

Is Democracy in Crisis?  
Address to the Israeli Political Science Association  
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Let me begin by thanking my good friends Itzhak Galnoor, Reuven Hazan, and the Israeli Political Science Association for the honor of being invited to give this lecture. I have long had the sense that if we were to compute the quality of a national political science community on a per capita basis, Israel would have one of the highest scores of any country on earth. It is always immensely stimulating and instructive for me to come here and learn more about this complex, challenged, vibrant, and ever-evolving democracy.

I would like to explore several inter-related questions here today. First, Is Democracy in Crisis? What is the state of democracy globally today? Second, can we offer any generalizations about the specific generational group of democracies that the conference has identified, in the age range of 50+ years? Third, are the challenges identified in the Conference's Call for Submission—globalization, rising inequality, minority group demands for self-determination—better understood as challenges to the authority and legitimacy of all states, rather than merely democratic ones? And finally, whether or not democracy is in crisis, what can be done to repair and reform democracy where it is not functioning well? Here I will address the obvious and growing problem of democratic governability in my own country, the United States.

I do not think it can be said that there is a general crisis of democracy in the world. I understand crisis as an existential challenge. Here are some dictionary synonyms for crisis: disaster, catastrophe, calamity, predicament. Yes, there is a

broad predicament: Democracies face increasingly intractable policy challenges that are difficult to solve, and they face more demanding, more mobilized, more fragmented, and more intensely informed publics. This is a difficult and even stressful combination of circumstances, but it is not a crisis.

It is useful—indeed essential—to ponder this question in historical perspective. Recall the two previous periods over the last century when democracy was in crisis. The first of these was what Samuel Huntington called the first reverse wave of democracy, with the rise to power of totalitarian ideologies, particularly fascism, in the 1920 and 30s, and the collapse of many democracies or semi-democracies in Europe and also to some extent Latin America. During the two decades from the early 1920s until the tide of World War II began to swing away from fascism around 1943, democracy was in extreme and truly existential crisis: in fact it faced the threat of virtual elimination. When the Great Depression engulfed Europe and the United States in the late 1920s and 30s, throwing a quarter or more of the labor force out of work and shaking the foundations of the capitalist system, sympathy for totalitarian, nativist, and racist ideologies rose. Intellectuals openly questioned whether democracy as a system could survive. When he entered the presidency in 1933, amid mounting economic disarray and a collapse of political confidence, FDR was keenly aware that democracy in the United States was in crisis. For much of this period, the global zeitgeist—the normative and emotional spirit of the times—admired the energy and dynamism of totalitarian regimes, and denied, minimized or even celebrated their excesses.

The democracies in the 50+ generation were born out of the global defeat and deligitimation of fascism, the victory of the democracies in World War II, and the subsequent rapid pace of European decolonization. All of the former fascist dictatorships—Germany, Austria, Italy, and Japan—have remained democracies continuously since the inauguration of these regimes after World War II. So of course has another democracy born out of the ashes of World War II—Israel—and so have all the West European countries where democracy was restored following their conquest by and then liberation from the Nazis.

The second global crisis of democracy came in what Huntington has identified as the second reverse wave of democracy. It began in the early 1960s with the wave of military coups and executive usurpations of power that swallowed a large swath of post-colonial democracies in Asia and Africa, along with most Latin American democracies as well. Think of the conditions that prevailed during the 1960s. Once again, democracy confronted a major ideological competitor with a claim to universal relevance and legitimacy, Marxism-Leninism. Its organizational forms, the Comintern, various national communist parties (many funded by and taking direction from the Soviet Union), and revolutionary armed Communist movements stalked and in several cases conquered the political landscape throughout the so-called “Third World.” While democracy seemed reasonably secure in the West—until the late 1960s—it was seen to be passé, a cultural and even imperial imposition in most of the developing world. Both in intellectual circles (West, South, and of course East) and among political actors and movements, democracy seemed archaic, a handmaiden and façade for an unjust social and

economic system (namely capitalism), and a quaint relic of where the world had been politically, not where it was going.

