How Democracies Die

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF STEVEN LEVITKSY AND DANIEL ZIBLATT

Steven Levitsky earned his PhD in Political Science from the University of California, Berkeley, in 1999. Since 2000, he has been a Professor of Government at Harvard University, where his research focuses on democracy, revolution, and political institutions in Latin America (particularly in Peru, Nicaragua, and Argentina). He is especially recognized for his theory of competitive authoritarianism—or countries in which leaders are selected through free elections, but incumbent authoritarian leaders abuse their power to ensure that they always win. He also directs several student groups at Harvard and the Pontifical Catholic University of Peru. He has also taught in Peru and frequently offers political commentary in the Peruvian media. Daniel Ziblatt also completed his PhD in Political Science at the University of California, Berkeley, and now teaches in the Department of Government at Harvard University. His research focuses on the history of democracy in Europe, especially in Germany, Italy, and the United Kingdom. Besides *How Democracies Die*, he is also widely known for his award-winning 2017 book *Conservative Parties and the Birth of Democracy*. He has taught in several European universities, primarily in Germany. Levitsky and Ziblatt have also written for news outlets including the *New York Times*, and they co-chair Harvard's Challenges to Democracy Research Cluster.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

In *How Democracies Die*, Levitsky and Ziblatt use numerous international examples of democratic breakdown in the 20th century to illustrate the dangers American democracy faces in the 21st. They tell the story of Chile's democratic collapse in the 1970s, the Fujimori dictatorship in Peru in the 1990s, and democratic backsliding in Hungary and Turkey in the 2010s. The authors also explain Benito Mussolini's rise to power in Italy in the 1920s, Hitler's in Germany in the 1930s, and Hugo Chávez's in Venezuela and Vladimir Putin's in Russia in the 1990s. And they make a point of highlighting lesser-known examples of countries that saved their democracies from authoritarian forces, like Belgium and Finland in the 1930s. However, Levitsky and Ziblatt's primary focus is the history of the United States since the civil rights movement of the 1960s, when a process of partisan realignment began exacerbating political polarization between the North and South, liberals and conservatives, and different racial, ethnic, and religious groups. In particular, as white segregationist Democrats and Protestants switched to the Republican Party and Black and immigrant voters flocked to the Democrats, each side gradually became more ideologically homogeneous and extreme. Political norms of compromise and restraint started to break down in the 1990s and 2000s, and by the time of Barack Obama's presidency, many Republicans viewed Democratic politicians as illegitimate and existentially threatening. By explaining this historical context, Levitsky and Ziblatt hope to show that Donald Trump's election wasn't a random or unpredictable event—rather, it was the product of historical conditions as much as of Trump's authoritarian, populist political style. In fact, there have been right-wing demagogues throughout U.S. history, but none of them has gotten the same mainstream political support as Trump because the major parties were never as willing to embrace anti-democratic tactics or as unable to overturn the voters' will during the primary process as the Republicans were in 2016.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Steven Levitsky's other most significant work is *Competitive Authoritarianism: Hybrid Regimes after the Cold War* (2010, with Lucan A. Way), which develops a theory of competitive authoritarian regimes, which combine nominally democratic institutions with authoritarian rule. Ziblatt's other major book is *Conservative Parties and the Birth of Democracy* (2017), which cites German and British history to argue that establishment conservative parties determine whether new democracies prove successful. Levitsky and Ziblatt cite numerous classic works of political science in *How Democracies Die*, but some of the most important include Juan Linz's *The Breakdown of Democratic Regimes* (1978), Arthur T. Hadley's *The Invisible Primary* (1976), and Donald R. Matthews's *U.S. Senators and Their World* (1960). Other popular political science books about democracy in the Trump era include Timothy Snyder's *On Tyranny: Twenty Lessons from the Twentieth Century* (2017) and *The Road to Unfreedom: Russia, Europe, America* (2018), Yascha Mounk's *The People vs. Democracy: Why Our Freedom Is in Danger and How to Save It* (2018), and Anne Applebaum's *Twilight of Democracy: The Seductive Lure of Authoritarianism* (2020). During the same period, many journalists have also refocused their work on democracy and autocracy both in the United States and around the globe. They include Masha Gessen (*Surviving Autocracy*, 2020), Ezra Klein (*Why We're Polarized*, 2020), and Michael Lewis, (*The Fifth Risk: Undoing Democracy*, 2019).

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *How Democracies Die: What History Reveals About Our Future*

- **When Written:** 2016-7
- **Where Written:** Boston, Massachusetts, United States
- **When Published:** January 2018
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Comparative Politics, American Politics, Political History, Political Theory
- **Setting:** The United States in 2017, various democracies and authoritarian regimes throughout Europe and Latin America in the 20th and 21st centuries
- **Antagonist:** Authoritarianism, the breakdown of democratic norms, polarization

EXTRA CREDIT

Biden's Guidance. During the 2020 presidential campaign, Joe Biden became an avid fan of *How Democracies Die*. He carried the book around on the campaign trial and started to model his campaign rhetoric on the book's recommendations for the Democratic Party.

The Pessimistic Scenario, Three Years Later. At the end of How Democracies Die, Levitsky and Ziblatt present three theories about Trump's legacy for American democracy. The nation might bounce back and recommit to democracy, fall into Republican-led authoritarianism, or remain extremely polarized and constantly on the brink of collapse. In 2021, after President Trump supported an insurrection that tried to steal the 2020 election for him, Ziblatt admitted that "things are much worse than we expected."

PLOT SUMMARY

In *How Democracies Die*, political scientists Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt examine democratic breakdowns around the world in order to assess the dangers that President Donald Trump poses to the U.S. political system. When they imagine the end of democracy, most people still think of sudden regime changes through revolution, conquest, or coups d'état. But since the end of the Cold War, democracies have mostly died in a slower, more gradual way, as elected leaders deliberately dismantle them to keep power. The authors worry that Trump will follow this playbook, arguing that like many authoritarian leaders throughout history, ranging from Mussolini and Perón to Putin and Chávez, Trump rejects basic democratic norms and attacks the institutional checks and balances that are designed to prevent him from abusing his power. He viciously attacks his opponents, promotes violence, and tries to manipulate election laws to his advantage. These "clear authoritarian tendencies" should trouble all Americans. But Levitsky and Ziblatt hope that Americans can better recognize and counteract these tendencies if they learn how they have played out in other societies across the globe.

In the first third of their book, Levitsky and Ziblatt focus on how authoritarians get themselves elected. Many start as charismatic, radical, populist outsiders, so they have to fight the political establishment to win recognition and legitimacy. However, the establishment often chooses to make "fateful alliances" with these outsiders in the hopes of neutralizing them and winning over their supporters. This usually fails: instead of bolstering the establishment, these alliances usually normalize and popularize the outsiders. For instance, German conservatives encouraged President Paul von Hindenburg to give Nazi leader Adolf Hitler the chancellorship in 1933 because they thought they could easily control Hitler and moderate his policies. Needless to say, the opposite happened: Hitler *became* the establishment, dismantled democracy, and seized absolute power for himself.

Instead of allying with prospective authoritarians, Levitsky and Ziblatt argue, establishment parties should identify and stop them. For this reason, they call political party elites the gatekeepers of a healthy democracy. Throughout most of U.S. history, these party gatekeepers have effectively prevented popular far-right extremists like Father Charles Coughlin and George Wallace from winning public office. But since the 1970s, the presidential nomination process has relied more on primary voters than party leaders. Along with the growth of independent conservative media and political donations from the ultra-wealthy, this helps explain why Republican gatekeepers failed to stop Donald Trump from winning the nomination in 2016. Trump clearly fulfilled the four key characteristics of authoritarian rulers: he rejected the basic rules of democracy, denied his opponents' legitimacy, promoted violence, and proposed curtailing his critics' civil liberties. But even though many of them recognized these dangers, Republicans gave up on stopping Trump as soon as he won the nomination. In reality, the election was close enough that prominent Republicans could have swung it had they endorsed Hillary Clinton—but they didn't.

In the next part of their book, Levitsky and Ziblatt examine how authoritarians attack democracy and how institutional norms can stop them. Using the example of Peruvian president Alberto Fujimori, they point out that authoritarian leaders usually don't follow a blueprint—instead, when they clash with the establishment, authoritarians lash out in an attempt to hold power. When they do attack democracy, they generally use three main strategies: they turn neutral agencies into partisan weapons, sideline their opponents, and change laws to expand their own power. Crises, like wars and terrorist attacks, give leaders a golden opportunity to use all these strategies at the same time.

The best way to stop these authoritarian tactics is through political norms, which Levitsky and Ziblatt compare to **guardrails** protecting democracy. The two most important norms are mutual toleration, which means that politicians

accept their opponents' legitimate right to participate in the political system, and institutional forbearance, which means that politicians respect the spirit of the law by refraining from using all their power. The opposite of institutional forbearance is "constitutional hardball," in which politicians push the limits of the law in order to get their way. (Classic examples of hardball are politically-motivated filibusters and impeachments.) When democratic norms are weak, polarization spirals out of control and opposing sides take increasingly desperate measures to seize power. This kind of "death spiral" has led many democracies to collapse, like Chile in 1973.

Next, Levitsky and Ziblatt look at the history of democratic norms in the U.S. and explain how they started to weaken in the late 20th century. Actually, toleration and forbearance weren't always the norm in the U.S.: in the early days of the republic and during the Civil War, each side viewed the other as illegitimate and was willing to destroy democracy in order to gain power. But during most of the 20th century, tolerance and forbearance *did* contain abuses of power. For instance, when Franklin D. Roosevelt tried to pack the Supreme Court in 1937 and Richard Nixon tried to sabotage his Democratic opponents in the 1972 election, Congress stopped them. In other words, "the guardrails held."

But this all changed after the civil rights movement, when the political parties changed their positions and constituencies. This created the polarized system that continues today, in which the Democrats primarily represent liberals, minority voters, nonreligious people, and the North, while most Republicans are conservative white Protestants in the South and Midwest. Following this polarization, democratic norms started to collapse. Nobody illustrates this shift better than Republican Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich, who viewed politics as a "war for power" and attacked Democrats and the media with extreme anti-system rhetoric. During Bill Clinton's administration, Republicans stopped exercising forbearance and started using powers like the filibuster and impeachment as political tools. In response, the Democrats also played hardball, and democratic norms gradually weakened. By the 2010s, Republicans were questioning Barack Obama's citizenship and denouncing him as an illegitimate president.

This gradual erosion of democratic norms set the stage for Donald Trump's presidency. Once in office, Trump immediately started using all three classic authoritarian strategies. He tried to turn neutral law enforcement and government ethics offices into partisan tools, disempower his media and opposition critics, and tilt elections in his favor through racist voting restrictions. But a year into his presidency—when Levitsky and Ziblatt wrote this book—democratic checks and balances had largely prevented him from succeeding. But this is little cause for celebration: authoritarian leaders can take years or decades to unravel the democracies that elected them.

Looking forward, the authors argue that three key factors will determine whether Trump succeeds or fails to dismantle American democracy: whether Republicans are loyal to him, whether the public supports him, and whether unexpected crises give him an opportunity to consolidate power. Regardless, Trump's behavior will further erode democratic norms by normalizing "lying, cheating, and bullying" in American politics.

In their conclusion, Levitsky and Ziblatt consider the future of American democracy. The U.S. might bounce back from Trump and recommit to democracy, but Republicans also might seize power, rig the system to keep power permanently, and pass a "profoundly antidemocratic" agenda to maintain white political, economic, and social dominance in the U.S. However, the most likely outcome is "democracy without solid guardrails," a polarized system in which constitutional hardball becomes the norm. This is already how politics works in several U.S. states, such as North Carolina.

To save democracy, Americans have to act urgently. Democrats should reinforce democratic norms and win power through democratic institutions. They must build new, diverse coalitions by implementing universal social programs that show voters what democracy can do for them. Meanwhile, Republicans should moderate their positions and restructure their party to give establishment leaders greater control. This is difficult, but it's possible—for instance, German conservatives did it after World War II. Ultimately, however, the American people will decide whether their democracy falters or endures. If they succeed, the U.S. can still fulfill its promise and become the most inclusive, equitable, vibrant democracy in world history.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

George W. Bush – George W. Bush was the president of the United States from 2001 to 2009. During his term, the severe partisan polarization that began under his predecessor, Bill Clinton, continued to worsen. Moreover, after the 9/11 attacks, Bush rapidly pushed through a series of policies restricting civil liberties, which, according to the authors, shows how leaders can take advantage of crises to amass power and weaken democracy.

Rafael Caldera – Rafael Caldera was the president of Venezuela from 1969 to 1974 and then again from 1994 to 1999. He allied with the outsider revolutionary Hugo Chávez to win this second term, and this helped Chávez become a popular mainstream politician (and go on to win the presidential election in 1998).

Hugo Chávez – Hugo Chávez was the socialist president of Venezuela from 1999 to 2013. After failing to overthrow the Venezuelan government in a coup d'état, he allied with Rafael Caldera in order to gain political legitimacy and went on to win

four terms as president. During this time, the nation progressively fell into economic crisis and Chávez increasingly turned to authoritarian tactics in order to hold power. For instance, he continued to hold free elections, but arrested his opponents and ensured that the media was heavily biased towards him. His presidency shows how nations can slowly drift to authoritarianism over the course of years or even decades.

Bill Clinton – Bill Clinton was the president of the United States from 1993 to 2001. During his term, Republicans in Congress largely abandoned institutional forbearance. According to Levitsky and Ziblatt, they started overusing the filibuster, investigated Clinton on dubious grounds, and impeached him for a personal scandal that didn't meet the traditional impeachment standard of "high crimes and misdemeanors."

Hillary Clinton – Hillary Clinton was the 2016 Democratic Party nominee for president. She lost the electoral college to Donald Trump, despite winning the popular vote. During the campaign, Trump repeatedly attacked her legitimacy and called for her imprisonment for unspecified crimes. According to the authors, these were clear signs of Trump's authoritarian tendencies. Clinton was previously the Secretary of State, a Senator for New York, and the First Lady of the United States.

Father Charles Coughlin – Coughlin was a priest who hosted an extremely popular political radio show in the United States in the 1930s. He eventually started supporting European Fascists and spreading antisemitism. Levitsky and Ziblatt use his rhetoric as an example of how far-right ideas have often been popular in U.S. history, but haven't gotten a foothold in national politics because of political party gatekeepers.

Recep Tayyip Erdoğan – As of 2021, Erdoğan is the conservative authoritarian president of Turkey. He was previously the nation's prime minister, but his government dissolved that office in order to reserve more power for the president. Like many authoritarians, Erdoğan has extensively repressed his opposition and the media, and he has exploited crises (like ISIS terror attacks) to justify permanent, self-serving changes to the Turkish system of government.

Henry Ford – Henry Ford was a popular businessman, antisemitic conspiracy theorist, and aspiring politician in the first half of the 19th century. Today, he is best remembered as the founder of Ford Motor Company, but in his time, he was a serious outsider political candidate for the presidency. However, he failed to garner significant support because major party gatekeepers rejected him.

Alberto Fujimori – Alberto Fujimori was the authoritarian president of Peru from 1990 to 2000. Levitsky and Ziblatt use his presidency as an example of why "democratic breakdown doesn't need a blueprint"—Fujimori never thought he would win the presidency, but ended up getting elected as part of the public's rebellion against the political establishment. Facing a number of simultaneous crises and significant opposition from the media and political establishment, Fujimori responded by trying to overrule congress and playing constitutional hardball. He ultimately dissolved congress, had his advisor Vladimiro Montesinos bribe other politicians and media figures in exchange for their support, and encouraged the military to commit crimes against humanity as part of its campaign against the Shining Path guerilla group. Fujimori's rule shows how crisis primes nations for autocracy and leaders can choose authoritarian tactics for pragmatic reasons, in order to achieve their agenda in a divided and dysfunctional government.

Newt Gingrich – Newt Gingrich is a Republican congressman from Georgia who served as Speaker of the House from 1995 to 1999. Famous for his exaggerated rhetoric and obstructionist tactics during the Clinton administration, Gingrich played a central role in pushing the modern Republican Party to the right and discarding congressional traditions of mutual toleration and institutional forbearance.

Adolf Hitler – Adolf Hitler was the infamous dictator of Nazi Germany from 1933 to 1945. While readers are likely to understand Hitler's role in launching World War II and orchestrating the Holocaust, Levitsky and Ziblatt focus on how he went from being a marginalized, extremist revolutionary to seizing power. German establishment conservatives chose Hitler as chancellor because they believed they could control him and hoped to benefit from his popular support among right-wing radicals. But their "fateful alliance" backfired: Hitler used the 1933 fire at the Reichstag (German parliament) as an excuse to eliminate his opposition, dismantle Germany's democratic constitution, and rule by decree. He is the most widely-known example of an authoritarian who rose to power in a democratic system, then immediately used that power to dismantle democracy.

Charles Lindbergh – Charles Lindbergh was a pilot and inventor who became internationally famous in 1927 as the first person to fly solo across the Atlantic Ocean. Later, he became an outspoken opponent of American involvement in World War II and was rumored to support the Nazis. He also considered running for the presidency. In Philip Roth's alternative history novel *The Plot Against America*, Lindbergh wins the presidency by conspiring with the Nazis and becomes an antisemitic authoritarian dictator.

Joseph McCarthy – Joseph McCarthy was a U.S. senator who led a congressional effort to blacklist communists, both real and suspected, in the 1950s. Levitsky and Ziblatt argue that this is one of a select few times that the U.S. abandoned norms of mutual toleration in the 20th century. In fact, the Senate eventually rejected McCarthy's tactics and formally censured him, which shows how strongly it was once committed to mutual toleration.

Robert Mueller – Lawyer and former FBI director Robert Mueller was the special counsel hired by the Department of Justice to investigate Donald Trump's possible links to Russian interference in the 2016 election. Trump briefly considered firing Mueller, which the authors cite as an example of undermining the democratic checks and balances on his power.

Benito Mussolini – Benito Mussolini was the Fascist leader of Italy from 1922 to 1943. Much like Hitler, he rose to power when establishment conservatives decided that he could help them inspire voters and unite the country. And as with Hitler, this plan failed—instead of empowering the center-right, it empowered and legitimated Mussolini and his Fascist Party. Mussolini used secret police to dismantle his political opposition, then went on to rule as a dictator for two decades.

Richard Nixon – Richard Nixon was the president of the United States from 1969 to 1974. He is best remembered for the Watergate scandal, which centered on his numerous abuses of power—like surveilling opponents, manipulating neutral regulatory agencies for political gain, and most famously, ordering a break-in at the Democratic National Committee headquarters. Levitsky and Ziblatt argue that Nixon is the only modern American president besides Donald Trump to have exhibited authoritarian tendencies. However, they note that democratic norms stopped Nixon's misbehavior: Congress investigated his actions and forced him out of office after the Watergate scandal. In contrast, with democratic norms weakened in the 21st century, Trump wasn't punished for abusing his office in similar ways as Nixon.

Barack Obama – Barack Obama was the president of the United States from 2009 to 2017 (and Donald Trump's predecessor in that role). During his presidency, the U.S. electorate and political system became more divided and polarized than ever before. Obama tried to encourage unity and reinforce democratic norms of civility and mutual toleration, but his Republican opposition painted him as an illegitimate leader and an existential threat to the American way of life. In response to Republican obstructionism in Congress, Obama also weakened the norm of institutional forbearance—for instance, he governed through an unprecedented number of executive orders.

Viktor Orbán – As of 2021, Viktor Orbán has been the Prime Minister of Hungary since 2010 and the leader of far-right party Fidesz since 1993. During his first premiership, from 1998 to 2002, he supported democratic rights and norms. But since his return to power, he has governed in an increasingly authoritarian style, changing election laws and replacing independent regulators and judges with loyalists in order to lock in his party's legal advantages.

Vladimir Putin – As of 2021, Putin is the president of Russia, a position he has held (with a brief interruption) since 1999. Notably, shortly after his rise to power, Putin exploited a series of military crises—which may have been of his government's own making—in order to justify consolidating power. Ever since, he has taken an increasingly authoritarian path, often by legally and sometimes violently eliminating his political opposition.

Franklin D. Roosevelt – Franklin D. Roosevelt was the president of the United States from 1933 to 1945. While he is widely admired for supporting Americans during the Great Depression through the New Deal programs and leading the nation through World War II, he also tried to greatly expand executive power and frequently broke the democratic norm of institutional forbearance. For instance, he tried to weaponize the Supreme Court by expanding it and packing it with loyalists, and he continued running for office after completing the traditional two terms. (He died just after winning a fourth term.) However, Levitsky and Ziblatt point out that democratic norms still prevailed in both cases, because Congress united to deny his court-packing scheme and pass an amendment limiting presidents to two terms. This demonstrates how strong democratic norms can check leaders' overreach.

Theodore Roosevelt – Theodore Roosevelt was the president of the United States from 1901 to 1909. He had a famously broad view of executive power, which scared many of his contemporaries. But ultimately, instead of trying to exercise as much power as possible, he followed the tradition of institutional forbearance set by earlier presidents (most importantly George Washington).

Donald Trump – Donald Trump, the central figure in *How Democracies Die*, was the president of the United States from 2017 to 2021. Writing in the first year of Trump's presidency, Levitsky and Ziblatt argue that Trump poses an unprecedented threat to American democracy. Namely, they argue that he has no respect for democratic norms, including mutual toleration and institutional forbearance, and he gladly challenges the legitimacy of democracy itself—including the electoral process and the nonviolent transfer of power—if it promises to personally benefit him. In fact, his "clear authoritarian tendencies" were obvious from the beginning of his campaign, and in his first months in office, he immediately started attacking the democratic, administrative, legislative, and judicial checks on his power. For instance, he demanded loyalty from FBI director James Comey and started pushing for more restrictive voting laws that disproportionately target Democratic voters. To help explain the kind of threat Trump poses, Levitsky and Ziblatt compare him to numerous other demagogues throughout history, ranging from authoritarian dictators like Benito Mussolini, Alberto Fujimori, and Hugo Chávez to far-right Americans who never managed to win wide political support, like Henry Ford, Huey Long, and George Wallace. The authors conclude that American politicians from both parties must collaborate to stop Trump's "profoundly antidemocratic" agenda—and should have banded together

long before to prevent him from being elected in the first place.

George Washington – George Washington was the first president of the United States, from 1789 to 1797. In the hopes of creating a durable, balanced democracy, he set the bar for presidential behavior in many respects. For instance, he introduced the norm of a two-term limit and the tradition of respecting Congress's right to legislate, while limiting vetoes and executive orders. In general, Levitsky and Ziblatt argue, he created a strong tradition of institutional forbearance for subsequent presidents.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Salvador Allende – Salvador Allende was the democratically-elected socialist president of Chile from 1970 until his death during a military coup d'état in 1973. He took power during a time of escalating polarization, and his attempts to promote talks between the left and right to preserve democracy ultimately failed.

Abdalá Bucaram – Abdalá Bucaram was the controversial president of Ecuador from 1996 to 1997, when the Ecuadorian congress impeached him on the dubious grounds of mental incapacity. Levitsky and Ziblatt cite Bucaram and Paraguayan President Fernando Lugo's impeachment trials as egregious examples of constitutional hardball.

James Comey – James Comey was the director of the FBI from 2013 until 2017. Donald Trump demanded personal loyalty from Comey as part of his attempt to "capture the referees." When Comey refused, Trump fired him.

Rafael Correa – Rafael Correa was the president of Ecuador from 2007 to 2017. He took many typically authoritarian actions in office, ranging from attacking opposition leaders to suing unfavorable media outlets.

Merrick Garland – Merrick Garland is a federal judge who Barack Obama nominated for the U.S. Supreme Court in 2016. However, in an unprecedented act of constitutional hardball, the Republican-led Senate blocked Garland's nomination. After Donald Trump's election, the Senate instead confirmed a more conservative justice, Neil Gorsuch.

Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt – Levitsky and Ziblatt are Harvard political scientists and the authors of *How Democracies Die*. They wrote this book to apply the lessons they've learned from studying global authoritarianism to Donald Trump's presidency in the United States.

Abraham Lincoln – Lincoln was the President of the United States during the Civil War, from 1861 to 1865. In response to the crisis, he oversaw an expansion of executive power, but Levitsky and Ziblatt argue that he generally used forbearance when exercising this power.

Huey Long – Huey Long was the radical, authoritarian governor of Louisiana (and later U.S. Senator) in the 1920s and 1930s. While he aspired to the presidency, Levitsky and Ziblatt argue that he would not have succeeded because party gatekeepers would have deemed him too extreme.

Fernando Lugo – Fernando Lugo was the outsider president of Paraguay from 2008 until 2012, when the Paraguayan congress hastily impeached him for "poor performance of duties." Levitsky and Ziblatt use his impeachment, like that of Ecuadorian president Abdalá Bucaram, as an example of constitutional hardball.

Nicolás Maduro – Nicolás Maduro is Hugo Chávez's successor and, as of 2021, the current president of Venezuela. He completed Venezuela's transition to authoritarian one-party rule by manipulating the supreme court and replacing the congress with a new body of loyalists.

Ferdinand Marcos – Ferdinand Marcos was the famously corrupt, authoritarian president of the Philippines from 1965 to 1986. In 1972, after an unexplained bombing in Manila, he declared marital law and exploited the crisis to justify changing the national constitution and persecuting his opposition.

Vladimiro Montesinos – Vladimiro Montesinos was Peruvian president Alberto Fujimori's close advisor. He blackmailed hundreds of Peruvian politicians and paid off every television network in exchange for favorable coverage.

Juan Perón – Juan Perón was the president of Argentina from 1946 to 1955, and then again from 1973 to 1974. Like many other authoritarians, he persecuted political opponents and weaponized the judiciary in order to keep his hold on power.

Philip Roth – Philip Roth is the American novelist who wrote *The Plot Against America*, a novel set in an alternative timeline where Nazi sympathizer Charles Lindbergh won the U.S. presidency in 1940.

