

LET'S TALK ALASKA DISCUSSION GUIDE

Saving Democracy: What can we do?

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Overview

The purpose of this dialogue is to answer the question: What can we do to save democracy? The focus of discussion is our role as citizens; what is required of us for a democracy to work. The determinates of our behavior—our capabilities—requires an understanding of the latest research on the psychology of choice making and how our membership in groups affects the decisions we make. We may not be the rational beings we think we are.

The United States is a democratic republic that derives its power from the consent of its citizens. Citizens exercise their power by electing leaders to represent and act on their interests, or to replace leaders who do not. An individual citizen with only one vote has power only when it is part of a majority. For a democracy to succeed a majority of its citizens must be committed to, and defend, the principles on which it was founded.

This is the democracy challenge; citizen vigilance in defense of core democratic principles and practices, and a commitment to the common good. The pursuit of wealth and power must not eclipse our commitment to core values and to one another. This discussion guide frames the challenge from three perspectives:

1. The Political Problem: What are the democratic norms we should use to hold our elected representatives accountable to their oath of office?
2. We the People: Are we up to it?: How do we find shared values and common cause with those whose beliefs we may not agree with?
3. The Democracy Problem: What are the essential citizen behaviors necessary for a functioning democracy, and do citizens have to change to do their part?

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.

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- 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.

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.

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The authors warn, "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 are shared codes of conduct based on the values and principles contained in our constitution and other founding documents. They have sustained 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

Part II: We the People: Are we up to it?

The authors acknowledge there is no simple solution to this increasing polarization, but they do identify two prominent causes. One is that economic changes have brought decreased job security, longer working hours, and fewer prospects for upward mobility. The result is resentment that fuels polarization. Another is the intensity of partisan animosities fueled by resurgent racism in response to increasing ethnic diversity.

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.⁵ Extreme polarization can kill democracies. Americans created the polarization, and only Americans can save it. Levitsky and Ziblatt tell us what needs to be done.

- "Democracy is a shared enterprise. Its fate depends on all of us."⁷
- "To save our democracy Americans need to restore the basic norms that once protected it. But we must do more than that. We must extend those norms through the whole of a diverse society. We must make them truly inclusive. America's democratic norms, at their core, have always been sound."⁸

But, they don't tell us how. Two recent books based on the social science research of three university professors may provide some answers.

The Righteous Mind

In *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion*, the author, Jonathan Haidt, also believes Americans have become "polarized and embattled to the point of dysfunction."⁹ He argues that people are primarily and

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innately driven by their feelings and emotions which gets them sucked into tribal, moral communities or teams. "Once people join a political team, they get ensnared in its moral matrix which makes it difficult for them to connect with those who live in other matrices."¹⁰ Some conclusions from his research relevant to this discussion are:

- The human mind is divided into two parts, a rider—our intellect— and an elephant—our feelings and emotions. The rider evolved to serve the elephant."¹¹
- We are born with an innate sense of morality that evolves from feeling and emotion through rational constructs into our righteous minds.
- Our righteous minds are moralistic, critical, judgmental and groupish. They embody the values we hold sacred.¹²
- They are shaped by the moral constructs—matrices—of the groups we join and bind us into conflict with those groups we do not understand.

Haidt's take-away recommendations are:

- "If you want to change someone's mind about a moral or political issue, *talk to the elephant first*."¹³
- "If you want to understand another group, *follow the sacredness*," and open your heart.¹⁴

Democracy for Realists

Christopher Achen and Larry Bartels are authors of the book, *Democracy for Realists: Why Elections Do Not Produce Responsive Government*. Their research presents a compelling argument that our "folk theory of democracy" based on "the wisdom of popular judgments by informed and engaged citizens is false. Their work expands on Haidt's description of humans as first and foremost intuitive rather than reasoning with an examination of group behavior.

