

Remarks at a panel discussion on “Building Lasting Majorities” at
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The dilemma of building lasting majorities in newly democratic nations is that lasting majorities are, by definition, passive and intermittent majorities. They are the opposite of the aroused, adamant majorities that lasted just long enough to shove the old regime aside. Indeed the purpose of the democratic revolution was not only to establish self-government but to permit the majority of nonpolitical citizens to govern themselves through only intermittent political participation. The confrontation and strikes, the heroic deeds of the revolution’s leaders, the filling of public squares with scores of thousands of citizens, the transformation of public anger over the old regime’s abuses into a self-conscious majority demanding redress and reform – all were intended to establish a political order where ordinary citizens could lead normal private lives in tranquility, safety, and freedom.

But once a democratic government is in place, the nature of the political problem changes. It becomes one of lasting *minorities* that build and maintain themselves, often at the expense of the majority. Farmers, unions, business groups, professional associations, teachers, students, pensioners, and on and on, all care intently about their own narrow interests and advance them through government subsidies, legal privileges, and protectionist regulations that would in most cases be strongly opposed by an informed majority. In the United States we have been working on this problem for 215 years since our own democratic revolution, and we have not solved it yet. The old and new democracies of Europe and Asia have not solved it either.

Interest-group domination of government policymaking – the signature problem of liberal democracy – is of course exactly the kind of problem that today’s freedom fighters in Zimbabwe, Syria, Cuba, North Korea, and elsewhere would be happy to face themselves in exchange for the vastly more dire problems they currently face. We might leave it at that and ask them to get back to us in the established democracies after their revolutions have succeeded, but I think there is more to be said in advance of their accession to our privileged ranks. Much has already been learned about the characteristic pitfalls facing new democracies that can lead to popular disillusionment – corruption, inflation, the frantic scramble for divested state assets, the political rebirth of stalwarts of the old regime – and one hopes that the leaders of the next wave of democratic revolutions will pay heed to the experiences of their predecessors. To these precautions I would add three others for consideration in the immediate aftermath of a democratic regime change. My rules for revolutionaries aim to anticipate the passive-majority problem – and to encourage the activists who succeeded at mass-movement politics to think about the very different challenges of normal democratic politics that lie ahead.

The first is: don’t try to settle every question of democratic process and freeze in place the configuration of parties and interests as they appear at the constitutional moment. Democratic politics is a dynamic discovery process; its alliances and judgments cannot be anticipated; it needs to be responsive to conditions, problems, and public sentiments that will change continuously over time. Many new democracies (including our host country of Poland) have found after a few short years that their initial electoral and representation systems are inappropriate and unresponsive to evolving public opinion and policy challenges – but by this time powerful interests have congealed around the systems, making them very difficult to reform. A particularly serious problem is the proportional representation and “party list” systems much favored by contemporary constitution writers and by the U.S. State Department. They have

the initial appeal of appeasing the various conflicting interests that had set aside their differences for purposes of ousting the old regime; but in short order, and in almost every case, they produce political sclerosis that fuels popular disillusionment with the new regime and to some extent with democracy itself.

Second, continue to promote “anti-state activities,” which will be as important after the democratic revolution as before. That is the term that the old, despotic regime applied to all critical or merely independent political activities, which were persecuted ferociously until they reached overwhelming proportions. Under the new democracy anti-state activities will be legal but unfamiliar and fragile – weak in human and financial resources, and appearing vaguely unpatriotic to many people. But robust criticism from outside the structure of party, legislative, and interest-group politics is essential to good government. An independent media is part of this of course, but the media will be bound to focus on personal, populist, and sensational issues. More important are independent universities, think tanks, intellectual journals, broad-based civic organizations, and networking projects with liberal reformers from other nations. Their essential purpose is to furnish steady, reputable, disinterested critiques of the day-to-day machinations of the new political system – in other words to represent the interests of the silent majority in the long periods between elections. Successful democratic revolutionaries need to remember their roots and concern themselves not only with building government institutions but private, civic, politically independent institutions as well.

Third and finally, disperse and decentralize government power through federalist systems (where regional governments are not just administrative subunits of the central government but possess a degree of political autonomy) and other devices. There is no more important principle for fostering government worthy of lasting majority support. The dispersion of power – and the obligation of each unit of government to compete with others for the allegiances of citizens and businesses – is the most durable protection against the

capture of government by special-interests, and the strongest discipline forcing governments to devote themselves to the interests of broad majorities. Boris Yeltsin understood this principle well – as does Vladimir Putin.

This last rule is important for those of us in the advanced democracies as well. One of the most pronounced features of contemporary politics is the effort to centralize government power through global, EU, and other regional programs for “harmonizing” regulations, taxes, subsidies, welfare policies, and much else. These are, for the most part, efforts to reduce policy competition among nation-states – and thereby to reduce inconvenient political and economic pressures on individual nations to reform and improve their domestic policies. Maintaining a competitive international order that maximizes the returns to good policy in each nation – which means moving from tyranny to democracy, and then making democracy as public-spirited as possible – is one of the most important things the wealthy democracies can do to isolate and discredit tyrannies and buttress the forces of liberal reform in fledgling democracies.