

The Public, Press, and Presidency in a Time of Democratic Turbulence

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I want to present a scenario to you: You decide to join a friend for a game of checkers. You choose the red pieces, and your friend chooses the black ones. As you play the game, you realize that you might be able to gain an advantage by hiding a black piece here and there when your friend is distracted. You then suddenly decide to make a very public decision. As opposed to jumping a piece diagonally, you jump a piece vertically. Your friend asks, “What are you doing?” You reply, “Well, I never win at checkers. I think the rules are really keeping me down. I think they favor people like you, not people like me, so I decided to change the rules.” Your friend responds, “That is not how checkers works. That is not how any of this works.” But you say, “I have been beaten up by this game so many times. I have little hope of winning unless I change the rules.” Your friend explains to you, “Then we should talk about the rules and figure out what to do, but we both need to find a way forward if we are going to keep playing this game.” You reply, “The rules are unfair. If you have a hand in the rules, they will continue to be unfair!” At this point, you throw up the board and punch your friend in the face.

Now, what did we observe? First, games have rules, obviously. Second, both sides need to agree to the rules of the game. If not, you are no longer playing a game. In our civil and political life, political theorists talk about this as a social contract. Essentially, these are the visible laws and invisible norms that bind us together and that we all agree to in order to receive the benefits of democracy. These are the rules of the game of democracy, except democracy is not a game. Far from it, in fact.

For the past fourteen years, I have worked in, taught, and studied closely the movements of our political process, particularly the ways that our leaders communicate about the political process. Yet the last three years have taught me quite a bit about rules. I will admit I am not a natural rule follower, as my parents will attest. I am sure most of us chafe under the strictures of some rules. However, in my observations and study of American politics, I have come to see that our current moment presents an interesting dichotomy between those of us who are attempting to uphold the rules of the democratic game

and those who want to move the goal posts for the sake of some advantage. I find this deeply troubling, no matter which side or partisan persuasion is attempting to change the rules.

Tonight, on the eve of the 2018 election, we face an important moment in thinking about our national political rules and the stark choice we have. It is not between Democratic and Republican candidates. It is not between left and right. This choice we face is far more important than that. It is a choice between whether we will accept our official and unofficial bonds to one another in a civil society or cast them aside for some advantage.

Specifically, I am talking about the bond to the peaceful process of choosing our leaders and deciding our political affairs. Put simply, democracies die when our bond is taken for granted or forsaken for violence. When ballots are traded for bullets, incitement, or political extremism, our democracy is stressed. We are living in the midst of a national stress test that threatens the heart of our democracy. I wish to share with you the circumstances that have led us to this moment, what this national stress test presently looks like, the democratic turbulence in our midst, and how we can move forward.

American political life has cycled through periods of relative calm and turbulence. Steve Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt, professors of government at Harvard University, note that we have seen troubling times and political figures before. We have witnessed Senator Joseph McCarthy's crusade against a hidden and largely nonexistent communist invasion of the government in the 1950s and Governor George Wallace's attempt to prevent the racial integration of Alabama public schools in open defiance of federal law and court order.¹ Indeed, historian Jon Meacham notes that American history is dotted with examples of violence from the Jacksonian Era through the Civil War to the Civil Rights Era.²

However, the confluence of several factors makes this moment a particularly interesting one in which to live. First, we live in a dichotomous economic reality: relatively prosperous times overall, yet pockets of stagnation and hopelessness dot our landscape. In general, unemployment is low, and wages are growing modestly. However, many work harder for less. Income inequality has grown since the Great Recession.³ According to the Economic Policy Institute, the economic recovery that began and accelerated under President Barack Obama has continued in the first two years of Donald Trump's administration. This dual economic reality, fostered increasingly by the global reach of our economic life, means many feel left behind.

Second, American life is changing dramatically. Millennials and Generation Z are coming of age, both in the job market and in the voting process. Demographically, the population is becoming more ethnically and racially diverse by the day.⁴ Politically, institutions that may have unified us—the presidency, news media, political parties, and even organized religion—now lack public confidence and trust.⁵ We are highly polarized between conservatives and progressives,⁶ a fact illustrated by a relatively

robust voter turnout since 2000. These changes highlight the unmoored and pluralistic nature of American democracy.⁷

The means by which our political leaders speak to these developments have evolved as well. As I have noted in some of my research, for instance, political leaders increasingly trade true persuasion for mobilization of their respective polarized bases.⁸ Presidents since Ronald Reagan have included guests in the gallery of the House of Representatives to point to during their State of the Union addresses.⁹ These individuals serve as concrete, flesh-and-blood examples of otherwise abstract policies and values. Mentions of these individuals have quadrupled in presidential addresses since 1981, illustrating how presidents attempt to symbolically capture a cross-section of an ever-changing public. Yet, who is mentioned, who is left unmentioned, and how groups are mentioned become points of contention amid arguments about political correctness versus freedom of expression.

