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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.