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# **The Republican Party Chose Hungary's Playbook. Here's How That Movie Ends.**

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Let's begin with a principle that transcends partisan politics: democratic legitimacy derives from the consent of the governed, expressed through free and fair elections in which all citizens can participate. This isn't a progressive or conservative position. It's the foundational premise upon which the American experiment rests. What follows from this principle, when we examine the current evidence dispassionately, leads to an uncomfortable but unavoidable conclusion about the unlikelihood of our democracy ever prospering while Republicans hold public office.

Since 2021, at least 30 states have enacted 78 to 79 laws that restrict access to voting. In 2024 alone, states passed more restrictive voting laws than in any year this past decade except 2021. These are not interpretations or partisan characterizations. These are documented legislative acts, recorded in state records, analyzed by nonpartisan research institutions. The pattern these laws follow is so consistent, their partisan distribution so uniform, and their demographic targets so specific that we must consider what they represent.

The most charitable interpretation of these restrictions is that they aim to secure election integrity. This would be a legitimate concern if there were evidence of widespread fraud to address. Yet court after court, including those presided over by conservative judges appointed by Republican presidents, examined claims of fraud following the 2020 election and found them without merit. The Heritage Foundation, a conservative think tank motivated to find voter fraud, documented only 1,384 proven cases of fraud over decades, out of billions of votes cast. The problem these laws purport to solve effectively does not exist.

Consider a thought experiment. Imagine that Democratic-controlled legislatures in 30 states simultaneously passed laws that made it disproportionately harder for rural voters to cast ballots. They might limit voting to weekdays when farmers cannot leave their work, close polling locations outside urban centers, or require forms of identification more common in cities than rural areas. Republicans would correctly identify this as an attempt to manipulate electoral outcomes by choosing who gets to vote. The principle remains the same regardless of which party does it or which voters are targeted.

What we observe in states like Arizona and Texas goes beyond normal political competition. Arizona has implemented four new restrictive laws since 2020, including

provisions that make it harder to correct absentee ballot signature defects in a state where 75 percent of voters cast ballots by mail. Texas Senate Bill 1 creates a comprehensive web of restrictions: limiting assistance for mail ballots, imposing stricter ID requirements, creating additional barriers for voters with disabilities, reducing polling locations, and curtailing early voting hours. These are not random policy choices. They form a pattern.

The partisan distribution of these laws reveals their instrumental purpose. Republican-controlled states have passed the vast majority of restrictive voting laws, while Democratic-controlled states have enacted 47 laws expanding voting access. This is not a case where both parties are engaging in similar behavior with different rhetoric. It is a fundamental divergence in approach to democratic participation itself.

Meanwhile, in the United States Senate, we witness a parallel phenomenon that compounds the problem. The filibuster, which once required senators to hold the floor and speak continuously to delay legislation, has evolved into something quite different. Today, the mere threat of a filibuster effectively imposes a 60-vote threshold on most legislation. This is not what the Constitution prescribes. It is not what the Founders intended. It is a procedural mutation that has calcified into standard practice.

The consequences are measurable. Eight pieces of legislation that would have benefited workers or curtailed corporate influence passed the House and secured majority support in the Senate between 1947 and 2020, yet died because they could not reach 60 votes. The For the People Act, which would have protected voting rights nationally, met the same fate despite majority support. The Protecting the Right to Organize Act and the Paycheck Fairness Act similarly failed, not because they lacked majority support, but because a minority could veto them.

Here we must be precise about what is happening. This is not the system working as designed. When a minority can routinely block the will of the majority, when procedural tactics override democratic outcomes, the basic principle of representative government is violated. The system continues to operate, but like a machine whose gears have been deliberately misaligned, it no longer produces its intended output.

To understand where this leads, we need only examine contemporary examples. Hungary presents the clearest parallel. In 2022, the European Parliament declared that Hungary "can no longer be considered a full democracy," describing it instead as a "hybrid regime of electoral autocracy." This term is precisely descriptive: elections continue to occur, but the conditions under which they occur have been so manipulated that democratic choice becomes illusory.

The Hungarian playbook is instructive. Viktor Orbán's Fidesz party did not cancel

elections or openly declare dictatorship. Instead, they gradually tilted the playing field through technically legal means: gerrymandering, media control, voting rule changes, and judicial capture. International election observers consistently note that while Hungarian elections remain competitive, they are not fair. The parallels to American voter suppression efforts are not subtle.

Poland followed a similar trajectory, with its Law and Justice party explicitly citing Orbán as a model. As party leader Jarosław Kaczyński stated in 2011, "Viktor Orbán gave us an example of how we can win." Both parties, once in power, systematically weakened judicial independence, curtailed press freedoms, and modified electoral rules to entrench their positions. By 2020, only 38 percent of Polish citizens and 36 percent of Hungarian citizens believed their countries were democratic. These were not gradual slides over generations. These transformations occurred within a single decade. Turkey provides another data point. Elections continue, multiple parties compete, yet the systematic advantages accrued by the ruling party through control of media, restrictions on opposition organizing, and electoral rule manipulation have created what scholars term "competitive authoritarianism." The form of democracy persists; its substance has been hollowed out.

Historical precedent reinforces these contemporary warnings. The Weimar Republic did not fall because of external invasion or revolutionary overthrow. It collapsed because political polarization and legislative dysfunction made normal governance impossible. Between 1930 and 1933, chancellors governed through emergency decrees rather than parliamentary legislation. The system maintained its formal structures while abandoning its democratic essence. Citizens lost faith not in the idea of democracy but in its ability to function. Extremist parties gained support not through superior ideas but by promising to break the paralysis.

