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Introduction

THE REGIME QUESTION

THE REGIME question has returned to established democracies. This question, frequently boiled down to “democracy or autocracy?,” contains within it multitudes of questions having to do with the status of representative government, the rules that will regulate competition between political forces, and the boundaries of the political community, among others. Long considered to have been decisively answered, today the regime question returns with great force. Challenges to existing democratic norms, practices, and institutions have emerged in various arenas of governance, with political forces consolidating on different sides of the divide. Some scholars have identified within recent political turmoil a new regime cleavage emerging in Western democracies, overtaking the old economic cleavage that has been the focal point of politics throughout the postwar period.¹ A worrying development, no doubt, but as the analysis in this book demonstrates, this occurrence is neither novel nor exceptional in the history of modern political development. Indeed, the regime question has been an enduring feature of democratic politics from the start.

In the history of Western democracy, the regime question has entailed fights not only over the extent of the franchise, which has been the focus of much of the work on democratic development in the West, but also, and crucially, over core principles of democratic governance, or the “rules of the game.” Throughout the nineteenth and much of the twentieth century, these fights centered on the status of representative government vis-à-vis constitutional monarchy and other autocratic arrangements. Today, fights over the rules of the game have once again emerged as a significant vector of conflict. The return of the regime question, I argue, represents not a break with prior trajectories of political development, but a new instantiation of fights found

in previous eras. These fights take place along what I term the “regime dimension,” an enduring feature of democratic politics capable of dividing democracies over the very structures they are built on, as well as shaping the oppositional forces on both sides of the divide.

For much of the history of modern political development, the regime dimension has been one of the main organizing principles of democratic politics, receding only after 1945, largely in consequence of Cold War imperatives, which required the suppression of regime contention. The emergent liberal democratic capitalist world order reshaped the political landscape in many countries, creating the appearance of regime consensus and firmly establishing the economic policy dimension as the primary dimension of politics in the postwar period. In fact, what we refer to today as the Left–Right political spectrum *is* an economic policy dimension. For much of the postwar period, this economic policy dimension has been the main organizing principle of politics and party systems in Western democracies. That is to say, the fights between different political forces have centered primarily on economic management and distributive politics. Other issues have entered sporadically, but the economic dimension has dominated.

This dominance has contributed to the impression that the economic policy dimension has always been the only or most important terrain of political contestation. It also has contributed to the idea that the emergence of other dimensions of contestation represents a break from the norm. But this is far from the case. In the history of Western political development, the economic dimension has always competed with at least two other foundational dimensions: One was the national dimension, involving struggles over national unification. This was highly salient at early stages of political development but had receded in most countries by the early twentieth century. The second was the regime dimension, involving struggles over the status of representative government. This book shows that, despite receiving little attention in the scholarly literature, the regime dimension has been one of the most enduring forces in the political development of the West, and that we should not be surprised by its return to political life.

Early work on political development failed to consider the regime dimension, either collapsing it into broader considerations of national unification or assuming that once democracy had been established, or at least once consolidated, genuine regime contention would be eliminated from ordinary politics, relegated to extraordinary and episodic encounters with aspiring autocrats.² In this view, while struggles for inclusion may continue, fights over the

democratic system of government, or the rules of the game, are settled in founding moments, and any recurrence of it signals a lack of consolidation.³ In contrast to these views, this book proceeds from the understanding that the regime dimension represents a third foundational dimension of modern political development. Like the economic and national dimensions, the salience of the regime dimension has depended on the circumstances, but it represents a distinct axis of political organization and competition, and one that has been highly consequential for democratic politics.

The regime dimension is consequential not only because the outcomes of the struggles within it determine governing institutions and principles, but because of what regime contention does to democratic politics. Specifically, I contend that the regime dimension presents significant and underappreciated threats to democratic *governance*. During times of regime contention, democracy is imperiled not only because of the designs of aspiring autocrats, but because the nature of the conflict itself can be debilitating for effective governance, diminishing opportunities for compromise, increasing the likelihood for legislative failure and gridlock, and opening the door to executive encroachment.⁴ This is because the regime dimension does not function like other policy dimensions, where, despite disagreements, entrepreneurial political actors can engage in a sort of logrolling that actually improves the likelihood of compromise. The regime question, because it relates to the very structures on which actors' political power is predicated, does not easily lend itself to compromise. Moreover, because of the existential stakes involved, once it becomes salient, the regime dimension tends to trump other policy dimensions, interrupting the formation of typical policy coalitions.

This book focuses on political development in first wave democracies, but it also aims to offer insights for contemporary democratic politics. The perspective of the *longue durée* offered here suggests that the postwar period was but a reprieve in a long history of regime contention. It was the exception rather than the rule, a midpoint rather than the end of history. It produced a stability that we may now be nostalgic for, but it was always a manufactured stability driven by Cold War imperatives, which deliberately subdued regime contention in much of Western Europe and the United States and constricted even the economic dimension to a narrow set of choices about the economic management of liberal democratic capitalist states. I return to this in the concluding chapter to place the current moment in its historical context. I offer a historical interpretation that highlights the ways in which the postwar period, often considered the "golden age" of party politics and regime consensus, was predicated on a

suppression of the regime dimension rather than a resolution of regime contention. This involved not only excluding antisystemic actors on the Right that might threaten the democratic order, but also marginalizing regime dissenters on the Left. In Europe, this marginalization included economic actors that dissented from the capitalist order, and in the United States, it was racial minorities and others who challenged the prevalent system of racial exclusion.

