

A Discussion of Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt's *How Democracies Die*

How Democracies Die. By Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt. New York: Crown Publishing, 2018. 320p. \$26.00 cloth.

Among the many scholarly attempts to reckon with the causes and consequences of Donald Trump's rise, few have attracted popular attention on the scale of Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt's *How Democracies Die*. Seldom do books by political scientists make it onto the *New York Times* best sellers list, but this one has, a testament to its broad influence. Levitsky and Ziblatt situate Trumpism within a broader comparative and historical context in order to assess its similarities to and differences from democratic breakdowns elsewhere, particularly in Europe and Latin America. Their broad argument is that modern slides into authoritarianism are not the result of revolutions or military coups, but rather the consequence of a steady erosion of political norms and the assault on such fundamental democratic institutions as an independent judiciary and a free press. In short, contemporary democracies die not as a result of men with guns attacking from outside the system, but rather because elected leaders from inside that system slowly undermine them. Judged from this standpoint, the authors argue that American democracy is now in real danger, and they offer a range of suggestions for saving it. How convincing is Levitsky and Ziblatt's analysis of democratic breakdown, and how well does it apply to the American case? How useful are the solutions that they offer for rescuing American democracy? We have asked a range of prominent scholars from across the discipline to consider these questions in the present symposium.

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Steven Levitsky's and Daniel Ziblatt's *How Democracies Die* showcases the potential of political science. It demonstrates the value of comparative work, bringing together scholars of Latin America (Levitsky) and Europe (Ziblatt) who use their knowledge of these regions to help us better understand what is going on in the United States. The book also proves that there is no trade-off between top-notch scholarly work and public engagement. Indeed, the success of the book reflects how much hunger there is for smart, accessible analyses of contemporary issues—and makes clear the disservice our profession has done by not explicitly encouraging political scientists to share the knowledge they have had the privilege to accumulate with the wider public.

What do the authors aim to accomplish? The “*How*” in their title is crucial: The book analyzes the means and mechanisms through which democracies become dictatorships. Although many assume democracies die “at the hands of men with guns,” Levitsky and Ziblatt stress that there are “other ways to break a democracy” (p. 3)—less

dramatic but equally effective, via politicians undermining the democratic system that brought them to power. When democratic death is a process rather than event, and there is accordingly no “single moment” when potential dictators make their intentions clear, it is difficult for citizens to recognize and therefore react to threats. By examining how this process has unfolded in Europe, Latin America, and elsewhere, the authors hope to arm citizens with the knowledge they need to identify when their countries are in danger.

Much of the book therefore analyzes how politicians have eviscerated the formal and informal infrastructures of democracy across time and space. The former are what most scholars and observers of democracy focus on: the institutions, with their checks and balances, or what Levitsky and Ziblatt refer to as the “referees,” that restrain politicians and prevent excessive accumulations of power—courts, constitutions, the media, law enforcement agencies, and civil society. They analyze the tools that would-be dictators have used to render these impotent, without “setting off alarm bells” (p. 92). For example, the book discusses how in order to undermine the independence of courts, the retirement age of judges has been lowered and obstreperous judges charged with malfeasance, enabling leaders to restock courts with pliant supporters; how frivolous libel suits or other trumped-up charges have been used to intimidate the press; how bribes or access to government

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contracts have been used to buy the support of business and cultural elites; and how constitutions and electoral laws have been changed to tilt the playing field in ruling parties' favor.

Tactics like these are well studied by political scientists and, when highlighted, probably recognized by most citizens as threats to democracy. Therefore, the more interesting and perhaps helpful part of *How Democracies Die* is its emphasis on democracy's informal infrastructure: the norms, unwritten rules, or what Levitsky and Ziblatt call the "soft guardrails" of democracy that "prevent day-to-day political competition from devolving into no-holds barred conflict" (p. 101). The authors focus on two of these in particular: mutual toleration and institutional forbearance. The former refers to the idea "that as long as rivals play by constitutional rules, they accept that the other has an equal right to exist, compete for power and govern" (p. 102). Mutual toleration is thus simply a collective willingness to disagree; without this, rivals become enemies, disputes become zero sum, and elections become extremely high stakes. Forbearance, on the other hand, refers to "patient self-control" and restraint (p. 106), a collective willingness to avoid actions that respect the letter of the law but violate its spirit. Again, drawing on numerous cases, Levitsky and Ziblatt show how these norms can be gradually undermined, stretching the rules of the democratic game past their breaking point and rendering democracy's "players" so aggravated that they may be willing to go to extremes or even suspend the game entirely.