During this period, most of the multiparty systems in Asia and Africa quickly yielded either to military, strong-man, or one-party rule. Communist parties or Marxist movements conquered power in China, Cuba, and eventually all of Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos, as well as Angola and Mozambique. The most powerful democracy, the United States, squandered its treasure and political will in a fruitless struggle to preserve a corrupt autocracy in South Vietnam, while it also embraced one authoritarian regime after another in the Cold War struggle, and backed a military coup against a left-wing, democratically elected government in Chile. This period was a global crisis of democracy.

Although the crisis did not directly threaten the democracies of the West as it had during the 1930s, it did once again broadly shake their confidence in the late 1960s and early 1970s. This briefer period, right up through the beginning of the third wave of democratization in 1974, saw a renewed surge in intellectual sympathy for authoritarian (left) ideologies and systems, and briefly, a surge in violent, revolutionary movements (not only Marxist but also anarchist). With intense generational cleavages challenging the old order in Europe, the United States and Japan, followed by the Watergate crisis in the US, the 1973 oil price shocks, and other chronic economic problems globally and in the West, the Trilateral Commission, set up a Task Force on the Governability of Democracy. It then commissioned Samuel Huntington, Michel Crozier, and Joji Watanuki to produce a report, published in 1975, on "The Crisis of Democracy." That report

noted the growing sense “on all three continents” (Europe, North America and Asia) of a “bleak future for democracy.” It explored whether democracy had become ungovernable and indeed it asked the very question of this conference, “Is Democracy in Crisis?”<sup>1</sup>

It is worth studying this report to get some deeper perspective on the contemporary challenges of democracy, and even one could say (and they did) the *intrinsic* challenges of democracy. This study of the problems of advanced industrial democracies, now almost forty years old, noted a widespread sense of “the distintegration of civil order, the breakdown of social discipline, the debility of leaders, and the alienation of citizens.”<sup>2</sup> It expressed acute concern about “the decreasing legitimacy of government,” and it made an observation that is probably at least as true today as it was then: “The demands on democratic government grow, while the capacity of democratic government stagnates.”<sup>3</sup> But it is important to remember that democracy did not remain in this funk for forty years. It recovered energy, capability, self-confidence, and capacity for reform and adaptation. It is only fairly recently that advanced democracies seem once again to have fallen into a diffuse sense of ungovernability, stagnation, and declining self-confidence.

Compared to the above challenges—even the challenges faced by the United States in the late 1960s and early 70s, when there was virtual war on university campuses, and the streets of Washington were periodically occupied by hundreds of thousands, ultimately over a million protestors, and federal troops—we face nothing like these conditions in most of the democracies of the world today. It is

true that the streets of Greece do bear a haunting resemblance to the prior periods of extreme turmoil, as its economy does to the worst days of the Great Depression. I do think the fiscal crises confronting Greece, Cyprus, and potentially other European democracies have potentially existential or at least systemic political implications. Yet so far as I can tell, there is no broad support, or even very loud cry, in Greece today for the abandonment of democracy, nor any sign of a viable authoritarian regime option. What Greeks and other Europeans caught in this painful economic vise want is not the end of democracy but more and better democracy. This includes a renovation of their corrupt party systems, and greater popular sovereignty vis-à-vis European-wide institutions. There is also growing discomfort among European publics generally with the lack of democratic accountability of the European Union and Eurozone decision-making institutions. You can call these sentiments naïve or simplistic, in their denial of some basic and sobering fiscal imperatives. But I think it is wrong to conclude that they are anti-democratic.

In fact, what is striking about the economic crisis that spread across the globe after the financial system collapse in the United States in September 2008 is how few casualties it has claimed among democratic regimes—or even democratic norms. Admittedly, this economic jolt was hardly as deep or as long lasting as the Great Depression (though we don't really know where the fiscal crisis of Europe is headed or when it will end). But the key point is that democracy remained stable because democracy “worked” in its most basic sense. When people were dissatisfied—and usually, that meant when economic growth plummeted—voters tossed out the ruling party. In fact, between October 2008 and October 2010 they

did so 70 percent of the time where economic growth severely contracted. When the economic growth more or less persisted, incumbents won a majority of the time, and when they lost it was for other reasons. The experience showed that democratic elections “provide a safety valve that allows voters to punish incumbents while preserving the system as a whole.”<sup>4</sup>

This of course leaves open the question of what will happen to democracy if all political party alternatives in a country are seen to fail over a protracted period of time. But even well into the third decade of what has been a protracted run of economic stagnation in Japan, there is no discernible sentiment in favor of a regime alternative. In fact, support for democracy as the best system of government—and for liberal values affirming individual rights and the rule of law—remains strong in Japan.

