

Political Order and Political Decay: From the Industrial Revolution to the Globalization of Democracy

by Francis Fukuyama

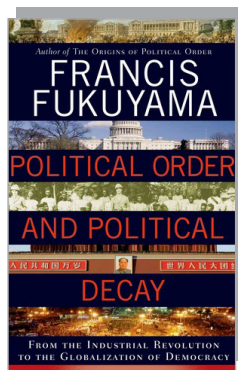
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Political Order and Political Decay is Francis Fukuyama's sequel to 2011's *The Origins of Political Order*, which covered prehuman times to the French Revolution. The world has only become more unstable since that book was published, so insight into how to understand political order and foster political stability has never been more pertinent. This book is more successful at elucidating the former than the latter, but it nonetheless represents a major achievement.

The book opens with a quote by American Founding Father Alexander Hamilton, and the introduction leaps from the Arab Spring to modern China to the Dodd–Frank Act. This is indicative of the book's broad geographic and historic scope, the purpose of which is to allow the reader to “connect the dots” in order to place individual events in the wider context of political order.

Readers expecting a scientific approach will be disappointed. No modelling or formulae are applied, and the included diagrams could be considered rather basic. Moreover, the book does not offer any precise guidance on how nations looking to foster political order should go about this, either in general terms or in concrete cases.

The book is, however, rich in examples demonstrating the ways that the emergence of political stability depends on a confluence of circumstance and how political order, once obtained, is susceptible to decay. Fukuyama's notions of state-building, rule of law, and political accountability, which he developed in his first volume, continue to feature prominently. This is especially true of state-building, which suggests that his observations since the earlier book was published have led him to conclude that state-building truly is the cornerstone of political order.

A key tenet developed in this volume is how political order typically evolves over time, with state-building preceding rule of law and political accountability. Fukuyama calls this evolution “sequencing.” With the notable exception of the U.S., most successful rich democracies achieved their standing by establishing a relatively strong state *before* becoming democratically accountable. The relationship between democracy and political order is complex. As Fukuyama demonstrates, democracy can have a malign influence on political order in the absence of a sufficiently strong state. This is best illustrated by the practice of clientelism—that is, when votes and political support are traded for individual benefits rather than programmatic policies.

This critique of democracy is both relevant and controversial, especially for development economics. Whilst Fukuyama does not advocate a reversal of democratic rights, he is less than sanguine about their impact in countries that have not yet established a strong state.

Sub-Saharan Africa and its weak states are a case in point. According to Fukuyama, the sub-Saharan African experience of colonialism and the absence of pre-colonial indigenous state structures placed these countries at a disadvantage relative to East Asian states, which could draw upon pre-colonial institutions and a more benign colonial experience. Fukuyama considers this difference critical in explaining sub-Saharan Africa's lower levels of development. Attempting economic modernization simultaneous to state-building under democratic constraints evidently risks biting off more than one can chew.

Factors unique to the history of the United States—in particular its hostility to state overreach—made its sequencing a typical, in that democracy preceded the state. Because of this, the U.S. experience deserves special attention in the developmental context, as it can serve as a model for developing countries yet to establish a strong state.

However, Fukuyama is keen to emphasize the other factors that were important to America's political evolution. These include the mobilization of new social actors by economic growth and their use of democratic means to secure advantages for themselves that serendipitously ended up benefiting wider society. An example of the latter would be

middle-class support for state reforms to curtail railway barons' political peddling. So while the U.S. experience demonstrates that a strong state can develop out of political accountability, the specifics of the U.S. experience preclude any generic solution based on its example.

Fukuyama is at his best when his arguments lead to novel conclusions, like that war can play a positive role in facilitating the establishment of an effective state (think of Prussia). Similarly, Fukuyama shows how social actors tend to be driven by self-interest rather than the abstract pursuit of political order but whether this is favorable or harmful to political development depends on the circumstances. Newly empowered groups may press for salutary reforms, or they may be bought off by the status quo. They may also become reactionary when they judge their own interests to be threatened, as in the recent class-based conflict in Thailand between the "red shirts" and "yellow shirts."

In attempting to draw such strong links between causes and effects, the book can at times read as if Fukuyama believed countries' development to be path dependent or predetermined, but he emphasizes that human agency can sometimes be decisive. Tanzania and Indonesia's post-colonial leaders receive praise for their peaceful fostering of a sense of nationhood out of disparate groups, and Costa Rica's rulers are acknowledged for eschewing political extremes and laying the foundations for today's stability and relative prosperity. On the other hand, Fukuyama laments the political legacy of Argentina's leaders, whose country was free of many of its South American neighbours' disadvantages but squandered its opportunity to develop.

As the title suggests, the book ends on a pessimistic note, emphasizing that political order is not only hard in the making but hard to preserve. The United States receives particular attention for its seeming inability to address current challenges, including the growth of the state, its decline in quality of state services, the judicialization of administration, and the spread of interest group influence. Fukuyama asserts that the risk of political decay is especially high in the U.S. due to the confluence of partisanship and the hampering of state effectiveness through checks and balances. The upshot is that a state apparatus lacking sufficient autonomy from an

overly politicized legislature results in weak government—or, as Fukuyama succinctly puts it, "When polarization confronts America's Madisonian check-and-balance political system, the result is particularly devastating."

Thankfully, in spite of the above, *Political Order and Political Decay* is not an endorsement of big government. Fukuyama argues that both small and large states can be effective. Nor is he anti-democratic. He considers democracy a matter of human dignity and expresses doubt that the Chinese Communist Party's system can continue on its current trajectory indefinitely.

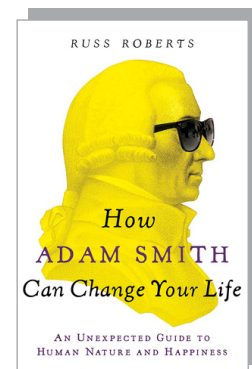
The book is surprisingly readable for one so broad in its scope, and readers come away considerably wiser as to why political order is so difficult to achieve and to maintain. It may not provide a precise playbook for a country seeking to chart its own path to political order, but for those of us fortunate enough to live in the developed world, perhaps it will inspire us to be a little more vigilant against political decay.



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How Adam Smith Can Change Your Life: An Unexpected Guide to Human Nature and Happiness

By Russ Roberts
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Reviewed by Alex Russell



To handle yourself, use your head; to handle others, use your heart" is a piece of enduring wisdom from Eleanor Roosevelt that captures the thought of Adam Smith in his lesser-known work *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*. It is the task of Russ Roberts to present us with a