Based on these criteria, Levitsky and Ziblatt conclude that American democracy is in danger, with Trump accelerating trends set in motion before his election. "When Donald Trump took office in January 2017," they argue, "the guardrails were still there, but they were weaker than they had been in a century—and things were about to get worse" (p. 175). Although they consider the role played by Democrats and Republicans in this process, they find the latter more culpable, arguing that since Newt Gingrich, the Republican Party has practiced a "no compromise, no-holds barred" (p. 150) style of politics antithetical to democratic health and stability. Taking this "style" to the next level and following a "familiar authoritarian script" (p. 176–77), the authors argue that Trump has pushed our democracy's formal and informal infrastructures to the breaking point. He has attacked our political system's institutions and checks and balances, exhibiting little knowledge of or regard for the Constitution; questioning the validity of elections and trying to weaken voting rights; assailing courts, law enforcement and intelligence agencies; refusing to openly condemn illiberal and even violent tactics used by some of his supporters; and using public office to favor his backers and intimidate his opponents. Trump has also assaulted our democracy's norms or "soft guardrails," throwing mutual toleration out the window by openly doubting

the patriotism and legitimacy of political rivals, civil society opponents, and the press, and using falsehoods and threats to rile up supporters. Institutional forbearance has also deteriorated, as Republicans have engaged in obstructionism at the national and state levels, and refused to even consider President Barack Obama's Supreme Court nominee in the run-up to Trump's election.

How Democracies Die's most obvious contribution, in short, is offering a concise, accessible master course in the means and mechanisms of democratic decline. But as with all great books, this one raises as many questions as it answers. The *How* in the book's title leads inextricably to the *Why*: Levitsky and Ziblatt focus on democracy's endgame and thus are naturally led to focus on elites. But if we really want to understand democratic health and stability, we need to study politics from the bottom up, as well as from the top down; in particular, we need to know *why* citizens become dissatisfied with and lose faith in democracy, setting the stage for democratic decline—and for that, focusing on elites is not enough. For example, the authors recognize that polarization lies behind many of the worrying trends facing our democracy today—but polarization is not merely the consequence of elite actions. It is also the consequence of long-term developments like rising economic inequality, growing divergence between the economic and social vibrancy of regions of the country; social and cultural divisions; the sorting of the American electorate into white, Evangelical, conservative, and noncoastal Republicans and non-white, non-Evangelical, liberal and coastal/metropolitan Democrats; and the organizational decline of political parties, particularly the Democratic Party, in many parts of the country.

If we want, in other words, to protect our democracy from dying, we need more books about *why* democracies die as well as *how* they do so. Thankfully, political scientists are engaged in this task and some are also, like Levitsky and Ziblatt, committed to informing the general public as well as their colleagues. (Recent work by Yascha Mounk,¹ Theda Skocpol,² Daniel Schlozman and Sam Rosenfeld,³ Julia Azari,⁴ and Lilliana Mason⁵ exemplify this trend.) Alongside the book's excellent analysis of how democracies can die, perhaps its most useful contribution may be encouraging other members of the profession to help create a new "independent variable": a more informed citizenry that can help counteract democratic decline.

Notes

- 1 *The People versus Democracy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 2018).
- 2 E.g., <https://terrain.gov.harvard.edu/>. Theda Skocpol and Alexander Hertel-Fernandez, "The Koch Network and Republican Party Extremism," *Perspectives on Politics* 14, no. 3 (2016): 681–99.

- 3 “The Hollow Parties” (<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/540f1546e4b0ca60699c8f73/t/58863924bf629aaf2532decb/1485191461216/DSSR+The+Hollow+Parties+23Jan2017.pdf>).
- 4 Regular contributor to “The Mischiefs of Faction” and author of *Delivering the People’s Message: The Changing Politics of the Presidential Mandate*. (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2014).
- 5 *Uncivil Agreement: How Politics Became Our Identity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018).

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Within minutes after Justice Antonin Scalia's death in February, 2016, a *Federalist Society* leader tweeted, "If Scalia has actually passed away, The Senate must refuse to confirm any justices in 2016, and leave the nomination to the next President" (p. 145). Within a day, Senate Leader Mitch McConnell announced there would be no hearings on any Barack Obama nominee. This is a prime example of partisan flouting of a long-standing norm. Old democracies die, Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt assert, when elected officials and political parties become highly polarized, break tacit norms of democratic governance, and refuse to enforce democratic guardrails. This time the Republican Party blocked Obama and soon confirmed a right-wing Supreme Court justice nominated by President Donald Trump. The argument: proliferation of such breakdowns presages an end to democracy, even when the formality of elections is retained.

The book is replete with such examples; it explains their sources largely in the political polarization and breakdown of guardrails by political elites. It is a fine study as far as it goes. Clearly, addiction to norm breaking has taken a huge toll on the ethos of democracy. The book should be read closely; its examples must be pondered, and its comparisons between countries are important. Nonetheless, it does not reach far beyond a political science study of electoral politics to probe deeper sources of the contemporary threat to America. Consider a few pertinent issues.

First, I did not find reference to the high probability that Donald Trump conspired with Russia—a hostile foreign country—to turn the election in his favor. If true, that would be the most extreme "norm breaking" of all, amounting to treason; it would result in impeachment, unless the Republican Party broke yet another norm and failed to act. It does not suffice to say that the juridical evidence was not settled when the book was in production. *Political* analysts must weigh the evidence and consequences of such a dark attack on democracy. Well before this book appeared, some of us said in print that Trump collusion "was highly probable," reviewing available evidence at the time.