Third, digital and socially mediated technologies provide outlets for emotional expression and symbolic connectedness, even as many feel disconnected from the physicality of institutions, communities, and employment.¹⁰ These spaces have become our modern-day water coolers for conversation and community. In the initial rollout of the Internet, many trumpeted the potential for such spaces to flatten power relationships between the governed and the governors, for the little dogs to challenge the big dogs. At a time of already declining trust in traditional institutions, this has created a rocky set of circumstances. As political communication scholars Jay G. Blumler and Dennis Kavanagh observed at the turn of the millennium in 1999, “relations of elites to masses are transformed by the evaporation of deference and increased skepticism about the credentials, claims, and credibility of authority holders in many walks of life. This supports political and media populism.”¹¹ In other words, when technology allows us to challenge everything, including factual truth, we become unmoored from the common set of facts and realities that form the basis of civic life.

Although I could touch on additional factors that have gotten us to this moment of political rule-bending and our national stress test, these three intertwined factors (dueling economic realities, a diversifying American population, and the rise of digital and socially mediated technologies) all converge in this moment to create circumstances ripe for exploitation by our political leaders.

I want to turn next to thinking about what the present moment looks like. Juniata College is 121 miles from Squirrel Hill, the Pittsburgh neighborhood that, nine days ago, was the site of the tragic synagogue massacre that was the most violent anti-Semitic attack in US history. Yet, placed in context, this event becomes part of a broader, more troubling trend. The Anti-Defamation League recorded a 57% increase in anti-Semitic incidents nationwide from 2016 to 2017, the largest spike since 1979.¹² This statistic joins others. The Center for the Study of Hate and Extremism at California State University, San Bernardino found a 12.5% increase in hate crimes reported by police in America’s ten largest cities from

2015 to 2016; and these just are the ones that have been recorded.¹³ The groups targeted most frequently are Jewish, Muslim, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, Latino, and African-American.

Unfortunately, our current moment is awash in aggressive, uncivil, and dangerous language from the bottom to the top of our political system. This language specifically targets individual members of these and other groups. For example, recently we saw overtly racist phone calls targeting the candidacies of African Americans running for governor in Georgia and Florida,¹⁴ as well as a major political party warning against the possible horrors a caravan of starving, emaciated Central Americans could cause to US society if they were allowed to seek refuge here.¹⁵ Incendiary communication finds an easy home in our politics due to socially mediated technologies, a public increasingly polarized between left and right, and the diversification of American life that highlights differences in how we love, live, and look. As someone who has studied our environment of coarse communication, this tone creates toxic shock for the democratic system. According to political scientist Bryan Gervais at the University of Texas at San Antonio, disagreeable incivility used by our political leaders (that is, uncivil messages that some would disagree with substantively) generate feelings of anger and induce people to use incivility in their own language.¹⁶ In other words, nasty messages that flow down from our political leaders are mimicked and can make us angry.

What our present moment lacks is the restraint and strength of conscience among political leaders to ensure that their calls to action have a better chance of helping democracy than alarming it. Anyone can win an argument by force or coercion, what might be called in Latin an *ad baculum* attack; however, that is not how the rules of democracy work.

Enter our national stress test. As a presidential candidate or as president, Donald Trump has publicly called news media outlets the enemy of the people, shared a doctored wrestling video of himself beating up the CNN logo, said that “Second Amendment people” might do something about a Hillary Clinton presidency, compared Democrats to arsonists, called his political opponents evil, described immigration as an infestation, urged surveillance of mosques and a watchlist for Muslim Americans, and insinuated that the US military should open fire on asylum seekers crossing the southern border (which several generals said would be a violation of military rules of engagement).¹⁷

In the most trying of circumstances, our political leaders have traditionally attempted to step in and serve as national mediator and healer of divisions. Even on the eve of the Civil War, what we would probably all argue was our nation’s most calamitous moment, Abraham Lincoln called for restraint in the face of Southern insurrection. South Carolina had seceded three months earlier, an egregious act of rebellion in violation of the United States Constitution, and yet President Lincoln in his inaugural address placed the decision for violence with citizens. He said, “in your hands, my dissatisfied fellow countrymen

and not in mine, is the momentous issue of civil war. The government will not assail you. You have no conflict without being yourselves the aggressors.”¹⁸

Yet Donald Trump does not. It is not just unfortunate; it is a violation of the unwritten rules of our democracy. Words matter. They constitute force and action; they create, recreate, and destroy reality. We should not fixate on the direct cause linking a specific word to a specific action. That misses the point. Words create the context or environment by which actions and attitudes operate and by which these actions and attitudes are justified. Words matter, particularly words from our political leaders. Consider the outcomes of the following moments when Donald Trump changed the norms by which we relate to each other and democracy to create an environment favorable for troubling behavior.

