

**BOOK REVIEW: *How Democracies Die*, by Daniel Ziblatt and Steven Levitsky**

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In their book *How Democracies Die*, Daniel Ziblatt and Steven Levitsky argue that growing partisan polarization, exacerbated by President Donald Trump’s administration, is weakening the guardrails that keep American democracy functioning and is paving the way for potential authoritarianism. The authors see American democracy as functioning under two guardrails: mutual toleration and institutional forbearance. Mutual toleration is the idea that our rivals have an equal right to exist, compete for power, and govern – as long as they play by the constitutional rules. Institutional forbearance means that politicians should avoid actions that, while technically legal, obviously violate the spirit of the law.

These norms functioned until they were eroded by historical events in American history. Following the 1960s civil rights movement, for instance, American political parties no longer operated under the ideological “big tents” that relied on a white Christian majority. Instead, they became divided in issues of “way of life,” causing deep polarization. For Ziblatt and Levitsky, this polarization has provoked both parties -- but especially the Republican Party -- to play constitutional hardball with each other, weakening these norms. The rise of Donald Trump, who the authors see as a would-be authoritarian, was not a cause but rather an effect of this polarization. However, the authors argue that his administration and the broader Republican Party continued to erode these democratic norms. Throughout his time in office, Trump continuously lied, abandoned civility against his rivals, and openly

challenged the legitimacy of the American election system. The Republican Party stood by him through these actions that eroded democratic guardrails, leaving them constantly redefining what is and is not acceptable in their party.

Ziblatt and Levitsky write that the solution to this polarization – which they believe will inevitably destroy American democracy if left unchecked – lies with both Republican and Democratic parties, although they emphasize Republican culpability to a far greater extent. If Republicans can reform their party and get away from the rhetoric and authoritarian tendencies left from “Trumpism,” it is likely our democracy can recover as polarization lessens significantly. Democrats can aid this process by working to solve economic disparity, which is a problem that only encourages the divide.

*How Democracies Die* leaves the reader with many important takeaways about how American democracy has historically functioned, as well as how it is changing. The reader will more deeply understand just how significantly racial issues – including political leaders ignoring racial inequality in order to foster political stability among powerful stakeholders – have contributed to the survival of American democracy, at the expense of human rights. They will also understand how different changes in the function of American democracy, such as the growing use of the filibuster to block partisan legislation, have only aided growing partisan animosity between Democrats and Republicans.

Notably, Ziblatt and Levitsky also use many examples from around the world to argue that American democracy may follow troubling international trends. For example, the authors cite Germany’s Adolph Hitler and Italy’s Benito Mussolini to show how easily people in positions of party leadership can aid the rise of authoritarians. Latin American political outsiders such as Peru’s Alberto Fujimori and Bolivia’s Evo Morales illustrate how rhetoric against the political elite and the election system can lead to mistrust, and eventually degrade democratic voting systems. These trends are scary, particularly as we consider these cases alongside Trump’s rhetoric following the 2020 presidential election in the United States.

Despite its strengths, *How Democracies Die* has one fundamental problem: it claims polarization is the underlying problem for democracy, and yet the book itself is a deeply polarizing work. Ziblatt and Levitsky rely on the stance that Republicans created this polarization within the United States and rarely hold Democrats accountable for their role in the country's current political climate. This perspective is objectively incorrect, and the authors completely ignore historical instances in which Democrats are to blame for the erosion of democratic norms. One of the best examples of this, which is not even mentioned by the book, is the failed Supreme Court nomination of Robert Bork. Bork was nominated to the Supreme Court by President Ronald Reagan, but his extremely conservative views made him unpopular with Democrats. While the norm of the U.S. Supreme Court had historically been to confirm nominees based on merit alone, the Democrats essentially ran a smear campaign against Bork; they published ads, sent negative mail, and lobbied against him. Bork was ultimately not confirmed to the Court, leading to the term "borked" to voice conservative grievance. This set a new norm for Supreme Court nominees (Totenburg, 2012). It is frustrating that this example was left out of the book, especially since the authors used the blocked nomination of Merrick Garland – who was nominated to the Supreme Court by President Barack Obama but never confirmed – as an example of changing norms due to partisan animosity. (Even where the authors acknowledge Democrats' contribution to eroding norms – such as their unprecedented blockage of President George Bush's judicial nominees – they tend to frame those actions as "constitutional hardball" in response to Republican actions.)

*How Democracies Die* is an important read for anyone who wants to understand more about the history of American politics, as well as how to start bridging the divide. It becomes clear why Donald Trump was elected president, as well as what steps need to be taken to ensure that another would-be authoritarian is not elected again. However, the book falls short in its critique of the political parties' contributions to polarization. If the goal is for everyone to cooperate and collaborate – and for

Republicans to understand the issues with their party – it is important to put the blame exactly where it belongs, which is with all of us.

## References

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