Second, while representational politics and free, competitive elections are absolutely critical to democracy, they do not suffice. Another essential side of democracy involves social movements by activists who press the state, corporations, churches, localities, bureaucracies, and universities to act upon grievances and suffering below the radar of public normality and electoral politics.

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Numerous things the authors now support—open voting laws, racial equality, gay rights, women's rights, religious diversity, and action to respond to rapid climate change—*were pressed first by vibrant social movements that challenged the embedded norms, disciplines, interests, and vigilante violence that had blocked them.* Parties and political elites wheeled in later. That means that norm protection and revision cannot be trusted to elections, elites, and political parties alone. There is too little appreciation in this book of the vital role of social movements, hence insufficient respect for the bifocal character of democracy itself.

This omission is doubly important today, since Trumpites, if they were to succeed in quashing the Mueller probe and the last vestiges of Republican integrity, would soon move dramatically to block social movements on the left. When Trump roars every day that CNN and MSNBC report "fake news"—stealing the phrase from those concerned about evidence-free Facebook implants—he also signals the desire to take more repressive steps, if the opportunity arises. Note *Kompromat*, and the surveillance glasses worn by police in China today. Indeed, several of Trump's Big Lies against others provide tells about his own ambitions. Take the charges of "fake news," a "rigged election," and a "deep state" for starters.

Third, no citations appear in the Index to either neoliberalism or capitalism. That is unfortunate. For decades now, the dispersed white working and lower middle class has been caught in a bind between the neoliberal wealth/income-concentration machine and noble movements by the pluralizing Left. Its wages have stagnated; it has suffered underwater mortgages due to neoliberal collapses and harsh bankruptcy laws; it is hard-pressed to send its kids to college in an economy organized around higher education; its public schools have declined; its labor unions are weakened by neoliberal courts; and it has felt closed out of affirmative action. And on and on. If you define the white working class through the cluster category of relative income level, wealth, education level, lifetime earning prospects, inheritance, retirement assets, access to health care, and the ability to make ends meet within a neoliberal infrastructure of consumption, it is clear that a time bomb has been waiting to explode. Some of us have warned about this for years. It is important to say that other constituencies have been doing even worse. But the white working class, too, is a minority in need of attention.

Unless and until social movements and the Democratic Party attend to this constituency, things will be precarious. Yes, the racism and misogyny in sectors of it must be adamantly opposed, but as Trump's ugly incitements reveal, a large segment must be drawn into any dynamic movement to promote pluralism, democracy, and egalitarianism if these goals are to progress. This, too, is a neglected minority.

Fourth, after voicing suspicion that courting the white working class would mean discounting other minorities, the authors do note a few “universalist” policies to reach across constituencies. Social Security, Medicare, and a minimum wage are included. Good. But that list needs enlargement to include real job security, protection against corporate authoritarianism, legislation to strengthen labor unions, free public college tuition, better retirement prospects, and fair bankruptcy laws, just for starters. Reverend William Barber, Cornel West, Elizabeth Warren, and Bernie Sanders are fomenting such cross-minority movements.

Fifth, the authors say that democracies often die slowly. Yes they do. However, we now face rapid aspirational drives toward fascism: drives to create the deep state Trump purports to expose, to intimidate the media, to entrench white triumphalism, to merge with Fox News, to suppress poor and minority voters, to weaken labor unions, to flood courts with right-wing judges, to whip up anti-immigration frenzy, to test public tolerances of new cruelties, to collude with urban police, to encourage vigilantism, and to use real or fake security threats to intensify the base. Things are moving fast. Seeing it this way, we must ask ourselves what to do if Trump either closes down an inquiry that is boxing him in or a Republican Congress refuses to impeach and convict if evidence of conspiring with Russia to sabotage an election becomes overwhelming.

We are living through an attempt to assassinate democracy. I certainly do not say that things must necessarily break that way. Other possibilities are real, though they probably involve public mobilization on several fronts. However, the authors do not advise what to do if or when things take such a sinister turn. My own sense is that if they do concerned citizens need to foment a nonviolent, general strike: withdrawing from work, minimizing consumption for its duration, flooding town halls, taking to the streets, and lobbying institutional leaders intensely. I hope it does not come to that.

So I disagree with Levitsky and Ziblatt in some ways. I also appreciate their attention to the norms or ethos of democracy. I trust that across these differences, we will be aligned to resist efforts to assassinate democracy.

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How Democracies Die is an alarming book. The authors marshal their knowledge of democratic failure around the globe to warn us that American democracy is at risk under the Donald Trump presidential administration. They remind us that all democracies are fragile, including democracy in the United States. Through detailed retelling of the collapse of democracies in multiple countries, they outline the ways in which recent events in the United States resemble the pattern of the weakening of democracy more generally.

As the book's title suggests, the authors describe what it looks like when democracies die, and in this description lies explanation. They derive two key causes of the death of democracy from their reading of history: the evaporation of the norms of mutual toleration, "or the understanding that competing parties accept one another as legitimate rivals," and forbearance, "or the idea that politicians should exercise restraint in deploying their institutional prerogatives" (pp. 8–9). These norms form what they call the "guardrails of democracy."