At a November 21, 2015, rally in Birmingham, Alabama, then-presidential candidate Donald Trump’s speech was interrupted by Mercurio Southall, an activist with Black Lives Matter.¹⁹ Trump responded by encouraging his supporters to “get him the hell out of here. Will you please get him out of here? Throw him out.”²⁰ Video captured rally attendees pushing and shoving Southall, with one person attempting to choke him.

A similar scene unfolded several months later at a Trump campaign event in Louisville, Kentucky. Trump responded by calling on his supporters to “get them out of here.”²¹ Trump’s actions in the latter case sparked a federal lawsuit. Federal judge David Hill concluded that the candidate’s words “amounted to incitement.”²² Judge Hill devoted 167 words in his opinion to defining incitement in both common and legal language as a communicative act that induces violence.

During the 2016 campaign, Hillary Clinton received social media death threats following Donald Trump’s “Second Amendment people” comment; these threats were subsequently compiled by the US Secret Service.²³

During the 2016 New Hampshire primary campaign, an eighteen-year-old college student, Lauren Batchelder, questioned Donald Trump regarding his past statements about women during a candidate forum. Trump proceeded the next day to attack the “arrogant young woman” on Twitter. She was eighteen-years-old and received rape threats as a result.²⁴

Last month, domestic terrorist Cesar Sayoc mailed improvised explosive devices to former President Barack Obama, former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, several other Democratic officials, and CNN.²⁵ All had faced fairly regular criticism by Donald Trump.

Earlier this year, Patrick Stein, Gavin Wright, and Curtis Allen, members of a Kansas militia, were convicted by a federal judge for plotting to use a weapon of mass destruction against a mosque and an apartment complex that houses Somali immigrants.²⁶ The attack was planned for November 9, 2016, the day after Election Day. Attorneys for these individuals recently asked for leniency during sentencing, citing the climate in which the attempted actions took place. The attorneys pleaded with the court not to

“ignore the circumstances of one of the most rhetorically mold-breaking, violent, awful, hateful, and contentious presidential elections in modern history, driven in large measure by the rhetorical China shop bull, who is now our president.”²⁷ That is, his attorneys partly blamed Trump, arguing that “as long as the Executive Branch condemns Islam and commends and encourages violence against would-be enemies, then a sentence imposed by the Judicial Branch does little to deter people generally from engaging in such conduct if they believe they are protecting their countries from enemies identified by their own Commander-in-Chief.”²⁸ The lawyers for these three domestic terrorists essentially claimed that they were simply following Trump’s directive.

These moments are obviously troubling for a number of reasons. First, the legitimacy of the presidency, an institution of our democracy, becomes significantly compromised when the office is used as an accelerant for rhetorical incitement and violence. If this does not concern you, maybe the second one will. Even if the president does not mean to engage in incitement—and in some instances I will give him the benefit of the doubt—his words have weight and serve as a megaphone to be used by others to justify hateful actions. Donald Trump is not a cause of these events. I study media effects and do experimental research on this topic; it is very difficult to say that Donald Trump causes things. That misses the point. While he may not be the cause, his use of a trick of language called “paralipsis” (implying something without actually saying it) gives him plausible deniability should his words inspire someone else’s hateful actions.²⁹ Thus, Donald Trump’s rhetoric exposes the presidency to exploitation by troubled individuals.

The third troubling possibility is that it signals to other political leaders—like cancer cells metastasize in the body—that this behavior is okay and that the rules of the game have changed. The weakening of these boundaries sends a signal about the acceptance of this type of behavior. For instance, Pennsylvania gubernatorial candidate and business professional Scott Wagner, who has been endorsed by Donald Trump, released a campaign video suggesting that his opponent, Governor Tom Wolf, wear a catcher’s mask because Wagner was “going to stomp all over [his] face with golf spikes.”³⁰ Or consider the actions of Congressman Greg Gianforte of Montana who body-slammed a reporter who asked him a question about healthcare, a topic that matters to all of us and that the reporters have every right to ask candidates about. Later, and without regret, President Trump praised Gianforte, saying, “Any guy who can do a body slam... he's my guy.”³¹

Harvard professors Stephen Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt observe as part of their book *How Democracies Die* that, in the 20th century, political leaders used to act responsibly. “Leaders of the two major parties accepted one another as legitimate and resisted the temptation to use their temporary control of institutions to maximum partisan advantage. Norms of tolerance and restraint served as the soft guardrails of American democracy, helping it avoid the kind of partisan fight to the death that has

destroyed democracies elsewhere in the world, including Europe in the 1930s and South America in the 1960s and 1970s.”³² I am not going to sugarcoat this for you; we live in a troubling moment. Researchers who have studied the rise and fall of other democracies note troubling trends accelerating in the present moment. It is our choice whether and how to move forward. I say *whether* we move forward because democracy is not a guarantee. I say *how* we move forward because we must take active steps to push back against a rising tide that is changing our politics. I am not saying, “There is nothing we can do about this. Everything is hopeless. Go home and watch Netflix”—though I admit that that thought may have crossed my mind. Rather, I want to give you a few concrete things that you can do in the present moment to steel democracy.