### The Global Democratic Recession

Unfortunately, this does not mean that we have nothing to worry about respect to the state of democracy in the world. I have always been reluctant to accept Adam Przeworski’s empirical conclusion that above \$6,055 in per capita income, in 1985 purchasing power parity dollars, which would be slightly over \$9,000 in today’s dollars, “democracy is impregnable and can be expected to live forever.”<sup>5</sup> We have already seen reversals of democracy at slightly higher per-capita income levels in Venezuela and Russia, and it is hard to know where (if anywhere) on the spectrum of national wealth the line of democratic invulnerability should be

drawn. Yet I do believe in the value of modernization theory, and of public opinion survey research to inform us about the stability or vulnerability of democracy. It is difficult to find in any of this growing profusion of survey data signs that democracy is vulnerable in any wealthy industrialized democracy. In fact, even in South Korea and Taiwan, where public confidence in parliament, parties, and politicians is very low and support for democracy on some measures dips to surprisingly modest levels, the public overwhelmingly rejects all authoritarian options. Where high levels of economic development have brought the transformation of values that Ronald Inglehart and Christian Welzel write about, toward human empowerment, social tolerance, and a high priority on individual autonomy, freedom, and choice, it is hard to imagine the circumstances in which mass publics would come to condone, much less demand, a switch to a non-democratic form of government.<sup>6</sup> Even where political trust is low and politics seem dysfunctional, these countries appear, in the memorable words of Philippe Schmitter, “condemned to democracy.”<sup>7</sup>

That is very much not the case for democracies overall, however. In fact, during this third wave of democratization, which began in 1974, the failure rate of democracy has been surprisingly high: Nearly a third of all the electoral democracies that have existed in this period have broken down (in some countries, two or three times). If we subtract the democracies that were already wealthy in 1974—Western Europe, the US, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and Japan—the failure rate has been close to 40 percent. And among the poor democracies of the world, it has been even higher, as Przeworski and his colleagues found for the earlier period of 1950 to 1990.

We are not in a reverse wave, at least not yet. But the aggregate political movement in recent years has been backward. By my count (which is very close to that of Freedom House) the number of democracies peaked around 2005, and has declined in net terms by about five democracies since then. The regression has been particularly visible in Africa, where the number of democracies has declined from a peak of about 23 to about 17 today. Moreover, in each of the last seven years, more countries declined in freedom than improved their freedom scores. In most of these years, this negative ratio has been more than two to one in favor of eroding freedom. Another element of the democratic recession has been the growing coordination in methods and strategies of the world's authoritarian regimes. As a result, there has been a broad crackdown on civil society in authoritarian regimes, and on international efforts to assist opposition parties and movements in civil society. Unfortunately, this has made it much more difficult to monitor elections, strengthen opposition parties and independent associations and media, and otherwise generate more favorable conditions for democratic transition.

### Generations of Democracies?

Now what about the 50+ democracies? Is it even useful to attempt to analyze them as a group? I think not. This is a very diverse group that includes the European democracies that emerged or were revived after World War II (and for this analytic purpose, I would include Israel in this group as well), and some poorer developing (now we call them "emerging market") countries, like India, Botswana, Mauritius, and Costa Rica. I do not think these two groups of democracies have

anything more in common than other groups of democracies we could construct, except the historical accident of age. Moreover, while none of the European democracies that emerged between, let's say, 1945 and 1962, have broken down, many (in fact, most) of the ones that emerged during this period in Asia, Latin America, and Africa have done so. This includes not only the democracies that did not live for long or even fully emerge (such as Ghana, Nigeria, Singapore, Malaysia, Burma, and Indonesia) but also democracies that survived for quite some time, only to erode or break down more recently, such as Sri Lanka, Venezuela, and Gambia.

