

Opinion | Are Our Expectations Too High for Democracy? Adam Przeworski Thinks So.

Adam Przeworski, John Guida

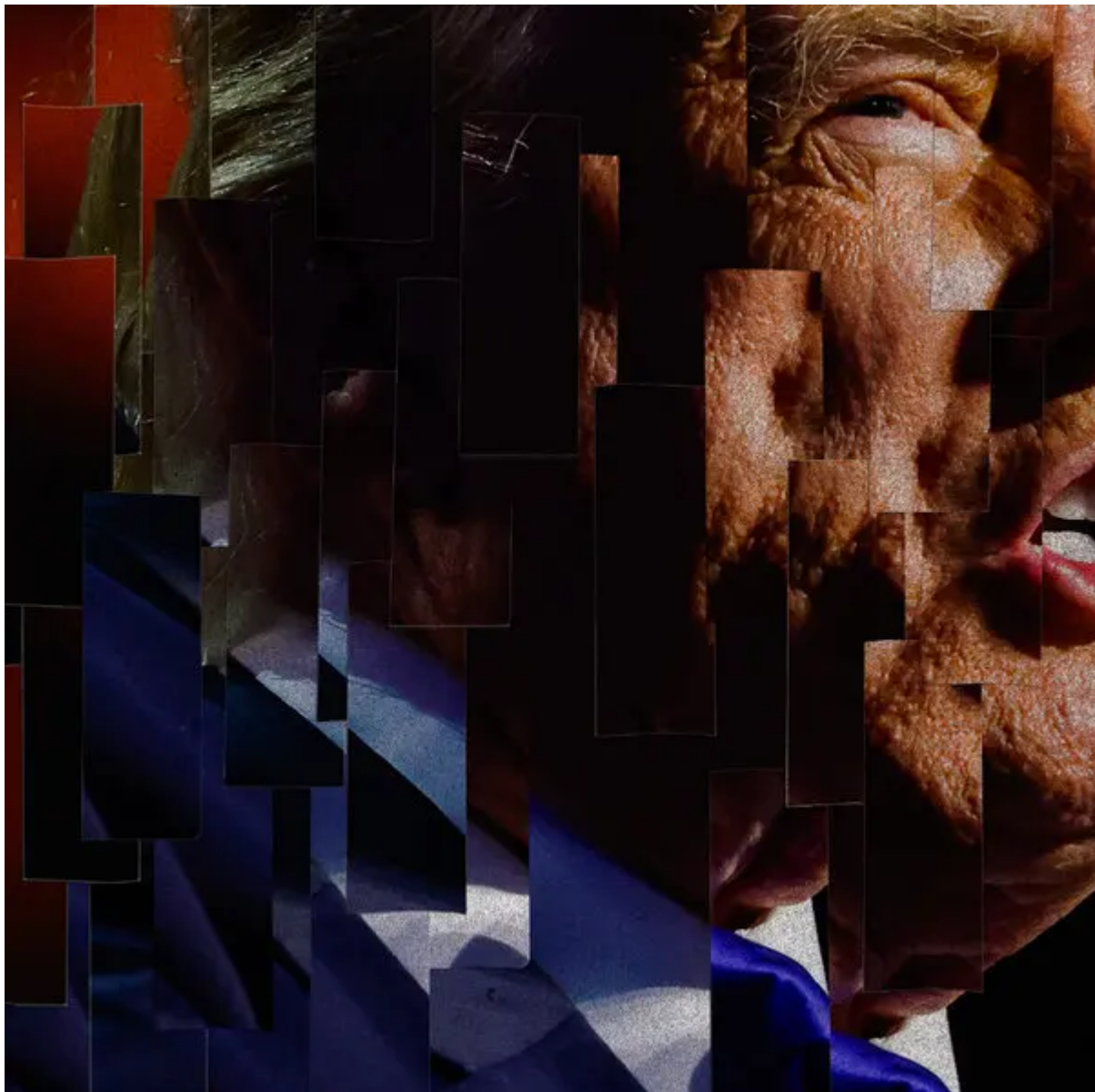
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Guest Essay

‘I Am Weary of Excessive Expectations About Democracy’

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By Adam Przeworski and John Guida

Mr. Przeworski is a professor emeritus of politics at New York University. Mr. Guida is an editor in Times Opinion.

The Trump administration's effort to restrict voting by mail is the latest in a series of challenges to how midterm elections are run.

Is this hardball politics or a crisis of democracy? Adam Przeworski, a professor emeritus of politics at New York University, is an authoritative theorist of democracy. He is known for this [theory](#): "Democracy is a system in which parties lose elections," he [wrote](#) in 1991.

