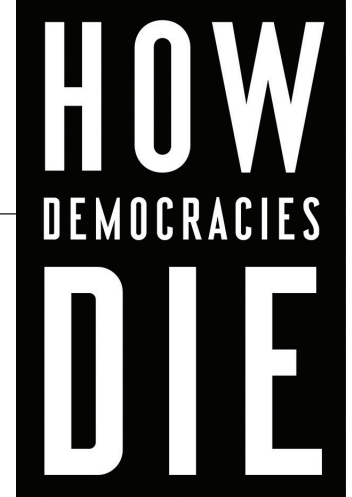


How Democracies Die

by Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt

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"We're already awash in public indignation—what we desperately need is a sober, dispassionate look at the current state of affairs. Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt, two of the most respected scholars in the field of democracy studies, offer just that." —*The Washington Post*

about the book

Donald Trump's presidency has raised a question that many of us never thought we'd be asking: Is our democracy in danger? Harvard professors Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt have spent more than twenty years studying the breakdown of democracies in Europe and Latin America, and they believe the answer is yes. Democracy no longer ends with a bang—in a revolution or military coup—but with a whimper: the slow, steady weakening of critical institutions, such as the judiciary and the press, and the gradual erosion of long-standing political norms. The good news is that there are several exit ramps on the road to authoritarianism. The bad news is that, by electing Trump, we have already passed the first one.

Drawing on decades of research and a wide range of historical and global examples, from 1930s Europe to contemporary Hungary, Turkey, and Venezuela, to the American South during Jim Crow, Levitsky and Ziblatt show how democracies die—and how ours can be saved.

about the authors

Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt are Professors of Government at Harvard University. Levitsky's research focuses on Latin America and the developing world. He is the author of *Competitive Authoritarianism* and is the recipient of numerous teaching awards. Ziblatt studies Europe from the nineteenth century to the present. He is the author, most recently, of *Conservative Parties and the Birth of Democracy*. Both Levitsky and Ziblatt have written for *Vox* and *The New York Times*, among other publications.

note to the teacher

In *How Democracies Die*, Levitsky and Ziblatt analyze the demise of Latin American and European democracies throughout the twentieth century, as well as American political crises, to evaluate the potential for democratic collapse in the United States. The authors argue that American democracy is not exceptional, and that the Constitution alone is not sufficient to preserve it. Democracy depends, as it has across the globe, on established political norms, gatekeeping, and alliances that transcend polarization. By illustrating how the election of an authoritarian ruler can lead to the gradual breakdown of the system meant to rein him in, and by drawing parallels to the election of Donald Trump, Levitsky and Ziblatt offer compelling proof that democratic values in America are under threat. In response to this threat, they call for America to reestablish the norms that have undergirded its democracy throughout history.

recurring themes

The Importance of Democracy: In addition to a more formal definition of democracy earlier in the book, in the final pages of the book the authors share E. B. White's "unassuming but inspiring" definition: "It is the line that forms on the right. It is the 'don't' in don't shove . . . Democracy is the recurrent suspicion that more than half of the people are right more than half of the time . . . It is an idea which hasn't been disproved yet, a song the words of which have not gone bad . . . Democracy is a request from a War Board, in the middle of a morning in the middle of a war, wanting to know what democracy is" (230). Why do the authors only offer this metaphorical description, and only at the book's close? How does this choice influence the tone of the text and the reader's understanding of what a democracy is? How do the authors develop the underlying assumption that the American democratic system is worth saving?

The Perils of Authoritarianism: How do the authors' "Four Key Indicators of Authoritarian Behavior" (23) conflict with the premise of a democratic government? How do the different examples of authoritarian rulers' paths to power (Chávez, Hitler, Mussolini, etc.) compare to that of Donald Trump? How are they different? Does the election of an authoritarian ruler cement a risk to democracy? Why or why not?