George Wallace – George Wallace was the segregationist governor of Alabama who served four terms between 1963 and 1987. He repeatedly ran for president, and he was about as popular as Donald Trump in 2016. But he was unsuccessful because Democratic Party gatekeepers considered him too extreme and racist for national office.

TERMS

Compromise of 1877 – After the contested election of 1876, the Compromise of 1877 was an informal agreement that the Democrats would give Republican candidate Rutherford B. Hayes the presidency, so long as Hayes agreed to remove all federal troops from the South. This ended the Reconstruction era and allowed white segregationist Democrats to take over most Southern states, where they passed the strict laws that prevented virtually all Black citizens from voting until the civil rights movement in the 1960s.

Constitutional Hardball – Constitutional hardball is the political

strategy of doing everything possible to win power, even if it means pushing the limits of the constitution and abandoning democratic norms. The opposite of constitutional hardball is institutional forbearance.

Coup d'état – A coup d'état is a violent overthrow of a government, often by a small group of political or military leaders.

Filibuster – The filibuster is a procedural rule in the U.S. Senate that allows any senator to block voting on legislation unless three-fifths of the Senate overrides them. Senators have used the filibuster more and more often since the 1990s, to the point that much legislation now requires sixty votes to pass through the Senate. **Levitsky and Ziblatt** cite this misuse of the filibuster as evidence that institutional forbearance is weakening in U.S. politics.

Gatekeeping – In politics, gatekeeping refers to political parties' power to select certain candidates, which gives them the platform and legitimacy they need to succeed in elections.

Institutional Forbearance – Institutional forbearance is the norm that politicians exercise restraint in using their legal powers, in order to respect the spirit of the law and protect legitimate democracy. According to **Levitsky and Ziblatt**, institutional forbearance is one of the two key norms in a democracy, along with mutual toleration. The opposite of institutional forbearance is constitutional hardball.

Invisible Primary – The invisible primary is the informal selection process through which political parties give their favored candidates the resources and publicity they need to launch a viable presidential bid. However, in the 21st century, the invisible primary is decreasingly important because wealthy celebrity candidates like **Donald Trump** can fund their campaigns and command attention on their own.

Mutual Toleration – Mutual toleration is the democratic norm that politicians recognize their opposition as legitimate rivals for power. **Levitsky and Ziblatt** argue that, along with institutional forbearance, mutual toleration is one of the two key norms that holds democracies together.

THEMES

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AMERICAN TYRANNY

Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt, political scientists at Harvard who are experts on authoritarianism, wrote *How Democracies Die* in the first year of Donald Trump's presidency to answer a fundamental question about 21st century American politics: "Is our democracy in danger?" They answered yes. While the U.S.'s democratic institutions were still intact, the nation faced a unique and unprecedented threat from Donald Trump's extreme, intolerant, anti-democratic style of politics. With its democratic norms and **guardrails** already weakened, the U.S. was beginning to look remarkably similar to other democracies on the brink of collapse—like Chile in the 1970s, Venezuela in the 1990s, or even Germany in the 1930s. And Trump threatened to push it over the edge. The authors argue that Donald Trump's "clear authoritarian tendencies" posed a clear and present danger to U.S. democracy, and it was up to Americans—voters as well as politicians—to stop him.

During the 2016 election process, Donald Trump displayed all four of Levitsky and Ziblatt's main warning signs of authoritarianism, signaling that he posed a threat to American democracy. First, Trump rejected the basic rules of democracy—most importantly, he questioned the free and fair electoral system by making up claims of voter fraud. Elections are the cornerstone of democracy because they make the government reflect the people's will. By rejecting them, Trump encouraged Americans to hand him power through anti-democratic means. Second, Trump denied his opponents' legitimacy—for instance, he argued that Barack Obama wasn't born in the U.S. and called for Hillary Clinton to be locked up in prison. He thereby positioned himself as the only legitimate candidate, an idea that he could have used to justify rejecting the election results. Third, Trump supported violence among his followers (most notably at his campaign rallies). This was troubling because democracy relies on the peaceful transfer of power to the winner of legitimate elections. Fourth and finally, Trump publicly supported restricting his critics' civil liberties. For instance, he called for censoring and prosecuting the press. But critics and the media hold leaders accountable for their actions—by attacking them, Trump tried to avoid this public accountability. Levitsky and Ziblatt note that Trump is the only "major presidential candidate in modern U.S. history" to meet more than one of these four criteria. This is why, in their view, he poses a unique threat to democracy in the U.S.

Sure enough, once he entered office, Donald Trump acted like an authoritarian: he tried to consolidate power and dismantle democracy through three classic authoritarian strategies. First, he tried to "capture the referees"—or turn neutral agencies into partisan weapons. For instance, he asked for personal favors from FBI director James Comey and attacked the Office of Government Ethics. Instead of letting neutral agencies perform formal oversight, which would prevent him from abusing his power, Trump wanted to use their oversight power against his opponents. That was his second authoritarian tendency: he tried to "sideline the opposition" through the law. For instance, he tried to file legal cases against unfavorable journalists,

Democratic politicians, and "sanctuary cities." By eliminating their critics and rivals for power, authoritarians increase their own chances of maintaining power. Third and finally, Trump tried "to tilt the playing field," or change laws to help him stay in power. Most importantly, he pushed for states to pass voting restrictions targeting Democratic voters. He hoped that this legislation would bias elections in his favor. In Levitsky and Ziblatt's analysis, Trump's behavior in office showed that he cared more about maintaining power than preserving democracy.

While Trump clearly attempted to dismantle American democracy, Levitsky and Ziblatt argue, American voters and politicians determined whether he would succeed. First, Republican gatekeepers had the power to stop Trump, both during the election and once he took office. They could have more forcefully rejected his demagogic tendencies, endorsed Hillary Clinton in the election, or voted against his anti-democratic policies. However, they failed: instead, they tolerated, normalized, and eventually supported him. Next, the Democrats could also stop the U.S.'s slide into authoritarianism by building nationwide support for democracy and democratic norms. Even if Trump didn't win reelection, the authors argue, he would leave a dangerous legacy of broken democratic norms and distrust in democracy. Levitsky and Ziblatt argue that the Democrats should focus on repairing this legacy by winning back power through institutions, addressing economic inequality, and clearly articulating the value of democratic norms like mutual toleration and institutional forbearance to voters. Finally, the public could also block Trump's authoritarian agenda by turning against him. When public opinion favors authoritarian leaders, Levitsky and Ziblatt note, opponents soften their criticism and the leaders become emboldened. But by mounting a consistent campaign of public opposition, citizens could make each step in Trump's agenda harder to achieve. Writing in the first year of Trump's presidency, Levitsky and Ziblatt note that his earliest attempts to dismantle democracy were largely unsuccessful. But this didn't make them any less dangerous—after all, many democracies collapse piecemeal, over the course of years. Levitsky and Ziblatt conclude that Americans ought to firmly and consistently oppose Trump's agenda for as long as he continues to threaten democracy.

In their final chapter, the authors look at three different possible outcomes for Donald Trump's presidency. First, the nation might bounce back and recommit to building a diverse, inclusive democracy. Second, the Republican Party might seize perpetual control of the U.S. government and pursue a white nationalist agenda, attacking minority groups and immigrants in an effort to keep the U.S. majority white and Protestant. Finally, democratic norms might continue to fade, and the nation might keep growing more polarized and extreme. The choice is up to Americans themselves. Since Levitsky and Ziblatt published this book in 2018, Trump's term in office has ended and Americans can decide for themselves how he has affected democratic norms, institutions, and attitudes in the United States.

AUTHORITARIANISM VS. DEMOCRATIC NORMS

For centuries, democracies most often died in spectacular, decisive moments, through revolutions, wars, and coups d'état. But Levitsky and Ziblatt point out that, since the end of the Cold War, authoritarian leaders are more likely to gain power through elections than violent takeovers. Paradoxically, they then use democratic institutions to dismantle democracy itself. But even when they're dead-set on doing so, other members of the government can stop them. In fact, this is why the U.S. Constitution sets up checks and balances among different branches of government. However, for these checks and balances to work, they have to be upheld by "shared beliefs and practices"—or informal democratic norms. Levitsky and Ziblatt argue that democracy's survival depends on whether these norms—particularly mutual toleration and institutional forbearance—are strong enough to stop and contain an authoritarian's power grabs.

Levitsky and Ziblatt argue that the cornerstone of effective democracy isn't institutional checks and balances, but rather the informal norms that govern politicians' behavior. The first key democratic norm is *mutual toleration*, which means that politicians accept their opponents as legitimate participants in the democratic system, or "rivals rather than enemies." Mutual toleration encourages politicians to preserve democratic rules and procedures, no matter how much they disagree, because it promises that their opponents will do the same. When both sides agree that the game is fair and legitimate, then neither side will destroy democracy in order to win power. The second key democratic norm is *institutional forbearance*, which means that politicians protect the political order by refraining from using all their power. In other words, they don't take actions that are technically legal, but that violate the spirit of the law—like impeaching presidents who haven't committed any crimes or filibustering every possible bill. When politicians exercise forbearance, they choose fair play instead of short-term gain.

The norms of mutual toleration and institutional forbearance allow checks and balances to function in a democracy. Without toleration, both sides view each other as enemies, which encourages them to go to any possible lengths to win—including anti-democratic ones. For instance, each side might try to steal elections or sabotage the other's agenda. Without forbearance, competing parties and different branches of government fight to increase their power, rather than balancing it with others. For example, a leader might

refuse to implement new laws or honor court rulings that limit their power. When both toleration and forbearance prevail in a democracy, however, politicians agree to play fair and preserve democracy rather than grabbing power. This is why these norms are "**democracy's guardrails**"—they keep a nation democratic even when some of its political actors veer dangerously off course. Finally, toleration and forbearance tend to work together: when opponents view one another as legitimate, they're more likely to refrain from doing anything within their reach to win, and vice versa. But when one side abandons toleration (and starts attacking the opposition) or forbearance (and starts taking extreme measures to win power), both norms decline together.

Elected authoritarians' attempts to consolidate power violate these democratic norms—but enforcing them is an effective way to stop authoritarianism. The first strategy that authoritarians tend to use to grab power is by "capturing the referees," or turning neutral government agencies into partisan actors. For instance, Peruvian president Alberto Fujimori had his advisor Vladimiro Montesinos bribe and blackmail hundreds of government officials in order to win their loyalty. But when toleration and forbearance prevail in a society, the "referees" know that they will face punishment for behaving unethically, so they refuse to abandon their neutrality and do the leader's bidding. For instance, when Donald Trump demanded James Comey's loyalty at the beginning of his administration, Comey refused and spoke out against the president instead. This shows that democratic norms can keep neutral agencies neutral and enable them to successfully do their job: checking executive power. Next, authoritarians try to strip their opponents' power. Leaders ranging from Hugo Chávez and Rafael Correa to Vladimir Putin and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan have fined, arrested, and shut down the opposition in order to prevent challenges to their power. But again, democratic norms can stop these abuses of power. Congresses will refuse to pass biased laws, the courts will strike them down, and law enforcement agencies will refuse to implement them. This is what happened when Richard Nixon tried to sabotage his Democratic opponents during the Watergate scandal: Congress recognized his anti-democratic abuses of power and pushed him out of office Finally, authoritarians try to rewrite the law for their own benefit. They pass laws to restrict voting, limit civil liberties, or otherwise expand their and their party's power. For instance, many authoritarians erase term limits or pack national supreme courts with loyalists. But democratic norms can stop this, too. For instance, when Franklin D. Roosevelt abandoned forbearance in 1937 by trying to expand the Supreme Court and fill it with loyalists, both parties worked together to stop his proposal and enforce democratic norms.

More than checks and balances or a well-written constitution, Levitsky and Ziblatt argue, democratic norms are the key fabric that serves to keep politicians honest and punish those who stray. Of course, the reverse of this is also true: when democratic norms decline, politics loses its guardrails, and politicians find opportunities to grab power through authoritarian tactics. While democratic norms seem to have contained Donald Trump during his first year in office, Levitsky and Ziblatt argue that they were dangerously fragile in the U.S. in 2018. With or without Trump, they think, the nation will move one step closer to autocracy unless Americans make an urgent, concerted effort to reestablish democratic norms in politics.

EXTREMISM AND GATEKEEPING

The best way to stop authoritarian leaders, Levitsky and Ziblatt argue, is by never giving them power in the first place. In many nations throughout history, this has been much easier said than done, because authoritarians have gained power through undemocratic means like coups d'état and patronage. But in contemporary democracies like the U.S., politicians and voters have the chance to identify and stop would-be demagogues. In particular, Levitsky and Ziblatt argue, this responsibility falls on political parties, which are "democracy's gatekeepers." Throughout history, these gatekeepers have frequently opened the door to demagogues in the hopes of winning greater public support. But instead of winning that support, they have usually legitimized the demagogues. Instead, Levitsky and Ziblatt argue, party gatekeepers should identify anti-democratic politicians and movements as early as possible, then stamp them out by expelling, marginalizing, and uniting against them.

Levitsky and Ziblatt argue that establishment political parties generally have the power to give or deny extremists power. This tends to follow an established pattern: extremist outsiders, usually on the right, build passionate followings and start to challenge establishment parties' power. Hoping to hold onto their fragile power, those establishment parties then form "fateful alliances" with the outsiders. There are too many examples of this pattern to count, ranging from Adolf Hitler and Benito Mussolini's notorious rises to power in the early 20th century to Vladimir Putin, Hugo Chávez, Alberto Fujimori, and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's strategies in more recent decades. To take just one example, Hugo Chávez was a disgraced, imprisoned revolutionary in 1992. But then, Venezuela's former president, Rafael Caldera, decided that embracing Chávez might give him another shot at the presidency. Caldera won with Chávez's support, then freed Chávez from prison. This gave Chávez legitimacy in Venezuelan politics. Eventually, it enabled him to win his own presidential bid and permanently take power away from establishment politicians like Caldera. This shows what *actually* happens when establishment parties embrace outsiders in the hopes of boosting their own electoral chances. By embracing Chávez, Caldera temporarily boosted his own popularity, but undermined Venezuelan democracy in

the long term. In general, Levitsky and Ziblatt conclude, "fateful alliances" between establishment politicians and populist outsiders tend to backfire—rather than boosting the establishment, they lend the outsider candidates the legitimacy they need to win power.

Instead of making such ill-fated alliances, Levitsky and Ziblatt argue, establishment party leaders should do everything in their power to keep unfit, anti-democratic candidates out of office. First, elites have to identify extremists—which is why Levitsky and Ziblatt list the "four behavioral warning signs" of authoritarianism: rejecting the rules of democracy, denying the legitimacy of opponents, encouraging violence, and restricting critics' civil liberties. Candidates who meet one or more of these criteria are likely to undermine democracy, but by identifying such candidates as early as possible, parties make it easier to stop them. Next, Levitsky and Ziblatt argue that party elites have to "isolate and defeat" prospective authoritarians. This means refusing to let extremists run for office on their party ticket and expelling them from the party when necessary. Party elites also have to expel extremist grassroots *movements* when necessary to maintain and signal their commitment to democracy. Where "fateful alliances" normalize and popularize extremists, the "isolate and defeat" strategy ensures they remain marginal and irrelevant. Most importantly, when extremists *do* make it to the general election, party elites have to work to defeat them—even if it means joining forces with the opposition. This isn't just in the national interest—it's also in the party's self-interest, because preserving the rules of democracy is the best way for them to have a better chance at winning elections in the future.

Successful gatekeeping would have kept Donald Trump out of the White House. There's plenty of precedent for it in the U.S. In fact, numerous right-wing demagogues have been extremely popular in U.S. history, ranging from well-known celebrities like Henry Ford and Charles Lindbergh to successful state politicians like Huey Long and George Wallace. Many of them had around the same level of national support as Donald Trump—roughly 40 percent—but never stood a chance of winning the presidency because neither major party would back them. But key differences in the 2016 election prevented gatekeepers from stopping Trump. First, the Republican establishment didn't have enough control over the primary-based nomination process to overrule Trump's popularity. Second, once it became clear that Trump would win the Republican nomination, virtually no Republicans broke with him and endorsed Hillary Clinton in order to save democracy. Had they done so, they would have preserved both American democracy and their own party's integrity.

But ultimately, Levitsky and Ziblatt conclude, the Republican Party failed to contain Donald Trump in 2016, then made the fatal error of embracing him instead. As the GOP increasingly becomes Trump's party, establishment Republicans are increasingly paying the price for their errors. The authors hope that, at the very least, this Republican failure can help gatekeepers identify and stop dangerous politicians like Trump in the future.

POLARIZATION AND INCLUSIVE DEMOCRACY

Donald Trump's presidency represented an acute crisis for American democracy, but Levitsky and Ziblatt argue that this crisis didn't come out of the blue: instead, it was actually a continuation of longer-term political trends. Since the civil rights movement in the mid-20th century, polarization has steadily worsened and democratic norms have steadily weakened in the U.S. Even absent a Trump presidency, this trend poses a fundamental threat to American democracy because it encourages both sides to seek power by any means necessary. Levitsky and Ziblatt conclude that, as American democracy has become more inclusive, it has also become more polarized, which has accelerated its decline. This means that, in the 21st century, Americans' great political challenge is overcoming polarization without sacrificing inclusivity.

The U.S. electorate and political parties have become more and more polarized since the 1960s due to a variety of social, political, and economic factors. First, the two major parties realigned in response to the civil rights movement. Both parties used to be "big tents" that included voters with diverse political views. But after the Democrats supported civil rights legislation in the 1960s, segregationists and white supremacists in the South started switching to the Republican Party. This created new ideological and geographical allegiances in the parties: liberals and the North went primarily for the Democrats, while conservatives and the South went for the Republicans. Rather than having to compromise and disagree productively, as in the past, the parties started to clash and grow intolerant. This tendency has become more and more extreme over time. Next, after the 1960s, the demographics of the American electorate also started to change. Black citizens finally got to exercise their voting rights, and they joined unprecedented numbers of new immigrants from Latin America and Asia in voting for the Democratic Party. Meanwhile, the Republican Party remained mostly white and Protestant. Because they belong to different "social, cultural, and ethnic bases," Democratic and Republican voters decreasingly empathize with one another and increasingly see one another as enemies. Two other developments have also accelerated these changes: independent media and the influence of money in politics. Independent partisan media has profited by pushing increasingly extreme views, and new rules that allow unlimited political donations have forced many politicians to appease ultra-wealthy donors in order to finance their campaigns. Both of these factors have loosened the traditional party establishments' control over candidates and

their policy positions—particularly among the Republicans, who, in the authors' view, have become much more extreme than the Democrats.

In response to the U.S.'s increasing diversity and growing polarization, its two major political parties have increasingly turned against democratic norms. From the early 1900s to the 1960s, Levitsky and Ziblatt argue, Democrats and Republicans largely held to democratic norms of mutual toleration and institutional forbearance. For instance, they refrained from using impeachment or the filibuster for partisan gain. Of course, this was only possible because both parties agreed to build a racially exclusionary political system based on white supremacy—neither wanted Black people to vote or participate as equals in the political process. Since neither party wanted a truly inclusive democracy, both worked together fruitfully, without feeling that the other side threatened their existence. But this started to change in the 1970s. Newt Gingrich played a key role in overturning democratic norms: he argued that the Republicans should treat politics as "a war for power," not a democratic process to produce effective policy. He started rejecting mutual toleration and describing Democrats as treasonous enemies. As these tactics won Gingrich attention and support, other Republican politicians followed suit. Since Gingrich's tenure as Speaker of the House, both parties have largely abandoned norms of toleration and forbearance. Instead, they have started taking extreme, anti-democratic measures to win power. For instance, both sides started overusing the filibuster to block the opposing party's legislation, and the Republicans impeached President Clinton without accusing him of "high crimes and misdemeanors," the traditional standard for impeachment. By 2008, some Republicans were accusing Barack Obama of being foreign-born, Muslim, and ineligible for the presidency. They claimed to want a "real American"—meaning a white Protestant—in the Oval Office. This shows how polarization around race and religion has led Americans to stop viewing their political opposition as legitimate, equal citizens. This polarization set the stage for democratic norms to collapse and Donald Trump to win the presidency on an extreme, authoritarian platform. In the future, Levitsky and Ziblatt argue, similar behavior will become more and more frequent unless Americans manage to overcome polarization.

To reduce polarization, restore trust in politics, and slowly rebuild democratic norms, the authors argue, the United States needs another great realignment so that people can find common ground across racial, ethnic, religious, and regional lines. In the past, this common ground was racial exclusion, but that model is no longer viable. The Democrats' challenge is to win white working-class conservative voters, not by deemphasizing minority constituents and replicating the racial exclusion of the past, but instead by implementing effective universal social policies that will win them a new, broader coalition. If they succeed, Levitsky and Ziblatt insist, the United States can achieve its great promise of building the first truly inclusive, equitable, multiethnic democracy in the modern world.

GLOBAL AND HISTORICAL PATTERNS

Many Americans believe that the United States is an exceptional nation. Whether they credit the Constitution, historical leaders, or a higher power, they think that the U.S. has a uniquely democratic political system that guarantees citizens more civil rights and liberties than any other country. But while Levitsky and Ziblatt agree that the United States's democracy is historically strong and particularly long-lasting, they don't think it's exempt from the forces that have toppled other democracies around the world. In fact, they argue that Americans' faith in U.S. democracy often blinds them to its failures and weaknesses. Rather than holding the United States apart as exceptional, Levitsky and Ziblatt closely compare it to other nations that have experienced democratic breakdown. They argue that, by learning about the distinct global and historical patterns in authoritarianism—and the strategies that have stopped it—everyday Americans and politicians alike will better equip themselves to defend democracy.

American democracy isn't unique: like other democracies around the world, it's also vulnerable to collapse. Many Americans credit the U.S. Constitution with creating an exceptionally long-lived democracy, which they believe will naturally overcome authoritarian attempts to undermine it. But actually, Levitsky and Ziblatt argue, the Constitution can't protect democracy against authoritarians. When they want to destroy a nation's democracy, authoritarians are usually happy to dismantle its constitution in the process. For instance, this is what Adolf Hitler did to Germany's strong Weimar Constitution in the 1930s. The framers of the U.S. Constitution built checks and balances into the U.S. government in order to try and prevent this kind of takeover, but they knew that democracy can never magically defend itself. Citizens and politicians need to come to its defense. However, Americans who see U.S. democracy as infallible are unlikely to actively defend it. Levitsky and Ziblatt are careful to combat this myth by comparing the cracks in U.S. democracy with examples from throughout history and the world. In fact, by simply taking a look at U.S. history, readers will see that the U.S. hasn't always been the stable democracy that many Americans imagine. For instance, in the early years of the U.S., the Federalists and Republicans both viewed the other as an existential threat and used anti-democratic strategies to fight for power. From the 1870s through the 1960s, Black people were essentially disenfranchised in the South, making Southern state governments deeply undemocratic. These examples show that undemocratic government has a long history in the U.S. But

Levitsky and Ziblatt argue that it risks making a bombastic comeback on a national scale.

Levitsky and Ziblatt also think that examples from other times and places can help Americans understand and stop the threats to their democracy. This is why they compare Donald Trump's rise to those of other authoritarians over the last century, like Venezuela's Hugo Chávez, Russia's Vladimir Putin, Turkey's Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, and the notorious Hitler and Mussolini. Authoritarians tend to use similar strategies to get and maintain power, so by understanding these patterns, Americans can better identify and stop anti-democratic politicians in the present and future. For instance, by learning how authoritarians like Juan Perón, Hugo Chávez, and Rafael Correa prosecuted and fined their political opponents in order to sideline them and keep power, Americans can understand why Donald Trump's threats to prosecute Hillary Clinton and fine the media are so dangerous. Other countries' stories can also help Americans understand where they stand on the road towards democratic decline. Levitsky and Ziblatt point to polarization during the 1960s and 1970s in Chile to show how partisanship escalates over time and eventually takes the **guardrails** off democracy. Meanwhile, outsider candidate Alberto Fujimori's unexpected rise to power in Peru shows how "democratic breakdown doesn't need a blueprint." These examples can help Americans understand their nation's own polarization and attraction to outsider candidates. In turn, they can help Americans predict and prevent authoritarianism. In fact, other countries aren't the only source for illustrative examples of authoritarianism. So is the U.S.'s own past. In particular, segregation in the South is a classic example of how authoritarian parties rig election laws to ensure single-party rule. By learning about this history, Americans can start to identify how similar tactics—like Trump's push for voter ID laws—serve to repress democracy in the present day.

Finally, other countries and times can also show Americans how to effectively *fight* authoritarianism. While there are "extremist demagogues" in every time and place, the authors explain, history shows how some countries have managed to keep them out of power. For instance, the authors note how Belgian and Finnish conservative parties stopped authoritarians in the 1930s through effective gatekeeping: they disavowed, expelled, and won voters back from far-right extremists rather than making "fateful alliances" with them. (Austria did the same as recently as 2016, when center-right parties supported the democratic Greens instead of anti-democratic far-right extremists.) These are models for how Republican gatekeepers can and should keep out extremists like Donald Trump. Similarly, in their concluding chapter, the authors cite Chile's push for democracy in the 1980s and Germany's transition to democracy after World War II as examples of how countries can overcome authoritarianism and polarization through political party reform. These examples show how the U.S. can restore its democracy in the future.

"History," the authors argue at the end of their introduction, "doesn't repeat itself. But it rhymes." By bringing their expertise as scholars of global authoritarianism to bear on the United States, they don't just highlight the patterns and warning signs that suggest U.S. democracy is on the road to decline: they also make a strong case for Americans to take their own history more seriously and learn about themselves by looking out at the world.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

DEMOCRACY'S GUARDRAILS

Levitsky and Ziblatt compare democratic norms to guardrails in order to illustrate how they protect political systems against anti-democratic elements. Just as guardrails protect people from falling off a balcony or cars from veering off a freeway, democratic norms can protect a democracy in its moment of greatest need. But most of the time, they just sit passively in the background, so it's easy to underestimate their importance.

