and organizational aid, the conflicts intensify and undermine the solid fundaments described in the initial paragraphs on which the survival chances of democracy depend. The greatest danger arrives when the insiders in the (democratic) system of power combine with outsiders (Tilly, 1978). The latter might be called for support to win over the traditional competitors. Betting on Russian support is a strong challenge and temptation in many European countries right now: the closer the Russian neighbor, the more so. Sometimes former democratic or semi-democratic parties fully surrender and run over to the adversaries of democracies. They give into to the maelstrom of such more radical parties. This was, e.g., the case with the *Landvolkbewegung* in Schleswig-Holstein in the early thirties where the agrarian party functionaries and voters alike converted almost entirely to the National Socialist party (Heberle, 1963).

One can at least distinguish four types of coalitions here:

(a) *Coalitions* with other democratic parties, led by a *predominant party* and most common in multi-party democratic states.

(b) Bringing in *ideological opponents* on the parts of *overarching highly credible national figures* such as King George V did in Britain in 1931 in calling upon the charismatic Labour Party leader MacDonald to form a coalition with the still dominant but ailing Conservative Party.

(c) The *outbidding of more radical political parties* by former center parties towards the right or left has been mentioned repeatedly (Linz, 1978). One such outcome comes about when this is having a temporary effect only, until the next election is won within the *family of democratic parties*. President Mitterand disembarked the Communist party in such a way in 1984. Actually, the communists left the cabinet. Yet, when outbidding is trump the electorate easily might go for the hardest outbidding contender not to be taken over by even greater extremist parties. This process, described by Tullock (1974) for the analysis of political terrorism and its intention to instigate fear amongst the "neutral" population, explains to a large extent why considerable portions of the population are going to side with the most extreme challengers. This is for two reasons, one is pure fear to be out-mastered, the other one is rational choice just to avoid this.

(d) The other outcome as to outbidding occurs when the democratic national consensus formation that is still underlying all these processes in normal times is wiped out in times of crises. Democratic national consensus is being lost vis-à-vis a *new anti-democratic national consensus formation* (Zimmermann & Saalfeld, 1988). Such a process is not only challenging and destroying democratic parties and their leaders but the entire set of rules and procedures of selecting political leaders, their styles of political behavior and policy-making. The democratic "rascals" in the view of the opponents are thrown out just as much as the political system is providing chances to come to power again in future elections (Przeworski, 2019).

The nationalistic conservative DNVP in Germany with its share of 8.3 % of the votes in the November 1932 election believed to have "enframed" Hitler. In January 1933, these were the keywords and the recommendation by the later vice-chancellor Papen to Reichspräsident Hindenburg. The NSDAP leaders knew better what they wanted. In the words of Goebbels upon entering the building of the chancellery: "We shall never leave this place alive."

When the political radicalization in Germany occurred, in Sweden in the very same year of 1933 political learning led to a new cross-class coalition between the Liberals and the Labor Party recognizing their respective claims as to free markets and the rights of the union (Luebbert, 1991; Rogowski, 1989). Later on in the Saltsjöbaden agreement of December 1938 the government came up with a new social pact including social insurance and pension schemes. This created the new *Folkhemmet* consensus and lasted till the end of the 1970s. In Germany rather antagonisms between social cleavages and political groups intensified. There the Communist Party was actually the only winner in the last free election of November 1932 reaching its maximum vote share of 16.9% during the Weimar Republic. Rather than going for the predominantly right-wing extremes as in Germany, Austria, Italy a decade early and other European and overseas countries, in Sweden there was a notable concentration of political forces around the political center and according compromises. The *national consensus formation* occurred within the *democratic framework* and not against it as in Germany.

The next Section provides a larger overview of what to compare and what to address.

Setting Up the Broader Research Agenda

In sum, the order of analysis is as follows in simplified terms:

(1) In the most stable case with all parliamentary parties being democratic and one party having the clear majority, even in relative terms, there is nothing to worry about.

(2) Even growing party fractionalization within the *democratic party family* is no indication of coming instability. Rather it could indicate political and social change becoming necessary over time under a highly stable democratic rule.

(3) Thus leftist, center, conservative, and rightist parties can very well coexist within and beyond their respective party families. There may be high turnover of voters from one party to another or to another party family. The argument goes along with the two basic criteria of Sartori (1976) for party systems: whether parties are center-petal in their orientation, and their degree of overall fractionalization over the entire electorate. The idea of linked party families just adds a finer liner of argumentation.

