

CHRIS CHRISTIE AND KARL ROVE'S US ATTORNEY PROJECT

The Republicans were supposed to talk about how they plan to Make America Work Again last night. And I supposed Paul Ryan – and to a lesser extent Mitch McConnell, when he wasn't being booed – presented a vision of how they think Republicans run the economy. That vision doesn't actually resemble the protectionist big government approach Donald Trump has been running on. But given the revelation that Trump offered to let John Kasich run both domestic and foreign policy if he would be his VP candidate (Kasich was still reluctant), perhaps we should focus more on how Mike Pence wants to suffocate the economy.

Instead, as most people have focused, Republicans continued to attack Hillary (Hillary continues to attack Trump, though I suspect she will focus somewhat more on policy next week than Republicans have thus far). Many people have unpacked Chris Christie's rabble inciting witch hunt last night, but Dan Drezner backs his review of it with some data on the risks to democracy (click through to read all of, which is worth reading).

Gov. Chris Christie's speech garnered particular attention. It triggered similar reactions from The Weekly Standard and Vox, two outlets not known to agree on all that much.

The climax of Christie's speech was a call-and-response with the crowd listing Clinton's various misdeeds.

[snip]

Indeed, political events in both Turkey and the United States makes one somewhat concerned about the future of democracy as a political institution.

Francis Fukuyama has banged on in recent years on the problems of political decay in the advanced industrialized democracies. He's a bit more sanguine about this election cycle than most, but the erosion of accepted norms of political behavior is an extremely disturbing trend. Donald Trump (and his campaign manager) certainly epitomizes this contempt for such minor things as the Constitution and the rule of law:

As the cherry on the top of this worry sundae, the Journal of Democracy has just published an article by Roberto Stefan Foa and Yascha Mounk entitled, "The Danger of Deconsolidation: The Democratic Disconnect." Foa and Mounk have previewed their findings [here](#) and [here](#) over the past year, and their thesis is pretty damn sobering:

[snip]

What we find is deeply concerning. Citizens in a number of supposedly consolidated democracies in North America and Western Europe have not only grown more critical of their political leaders. Rather, they have also become more cynical about the value of democracy as a political system, less hopeful that anything they do might influence public policy, and more willing to express support for authoritarian alternatives. The crisis of democratic legitimacy extends across a much wider set of indicators than previously appreciated....

In theory, it is possible that, even in the seemingly consolidated democracies of North America and Western Europe, democracy may one day

cease to be the “only game in town”: Citizens who once accepted democracy as the only legitimate form of government could become more open to authoritarian alternatives.

[snip]

By all means, read the whole thing. As an American, I find it particularly troubling that Ronald Inglehart’s rebuttal essay says that Foa and Mounck are exaggerating because this phenomenon is limited to the United States.

Foa and Mounck’s data ends in 2010. One could argue that things have only gotten worse since then, as Christie’s show trial speech suggests. But if I have a sliver of optimism, it is that the Trump campaign is America’s moment of staring into the anti-system abyss and seeing the ugliness that would await.

I will be curious if, after this election cycle, there is a greater appreciation for the democratic institutions that have made America great for more than a century.

I’m sympathetic to the notion that democracy is becoming delegitimized here and elsewhere, and in part blame the elites who have divorced policy outcomes from democratic accountability and therefore from benefits for average voters.

But the Chris Christie witch hunt is a special case. After all, this is a former US Attorney, a former top embodiment of America’s criminal justice system (and Christie’s attack was far more irrational than that of another US Attorney, Rudy Giuliani, earlier in the night).

And he’s not just any US Attorney. He’s a US Attorney who got that role largely off his fundraising for George W Bush, even in spite of

concerns about his experience. Christie was, in some ways, one of the early test cases for Karl Rove's theory that US Attorney positions would make great launching pads for further political advancement – and it worked, to some degree. After prosecuting a bunch of Democrats in an equal opportunity political corruption state, Christie won the governorship and started abusing his power, most spectacularly with Bridgegate. He came close to winning the VP nomination with Trump (and if last night is any indication, perhaps he should have). Along the way he pioneered Deferred Prosecution Agreements, making monitor positions another piece of pork for loyal Republicans.

In other words, Christie is the personification of a Republican effort to politicize a position that – while political – had previously been treated with some respect for precedent and neutrality.

No longer. Last night, Christie broke down all remaining barriers between law enforcement and political prosecution. It was the inevitable outcome of Rove's little project.

Like Drezner, I'm worried generally about the state of our democracy (though unlike him I think the elite have a lot to answer for letting it happen). But the Christie witch hunt is a development above and beyond that general trend.