How Democracies Die

by Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt

A Review by *Anne Armstrong*

The election of Donald Trump in 2016 baffled political analysts around the world and cast doubt on the strength of American democracy. The simultaneous rise of strongman politics in other parts of the world led many to reconsider the assumptions of liberal democracy. In *How Democracies Die*, authors Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt use a comparative approach to determine factors that have weakened democracy in America and created deep divides within the United States. The authors delve into the country's inception as a republic and outline defining moments in American political history. This research is supplemented with historical case studies from countries such as Turkey, Sweden, and Venezuela. Levitsky and Ziblatt describe how and why democracies have failed throughout history and the world. The authors then detail the institutions and norms that have sustained American democracy, how these institutions are currently under attack, and what must be done to preserve democracy in the United States.

Levitsky and Ziblatt are academics with extensive expertise in democratization theory and practice. Levitsky's background in Latin American politics and Ziblatt's specialization in European governance blend effortlessly in *How Democracies Die* to produce keen insights and pertinent examples. Their unbiased and comprehensive perspective allows them to draw convincing conclusions about patterns in democratic breakdown. The authors argue their case through a historical narrative, and successfully avoid the temptation to assign blame while remaining extremely critical of the United States' Republican Party. The result is a well-researched and well-argued critique of American democracy, a set of realistic recommendations for its preservation, and adds to the broader critique of liberal democracy in the 21st century.

Early in *How Democracies Die*, Levitsky and Ziblatt use several metrics to measure President Trump against current authoritarian leaders. These behaviors include rejection of rivals, indifference to civil rights, or a refusal to denounce violence; and were found to be prevalent when leaders such as Nicolás Maduro, Vladimir Putin, and Recip Erdoğan came to power. The authors conclude that

Donald Trump is not an autocrat like these infamous leaders but nevertheless has behaved undemocratically. Levitsky and Ziblatt emphasize President Trump's attacks on the judicial system and the media, including public criticism of oppositional judges and independent investigator Robert Mueller. evitsky and Ziblatt note the similarity between Trump's actions and actions taken by Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro against a Venezuelan prosecutor who attempted to investigate him. They also highlight a similarity to Ecuadorian President Rafael Correa's use of media attacks to sideline critics. By showing the behavioral similarities between President Trump and undemocratic leaders of less developed countries, the authors demonstrate how he is challenging democratic norms in the United States.

Two critical "guardrails of democracy" frame the book's argument: *mutual tolerance* and *institutional forbearance* (Levitsky and Ziblatt, 97). According to the authors, these norms are crucial as they reinforce checks and balances in the U.S. Constitution that prevent leaders from abusing power. Mutual tolerance is defined as the acceptance of political rivals as legitimate competitors and leaders, so long as they abide by the law. Institutional forbearance refers to the idea that politicians exercise restraint over their power, resisting the temptation to act in a way that violates the "spirit" of the law, even if their actions are technically legal (106). By accepting and respecting these norms, America's two major political parties can and have operated with civility. The authors use these norms as a framework to show how polarization rooted in racial and religious difference has shifted the country's political landscape, and led to electoral wins for populist figures.

Levitsky and Ziblatt show how these two norms have secured American democracy in the past and demonstrate how the same norms relied on racial exclusion to do so. This claim is significant: it suggests that the presumed collegiate nature of past American politics cannot be achieved in the future without rolling back civil rights. The authors contend that the "guardrail norms" were violated and American society became increasingly polarized as non-white voters gained rights in the United States. They trace the division to the Civil Rights Movement; specifically, President Lyndon Johnson's support for the 1964 Civil Rights Act and 1965 Voting Rights Act. These changes, in addition to the 1973 *Roe v. Wade* Supreme Court decision that legalized abortion, triggered a dramatic change in the American electorate. Vast numbers of black voters and white evangelical Christians entered politics for the first time. This shift would define the Democratic Party as "the party of civil rights" and the Republican Party as that of the "racial status quo" (169). The increased enfranchisement of black Americans therefore inevitably decreased ideological overlap between Democrats and Republicans and decreased effectiveness of the "guardrails of democracy." Nevertheless, the remedy to partisan polarization is not racial exclusion, and as the American voter base diversifies,

it seems that race has become increasingly divisive.

There is no question that the book paints an unflattering picture of the Republican Party, yet Levitsky and Ziblatt simultaneously maintain that the GOP is critical to maintaining democracy in the United States. To secure American democracy both parties must recommit themselves to upholding democratic norms, rejecting extremism—even at the expense of their party's power—and healing the polarization and resentment through civic and political alliances. Democrats and Republicans must identify the spaces in which their ideals converge without insisting on a political litmus test (219). Working together, these coalitions can strive for genuine progress.

Levitsky and Ziblatt gracefully guide the reader through the key institutions and challenges that have characterized democracies across time and borders. The authors are effective at using domestic and international historical examples to articulate how and why democracies become vulnerable. The book overlooked, however, key aspects of the contemporary political environment – namely, the effect of increased women's political involvement and the impact of foreign influences on U.S. elections. Levitsky and Ziblatt discuss how racial and ethnic diversification has impacted American politics, but they fail to address other changing demographics. As more women have run for office now than any time in American history,[1] and because female lawmakers are shown to be more efficient on average both financially and in terms of laws passed,[2] the absence seems like a critical oversight. The book also neglects to analyze the effect that foreign powers can and have had on U.S. elections. While perhaps published too close to the 2016 U.S. election to comment, the authors could have discussed misinformation campaigns as a contemporary tactic used by foreign adversaries to undermine democracy around the world. Finally, the authors' argument could be enhanced by applying more of the global examples they cite while developing the two critical norms. These comparative examples would place their argument in an international context and contribute to the larger discussion on the current global retreat from democracy. While these oversights do not detract from the overall value of *How Democracies Die*, they call into question whether the book's interpretation of American democracy is truly comprehensive – and if the observations are globally applicable.

The campaign and election of Donald Trump in 2016 challenged the United States' democratic institutions and highlighted their weaknesses. While still fundamentally a democracy, the country remains vulnerable to populist forces. The experience has jolted the international perception of the United States as the world's most successful democracy; in reality, the country is vulnerable to authoritarian threats like any other. Levitsky and Ziblatt explore the nuances of American democracy in *How Democracies Die* without softening these details. The book is not a validation of liberal political claims, but rather a thoughtful reflection on the trajectory of democracy in the United States and

how it can – and must – be safeguarded. Though the book's scope is focused primarily on the mechanisms of democracy in the United States, the lessons it imparts have implications for democracies around the world. As global democracy faces new challenges, Levitsky and Ziblatt's recommendations may prove useful for practitioners aiming to make democratic institutions more resilient.

Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die* (New York: NY: Crown Publishing Group, 2018), ISBN 978-1-5247-6295-7. $26.00.

ENDNOTES

1   Heather Caygle, "Record-breaking number of women run for office," *Politico*, March 8, 2018, https://www.politico.com/story/2018/03/08/women-rule-midterms-443267

2   Andrew McGill, "Would Electing More Women Fix Congress?" *The Atlantic*, August 23, 2016, https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2016/08/would-electing-more-women-fix-congress/495989.