Specifically, norms like mutual toleration and institutional forbearance protect democracies by helping them course-correct when authoritarian leaders take power. In short, when the majority of lawmakers believe in toleration and forbearance, they isolate and punish others who break from those norms. For instance, during three key moments when powerful politicians challenged democratic norms in the 20th century U.S.—Franklin D. Roosevelt's attempts to expand executive power, Joseph McCarthy's persecution of suspected communists, and Richard Nixon's abuses of presidential power to sabotage his electoral opponents—Congress united to stop and sanction the offenders. But these guardrails also explain why Donald Trump's presidency is so dangerous: the guardrails are no longer functioning like they're supposed to. Therefore, according to the authors, Trump genuinely risks pushing American democracy over the edge to authoritarianism.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Crown edition of *How Democracies Die* published in 2019.

Introduction Quotes

Is our democracy in danger? It is a question we never thought we'd be asking. We have been colleagues for fifteen years, thinking, writing, and teaching students about failures of democracy in other places and times—Europe's dark 1930s, Latin America's repressive 1970s. We have spent years researching new forms of authoritarianism emerging around the globe. For us, how and why democracies die has been an occupational obsession.

But now we find ourselves turning to our own country. Over the past two years, we have watched politicians say and do things that are unprecedented in the United States—but that we recognize as having been the precursors of democratic crisis in other places. We feel dread, as do so many other Americans, even as we try to reassure ourselves that *things can't really be that bad here*. After all, even though we know democracies are always fragile, the one in which we live has somehow managed to defy gravity.

Related Characters: Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt (speaker), Donald Trump

Related Themes:

Page Number: 1

Explanation and Analysis

In their introduction, political scientists Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt explain why they decided to write *How Democracies Die*. They are stepping out of their comfort zone by writing about the U.S.: Levitsky is an expert on Latin America and Ziblatt on Europe. Both primarily study the 20th century. But in the first two decades of the 21st century, their expertise suddenly became relevant to the U.S. While there is no single formula for democratic decline, there are clear signs and patterns that portend it. Polarization and Donald Trump have put American politics on this path, and Levitsky and Ziblatt feel a sense of civil obligation to use their expertise to try and rescue it.

In this book, Levitsky and Ziblatt cite their extensive research to make the case that American democracy is faltering. They know that "democracies are always fragile" because anti-democratic forces are always looking for a way to use the power of the state for their own benefit. This is why even the most robust constitutional democracies have collapsed throughout history. American democracy is vulnerable, too, but it's possible to save it. However, Americans will lose their only chance to do so if they believe in their democracy too blindly. By clearly understanding how other democracies have coped with similar problems, Levitsky and Ziblatt hope, Americans will learn to better assess the threats to their democracy and push for the reforms that are necessary to save it.

Blatant dictatorship—in the form of fascism, communism, or military rule—has disappeared across much of the world. Military coups and other violent seizures of power are rare. Most countries hold regular elections. Democracies still die, but by different means. Since the end of the Cold War, most democratic breakdowns have been caused not by generals and soldiers but by elected governments themselves. Like Chávez in Venezuela, elected leaders have subverted democratic institutions in Georgia, Hungary, Nicaragua, Peru, the Philippines, Poland, Russia, Sri Lanka, Turkey, and Ukraine. Democratic backsliding today begins at the ballot box.

Related Characters: Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt (speaker), Hugo Chávez

Related Themes:

Page Number: 5

Explanation and Analysis

Levitsky and Ziblatt recognize that many readers will associate their book's title, *How Democracies Die*, with bombastic political events like popular revolutions and military coups d'état. To help explain the threats to American democracy, however, the authors distinguish such bombastic events from a subtler but no less dangerous kind of attack on democracy. Specifically, elected leaders use their legal powers to dismantle the democratic policies, procedures, and norms that got them elected.

Today, "blatant dictatorship" and "violent seizures of power" are no longer common, but more and more governments use the other kind of tactics to attack democracy gradually, legally, and quietly. Levitsky and Ziblatt argue that, in the U.S., both major parties have been doing this gradually since the 1970s. And since 2015, Donald Trump has been trying to do it in earnest. To understand the specific threat he poses, however, readers must first grasp how backsliding has functioned throughout the world. Therefore, Levitsky and Ziblatt use examples from around the world in order to outline the model that Trump appears to be following and explore its effects on other countries' democracies in the last century.

> Studying other democracies in crisis allows us to better understand the challenges facing our own democracy. For example, based on the historical experiences of other nations, we have developed a litmus test to help identify would-be autocrats before they come to power. We can learn from the mistakes that past democratic leaders have made in opening the door to would-be authoritarians—and, conversely, from the ways that other democracies have kept extremists out of power. A comparative approach also reveals how elected autocrats in different parts of the world employ remarkably similar strategies to subvert democratic institutions. As these patterns become visible, the steps toward breakdown grow less ambiguous—and easier to combat. Knowing how citizens in other democracies have successfully resisted elected autocrats, or why they tragically failed to do so, is essential to those seeking to defend American democracy today.

Related Characters: Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 6-7

Explanation and Analysis

In their introduction, Levitsky and Ziblatt make a case for viewing the U.S. through the lens of comparative politics. Americans often view their democracy as unique and therefore resist comparing it to other countries'. However, Levitsky and Ziblatt explicitly reject this tendency. American democracy certainly has many unique traits, they argue, but Americans can learn a great deal by examining other democracies around the world. After all, Americans commonly believe that their democracy serves as a model for other nations around the world, which shows that they understand how different democracies can and do develop according to similar patterns. The same should apply in reverse: the U.S. can also follow the models set by other democracies.

This leads the authors to one of their book's central premises: saving American democracy requires adapting strategies that have saved other democracies and avoiding strategies that have imperiled them. And this is where their expertise comes in handy: they clearly understand the patterns in how "democracies have kept extremists out of power" and "autocrats […] subvert democratic institutions." The more data that political scientists like them can collect about the past, the authors think, the better decisions politicians and citizens can make for their democracies in the future.

> Many Americans are justifiably frightened by what is happening to our country. But protecting our democracy requires more than just fright or outrage. We must be humble *and* bold. We must learn from other countries to see the warning signs—and recognize the false alarms. We must be aware of the fateful missteps that have wrecked other democracies. And we must see how citizens have risen to meet the great democratic crises of the past, overcoming their own deep-seated divisions to avert breakdown. History doesn't repeat itself. But it rhymes. The promise of history, and the hope of this book, is that we can find the rhymes before it is too late.

Related Characters: Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt (speaker), Donald Trump

Related Themes:

Page Number: 10

Explanation and Analysis

Levitsky and Ziblatt close their introduction by repeating a popular saying among social scientists: "History doesn't repeat itself. But it rhymes." This captures what the authors hope their readers can glean from the historical record. History won't yield silver bullet solutions or perfect answers to Americans' problems today, but it can teach them important lessons that can strongly influence the course of their democracy. In fact, history is the greatest strategic resource that contemporary Americans have to save democracy, and Levitsky and Ziblatt have written this book to help synthesize it for them.

One of the most important lessons that the historical record has taught Levitsky and Ziblatt is that democracies don't save themselves: citizens have to act to save them. It's absolutely important for Americans to understand the threats that authoritarian politicians like Donald Trump and antidemocratic tendencies like polarization pose to their democracy. But understanding isn't enough: it has to be followed by action.

Chapter 1 Quotes

A cast of political outsiders, including Adolf Hitler, Getúlio Vargas in Brazil, Alberto Fujimori in Peru, and Hugo Chávez in Venezuela, came to power on the same path: from the inside, via elections or alliances with powerful political figures. In each instance, elites believed the invitation to power would *contain* the outsider, leading to a restoration of control by mainstream politicians. But their plans backfired. A lethal mix of ambition, fear, and miscalculation conspired to lead them to the same fateful mistake: willingly handing over the keys of power to an autocrat-in-the-making.

Related Characters: Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt (speaker), Adolf Hitler, Alberto Fujimori, Hugo Chávez

Related Themes:

Page Number: 13

Explanation and Analysis

One of the clearest and most dangerous patterns in political history is that, when the political establishment decides to collaborate with popular outsiders, its decision tends to backfire and undermine democracy in the process. For extremist authoritarians to legally get power in a democracy, they first have to become legitimate political candidates. The best way to do this is by running on an establishment party's ticket, or at least with well-known establishment figures' support. Accordingly, outsiders like Hitler, Fujimori, and Chávez all made alliances with establishment parties in order to gain legitimacy—and then turned against those same parties once they gained power.

Levitsky and Ziblatt's deeper point is clear: the Republican Party failed to learn from history. Republican leaders made the same mistake as German, Peruvian, and Venezuelan establishment politicians did when they embraced Hitler, Fujimori, and Chávez: they arrogantly let Donald Trump into the party because they thought they could control him. In reality, Donald Trump ended up hijacking the party and controlling *them*. Levitsky and Ziblatt see history repeating itself—but only because political leaders failed to learn from it. They hope that their book will help democracy's defenders succeed where the Republicans failed.

Potential demagogues exist in all democracies, and occasionally, one or more of them strike a public chord. But in some democracies, political leaders heed the warning signs and take steps to ensure that authoritarians remain on the fringes, far from the centers of power. When faced with the rise of extremists or demagogues, they make a concerted effort to isolate and defeat them. Although mass responses to extremist appeals matter, what matters more is whether political elites, and especially parties, serve as filters. Put simply, political parties are democracy's gatekeepers.

Related Characters: Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 20

Explanation and Analysis

Many citizens start worrying about the health of their democracy whenever extremist politicians start to become popular. But Levitsky and Ziblatt argue that such extremists don't always pose as much of a threat as they might seem to. What really matters isn't whether extremists become popular, but whether the political establishment gives them power. In a healthy democracy, politicians from all parties agree that protecting the system is more important than any substantive policy issue. Therefore, political leaders will proactively identify and stamp out newcomers who threaten democracy itself.

Levitsky and Ziblatt call this process *gatekeeping*, and they argue that successful gatekeeping is the single most effective way that democracies can stop authoritarian wannabes. It's almost impossible for governments to silence those wannabes at the source—unless they're willing to violate citizens' basic civil rights (and undermine democracy in the process). Instead, governments simply have to keep the gates of politics shut to extremists. In fact, this is why Levitsky and Ziblatt argue that democracy is inherently fragile: "potential demagogues" are always waiting on the sidelines, eager to win and abuse power as soon as the proverbial gate opens. Therefore, successful gatekeeping is a key indicator of democracy's health.

Building on Linz's work, we have developed a set of four behavioral warning signs that can help us know an authoritarian when we see one. We should worry when a politician 1) rejects, in words or action, the democratic rules of the game, 2) denies the legitimacy of opponents, 3) tolerates or encourages violence, or 4) indicates a willingness to curtail the civil liberties of opponents, including the media. Table 1 shows how to assess politicians in terms of these four factors.

Related Characters: Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 21-22

Explanation and Analysis

One the best ways to stop authoritarians is by never handing them power in the first place. Therefore, Levitsky and Ziblatt argue that robust political party gatekeeping is critical to the health of a democracy. In 2016, the Republican Party spectacularly failed in its gatekeeping duties, due to a combination of political shortsightedness and structural changes in the presidential nomination process.

To help future party gatekeepers identify and stop authoritarians, Levitsky and Ziblatt build on influential political scientist Juan Linz's research to come up with this set of "behavioral warning signs." Each signals that a candidate risks becoming an authoritarian if they gain power. The authors later expand on these warning signs in more depth, but they're all based on the same principle: the candidate puts their own interest in power above the collective interest in democracy. In addition to showing how historical examples can illuminate contemporary politics, this schema promises to help establishment politicians better protect democracy in the future.

Chapter 2 Quotes

In short, Americans have long had an authoritarian streak. It was not unusual for figures such as Coughlin, Long, McCarthy, and Wallace to gain the support of a sizable minority—30 or even 40 percent—of the country. We often tell ourselves that America's national political culture in some way immunizes us from such appeals, but this requires reading history with rose-colored glasses. The real protection against would-be authoritarians has not been Americans' firm commitment to democracy but, rather, the gatekeepers—our political parties.

Related Characters: Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt (speaker), Donald Trump, George Wallace , Joseph McCarthy, Huey Long, Father Charles Coughlin

Related Themes:

Page Number: 36-37

Explanation and Analysis

Many Americans erroneously believe that the U.S. had never seen a far-right political leader before Donald Trump. Further, they tend to think that eliminating Trump's brand of authoritarian politics requires preventing authoritarians from gaining popularity in the first place. Levitsky and Ziblatt think this is wrongheaded. Right-wing extremism has a long history in the U.S. In the 1930s, Father Coughlin broadcasted fascist, antisemitic propaganda to millions of Americans on his popular radio show. Later, Louisiana governor Huey Long ran his state like a dictatorship, and George Wallace staked his entire political career on defending white supremacy and racial segregation. All of these politicians were just as popular as Trump, but none of them gained power.

Therefore, the difference between the past and the present isn't that there were no extremists in the past—it's that, in the past, those extremists never won power. Political party gatekeepers were the ones who made this possible. Although it's important to fight extremism at the root, it's even more important to keep it out of government. This is why, since the 1960s, polarization and structural changes to the American party system have been so significant. By reducing the parties' commitment to democratic principles and hampering their ability to filter out unfit candidates, these changes have opened the gates to authoritarianism in the United States. Donald Trump was unique not because of his popularity and political ideology, but rather because he ran for office at a time when the U.S. political system was already ripe for authoritarian takeover.

Because they select our presidential candidates, parties have the ability—and, we would add, the responsibility—to keep dangerous figures out of the White House. They must, therefore, strike a balance between two roles: a democratic role, in which they choose the candidates that best represent the party's voters; and what political scientist James Ceaser calls a "filtration" role, in which they screen out those who pose a threat to democracy or are otherwise unfit to hold office. These dual imperatives—choosing a popular candidate and keeping out demagogues—may, at times, conflict with each other. [...] There is no escape from this tension. There are always trade-offs.

Related Characters: Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt (speaker)

Related Themes:

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Explanation and Analysis

Levitsky and Ziblatt admit that political gatekeeping relies on a paradox: parties have to use antidemocratic strategies if they want to preserve democracy. Namely, gatekeeping is inherently antidemocratic because it gives party elites the power to screen and select candidates, regardless of the people's will. When they have too much power, gatekeepers can simply ignore their constituents and choose candidates who don't represent them. Taken to an extreme, gatekeeping can foster corruption and undermine democracy itself: party bosses can focus more on rewarding loyal supporters with jobs than governing well or even winning elections.

But the opposite is also true. Without effective gatekeeping, time and time again, the public elects demagogues. These demagogues then dismantle democracy, leaving the people who elected them with virtually no voice. Therefore, too little gatekeeping threatens democracy even more than too much gatekeeping.

This paradox in gatekeeping points to a deeper paradox in democracy: following the people's will is not the same thing as doing what's best for the people. This is because the majority of the public often supports antidemocratic policies and candidates. Levitsky and Ziblatt consistently argue that preserving democracy requires striking a balance between too much and too little representation of the popular will. It's essential for the government to reflect the people's will, but it's also essential for qualified elites to filter antidemocratic policies out of the people's will.

Chapter 3 Quotes

❝ Collective abdication—the transfer of authority to a leader who threatens democracy—usually flows from one of two sources. The first is the misguided belief that an authoritarian can be controlled or tamed. The second is what sociologist Ivan Ermakoff calls "ideological collusion," in which the authoritarian's agenda overlaps sufficiently with that of mainstream politicians that abdication is desirable, or at least preferable to the alternatives. But when faced with a would-be authoritarian, establishment politicians must unambiguously reject him or her and do everything possible to defend democratic institutions—even if that means temporarily joining forces with bitter rivals.

Related Characters: Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt (speaker), Donald Trump

Related Themes:

Page Number: 67-68

Explanation and Analysis

In a democracy, Levitsky and Ziblatt argue, the establishment has an obligation to identify and defeat would-be authoritarians as early as possible. But in 2016, the Republican Party completely failed to fulfill this obligation. Where Republican leaders should have done everything possible to stop Donald Trump—up to and including endorsing Hillary Clinton in the election—they instead chose collective abdication. In other words, they refused to act as gatekeepers and handed Donald Trump power instead.

In this passage, Levitsky and Ziblatt give historical and theoretical context to the Republicans' collective abdication. They explain two conventional sources of abdication. Establishment leaders have long tried to control authoritarians—like the Italian king and German conservative parties did when they handed power to Mussolini and Hitler, respectively. Alternatively, establishment leaders also frequently team up with authoritarians who share aspects of their agenda. They hope that authoritarians like Trump will help pass favorable policies, but ignore the threats they pose to democracy itself. In 2016, the Republican Party seems to have mixed both strategies—many Republican leaders played down the threat Trump posed to democracy, while many others held their noses and endorsed him, hoping that it would help their own political careers and policy agendas.

But both of these strategies are dangerously shortsighted. In reality, throughout history, authoritarians have

frequently convinced establishment politicians to abdicate power, then exploited their abdication in order to dismantle democracy. When Levitsky and Ziblatt wrote this book in 2018, it was unclear whether Trump would succeed in doing the same.

In short, most Republican leaders ended up holding the party line. If they had broken decisively with Trump, telling Americans loudly and clearly that he posed a threat to our country's cherished institutions, and if, on those grounds, they had endorsed Hillary Clinton, Donald Trump might never have ascended to the presidency. [...] We have no way of knowing how Republican voters would have split. Some, perhaps even most, of the base might still have voted for Trump. But enough would have been swayed by the image of both parties uniting to ensure Trump's defeat.
What happened, tragically, was very different. Despite their hemming and hawing, most Republican leaders closed ranks behind Trump, creating the image of a unified party. That, in turn, normalized the election. Rather than a moment of crisis, the election became a standard two-party race, with Republicans backing the Republican candidate and Democrats backing the Democratic candidate.

Related Characters: Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt (speaker), Donald Trump, Hillary Clinton

Related Themes:

Page Number: 70

Explanation and Analysis

After the 2016 election, many Americans on both sides of the aisle concluded that Trump's candidacy was a perfect storm of sorts. They decided that there was no way the Republican establishment could have possibly stopped him. Levitsky and Ziblatt think this is a misguided, dangerous kind of wishful thinking. After abdicating control over the party to Trump, Republicans started abdicating responsibility for stopping him. But in reality, they had both the power and the obligation to do so.

Trump's margin of victory in the electoral college was relatively narrow, and if any major Republican establishment figures had endorsed Clinton, concerned Republican voters would have gotten a legitimate excuse for voting for her. But instead, Republicans pretended that the 2016 election was a conventional one like any other. In Levitsky and Ziblatt's view, they willfully denied the clear threat that Trump posed to democracy.

The precariousness of Trump's victory and the relatively small effort that Republicans needed to make to stop him underline how fragile democracies tend to be. There is an exceedingly fine line between democracy and authoritarianism, and Levitsky and Ziblatt argue that the Republican establishment is as responsible for letting it be crossed as Trump is for crossing it.

Chapter 4 Quotes

Although some elected demagogues take office with a blueprint for autocracy, many, such as Fujimori, do not. Democratic breakdown doesn't need a blueprint. Rather, as Peru's experience suggests, it can be the result of a sequence of unanticipated events—an escalating tit-for-tat between a demagogic, norm-breaking leader and a threatened political establishment.
[...]
Many [demagogues] do eventually cross the line from words to action. This is because a demagogue's initial rise to power tends to polarize society, creating a climate of panic, hostility, and mutual distrust. The new leader's threatening words often have a boomerang effect. If the media feels threatened, it may abandon restraint and professional standards in a desperate effort to weaken the government. And the opposition may conclude that, for the good of the country, the government must be removed via extreme measures—impeachment, mass protest, even a coup.

Related Characters: Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt (speaker), Alberto Fujimori

Related Themes:

Page Number: 75

Explanation and Analysis

Readers might assume that most autocrats are malicious, power-hungry, and intent on dismantling democracy from the start. They would be wrong. As Levitsky and Ziblatt clarify here, "democratic breakdown doesn't need a blueprint." Many leaders turn to authoritarianism not because they dream of absolute power and develop a master-plan to seize it, but instead because they find that authoritarian tactics provide the path of least resistance to passing their agenda.

President Alberto Fujimori of Peru is a classic example of this. Strikingly, Fujimori didn't even plan to win the presidency—he just ran for the publicity. After his victory, he confronted a hostile congress and an escalating guerrilla

war with a terrorist group called the Shining Path. To pass his agenda over the congress's opposition, he dissolved it. To win the war against the Shining Path, he pushed the military to commit war crimes, like massacring civilians. And gradually, in order to defend this agenda and maintain power, he started cracking down on the media, blackmailing his opposition, and changing the laws (including Peru's constitution).

Levitsky and Ziblatt cite Fujimori's presidency to show that circumstances can drive authoritarianism as powerfully as candidates themselves. Specifically, polarization and crisis tend to make a nation ripe for authoritarian overthrow. Polarization breeds authoritarianism because, when democracy isn't functioning property, the easiest way for leaders to pass their agenda is by bypassing democratic procedures and overruling other parts of the government. (The authors explain this in much more depth in their chapters on democratic norms.) Of course, this has clear applications to the contemporary United States, in which political polarization is deeper than it's been since the Civil War. Crisis breeds authoritarianism because it demands the quick, decisive responses. Authoritarians can provide such responses, while deliberative representative democracies tend to slow down decision making.

> By capturing the referees, buying off or enfeebling opponents, and rewriting the rules of the game, elected leaders can establish a decisive—and permanent—advantage over their opponents. Because these measures are carried out piecemeal and with the appearance of legality, the drift into authoritarianism doesn't always set off alarm bells. Citizens are often slow to realize that their democracy is being dismantled—even as it happens before their eyes.
> One of the great ironies of how democracies die is that the very defense of democracy is often used as a pretext for its subversion. Would-be autocrats often use economic crises, natural disasters, and especially security threats—wars, armed insurgencies, or terrorist attacks—to justify antidemocratic measures.

Related Characters: Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt (speaker)

Related Themes:

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Explanation and Analysis

Based on their extensive knowledge of 20th century politics, Levitsky and Ziblatt argue that elected autocrats use three primary strategies to subvert democracy. First, by "capturing the referees," or manipulating impartial government agencies for partisan gain, they avoid accountability and gain a powerful weapon to use against their rivals. Second, by "buying off or enfeebling opponents," they make it harder for those opponents to challenge their power. Third, by "rewriting the rules of the game," they expand their own powers and make it easier for themselves to keep power when they don't enjoy majority support. Crucially, crises give authoritarians a unique opportunity to deploy these tactics.

The key difference between this kind of democratic backsliding and the bombastic anti-democratic tactics that authoritarians have used to gain power in the past is that this backsliding is all legal: rather than overthrowing the law, authoritarians change it. To destroy democracy, they actually use the same mechanisms that are supposed to make a government responsive to the people—the power to change and enforce laws, modify the constitution, appoint advisors and judges, and so on. And outwardly, they often use "the very defense of democracy [...] as a pretext for its subversion."

This can make it very difficult for citizens to identify and stop democratic backsliding. But it makes Levitsky and Ziblatt's project all the more important: by clearly understanding authoritarians' key tactics, citizens can learn to see past antidemocratic leaders' claims to defend democracy and take the actions necessary to defend true democracy instead.

Chapter 5 Quotes

> Mutual toleration refers to the idea that as long as our rivals play by constitutional rules, we accept that they have an equal right to exist, compete for power, and govern. We may disagree with, and even strongly dislike, our rivals, but we nevertheless accept them as legitimate. This means recognizing that our political rivals are decent, patriotic, law-abiding citizens—that they love our country and respect the Constitution just as we do. It means that even if we believe our opponents' ideas to be foolish or wrong-headed, we do not view them as an existential threat. Nor do we treat them as treasonous, subversive, or otherwise beyond the pale. We may shed tears on election night when the other side wins, but we do not consider such an event apocalyptic. Put another way, mutual toleration is politicians' collective willingness to agree to disagree.

Related Characters: Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt

(speaker)

Related Themes:

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Explanation and Analysis

Levitsky and Ziblatt argue that political norms are the key to stopping autocracy and preserving democracy. In *How Democracies Die*, they focus on two norms in particular: mutual toleration and institutional forbearance. Here, they define mutual toleration, which relates to the way politicians view their rivals. Mutual toleration depends on believing that the political system is legitimate. In short, if politicians believe that the game is fair, then they accept that their rivals "have an equal right to" participate in the system.

As the authors explain here, one key litmus test for mutual toleration is whether politicians assume that their rivals also have the nation's best interests at heart. When everyone in the government shares this assumption, they don't view their rivals as fundamental threats to the nation. Instead, they see that their rivals simply have different ideas about what is best for the nation. And they trust in the political process to decide more or less fairly between these competing ideas.

When a strong majority of politicians agrees on mutual toleration, leaders will always prioritize democracy above partisan advantage. Therefore, when antidemocratic or authoritarian forces appear poised to take power, the opposing sides will band together to stop them. This is why mutual toleration strongly protects democracy.

> A second norm critical to democracy's survival is what we call institutional forbearance. *Forbearance* means "patient self-control; restraint and tolerance," or "the action of restraining from exercising a legal right." For our purposes, institutional forbearance can be thought of as avoiding actions that, while respecting the letter of the law, obviously violate its spirit. Where norms of forbearance are strong, politicians do not use their institutional prerogatives to the hilt, even if it is technically legal to do so, for such action could imperil the existing system.
> [...]
> Think of democracy as a game that we want to keep playing indefinitely. To ensure future rounds of the game, players must refrain from either incapacitating the other team or antagonizing them to such a degree, that they refuse to play again tomorrow. If one's rivals quit, there can be no future games. This means that although individuals play to win, they must do so with a degree of restraint.

Related Characters: Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt (speaker)

Related Themes:

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Explanation and Analysis

Besides mutual toleration, institutional forbearance is the other political norm that Levitsky and Ziblatt deem as "critical to democracy's survival." Essentially, institutional forbearance means that politicians choose not to use all their power, or they choose to limit their own power to protect democracy. For instance, when a majority party or coalition can legally take over by removing an unfriendly president from office, they don't do it because they know that this violates the proper distribution of power. When a president can legally block legislation that the vast majority of citizens and legislators support, they don't do it, because they know that the people's will should override the leader's in a democracy.