That the postwar period has been so naturalized in our understanding of democratic politics, so celebrated for the stability it produced, leads to a kind of political disorientation with respect to the current moment. One of the goals of this project is to elucidate the history of regime contention in Western democracies such that we may better orient ourselves to the demands of the present. This is necessary not only for scholarship, but also for politics. That the apparent regime consensus which made possible the economic alignment of the postwar period has begun to crumble reveals both its transient nature and the unfinished business of regime contention it for a time concealed.

It should be stated at the outset that although the analysis in this book speaks to the dangers of regime contention, it is *not* meant to suggest that regime contention should be avoided. Often it is necessary for democracy's preservation and vital to the protection of particular groups within it. But the findings of the study should alert us to the perils of regime contention, particularly its tendency to polarize in ways that make effective governance exceedingly difficult. Those who undertake regime contention today are faced with the same dilemma that has confronted democracy's defenders from the start: How should we fight for democracy? When the fight itself can imperil democracy, the weight of this dilemma is heavy indeed. If, as I contend, the regime question is an enduring feature of democratic politics, so too is this dilemma. The final chapter returns to this question with a view to elaborating how contemporary struggles are both relatable to and distinct from these earlier stages of regime contention.

Conceptual Clarifications

The theoretical and empirical reach of this book means addressing multiple audiences simultaneously, each of which may have a different understanding of the concepts employed here. In offering this conceptual scheme, my goal is not to supplant other usages but to establish, for the purposes of this study, a common vocabulary, which, even if not perfectly applicable, is relatable to multiple contexts and legible within various research traditions.

Several key concepts used in this study revolve around the concept of a “regime.” Here I employ the understanding of a regime used in the field of democracy studies, typically a term used to characterize political systems according to their basic logic of governance. In contemporary discourse we may speak of a democratic regime or an autocratic regime. Regime categories need not be mutually exclusive or internally consistent. That is to say, democratic regimes may contain within them autocratic elements, and autocratic regimes may also contain democratic elements, but the label democratic or autocratic provides a basic, if somewhat overly simplified, understanding of the prevalent logic of governance.

The “regime question” I refer to throughout the study refers to the choice of political system, or logic of governance. This question, I contend, is foundational to the establishment of political order. But it is present not only at founding moments. Rather, it endures within political systems, pushing publics to ask repeatedly, “How shall we govern ourselves?” While the question itself is enduring, actors’ understanding of the choices available in a given historical period will differ. Throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the regime question was understood as a choice between parliamentary government via independent legislatures and constitutional monarchy with executive control over legislatures. This is, in many ways, analogous to contemporary understandings of the regime question, posed as a choice between democracy and autocracy, but it was also distinct in several respects. Perhaps most important is that for first wave democracies, mass suffrage was not seen as a distinctive marker of a regime, and indeed mass suffrage was seen as compatible with either parliamentary government or constitutional monarchy. This distinction transformed the nature of the regime question considerably. Finally, it should be stressed that, though often presented as a binary, the regime question in fact entails many questions and various possible answers within it.

From the regime question, I develop the concept of a regime dimension. The concept of a dimension aims to abstract the political space within which politics is organized. Many questions arise with the establishment and maintenance of political order. To say that any given question represents a dimension means that it has the capacity to systematically polarize politics along the lines of the choices involved. By *systematically* I mean that the question is powerful enough that most actors are forced to choose sides. Therefore, the dimension also shapes the organization of political forces on opposing sides of the divide, in this case in terms of their regime preferences.

While the regime dimension is an enduring feature of modern politics, its salience varies depending on the context. When the regime dimension becomes salient, it emerges as a primary force in the organization of politics, eclipsing the other dimensions; that is, the logic of political organization is driven by regime preferences rather than economic or national preferences. When the salience of the regime question decreases, politics becomes organized along other dimensions. Typically, this indicates that some sort of regime consensus has emerged allowing actors, even if temporarily, to redirect their attention to other policy considerations. Importantly, a reduction in the salience of the regime dimension does not mean the absence of ongoing conflicts over issues related to the regime, nor does it mean that no actors wish to disrupt the prevalent regime consensus. It means only that these forces are not strong enough to push for a reorganization of politics or a realignment of parties along the lines of regime preferences.

Times at which the regime dimension is salient I characterize as times of regime contention, that is, times when the most pressing fights among political actors are about the regime question. This represents something of a departure from the conventional usage of the term, which typically connotes fights that occur before the founding of a political order, or exceptional moments of backsliding or deconsolidation. Because one of the central themes of the work is that these questions have an enduring quality, regime contention is also taken to be an ongoing feature of democratic politics, representing both big and small fights.

Plan of the Book

The book is organized in three parts. In part 1, I develop the theoretical framework of the analysis. The first chapter unpacks the key components of the argument and the methods employed. Chapter 2 deals in greater detail with the conceptual and theoretical challenges of understanding legislative coalitions. In it, I further articulate the historical institutionalist approach employed in this study to understand change and continuity in legislative coalitions. Part 2 begins the empirical analysis of the book with a focus on European political development. Three chapters each deal in turn with one of the main case studies of the book: chapter 3 on the United Kingdom, chapter 4 on Germany, and chapter 5 on France. Part 3 aims to expand the analysis to the distinct but related context of American political development. In chapter 6, I illustrate the roots of regime contention in the United States in the antebellum period. In

chapter 7, I examine the persistence of regime contention in the post–Civil War period.

The concluding chapter offers some reflections on the political development of Western democracies beyond the interwar period. In it, I relate the history of regime contention to contemporary struggles in established democracies. Though alarming, the return of the regime question, I contend, is best understood in view of the *longue durée* and of historical processes of development in which regime contention was central, and of which the postwar period of apparent regime consensus was the exception. In its substance, the regime contention we observe today represents both a continuation of old struggles and the appearance of new ones, reflecting the resurgence of a foundational dimension of democratic politics that has shaped political development from the start.

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