(4) With anti-system parties being present and established or forming, the shibboleth occurs: can the democratic parties maintain the majority and the relative consensus in the polity? Eastern European democracies under Russian threat of war as well as Middle, Western, and Northern European countries, in short nearly everywhere, face this test now for a decade and longer. The main issues here are uncontrolled immigration and inadequate adaptation to social change and growth in a globalized economy and boring and incompetent politicians, as much as voters, to grasp the challenges of the times. Their focus is being re-elected and re-electing, and keeping their privileges rather than introducing hard-hitting reforms in political and social structures that are no longer compatible with changing circumstances. Mainly these are matters of over-extended welfare benefits with ailing, aging, and less industrious populations.

(5) Here several scenarios can emerge: one is simply the collapse and disappearing of center parties dissolving themselves (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2019). This is a clear-cut rupture. Disappointed former democratic voters might have underestimated such consequences of their desertion of traditional parties.

(6) The other major route occurs within the democratic system, if political parties try to unite with (portions) of the political extremes or even try to win over them by copying their ideas: winning them over and winning over them. Note, that this was the strategy and success of the Christian Democratic parties in East Germany after unification in 1990. They had to be successful "socialist" parties in handing out large sums of subvention in keeping the majority of the population at bay, namely in East Germany. With public debt going up by about 16 per cent of the GDP in seven years, money was handed out for urban construction and mostly consumption. Going for further investments and a different course of economic development with more flexible wages was an alternative nobody fought for. The dominant parties were outbidding each other and in a way are still doing so. One third of the BIP in East Germany is still coming from the outside. There is no self-reinforcing long-term economic growth.

In the analysis of revolutionary situations and their eventual outcome: revolution, Lenin (1902) and Tilly (1978) have analyzed the links and alliances offered between the "foxes" in Pareto's terms (Pareto 1991; Zimmermann, 1983) and the more dynamic lions. With Lenin the former elites cannot go on and the new ones cannot act on their own term. New cross-cutting alliances, cutting across party families, across former anti-systemic lines and ideologies are at issue here. That the degree and types of political violence incidentally flourish after revolutionary take-over is one of the insights of Tilly and others.

Again a simple four-fold table helps in structuring the potential constellations to a rudimentary degree.

Table 2

Adding Party Families to the Analysis

	Democratic party family consensus prevails 1	Democratic party family consensus breaks down 2
Political system and societal consensus prevail	Consistent Democrats	Transient Democrats
Political system and societal consensus break down	3 Protest Voters	4 Consistent anti-democratic breakdown

Families of democratic parties may either be retained or challenged by anti-system party families. The question of outcome is denoted on the left: the political system and societal consensus, in short, the basic societal pact may prevail or break down. These processes and the relative amount of power wielded by each contending group may vary over time. Normally case 3 is farther away from breaking the prevailing unstable "equilibrium", compared with case 2. Here the consensus within the democratic parties family is already collapsed. Thus one has to reckon with different speeds of acceleration when comparing the four basic patterns. As usual in social science analysis, the "consistent" cases are easier to analyze, the diagonals, the "inconsistent" ones are more demanding to understand.

Concluding Remark

The crucial element for democracy to re-stabilize is the believe and experience that the losers of one election can come back in a future election and that the rules of gaining power are not changed as in Nazi Germany in March 1933 already. Keep the tolerance of the democratic system going and throw out intolerant rascals, political leaders, and parties. That is the recipe. Voters drifting away and being comforted by more radical parties need to be won back. Call it statesmanship or essential democratic competition. You can observe this everywhere in Europe and with much grave consequences now in the U.S. where the division of power and institutional checks seem to break down completely. So in the end it is the interplay of electorates, parties, political leaders, functioning party systems (cf. Huntington's, 1968, criteria of adaptability, complexity, autonomy, and coherence) and, with respect to international politics, international partners, and allies.

Back to the rascals and the theaters wherein they are creating trouble and catastrophes, in every decent plot some form of a rascal is needed but not necessarily those addressed and pointed to here. They can raise attention for urgent problems to be solved as in peaceful protests. If they go for suppressing free opinions, political competition, and for suppressing minorities actively and violently, they are acting in a play out of hands. To come to terms, here then throwing the rascals out is indicated.

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