Although Levitsky and Ziblatt argue that the guardrails of American democracy are broken, they are nevertheless hopeful that these safeguards can be repaired. They are deeply critical of choices made within the Republican Party, and suggest in their conclusion that Democrats take the high ground and restore the norms of mutual toleration and forbearance. They urge them to strive for greater inclusivity and racial and economic justice, rather than seeking retribution or revenge against their opposition.

This hopefulness derives from a view that humans are capable of doing enormous harm to each other, but that they are also capable of doing good. This is optimism, but it is deduced from their analysis of the past. They identify examples of political parties and leaders isolating and defeating extremist leaders, even when it means taking sides with the opposition in order to defeat an authoritarian (pp. 24–32). The book as a whole reminds us that the turn toward extremism and away from democracy around the globe is and has been a matter of human choice. Levitsky and Ziblatt argue that democratic institutions are fragile, but also imply this is mutable. And therein lies the hope. In other words, *How Democracies Die* argues that people created this mess, and people can also get out of it.

Levitsky and Ziblatt argue that the mess they seek to draw our attention to is bigger than populism, and bigger

than Donald Trump. This is a very welcome contribution, as perhaps too much of the blame for the ills of American democracy has been focused on this particular president and the 2016 election. Through their rich historical detail, the authors illuminate the ways in which the current weakening of democracy has been decades in the making.

At the same time, however, Trump does play a starring role in their book, perhaps at the expense of attention to others leaders, especially those in the private sector who have ignored the interests of ordinary people, setting the stage for authoritarian appeals to take root.¹ The choices of corporate leaders to move manufacturing production to foreign countries have depleted job opportunities in many communities. Shifts toward consolidation in the news industry have depleted the availability of local and state news. These choices are smart for business but detrimental to democracy.

The book is short on its attention to the contemporary media environment generally and the way it has enabled extremists to come to power by circumventing established party systems.² Outsider candidates can reach millions directly through social media, at little cost. These platforms privilege provocation rather than dialogue, rewarding posts or Tweets that draw attention and intense emotion through the mechanisms of "likes" and "retweets."

Neither of these shortcomings prevents this book from sounding an important alarm and also offering a fresh perspective on American democracy. One of the welcome turns it provides is the focus on political leadership. Too much of the conversation about authoritarian populism in the United States has been about the flaws of ordinary people. *How Democracies Die* turns our attention to the flawed choices and behaviors of leaders. The authors recount the occasions when mainstream party leaders in various countries accommodated an authoritarian extremist, only to be overtaken by such a person who then further wrenched the country away from democracy. They blame these democratic declines not on ordinary people but on the failures of leaders who offered up flawed and dangerous choices to the electorate.

We would do well to follow the lead of Levitsky and Ziblatt and give attention to elite failures, given that the field of political behavior has offered up ample evidence that measuring democracy by how ordinary people live up to mythical standards of civic competence is a fool's errand.³ *How Democracies Die* argues that it is elites who establish the norms that make democracy persist.

However, members of the public teach one another democratic norms and the identities that unite or divide us through their everyday interaction.⁴ So there is more of a role here for ordinary citizens than Levitsky and Ziblatt grant. I have found in my own work that the divides that we see populist candidates making use of are preexisting. The contemporary resentment among rural residents

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toward urbanites, for example, has been decades in the making. Even if politicians draw attention to or exacerbate such divides, these divides persist because people reinforce them through offhand remarks, jokes (Cramer 2016). Candidates' appeals to racism work because they resonate (Mendelberg 2001). Politicians of all stripes make use of social identities, arguing in various ways that they are one of us or stand up for people like us. These identities move us because they are basic tools with which we make sense of the world, including the political world (Cramer Walsh 2004). Politicians do not create the identities that matter in politics from scratch. They draw attention to the understandings that people already have practiced using with one another. Repairing democracy will require leaders to choose to emphasize the things that unite rather than divide us. But the work that citizens do to perpetuate divides requires some serious attention as well.

Nevertheless, Levitsky and Ziblatt's focus on the behavior among political leaders is an important step forward, particularly because they illuminate the way leaders' norms involve both rules and morality. The field of political science all too often separates the study of institutions from the study of behavior. One result is that we have done too little to understand the way institutions in the form of norms have a moral quality. We have moved away from studying personality and character among our leaders, and we have moved away from the study of great leadership. It seems that it is this resource that Levitsky and Ziblatt are diagnosing as the one that is in dangerously short supply.

Notes

- 1 Rodrik 2018.
- 2 Alvares and Dahlgren 2016; Mounk 2018; Waisbord and Amado 2017.
- 3 Achen and Bartels 2016.
- 4 Cramer 2016.