He assessed the state of democracy in America and elsewhere in the world in a written conversation with John Guida, an editor in Times Opinion. It has been edited for length and clarity.

John Guida: Your view of what makes a democracy a democracy stresses the integrity of elections. In light of the Trump administration's interjections and various court rulings, how are you thinking about the U.S. midterm elections?

Adam Przeworski: I must preface all my responses by emphasizing that I am not a specialist on U.S. politics. But some aspects of the current situation are glaring. The Trump administration is dismantling agencies, discontinuing services, reducing spending and deregulating. It uses the language of "the enemy within," attacking political opponents and their sources of financing, intimidating the news media, universities and law firms, building a new police force, putting troops on the streets.

The big question, which I take seriously, is whether all these measures are putting democracy in danger. This very possibility was just inconceivable before 2020, but the stakes in elections are high and, as a prominent political scientist, Seymour Martin Lipset, observed long ago, "If loss of office means serious losses for major power groups, they will seek to retain or secure office by any means available."

I see the future of democracy in the United States as uncertain and find it difficult to predict what will happen in the next two years. I have read lots of memoirs of Germans writing in the 1930s, and I was struck how disoriented and often wrong they were in thinking about the immediate future. I took it as a lesson in humility.

As a political scientist with 60 years of research, I should know better, but I never thought that democracy could be in crisis in the U.S., so I do not feel wise.

Guida: Do you see any of the administration's efforts to shape elections as a threat to their integrity, and thus, as suggested by your theory, democracy itself? Or for that matter any of the interjections by the various courts, in particular the Supreme Court?

Przeworski: Here is something puzzling. Every day I look at approval polls for Donald Trump. Almost every week some publication has a title announcing that his popularity has declined to a historical low. But his approval has actually remained more or less stable, at around 38 percent, since April of this year, and within a handful of points of that since last April. Trump's base of support seems unshaken, even by a stupid war.

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So the question is whether a party that controls the presidency, Congress and the Supreme Court can win an election with 38 percent support. Under normal times, one would immediately say no. But then Republicans can manipulate (redistricting) or try to manipulate (voting by mail) the rules. They can intimidate some voters, they can confiscate some ballots, and they can contest the results ex-post in friendly courts. Will this work? Is it enough to win? I am inclined to answer in the negative, but I have

been wrong before.

Guida: That manipulation of the rules — do you see that as a threat to the legitimacy of the democratic system itself?

Przeworski: I do. Rules of elections do change from time to time in most democracies, but the changes require a broad consensus, often constitutional amendments supported by supermajorities. But the voters must see rules as given when they vote according to the rules. Trump's desperate attempts to change the rules at the last moment is a threat because it allows some people to conclude that their candidates lost only because the rules were changed. And it renders elections illegitimate in their eyes.

Guida: Do you think Trump's focus on the outcome of the 2020 election had an impact on our democracy, or at least how people see it (or both)?

Przeworski: Trump has [said](#) that the only way he could lose an election is by fraud. He may actually believe it. And this means that if Republicans lose the midterms, whether one house or both, he will refuse to consider the defeat as legitimate.

Guida: Let's pull back to explore your theory of democracy. You describe it as minimal — how so?

Przeworski: I see democracy as a system in which whatever conflicts that are present in a society are temporarily managed through elections. Different people may value democracy as an embodiment of different values. They may expect democracy to realize different interests. In other words, they value democracy because they expect it to generate some outcomes. But the question then becomes what happens when different groups disagree about what they want. This is where “minimalism” comes into play: We manage such conflicts by elections.

Guida: By contrast, what is a “maximal” version of democracy?

Przeworski: Some people think that democracy must generate economic and social equality, while some want it to provide economic incentives. Some people think democracy must guarantee freedom of and from religion, while others want it to promote a particular religion. These are maximalist values.

Guida: How big a role do voter expectations play in their views of democracy?

Przeworski: Let me first comment on expectations in general. In elections, about half of voters commonly find themselves on the losing side. Moreover — here I am just guessing — about half of the people who voted for the winning party (or parties) are disappointed in the performance of the government. And what do they expect to happen the next time around? That the parties they support would win next time around and would fulfill their promises. This seems, and may be, irrational, but elections are the only mechanism open to virtually all citizens by which societies manage conflicts in liberty and peace, so where else can one place collective hopes?

Guida: And one big theme you identify in voters' views of democracy is inequality. You said in a recent interview that a “principal problem and the biggest disappointment is that democracies do not reduce social and economic inequality, because for 200 years we have expected it of them.”