If we are looking to group countries in ways that would sensitize us to possible causal drivers of democratic endurance or failure, once we get past 20 to 30 years, I am not sure age has much to do with it. Rather, as I have already suggested, the level of economic development is an important determinant, and (related to that) the strength of political and state institutions and the quality of governance. The character of political leadership also matters considerably, and I think it is a mistake to assume that this is fully predetermined by structural conditions or political culture.

In the effort to classify, Israel presents a challenge in several senses. First of all, in contrast to the new or restored European democracies (and to Japan), democracy emerged in Israel with its birth as a new nation, one could say a post-colonial nation, and a nation of immigrants from many areas, including a number of non-European ones. Second, Israel did not have a high level of economic development until relatively recently. Third, Israel has faced a challenge of continual external threat unlike anything faced by any of these other 50+

economically developed democracies. And fourth, alone among this peer group of relatively wealthy 50+ democracies, Israel now finds itself in a reversed situation of colonization or occupation. While the other 50+ European democracies have recently had to contend with quite substantial immigration, the latter two challenges are unique to Israel and make it difficult to compare with other high-income democracies. Thus, while I think all of the other members of this group are highly likely to be—and to be widely recognized as—democracies a generation from now, I am no longer sure this will be true of Israel. As you know better than I, Israel confronts the painful dilemma that it cannot be a democracy, a Jewish State, and Greater Israel. Since it is very unlikely that the Israeli public would opt for a one-state democratic solution that would abandon the character of the state as a home for the Jewish people, the choice that confronts Israel is democracy or permanent occupation. And to many sympathetic outside observers, it is no longer clear which path Israel will choose. As we approach the half-century mark in occupation, with a steady expansion in settlements deep into the West Bank that have the look, feel and even intention of permanence, it becomes increasingly difficult to regard the phenomenon as a temporary reality waiting for a lasting resolution.

### Is There a Crisis of Governability?

I want to explore now a different proposition, not that there is a crisis of democracy but rather that there are broader challenges to governance that confront all political systems in the world, democratic and authoritarian. Consider the

specific social changes and challenges (and related ones) that have helped to shape the call for this conference: Globalization, robotization and the threat it represents to jobs, rising inequality, tenacious identity demands, and the revolution in information, communication and expectations driven by the proliferation of social media, mobile phones and Internet access. These are not only making it difficult for democracies to govern. They are stressing authoritarian regimes as well. China is experiencing hundreds of protests and demonstrations against abuses of power, so-called “mass incidents,” every single day. Increasingly, Chinese are aware of what is happening elsewhere in the world, and in China. They have more consciousness of their rights, and more ability, in part by using social media tools, to mobilize for them. Moreover, it is not only Spain, Canada, Belgium, and the UK (among other advanced democracies) that face the threat of secession from aggrieved and mobilized ethnic or linguistic minorities. This threat is also present—and in fact it is more palpable and at much greater risk of exploding suddenly and violently—in many authoritarian regimes, including China, Iran, Uzbekistan, and a number of other states in Asia, Africa, and the Middle East.

China and Iran, and many other middle-income authoritarian regimes, face a dilemma. They need to provide their societies with access to the Internet and to social media in order to remain or become competitive in the global economy. But these tools of economic advancement are also tools of societal and political liberation. Authoritarian regimes are investing mightily in technology and human capacity to control the Internet and to monitor, suppress, and utilize these tools in order to perpetuate their rule. But many regime opponents are figuring out how to

circumvent these controls, and the challenge they pose has not been laid to rest. It is a constant struggle for these regimes to stay ahead and on top.

As for the economic forces that are ruthlessly reshaping our world—increasing competitiveness in international trade, growing inequality, the revolution in robotics that is reducing the demand for unskilled labor—these threaten authoritarian regimes as much if not more than democratic ones. Just look at the stunning increase in inequality in China over the last two decades, or the threat it faces of rising unemployment as low-wage manufacturing begins to shift to cheaper locations.