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These are trying times for democracy. Across Europe and Latin America, democracy is in retreat, with autocrats running roughshod over the ideal that political leaders serve at the pleasure of the people—not the other way around. This is America, too. Indeed, Donald Trump has much in common with strongmen around the world. Like them, the people beckoned him to power through the ballot box. Likewise, as is the case elsewhere, nationalism—white nationalism in Trump’s case—is at least partially responsible for his win. Further, the press is on the run, the political opposition is under siege, the rule of law is flouted, and there are questions about the fairness of the election in which Trump won the presidency. How is it possible that America, long seen as a beacon of democracy, teeters on the edge of autocracy? Equally important, how is it that someone so patently unqualified for the office, someone with such antidemocratic tendencies, is now the American president?

These questions serve as the motivation for *How Democracies Die*, written by a pair of comparative political scientists, Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt, who are experts on the rise and decline of democracies in other regions of the world. In a nutshell, they argue that American democracy is imperiled by the declining presence of mutual toleration and institutional forbearance. When practiced, they argue, these “unwritten rules” of democracy prevent interparty political competition from spinning out of control. According to them, these norms are often taxed by political polarization driven by socio-economic, racial, and religious cleavages. Remaining mindful of democratic norms, they suggest, will facilitate the ability to assemble coalitions spanning ideological, even partisan, divides, coalitions based on at least one shared interest: upending Trump’s America.

As comparativists, the authors turn their gaze toward examples of other democracies that eventually “backslid” into autocracy. Highlighting failed democracies, ones undone at the ballot box, not by the rifle, the authors suggest that the United States may well be the next Hungary or Poland if we do not get our collective act together.

Among other things, the book is a primer on how to identify authoritarians. Levitsky and Ziblatt identify four facets of authoritarian behavior: 1) rejection of (or weak commitment to) democratic rules of the game; 2) denial of legitimacy to political opponents; 3) toleration or encouragement of violence; and 4) readiness to curtail civil liberties of opponents, including the media. The authors argue that until the 1970s, when the nomination process became more democratized in the United States,

party elites kept demagogues like Father Coughlin and Huey Long in check. Democratizing the nomination process, the authors argue, ultimately paved the way for someone like Trump, an outsider, to succeed.

It is an understatement to say that this is a timely piece of work. Indeed, more of us should follow Levitsky and Ziblatt’s lead and bring our much-needed expertise to bear on issues of great public import. *How Democracies Die* is exceptional in its diagnosis of the declining observance of democratic norms, and how this informs our current predicament. Of course, it inevitably raises the question: How do we emerge from this mess?

Drawing on the lessons of other democracies that have confronted similar challenges, Levitsky and Ziblatt offer a menu of potential remedies. One entails the adoption of a relatively civil approach to reclaiming democracy in which progressive forces reject more contentious politics. Another solution proffered is the reformation of the GOP, something that includes rebuilding the “establishment” wing of the party while marginalizing more “extremist” elements. A further suggestion is that polarization may be undone through the implementation of social policy that addresses the economic inequality they believe helps to drive resentment.

These are all very reasonable proposals, ones that align well with conventional wisdom. Even so, they are difficult to reconcile with existing social science. Why? American exceptionalism—and not the kind with which we are most familiar. By this, I refer to how America is unlike any of the comparison cases on which the authors draw, with respect to the permanence of race and racism.

With the possible exception of Turkey, which enjoyed decades of experience with unbroken democracy prior to Recep Tayyip Erdogan, the rest of the book’s comparison countries were exposed to it (democracy) only in fits and starts. Even if we leave aside the *Herrenvolk* democracy that prevailed in the United States until roughly 1965, America remains a relatively mature democracy. Path dependence suggests that newer democracies are far more delicate than older, more stable ones, including the United States. Further, to the degree that democracies facilitate economic development (and vice versa), and the United States is the most economically advanced country, one would think American democracy to be among the most robust in the world.

That American democracy is unstable may seem surprising, but that is only until we take race seriously. As far as I know, the United States is the only country among those mentioned in which the inscription of racial difference and inferiority was written into the founding document: the Three-Fifths clause of the Constitution. Levitsky and Ziblatt are correct to identify the fact that partisan comity is coextensive with the removal of racial equality from the national agenda, and they are to be commended for pointing it out. (That it took two

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comparativists to place race at the center of American politics, when so many Americanists claiming to study American democracy fail to do so, is troubling.) But the depth of racism must be acknowledged, for it permeated every aspect of American life, and continues to do so. In fact, the three-fifths clause was the original compromise on which white America was made whole, not the Hayes-Tilden Compromise that unwound Reconstruction. Race, I believe, is why America finds itself in such a precarious, even embarrassing, position today. Whatever markers of difference other countries possess, they are hard-pressed to match the endurance and invidiousness of racism, a fundamental facet of American exceptionalism.

The centrality of racism to American life increases the degree of difficulty encountered by Levitsky's and Ziblatt's proposed solutions to the problem of American democratic decay. Consider their counsel against political contentiousness. When it comes to challenging racism, disruption was a useful tactic. In 1964, on the eve of the Civil Rights Act and Voting Rights Acts, the American National Election Study (ANES) found that 74% of whites believed that blacks were "pushing too fast" for civil rights. Disruptive acts, such as marches, sit-ins, and freedom rides, however, effectively resulted in the legislation that ended Jim Crow. They disrupted white business interests and brought "outside agitators" to the South, stirring things up much to the dismay of the powers that be. Even the political violence of the 1960s resulted in positive changes for the black community. Disruption, in sum, is needed in order to dislodge the embeddedness of racism.

