Twitter Thread by Jay Ulfelder

Jay Ulfelder
@JayUlfelder

Picking up on @henryfarrell's comments here, one implication of my work on democratic breakdown is that the US should harshly punish GOP leaders who attempted to keep Trump in power despite losing the election and fomented insurrection to advance that effort. 1/n

> 1. Short thread - on the various claims we're seeing from Republican politicians over the last few days that the Democratic push for accountability is "divisive." Damn right it's divisive - that is what it has to be.
>
> — Henry Farrell (@henryfarrell) January 10, 2021

I wrote a book a decade ago that used game theory to explore the ways democracies die and what that tells us about how and why they sometimes survive. 2/n https://t.co/0kFAiOKOf7

One implication of the formal model in that book is that normative commitments to democracy may matter less than expectations about the benefits and costs of trying to subvert democracy. 3/n

It's great when all the major players (ruling party, opposition party, and military) believe democracy is good in itself. If they don't, tho, then what matters most are their beliefs about how easily they can seize power and how costly it would be to try and fail. 4/n

I think it's pretty clear that many key players in the GOP don't see democracy as a good in itself ("we're a republic, not a democracy"). So that shifts their attention to their ability to usurp power and the costs of trying and failing. 5/n

Some of the GOP's strategies for usurping power, like voter suppression, involve marginal gains and are generally pursued within legal bounds. They are anti-democratic, but not flatly undemocratic. 6/n

What we've seen over the last two months, though, is a qualitative jump into undemocratic territory. Since losing the election, Trump has tried to overturn that results in increasingly desperate ways that amount to an attempted executive coup, a.k.a. autogolpe. 7/n

The initial legal challenges were anti-democratic. The calls and threats to state officials were undemocratic and are where, for me, the attempted autogolpe begins. 8/n

By late December, it was clear that strategy was failing. That's when Trump seems to have decided to egg on the far-right organizations that were already mobilizing on his behalf, seeking to find a way to keep Trump in office and gain control of the GOP writ large. 9/n

In other words, I think that Trump chose to push protesters toward insurrection because he saw the threat of their violence as leverage he could use to try to salvage his failing autogolpe. And lots of his GOP counterparts played along. 10/n

Crucially, and to @henryfarrell's point about the normalization of this kind of politics in recent years, I think Trump and co. also figured their would be little consequence for trying and failing. I.e., a failed putsch would be cheap, at least for them personally. 11/n

This is why it's so important to punish them. That kind of Republican isn't suddenly going to see democracy as a good in itself. So, if you want to deter them from trying this crap again, you have to change their expectations about how painful it will be to try again & fail. /end