The Responsibilities of Politicians: The rise to power of authoritarian leaders like Mussolini, Chávez, and Hitler was made possible ". . . because establishment politicians overlooked the warning signs and either handed over power to them (Hitler and Mussolini) or opened the door for them (Chávez)" (19). Why might politicians partner with those they view as a threat to democracy? How does the failure of establishment politicians to distance themselves from extremists influence the opinions of the electorate? Within the party system, elected officials necessarily act as gatekeepers; though the cases of Chavez and Hitler show how they can fail in this role, the authors also caution against relying on "the collective wisdom of voters" (19) to preserve democracy, as they claim that this "assumes too much of democracy—that 'the people' can shape at will the kind of government they possess" (19). Do citizens in a democracy overestimate their influence? How, outside of elections, can the average citizen aid the gatekeeping process? How might the rise of a third party in the American system affect the roles of politicians as gatekeepers?

The Necessity of Norms: The authors argue that while the United States Constitution may be brilliant, the preservation of a democracy requires more than a guiding document: “Democracies work best—and survive longer—where constitutions are reinforced by unwritten democratic norms” (8). According to the authors, two “soft guardrails” of American democracy are forbearance and mutual respect. How do these two norms work? Why do the authors liken them to “guardrails”? At what point in American history did the degradation of these norms begin? What major factors have lessened the adherence to these norms? Conversely, how can following well-established norms stunt the evolution of a society? How can new norms be established?

Racial Exclusion: The authors explain that the upholding of political norms in the past has depended in no small part on an acceptance of racial inequality, beginning with the bargaining that drew the South back into the Union after the Civil War, becoming entrenched in the racist, exclusionary policies of Reconstruction, and “contribut[ing] directly to the partisan civility and cooperation that came to characterize twentieth-century American politics” (143). What events in recent years, specifically relating to race relations, have contributed to the degradation of “civility and cooperation”? How do politicians and the media influence the discussions surrounding racial equality? What role does President Trump play in influencing the rhetoric surrounding race relations?

discussion points

1. The authors close the introduction by touching on the importance of understanding history, both local and global: “History doesn’t repeat itself. But it rhymes” (10). How does the introduction justify the scope of their argument? What role does history play in shaping our understanding of the ideas presented in the text? Geography? How does education play a role in shaping the events of the future?
2. Politics and political systems persist, even as the issues they address change and presidencies pass. Will Levitsky and Ziblatt’s argument still hold beyond Trump’s presidency? Why or why not?
3. Many who hear the names Henry Ford or Charles Lindbergh remember their public triumphs rather than the ugliness of their beliefs as outlined in the text. What does this say about how Americans view the past? More specifically, what characteristics are they willing to ignore when it comes to “American heroes”?
4. The authors make the claim that “America’s great challenge” (227) is, in the words of Danielle Allen, to establish: “. . . a multiethnic democracy in which no particular ethnic group is in the majority and where political equality, social equality and economies that empower all have been achieved” (227). Is this type of democracy a possibility in the United States? What specific actions can the United States take to ensure a more multiethnic democracy? Who must enact these changes?
5. The authors argue that the evolution of the primary process is one way by which the gatekeepers of the political system lost power to the electorate: “. . . in adopting binding primaries, both parties substantially loosened their leaders’ grip over the candidate selection

process—opening it up to votes instead” (50). How does the primary process differ across the parties? How did this process contribute to the election of Donald Trump? Is the primary system too democratic? Should voters have the power to nominate presidential candidates or is this a job that should be left to the party leaders?

6. President Trump’s presidency is characterized, amongst other things, by his use of social media—specifically Twitter. How does this accessibility to a president’s thoughts, opinions, and stances shape public perception? How are his tweets related to the ideas expressed in the text? In what ways does his outlook further contribute to the disintegration of American democracy? How does his rhetoric impact the ideas of forbearance and mutual respect? Should future political leaders continue to use social media as a platform for sharing ideas and opinions? Why or why not? What impact does it have on their party as a whole?