Reforming the GOP is another of Levitsky and Ziblatt's proposals that is likely to run aground on the shoals of race. Consider their goal of purging extremists while reconstructing the establishment wing of the party. Postwar Germany, they argue, accomplished this with the formation of the Christian Democratic Union (CDU). Again, however, this is where America is exceptional. Unlike Germany, where the remaining extremists were small in number, the reactionary wing of the GOP effectively runs the party. Approximately 20%–22% of the electorate is reactionary, and 14% of the GOP conference belongs to the Freedom Caucus. As Matt Barreto and I have argued elsewhere (*Change They Can't Believe In: The Tea Party and Reactionary Politics*, 2014), this group is not conservative by any stretch of the imagination. Conservatives eschew violence; reactionaries embrace it. Conservatives swear by the rule of law; reactionaries can take it or leave it. Conservatives are pragmatic, willing to make deals; reactionaries are idealists, and refuse to compromise with their "enemies." Reactionaries are driven by a sense of existential threat, anxious and angry over the prospect of losing "their" country. Race is central to this belief. With the establishment in full retreat

and extremists ascendant, rebuilding the former while purging the latter is not likely to happen anytime soon.

Levitsky and Ziblatt also suggest that economic anxiety fuels some of the resentment that feeds into the polarization undermining democratic norms. For them, one way to remedy this state of affairs is to develop social policy that is more universal than means tested, as a means-based social safety net often results in the stigmatization of recipients. They argue for a more universal social policy, one based on the Scandinavian model. This is a solid suggestion, but one whose likelihood of achievement is undercut by the facts. First, racial resentment causes the *perception* of economic anxiety, not the other way around. Second, the Scandinavian model of social welfare only works because of the relative homogeneity of Scandinavia. Social welfare policies are less generous in more diverse settings, a fact that is supported by social science research showing that people are more generous with redistribution when the prospective recipients are of the same race. Such inconvenient facts make universal social policies all the more unlikely in America, with its long history of racial stereotyping and scapegoating around entitlement programs (consider the black female figure of the "welfare queen," which long predated Donald Trump).

For the sake of argument, however, let us assume the possibility of universal social welfare policy. Would this help solve the problem? I doubt it. Consider recent findings from another ANES survey in which 65% of Trump supporters reported incomes above \$50,000 per year, the median income. So, almost two-thirds of Trump support resides in the upper half of the income distribution.

This is not to say that all of Levitsky and Ziblatt's suggestions are hostages to race and racism. One particularly promising alternative they mention is voter mobilization. In general, Democrats already appear more committed to turnout compared to Republicans, but adding race and racism to the mix actually improves the likelihood that Trump's GOP will lose. For instance, in a recent poll conducted by Latino Decisions, approximately 70% of African Americans are certain that they will vote in the midterms because they see Trump as a threat to minority interests.

How Democracies Die is must-read for anyone—scholar or layperson—who is curious about how we arrived at this place in our history. Further, the work is easily accessible: not a trace of jargon. Finally, I thoroughly enjoyed the comparative perspective. It helps to know that other democracies have experienced similar problems. I am just not sure, owing to America's exceptionalism, that we can draw anything in the way of meaningful lessons from their experiences that might apply to our situation.

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The probability of two political scientists writing a best-seller is like the probability of Donald Trump winning a presidential election. But we are not in normal times. *How Democracies Die* is an extraordinary volume: well documented, beautifully written, and accessible to a general readership. Its message is clear: America's democracy is at risk because politicians are abandoning basic norms of toleration and forbearance, but a broad citizen coalition can save the republic.

Future generations will read this book as part of the great Trump Scare, a historical moment that forced American scholars to rethink the United States in comparative perspective. The Trump Scare has produced beautiful texts like Timothy Snyder's *On Tyranny* and insightful studies like Tom Ginsburg and Aziz Huq's *How to Save a Constitutional Democracy*. It has inspired projects like Bright Line Watch and the Authoritarian Warning Survey.¹ All of them share three assumptions that underpin this book: 1) American democracy is at risk, and it is not alone; 2) politics is about moral choices; and thus 3) our discipline must provide effective answers.

The End of American Exceptionalism. The 2016 election prompted the realization that the United States is not unique: "Comparing our current predicament to democratic crises in other parts of the world, . . . it becomes clear that America is not so different from other nations" (p. 230). Since the end of the Cold War, most failing democracies have not been killed by military coups but by elected leaders. Demagogues spill vitriol on their critics and then dismantle the democratic game in three moves: They capture the judiciary and law enforcement; harass opponents, independent media, and intellectuals; and alter institutional rules to lock in permanent advantage. After describing this process in other countries (Chapter 4), the authors show that President Trump attempted all three moves (unsuccessfully) during his first year in office (Chapter 8).

