

VI. Reseñas

**Ordinary People in Extraordinary Times: The Citizenry
and the Breakdown of Democracy by Nancy Bermeo,
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What role did ordinary people play through voting and taking collective action when democracies fell on hard times, asks Nancy Bermeo in her latest book. Basing her argument on evidence of seventeen countries in Europe and Latin America where democracy broke down, she shows that the vast mass of the population continued supporting pro-democratic parties during times of crisis, and that mass defections to extremist parties were rare. Professor of Politics at Princeton University and senior editor of *World Politics*, Nancy Bermeo is one of the leading scholars of studies of regime changes and democracy in the field of comparative politics. In the present book she urges us to rethink the causes of democratic breakdown and stability, and develops a theoretical synthesis of the literature on polarization, civil society, democracy, and political parties. While the empirical scope of the work is on twentieth century Europe and Latin America, its findings are an important contribution towards understanding current processes of polarization and democratic consolidation in the whole world.

Parting from the argument that the process of democratic breakdown is too complex to be understood only with the classic polarization model of Giovanni Sartori, Bermeo sets out to evaluate the relationship between polarization and regime change. According to Sartori, when political actors group themselves in opposite and distant ideological camps and start supporting anti-system parties, they vacate the middle ground of pro-system parties where cooperation is most likely, and leave democracy vulnerable to collapse. For Sartori, ordinary people are the masons of polarization who one by one, vote by vote, contribute to the collapse of democratic order. Bermeo claims

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instead, that polarization is not a condition or a property of party systems, and not even a single process, but a set of processes unfolding with different sets of actors, in different spheres, and with different degrees of intensity (Bermeo, 19, 227-9).

We have often mistaken the polarization of few and select groups in society for polarization in society as a whole, and failed to distinguish between two different sets of polarization, Bermeo argues. A less visible, *private polarization* involves changes in voting preference and changes in public opinion, whereas *public polarization* takes the form of mobilizations and counter-mobilizations in the public space of plazas, streets, taverns, factories, and farms (Bermeo, 20). In the studied cases where either of these polarizations occurred, the responsibility of breakdown of regimes laid exclusively on the elites. Similarly, in the countries where the public sphere became polarized, the major responsibility fell on the elites who used public polarization as an excuse to create an authoritarian regime. When groups of civil society transformed into social movements and set in motion, a process of public polarization, the political and military leaders read these actions as an issue representative of public opinion in general, and, justifying with restoring order, sacrificed the democratic system.

Much of what political and military elites attempt to do, thus, is conditioned by their judgments of how ordinary people will behave, Bermeo argues. In the cases of this study, while elections gave a more accurate reading of public preferences, most of the time the elites had to make their reading on the public spaces dominated by social movements. This is why, by looking at social movements within civil society, we solve puzzles about both polarization and the breakdown of democracy (Bermeo, 229, 234). In a positive valuation, the civil society not only “lays down limits on the actions of the state” but also counterbalances, penetrates, fragments, and decentralizes state power (Ruschmeyer et al. in Bermeo, 9). In the same direction, in the arguments emphasizing political culture, the civil society is represented as the basis of good and effective government, and portrayed as a school for the training of

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democratic citizens (Putnam in Bermeo; Almond and Verba in Bermeo, 9). According to Bermeo, civil society was cast in a much more ambiguous role in our recent past however, and this had a direct effect to suspicions about ordinary people and their commitment to democracy. This distrust of the masses is reflected especially in the theories of party systems and voting behavior.

Thus, in many works of political sociology and comparative politics of the 1960s and 1970s, civil society was associated with ineffective policy making and instability instead. In his classic *Political Man*, Lipset argues that the lower strata will be more attracted to an extremist movement than to a democratic and moderate one (Lipset in Bermeo, 16). Juan Linz does not claim that the elements of civil society should be prohibited to organize, but he does suggest that they should be kept at a distance from actual rulers, especially in times of crisis. According to O'Donnell, in their attempt to respond to the "very real" threats from the mobilized citizenry, "governments tended to adopt whatever policies best satisfied the sector that was most threatening at the time, but it meant that each such policy decision raised new threats from other powerful sectors" (Linz in Bermeo; O'Donnell in Bermeo, 12-13). Whether the theories of democratic breakdown found the roots of democratic failure in poor leadership, economic collapse, or flawed political structures, ordinary people were always a major medium through which cause became effect. This made later many scholars focus on institutional design, and ask what sorts of political institutions could best constrain the popular tendencies that worked against democracy (Bermeo, 17).

Bermeo states that seeing parties as a primary means for counteracting the destabilizing forces of society, is still common. For Lipset parties are the most important mediating institutions between the citizenry and the state, and that having at least two parties with an uncritically loyal mass base comes close to being a necessary condition for democratic stability. For Mainwaring and Scully, parties shape the prospects of political systems by shaping the messages citizens get and send (Bermeo, 18). For Sartori if party systems fail

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to constrain both the ideological range and the number of parties in the national legislature, centrifugal forces will tear democracy apart. Consequently, for Sani and Sartori, working democracy and party polarization are inversely related. The best single explanatory variable for stable versus unstable, and easy versus difficult democracy is polarization (Sartori in Bermeo; Sani and Sartori in Bermeo, 19). Arguing that this party-centered view to democracy is too limited, Bermeo shows that mutually exclusive, polarized oppositions existed in nearly all the cases where democracy broke down, but they existed in the survival cases as well.