The crucial difference in durability between authoritarian and democratic regimes is the differing bases of their legitimacy. Few authoritarian regimes any longer justify their rule on the basis of the intrinsic worth of their form of rule. In almost all the world now, authoritarian ideologies are dead or dying. Thus, non-democratic regimes depend for their legitimacy much more purely on performance, especially maintaining and distributing economic growth. When performance fails, they have nothing left to fall back on except coercion, and pure coercion is costly, risky, and difficult to sustain. This is the dilemma that China confronts today. Democracies, by contrast, are able to fall back in hard times on belief in the intrinsic legitimacy of their form of government, and are able to renew that legitimacy not only with electoral alternation but with reforms that deepen and invigorate democracy itself.

Moreover, in China, and more perhaps more imminently in Singapore and Malaysia, and down the road in Vietnam, authoritarian regimes face a different

existential threat that is wholly unique to authoritarianism: Success. If they continue to develop economically, society will become empowered and informed, values will change, and people will demand greater freedom and control over their lives, as Inglehart and Welzel have shown. Democracies are not destabilized by success in this way.

If you compare the governance challenges of prominent authoritarian regimes—Russia, China, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Venezuela—to those that confront the wealthy established democracies (or put differently, even most of the still surviving 50+ democracies), it is the authoritarian regimes, not the democracies, that face a looming or present crisis. Thirty years from now (and probably much sooner), one-party communist rule will be dead in China, while India will have pretty much the same constitutional system it has today.

I do not think democracy as a system is in crisis today. But it is in a funk—a period of waning momentum, declining confidence, and deepening frustration. The sources of this are not merely the current economic and fiscal woes of most advanced industrial democracies, but the mounting political ones, the growing sense that the political system is captured by special interests that are using power to appropriate the lion's share of income and wealth, and the inability of the system to generate clear and effective policies that command broad support.

While this is not yet a crisis, it is a predicament, and cause for concern. The growing doubts about the effectiveness and governability of the advanced democracies threaten the momentum and legitimacy of democracy globally.

## The Troubled State of Democracy in the United States

One of the most important observations in Samuel Huntington's seminal work, *The Third Wave*, concerns the unusually important role that international factors—and not least, the preeminent power and influence of the United States—have played in the expansion of democracy over these past few decades.<sup>8</sup> It is fair to ask: what will be the fate of democracy globally if it is no longer seen to function efficaciously in the world's richest democracies, particularly in the United States and Europe?

There are growing signs of political decay in the United States. Confidence in the Congress and other important democratic institutions is at a nearly record low. Identification with political parties is in steady decline. The Congress is more polarized along partisan lines than at any time in anyone's memory. The bridging middle has virtually disappeared from the Congress and from other elements of political life. Today, there is no Democrat on Capitol Hill who is more conservative than the most moderate Republican, and vice versa. Some of this polarization is institutionally driven by the increasingly precise and scientific nature of gerrymandering of district boundaries, the intensification of the filibuster and other minority vetoes in the Senate, and by the cruel and relentless need of legislators to spend most of their time raising money (as a result of which, members of Congress do not spend weekends, or even Mondays, Fridays and evenings getting to know one another personally, but rather are back in the district on the perpetual campaign, or phoning contributors, or dining with lobbyists and political action committees who can generate campaign contributions). Then there is the explosion of the soft

corruption of lobbying, an industry of influence peddling awash in staggering amounts of loosely tracked and undisclosed money, which has grown from a few hundred registered lobbyists a generation or two ago to over 13,000 in Washington, DC alone today. The bulk of these lobbyists serve corporate interests, and even those that do not do so explicitly, such as the National Rifle Association, are heavily funded by corporate interests which stand to profit from, for example, blocking legislation that would make it even slightly more difficult to buy guns and ammunition. We can't understand why even the most ridiculously mild gun control legislation has just failed in the US Congress after one of the most grotesque shooting rampages in American history if we don't follow this murky trail of political money.