Through institutional forbearance, politicians reaffirm and reinforce the rules of the democratic game because they want to make sure that their society can "keep playing [it] indefinitely." In turn, when the norm of institutional forbearance predominates in a democracy, politicians punish their peers who deviate from it. The majority *will* impeach a president who abuses their veto power, for instance, and it *will* publicly repudiate and punish lawmakers who try to overstep their constitutional powers.

Just like gatekeeping, institutional forbearance lets politicians perform an important balancing act. Parties use

gatekeeping to balance their obligation to represent the people with their responsibility to keep unfit candidates off the ballot. Similarly, politicians use forbearance to ensure that members of government have the extraordinary powers they need to deal with extraordinary situations, while also preventing them from abusing those powers in situations that don't call for them. For instance, a nation's president needs the power to rule through executive orders during profound security crises—but institutional forbearance in the nation's congress can prevent the president from using executive orders when they're not truly necessary.

Mutual toleration and institutional forbearance are closely related. Sometimes they reinforce each other. Politicians are more likely to be forbearing when they accept one another as legitimate rivals, and politicians who do not view their rivals as subversive will be less tempted to resort to norm breaking to keep them out of power. Acts of forbearance—for example, a Republican-controlled Senate approving a Democratic president's Supreme Court pick—will reinforce each party's belief that the other side is tolerable, promoting a virtuous circle.

Related Characters: Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt (speaker)

Related Themes:

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Explanation and Analysis

Mutual toleration and institutional forbearance, the two key democratic norms that the authors emphasize throughout *How Democracies Die*, are part of the same "virtuous circle." As Levitsky and Ziblatt explain here, toleration encourages forbearance and forbearance encourages toleration. Both norms depend on politicians' basic commitment to democracy—toleration depends on how they view their rivals' participation in the political system and forbearance depends on how they view their own. Therefore, it's no surprise that, when politicians fundamentally believe in democracy, they're willing to tolerate their opponents and limit their own power when necessary. And when politicians see their rivals use toleration and forbearance, they recognize that those rivals are respecting their right to participate in the political system as equals. Therefore, by using toleration and forbearance, politicians can send a signal that they're willing to work together with their rivals to protect democracy—even if they disagree on matters of substance.

The interaction between toleration and forbearance also reflects an important broader principle: democratic norms are self-reinforcing. When they're strong, they tend to get stronger: new politicians have to adopt them, and anyone who breaks them gets punished. But when some politicians are no longer punished for breaking them, others lose their only incentive to follow the rules.

But the opposite can also occur. The erosion of mutual toleration may motivate politicians to deploy their institutional powers as broadly as they can get away with. When parties view one another as mortal enemies, the stakes of political competition heighten dramatically. Losing ceases to be a routine and accepted part of the political process and instead becomes a full-blown catastrophe. When the perceived cost of losing is sufficiently high, politicians will be tempted to abandon forbearance. Acts of constitutional hardball may then in turn further undermine mutual toleration, reinforcing beliefs that our rivals pose a dangerous threat.

Related Characters: Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt (speaker)

Related Themes:

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Explanation and Analysis

While toleration and forbearance can build each other up in a virtuous circle, they can also tear each other down in a vicious circle. It can help to think of democratic norms as the taboos that prevent politicians from indulging their worst instincts. These taboos force them to consistently put the national interest above their own personal and partisan interests. So when politicians realize that these taboos no longer hold—and that the other side is already rushing to break them—there's little incentive for them to keep reinforcing them. Therefore, toleration and forbearance require buy-in from all major political actors (or, in the U.S., both major parties). Once one group gives up on them, other groups have an incentive to follow suit. Politics turns from a civil process for resolving national problems through democratic debate into an all-out conflict over power.

Levitsky and Ziblatt's argument may seem complicated, but democratic norms are really quite similar to other social norms. For instance, the law and social norm against

stealing prevent most people from shoplifting. But if people see their peers start to get away with shoplifting—or even celebrated for it—they realize that they can do the same. There is no longer a disincentive to steal, and so it's no surprise that more people will shoplift. Similarly, when democratic norms break down, politicians no longer have an incentive to preserve democracy, so more politicians tend to attack it—and it begins to decline in general.

❝ Polarization can destroy democratic norms. When socioeconomic, racial, or religious differences give rise to extreme partisanship, in which societies sort themselves into political camps whose worldviews are not just different but mutually exclusive, toleration becomes harder to sustain. Some polarization is healthy—even necessary—for democracy. And indeed, the historical experience of democracies in Western Europe shows us that norms can be sustained even where parties are separated by considerable ideological differences. But when societies grow so deeply divided that parties become wedded to incompatible worldviews, and especially when their members are so socially segregated that they rarely interact, stable partisan rivalries eventually give way to perceptions of mutual threat. As mutual toleration disappears, politicians grow tempted to abandon forbearance and try to win at all costs. This may encourage the rise of antisystem groups that reject democracy's rules altogether. When that happens, democracy is in trouble.

Related Characters: Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt (speaker)

Related Themes:

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Explanation and Analysis

Levitsky and Ziblatt explain that polarization can accelerate the vicious circle that weakens democratic norms—and, often, destroys democracy itself. Specifically, this is because intolerance strengthens polarization and polarization strengthens intolerance. When people view their political rivals as an entirely separate group of people who follow a totally different set of values, they are far less likely to identify or empathize with those rivals.

Toleration and unity depend on both sides' basic feeling that everyone belongs to the same community and has the whole community's interests at heart. Ideally, this shared community is the nation as a whole. But it doesn't have to be. (For instance, Levitsky and Ziblatt note how Democrats and Republicans upheld democratic norms for most of the 20th century because both groups agreed to only represent white Americans, while ignoring Black people's fight for civil rights.)

However, when different political groups start to represent entirely different constituencies, politicians stop asking which proposals are best for the entire nation and start asking how to gain more power, wealth, and influence for their *own* constituencies. As Levitsky and Ziblatt explain here, once a democracy reaches this state of affairs, it's all but inevitable that some groups will challenge their rivals' right to participate in the political system at all. In other words, they'll try to seize power by attacking democracy.

Chapter 6 Quotes

❝ Throughout his life, Washington had learned that he "gained power from his readiness to give it up." Thanks to his enormous prestige, this forbearance infused many of the American republic's other nascent political institutions. As historian Gordon Wood put it, "If any single person was responsible for establishing the young Republic on a firm footing, it was Washington."

Related Characters: Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt (speaker), George Washington

Related Themes:

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Explanation and Analysis

After explaining how authoritarians attack democracy and how democratic norms protect it, Levitsky and Ziblatt analyze how such norms have successfully protected American democracy in the past. In this passage, they argue that George Washington set a strong precedent for presidential forbearance, which encouraged subsequent leaders to follow in kind. In turn, by choosing not to abuse or expand their power, American presidents made it possible for the legislature and judiciary to play their rightful role in government. This helped preserve democracy by preventing any one branch or party from overruling the others.

As he helped found the U.S. government, Washington was deeply committed to the principle that different parts of the government should check and balance one another's power. But he knew that it wasn't safe to rely on future presidents to uphold these checks and balances through goodwill alone. Instead, he helped create laws and establish norms to force presidents to respect Congress, the courts, and the

people. And he was remarkably successful: as Levitsky and Ziblatt point out, through the end of the 20th century, congresspeople from both parties worked together to stop virtually every significant abuse of presidential power.

In the 150-year span between 1866 and 2016, the Senate never once prevented the president from filling a Supreme Court seat. On seventy-four occasions during this period, presidents attempted to fill Court vacancies prior to the election of their successor. And on all seventy-four occasions—though not always on the first try—they were allowed to do so.

Related Characters: Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt (speaker)

Related Themes:

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Explanation and Analysis

While the U.S. has suffered important periods of democratic breakdown in the past—during the first decades of its existence and during the Civil War—the "guardrails" of democracy have mostly held throughout U.S. history. Democratic norms were particularly strong during the first decades of the 19th century, and then again from the 1870s to the 1960s. But, Levitsky and Ziblatt argue, it's difficult to convey how seriously the U.S. has abandoned them in recent decades—and how seriously this threatens American democracy.

In this passage, they give one striking example. When the Republican-led Senate refused to fill Antonin Scalia's Supreme Court seat after his death in 2016, it broke a 150-year precedent of institutional forbearance. Franklin D. Roosevelt did try to expand the Supreme Court and pack it with loyalists in 1937, but democratic norms stopped him. In the past, the Senate has always followed these norms and confirmed qualified judges, regardless of their ideology or the president's partisan affiliation. But by leaving Garland's seat open until Trump took office, the authors argue, the Republican Party turned against forbearance—and threatened democracy—to an extent unprecedented since the Civil War.

The norms sustaining our political system rested, to a considerable degree, on racial exclusion. The stability of the period between the end of Reconstruction and the 1980s was rooted in an original sin: the Compromise of 1877 and its aftermath, which permitted the de-democratization of the South and the consolidation of Jim Crow. Racial exclusion contributed directly to the partisan civility and cooperation that came to characterize twentieth-century American politics. […]
The process of racial inclusion that began after World War II and culminated in the 1964 Civil Rights Act and 1965 Voting Rights Act would, at long last, fully democratize the United States. But it would also polarize it, posing the greatest challenge to established forms of mutual toleration and forbearance since Reconstruction.

Related Characters: Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt (speaker)

Related Themes:

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Explanation and Analysis

At the end of their chapter on the history of democratic norms in the United States, Levitsky and Ziblatt highlight this extremely important caveat. While the U.S. had strong democratic norms for most of the 20th century, paradoxically, these norms were based on a fundamentally antidemocratic policy of racial exclusion. Except for a brief period during Reconstruction, Black people did not have meaningful political representation or civil rights until the civil rights movement. In this sense, American elections were not truly free or fair until the 1960s.

Levitsky and Ziblatt don't specifically argue whether it's better to view the 20th century U.S. as a white supremacist state disguised as a democracy, or a functioning democracy that simply didn't include everyone yet. But either way, racial exclusion was fundamental to American democratic norms because it allowed both main parties to represent the same, all-white constituency. Both parties could agree on political white supremacy, and neither party was willing to challenge it. Therefore, most politicians were willing to exercise toleration and forbearance in order to achieve white Americans' common goals.

By pointing out the ugly, racist history of American democratic norms, Levitsky and Ziblatt introduce their central thesis about race in American politics. In the past, democratic norms have depended on racial exclusion. Going forward, Americans' great challenge is to reestablish those norms without recreating that exclusion.

Chapter 7 Quotes

The traditions underpinning America's democratic institutions are unraveling, opening up a disconcerting gap between how our political system works and long-standing expectations about how it *ought* to work. As our soft guardrails have weakened, we have grown increasingly vulnerable to antidemocratic leaders.
Donald Trump, a serial norm breaker, is widely (and correctly) criticized for assaulting America's democratic norms. But the problem did not begin with Trump. The process of norm erosion started decades ago—long before Trump descended an escalator to announce his presidential candidacy.

Related Characters: Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt (speaker), Donald Trump

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 146

Explanation and Analysis

After examining how democratic norms functioned smoothly during most of the 20th century in the U.S., Levitsky and Ziblatt show how they have started to fall apart since the 1960s. The authors repeatedly emphasize that, while Trump's presidency represented a pressing crisis for American democracy, the crisis neither began with him nor will end when his political career does. Instead, Trump layered an acute crisis on top of a much older, chronic one. Polarization was like the kindling and Trump was like the spark that set it on fire. And troublingly, putting out this fire won't prevent other, potentially worse ones from burning in the future. Trump and polarization represent two interdependent crises—each worsens the other, and the whole is far worse than the sum of its parts.

Specifically, Levitsky and Ziblatt argue, polarization has gradually eroded democratic norms in the U.S., which made possible Trump's presidency—and his far greater attacks on democratic norms. The erosion of norms led many Republicans to support Trump or condone his behavior. It prevented party gatekeepers from stopping him, and it led voters to see his political style as refreshing and inspiring, rather than dangerous and antidemocratic. And it primed the Republican Party to cooperate with Trump and support his authoritarian measures once he took office.

In the early 1990s, Gingrich and his team distributed memos to Republican candidates instructing them to use certain negative words to describe Democrats, including *pathetic*, *sick*, *bizarre*, *betray*, *antiflag*, *antifamily*, and *traitors*. It was the beginning of a seismic shift in American politics.
[...]
Though few realized it at the time, Gingrich and his allies were on the cusp of a new wave of polarization rooted in growing public discontent, particularly among the Republican base. Gingrich didn't create this polarization, but he was one of the first Republicans to exploit the shift in popular sentiment. And his leadership helped to establish "politics as warfare" as the GOP's dominant strategy.

Related Characters: Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt (speaker), Newt Gingrich

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 148-149

Explanation and Analysis

According to Levitsky and Ziblatt, from the late 1970s through the 1990s, Republican Representative and Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich was the most influential anti-democracy politician in the U.S. He led the Republican Party's break with mutual toleration and institutional forbearance. In the past, Democrats and Republicans exercised forbearance by prioritizing democracy above their own partisan goals—they agreed not to push the limits of the Constitution or undercut democratic procedures in order to get their way. And they exercised toleration by treating one another with civility, as colleagues and rivals rather than mortal enemies.

But Gingrich argued that politics should be a "war for power" and broke with both of these norms. He broke with forbearance by encouraging House Republicans to block the Democrats' policy agenda by any means necessary. As Levitsky and Ziblatt explain here, Gingrich broke with toleration primarily through his political rhetoric. By using insults like "*pathetic*," "*sick*," and "*bizarre*," he encouraged his supporters to view Democrats as alien, deviant, and inferior. By arguing that Democrats were "*traitors*" who "*betray[ed]*" the country, Gingrich told his supporters that the Democrats posed an existential threat to the U.S. In turn, this rhetoric justified extreme, antidemocratic Republican policies—which, ironically enough, Levitsky and Ziblatt believe were the *actual* threat to American democracy in the 1990s.

> If, twenty-five years ago, someone had described to you a country in which candidates threatened to lock up their rivals, political opponents accused the government of stealing the election or establishing a dictatorship, and parties used their legislative majorities to impeach presidents and steal supreme court seats, you might have thought of Ecuador or Romania. You probably would not have thought of the United States.
> Behind the unraveling of basic norms of mutual tolerance and forbearance lies a syndrome of intense partisan polarization. […] Over the last quarter century, Democrats and Republicans have become much more than just two competing parties, sorted into liberal and conservative camps. Their voters are now deeply divided by race, religious belief, geography, and even "way of life."

Related Characters: Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 167

Explanation and Analysis

By comparing the U.S. to countries with more notorious antidemocratic tendencies, like Ecuador and Romania, Levitsky and Ziblatt underline how far U.S. democracy has fallen from its peak in the mid-1900s and how weak its democratic norms are now, in the 21st century. But they emphasize that this is part of a long historical process of polarization and democratic decline—one that Americans can reverse if they're willing to take steps to reduce polarization in the future.

In addition to making their point about the main threats to American democracy, however, Levitsky and Ziblatt use this passage to defend their method. By comparing the U.S. to other countries and emphasizing the long history behind its current political crisis, the authors show how people can better understand and address political challenges if they are willing to take a step back and examine historical patterns through a comparative lens.

> Unlike the Democratic Party, which has grown increasingly diverse in recent decades, the GOP has remained culturally homogeneous. This is significant because the party's core white Protestant voters are not just any constituency—for nearly two centuries, they comprised the majority of the U.S. electorate and were politically, economically, and culturally dominant in American society. Now, again, white Protestants are a minority of the electorate—and declining. And they have hunkered down in the Republican Party.
> […]
> The struggle against declining majority status is, in good part, what fuels the intense animosity that has come to define the American Right. Survey evidence suggests that many Tea Party Republicans share the perception that the country they grew up in is "slipping away, threatened by the rapidly changing face of what they believe is the 'real' America."

Related Characters: Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 173-174

Explanation and Analysis

Levitsky and Ziblatt view partisan polarization as the root cause of democratic decline in the U.S. since the 1960s. However, to fix this polarization, Americans also need to understand where it came from. It's impossible to attribute polarization to a single cause, but the authors argue that the most significant factor behind it is partisan realignment—which is itself a response to both demographic shifts and policy changes.

Until the 1960s, the overwhelming majority of the U.S. electorate was white, and both parties represented complex groups of voters with different ideologies, religious beliefs, and policy priorities. But Black Americans finally won true voting rights during the civil rights movement, which many white Americans opposed. Moreover, immigration from Latin America and Asia has changed the racial and ethnic composition of the U.S. electorate since the 1970s and 1980s. As a result, the major parties came to represent different demographic groups: the Republicans represented conservative white Protestants and the Democrats represented virtually everyone else. These groups also united around opposing political ideologies and regional bases—the Republicans became increasingly conservative and started to win consistent majorities in the South, Midwest, and rural West, while the Democrats became liberal to progressive and started winning consistent majorities in the Northeast and on the West Coast.

Therefore, in Levitsky and Ziblatt's analysis, the Republican

Party has primarily driven the breakdown in democratic norms in the U.S. because it represents a "declining majority" that used to dominate national politics but doesn't anymore. Fixing partisan polarization requires building new political coalitions to challenge this division between the "declining majority" and rising minority groups. But Levitsky and Ziblatt are *not* arguing that the U.S. should try to turn back the clock and make its electorate as "culturally homogeneous" as it once was (and the GOP is now). After all, this would mean disenfranchising the majority of the population and creating an antidemocratic system of white Protestant minority rule.

Chapter 8 Quotes

❝ Efforts to discourage voting are fundamentally antidemocratic, and they have a particularly deplorable history in the United States. Although contemporary voter-restriction efforts are nowhere near as far-reaching as those undertaken by southern Democrats in the late nineteenth century, they are nevertheless significant. Because strict voter ID laws disproportionately affect low-income minority voters, who are overwhelmingly Democratic, they skew elections in favor of the GOP.

Related Characters: Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt (speaker), Donald Trump

Related Themes:

Page Number: 186

Explanation and Analysis

According to Levitsky and Ziblatt, one of Donald Trump's most disturbing authoritarian moves has been his attempt to "tilt the playing field to his advantage" by restricting voting rights. Specifically, he founded the Presidential Advisory Commission on Election Integrity, which pushed state governments to consider and adopt restrictive voting laws. For instance, these state laws would require voters to present IDs—which Democratic-leaning voters are less likely to have. Like partisan gerrymandering, these laws would give Republicans a strong electoral advantage and allow them to win elections even when they're only supported by a minority of the population. This law attacks one of the pillars of democracy: "regular, free and fair elections."

But Levitsky and Ziblatt also point out that readers can easily miss the significance of Trump's election restrictions if they don't take an adequate look at history. They see Trump's proposal as a (much more limited) version of Jim Crow, the system of exclusionary voting laws that maintained white supremacist rule in the South from the 1870s to the 1960s. While it's unlikely that these laws would disenfranchise all minority voters, the Republican Party's strategy could be viewed as an attempt to restrict minority groups from participation in American politics.

❝ In many ways, President Trump followed the electoral authoritarian script during his first year. He made efforts to capture the referees, sideline the key players who might halt him, and tilt the playing field. But the president has talked more than he has acted, and his most notorious threats have not been realized. [...] President Trump repeatedly scraped up against the guardrails, like a reckless driver, but he did not break through them. Despite clear causes for concern, little actual backsliding occurred in 2017. We did not cross the line into authoritarianism.
It is still early, however. The backsliding of democracy is often gradual, its effects unfolding slowly over time. Comparing Trump's first year in office to those of other would-be authoritarians, the picture is mixed.

Related Characters: Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt (speaker), Donald Trump

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 187

Explanation and Analysis

Writing in 2018, Levitsky and Ziblatt point out that Trump's earliest authoritarian efforts—like his attempts to bias independent law enforcement agencies, his attacks on the media, and his efforts to spread restrictive voting laws—largely failed. For the most part, democratic norms restrained him and prevented him from acting out his worst instincts. Virtually all Democrats and even some Republicans opposed his policies.

However, Levitsky and Ziblatt emphasize that this isn't as positive a sign as it might seem. Many authoritarian leaders fail to overcome the guardrails in their first year. But the longer they try, the more they chip away at democratic norms and normalize extreme, previously unthinkable behavior. Therefore, there was little cause for celebration in 2018, even if Trump hadn't destroyed American democracy yet. He was still trying, and stopping him was likely to

become ever more important—and ever more difficult—as his term went on. Of course, readers looking back at 2018 today will have their own opinions about whether the guardrails held during Trump's presidency. But Levitsky and Ziblatt's point still holds: when authoritarians fail, they tend to try again. In fact, they tend to learn from their failures and change their tactics over time. They also learn from other authoritarians' successes and failures throughout history. Levitsky and Ziblatt hope to help democracy's defenders do the same.

❝ We fear that if Trump were to confront a war or terrorist attack, he would exploit this crisis fully—using it to attack political opponents and restrict freedoms Americans take for granted. In our view, this scenario represents the greatest danger facing American democracy today.

Related Characters: Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt (speaker), Donald Trump

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 193

Explanation and Analysis

Levitsky and Ziblatt warn their readers about how authoritarians throughout history have exploited crises—especially natural security crises like wars and terrorist attacks—to consolidate power. Because crises usually call for swift, decisive action, authoritarian leaders use them as an excuse to overrule other branches of government and implement their agendas. In fact, authoritarians have often used crises as an excuse to capture the referees, sideline their opponents, and tilt the playing field in one fell swoop. Many have even invented crises in order to justify this kind of power grab.

In light of this historical precedent, Levitsky and Ziblatt argue that Donald Trump would be extraordinarily dangerous in a crisis. Rather than addressing and solving the crisis, they suspect, he would do everything he talked about doing but failed to accomplish in his first year in office. He could use the crisis to justify installing loyalists in major law enforcement agencies, shutting down media outlets that opposed him, or even imprisoning his Democratic opponents. In 2018, Levitsky and Ziblatt wrote that "this scenario represents the greatest danger facing American democracy today" because a crisis would have offered Trump the easiest path to dismantle American democracy once and for all.

❝ Norms are the soft guardrails of democracy; as they break down, the zone of acceptable political behavior expands, giving rise to discourse and action that could imperil democracy. Behavior that was once considered unthinkable in American politics is becoming thinkable. Even if Donald Trump does not break the hard guardrails of our constitutional democracy, he has increased the likelihood that a future president will.

Related Characters: Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt (speaker), Donald Trump

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 203

Explanation and Analysis

Levitsky and Ziblatt argue that Trump wasn't only a dangerous president because he wanted to dismantle democracy and rule as an authoritarian. He was also dangerous because he threatened democratic norms, including (but not limited to) toleration and forbearance. Of course, these norms were already declining in the U.S. long before Trump took office. But Levitsky and Ziblatt worry that Trump would greatly accelerate this existing trend and threaten to take the guardrails off democracy completely.

Levitsky and Ziblatt's argument depends on their deeper understanding of how and why democratic norms work. When everyone follows norms and there are strong penalties for breaking them, norms tend to become stronger over time. Politicians realize that their chances of participating in politics are closely tied to their respect for these norms, so they agree to follow them, and the consensus around them grows. But when politicians get away with breaking them, other politicians realize that they can do the same. There are no punishments, so politicians start doing whatever most benefits themselves and their party. In the process, they ignore and imperil democracy.

This is where Donald Trump comes in. During his term, he constantly broke norms—and because he was the president, he generally got away with it. In many cases, his party supported and imitated his norm-breaking. In other words, he was the unruly politician who showed his friends that they could get away with breaking the rules—so it's no surprise that he ushered in a flood of rule-breaking.

Chapter 9 Quotes

A second, much darker future is one in which President Trump and the Republicans continue to win with a white nationalist appeal. Under this scenario, a pro-Trump GOP would retain the presidency, both houses of Congress, and the vast majority of statehouses, and it would eventually gain a solid majority in the Supreme Court. It would then use the techniques of constitutional hardball to manufacture durable white electoral majorities. This could be done through a combination of large-scale deportation, immigration restrictions, the purging of voter rolls, and the adoption of strict voter ID laws. Measures to reengineer the electorate would likely be accompanied by elimination of the filibuster and other rules that protect Senate minorities, so that Republicans could impose their agenda even with narrow majorities. These measures may appear extreme, but every one of them has been at least contemplated by the Trump administration.

Related Characters: Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt (speaker), Donald Trump

Related Themes:

Page Number: 207

Explanation and Analysis

Levitsky and Ziblatt open their final chapter by considering several possible outcomes for Trump's presidency. In their optimistic scenario, the U.S. responds to Trump's authoritarian tendencies by reinvesting in democratic norms and building new, multiracial political coalitions. This passage summarizes their pessimistic scenario, in which Trump's authoritarian policies succeed and white nationalism becomes a permanent feature of American politics.

While improbable, the picture is bleak. If Trump successfully captures the referees, sidelines his opponents, and tilts the political playing field to his advantage, the Republican Party can establish white minority rule over the U.S., much as the Democratic Party did in the South from the 1870s to the 1960s. The agenda that Levitsky and Ziblatt outline here would be repressive and controversial, but also perfectly legal and maybe even popular with wide swaths of the white electorate.

Most importantly, this scenario allows Levitsky and Ziblatt to explain the stakes of defeating Trump and rebuilding American democracy. The U.S. is clearly moving towards authoritarianism, but it's by no means a foregone conclusion. Instead, it's up to politicians and citizens to save it—and the authors dedicate this final chapter to the various strategies they can use to do so.

The third, and in our view, most likely, post-Trump future is one marked by polarization, more departures from unwritten political conventions, and increasing institutional warfare—in other words, democracy without solid guardrails.

Related Characters: Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt (speaker), Donald Trump

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 208

Explanation and Analysis

Levitsky and Ziblatt acknowledge that Trump's presidency could end in a variety of ways, ranging from reinvigorating American democracy to imposing a white nationalist agenda on the United States. But they argue that the most probable outcome is simply "democracy without solid guardrails." Trump could profoundly weaken U.S. democracy without totally destroying it.