The American Jim Crow era offers an even more direct parallel. Following Reconstruction, Southern states did not openly declare that Black citizens could not vote; such explicit discrimination would have violated the Constitution. Instead, they erected facially neutral barriers like poll taxes, literacy tests, and grandfather clauses that achieved the same result through indirect means. In North Carolina alone, these measures removed an estimated 75,000 Black voters from the rolls by 1904. Mississippi's approach became the template for systematic disenfranchisement that persisted until federal intervention in 1965.

The contemporary resonance is unmistakable. Today's voting restrictions follow the same pattern: technically legal, ostensibly race-neutral, but designed to achieve discriminatory outcomes. Requirements for specific forms of ID, limitations on early voting, restrictions on mail ballots, and polling place closures disproportionately affect the same communities that faced Jim Crow disenfranchisement. The methods have been

updated; the intent remains constant.

What makes the current moment particularly dangerous is the interaction between these phenomena. Voter suppression and legislative obstruction create a self-reinforcing cycle. When voting restrictions ensure that those in power do not truly represent the majority, and when procedural obstacles prevent any legislative correction, each problem compounds the other. Political scientists term this a "democratic death spiral," where each degradation of democratic norms facilitates further degradation.

The Varieties of Democracy Institute's data quantifies this decline. The global share of democracies decreased from 54 percent in 2009 to 49 percent in 2019. The United States has been specifically identified as experiencing "significant autocratization" over the past decade. These are not partisan assessments but empirical measurements based on observable changes in democratic institutions and practices.

The economic dimension intensifies this dynamic. Research consistently shows that economic inequality correlates with democratic instability. When democratic institutions fail to address economic grievances, citizens become more receptive to anti-democratic alternatives that promise decisive action. The inability of the U.S. Congress to pass significant economic reforms due to filibuster obstruction, combined with voting restrictions that prevent electoral accountability, creates precisely these conditions.

Now we must confront the logical implications of these facts. If we accept that democracy requires the consent of the governed, and if we observe that one political party is systematically working to restrict who can provide that consent while simultaneously blocking any legislative remedy, then we must conclude that this party has abandoned democratic governance as a principle. This is not a statement of partisan preference but of logical necessity.

The defense might be raised that both parties engage in political hardball, that this is simply vigorous competition within democratic bounds. But the evidence does not support this equivalence. One party is expanding voting access in states it controls while the other restricts it. One party seeks to lower barriers to democratic participation while the other raises them. One party accepts electoral losses and peaceful transitions of power while the other increasingly does not. These are not differences of degree but of kind.

Consider an analogy. If we discovered that one team in a sports league was systematically changing the rules to disadvantage their opponents, moving the goalposts, disqualifying opposing players on technicalities, and claiming that any loss must be due to cheating, we would not describe this as competitive sports. We would recognize it as the abandonment of competition itself in favor of rigged outcomes. The

principle holds regardless of the arena.

The path forward requires acknowledging what the evidence demonstrates: the Republican Party, in its current incarnation, has chosen power over democratic principles. This is not a claim about all Republicans or conservative ideas more broadly. Many Republicans have stood against these anti-democratic efforts, often at great personal and political cost. But the institutional party, as evidenced by its legislative actions across multiple states and its embrace of obstructionism at the federal level, has made a different choice.

History suggests that political movements that abandon democratic norms rarely return to them voluntarily. The incentive structure changes: once a party realizes it can maintain power without majority support, the motivation to seek that support diminishes. Each victory achieved through suppression and obstruction validates the strategy and encourages its expansion. Hungary's Fidesz did not become less authoritarian over time; Poland's Law and Justice party did not moderate with success. The trajectory, once begun, tends to accelerate.

The American system retains safeguards that Hungary and Poland lacked, particularly an independent judiciary and a federal structure that limits the damage any single state can inflict. But these safeguards are not self-executing. They require citizens who understand what is at stake and are willing to act on that understanding. They require recognition that democracy is not a spectator sport where we can assume the system will self-correct.

The evidence leads to an uncomfortable but unavoidable conclusion. A political party that systematically restricts voting access, blocks majority-supported legislation through procedural manipulation, refuses to accept electoral losses, and models itself on illiberal movements abroad cannot be a participant in democratic governance. It has become, to use the clinical term, an anti-democratic force. This is not hyperbole or partisan rhetoric. It is the logical conclusion from observable facts.

The question before us is not whether this assessment is too harsh. The question is whether we will recognize reality in time to address it. History is littered with democracies that failed not because their citizens rejected democratic values but because they could not imagine that others had. They assumed that democratic norms were too strong, institutions too resilient, traditions too deeply rooted to be overturned. They were wrong.

The United States stands at an inflection point. The patterns are clear, the trajectories established, the international precedents instructive. What remains uncertain is whether enough Americans will acknowledge what the evidence demonstrates: that one of our

major political parties has chosen a path incompatible with democratic governance. Recognition is not sufficient for remedy, but it is necessary. Without it, we risk joining the growing list of nations that retained the forms of democracy while losing its substance, that held elections without offering genuine choice, that maintained institutions while draining them of purpose.

The principle with which we began remains true: democratic legitimacy requires the consent of the governed. When that consent is systematically suppressed, when procedural obstacles override majority will, when one party treats democratic norms as optional rather than foundational, the system cannot function as intended. This is not a prediction or a warning. It is a description of where we now stand.

But knowing their playbook means we can predict their next moves and prepare countermeasures. Orban and other authoritarians succeeded because citizens didn't recognize the pattern until too late. We still have time. In upcoming pieces, I'll explore exactly how to turn their own strategies against them.

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