Journal of Liberty and International Affairs · Volume 11 · Number 2 · 2025 · eISSN 1857-9760
Published online by the Institute for Research and European Studies at www.e-jlia.com

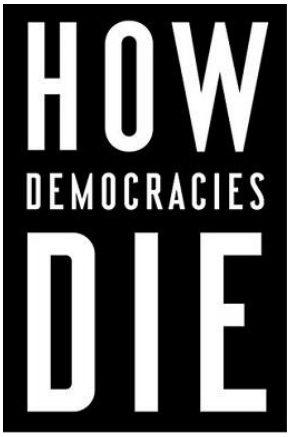
Copyright © 2025 The author/s
This work is licensed under the CC BY 4.0 license
(*) Corresponding author
Non-Peer-Reviewed
Book review
DOI: https://doi.org/10.47305/jlia.2025.1884
Received: 10.07.2025 • Accepted: 02.10.2025 • Published: 06.10.2025
Pages: 177-180

How Democracies Die

By Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblat (Authors) (Publisher: Crown Publishing 2018)

Usman Anwar[1], Muhammad Atif[2*]

[1]Department of Politics and International Relations at Lahore Leads University, Lahore, Pakistan ✉ usmananwar2023@gmail.com
[2]School of Integrated Social Sciences, The University of Lahore, Pakistan ✉ muhammad.atif@siss.uol.edu.pk



Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt begin their book with a crucial question: Is democracy in the United States at risk? They argue that today, democracies rarely collapse through violent coups or the imposition of martial law by non-democratic forces. Instead, populist leaders who weaken democratic institutions and manipulate public emotions play a major role in eroding democracy from within. The authors note that Donald Trump's 2016 election reflects broader global trends observed in countries such as Venezuela, Hungary, and Turkey. Populists often exploit democratic processes to gain power and then undermine democracy from the inside, viewing themselves as superior to democratic institutions.

They also examine the subtle and gradual ways in which modern democracies deteriorate over time. Typically, populist leaders make promises to take actions they are not authorized to carry out without democratic approval.

The book provides a framework for understanding internal threats to democracy, interpreting Trump's election as a symptom of democratic decline rather than its cause. Fateful alliances are highlighted in this chapter as a key factor in the collapse of democracies, where decisions by political elites to support authoritarian outsiders play a crucial role. The chapter examines how powerful outsiders have frequently ascended to power with the support of established political figures. This dynamic can benefit either side, although the public may ultimately bear the brunt of the cost. Levitsky and Ziblatt cite several examples of democratic elites underestimating authoritarian leaders: in the 1920s, Italian liberal politicians brought Benito Mussolini into the government to quell unrest; in the 1930s, German conservatives invited Adolf Hitler to power, believing they could control him; and in the 1990s, Venezuelan President Rafael Caldera inadvertently paved the way for authoritarian rule by Hugo Chávez (p. 22). These instances demonstrate how political elites, by ignoring early warning signs for short-term political gain, contributed to the eventual decline of democracy, with lasting consequences for society (Crouch 2020).

In discussing "Gatekeeping in America," the authors describe how political parties have historically acted as "gatekeepers." Through closed-door negotiations, they once prevented demagogues and extremists from advancing their agendas. However, after the late 1970s, primary elections shifted power to the public, allowing voters to choose candidates directly. While this reform increased participation and transparency, it also weakened party control, making it easier for populists and celebrities—like Donald Trump—to bypass traditional screening processes. As illustrated in the book, backroom deals and politically engineered nominations had once enabled party elites to block fringe candidates (p. 29). With the rise of mass media and social networks, populists now communicate directly with the public, sidestepping traditional party mechanisms. Despite initial resistance from party leaders, Levitsky and Ziblatt argue that this shift paved the way for populist outsiders like Trump, whose celebrity status and divisive rhetoric helped him secure the Republican nomination in 2016 (Rubsamen 2020).

"The Great Republican Abdication" explains how the Republican Party failed to prevent Trump from winning. Most Republican leaders recognized and ultimately supported him despite his repeated violations of democratic norms. He quickly became highly influential within the party. Levitsky and Ziblatt compare this dynamic to the failures of European conservative elites during the rise of fascism. This "abdication of responsibility" echoes earlier elite mistakes, when conservatives underestimated autocratic leaders (p. 69). Major party figures prioritized electoral victory and partisan prejudice over defending democratic institutions once Trump secured the nomination. The authors argue that democratic backsliding often results more from elite complicity or silence than from a lack of popular will. They contend that the decline of American democracy accelerated due to this failure to uphold democratic values.

"Subverting Democracy" details how modern autocrats have shifted their strategies—from suspending constitutions or launching coups to using democratic institutions themselves to suppress opposition and consolidate power. The primary tactics of this "legal authoritarianism" include manipulating the media, politicizing the legal system and police, engaging in political witch hunts, packing courts, and exploiting state authority to target opponents (p. 89). Authoritarian leaders such as Erdoğan in Turkey, Orbán in Hungary, and Chávez in Venezuela have all employed these methods. The authors note that elected autocrats often erode democracy gradually, using laws and public justifications to disguise their anti-democratic actions (Barroso 2021). By manipulating regulatory bodies and law enforcement for personal gain, they neutralize opposition while maintaining a façade of democracy.