It's perfectly possible for the U.S. to keep getting more polarized and its democratic norms to keep declining. If neither party wins a solid majority, both can turn to increasingly antidemocratic and underhanded tactics to try and win power. At first, neither party would necessarily take over and impose its will on the other, but both parties would try to. It's unclear how long this situation could last, but it *is* clear that it would be highly unstable. The authors compare it to North Carolina's fraught state politics, and it also looks similar to many of the historical examples from the book (such as the collapse of Chilean democracy in the 1960s and 1970s). These examples—and the last several decades of U.S. politics—show that, the more polarized a nation gets, the more open to authoritarianism its citizens and politicians become. Therefore, "democracy without solid guardrails" is incredibly perilous, even if it isn't quite a worst-case scenario.

Opposition to the Trump administration's authoritarian behavior should be muscular, but it should seek to preserve, rather than violate, democratic rules and norms. Where possible, opposition should center on Congress, the courts, and, of course, elections. If Trump is defeated via democratic institutions, it will strengthen those institutions.

Related Characters: Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt (speaker), Donald Trump

Related Themes:

Page Number: 217-218

Explanation and Analysis

In their final chapter, Levitsky and Ziblatt ask how Americans can repair their government's increasingly broken democratic norms. This is a difficult task, not least of all because norm-breaking drives norm-breaking. After all, as Republican norm-breaking has increasingly deprived Democrats of a fair shot at power, Democrats have started breaking norms, too—which has further weakened those norms. Saving democracy requires finding a way out of this death spiral, without letting one side's authoritarians take absolute control over the levers of power.

Levitsky and Ziblatt offer different suggestions to different groups, but this passage summarizes their main advice to Democrats. While some Democrats propose playing hardball and using underhanded tactics to win power back from Republicans, Levitsky and Ziblatt argue that this will further weaken the democratic norms that Democrats want to save. They might take back power, but they'll face a democracy even more fragile than it is now.

Instead, Levitsky and Ziblatt argue that Democrats should strive to counter the Trump administration *through* democratic norms and procedures. Instead of abandoning democratic norms in order to try and stop the Republican party in the short term, then, Democrats should insist on following democratic norms in order to strengthen democracy in the long term. After all, taking the moral high ground and becoming the nation's pro-democracy party would give Democrats a powerful message.

❝ Where a society's political divisions are crosscutting, we line up on different sides of issues with different people at different times. We may disagree with our neighbors on abortion but agree with them on health care; we may dislike another neighbor's views on immigration but agree with them on the need to raise the minimum wage. Such alliances help us build and sustain norms of mutual toleration. When we agree with our political rivals at least some of the time, we are less likely to view them as mortal enemies.

Related Characters: Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 220

Explanation and Analysis

Levitsky and Ziblatt argue that Donald Trump's behavior as president posed an unprecedented risk to American democracy. However, they still see political polarization as the fundamental root cause behind both Donald Trump's rise and the U.S.'s weakening democratic norms. Therefore, they view solving polarization as one of the most important challenges—if not the single most important—for the American political system in the 21st century.

Polarization started to skyrocket after the 1960s, when U.S. democracy became racially inclusive for the first time and the two major parties started a process of realignment. Before the civil rights movement, the parties were heterogeneous coalitions—they were made up of numerous groups with meaningful political differences. But now, they are ideologically and geographically homogeneous—most people in each party have virtually identical policy views.

Turning the clock back on racial inclusion isn't a reasonable solution to polarization. But making the parties heterogeneous again is. This is why Levitsky and Ziblatt believe that the U.S. has to undergo a *new* partisan realignment. They hope to see each party represent ideologically diverse groups again, because one of the best ways to build mutual toleration is to show people that they can work together on *some* issues even if they don't agree on *everything*. If the parties can build new coalitions around new issues—particularly, they think, if the Republican Party can reject extremism and the Democratic Party can push for universal social programs—then it would be possible for U.S. democracy to overcome polarization while remaining racially inclusive.

Reducing polarization requires that the Republican Party be reformed, if not refounded outright. First of all, the GOP must rebuild its own establishment. This means regaining leadership control in four key areas: finance, grassroots organization, messaging, and candidate selection. Only if the party leadership can free itself from the clutches of outside donors and right-wing media can it go about transforming itself. This entails major changes: Republicans must marginalize extremist elements; they must build a more diverse electoral constituency, such that the party no longer depends so heavily on its shrinking white Christian base; and they must find ways to win elections without appealing to white nationalism, or what Republican Arizona senator Jeff Flake calls the "sugar high of populism, nativism, and demagoguery."

Related Characters: Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 223

Explanation and Analysis

Levitsky and Ziblatt believe that the Republican Party has become far more extreme than the Democratic Party over the last half-century. There are several reasons for this, including racial and religious polarization, Newt Gingrich's hardball tactics and extreme rhetoric, the rise of independent conservative media, and the unprecedented influx of money into politics in the 2010s—just to name a few.

In order to save American democracy, the authors argue, the Republican Party has to address its extremism problem. In practice, this means that establishment party leaders need to wrest control of the party back from the extremist elements that have taken it over—including Donald Trump. As the ultra-wealthy have increasingly set Republican politicians' agenda through massive donations, the party establishment has lost control of finances. As independent movements like the Tea Party have become the main forces mobilizing conservative voters, the party establishment has lost control of grassroots organization. As independent media personalities have become some of the most popular conservative public figures, the party establishment has lost control of messaging. And as the internet, celebrity culture, and the primary-based party nomination process have made it possible for anyone with money and status to become the Republican nominee, the party establishment has also lost control of candidate selection (or gatekeeping). In Levitsky and Ziblatt's estimation, the establishment has to work hard to regain all four. While this is incredibly difficult, it's clearly possible—for instance, after World War II, German conservatives successfully built the first tolerant, democratic, popular conservative party in the nation's history.

The reforms of the 1960s gave Americans a third chance to build a truly multiethnic democracy. It is imperative that we succeed, extraordinarily difficult though the task is. As our colleague Danielle Allen writes:
"The simple fact of the matter is that the world has never built 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."
This is America's great challenge. We cannot retreat from it.

Related Characters: Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 227

Explanation and Analysis

Ultimately, Levitsky and Ziblatt argue that Americans can only save their democracy by overcoming the polarization that continues to plague it. Republicans can do their part by reorganizing their party, expelling extremists from it, and recommitting to democratic values. Meanwhile, Democrats should do their part by trying to build a new coalition—in part, by attracting many of the white Protestant voters that Republican leaders often take for granted. However, Levitsky and Ziblatt emphasize that Democrats must avoid doing this through racial exclusion—which is one of the main ways the major parties have appealed to white voters in the past. For most of the nation's history, democracy only functioned because both parties agreed only to represent white people. Political leaders made this fateful error when they founded the nation, and then again after the Civil War, in the Compromise of 1877. This is why Levitsky and Ziblatt believe that the U.S. is now looking at its "third chance to build a truly multiethnic democracy."

In their closing lines and through their quote from Danielle Allen, Levitsky and Ziblatt lay out their vision for the United States as a vibrant, equitable, multiracial democracy. In the past, functional democratic norms have been based on racial exclusion, but Levitsky and Ziblatt think that, in the future, they can be based on inclusion instead. Therefore, it will be possible to eliminate polarization without returning to a white supremacist government.

But the Democratic Party has to act first, and it faces the "extraordinarily difficult" challenge of winning over the toughest customers of all: it has to convince white Americans, who have frequently benefited from racism in the past, that racial inclusiveness is in their best interests. In fact, it has to win this battle so definitively that it can force the Republican Party to embrace racial inclusivity, too.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

INTRODUCTION

"Is our democracy in danger?" ask Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt, political scientists who research global authoritarianism. U.S. politics has changed in unprecedented ways since the mid-2010s, and similar changes have caused other democracies to collapse. So even though Americans tend to believe that their democracy is uniquely strong, there's reason to worry that it's now declining. Politicians are attacking their opposition, the free press, and the legitimacy of elections. They are weaking important institutions like the courts and restricting voting at the state level. Donald Trump has no political experience and "clear authoritarian tendencies."

Levitsky and Ziblatt worry that Americans' faith in their democracy might prevent them from understanding how Donald Trump threatens it. They bring their extensive knowledge about global authoritarianism to bear on the U.S. in order to illustrate these threats and show Americans that their democracy is not as flawless or invincible as they may like to think. It's true that U.S. democracy has been particularly long-lasting. But there's no magical element that makes it immune to collapse. As Levitsky and Ziblatt will later argue, democracy has endured in the U.S. through the 20th century because of effective norms (which are now falling apart) and racial exclusion (which has fortunately changed since the 1960s).

In September 1973, the Chilean military bombed the presidential palace and ousted the elected president, Salvador Allende. Such coups d'état are the classic way to destroy democracy, and they happened frequently during the Cold War.

Levitsky and Ziblatt narrate the 1973 Chilean coup d'état in order to help their readers understand the contrast between how democracies used to *die and how they die* now. *This contrast is important because it can help readers understand the kind of threat that American democracy faces and the kind of authoritarian state that it risks becoming.*

But democracies can also die when "elected leaders […] subvert the very process that brought them to power." They can do this quickly—like Adolf Hitler did in 1933—or they can do it slowly, like Hugo Chávez in Venezuela. Chávez was elected in 1998, took some small authoritarian steps in 2003, and started arresting political opponents in 2006. But the country kept holding free elections—the opposition even won in 2015. Venezuela didn't become fully authoritarian until Chávez's successor Nicolás Maduro replaced Congress with one-party rule in 2017.

Now, authoritarians destroy democracy from the inside rather than the outside. These historical and international examples illustrate a kind of worst-case scenario for the United States. This proves that democracies—even historically successful ones like the U.S.'s—are always vulnerable to takeover from within. Institutions, traditions, and checks and balances are not enough to protect democracy on their own. Instead, people committed to democratic norms and principles need to use these tools to fend off tyranny.

This is how democracy commonly dies today: elected leaders gradually destroy it to keep power. This backsliding is a dangerous pattern because, unlike coups d'état, it happens slowly, and "there are no tanks in the streets." Democratic institutions appear to continue functioning. Leaders employ the legislature and courts to help undo democracy, while often claiming to be defending or improving it. Many citizens don't even realize what's happening.

Levitsky and Ziblatt explain that this new form of authoritarianism is particularly dangerous because it looks like democracy from the outside. Politicians and citizens may disagree about whether democracy is collapsing or even justify authoritarianism in the name of democracy. Therefore, learning to identify and prevent this democratic backsliding is essential. This is part of why Levitsky and Ziblatt carefully define the key traits of authoritarian candidates, rulers, and governments in this book.

To understand whether the U.S. is experiencing such a democratic crisis, Levitsky and Ziblatt will compare it to other democracies from history in this book. By "democracy," they mean a government that holds "regular, free and fair elections" and gives all adult citizens voting rights and essential civil liberties (like free speech). They hope to help Americans see patterns in authoritarianism around the world and learn from other countries' successes and mistakes.

Readers may have differing opinions about how democratic the U.S. is when it comes to aspects of government besides elections and civil rights. The authors also emphasize that U.S. democracy has long depended on the undemocratic exclusion of Black citizens. Still, they're not trying to give a perfect definition of democracy, once and for all. Instead, they're offering a working definition that is useful for measuring how democratic different governments are at different points in time. They compare the U.S. to other countries in order to point out that, contrary to many Americans' beliefs, U.S. democracy is vulnerable to change or collapse.

All countries produce "extremist demagogues," but in healthy democracies, political parties stop them from gaining power. If these demagogues do gain power, democratic institutions and norms should constrain them. Otherwise, demagogues will use these same institutions—like the courts, media, and private sector—to destroy democracy.

Levitsky and Ziblatt argue that the measure of a democracy isn't whether it has anti-democratic elements in it, but rather whether the system manages to stop those anti-democratic elements. In other words, democracy isn't just something that passively exists on its own in a society. Instead, it's something that people have to constantly, actively promote against forces that want to destroy it. The responsibility for stopping these anti-democratic forces lies first with party gatekeepers and second with the people who run institutions and set political norms.

In 2016, the U.S. "failed the first test" by electing Donald Trump. Many Americans expect constitutional checks and balances to stop Trump and protect democracy, but they can't unless "unwritten democratic norms" reinforce them. In the U.S., the two key norms are mutual toleration (accepting the other side as legitimate) and institutional forbearance (refraining from using all of one's legal powers). But they've been eroding since the 1980s, especially because of the U.S.'s extreme polarization around politics, culture, and race. History shows that this is a warning sign for any democracy. But it also shows that nations can stop and reverse democratic breakdowns. Protecting American democracy will require humility, courage, and a careful look at history.

Levitsky and Ziblatt wrote this book in 2018, about a year into Trump's presidency. To them, the fate of American democracy was up in the air—and readers can decide whether or not it still is, in their own time. The authors hope that their knowledge about democracy and authoritarianism in the rest of the world can help Americans evaluate what to do in their own political circumstances. Here, they lay out two of their book's central arguments. First, democratic norms are the key to stopping authoritarianism, which means that the U.S. needs to reinforce these norms in order to stop Donald Trump. Second, while Trump is certainly dangerous, his presidency is only possible because of a longer, equally dangerous process of democratic breakdown. This breakdown comes from political polarization, which is largely a response to racial inclusivity in American politics since the 1960s.

CHAPTER 1: FATEFUL ALLIANCES

Levitsky and Ziblatt quote one of Aesop's fables: the Horse asks the Hunter to help him conquer the Stag, and the Hunter agrees, on the condition that he can saddle up and ride the Horse. But after the Hunter kills the Stag, he refuses to get off the Horse.

In this fable, the Hunter is the authoritarian, the Horse is the establishment, and killing the Stag represents winning power through elections. The fable represents the way authoritarians take power: they promise establishment politicians short-term political gain in exchange for their support. But in the long term, establishment politicians end up handing power to the authoritarian.

In October 1922, Benito Mussolini traveled to Rome to become the premier of Italy. Famously, he visited the king dressed in black, then led thousands of Blackshirts (Fascist paramilitary gangs) as they paraded through the city, proclaiming revolution. At least, that's the myth—in reality, there was no revolution. Italy was politically divided and the Blackshirts were threatening violence. King Victor Emmanuel III thought he could restore order by giving Mussolini power. At first, it worked—but soon, like the horse from Aesop's fable, Italy was under Mussolini's control.

The difference between the myth and the reality of Mussolini's rule shows why it's so important to accurately understand history. The myth makes it seem as though Mussolini was all-powerful and unstoppable. But the reality is that he wasn't very powerful at all, and he could have been stopped. One establishment politician simply made a poor decision and sold out his country's long-term future for his own short-term gain. Had he understood the consequences of this course of action—for instance, if he had studied a book of political history like this one—then perhaps he would have chosen differently.

This pattern has repeated itself throughout history, with outsider figures like Hitler, Brazilian dictator Getúlio Vargas, Fujimori, and Chávez. Political elites gave them all power in the hopes of preserving order—but they created autocracies instead. For example, Hitler led a failed coup attempt in 1923, went to jail, and then founded the Nazi Party. In the 1930s, Germany faced polarization and economic crisis. President Paul von Hindenburg tried naming a series of new chancellors to lead the parliament, but all failed. Instead, conservatives proposed Adolf Hitler—whom they hated, but wrongly believed they could restrain.

The historical pattern that Levitsky and Ziblatt cite is significant because it shows that there's a structural weakness in all democracies that their citizens and leaders must watch out for. Namely, establishment forces can try to win power by appealing to anti-democratic forces—and then lose control of those forces. The long gap between Hitler's imprisonment and his rise to power further shows why democracy's defenders should always be vigilant. For years, Hitler was considered a fringe extremist with no chance at winning power. But his alliance with mainstream conservatives turned him into a legitimate political contender.

Like in Italy, German politicians tried to resolve a crisis by making a "fateful alliance" with a popular outsider. They hoped to benefit from the outsider's popularity, without accepting their radical ideas. This "devil's bargain" tends to fail: instead of bringing the outsider to the establishment's side, it often gives the outsider the political legitimacy they need to win. Back in Italy, the Italian prime minister faced economic and political crises in 1921. He organized early elections and allied with Mussolini's Fascists. Their alliance lost—but it gave the Fascists political legitimacy.

Like the Horse asking the Hunter for help in Aesop's fable, the Italian and German establishments thought they were controlling Mussolini and Hitler—when it was actually the other way around. They sold out their long-term wellbeing for short-term political gains. Not only did democracy crumble in the establishment parties' countries, but their own prospects also dimmed over time. Levitsky and Ziblatt clearly hope that present and future politicians will see this pattern and steer clear of charismatic, popular, anti-democratic candidates.

Chávez's rise to power in stable, democratic Venezuela followed the same pattern. Declining oil prices threatened the country's economy, increased poverty, and caused unrest in the 1980s. Chávez led two failed coups in 1992, but the elderly ex-president, Rafael Caldera, responded by embracing Chávez. Caldera became massively popular and won the 1993 election as a result. He quit his own political party and dropped the treason charges against Chávez for his coup. Caldera assumed that Chávez would eventually fade into obscurity, but instead, he gave Chávez the credibility he needed to win the presidency in 1998.

Chávez and Caldera again follow the pattern from Aesop's fable: Caldera used Chávez to gain power in the short term, but Chávez manipulated Caldera into handing him anti-democratic power in the long term. Like Mussolini and Hitler, Chávez went from an imprisoned extremist outsider to a serious presidential candidate. This suggests that many politicians still haven't learned from the pattern that Mussolini and Hitler set.

Hitler, Mussolini, and Chávez all rose to power by partnering with establishment politicians who didn't take them seriously. But many countries have also stopped such demagogues. It's not because of their citizens' superior democratic values—the public didn't support the Nazis or Fascists when they took power, and while most Venezuelans supported Chávez, they opposed authoritarianism. Instead, democracies stop demagogues when political party elites "isolate and defeat them." In fact, "political parties are democracy's gatekeepers."

As Levitsky and Ziblatt argued in their introduction, the real difference between functional and failing democracies isn't whether populist demagogues arise: it's whether democratic forces consistently "isolate and defeat them." Here, the authors specify that elites—not everyday citizens—are primarily responsible for ensuring this defeat. Ironically, then, preserving democracy requires giving party "gatekeepers" the anti-democratic power to override the people.

To stop wannabe authoritarians, party elites have to identify them first. Hitler, Mussolini, and Chávez declared their ambitions through violence, but many don't. For instance, Viktor Orbán governed Hungary democratically from 1998 to 2002, but became an autocrat after 2010. Citing political scientist Juan Linz, Levitsky and Ziblatt list "four behavioral warning signs" of authoritarian tendencies: rejecting the rules of democracy, denying opponents' legitimacy, encouraging (or tolerating) violence, and restricting opponents' (and the media's) civil liberties. Populist outsiders, who claim to represent "the people" in a fight on the elite, frequently meet one or more of these conditions. When elected, they tend to attack democracy.

These "four behavioral warning signs" are a straightforward, unambiguous tool for evaluating political candidates. All four "warning signs" revolve around a candidate's hostility to democracy—or their willingness to seize and maintain power even if it goes against the people's will. This shows that, when populist outsiders appeal to "the people," they're not really talking about the democratic decisions of the people as a whole. *Instead, they assert that their followers are the only people who really count. They make empty appeals to the idea of democracy, when they actually want to dismantle it.*

Because democracies can't stop candidates from running for office, political parties and leaders have to stop them instead. Leaders should keep extremists off the ballot, expel extremist elements at the grassroots level, and refuse to build alliances with antidemocratic parties. Parties should isolate extremists, not legitimize them, and unite to defeat them whenever they stand a chance of winning elections.

Again, democracy is paradoxical: if the people have free reign to elect anyone they wish, Levitsky and Ziblatt argue, they will often elect extremists who want to destroy democracy entirely. Political parties can help solve this paradox, but they have to put democracy first and make a constant effort to protect it. When parties stop valuing and reinforcing democracy, Levitsky and Ziblatt suggest, it tends to decline.

Gatekeepers have successfully stopped extremists several times. In Belgium in 1936, two far-right parties challenged the mainstream Catholic, Socialist, and Liberal parties. The right-wing Catholic Party expelled extremists from its own ranks and fought to win young right-wing voters over from them. Ultimately, the Catholics agreed to ally with their Socialist and Liberal rivals instead of building a coalition with the far-right parties. Similarly, in Finland in the 1930s, traditional right-wing parties gradually broke with the far-right Lapua Movement when they refused to give up political violence. Eventually, they formed an alliance with the Social Democrats to keep the extremists out.

These examples of effective gatekeeping aren't as famous as instances in which gatekeeping spectacularly failed—like when Hitler and Mussolini took power. But they're essential for Levitsky and Ziblatt's readers because they show how effective democracies can and do stop authoritarian wannabes. In both Belgium and Finland, establishment conservatives put the national interest in preserving democracy above their short-term self-interest in getting conservative candidates elected. Of course, doing so was also in their long-term *political self-interest because it meant that they could remain the primary conservative contenders and stop extremist movements from supplanting them.*

There are also more recent examples of effective gatekeeping. In 2016, Austria's traditional center-left and center-right parties faltered in the first round of the presidential election, sending the far-right FPÖ to the runoff election for the presidency against an independent candidate associated with the Green Party. The center-right party endorsed the Green candidate, who narrowly won because of its support. The U.S. also effectively kept extremists out of politics for decades—until 2016.

This recent example shows that democracy is still constantly vulnerable to overthrow, but establishment parties can still protect it by rejecting extremism. Moreover, the Austrian Green candidate's narrow victory is a reminder that small changes in the electorate can have major effects on the health of democracy. This means that, often, just a few establishment figures can make the difference in stopping extremism.

CHAPTER 2: GATEKEEPING IN AMERICA

In Philip Roth's novel *The Plot Against America*, the media-savvy aviator, political outsider, and Nazi sympathizer Charles Lindbergh gets elected president in the 1930s, causing widespread violence around the country. Many people have compared the novel to the 2016 election, which leads Levitsky and Ziblatt to ask why something like this didn't happen in the 1930s, during the Great Depression.

Lindbergh and Trump were both charismatic outsiders with enough name recognition to immediately become major national contenders and extreme enough views to seriously threaten American democracy. Of course, The Plot Against America *therefore also represents one possible future for the United States. Levitsky and Ziblatt compare 2016 to the 1930s because both were times of deep political crisis. Their point is that, despite these crises, party gatekeepers did their job in the 1930s but not in 2016.*

There have been right-wing extremists in the U.S. for centuries. Just in the 1930s, the pro-fascist priest Father Charles Coughlin reached forty million Americans per week via his radio show, and Louisiana governor Huey Long ran his state like a dictatorship, disregarding the state constitution and bribing officials left and right to get his way. Joseph McCarthy, the senator who blacklisted and censored alleged communists in the 1950s, was also extremely popular. In 1968 and 1972, the segregationist Alabama governor George Wallace ran for president on a racist, anti-democratic platform, supporting violence and deriding the Constitution. It's been common for such figures to get 30-40% support in the U.S. Only political party gatekeepers have prevented them from winning power.

Again, the mere presence of popular extremist demagogues doesn't say much about a democracy's health—but their ability to gain power does. Coughlin, Long, McCarthy, and Wallace were all popular, all had clear authoritarian tendencies, and all likely would have threatened democracy if they won national office. But successful gatekeeping stopped them. Their failures bolster Levitsky and Ziblatt's thesis in this chapter: something changed between the 1960s and the 2010s that prevented gatekeeping from successfully stopping Donald Trump. Specifically, this involves changes in party nomination processes.

During the 1920 Republican National Convention, after four days of deadlock in the vote for a presidential nominee, party leaders chose the longshot candidate Warren G. Harding in a backroom deal. While such backroom dealing is anti-democratic, it's also an example of good gatekeeping: risk-averse party leaders prevented "demonstrably unfit" candidates from getting nominated. Parliamentary systems also have gatekeeping built-in, because the elected parliamentarians choose the prime minister. But presidential systems like the U.S.'s are more complicated, because anyone can enter and win an election.

Gatekeeping and democracy are generally opposing tendencies: as voters gain more power, gatekeeping becomes harder, "demonstrably unfit" candidates become stronger, and democracy becomes more unstable. But as gatekeeping grows stronger, elites' power increases and government becomes less responsive to the people. This was the problem with early 20th century politics in the U.S. In presidential republics like the U.S., the key challenge is how to strike an effective balance between democracy and gatekeeping.

The framers of the Constitution recognized the need for gatekeeping. They wanted the president to represent the popular will, but also didn't trust the people, who often elect tyrants. They originally created the Electoral College to ensure that prominent men would elect the most competent candidates. But in the 1800s, political parties formed, and they became the new gatekeepers. Parties have to both choose the candidates who represent their voters and filter out candidates who are unfit for office. At times, these obligations conflict—like when the popular favorite is a demagogue. Parties always have to balance gatekeeping with openness.

Levitsky and Ziblatt agree with the framers: the greatest threat to democracy can often be democracy itself. To ensure that democracy functions effectively, they think, elite institutions like political parties need to moderate it. Specifically, they have to balance candidates' quality with their popularity. But if these institutions fail to uphold democratic values, they can also weaken democracy and restrict power to a small, corrupt elite—just like demagogic candidates. Therefore, while outsourcing gatekeeping to specialist political elites can create a more stable and effective system, those elites have to value and defend democracy above all else.

American political parties have generally relied too heavily on gatekeeping. Originally, congressmen chose the presidential candidates. Starting in the 1830s, the parties elected delegates from each state to a national convention—but these delegates could vote for whomever they wanted, so they usually chose insider candidates who had party leaders' support. In the early 1900s, states started holding primaries, but delegates didn't have to honor the result, so little changed. While this gatekeeping system was incredibly undemocratic—wealthy, well-connected white men held all the power—it *did* effectively screen out unfit candidates.