Przeworski: This is a huge topic, which has a history of several centuries. When democracy appeared on the historical horizon, it was widely expected — some feared and some hoped — that universal suffrage would lead to equality of property or income. Yet while the extent of inequality differs significantly across democracies, the average levels of inequality are not lower in democracies than in autocracies. Caveats are needed because inequality can concern wealth or incomes, and it can be measured in a variety of ways, not always generating the same conclusions. But the fact that democratic systems are compatible with a significant extent of economic inequality is perhaps the most surprising aspect of democracy.

Guida: You have referred to the rise recently of “political magicians” who claim to speak to the

persistence of inequalities and other economic and social problems. Trump is among them, along with others like Viktor Orban in Hungary. You do not claim that they are antidemocratic, only that they are responding to a dissatisfaction among voters in representative institutions. Are the failures of those institutions to respond to the concerns of citizens the true crisis of democracy?

Przeworski: I am struck that in recent years people who have no or a minimal experience of politics have won elections in several countries. Trump in 2016 is on my list. Javier Milei in Argentina is another example. Here is how I see it: People vote, parties and leaders in office change, but the life of voters does not change.

Then someone comes and says, “I have a magical solution to your problems,” and people think they have nothing to lose voting for him or her.

Is this a response to a failure of institutions? This is profound question, and I do not know. All the surveys show that people are mistrustful of institutions, representative, public, but also private. It may be not institutions but the fact that people who occupy places in them have interests of their own or of the people who paid to place them there. To put it bluntly, the culprit may be the influence of money over politics.

Guida: In the U.S., the Supreme Court has shaped the rules of how money can direct politics and political expression. How should we think about the role of courts in shaping a system of democracy?

Przeworski: All I know is that in the U.S. there are no limits to access of money to politics and that many perfectly legal practices in the U.S. would be considered corruption in other democratic countries.

Guida: Germany just had a regional election in which the Alternative for Germany party prevailed. Political observers have written about a crisis of democracy, often in reference to the growing popularity of far-right parties like that one. You yourself wrote a book in 2019 with the title “Crises of Democracy” Yet you said recently, “I do not believe there is a worldwide crisis of democracy.” Could you explain why?

Przeworski: I am particularly touchy about people interpreting victories of right-wing parties as a weakening of democracy. I often think about the speech by the first democratically elected prime minister of Spain, Adolfo Suarez (following the dictatorship of Francisco Franco), in which he declared, “The future is not written because only the people can write it.” Well, we are learning that the people can write all kinds of things some of us, myself included, do not like.

A necessary virtue of a democrat is to know how to lose elections. And as long as these parties are willing to lose the next time, this is democracy. So, at least thus far, I do not think there is a worldwide crisis of democracy. One should not project what is happening in the U.S. to the rest of the world.

Guida: To be clear, you *do* think there is a crisis of democracy in the United States? Or at least the potential for one?

Przeworski: I do.

Guida: How would you compare or contrast the objectives of the AfD and Trump 2.0 within their democratic systems?

Przeworski: They share a hate of foreigners, perhaps more generally racism, but this is perhaps where AfD’s appeal ends. Trump 2.0 has had an elaborate blueprint of political, economic and social transformations. For example, I was struck by the rule proposed by the Office of Management and Budget, which would significantly change the way the government funds science. Immigration is just one aspect, but the Trump program affects all spheres of life.

Guida: You have made another distinction about democratic systems, which is problems *of* democracy versus problems *for* democracy. What is the difference?

Przeworski: Unfair elections are a problem *of* democracy; badly functioning institutions are a problem *for* democracy. Crime is a problem for democracy, not of democracy, although it becomes a problem of democracy when criminal syndicates penetrate the state. There are some problems that no government, democratic or not, cannot cope with. This is why I am weary of excessive expectations about democracy. But then some democratic systems are patently dysfunctional.

Guida: You said that “elections offer a siren song of hope.” Is it fair to say that the phrase can be taken to have both optimistic and pessimistic overtones?

Przeworski: The magic of elections is that they kindle hope. One may lose now and still hope to win in some future. George W. Bush assumed office in 2001 and Democrats hoped to win in 2004; he actually won in 2004 and crushed the hopes of Democrats. Yet lo and behold, the country that elected and re-elected Bush and Dick Cheney went on to vote for Barack Obama. This is inherent in elections; inherent for as long as the incumbent government is willing to lose. Whether the Trump Republicans are, I do not know.

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