Based on their extensive research they write:

- "We have argued that voters choose political parties, first and foremost, in order to align themselves with the appropriate coalition of social groups. Most citizens support a party not because they have carefully calculated that its policy positions are closest to their own, but rather because "their kind" of person belongs to that party."¹⁵
- "The primary sources of partisan loyalties and voting behavior are social identities, group attachments, and myopic retrospections, not policy preferences or ideological principles."¹⁶
- "Identities are not primarily about adherence to a group ideology or creed. They are emotional attachments that transcend thinking."¹⁷
- "Most of the time, voting behavior merely reaffirms, voters' partisan and group identities."¹⁸

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Their take-away is:

- “As a blueprint for government, the folk theory is hopelessly flawed.”¹⁹
- “In the end, it is the folk theory, that props up elite rule, and it is unrepresentative elites that most profit from the convenient justifications it provides for their activities.”²⁰
- A more realistic, group theory of democracy based on the following psychological observations is a better description of how voters actually behave:
 - “the powerful tendency of people to form groups,
 - the ensuing construction of ‘us’ and ‘them,’ and
 - the powerful role of emotion rather than reason in directing group activity”²¹

Part III: The Democracy Problem

I have only one vote. Where is the power in that?

One vote has power when it is part of a majority that shares a common purpose.

This is the democracy problem—creating common purpose out of individual, often competing, expectations and interests.

In *How Democracies Die*, Levitsky and Ziblatt tell us American democracy is at risk due to extreme polarization of people and parties. In the last two years many of the conditions that have led to the failure of democracies in other countries have been created by politicians in our own country. The norms of citizen behavior that protect our democratic institutions are weakening. Americans must restore the basic norms that have defended our democracy. Citizens are the first protectors of democracy.

In *The Righteous Mind*, Jonathon Haidt tells us we humans are innately moral beings. We connect with one another first on an intuitive feeling level before we interact rationally. We are empathic. We form relationships based on our morals and the feelings we have for one another. We evolved to live in groups. “We may spend most of our waking hours advancing our own interests, but we all have the capacity to transcend self-interest and become simply a part of a whole.”²² If we want to change the world we must first identify the moral foundations that connect us as citizens in a democratic society.

In *Democracy for Realists*, Achen & Bartels describe a new view of political psychology they call a group theory of politics. They argue, “in thinking about politics, it makes no sense to start from issue positions—they are generally derivative from something else. And that something else is identity.”²³ Political

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parties are in the business to mold identities into partisan loyalties which reflect the way people understand their own lives, and determine how they vote. The most powerful players in party politics are the educated, the wealthy, and the well-connected. A more effective and fair democracy will therefore require a greater degree of economic and social equality.

This is not a new problem. In 1927, the American philosopher, John Dewey observed, "The prime difficulty, ... is that of discovering the means by which a scattered, mobile, and manifold [diverse] public may so recognize itself as to define and express its interests."²⁴ He understood it as a moral problem to be solved by education and communication.

What we can do: A starting place

We can begin with simple one-on-one conversations—everyday conversations—about who we are, what we value, and how we find meaning in our lives.

We can begin by listening to those whose beliefs we may not share for the values they hold sacred and how they find meaning in their lives.

We can begin a new, national conversation about:

- the fundamental principles (norms) essential for the existence of our democracy,
- the moral choices we must make to save it,
- the constitutional rights and protections that are most valuable to us,
- articulating the one political question that should transcend, supersede and dominate all others facing Americans today: How can we save our democracy?, and
- how we can prevent the poet's fear that "*Things fall apart, the centre cannot hold*"²⁵ from becoming our reality.

The Second Coming
by
William Butler Yeats

Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.²⁵

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Sources & Citations

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7. Ibid., 230.
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9. Jonathan Haidt, *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2012), 274.
10. Ibid., 312.
11. Ibid., 49.
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13. Ibid., 50.
14. Ibid., 312.
15. Christopher Achen & Larry Bartels, *Democracy for Realists: Why Elections Do Not Produce Responsive Government* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016), 307.
16. Ibid., 267.
17. Ibid., 228.
18. Ibid., 294.

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19. Ibid., 86.
20. Ibid., 327.
21. Ibid., 215.
22. Ibid., 317.
23. Ibid., 231.
24. John Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems* (Athens Ohio: Swallow Press/Ohio University Press, 1927), 146.
25. W. B. Yeats, *The Second Coming*, ed. Michael Schmidt (London: Quercus, 2008), 22.