Levitsky and Ziblatt aren't arguing that political party gatekeepers should have as much power as they did in the 18th and 19th centuries, nor use it to limit politics to elite insiders. Instead, they want a balance—parties should be responsive to voters while also effectively stopping extremist candidates. Their history of the presidential nomination process shows how procedural changes have made gatekeeping more or less effective over the last 200 years. In turn, similar changes can make it more effective in the future.

For instance, Henry Ford—the wealthy, popular, politically inexperienced businessman and antisemitic conspiracy theorist—repeatedly tried to run for public office. At one point, he even led in the national polls. But party leaders rejected him, so he had no chance of winning the nomination. Huey Long died before his planned presidential run, but he would have run into the same problem. Similarly, George Wallace had 40% approval in 1968—the same level as Trump in 2016—but Democratic Party gatekeepers wouldn't give him the nomination, so he had no chance of winning the presidency. In fact, Philip Roth had a point in *The Plot Against America*: in the 1930s, Lindbergh was extremely popular and planning a presidential run. But Republican Party gatekeepers made sure that he never had a chance.

Gatekeepers effectively stopped Ford, Long, Wallace, Lindbergh, and many others from becoming 20th century Donald Trumps. These stories aren't well known today, but their obscurity is actually evidence of how effectively gatekeeping worked during that era of American politics. By stamping out these candidates early, gatekeepers prevented them from ever having a shot at power. Levitsky and Ziblatt continue to raise one crucial question: what has changed since the mid-20th century that made it possible for Trump to win the nomination in 2016?

However, this all changed in the 1970s. In 1968, after prospective Democratic nominee Robert F. Kennedy was assassinated, the party nominated the deeply unpopular vice president Hubert Humphrey instead. Protestors marched on the Democratic National Convention, the police attacked them, and then fights broke out within the convention itself. In response, both parties restructured the nomination process. Ever since 1972, state primaries have determined the nominee.

The public was right to be concerned about parties choosing unpopular insiders in the 1960s—Levitsky and Ziblatt are not arguing that the U.S. should abandon the contemporary nomination process and return to a system of total elite control. Instead, they're explaining how an anti-democratic nomination process became more democratic, and how that had unintended, dangerous consequences.

As a result of these changes, it's become possible for candidates to win without party gatekeepers' support. But still, few outsider candidates succeeded from the 1970s until the 2000s. To win primaries across the whole U.S., candidates would need plenty of money, publicity, campaign staff, and powerful allies. In practice, to get all these resources, candidates still need support from the party establishment—political scientists call this the "invisible primary."

The "invisible primary" is still a form of gatekeeping—party elites might not have total control over the nomination process today, but they still have considerable power to normalize, legitimize, and popularize their preferred candidates. Indeed, this is why establishment politicians' "fateful alliances" with extremist outsiders tend to be so dangerous.

CHAPTER 3: THE GREAT REPUBLICAN ABDICATION

Donald Trump announced his candidacy in June 2015, but most politicians and media commentators didn't take him seriously at first. But the changes in the primary system made it possible for outsiders without any experience to succeed—in fact, more and more outsiders have run since 1972. Although they didn't win the nomination, figures like Pat Robertson, Pat Buchanan, and Steve Forbes showed that it's possible for candidates to skip past the invisible primary if they're rich or famous enough.

In the last chapter, the authors established that Trump's far-right, anti-democratic political style isn't unique in American history. Instead, he's unique because he ran for office in an era when political norms were fraying and the nomination system was ripe for authoritarian takeover. Specifically, party gatekeeping processes weakened enough that Trump's fame and wealth effectively substituted for political support from the establishment.

Still, in 2015, Trump initially appeared to face the same long odds as these earlier celebrity outsider candidates. Even after he started leading in the polls, media commentators assumed that party gatekeepers would keep him out of power. But gatekeepers were weaker than ever. After the Supreme Court's 2010 *Citizens United* decision, new money was flooding into politics, giving outsider candidates a better way to fundraise. And as cable news and social media took over from traditional media outlets, especially among Republicans, it got easier for outsiders to win name recognition and support across the country.

Coupled with longer-term changes in the party nomination process, short-term changes in political media and campaign contribution laws also made it easier for Trump to skip the "invisible primary" and win the nomination without any formal support from the establishment. Like the new nomination process, these changes in media and campaign laws allowed nontraditional actors to enter politics. But unlike the new nomination process, these changes didn't actually make American politics more democratic. Instead, they allowed powerful actors from outside the party establishments to further influence politics in their own favor.

Levitsky and Ziblatt argue that Republican Party gatekeepers failed to do their job during the invisible primary, the state primaries, and the election.

Gatekeeping isn't a one-time affair—rather, it's a constant process of strengthening a party and evaluating threats to it. This means that party leaders have several chances to stop potential authoritarians—but also that they constantly have to look out for threats to democracy.

First, Trump struggled in the invisible primary: no major Republicans supported him until very late in the race, after he won the second and third primaries in New Hampshire and South Carolina. Even by the end of the primaries, he had a fraction as many endorsements as his major competitors. Ultimately, in 2016, the invisible primary simply didn't matter: Trump didn't need the Republican gatekeepers. He was a celebrity, major conservative media figures supported him, and his endless controversies attracted constant news coverage.

While party gatekeepers generally did not support Trump, Levitsky and Ziblatt suggest that they could have taken a stronger stance against him earlier in the race, to help limit his influence. They also point out that, in the 21st century, media and business figures also act as important political gatekeepers (just like the party elite). This can be troubling, because their incentives aren't necessarily democratic. For instance, the authors point out how the media largely covered Trump because his exaggerated, controversial style made for good television. But this is the same style that made his authoritarian tendencies clear.

After the Super Tuesday primaries, prominent Republican politicians and magazines started turning against Trump, but they couldn't do much to stop him. Leaders tried to get delegates to change their vote, but they found little success. In the primary-based convention system, there was no way for Trump to lose. Party leaders no longer had control over the process.

In a previous era, party leaders would have been able to block Trump's nomination after Super Tuesday. But because of the changes to the nomination process in the last half-century, they couldn't do it in 2016. They needed to act earlier, but either didn't appreciate the threat Trump posed to democracy or quietly decided to make a "fateful alliance" with him.

Finally, during the general election, the Republican establishment and media cautiously suggested that Trump wouldn't bring his extremism and incivility into office. But actually, it's often possible to identify anti-democratic politicians before they get power—and Trump fits all the four warning signs of autocracy that Levitsky and Ziblatt laid out in the first chapter.

Levitsky and Ziblatt accuse Republican gatekeepers of normalizing Trump by pretending not to see his authoritarian tendencies after he passed through the "invisible primary." By returning to the four warning signs from their first chapter, they suggest that these warning signs were crystal clear. They hope this will help readers identify and call out such signs in the future, when party gatekeepers aren't willing to.

First, Trump isn't committed to the rules of democracy. He refused to promise to accept the 2016 election results, and he accused Hillary Clinton supporters of widespread voter fraud without any evidence. No president has questioned American democracy like this since the 1860s, and Trump's rhetoric led the majority of Republicans to doubt whether the election was fair.

According to Levitsky and Ziblatt, Trump's disdain for established, fair electoral procedures showed that he doesn't actually want the U.S. government to follow the will of the people—instead, he wanted it to hand him power, no matter the cost. This is destructive in the long term because it undermines the important democratic norm of public faith in free and fair elections. Given the events surrounding the 2020 election, readers will have to evaluate whether (and to what extent) Trump continues to threaten democracy in the U.S.

Second, Trump denies his opponents' legitimacy: he falsely claimed that Barack Obama was not born in the U.S. and called for imprisoning Hillary Clinton.

By denying that Obama and Clinton could legitimately participate in the U.S. political system, Trump undermined the key democratic norm of mutual toleration. He rejected the idea that elections are a legitimate contest for power between different groups, each of which has a right to rule if they are chosen by the public.

Third, Trump is the first presidential candidate in more than a century to promote violence. At his rallies, he frequently threatened protesters and encouraged his supporters to assault them.

While the violence at Trump's rallies was relatively small-scale, the authors suggest that it's troubling because it suggests that Trump is willing to use political violence—potentially on a much larger scale—to get his way and overturn democracy.

Fourth, Trump supports punishing his opponents and critics. He proposed prosecuting Hillary Clinton for unspecified crimes and threatened to change libel laws and sue the media.

Finally, Trump's attacks on his critics signal that he is willing to use the legal system as a partisan weapon against his opponents. He rejected the critical democratic principle that the law should apply equally to everyone, regardless of political ideology or affiliation.

In the general election, Republicans should have done everything possible to keep Trump out of power and preserve democracy—including supporting Hillary Clinton. Endorsing opponents to save democracy isn't unprecedented: it happened in Austria in 2016 and France in 2017. And some Republican politicians *did* endorse Clinton—but not any prominent national figures. Of the 78 who did, 77 were retired, and one was about to retire.

While there was little Republicans could do to stop Trump between Super Tuesday and the National Convention, they had the power to stop him in the general election by clearly articulating the risks he posed to U.S. democracy. However, this required them to sacrifice their own short-term self-interest in order to preserve political stability in the long-term. Clearly, the authors claim, they weren't invested enough in democracy to do so.

If prominent Republicans had endorsed Clinton, they very well might have swung the election. Unfortunately, they chose to pretend that it was an ordinary election. Because the U.S. electorate was highly polarized and very conflicted about Obama, this ensured that it was going to be a toss-up. If they hadn't normalized Trump's candidacy, Republican leaders could have prevented him from winning.

Levitsky and Ziblatt emphasize that it wouldn't have taken the entire party leadership to delegitimize Trump and swing concerned Republican voters to Clinton. Like in Austria in 2016 and France in 2017, narrow margins would have been enough. The authors introduce the thesis that polarization is partially responsible for the Republicans' unwillingness to put democracy before party. They elaborate this thesis at length in the book's final chapters.

CHAPTER 4: SUBVERTING DEMOCRACY

Alberto Fujimori never intended to rule Peru—in 1990, he only he ran for president to win name recognition for his independent *senate* campaign. Facing hyperinflation and a guerrilla insurgency, however, the public rebelled against the political establishment. They elected Fujimori, an inexperienced populist outsider, over the Nobel Prize-winning novelist Mario Vargas Llosa. When he took office, Fujimori faced an opposition-run congress and a skeptical media. He started publicly insulting his enemies, ruling through executive decrees, and pardoning thousands of prisoners. When the courts pushed back against Fujimori and congress tried to oust him, Fujimori disbanded congress and suspended the constitution instead.

The first several chapters of the book focused on how authoritarians take power. The next few chapters focus on how they attack democracy once they have it. Fujimori's rise to power illustrates several key principles about how authoritarians rule. For instance, it shows how crisis amplifies threats to democracy: crisis gives authoritarians a chance to consolidate power and often makes citizens comfortable with such behavior. Fujimori also exemplifies how authoritarians can consolidate power and dismantle checks and balancesgradually, step-by-step over a long period of time, rather than suddenly, all at once.

Fujimori's story shows that "democratic breakdown doesn't need a blueprint." Instead, it's often the result of gradually escalating tensions between a leader and the establishment. These tensions often start with insults and accusations, which then escalate to desperate actions. For instance, Juan Perón and Hugo Chávez's opposition tried to get them out of power by any means necessary, and they escalated tensions in response. Authoritarians also tend to dislike the endless compromises, criticism, and checks and balances that come with governing a democracy.

Levitsky and Ziblatt warn their readers against thinking of authoritarians as evil, malicious figures dead-set on crushing the people's will and winning power for themselves. Instead, Fujimori's case shows how ordinary politicians can become authoritarians under extraordinary circumstances. Fujimori, Perón, and Chávez were focused on fighting the establishment, not necessarily the popular will. But because they attempted to overcome polarization through escalation and dominance, rather than compromise and reconciliation, they ended up dismantling democracy in the process.

Elected demagogues tend to start attacking democratic institutions slowly, through a series of minor steps that seem legal or legitimate. Levitsky and Ziblatt compare this to how a soccer team might try to rig a game: they would win over the referees, incapacitate key players on the other team, and change the rules to their advantage.

Soccer is an apt metaphor for democracy because both games produce fair outcomes as long as both sides follow the rules. Both sides have an incentive to twist the rules for their own advantage, but there are severe punishments for doing so. Therefore, the game's integrity already has to be weakened if players are to get away with cheating.

First, like the soccer team would try to win over the referees, authoritarians try to take control of agencies that are supposed to be "neutral arbiters," like the courts, law enforcement, and regulators. This protects them from punishment and gives them a powerful weapon to use against their opponents. For instance, Viktor Orbán fired independent regulatory officials and hired allies instead. Alberto Fujimori's advisor Vladimiro Montesinos bribed and blackmailed hundreds of opposition figures. Juan Perón, Viktor Orbán, the Polish Law and Justice Party, and Hugo Chávez all restructured their countries' supreme courts to their favor.

Referees, or neutral legal and law enforcement agencies, are critical to a functioning democracy because they ensure that the law applies equally to all citizens and politicians. In turn, they provide a key democratic check on the ruling party's power. When rulers manage to bias the referees, however, they make sure that they only check the other side's *power. While Fujimori captured the referees in an obviously unethical way, Orbán, Perón, and Chávez's tactics are particularly sinister because they're technically legal: each of these presidents actually had (or gave themselves) the legal authority to change the courts.*

Next, like the cheating soccer team, autocrats try to sideline their opponents. Bribes and favors are often the easiest way to win over the opposition. For instance, Vladimiro Montesinos paid off every major Peruvian TV channel, and in exchange, they let him plan the nightly news. He also bribed opposition politicians to support Fujimori's illegal reelection effort and switch sides to give Fujimori a majority in congress.

By sidelining their political opponents, authoritarians eliminate their primary rivals for power and increase their chances of keeping power for themselves. By silencing the media, authoritarians cut off the public's access to information about their abuses of power. Fujimori and Montesinos's bribery campaign was a particularly egregious and successful example of this. Fujimori won loyalty from the media and opposition by making it as easy as possible for them to accept authoritarianism and as difficult as possible for them to defend democracy.

When bribes and favors fail, autocrats look to incapacitate their opponents, whether in politics, the media, business, or popular culture. They can't kill opponents anymore, but they often *can* attack them through the law. Juan Perón, Hugo Chávez, and the Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamed all got opposition leaders arrested on dubious charges. Rafael Correa, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, Vladimir Putin, and Chávez all crushed opposition media through fines and lawsuits, leaving them open for government takeover. Putin and Erdoğan investigated, audited, and fined wealthy businessmen who support the opposition. Perón got the iconic writer Jorge Luis Borges fired and blacklisted after he criticized the government, while Chávez funded cultural figures like the conductor Gustavo Dudamel to prevent them from speaking out against the regime. By silencing prominent opposition figures, autocrats convince *everyone* in the opposition to give up.

Just like they contrast coups d'état with gradual democratic backsliding, Levitsky and Ziblatt contrast traditional, bombastic anti-democratic tactics with the more subtle, ambiguous tactics that authoritarians use today. Political assassinations and Montesinos's bribery campaign exemplify black-and-white old-school authoritarianism. Meanwhile, the other tactics that Levitsky and Ziblatt mention here fall into the gray area of contemporary democratic backsliding. In all of them, authoritarian leaders technically act within the law and publicly claim to be defending democracy, when they're really manipulating the law to attack democracy.

Finally, like the cheating soccer team, authoritarians try to rewrite the rules for their own benefit. They change procedures and institutions to protect their power, while claiming to just be improving democracy. For instance, Malaysia's ruling UMNO party secured the vast majority of parliamentary seats through gerrymandering, and Viktor Orbán changed election laws to ensure that all political advertising ran on his government's broadcast station. In fact, Levitsky and Ziblatt argue that the worst example of such antidemocratic election laws is the Southern U.S. after the Civil War. Every Southern state passed discriminatory laws to prevent Black people from voting and lock in single-party white supremacist rule.

In a democracy, justice is supposed to be blind: the law is supposed to be neutral, impartial, and objective. By manipulating laws to their own benefit, authoritarians violate this fundamental democratic principle. In short, they change the law so that they can call their wrongdoing legal. Next, by pointing out how Southern state governments were fundamentally antidemocratic for much of American history, Levitsky and Ziblatt also challenge the common wisdom that the U.S. is and always has been an exemplary democracy. In fact, it's possible to understand contemporary challenges to the rule of law in the U.S.—like partisan voting restrictions—by looking at U.S. history as well as other countries like Malaysia and Hungary.

Ironically, while they dismantle democracy bit by bit, authoritarians frequently claim to be *defending* it—especially during crises. For instance, after an unexplained bombing in 1972, Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos declared that martial law was necessary to protect democracy. (He went on to rule as a dictator for fourteen years.)

By using pro-democracy rhetoric to justify anti-democratic behavior, authoritarians make their tactics harder to identify and give their supporters plausible deniability. They suggest that democracy's survival depends on them winning, *when it really depends on their willingness to give up power.*

Crises generally help governments concentrate and abuse power by encouraging citizens to "rally 'round the flag." This happened in the U.S. after 9/11, when President George W. Bush became incredibly popular and started restricting civil liberties. In crises, the public tends to tolerate authoritarian policies and constitutions tend to give executives special emergency powers. Therefore, demagogues seek out crises in order to rig the government in their favor. Fujimori justified his 1992 coup d'état by pointing to the guerrilla insurgency, and Marcos likely orchestrated the very bombing that he used to justify imposing martial law.

Bush's policy changes after 9/11 were not as extreme or authoritarian as Ferdinand Marcos's power grab after the 1972 Manila bombing. Most importantly, he didn't manufacture the crisis for his own benefit. However, Bush's policies still prove Levitsky and Ziblatt's basic principle: leaders can exploit the "rally 'round the flag" effect in order to consolidate power and attack democracy. This is as true in the U.S. as anywhere else, even if Americans are reluctant to admit it. Despite its pro-democracy rhetoric, the U.S. public is absolutely open to authoritarian policies that limit their civil rights and liberties.

Most famously, when the Reichstag (German parliament building) burned down in 1933, Adolf Hitler used his emergency powers to eliminate the Nazis' opposition and rule Germany by decree for more than a decade. Similarly, when Vladimir Putin became Russia's prime minister in 1999, he used a series of alleged terrorist attacks on Moscow to justify invading the region of Chechnya, consolidating power, and attacking the opposition. In fact, many historians believe that the Nazis started the Reichstag fire and Putin's government planned the attacks on Moscow. Similarly, in Turkey, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan used ISIS terror attacks and a 2016 coup attempt to justify calling emergency elections and cracking down on thousands of officials, journalists, and judges.

Authoritarians' behavior during crises resembles their rhetoric about democracy. They claim that democracy is under threat and the only way to save it is by handing them power, when in reality, they've created *the threat to democracy. Similarly, Hitler, Putin, and Erdoğan all manufactured or magnified crises, then argued that overcoming these crises required handing them power. In general, these crises were the key point at which their regimes turned from democratic to authoritarian. Levitsky and Ziblatt's message is clear: Americans should be extremely wary about Donald Trump's behavior during such a crisis.*

CHAPTER 5: THE GUARDRAILS OF DEMOCRACY

Americans have long viewed the U.S. as a special nation and attributed its success to the Constitution. Indeed, constitutional checks and balances have stopped many abuses of power throughout U.S. history—for instance, they limited executive power after the Civil War and forced Richard Nixon out of office after the Watergate scandal.

Levitsky and Ziblatt agree that the U.S. has a particularly long and robust democratic history, in which the kind of abuses they described in the previous chapter are rare and generally unsuccessful. But they are very careful about explaining this relative democratic success. Many Americans think of their government as inherently *free and stable, as though the Constitution has somehow guaranteed permanent democracy forever. But this is taking democracy for granted, when it shouldn't be. Levitsky and Ziblatt instead emphasize how democracy has depended on people's* actions *throughout history and continues to do so in the present. Americans who see democracy as inevitable are unlikely to stand up to defend it, while Americans who understand that people create and sustain democracy are much more likely to stand up in its defense.*

But a good constitution isn't enough to protect democracy. For instance, Hitler toppled Germany's sturdy 1919 constitution. Most Latin American countries' constitutions and systems of government are closely based on the U.S., but most of them have failed to stop authoritarianism. The same is true of the Philippines. Constitutions are never complete enough to deal with every situation, they're always open to interpretation, and they're always subject to malicious distortion, which can violate the spirit of the law. In the U.S., it's constitutional for the president to fill the FBI with loyal allies and rule by decree during crises.

Constitutions can't act on their own—instead, they're tools for politicians to use. While the quality of a constitution matters, the way that politicians use it is even more important. For instance, authoritarians can defeat the strongest democratic constitutions if other members of the government don't enforce them. Therefore, it's wrong to credit the relative longevity and strength of American democracy to the U.S. Constitution alone. The way that leaders have chosen to implement, protect, and improve the Constitution over time is more important than the document itself.

Democracy's greatest protector isn't a nation's constitution, but rather its democratic norms. These norms are like the rules of pickup basketball: they're the unwritten codes of conduct, based on shared understanding, that keep the system functioning. During ordinary times, they're often invisible, because they work in the background. But politicians who break them face serious consequences. The two main rules are mutual toleration and institutional forbearance.

People's actions *determine whether democracies live or die, so norms are essential because they determine how leaders act in any given political system. Just like basketball players who break the rules, politicians who violate democratic norms are likely to be thrown out of the game. This is a self-reinforcing cycle: strong norms protect democracy by stopping people who threaten it. When these people are stopped, the democratic norms that stop them also get reinforced, which deters anti-democratic behavior in the future. In short, when everyone in the government faithfully follows democratic norms, it is extremely difficult for authoritarians and their allies to destroy democracy because the entire system aligns against them.*

Mutual toleration means that politicians accept their opponents' right to participate in the system as equals, so long as they follow constitutional rules. In other words, it's "politicians' collective willingness to agree to disagree." This is a relatively new idea in history: for a long time, opposing the existing government was automatically considered treason. In the early U.S., both the Federalists and Republicans accused the other party of treason and tried to punish them through the law. It took decades for the main parties to become "rivals rather than enemies."

Under mutual toleration, the losing side in an election or legislative fight recognizes the winning side's victory as fair and legitimate. For instance, when the government passes a law, politicians who disagree with or voted against the law should still recognize its legitimacy and enforce it if necessary. They see the opposition's claim to participate in the political system as legitimate, so they recognize that they lost in a fair political contest and don't try to sabotage the rules of that contest in order to get their way. Levitsky and Ziblatt's examples from early American politics also show that the U.S. has not always been a perfectly democratic country. This further disproves the misleading popular idea that the Constitution is solely responsible for making the U.S. a functioning democracy.

Similarly, in newly democratic Spain in the 1930s, right-wing Catholics saw the socialist government as a threat to their survival, while leftists thought those same right-wing Catholics wanted to overthrow democracy. Neither saw the other as a legitimate opponent. Without mutual toleration, democracy fails, because each side is willing to take antidemocratic measures to win. That's what happened in Spain: the right took over the government, the left rebelled and created its own parallel government, the right attacked the left, and the country fell into civil war. Virtually all authoritarians portray their opponents as threats to the nation's existence.

Norms like mutual toleration are self-reinforcing—when everyone sees everyone else's claim to power as legitimate, it's very difficult for political newcomers to think otherwise. (If they do, they'll likely get expelled from the government.) But the opposites of democratic norms, like mutual intolerance, *are* also *self-reinforcing. This is why polarization often increases over time. When one side gives up on mutual toleration, they stop playing the political game fairly, so the other side has a strong incentive to do the same (lest they be forced to play at a disadvantage). Therefore, once mutual toleration is broken, tension and conflict tend to escalate over time (unless both sides manage to reestablish it). For contemporary readers, it's probably easy to see parallels between Spain's increasing polarization in the 1930s and the United States's since the 1960s.*

Next, institutional forbearance means that politicians avoid actions that are technically legal but violate the spirit of the law. This norm goes back to monarchies, in which kings technically had the divine right to rule with unrestrained power. But in practice, they knew that they had to act with self-restraint in order to prove their "godliness" and maintain order. In democracy, like in basketball, it's important to make sure that both sides will want to keep playing the game the future. Therefore, players should play fair and avoid dirty tricks.

Institutional forbearance is just a fancy way of saying that politicians should use wise restraint when governing. It's necessary because, for different parts of a government to balance one another's power, each part needs to have some legal right over the others. (For instance, in the U.S., Congress has the power to rule on executive appointments, while the courts have the power to strike down Congress's laws.) But politicians can only use these extraordinary powers when it's truly necessary to prevent overreach and keep the government in balance. Ultimately, this depends on their judgment and their willingness to prioritize the effective functioning of democracy. If, instead, they use this power whenever and however they wish, they cause conflicts and threaten their own legitimacy.

Many democracies rely on forbearance. For instance, in Britain, the Crown technically has the power to select the prime minister—but in practice, it always chooses the majority leader in Parliament. Similarly, in the U.S., presidents normally limited themselves to two terms, following the precedent set by George Washington and Thomas Jefferson. When Franklin D. Roosevelt broke the norm in the 1940s, Congress formalized it in the Twenty-Second Amendment.

The Crown chooses the majority leader as prime minister because the U.K. is now a democratic country. If the Crown selected its own prime minister, regardless of the people's will, it would widely be seen as illegitimate and undemocratic. Similarly, U.S. presidents limited their own terms in order to show that they believed in the peaceful, democratic succession of power. Again, this was a way for them to highlight the democratic value of sharing power and reinforce their own legitimacy. For more than a century, the U.S. didn't even need to make this norm a law, which attests to how widely presidents followed it and how consistently they chose to promote democratic values instead of gaining more power for themselves.

When they abandon forbearance, democracies become divided and dysfunctional. Parties play "constitutional hardball," pushing the rules to their limit and sacrificing democratic norms for the sake of political power. Juan Perón stretched the law to impeach supreme court justices in the 1940s, Argentine President Carlos Menem did so to rule by decree in the 1990s. In 2015, Nicolás Maduro manipulated the supreme court to block every law passed by Venezuela's congress. In Paraguay in 2012 and Ecuador in 1997, congresses booted unpopular presidents Fernando Lugo and Abdalá Bucaram from office through rushed impeachment trials. And in the 1800s and 1900s in the U.S., Southern Democrats took similarly extreme measures to limit Black people's power.