These comparative references help place the United States in perspective. America has had its share of extremists, but political parties historically played the role of gatekeepers. In the 1970s, presidential primaries transferred gatekeeping power to the mass media, donors, and interest groups. Yet celebrities easily bypass them (Chapters 2 and 3). Trump's rise, however, is part of a deeper historical trend. Basic norms of toleration and forbearance are in decline, assailed by "a syndrome of intense partisan polarization" (p. 167) that began with the GOP's radicalization in the 1990s (Chapter 7).

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Agency and Responsibility. A second theme central to the book is that political leaders have agency, and thus moral responsibility. Conventional analyses of democratic politics assume that political actors are morally equivalent and similarly constrained by institutional rules. Studies of democratic backsliding are forcing us to reconsider those assumptions.

Levitsky and Ziblatt propose a litmus test: Authoritarian wannabes 1) reject the democratic rules of the game, 2) deny legitimacy to their opponents, 3) encourage violence, and 4) are willing to curtail civil liberties (pp. 21–24). Chapter 3 shows that President Trump meets all four conditions. It follows that the American Constitution may not be sufficient to safeguard democracy—an argument echoed by Ginsburg and Huq's recent book.

The authors thus argue that two informal norms are central to the workings of democracy: toleration and forbearance (Chapter 5). Mutual toleration implies that parties accept one another as legitimate rivals, forbearance that rulers exercise institutional powers with restraint: "The American system of checks and balances requires that public officials use their institutional prerogatives judiciously" (p. 127).

The focus on toleration and forbearance is no doubt the central and most insightful contribution of the book. It also raises unresolved questions. First, the choice of the term "forbearance" is somewhat unfortunate because it blurs the concept recently advanced by Alisha Holland. For Levitsky and Ziblatt, forbearance involves restraint in the use of power; for Holland, it involves the selective enforcement of norms.² The two meanings are related, but future scholars will be forced to untangle this semantic knot.

Second, Levitsky and Ziblatt do not provide much guidance on the causes of toleration and forbearance. The book offers some historical insights about the U.S. case, but it remains unclear whether politicians embrace those principles because they have a normative commitment to democracy or because their policy preferences are moderate enough. This question will no doubt pose a central challenge for future studies.³

What Is to Be Done? The third theme driving the book is that responses to democratic backsliding should reflect our moral commitments: They should be nonviolent, operate within the constitutional framework, and rely on broad coalitions. Levitsky and Ziblatt join a growing chorus of voices—including the works of Erica Chenoweth and Maria Stephan, Laura Gamboa, and Srđa Popović—that remind us to do the right thing.⁴

The opening chapter builds on the experience of interwar Europe to argue that elites must isolate perilous leaders. Like Nancy Bermeo, the authors emphasize the elites' "distancing capacity" from extremists.⁵ The last chapter offers a plan for the United States: Urban progressives must build a broad coalition with business

executives, evangelical leaders, and red-state Republicans (p. 218). American parties must recast themselves along traditional European lines, with the GOP embracing a Christian Democratic ethos and the Democratic Party embracing universal social policies. The authors adamantly oppose the idea that the Democratic Party should relegate minorities to court the working class.

These calls give the book a hopeful tone, but this is an area where we need more empirical research. The issue of “distancing capacity” provides a good example: When is scorn from traditional elites a boon for populist outsiders? The authors acknowledge that Republican attacks against Trump during the primary “had little impact and possibly even backfired where it counted: the voting booth” (p. 59). Traditional elites confronted Hugo Chávez, Alberto Fujimori, and Juan Perón in the fateful elections that brought them to power.

Levitsky and Ziblatt’s book must be read as the prime example of a larger intellectual movement prompted by 2016. American institutions may prove to be dysfunctionally resilient, and the Trump Scare may be, in the end, unwarranted. But the consequences of this intellectual movement, I suspect, will shape our discipline well beyond the current administration.

Notes

- 1 Ginsburg and Huq 2018; Snyder 2017; <http://brightlinewatch.org>; <https://www.authwarningsurvey.com>.
- 2 Holland 2017.
- 3 On the distinction between normative commitments to democracy and radical policy preferences, see Mainwaring and Pérez-Liñán 2013.
- 4 Chenoweth and Stephan 2012; Gamboa 2017; Popović 2015.
- 5 Bermeo 2003.

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There is no shortage of blogs, books, and articles warning readers about the erosion of democracy in the United States and Europe. While *How Democracies Die* joins this chorus of Cassandras, it nonetheless breaks new empirical and theoretical ground. It is a must-read—for four reasons.

First, this book reminds us that when all is said and done, political leaders and not such “usual suspects” as socioeconomic decline, malfunctioning democratic institutions, and angry publics bring down democracy. This generalization seems as apt today as it was 15 years ago, when Nancy Bermeo fingered political leaders as the culprit in democracy’s demise in interwar Europe and post–World War II Latin America.¹ *How Democracies Die*, however, takes this insight about political leaders one step further. As the examples drawn from interwar Belgium and Finland as well as 2016 Austria suggest, democratic leaders—in particular, leaders of mainstream parties—have also played a decisive role in *defending* democracy from extremist leaders. A key issue for Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt, therefore, is whether political leaders decide to challenge or enable wannabe autocrats. What matters more to these leaders—their worries about democracy’s future or their hunger for power and policy? This is a question that many Americans keep asking themselves since January 20, 2017, as they watch the behavior of Republican members of Congress.

