How Democracies Die

by Levitsky · Language: EN

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Overview

How Democracies Die, by political scientists Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt, examines how democratic institutions erode not through sudden military coups or violent revolutions, but through the gradual, incremental actions of elected leaders who exploit legal loopholes and weaken democratic norms. The book draws on historical and comparative examples, particularly from interwar Europe and contemporary cases like Hungary, Turkey, and Venezuela, to argue that democracies today face a more subtle threat: the breakdown of mutual toleration and institutional forbearance among political elites. The authors contend that these unwritten rules, more than formal constitutions, are the true guardians of democracy, and that when they are abandoned, even robust democratic systems can slide into authoritarianism.

The book's central narrative arc moves from diagnosing the symptoms of democratic decay to prescribing remedies. Levitsky and Ziblatt first establish a framework for identifying authoritarian behavior, then apply it to the United States, warning that the Republican Party's embrace of Donald Trump, who repeatedly violated democratic norms, placed American democracy in a danger zone. They compare the current situation to historical cases where democracy survived, such as Finland and post-war Germany, and where it failed, such as Germany in the 1930s. The book concludes with a call for citizens, political parties, and institutions to defend democratic norms, including by refusing to legitimize norm-breakers, building broad coalitions, and maintaining a commitment to pluralism.

Why the book matters is its urgent, accessible warning that democracy is not self-sustaining; it depends on shared commitments to fair play and mutual respect. By shifting focus from formal institutions to informal norms, the authors provide a lens through which readers can recognize early warning signs of authoritarianism in their own countries. The book became a bestseller and a touchstone in political discourse, particularly in the United States, because it offers both a diagnosis and a set of practical defenses against democratic backsliding.

Key Takeaways

- Democracies usually die not by coup or revolution but by the gradual erosion of democratic norms by elected leaders.
- Two key norms are essential for democracy: mutual toleration, or accepting rivals as legitimate, and institutional forbearance, or exercising restraint in using one's legal powers.

• Political parties are the gatekeepers of democracy; they must refuse to nominate or support candidates who show authoritarian tendencies.

• Authoritarian leaders often use legal means, such as packing courts or rewriting electoral rules, to entrench their power, making it hard to remove them through elections.

• The United States in the Trump era exhibited warning signs of democratic backsliding, including attacks on the judiciary and the press, and questioning of election results.

• To defend democracy, citizens and parties should build broad coalitions and isolate extremists, rather than normalizing them.

• Historical cases like Finland show that democracies can survive crises if elites cooperate and uphold norms, while cases like Germany in the 1930s show the consequences of norm breakdown.

• Reforming institutions, such as reducing partisan gerrymandering and protecting voting rights, can help reduce polarization and strengthen democratic resilience.

Chapter Summaries

Chapter 1: Fateful Alliances

Levitsky and Ziblatt introduce the concept of democratic backsliding and argue that the primary threat to democracy today comes from elected leaders who subvert democratic institutions from within. They use the examples of Hugo Chávez in Venezuela and Viktor Orbán in Hungary to illustrate how leaders can dismantle democracy while maintaining electoral legitimacy. The chapter sets up the book's core argument: that the breakdown of democratic norms, not just formal institutions, is the key mechanism of democratic decay.

Chapter 2: The Norms of Democracy

The authors define two critical norms: mutual toleration, which means accepting political rivals as legitimate, and institutional forbearance, which means not using one's legal powers to the maximum extent to crush opponents. They explain how these norms historically protected American democracy, citing examples like the peaceful transfer of power and the restraint of the Supreme Court. The chapter argues that these norms are fragile and can erode when political actors see them as obstacles to victory.

Chapter 3: The Rise of American Authoritarianism

This chapter traces the historical roots of authoritarian tendencies in the United States, focusing on the Southern segregationist resistance to civil rights. Levitsky and Ziblatt argue that the Republican Party's 'Southern Strategy' and its reliance on white voters created a faction that was willing to undermine democratic norms to maintain power. They connect this history to the party's later embrace of Donald Trump, who openly violated norms of mutual toleration and forbearance.

