

Saving Democracy: What can we do?

A Discussion Guide

Part I: The Political Problem

Doctors Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt are professors of government at Harvard University. They have spent years researching how democracies fail. They found that in the 20th century most democracies were destroyed by democratically elected officials. The following examples from their book, *How Democracies Die*, describe how it happens.

In Venezuela Chávez:

- Demonized his opponents by describing them as “rancid pigs” and “squalid oligarchs.”
- razed the courts and created new ones.
- rewrote the constitution.
- threatened owners of the largest television/media corporation & forced them to sell to a government friendly businessman.
- used bullying, threats, and financial manipulation to silence critics.

In Peru Fujimori:

- was an unknown whose election was unexpected. He didn’t plan to be a dictator.
- was unable and unwilling to work with legislators & judges calling them “unproductive charlatans.”
- bypassed congress using executive orders.
- used economic and guerrilla insurgency crises to justify actions.
- dissolved congress and the constitution.

In Hungary Orbán:

- expanded the Constitutional Court, changed laws and regulations, & appointed new judges faithful to him.
- After his party won a two thirds parliamentary majority rewrote constitution and electoral laws.
- Replaced independent Prosecution Service, State Audit Office, Ombudsman’s Office, Central Statistical Office, and Constitutional Court with partisan allies.
- banned campaign advertising & limited access to public broadcast media to his ruling party.

In the United States, after the civil war, Southern States:

- created authoritarian single-party regimes in every post-Confederate state,
- every state reformed their constitutions and electoral laws to disenfranchise African Americans,
- created poll taxes, and literacy tests for voters.

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Can it happen in America?

“We feel dread,” the authors wrote, “as do so many other Americans even as we try to reassure ourselves that *things can’t really be that bad here.*” However, “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.”¹

It is troubling that American politicians now:

- treat their rivals as enemies,
- intimidate the free press,
- threaten to reject the results of elections, and
- try to weaken the institutional buffers of our democracy, including the courts, intelligence services, and ethics offices.

The authors warned, “Once a would-be authoritarian makes it to power [first test], democracies face a second critical test: Will the autocratic leader subvert democratic institutions or be constrained by them? Institutions alone are not enough to rein in elected autocrats. Constitutions must be defended—by political parties and organized citizens, *but also by democratic norms* (emphasis added).”²

Democratic norms, our shared codes of conduct, have been the sustaining strength of American democracy for much of our history, but not today. Extreme partisan division has polarized Americans and is destroying our ability to find common cause in the values essential to our democracy. “There are ... reasons for alarm,” the authors conclude, “extreme polarization can kill democracies.”³ “When partisan rivals become enemies, political competition descends into warfare, and our institutions turn into weapons. The result is a system hovering constantly on the brink of crisis.”⁴

The intensity of partisan animosities is fueled by resurgent racism in response to increasing ethnic diversity and growing economic inequality. The authors suggest a solution. Build a broad based pro-democratic coalition that brings “together groups with dissimilar—even opposing—views on many issues,”⁵ and work together on solving the growing economic inequality.

They ended by calling for the restoration of the norms that have protected our democracy since its inception. To save our democracy we must restore and extend them through the whole of our diverse society.⁶

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SOURCES & CITATIONS

1. Steven Levitsky & Daniel Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die* (New York: Crown, 2018), 1.
2. Ibid., 7.
3. Ibid., 9.
4. Ibid., 212.
5. Ibid., 218.
6. Ibid., 231.