First, shore up your interpersonal relationships. The past three years have divided so many families. Division can create deeper hostilities to be exploited by our political leaders. Let us start in our own houses. The Pew Research Center found that after the election of Donald Trump, 39% of US adults were trying to avoid family conversations about politics.³³ Thanksgiving 2016 was particularly tough. As reported by NBC News, analysis of cell phone location data by economics professors Keith Chen of the University of California Los Angeles and Ryne Rohla of Washington State University found that “on average, people who went from Democratic-leaning voting precincts to Republican areas in 2016 shortened their visits by between 20 and 40 minutes compared to blue-county residents who visited other blue-state residents.... Republicans shortened their visits to Democratic areas by about 50 to 70 minutes.”³⁴ Seeking understanding for why people think like they do can be an important step in the persuasion process and for bridging divides. Ask questions; listen closely.

Second, though this might be a little bit tougher, converse with one person each day who may not agree with you politically or who may be different in the way he or she lives, loves, or looks. The namesake for tonight’s talk, G. Graybill Diehm, was a Pennsylvania legislator who hired members of the political opposition during his time in office.³⁵ I think this is instructive for us. At one point, our political leaders, realizing that a hard-fought election was over, might have thought, “Hey, the person I ran against might have had a good idea, too. Why not bring him or her onboard if for no other reason than to have someone to argue with?” This is a stunning realization in the present moment. Professors Ben Warner and Astrid Villamil of the University of Missouri found that individuals who attributed malevolence to those who are politically different are more likely to accept political violence as a solution to these differences.³⁶ The authors offer an important corrective: an imagined conversation with someone who is politically different. Yes, imagined. Even pretend time with the political opposition can reduce feelings of malevolence about the other side. Find someone who is not like you and have a chat. Even if you cannot find common ground on all points, putting a face to a particular set of views cannot hurt. It cannot hurt you, and it definitely cannot hurt democracy.

Three, for the Republicans out there, hold your leaders accountable for how they treat you. Republican Party leadership has assumed that you will accept changes to rules in the pursuit of power and winning. I look at this as an affront to the genuine beliefs of conservatives and Republicans. Your efforts for our democracy do not end when your side wins. If you find behavior or policies troubling, speak up to your elected officials by letter, email, social media, or protest. Let your leaders know that you expect more from them on the national, state, and local levels. Your critiques, if nothing else, will hopefully make them pay attention. It might even make them better leaders. The prospering of our democracy depends on you realizing that the rules are made for you, too, for that moment when your side no longer exercises power.

For the Democrats in the room, you have a role to play as well in ensuring your leaders do not respond by bending the rules of democracy once they win the levers of power. At present, you cannot stop Donald Trump's behavior, but you can control how you respond to it. Remember that uncivil discourse has a negative effect on all sides of the political spectrum. The president has realized brilliantly that his oxygen comes from media attention and your outrage. In the 2016 campaign, he received \$5 billion in free media attention, far ahead of Hillary Clinton and far ahead of the attention received by the candidates in the 2012 election.³⁷ Fires only burn with oxygen. Actively choose news outlets that balance Trump coverage with other forms of political news. Yes, there are other forms of political news that have nothing to do with Donald Trump. This means—sorry my progressive friends—cutting out much of MSNBC. Rachel Maddow will forgive you. Selectively channel your outrage into positive efforts that strengthen progressive outreach.

The invisible rules, or norms, that bind us in a social contract, particularly mutual respect for difference and active deliberation that moves us forward, are ours to make fast and strengthen. If we do that, we will endure this national stress test. Leaders who undermine our rules in our democracy show that they think so little of us and that we care so little for the sacrifices of our forebears who fought wars, who crossed oceans, who went to the moon, and who built families and communities for us to enjoy and to pass on. Benjamin Franklin, upon the signing of our Constitution, implored our constitutional framers to remember that we have a republic only if we can keep it.³⁸ At this moment, just as in Lincoln's moment, that task falls into our hands, not into Donald Trump's hands. We know that. It is in our hands. Tomorrow is an important step in reaffirming our social contract with one another.

NOTES

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