"The Guardrails of Democracy" outlines two main informal norms essential to a functioning democracy: "institutional forbearance" and "mutual tolerance." These norms extend beyond formal institutions such as the judiciary or the constitution. Mutual tolerance involves viewing political rivals not as existential enemies but as legitimate opponents (p. 104). Institutional forbearance means refraining from exploiting legal technicalities for partisan advantage. These principles foster a political culture of negotiation and compromise. When either norm breaks down, politics becomes a zero-sum contest, exposing democracy to manipulation and authoritarianism. Even while operating within the law, both executives and legislatures can erode democracy, as seen in Venezuela, Argentina, Paraguay, and Ecuador (Holgado and Urribarri 2024).

CC BY

In "The Unwritten Rules of American Politics," the authors examine how key democratic norms have eroded in the United States, mainly due to rising inequality and polarization. The Republican Party—and, to some extent, both major parties—has increasingly violated traditional standards as political division deepens (Nair et al. 2025). The authors demonstrate how established conventions have eroded due to the excessive use of the filibuster, disregard for Supreme Court nomination protocols, and deliberate obstruction of government functions (p. 104). What were once extraordinary actions have become normalized, weakening public trust and undermining the informal principles that long sustained American democracy.

In "The Unraveling," Levitsky and Ziblatt emphasize that personality, ethnicity, and cultural identity have become the foundation of political division in the United States, extending beyond policy disagreements. As polarization deepens, parties increasingly see each other as mortal enemies, making compromise nearly impossible (p. 104). Political conflicts have evolved into existential struggles driven by ideological extremism, demographic anxieties among white rural voters, and backlash against civil rights movements (Berlet and Sunshine 2019). As political opponents are portrayed as threats, parties become more racially and culturally homogenous, undermining mutual toleration and democratic legitimacy.

"Trump Against the Guardrails" examines Donald Trump's presidency as a stress test for American democracy. His time in office challenged many of the nation's democratic safeguards. While some institutions—such as the courts and federal agencies—pushed back, the long-term damage to public confidence and institutional legitimacy remains significant. Levitsky and Ziblatt highlight numerous examples of Trump breaching democratic norms: attacking the press, delegitimizing the judiciary, questioning electoral integrity, and inciting political violence. Although some checks held firm, the authors argue that the harm to democratic culture and trust is profound and lasting (p. 164).

In the final chapter, "Saving Democracy," the authors move from diagnosis to prescription. They argue that preserving democracy requires more than legal reforms—it demands civic and cultural renewal. Their recommendations include forming cross-party coalitions to isolate extremists, reforming electoral laws to protect voting rights and reduce gerrymandering, and investing in civic education to foster respect for democratic principles. They also emphasize the importance of bridging racial and cultural divides through inclusive narratives. Ultimately, they contend that democracy depends not only on institutions but on citizens and leaders committed to democratic ideals and willing to defend them (p. 192). The authors conclude that democracy cannot sustain itself automatically; US democracy remains vulnerable to collapse, its stability undermined by polarization and the erosion of shared norms (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2024).

"How Democracies Die" offers readers a clear understanding of "mutual toleration" and "institutional forbearance," explaining why these norms are vital to the survival of democracy. Through numerous case studies—from Mussolini's rise in Italy to Chávez's rule in Venezuela—the book shows how democratic breakdowns recur across time and place. Levitsky and Ziblatt write in an accessible yet scholarly style, making complex political science engaging for a broad audience. Their warnings are especially timely as populist leaders and societal divisions threaten democratic values, particularly in the United States. They urge politicians and citizens alike to strengthen democratic norms and work across party lines.

CC BY

While the book's insights are profound, it leans too heavily on US examples and underrepresents similar global challenges, limiting its broader applicability. It also overlooks the role of digital media, social networks, and algorithmic echo chambers that complicate the defense of democratic values. Although the historical examples are illuminating, they sometimes obscure emerging risks that differ from past patterns. Furthermore, while the authors briefly mention socioeconomic inequality as a driver of polarization, they could have explored more deeply how economic disruption and demographic change beyond race strain democracy. Finally, the absence of a discussion on gender dynamics misses an opportunity to examine how women's political participation and diverse leadership styles could strengthen democratic resilience.

REFERENCES

1. Barroso, L. R. 2021. "Populism, Authoritarianism, and Institutional Resistance: Constitutional Courts in the Game of Power." *Texas International Law Journal* 59: 259–284. HeinOnline
2. Berlet, C., and S. Sunshine. 2019. "Rural Rage: The Roots of Right-Wing Populism in the United States." *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 46 (3): 480–513. https://doi.org/10.1080/03066150.2019.1572603.
3. Crouch, C. 2020. *Post-Democracy After the Crises.* Cambridge: Polity Press.
4. Holgado, B. G., and R. S. Urribarri. 2024. "The Dark Side of Legalism: Abuse of the Law and Democratic Erosion in Argentina, Ecuador, and Venezuela." *American Behavioral Scientist* 68 (12): 1578–1596. https://doi.org/10.1177/00027642241268332.
5. Levitsky, S., and D. Ziblatt. 2024. *Tyranny of the Minority: Why American Democracy Reached the Breaking Point.* New York: Random House.
6. Nair, K., R. A. Anderson, T. Spelman, M. Mosleh, and M. Kouchaki. 2025. "Asymmetric Polarization: The Perception That Republicans Pose Harm to Disadvantaged Groups Drives Democrats' Greater Dislike of Republicans in Social Contexts." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology.* https://doi.org/10.1037/pspi0000495.
7. Rubsamen, C. 2020. "'I Am a Popularist': A Critical Discourse Analysis of the Populist Rhetoric of Donald Trump's Presidential Campaign." PhD diss., University of Hawai'i at Mānoa.