INTERVIEW WITH PROF. VICTOR MENALDO ABOUT NEW BOOK AUTHORITARIANISM AND THE ELITE ORIGINS OF DEMOCRACY

Submitted by Stephen Dunne on September 4, 2018 - 12:46pm

Victor, you and your co-author Michael Albertus have a new book. What is it about?

Yes, we examine what happens when authoritarian systems of government transition to democracies. How does this process occur and what are the consequences? For example, since World War II, the outgoing authoritarian regime has drafted the new democratic constitution in over two-thirds of the countries that have made this transition. We examine the reasons, as well as the impact on different types of transitions for the distribution of political power and economic resources in a society following democratization.

And what do you find?

We study democratic transitions around the world over two centuries. We find that the people in power under the old system sometimes design new democratic institutions in ways that preserve their political and economic advantages. Some dictatorships transition into elite-biased democracies, where political and economic elites from the outgoing authoritarian regime coordinate to impose constitutional frameworks for democratic change that benefit them.

Others transition to popular democracies, when external circumstances catch incumbent authoritarian elites off guard and, under duress, they concede institutional control and rulemaking to a coalition of outsider economic elites—shut out of power and influence under authoritarianism—and the masses. This distinction is not just academic hairsplitting: these differing origins determine polities’ basic architecture, the rights of citizens, and how representative and inclusive the political system becomes. They also have a big impact on the size of future governments and their commitments to social justice and egalitarianism.

Can you give us an example?

Sure, the main objective of elites seeking to preserve their status is to restrict majority rule. There are many ways to do this. One is to require a supermajority for future amendments to the constitution they have written. Others include barriers to voting, malapportionment, and giving veto power to unelected political bodies in which elites from the old guard are over-represented.

Your book is not about the U.S., but many of the institutions and practices you describe do seem to apply to the U.S.?

Our book focuses on transitions from authoritarian to democratic systems and that does not describe United States’ history per se. But our findings are consistent with a longstanding argument about the U.S. Constitution. In 1913, Charles A. Beard wrote An Economic Interpretation of the U.S. Constitution in which he argued that the country's founders were members of a tiny elite (undoubtedly true) who drafted the Constitution, with the primary goal of protecting their interests.

The United States continues to hold indirect elections for the presidency, and its federal system long protected subnational enclaves in which a majority of citizens in some states were deprived of their basic rights. Until 1913, it maintained an indirectly elected upper chamber that overrepresented state-level oligarchs. Indeed, the American Senate still operates according to rules that require supermajorities to pass ordinary legislation (the filibuster). Gerrymandered electoral districts for the lower chamber alongside high malapportionment in the upper chamber effectively undermine the ideal of one person, one vote.
Others have argued that the founders limited majority rule because they didn't trust the public to make decisions that promoted the common interest?

Again, our book is not about the U.S., but the U.S. is not unique and other nations face similar dilemmas. There have been many examples of populists who exploited the democratic franchise to their own ends. So it can be argued, whether intentional or not, that elite-initiated provisions that limit majority rule can actually help to preserve and promote democratic systems of government. But it is complicated because the same non-democratic provisions can provide the pretext for populist appeals that ultimately undermine democratic systems. We have seen this recently in the Turkey, Hungary, the Philippines and elsewhere.

Are there any examples that offer insights into how countries can make successful transitions?

In the book, we have a chapter devoted to Sweden. There we show that, at first, political elites granted democracy from above and quite reluctantly. Over time, these elites reformed the political system to distribute power and privileges more equally – but it took centuries. We make the case that Sweden is emblematic of other cases in which unexpected changes or pressures, in the form of economic crises, trade shocks, or wars, overturn elite biases written into a democracy's social contract.

Let me start at the beginning. In the late eighteenth century, a strong fiscal crisis precipitated by Sweden’s participation in international wars compelled the state to tax the nobility for the first time in Swedish history. A little later, in 1789, the king abolished noble privileges without the consent of the noble chamber in parliament. In the early twentieth century, the government introduced progressive taxes on income, wealth, and inheritance in order to help defray the costs of increased defense spending in the wake of World War I. These policy changes were accompanied by institutional changes—most importantly, ever broader extensions of the franchise—that strengthened the voice of the people at the expense of the landed elites, oligarchs, and other entrenched interests. They made Sweden more politically and economically egalitarian.

During World War I, the government believed that soldiers would more readily accept military conscription if they were also granted greater political rights. However, constitutional engineering by elites (restrictions on the franchise, an indirectly elected upper chamber, and proportional representation that allowed conservative parties to survive despite the fact that their base of support had become a minority portion of the overall electorate) effectively muzzled these rights. Things began to change when major political revolts in Germany and the fall of the Kaiser at the conclusion of World War I strengthened the hand of local Swedish revolutionaries and radicals. These radicals demanded the abolition of the monarchy, upper chamber of the parliament, called for an end to universal military service and pushed for universal suffrage. With revolution knocking on the door, the political and economic elites who were holding democracy back felt compelled to compromise and began to dismantle many vestiges of elite bias starting around 1921 and continuing into the 1930s. However, the last major vestige – the indirectly elected upper chamber – was not eliminated until 1970. Only then did Sweden become exceptionally egalitarian.

Related readings:


Michael Albertus and Victor Menaldo, "Why are so many democracies breaking down?" The New York Times, May 8, 2018