Hardball is the opposite of forbearance. Hardball involves politicians exploiting the letter of the law in order to violate the spirit of the law for personal gain. In contrast, politicians exercise forbearance when they try to fulfill the spirit of the law, even if it means limiting their own power in order to maintain a balance between different parts of the government. Perón, Menem, and Maduro's behavior was all legal. But they all violated the spirit of the law by usurping powers that weren't supposed to be theirs. Again, global examples can show Americans how their own democracy could deteriorate when forbearance breaks down, but so can episodes from their own history. This is another reminder that U.S. history isn't as spotlessly democratic as many Americans would like to imagine.

The two key democratic norms, mutual toleration and institutional forbearance, tend to work together. When forbearance predominates, rivals are more likely to see each other as legitimate, and when rivals see each other as legitimate, they tend to use forbearance. But when they can no longer tolerate the other side, politicians are often willing to do anything within their legal power to win. And when the other side is willing to do anything, parties stop seeing each other as legitimate rivals. When these norms erode, politics loses its "**guardrails**."

Because they work together, democratic norms can create both vicious and virtuous cycles: they can build democracy up or tear it down. When politicians agree on democratic norms and are willing to punish those who violate them, these norms tend to get stronger over time, until they're the unstated assumptions behind all politics. But when politicians start to break these norms and get away with it, others tend to follow suit because they feel that they have to do so in order to stay even with the opposition. It's as though one side tilts the playing field and the other side starts tilting it back in their own direction. Levitsky and Ziblatt compare democratic norms to guardrails because they save democracy from the serious threats it faces. When the guardrails are working, authoritarians don't stand a chance. But when they aren't, authoritarians can easily take power.

One example of politics without these norms is England in the 1640s. The monarchy and Puritans accused each other of treason in Parliament, and Parliament refused to collect taxes to support the monarchy, even during a war with Scotland. King Charles dissolved Parliament, and eventually, England fell into civil war.

In this example, once neither side tolerated the other, both abandoned forbearance and started doing everything in their power to achieve their agenda. When both sides pushed their vast legal powers to the limit, the government literally could not function, and English society temporarily fell apart.

Similarly, democratic norms were strong in Chile until the 1960s, when leftists started abandoning them and the right started running hate-filled, fearmongering campaigns. Pro-democracy leftist Salvador Allende won the presidency in 1970, but the U.S.-backed conservatives tried to circumvent the election result in congress. They failed, but they successfully blocked Allende's agenda and removed his ministers by weaponizing the censure process. Each side started viewing the other as illegitimate. Such deep polarization often tears democratic norms apart—and in Chile, it did. After neither side won a definitive majority in the midterm elections, Allende kept insisting on dialogue, but neither his left-wing allies nor the right were interested. Eventually, the right declared him illegitimate and the military took power.

The breakdown of democracy in Chile again started when polarization gradually escalated over the course of years, then both sides started to abandon mutual toleration. And again, without mutual toleration, institutional forbearance quickly fell apart, too. Soon, both sides fell into a self-fulfilling prophecy: each saw its opposition as an existential threat, so both tried to eliminate the opposition, thereby turning each party into an actual *existential threat to the other. Eventually, when there was no longer a clear democratic solution to the nation's woes, it fell into authoritarianism. The key question that Levitsky and Ziblatt must confront in the rest of the book is how nations can put the brakes on this kind of runaway democratic breakdown.*

CHAPTER 6: THE UNWRITTEN RULES OF AMERICAN POLITICS

During his first inaugural address in 1933, President Franklin D. Roosevelt asked Congress for war powers to face the Great Depression. Later, the conservative Supreme Court repeatedly blocked major parts of the New Deal. In response, Roosevelt decided to expand the court to fifteen justices. He would have turned the Supreme Court into a political weapon, like Perón in Argentina and Chávez in Venezuela. But he failed—even many of his allies rejected his plan and voted to preserve checks and balances instead.

While Roosevelt's expansion of executive authority helped him pass effective national policies, it also marked a clear shift in the balance of power between different branches of the federal government. Much like Fujimori in Peru, he didn't initially expand executive authority because he wanted *to weaken democracy, but because he thought it was the best way to overcome dogged political opposition. However, unlike in Peru, the guardrails of democratic norms held in the U.S., preventing Roosevelt from fully achieving his agenda and packing the Supreme Court.*

In the late 1700s and early 1800s, constitutional hardball was the norm in U.S. politics: the Federalists and Republicans each wanted to eliminate the other party, and they repeatedly changed the size of the Supreme Court to increase their power. Stronger democratic norms formed a few decades later, and figures like Martin Van Buren tolerated and respected their rivals.

While many Americans believe that U.S. democracy has always been strong since the foundation of the republic, this history of constitutional hardball suggests that they are wrong. The truth is far more complicated: democratic and anti-democratic forces have consistently fought for control over the U.S. government. In turn, this means that the conflict and polarization that characterize U.S. politics today aren't completely unprecedented.

But in the 1850s, the polarized national debate over slavery destroyed these norms again. Each side accused the other of treason, and congresspeople frequently attacked each other on the House and Senate floors. During the Civil War, Lincoln drastically expanded executive power, and after it, many Americans started questioning the Constitution. For years, both sides continued playing constitutional hardball and viewing each other as enemies and traitors. To stop President Andrew Johnson's anti-Reconstruction policies, Republicans shrank the Supreme Court and refused to let Johnson appoint new cabinet members. Johnson ignored them.

The destructiveness of the Civil War is a warning for the 21st century. Levitsky and Ziblatt argue that the period from the 1850s through the 1870s was the only time when the American electorate and political system were as stubbornly polarized as they have been since 2000. Like in Chile in the 1960s and 1970s, this polarization slowly but surely broke down democratic norms. Both sides became more invested in winning power than preserving the nation's democratic rules. Ultimately, bringing the nation back together required strong, practically authoritarian executive actions.

But again, the parties gradually reestablished mutual toleration. However, this didn't happen until after Reconstruction ended in the Compromise of 1877 and Henry Cabot Lodge's legislation to protect the Black vote failed to pass in 1890. White Southern Democrats saw Black civil rights as an existential threat, so they weren't willing to tolerate Republicans until "racial equality [was] off the agenda." Soon, bipartisanship was common. And as mutual toleration increased, so did forbearance.

At the end of the 19th century, the U.S. successfully overcame polarization and reestablished democratic norms. This shows that it's still possible to stop and reverse democratic breakdown today. However, the Compromise of 1877 isn't a model for how this should be done. In fact, the Democrats and Republicans were only able to compromise after the Civil War because they agreed to run the U.S. as a white supremacist state, in which Black citizens didn't have the same full rights as white ones. Ironically, then, the U.S. government only followed democratic norms because it was based on deeply anti-democratic racial exclusion. Today, the challenge for Americans is how to build a functioning democracy without repeating these grave errors from the past.

In the 20th century, mutual toleration and institutional forbearance allowed the U.S. political system to function smoothly. They kept the executive, legislative, and judicial branches in balance, letting each oversee the others without getting in their way. When partisanship and polarization threaten these norms, they also imperil democracy. In a divided government, each side can play constitutional hardball and prevent the government from functioning unless it gets its way. In a united government, the ruling party can simply refuse to exercise oversight. Both threaten the system of checks and balances by letting leaders freely use their potentially antidemocratic powers.

In this chapter, Levitsky and Ziblatt have shown that the U.S. government hasn't always functioned smoothly, according to strong democratic norms. But when they discuss restoring American democracy to its previous strength, they are generally referring to the period they mention here: the first half of the 20th century. During this period, both parties agreed on and adhered to the basic rules of democracy. This shows how such norms serve as "guardrails": both sides preferred democracy to power.

The president has several extraordinary powers—and they have grown since the early 1900s. Today, presidents can rule by executive order, ignore court rulings, or issue pardons to avoid judicial oversight. Therefore, it's crucial for them to exercise forbearance. George Washington understood this and set a strong precedent for restraint. He avoided overstepping his authority and seldom used vetoes or executive orders.

These extraordinary presidential powers are all necessary in certain circumstances—for instance, executive orders can be crucial to address crises. This is why the norm of forbearance is crucial: presidents need to avoid using these powers in the majority of situations, in order to save them for the minority of circumstances when they're truly necessary.

Through the 20th century, other presidents followed Washington's lead—including those who wanted greater power, like Theodore Roosevelt. Presidents limited executive orders and pardons, and they respected the courts and congress. They also refrained from legally packing the Supreme Court, whether by impeaching and replacing justices or by expanding the court itself. When Franklin D. Roosevelt tried in 1937, he encountered severe opposition and failed.

Theodore Roosevelt's restraint and Franklin D. Roosevelt's failure to pack the Supreme Court are both key examples of how forbearance protects democracy. Specifically, it wasn't the Roosevelts' *forbearance that protected democracy, but rather the fact that forbearance was already a strong norm* before *they took power. Neither president wanted to exercise forbearance, but they had to do so because the rest of the government required them to. The norm of forbearance* deterred *Theodore Roosevelt's potential authoritarian behavior and* stopped *Franklin D. Roosevelt's.*

Congress also has extreme powers. In particular, the Senate was designed to foster deliberation and protect minority rights, so its rules (like the filibuster) often let minorities block the majority's will. These powers are important to check majority and presidential power, but senators can also abuse them to completely stop any bill from passing. For centuries, though, senators *didn't* abuse them—they exercised forbearance instead. Political scientist Donald Matthews argued that this was based on norms of *courtesy* and *reciprocity*. Courtesy meant avoiding insults and separating political conflicts from personal feelings. Reciprocity meant that senators could expect proportional retaliation to their attacks—so they avoided attacking the other side at all.

Although it's typically less unified than the executive branch, the legislative branch can also abuse its powers. This means that democratic norms are also essential in order to restrain it. Courtesy and reciprocity were simply the more specific norms that underlay the general norms of toleration and forbearance. Because the Senate has extreme powers like the filibuster, the U.S. government cannot function smoothly if senators abandon forbearance. This paradox actually protects democracy: senators couldn't try too hard to pass their agenda, or they would break the rules of courtesy and reciprocity that made it possible for them to pass that agenda in the first place.

Through courtesy and reciprocity, senators avoided using their most extreme powers. They rarely used the filibuster until the 1960s. Using its "advice and consent" power, the Senate could technically block all presidential appointments, but it only blocked nine between 1800 and 2005. Senators approved most eligible Supreme Court nominees, regardless of their political ideology, and never prevented the president from filling an open Supreme Court seat between 1866 and 2016. Finally, Congress can easily use its greatest power, impeachment, to undermine elections. Paraguay and Ecuador's congresses did this to remove presidents Fernando Lugo and Abdalá Bucaram. But in the U.S., Congress has refrained from weaponizing impeachment in this way.

The filibuster, advice and consent, and impeachment are the three extraordinary powers that Congress (and particularly the Senate) can use to obstruct democracy. Their proper use depends on democratic norms. For instance, senators are supposed to exercise forbearance by using the impeachment power only against presidents who criminally abuse their power—and not against partisan rivals. When the Senate abuses the impeachment power, it destabilizes the government by weakening the executive, which incentivizes future executives to abuse their power, too. Actually, it gets worse: by abusing the impeachment power, the Senate also corrupts it in the future, giving criminal presidents an excuse to portray legitimate impeachment proceedings as partisan attacks. Levitsky and Ziblatt start to hint at how these norms have degraded over time in the U.S. (particularly by the 2000s).

While mutual toleration and institutional forbearance predominated in the 20th century U.S., they also broke down in three key moments. First, Franklin D. Roosevelt discarded forbearance: he tried to pack the courts, issued an unprecedented number of executive orders, and served four terms. But the two parties worked together to reestablish and reinforce democratic norms where he abandoned them.

Roosevelt attacked forbearance by using all available presidential powers to try and pass his agenda without congressional or judicial support. This shows how the Constitutional guarantee of checks and balances isn't enough to protect democracy: rather, those in government have to enforce checks and balances through democratic norms. They succeeded: even Roosevelt's congressional allies put democracy above party loyalty.

Second, during the Cold War, Republican senator Joseph McCarthy dispensed with mutual toleration by pushing to purge known and suspected communists from the government. But in less than five years, his own party turned against him and gave up red-baiting.

McCarthy used communism as an excuse for portraying his political opponents as anti-American traitors. But democratic norms successfully contained him, just as they did Roosevelt.

Finally, Richard Nixon portrayed Democrats as traitorous enemies, used intelligence agencies against them, and famously tried to sabotage them in the 1972 election. But Congress investigated his abuses of power and started impeachment proceedings, leading him to resign.

Whereas Roosevelt and McCarthy used the law as a political tool, Nixon actually broke the law in his attempts to consolidate power. But Congress's swift, robust response enforced, restored, and strengthened democratic norms.

In each of these examples, "the **guardrails** held." Democratic norms prevailed, keeping the U.S. out of a "death spiral" of intolerance and polarization. But Levitsky and Ziblatt also point out that these democratic norms were based on the antidemocratic "original sin" of racial exclusion. The two parties only got along because, after the Compromise of 1877, they agreed to let white supremacists govern the South and disenfranchise most Black Americans. When the U.S. shifted toward racial inclusion in the 1950s and 1960s, polarization started to increase and democratic norms started to weaken.

Again, the measure of a democracy isn't whether authoritarian-leaning politicians challenge the system—it's whether they ultimately succeed in undermining it. Roosevelt, McCarthy, and Nixon's failures show why democratic norms act as "guardrails." All three men pushed up against the guardrails by tempting other politicians to choose intolerance, play hardball, and put party over country. But those other politicians didn't take the bait. Still, Levitsky and Ziblatt emphasize that, in the U.S., political harmony has long depended on the anti-democratic norm of racial exclusion, as well as the democratic norms of toleration and forbearance. In the 21st century, they argue, the U.S. has to repent of this "original sin" and create a functioning democracy based on the norm of racial inclusion *instead.*

CHAPTER 7: THE UNRAVELING

After Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia died in early 2016, Republican senators refused to consider Obama's replacement candidate, Merrick Garland. This was an unprecedented break with the Senate's tradition of forbearance. As soon as Donald Trump came into office, the Republican-led Senate pushed through his conservative nominee Neil Gorsuch instead. But this is only part of a much longer process of unraveling democratic norms in the U.S.—which started long before Donald Trump.

While it's technically legal for the Senate majority to leave a Supreme Court seat open indefinitely, it clearly violates the spirit of the law—which is that the Senate is supposed to actively confirm qualified justices and reject unqualified ones, regardless of partisan affiliation. Levitsky and Ziblatt start with this extraordinary moment of anti-democratic behavior in Congress, then pivot to looking at the historical context that brought U.S. democracy to such a fragile place. This is similar to their plan in the book as a whole: they start with Trump's election, but then spend the book explaining the context that made his assault on democratic norms possible.

Newt Gingrich won election to the House on his third try, in 1978. He viewed politics as "a war for power." While establishment Republicans still held to norms of bipartisanship and civility, Gingrich attacked the Democrats with exaggerated rhetoric, claiming they were "trying to 'destroy our country.'" He founded a political action committee to encourage other Republicans to use the same tactics. As he rose up in the ranks to become Speaker of the House, the rest of his party started to closely resemble him.

Levitsky and Ziblatt suggest that by putting Gingrich on the ballot, the Republican Party clearly failed in its gatekeeping responsibilities. Gingrich's view of politics is at odds with the norms of toleration and forbearance, which sustained American democracy through most of the 20th century. Toleration relies on viewing one's opponents as legitimate rivals for power who also have the country's best interests in heart—and not enemies who will "destroy our country." Forbearance depends on treating politics as a fair, democratic game, and not "a war for power." By spreading these extreme tactics, Gingrich clearly contributed to the decline in democratic norms in the U.S.

Gingrich was taking advantage of a new extreme in public polarization. During his rise, politicians started viewing the other side as immoral and illegitimate. During Bill Clinton's administration, Republican senators dramatically expanded use of the filibuster and started investigating presidential scandals that didn't exist.

Levitsky and Ziblatt emphasize that, like many authoritarian and anti-democratic figures throughout history, Gingrich was responding to real historical pressures. He didn't come out of the blue. Polarization justified his anti-democratic tactics. But, of course, his anti-democratic tactics also worsened polarization. These are the conditions that have created "death spirals" in other democracies, like Chile in the 1960s and 1970s.

When Republicans won a landslide election and Gingrich became Speaker of the House in 1994, the party completely abandoned forbearance in the hopes of stopping Democrats any way they could. They politicized the impeachment process by impeaching President Clinton without meeting the traditional standard of "high crimes and misdemeanors." After Gingrich left office, House Majority Leader Tom DeLay continued Gingrich's tactics. For instance, he created "a pay-to-play system" for lobbyists to buy legislation.

Gingrich and DeLay's obstructionist strategies were very popular and extremely effective, at least in the short term. This shows why anti-democratic tactics can be very attractive for parties that care more about winning power than preserving democracy. This leads to the difficult question at the heart of Levitsky and Ziblatt's book: how can Americans decide to put democracy above power, when they have no clear incentives to do so and no guarantee that the other side will cooperate?

Even though President George W. Bush promised unity and bipartisanship, polarization only increased during his term. He moved further to the right, and the Democrats filibustered Republican legislation and rejected Bush's judicial appointments. The Republican-led House refused to exercise oversight of Bush's actions. While states ordinarily redraw congressional districts every ten years (after each Census), Republicans decided to gerrymander Texas's House districts in 2003. Democrats organized two unsuccessful walkouts, and Republicans won six new seats in Texas during the 2004 midterms.

While Bush didn't have the same authoritarian tendencies as Trump, Congress increasingly embraced all three parts of the authoritarian playbook during his term. First, the Republicans tried to capture the referees by using their congressional oversight power for partisan purposes, not democratic ones. Second, the Democrats tried to sideline the opposition by rejecting Bush's appointments. Finally, the Republicans tried to tilt the playing field to their advantage through gerrymandering, which promised to give them legislative majorities even if they continued to represent a minority of voters.

Mutual toleration also broke down during the Bush administration. After 9/11, conservative media commentators like Ann Coulter accused Democrats of treason and anti-Americanism. In 2008, conservative media painted Barack Obama as a treasonous, communist, Muslim terrorist. Troublingly, Republican politicians started echoing the same intolerant ideas.

By viewing Democrats as treasonous enemies—and not fellow Americans with different ideas about what is best for the country—conservatives like Ann Coulter encouraged Republicans to view more extreme, anti-democratic tactics as necessary to save their country. Crucially, mutual toleration largely broke down around race, ideology, and religion. Levitsky and Ziblatt argue that these same identities became the basis for partisan polarization after the 1960s. Right-wing media figures viewed Islam and communism as un-American because they defined Christianity and capitalism as essential parts of American identity. This reflects the demographic shifts that have led Republicans to build their politics around white Protestant identity since the 1960s.

After the 2008 election, both Obama and his Republican opponent John McCain encouraged Americans to embrace civility and unity. But they didn't heed the call: the Tea Party formed, largely to oppose Obama's right to the presidency. It argued that Obama threatened American democracy and wasn't a "real American" (meaning a white Christian). Republican politicians like Sarah Palin, Newt Gingrich, and Rudy Giuliani openly questioned whether Obama loved his country.

Obama and McCain's failures to build unity show how, once basic democratic norms break down, reestablishing them is incredibly difficult. It requires broad political consensus because, when norms aren't functioning, politicians who break them will always have an edge on those who follow them. According to Levitsky and Ziblatt, the idea that only white Christians are "real Americans" reflects how the Republican Party's platform continues to center on racial exclusion. But this kind of exclusion has a long history in the U.S. It was the norm from independence to the Civil War, and then again from the Compromise of 1877 until the civil rights movement of the 1960s.

Meanwhile, the "birther movement" started questioning Obama's citizenship. Its most famous proponent was Donald Trump, who learned how intolerance could win him political support. Extremists like Henry Ford and Father Coughlin have challenged presidents' legitimacy throughout U.S. history, but the attacks on Obama were the first to win wide acceptance among American voters and major party leaders.

By condoning Donald Trump's intolerant, unsubstantiated "birther" attacks on Obama, the Republican establishment normalized Trump's extremism and gave him a legitimacy that previous figures like Ford and Coughlin never won. In other words, as the Republican Party became more extreme, it stopped gatekeeping effectively. This shows how strong democratic norms also support strong party gatekeeping.

During Obama's second term, the Republican Party increasingly embraced the Tea Party. It rejected mutual toleration by arguing that Democrats threatened the existence of the U.S., and it used this threat to justify rejecting forbearance, too. During the Great Recession, Republicans banded together to obstruct Obama's entire legislative agenda. They filibustered as many bills between 2007 and 2012 as the Senate did between 1919 and 1979, and they rejected as many Obama court nominees as possible.

The Republican Party's move toward the Tea Party shows how "fateful alliances" end up threatening the establishment. Namely, establishment figures often expect extremists to become more moderate, but actually, the establishment tends to become more extreme. This worsened polarization across the whole political system. Republicans' behavior in Congress is a clear example of how, when politicians abandon forbearance, checks and balances actually grind the government to a halt rather than keeping it functioning smoothly.

The Democrats and President Obama responded by breaking more norms. The Democrats banned filibusters for most presidential nominees, and when Congress wouldn't pass legislation, Obama started ruling through executive actions, which violated forbearance. Republican-led state governments started simply ignoring these orders, undermining the federal government's authority.

Levitsky and Ziblatt emphasize that the Democrats are also responsible for helping degrade democratic norms in the U.S. They largely justified their behavior as responses to Republican overreach, further weakening democratic norms rather than rebuilding them. This points to another enduring challenge in struggling democracies: is it possible for pro-democracy parties to govern effectively and *reinforce democratic norms when their opponents are willing to go to any possible lengths to win power?*

Levitsky and Ziblatt cite three key events that show how severely forbearance collapsed during the Obama administration. First, in 2011, Republicans decided to freeze debt ceiling negotiations and threaten defaulting on the nation's debt as leverage to pass wide spending cuts. Second, in 2015, forty-seven Republican senators wrote to the Iranian government to try to sabotage the nuclear deal Obama negotiated. Finally, the Senate refused to consider Obama's nominee Merrick Garland for the open Supreme Court seat. This hasn't happened once since Reconstruction. In short, the Republicans were taking the **guardrails** off American democracy.

In all three of these examples, the authors argue that the Republican Party prioritized its own political interests above the U.S. government's functioning. In each case, Congress tried to override an unfavorable executive. This shows how, even though the Constitution sets up checks and balances, they can break down in practice when government leaders no longer believe in their value. In other words, beaucse half of the government gave up on democratic norms, those norms essentially stopped functioning.

Extreme polarization is the underlying condition that has enabled this extreme breakdown of democratic norms. Democrats and Republicans aren't just two parties: they're now two different "way[s] of life." Many partisan Americans wouldn't want their children to marry someone from the other party, and most are afraid of the other party.

Polarization destroys mutual toleration because different sides don't empathize with one another or view the other side as part of their in-group. Levitsky and Ziblatt therefore clarify the chain of cause-and-effect that has badly weakened American democracy: polarization has destroyed mutual toleration, which has weakened forbearance and paralyzed the government. (Later, they explain how demographic changes actually underlie this polarization.) However, even though some links in the chain precede others, they can still reinforce each other. For instance, even though intolerance preceded the breakdown in forbearance, the authors have argued that, when forbearance breaks down, this further weakens mutual toleration. This can also operate in the opposite direction, however: even though intolerance came before the breakdown in forbearance, fixing forbearance can also help restore toleration.

This "intense partisan animosity" is a result of how the parties have realigned since the 1960s. In the past, both parties used to be "big tents" that included diverse groups and ideologies. They disagreed on some policy issues, but when it came to race—the most volatile issue in U.S. politics—*both* parties had pro-civil rights and pro-segregation factions. Then, President Johnson embraced the 1964 Civil Rights Act, and Presidents Nixon and Reagan campaigned on thinly veiled racial rhetoric. Many Southern white voters switched to the Republicans, and many newly enfranchised Black voters and Northern white liberals started going for the Democrats.

"Big tent" parties are used to tolerating internal disagreement, so it becomes easier for them to navigate external disagreements with other parties, too. Specifically, because each party represented a racially and ideologically diverse coalition, people in each party could relate to people in the other who resembled them. When one party became pro-civil rights and the other became anti-civil rights, it became easier for the parties to see one another as enemies who would only govern for themselves (and not for all Americans).

This realignment has created regional, ideological, racial, and religious divisions between the parties, where there used to be overlap. The South became reliably Republican and the Northeast reliably Democratic. Conservatives became reliably Republican and liberals reliably Democratic, and each side became more ideologically extreme and less willing to compromise. But mutual toleration has particularly eroded because the parties now represent different "social, ethnic, and cultural bases." Enfranchised Black voters and new immigrants since the 1960s almost all support the Democratic Party, while white evangelical Christians have become a key Republican constituency. Race and religion are often more polarizing than policy issues like taxes.

These are the partisan divisions that characterize the U.S. electorate today. Now that the two major political parties represent completely different constituencies, it's easier for politics to become a "war for power" between these two groups (just like Newt Gingrich proposed in the 1970s). Notably, while Levitsky and Ziblatt argue that the parties' different "social, ethnic, and cultural bases" have driven them apart, this doesn't mean that the only way to promote toleration is by creating a more ethnically homogenous society or party system. Either one can come first: mutual toleration can create interracial cooperation, or interracial cooperation can build mutual toleration.


Levitsky and Ziblatt ask why the Republicans have broken political norms far more often than the Democrats. Partisan media like Fox News and talk radio are more powerful on the right, and conservative commentators help support the Republican party line by attacking politicians who reject it. Conservative interest groups like Americans for Tax Reform force Republican congresspeople to pledge extreme positions (like never to raise taxes). Money from billionaires like the Koch family has flooded into such groups, many of which reject compromise.