classroom exercises

1. Write an analysis that identifies the main purpose of the text and include an explanation of how the authors establish and support their position. Conclude the analysis with an assessment of the strength of the argument and its timeliness and relevance.
2. The authors describe three possible scenarios in the aftermath of the Trump presidency (206). Dividing the class into groups of three, have each student in the group choose one of the scenarios and conduct research in order to provide evidence that their scenario is the most likely to occur. Each student should share their research with the rest of the group and attempt to convince them of the likelihood of their scenario; each group should attempt to come to a consensus as to which scenario is most likely to play out and should share their collective belief with the rest of the class. They should include in their explanation a prediction regarding American democracy and explain whether America is on a path to democratic implosion or the crisis can be averted.
3. Research the interactions between Trump and those Republicans with whom he has had a tumultuous relationship: Mitt Romney, Paul Ryan, Bob Corker, Jeff Sessions, Lindsey Graham, etc. How did their relationship to him change over the course of his candidacy and now presidency? Have those whom he treated poorly as a candidate chosen to align with him? How might these actions contribute to the idea that politicians cannot be trusted?
4. The text discusses the widening partisan gap and the role the media plays in widening that gap. Choose a politically polarizing topic and gather four articles from four different news sources. Ensure a balanced view by utilizing articles from both primarily liberal and conservative outlets. Read the articles and write an analysis comparing and contrasting the rhetoric and verbiage, point of view, and purpose of the articles. Conclude the analysis with a discussion regarding the importance of obtaining information from a variety of sources and suggestions for finding reliable and unbiased sources of news.
5. The authors outline many cases in which democracies have broken down outside America. Which of these examples most closely models the trajectory the United States is on? Write an essay that explains why the United States is or is not destined to follow the same path.

6. Research current political dialogue and find examples in which figures either followed or disregarded the norms of forbearance and mutual tolerance. Find examples of elected leaders who still uphold the norms and those who have disregarded them altogether.
7. The text notes both the decline of democracy and America's importance in its spread across the globe. Research the spread of democracy and the current state of democracies around the world. Write a position paper exploring America's role in the spread of democracy: What is the corresponding benefit to the United States? Should America actively propagate democracy elsewhere?
8. Attempt to assemble partnerships within the class between students who are diametrically opposed politically. Have these students first create a list of ground rules to govern their conversations and then have them determine where their outlook on political issues both align and diverge. Encourage them to share their stance and listen, without judgment, to those who disagree with them. Finally, have them work together to create an innovative approach to addressing the partisan gap beyond the classroom.
9. Two instances in recent history illustrate the impact of the Electoral College on the outcome of elections: the election of George W. Bush in 2000 and Donald Trump in 2016, both without securing the popular vote. Research the operating procedures and execution of the Electoral College process. Assume a stance on whether the Electoral College should or should not continue to be used in the United States. Write a persuasive essay supporting that stance; include an explanation of the Electoral College and its strengths and weaknesses. Be sure to acknowledge the opposite stance and the validity of the opposing argument.

resources

"How Americans see their country and democracy" ([tiny.cc/amerdemocracy](https://www.pewresearch.org/amerdemocracy/)): Findings from the Pew Research Center that reflect how Americans view the United States and its democratic government. There are many other insightful resources on the Pew Research Center's website, including a "Political Typology Quiz" and a "Political Polarization" interactive graph that can be manipulated to explore how political polarization has changed over a number of years.

"How the Electoral College Works" ([tiny.cc/electcollege](https://www.pewresearch.org/electcollege/)): A *How Stuff Works* podcast that provides an overview of the electoral system in America and the role of the Electoral College in elections.

"Study: On Twitter, false news travels faster than true stories" ([tiny.cc/MITfalsenews](https://www.mit.edu/falsenews/)): An article describing an MIT study that tracked the spread of fake news.

"The Chart, Version 3.0: What, Exactly, Are We Reading?" ([tiny.cc/mediabias](https://www.mediabiaswatch.com/)): A media bias chart created by attorney Vanessa Otero; information about the rankings and placement of the media sources can also be found on this page.

"Trump Twitter Archive" ([tiny.cc/trumptweets](https://www.trumptweets.com/)): A searchable listing of President Trump's tweets.

other works of interest

Fascism: A Warning, Madeleine Albright

A Higher Loyalty: Truth, Lies, and Leadership, James Comey

Evicted: Poverty and Profit in the American City, Matthew Desmond

Trumpocracy: The Corruption of the American Republic, David Frum

The Death of Democracy: Hitler's Rise to Power and the Downfall of the Weimar Republic, Benjamin Carter Hett

The Breakdown of Democratic Regimes: Crisis, Breakdown and Reequilibration, Juan J. Linz

1984, George Orwell

The Plot Against America, Philip Roth

The Color of Law, Richard Rothstein

Can It Happen Here?: Authoritarianism in America, ed. Cass Sunstein

about this guide's writers

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