Second, Levitsky and Ziblatt organize their book around an important but all too rarely posed question: If political leaders that threaten democracy are always a possibility (as the U.S. Founding Fathers recognized), then what can democracies do to stop them? They offer two answers. One is to take preemptive action; that is, prevent such leaders from winning power. While public preferences are an important part of this equation, even more critical for Levitsky and Ziblatt is how mainstream politicians and parties react to this threat. Do they offer credible and effective alternatives to extremists? If extremists manage to attract significant popular support, do mainstream players bicker among themselves or find ways to work together to marginalize dangerous politicians and parties? The second answer comes into play if extremist politicians are elected. Are mainstream leaders and formal and informal institutions up to the task of defending the democratic rules of the game? How effective are democracy’s guardrails when democratically elected leaders are not democrats?

Third, Levitsky and Ziblatt take a rigorous approach to assessing how and how well democracies deal with

authoritarian threats. In particular, they draw upon the contemporary and historical experiences of a wide range of democracies around the world to generate an insightful and user-friendly checklist of threats to the quality and survival of democracy (see pages 23–24, 1–67, and 188). It is chilling that the Trump administration, especially through its words (which the authors rightly see as an important first step in the story of democratic backsliding), has already succeeded in checking off *all* the boxes, not even halfway through its term. What makes this exercise so compelling is how the authors constructed their checklist. They give equal attention to democracy’s trials in the past and the present; key episodes in American, Latin American, and European history; and challenges to the quality and survival of democracy that succeeded and failed.

A final contribution of this book is that it fleshes out the details of democratic decline. For instance, the authors argue that extremist outsiders threaten democracy not just because of their policy priorities, but also because their background leaves them with little patience for either the “grinding work” of democracy (p. 77) or the unexpected and binding constraints on what they can do, once they win the election and take office. Another example is the importance of forbearance as an informal norm in democratic politics. This is the idea that the cause of democracy is best served when politicians underplay, rather than overplay, their power. Finally, the authors are quite right in my view to see most leadership assaults on democracy as the product of many steps, largely unplanned, taken by key players interacting with one another rather than a plot, hatched and orchestrated, by a dedicated autocrat.

While the many contributions of this book recognized, there are two questions that I would pose to the authors. First, like most studies of the crisis of democracy in the West, this book pays scant attention to international influences on both the decline *and* the return of democracy. Can this be right? What about the role of powerful international actors in subverting democracy—for example, not just Russia in the 2016 U.S. election (and the Brexit vote in Great Britain) but also the United States in the case of Chile in 1973? Similarly, what about the role of powerful international actors in helping secure and restore democracy—as with, for instance, the European Union in the case of its eastern expansion after the fall of communism; the United States in the case of the “No” campaign in Chile in 1988; or, more recently, U.S. and European support for the electoral defeat of authoritarian rulers in postcommunist Europe and Eurasia (the color revolutions)? But international influences also include international diffusion. It is striking that episodes of both transitions to democracy and democratic breakdowns tend to cluster over time and across country—whether we look at the interwar period, the 1970s to the 1990s, or the last decade. If international diffusion is in play, then these

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episodes are not independent of one another, and comparing them becomes problematic.

The other question regards the authors' decision to place political leaders and political parties at the center of their story, whether they are interested in explaining why extremist politicians win power or, having accomplished that, why those politicians succeed in compromising and dismantling democracy. I see a much more important role for mass publics in both dramas. First, as Julia Azari has convincingly argued, a key threat to U.S. democracy today is the odd combination of weak parties and strong partisanship.² It is this combination that highlights the interactions among politicians, parties, and citizens that elected Trump and that have helped him destabilize U.S. democracy. Second, as Aleksandar Matovski has argued, authoritarian turns in democratic politics, as we have seen over the course of Vladimir Putin's reign in Russia, have a demand as well as a supply side.³ The trauma of political disorder and threats to national security can lead citizens to seek and support authoritarian rulers.

Finally, does it make sense to look to mainstream politicians and parties to save imperiled democracies when it was the failures of those politicians and parties that laid the groundwork for the empowerment of an authoritarian ruler in the first place? Perhaps it makes more sense to focus on an obvious strategy—that is, defeating authoritarian rulers at the polls—and ask why that happens. As we know from such cases as the Philippines in 1986, the “No” campaign in Chile in 1988, the Nicaraguan election in 1990, and the color

revolutions in postcommunist Europe and Eurasia from 1998 to 2005, it was people, not party power, that won the day. More precisely, it was the adoption of sophisticated campaign strategies and unprecedented collaboration among opposition leaders and parties, civil society groups, and ordinary citizens willing to vote and, if necessary, take to the streets that played the key role in returning these countries to the democratic path.⁴

Notes

- 1 Bermeo 2003.
- 2 Azari 2016.
- 3 Matovski 2018.
- 4 Bunce and Wolchik 2011.

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