American democracy is not in crisis, but it is in a serious predicament. It is more polarized, less efficacious, and more extensively, elaborately, and subtly captured by moneyed interests than it has been in a long time. And as a result of several factors—the close partisan balance in election outcomes, the intense partisan polarization, intensification of minority vetoes in the Senate, and the still extensive (and disproportionately Republican) gerrymandering of the House—it can't seem to get much of importance accomplished. If we do not address these problems, they will eventually generate an economic and social crisis, as entitlement spending on Social Security and Medicare eats up such a large proportion of the federal budget that we will have virtually nothing left to meet other human needs, to invest in physical and human capital, and thus to preserve the foundations of our economic vitality and global power and influence.

Politicians, commentators, and even political scientists do not agree on the nature and scope of the problem, much less the solutions. But there is a growing sentiment behind a cluster of reforms that include the following:

1. Eliminate the power of state legislatures to draw legislative district boundaries and give it to some more politically neutral body, as has already been done in a number of states, including recently California (by voter initiative).
2. Reduce the capacity of party primaries to narrow and polarize the choice before voters in the general election. One way to do so is to eliminate party primaries altogether, as California has also done in adopting (again by voter initiative) the top-two electoral system or “open primary.” Another is through the alternative vote. And a third is by eliminating the “sore loser” rule, so that moderate candidates defeated in a party primary would still be eligible to contest in the general election as independents. Each of these reforms is attracting growing interest and support in different American states.
3. Restrict the use of the filibuster and other minority vetoes in the Senate.
4. Reduce the flows of money into political campaigns and make them more transparent. Transparency could be achieved by Congressional action. Reining in independent political action committees, which have utterly decimated previous efforts to control campaign finance in the U.S., would require a reversal of the 2010 Citizens United decision of the Supreme Court, which equated campaign spending with free speech and thus eliminated

government restrictions on independent campaign expenditures by corporations, trade unions, and associations. However, this was a 5-4 Supreme Court decision, and thus a shift in the ideological balance of just one justice would likely lead to reversal.

5. Further restrict the ability of lobbyists and corporations to offer cash and favors to members of Congress, and enact longer and more sweeping bans on the ability of retiring congressmen and government officials to become lobbyists.

There are many other reform ideas swirling around and gaining momentum at the state level, and these could percolate up into a federal impact. For example, a bill called the National Popular Vote would make the Electoral College irrelevant, by instructing states to cast their electoral votes for the winner of the national popular vote. This bill has now been passed by states with 132 electoral votes, 49% of the total needed for victory. Within one or two electoral cycles, it will probably have a majority. This would probably do little to address the big drivers of polarization and dysfunctionality in American democracy today, but it is an example of the energy, imagination, and grassroots initiative that are flowing into the political reform movement in the United States. I think it is possible that we are entering in the U.S. a period of demand-driven, citizen-initiated political reform similar in scope and intensity to the Progressive era about a century ago.

In closing, I do not want to be too sanguine. What used to be the core democracies of the world—Europe, the U.S., and Japan—face stiff and growing

challenges of policy and governance. But the one saving grace of democracy as a system is its capacity for reform and renewal. It is not that democracies do not fall victim to corruption, capture, and institutional sclerosis. But they have more means to address these problems than most authoritarian regimes do, and even in the face of them, citizens of wealthy and well-established democracies prefer to deepen democracy rather than abandon it. For all these reasons, I do not think democracy faces a global crisis, and I remain optimistic about its long-term future.

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<sup>1</sup> Michel Crozier, Samuel P. Huntington, and Joji Watanuki, *The Crisis of Democracy: Report on the Governability of Democracy to the Trilateral Commission* (New York: New York University Press, 1975), p. 2.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, p. 2.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, p. 9.

<sup>4</sup> Larry Diamond, "The Impact of the Economic Crisis; Why Democracies Survive," *Journal of Democracy* 22 (January 2011): 27.

<sup>5</sup> Adam Przeworski, et al. *Democracy and Development* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

<sup>6</sup> Ronald Inglehart and Christian Welzel, *Modernization, Cultural Change, and Democracy: The Human Development Sequence* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

<sup>7</sup> Cited in Juan J. Linz and Alfred Stepan, *Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), p. 221 (though I have also heard Schmitter make the remark on a number of occasions).

<sup>8</sup> Samuel P. Huntington, *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991).