The case-study sections on the failure of European and Latin American democracies bring empirical proof to the theoretical argument laid out previously. The common explanation for the transformation of thirteen European democracies to dictatorships between 1920 and 1938 has been that politically inexperienced citizens in new democracies facing several material scarcities turned their support to fascist groups. In order to challenge this belief, Bermeo begins by reminding us that the rise of fascism and the fall of interwar democracies are not synonymous processes. Nations such as France and Belgium with fascist-style anti-democratic parties, attracted a comparatively large percentage of the citizenry, but remained democracies during the interwar years. Even profound polarization in both public and private spheres was never sufficient condition for a regime to collapse. Poland and Portugal however, with weaker fascist groups, collapsed into dictatorships. In the vast majority of cases, ordinary people were reluctant to vote fascist. In Austria, Estonia, and Latvia, civilian leaders who seized power claimed that they acted only to prevent the victory of fascism. People believed this argument. Citizen passivity was often rooted in uncertainty, ignorance, or fear, and not in a specific hostility towards democratic values (Bermeo, 235).

The polarization in Germany has darkened our visions of ordinary citizens everywhere. The German polarization between left and right occurred in polls, mirroring polarization in public spaces, involving high levels of public violence, and encouraging the

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strengthening of privately organized citizen militias, enlisted as allies of the weak state forces. “Middle-class voters defected from traditional liberal elites in a reaction to a shared hatred and fear of protests in the streets and in response to the perception that the centrist parties could not restore order” (Bermeo, 36-37). The defection from the parties of the bourgeois Center and Right took place well before the rise of the nazis, however, and defections did not come from all the parties in the center of the spectrum, both the Catholic Center and the Social Democratic Party kept their electorates. Newly mobilized voters, outsiders of parties and associations, were the most likely to vote for the nazis. (Bermeo, 58-63). In Italy instead, the center weakened because of the defection of party elites towards the fascists. The ordinary voters did not defect to anti-systemic parties at all.

The section on interwar Europe is followed by in-depth case studies of postwar democratic collapse in Brazil, Uruguay, and Argentina. In the South American cases as well, Bermeo highlights the two different processes of polarization - the public and the electoral. Brazil in 1964 witnessed public polarization, and a fluctuating mobilization, but ordinary Brazilians, including rank-and-file unionists and most peasants and students, did not become radicalized and did not move either left or right. The elites misread the signals of public polarization and finished the democratic system off. A similar dynamic can be found in the case of Uruguay in 1973 and in Argentina in 1976. Chile is the closest case to Sartori's polarization paradigm, but even Chile fits only partially. Electoral polarization before the Allende government was the result of the extension of franchise to new groups, and change in the tactics of the party elites, and not a result of a massive defection from the center to the extremes. The political center in Chile never disappeared, and its support even rose during the Allende years.

What sort of party strength is required, then, to hold in check a destabilizing polarization? Neither institutionalization, nor popularity or a particular party system was sufficient to prevent the failure of democracy. What played a significant role was the quality of

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individual parties, Bermeo summarizes. The concept of *distancing capacity* refers to the ability to distance a party and its members from acts of violence and lawlessness, and deprive anti-democratic forces in the military and elsewhere from their most powerful argument for intervention. This involves condemning and prosecuting all those who engage in violence, even when they present themselves as current or potential party allies. Ideally, distancing should be taken early so that disruptive movements cannot gain momentum. In Italy and Germany for example, the failure of leaders to punish the perpetrators of violence in time raised citizen's fears, energized pendular mobilization, and provided the rationale for the suspension of democratic freedom. (Bermeo, 238-239).

Czechoslovakia and Finland in the 1930s, and Venezuela in the 1960s shared several distancing qualities that enabled the survival of their democracies. The first involved their party alliances, which allowed democratic government to pass laws controlling anti-democratic activity to institute reforms that co-opted the issues of their anti-democratic opposition, and to govern with relative efficacy. The presence of conservative parties in the coalitions saved of serious defections from capitalists and the military. Second, the main parties of these alliances were extremely hierarchical in all the three countries, which made the decisions of the party elites immediately consequential. Lastly, each country had a charismatic leader who wielded clear leadership mandate (Bermeo, 251).

Distancing capacity and its political effects are surely as important to today's struggling democracies as to the interwar Europe. This is why poor leadership can be decisive, Bermeo concludes, and in fact reconfirms to elites and strong parties the main agency in deciding over regime changes. In doing so, she liberates ordinary people from the guilt of polarizing societies and breaking down democracies however. This could be a starting point for asking in the future, if ordinary people actually had even more important roles in stabilizing or otherwise positively shaping the destinies of their democracies.

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