Chapter 4: The Danger of Donald Trump

The authors analyze Trump's candidacy and presidency through the lens of their framework, identifying his attacks on the judiciary, the press, and electoral integrity as classic authoritarian behaviors. They argue that Trump's willingness to question the legitimacy of elections and his refusal to commit to a peaceful transfer of power were unprecedented and dangerous. The chapter emphasizes that Trump's rise was not an accident but a product of the Republican Party's failure to act as a gatekeeper.

Chapter 5: The Guardrails of Democracy

Levitsky and Ziblatt examine the institutional and political factors that can prevent democratic backsliding, such as a strong civil society, a free press, and, crucially, political parties that are willing to isolate extremists. They compare the United States to other countries, showing that when mainstream parties cooperate to exclude authoritarian candidates, democracy is more resilient. The chapter also discusses the role of voters in rejecting norm-breakers.

Chapter 6: The Unwritten Rules of American Politics

This chapter delves into the historical evolution of unwritten rules in American politics, such as the norm of not using the filibuster excessively and the tradition of presidential restraint. The authors argue that these norms have been eroded in recent decades, particularly due to increased polarization and the rise of partisan media. They warn that without these informal constraints, the formal checks and balances of the Constitution are insufficient to protect democracy.

Chapter 7: The Case for Reform

The authors propose a series of reforms to strengthen American democracy, including reducing partisan gerrymandering, protecting voting rights, and reforming the Electoral College. They also advocate for changes to the Senate and the Supreme Court to make them more representative and less politicized. The chapter argues that these reforms, while difficult, are necessary to reduce polarization and restore trust in democratic institutions.

Chapter 8: How Democracies Die

In the concluding chapter, Levitsky and Ziblatt synthesize their argument, emphasizing that democracies die when citizens and elites abandon the norms of mutual toleration and institutional forbearance. They call on citizens to defend democracy by voting for parties that uphold these norms, building cross-partisan coalitions, and resisting the temptation to support authoritarian leaders for short-term gain. The book ends with a hopeful note that democracy can be saved if people act.

Themes

- Democratic backsliding
- Political norms
- Authoritarianism
- Party gatekeeping
- Institutional decay
- American polarization

Notable Quotes

- "Democracies may die at the hands not of generals but of elected leaders—presidents or prime ministers who subvert the very process that brought them to power." — Opening of the introduction, setting the book's central thesis.
- "Mutual toleration and institutional forbearance are the unwritten rules that make democracy work." — Chapter 2, where the authors define the two key norms.
- "The Republican Party, the oldest political party in the world, had become the vehicle for an authoritarian movement." — Chapter 4, discussing Trump's rise.
- "When one party abandons the norms of mutual toleration and institutional forbearance, it sets the stage for democratic breakdown." — Chapter 6, on the erosion of unwritten rules.
- "The only way to stop an authoritarian is to defeat him at the ballot box, and that requires building a broad coalition." — Chapter 8, on defending democracy.

Frequently Asked Questions

What is How Democracies Die about?

The book explains how democracies can erode from within, not through coups but through the gradual breakdown of democratic norms. Using historical and current examples, Levitsky and Ziblatt show how elected leaders can weaken institutions, and they apply this framework to the United States under Trump.

Is How Democracies Die worth reading?

Yes, it is a highly accessible and urgent read for anyone concerned about the state of democracy. It provides a clear framework for recognizing authoritarian behavior and offers concrete lessons from history. It became a bestseller for good reason, sparking widespread discussion.

How does How Democracies Die end?

Spoiler: The book ends with a call to action. The authors argue that democracy can be saved if citizens and political parties recommit to mutual toleration and institutional forbearance. They suggest reforms like ending gerrymandering and protecting voting rights, and they emphasize

the importance of defeating authoritarian candidates at the ballot box.

Who should read How Democracies Die?

Anyone interested in politics, democracy, or current events. It is especially valuable for voters, political activists, and students of political science. The book is written for a general audience, so no prior expertise is needed.

How long does it take to read How Democracies Die?

The book is about 288 pages. At a typical reading speed of 250 words per minute, it takes roughly 6 to 7 hours. Most readers finish it in a few days or a week.