Conservative media and money in politics are the same key forces that enabled Donald Trump to bypass the "invisible primary" and win the Republican nomination in 2016. These structural changes are the result of a different kind of failure in gatekeeping: party leaders lost control over their party's structure, messaging, and resources. Because Republican leaders didn't control their organizational structure, other groups (like the Tea Party and Americans for Tax Reform) started to mobilize voters. Because they lost control of their messaging, independent media started setting the conservative agenda. And when billionaire money flooded into politics, Republican leaders lost control over their own party coffers, leading candidates and voters away from their policy stances and toward wealthy extremists'.



The GOP's key constituency—white Protestants—used to be the dominant group in American politics and society, but is now a shrinking minority. Feeling that their status is under threat, white conservatives increasingly embrace a hostile, apocalyptic political style. They define themselves as "real Americans," unlike Democrats, which explains why they want to "Take Our Country Back" and "Make America Great Again." Republicans have learned that it's advantageous for them to abandon norms of toleration and forbearance and instead treat politics as a war against their Democratic enemies.

In Levitsky and Ziblatt's view, preserving American democracy requires understanding how anti-democratic behavior is rooted in demographic change. Their key question is how to change that anti-democratic behavior without trying to manipulate demographics (or disenfranchise certain racial or ethnic groups). They see the Republican Party as essentially proposing a return to the white supremacist system set up in the Compromise of 1877. Fighting this exclusionary, anti-democratic political agenda requires building interracial solidarity—or getting Americans (and especially Republicans) to view people of different races as part of their social, cultural, and political communities.

CHAPTER 8: TRUMP AGAINST THE GUARDRAILS

When he entered office, much like Chávez, Fujimori, or Erdoğan, Donald Trump started attacking his opponents (like the media, liberal judges, and major cities). Most of his media coverage was negative, and he soon faced a major investigation by Robert Mueller and discussions of impeachment. He used all three of the authoritarian strategies the authors discussed in Chapter Four: "capturing the referees, sidelining key players, and rewriting the rules."

Levitsky and Ziblatt have shown that, before Trump's presidency, anti-democratic politics was primarily confined to Congress in the U.S. (But there were some exceptions, like Bush's authoritarian measures after 9/11 and Obama's expanded use of executive orders.) But Trump brought congressional Republicans' strategies into the Oval Office. He was a uniquely dangerous figure, but his presidency was also the culmination of a long process of expanding partisanship and weakening democratic norms. In other words, the U.S. faced both *an acute crisis (Trump) and a chronic one (polarization). Each crisis reinforced the other.*

First, Trump tried to capture the referees. He asked the leaders of major government agencies, like FBI director James Comey, for loyalty and personal favors. Then he fired prominent officials, including Comey, who didn't follow his demands. He threatened to fire Mueller, who was investigating him, and attacked judges whose rulings he disliked. He pardoned the anti-immigrant sheriff Joe Arpaio for political reasons and even considered pardoning himself. This was a blatant attack on the independence of the judiciary. Trump even attacked the Office of Government Ethics when it criticized his business conflicts of interest. Fortunately, his authoritarian attempts to politicize independent agencies mostly failed.

Capturing the referees allows authoritarians to avoid accountability and lets them use the law as a partisan weapon against their opponents. According to Levitsky and Ziblatt, Trump clearly wanted to do this. In asking Comey for loyalty, he hoped to turn the FBI into a partisan agency that would do his bidding. In threatening to fire Robert Mueller, he attempted to avoid legal scrutiny for his actions. In pardoning Joe Arpaio and discussing pardoning himself, he signaled that he thought violating the law was acceptable if it benefited him. Altogether, he consistently viewed agencies responsible for maintaining the rule of law as illegitimate and tried to circumvent them.

Second, Trump tried to sideline key political players. He called major media outlets "fake news" and an "enemy of the people" (like Stalin and Mao did), and he threatened to change the law so that he could sue journalists (like Rafael Correa). He threatened to attack media outlets he disliked, like the *Washington Post* and CNN, with antitrust suits. He tried to defund "sanctuary cities" through an executive order, much like Hugo Chávez tried to defund opposition-run cities in Venezuela. But the courts stopped his executive order on sanctuary cities, and his attacks on journalists haven't led to arrests or pressured them to change their coverage.

By discrediting their critics and sidelining their rivals for power, authoritarians improve their odds of holding onto power in situations where a functioning democratic system would take it away from them. By calling the media "fake news" and the "enemy of the people," Trump encouraged his supporters to reject credible criticism of his policies and abuses of power. By threatening legal action against the media, he tried to prevent it from making such credible criticisms in the first place. And in attacking "sanctuary cities," he tried to disempower other officials who disagreed with his policies and took legal steps to limit their influence. In all these cases, rather than treating his critics and opposition as legitimate participants in a fair system, he tried to change the system so they couldn't limit his power.

Third and finally, Trump tried "to tilt the playing field to his advantage." He proposed eliminating the filibuster to increase Republican power in the Senate. But most disturbingly, he created the Presidential Advisory Commission on Election Integrity to make voting harder for low-income minority and immigrant Americans (who overwhelmingly support Democrats). Republicans in many states had already targeted these voters with strict voter ID laws, based on the disproven claims of voter fraud that Trump took up to argue that he won the popular vote in 2016. Trump's Commission pushed for the states to pass voter ID laws and purge voter rolls (which usually eliminates more legitimate voters than illegitimate ones). Fortunately, as of 2017, the states mostly rejected the Commission's demands.

Authoritarians "tilt the playing field to [their] advantage" so that they can gain more power than democratic rules would otherwise give them and maintain power when democratic rules would take it away from them. The authors present Trump's push for voting restrictions as a clear example of this: he wants Republican voters to count more than Democratic voters. Crucially, this kind of restriction is largely based on race, which means it has important precedents in the U.S. For almost a century, Jim Crow laws essentially disenfranchised Black voters in the South. Levitsky and Ziblatt argue that Trump wants to return to the same racially exclusionary system of government—and extend it around the country.

While "Trump followed the electoral authoritarian script during his first year," his attempts to consolidate power in that year were mostly unsuccessful. However, the authors compare Trump's first year to those of nine other authoritarians and point out that most didn't actually dismantle **democracy's guardrails** in their first year.

Levitsky and Ziblatt use historical examples from other nations to warn their readers that, even though Trump hadn't successfully crushed American democracy in his first year in office, he continued to pose a grave threat to it. Readers considering Levitsky and Ziblatt's argument after Trump's presidency can decide for themselves to what extent Trump ultimately tore down democracy's guardrails.

The Republican Party's response to Trump will be key to the survival of American democracy. Elected authoritarians' parties can check or enable their worst instincts. Republicans can remain loyal to Trump, whether by actively supporting him, quietly voting with him, or criticizing but refusing to vote against him. They can also choose containment—or support some of his policy agenda without accepting his antidemocratic abuses of power. Or finally, they could also try to remove him from office—but they are likely to find this too costly. In his first year, Republicans were often loyal to Trump, but also chose containment when he fired James Comey and proposed firing Robert Mueller.

While authoritarians generally try to circumvent the political establishment, it's no secret that they're more effective when they have the establishment's support. Therefore, even though Republican Party leaders failed as gatekeepers during the 2016 election, during Trump's term, they still had the chance to rescue democracy by prioritizing it above partisanship. Levitsky and Ziblatt see that, as democratic norms faltered, so did the Republican Party's willingness to defend them against Trump. However, the exceptions to this (like Republican opposition to Comey's firing) still made a significant impact on Trump's credibility.

Public support can also make or break Trump's attempts to destroy democracy. Opponents and the media tend to think twice before criticizing popular presidents. Fujimori, Chávez, and Erdoğan all used their popularity to their advantage. Similarly, in conservative West Virginia, even elected Democrats praise and vote with Trump. This shows that public support makes Trump more dangerous.

Like establishment support, public support can increase or decrease a leader's power. It determines whether their policies face political resistance and affects other politicians' willingness to work with them. Therefore, Levitsky and Ziblatt suggest, public mobilization and protest were important ways for Americans to defend democracy during Trump's term.

Crisis is the last key factor that decides whether Trump's attacks on democracy will be successful. In national security crises, citizens and judges often support authoritarian measures. Fujimori, Putin, and Erdoğan all used crises to their advantage. Pro-democracy leaders like Abraham Lincoln and George W. Bush have, too, but only through forbearance—which Trump seems uninterested in exercising. Levitsky and Ziblatt argue that Trump exploiting a terrorist attack or war to consolidate power is "the greatest danger facing American democracy today."

Crises often require unusually rapid, decisive responses, which means that extraordinary executive power is sometimes needed to address them. However, Levitsky and Ziblatt draw a clear line between leaders who focus on solving crises (like Lincoln and Bush) and those who focus on exploiting them (like Fujimori, Putin, Erdoğan, and likely Trump). The authors see Trump's behavior in such a crisis as "the greatest danger facing American democracy" because he could use it to circumvent all the checks, balances, and guardrails that ordinarily limit his power.

Trump's behavior will likely erode democratic norms and institutions in the long run, even if it doesn't destroy them. He has turned unsavory behaviors like "lying, cheating, and bullying" into acceptable political tactics in the U.S. But breaking norms isn't always bad. For instance, Jimmy Carter didn't hurt anyone by walking to his inauguration instead of riding in his limousine. Some norm-breaking can improve democracy: William Henry Harrison was the first presidential candidate to meet voters on the campaign trail in 1840, for example, and Theodore Roosevelt was the first to invite a Black political leader to the White House when he dined with Booker T. Washington in 1901.

Democratic norms are self-reinforcing: when politicians follow them, they strengthen them, and when they break them, they weaken them. This explains why Trump's actions are likely to have ripple effects and exacerbate polarization in the long term. Levitsky and Ziblatt also distinguish between useful and dangerous presidential norm-breaking. Their litmus test for whether norm-breaking is useful is whether it promotes or harms democracy. Carter and Harrison's decisions brought them closer to voters, while Roosevelt's was an important step towards racial inclusion. But Trump's "lying, cheating, and bullying" undermined key norms that make democracy function. He didn't just attack toleration and forbearance, but also more basic norms like civility, honesty, and respect for the truth.

But Trump's norm-breaking is constant and clearly antidemocratic. In particular, he abandoned key unwritten norms against nepotism (by appointing family members to White House jobs) and conflicts of interest (by continuing to control his company while acting as President). He violated the essential norm that politicians respect the integrity of American elections, and he convinced approximately half of Republican voters that the U.S. electoral system is rigged against them. He broke norms of civility by attacking Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama.

Trump's nepotism and conflicts of interest suggested that he put his own personal interests above the national interest. Although legal, this clearly violated the spirit of the law. By undermining public faith in American elections, he set the groundwork for stealing elections in the future and convinced many of his supporters to think that any election he loses is automatically illegitimate. Of course, this could be used to justify extreme or even violent responses.

Trump has broken one more fundamental political norm: telling the truth. While other politicians skirt around difficult questions, Trump simply lies—even about obvious questions like the number of bills he's signed. This erodes the public's trust in the government's credibility, which is essential to a functioning democracy. Where other presidents have respected the media's important role in democracy, Trump has attacked it in an unprecedented way. His personal attacks on reporters resemble Hugo Chávez, Nicolás Maduro, and Rafael Correa's public rhetoric. He has even rewarded news outlets whose coverage of him is favorable, while barring more skeptical reporters from attending press events.

Ordinary politicians skirt the truth instead of lying because they know that being caught in a lie will threaten their credibility with voters. But Trump is powerful and brazen enough to lie without losing substantial support. His opponents lose faith in the government, while his supporters lose faith in the truths that disagree with him. The American public becomes divided not just by party, race, and culture, but also by their different senses of reality. Again, by comparing Trump to Chávez, Mauro, and Correa, Levitsky and Ziblatt underline how grave the U.S.'s democratic crisis really is. Rebuilding public trust in government and the media is a monumental task, especially when the government remains as polarized as the electorate.

Social norms tend to shift when they are repeatedly broken. Trump's political deviance (or violation of democratic norms) is therefore accelerating political deviance throughout the rest of U.S. society. Americans are getting used to his lying, cheating, and attacks—and increasingly seeing such behavior as acceptable in U.S. politics. Survey evidence suggests that Republicans increasingly support fining the media. In a recruiting video, the powerful National Rifle Association explicitly threatened to shoot journalists. "Once considered unthinkable," such behavior is now increasingly normal.

The early years of Trump's presidency fulfilled the same pattern as "fateful alliances" between extremists and establishment parties in other democracies throughout the world. Namely, while the establishment expected the extremist to become moderate, the establishment became extreme instead. The authors argue that Trump's antidemocratic behavior is accelerating the Republicans' transformation into an antidemocratic party. Previously "unthinkable" authoritarian policies, like fining the media, are now on the table. This is a real-time example of democratic backsliding—or the steady shift from democracy to authoritarianism.

CHAPTER 9: SAVING DEMOCRACY

Levitsky and Ziblatt argue that U.S. democracy is heading toward collapse because rising polarization since the 1960s has led to an "epidemic of norm breaking." They reject the popular idea that democracy is receding across the globe—while many countries' democracies are declining, just as many are strengthening, and most are perfectly intact. With many exceptions, since the end of the Cold War, U.S. foreign policy has focused on promoting democracy and fighting authoritarianism. But Trump neither promotes democracy nor effectively models it for the world, so he may help democracy decline globally.

Levitsky and Ziblatt repeat their book's central thesis: polarization has weakened democratic norms, which threatens U.S. democracy. Donald Trump is both a cause and effect of this process—polarization made his presidency possible, but he has also significantly worsened it. In other words, the U.S.'s slide toward authoritarianism preceded Trump's presidency, but Trump has also sped it up. The authors also point out that international *democratic norms can be as important as domestic ones, like tolerance and forbearance. Just as Levitsky and Ziblatt have used international examples to illustrate the dangers in Trump's behavior, politicians around the world will look at Trump for an indication of what they can get away with.*

Levitsky and Ziblatt envision three different ways that the U.S. can come out of Trump's presidency. First, if Trump becomes widely unpopular, loses re-election, or gets removed from office, American democracy could quickly bounce back. The Democrats could undo his policies and pass new reforms to strengthen democracy, while the Republicans could give up on their extremism. While this is the best-case scenario, it's not likely, because polarization was already increasing and norms were already falling apart for decades before Trump's rise to power.

Levitsky and Ziblatt wrote this book in the first year of Trump's presidency. At this time, U.S. democracy's fate was still extremely uncertain, as they note here. Their optimistic scenario would likely require significant Republican opposition to Trump, effective gatekeeping in the future, and a strong popular commitment to overcoming polarization and reinforcing democratic norms. But this scenario shows that, during and after the Trump era, Americans still have the power to save their democracy. Therefore, through this scenario, Levitsky and Ziblatt also encourage activists and politicians to fight for American democracy.

Second, led by Trump, the Republicans might keep winning elections, consolidate power through constitutional hardball, and implement a white nationalist agenda that keeps the U.S. electorate majority white. The Trump administration is already contemplating this agenda, which would be "profoundly antidemocratic" and probably lead to significant resistance—or even widespread violence and police repression. This scenario is also unlikely, but it's possible—in countries like Lebanon and Israel, declining majorities have used war and oppression to keep power. Of course, white supremacists governed the Southern U.S. in the same way for almost a century.

Levitsky and Ziblatt argue that this "profoundly antidemocratic" pessimistic scenario is a reflection of the Republican Party's existing political strategy—one based on racial exclusion. This strategy has historical precedents in the South, and it would involve repeating some of the darkest moments from U.S. history. Levitsky and Ziblatt use this scenario to remind their readers that history isn't always a story of progress and inclusion—instead, different forces are fighting to move the nation forward and hold it back. The authors' reference to Lebanon and Israel also shows how unique the U.S.'s challenge is: few multiracial democracies, if any, have successfully transitioned from majority rule to inclusive, cooperative government.

Third and most likely, the U.S. might end up in a polarized system of "democracy without solid **guardrails**." Levitsky and Ziblatt point to North Carolina as an example of how this would look. It's a relatively wealthy, diverse, politically split state. It has become a partisan battleground, with state politics polarized over issues like abortion, Medicaid, and transgender people's rights in public bathrooms.

In a hyper-polarized nation "without solid guardrails," authoritarianism will not necessarily *replace democracy—but it will always be on the horizon, just one step away. In such a nation, as in North Carolina, democratic norms wouldn't deter or stop autocratic behavior. Therefore, both parties would be constantly trying to rig the game in their favor, and the side that succeeded would get to rule with virtually unchecked power.*

In 2010, North Carolina's Republican-controlled state legislature gerrymandered electoral districts to ensure that it maintained a large majority. In 2012, Republicans won nine of the state's thirteen congressional seats, despite receiving a minority of the vote. State Republican legislators collected demographic data on voters, then passed a series of new voting restrictions to exclusively target Black voters. When the courts ordered them to freeze the laws, they ignored the courts. And when a Democrat won the governorship, they considered overturning the election and passed a series of laws to limit the governor's power instead. With Republicans increasingly willing to grab and consolidate power by any means necessary, the nation may soon look like North Carolina.

North Carolina's politics is decreasingly democratic, because its politicians decreasingly represent their constituents. First, gerrymandering has given a Republican minority disproportionate power and effectively disenfranchised large groups of mostly Black voters. Second, while North Carolina voters are relatively diverse and politically moderate, state politics are increasingly extreme and one-sided. Rather than cooperating to produce laws that reflect the will and needs of the state's actual voters, the two parties go to ever-greater lengths to seize power and pass the most extreme policies they can get away with. They have all but abandoned mutual toleration and institutional forbearance.

Levitsky and Ziblatt return to one of their book's key lessons: in the U.S., democracy has depended on the key norms of mutual toleration and institutional forbearance. The founders thought that well-designed institutions would be enough to stop tyranny, but they were wrong. To function, institutions need informal, shared rules—or norms. Americans recognize freedom and equality as key national values, but they should view toleration and forbearance the same way.

Levitsky and Ziblatt differ from the founders because they think that the people *who run institutions—and especially their intentions and values—have greater consequences for democracy than those institutions' structure. Institutions can only protect democracy when politicians use them correctly, and their willingness to do so depends on democratic norms. Elevating toleration and forbearance to the same level as freedom and equality is one way to help the public understand, appreciate, and reinforce democracy.*

Many progressive Americans believe that the Democrats should "fight like Republicans" in order to win—they think that the Democrats will lose if they play by the rules while the Republicans ignore them. To stop Donald Trump, some Democrats proposed obstructing all Republican legislation, challenging the 2016 election results, or launching impeachment proceedings right away.

To some Democrats, playing dirty (or "fight[ing] like Republicans") might seem like the only way they can pass their agenda. However, if Democrats resort to power in order to restore democracy, they would likely do so through anti-democratic means. If both these premises are true, they suggest that Democrats have to attack democracy now in order to save it later. Levitsky and Ziblatt are sympathetic to this line of thinking, but they think it's wrong.

Levitsky and Ziblatt reject these ideas. If the Democrats play dirty, they argue, moderates will abandon them and Republicans will unite to crack down on them. When Hugo Chávez's opponents tried to oust him through a coup, general strike, and election boycott, they actually destroyed their own credibility and gave Chávez a justification for persecuting them. In contrast, in Colombia, democratic forces prevented Álvaro Uribe from running for a third term by focusing on winning over the legislature and judiciary. If the Democrats push Trump out through hardball, the government they inherit will lack democratic norms. Partisanship and polarization would only increase.

Levitsky and Ziblatt believe that if Democrats "fight like Republicans," they may or may not win power in the short term, but they'll almost certainly help destroy democracy in the long term. For the authors, democracy's long-term health is always more important. The contrast between Chávez and Uribe's outcomes suggests that pro-democracy forces should take the moral high ground against authoritarians, even if it seems unlikely to produce an immediate, decisive victory.

Instead of copying Republican tactics, Levitsky and Ziblatt argue that the Democrats should focus on reinforcing democratic norms and winning back power through institutions. When they protest, they should strive to support democratic rights and institutions, not challenge them. While it's important for Democrats to build progressive coalitions with diverse groups, it's even more important for them to build pro-democracy coalitions with conservative adversaries, like evangelical leaders and corporate executives. Such coalitions can appeal to a broader range of voters, fight polarization, and build mutual toleration.

Levitsky and Ziblatt emphasize that it's impossible to impose democracy on a society all at once. Instead, democratization is always a gradual process—after all, it requires buy-in from as much of the population as possible. Therefore, pro-democracy forces can't restore democracy simply by gaining power. But they can *start restoring democracy by building up the norms and institutions that it requires to function. The authors propose building coalitions between progressives and conservatives because such coalitions can push for democratic reforms and rebuild democratic norms like toleration at the same time.*

In fact, Trump's abuses of power aren't "the fundamental problem facing American democracy"—partisan polarization is. Politicians can lead the people to unity by first building alliances among themselves. Chilean politicians did this during the Pinochet dictatorship. Although they were enemies during the period of escalating tensions that killed Chilean democracy, the Socialists and conservative Christian Democrats worked together to defeat the dictatorship and reinstate democracy. For decades thereafter, they continued to consult with one another—and even their pro-Pinochet opponents—on all new legislation. However, Levitsky and Ziblatt doubt that this strategy would work in the U.S.

Removing Trump from office wouldn't solve polarization, but solving polarization would make Trump an unelectable candidate. Therefore, Levitsky and Ziblatt dedicate the rest of their conclusion to exploring solutions to this "fundamental problem." The example from Chile shows how politicians can take the lead in fighting polarization. Chile's opposing parties found a common enemy in the military dictator, Pinochet. But this is unlikely to happen in the U.S. because one of the two major parties will likely always be aligned with the president. Therefore, collaboration among politicians is unlikely to solve polarization and restore democracy. Instead, the U.S. needs to look at structural and grassroots solutions.

Rather than waiting for politicians to cooperate despite polarization, the U.S. has to defeat polarization. Political scientists have proposed many policy remedies, but Levitsky and Ziblatt think that it would be more effective to address racial, religious, and economic forces in American society. The Republican Party's extreme tactics and ideological shift have primarily driven this polarization. In particular, conservative media and wealthy donors have driven this shift. They have more power over Republican politicians than the party leadership does. So Levitsky and Ziblatt argue that the party needs to be reformed. Leadership must retake control of the party's "finance, grassroots organization, messaging, and candidate selection." They should make the party more diverse and expel extremists.

Where the Chilean solution won't work in the U.S., Levitsky and Ziblatt propose a series of other solutions instead. First, they propose moderating the Republican Party through better gatekeeping. This requires that Republican leaders who are committed to democratic norms first regain financial, ideological, and organizational control of their party. Only then can they expel extremists from it and ensure that both main parties support democracy. However, giving Republican leaders control over the party again will first require major structural reforms to the U.S. political system. It remains to be seen whether establishment conservatives have the power and resources necessary to enact them.

Refounding the Republican Party sounds extremely difficult, but in the past, conservative parties have successfully rebuilt democracies by rebuilding themselves. For instance, before the end of World War II, Germany's conservative parties were always either extremist or disorganized. But after the war, anti-Nazi conservatives founded the Christian Democratic Union (CDU), a tolerant center-right party that embraced both Catholics and Protestants. Like the CDU, the Republican Party can choose democracy over extremism and appeal to more voters besides white Christians. However, the CDU only rebuilt itself in response to a catastrophe, and the authors ask if the Republican Party will be able to do the same *without* a profound crisis.

The German CDU shows how it's possible for the political establishment to rebuild its gatekeeping capacities and create public trust in democratic norms. It also shows how conservative parties can be diverse and inclusive. But just like the Chilean example, the German example might not apply to the U.S.—the stakes may not be high enough for the Republican Party. Still, Levitsky and Ziblatt hope that enough Republicans will see how Trump and the far-right threaten their establishment's continued existence.

The Democrats can also help decrease polarization by focusing less attention on ethnic minority voters. But Levitsky and Ziblatt argue that "this is a terrible idea." From its founding until the 1960s, the U.S. political system was based on antidemocratic racial exclusion. Instead of repeating its mistakes, it should strive to create an equitable multiethnic democracy.

Next, Levitsky and Ziblatt look at how the Democrats can address polarization. If the Democrats pivot to focusing on white voters and take energy and resources away from minority populations, they will recreate the exclusionary, white supremacist political system that predominated in the U.S. until the civil rights movement. It's true that polarization and diversity have grown together, but this doesn't mean that solving polarization requires rejecting diversity.

Levitsky and Ziblatt propose that Democrats should fight polarization by addressing the nation's growing economic inequality (which has fueled the social resentment that underlies partisan polarization). Instead of using means-tested programs that only give benefits to certain people, the Democrats should implement universal social policies that can appeal to voters across the partisan spectrum. Examples of such programs include universal healthcare, a higher minimum wage, a universal basic income, paid parental leave, daycare, better job training, and work-study programs. Passing these programs will be difficult, but American democracy depends on them.

Levitsky and Ziblatt propose universal social policies because they believe such programs promise to simultaneously do the two things that U.S. politics sorely need: they can remake the party system and restore faith in democratic norms and institutions. They can remake the party system by helping Democrats win votes from everyone whom their policies benefit, including the white working class. If these policies succeed, then racial, religious, and ideological affiliation will no longer form the core of party politics in the U.S. These policies can also restore faith in democracy by showing Americans how public policy can actually improve their lives—but only if the government reflects the people's will and acts to meet their needs.

Levitsky and Ziblatt conclude that the U.S.'s situation is similar to other countries' democratic crises throughout history. American democracy depends on U.S. citizens' ability to restore basic norms and extend them across racial and ethnic lines.

Levitsky and Ziblatt argue that the U.S.'s democratic crisis isn't totally unprecedented, but it is unique in some important ways. Examples from other countries and U.S. history show that it's possible for the U.S. to reestablish democratic norms and overcome this crisis. But the U.S. also faces the unique challenge of doing so in a diverse, multiracial democracy. Inclusivity and polarization have been bound together in the past, and Americans must find a way to separate them in the future.

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