Democracy Dies a Slow Death
Book Review by Luke Johnson

How Democracies Die

On August 19, 1953, the democratically-elected nationalist Iranian Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh was forced from office with the help of the C.I.A. and British intelligence, and put under house arrest for the remainder of his life. The Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi took power and ruled as an autocrat until the 1979 Islamic Revolution forced him from power.

On May 29, 2010, Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban was sworn into office again as prime minister after his party, Fidesz, won a two-thirds majority in parliament fair-and-square, giving Fidesz the right to change the constitution. His re-emergence after being prime minister from 1998 to 2002 was barely noticed in the West. However, since taking power, Orban and Fidesz lawmakers have systematically dismantled the institutions of liberal democracy — an independent judiciary, civil service, non-governmental organizations, and the free press — rewritten the constitution, and changed electoral laws to ensure that Fidesz stays in power.

In their new book, Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt, professors of government at Harvard University, draw a distinction between two ways in which democracy can die: the first is a 20th century understanding of how democracy ends, by an armed coup in the Cold War, and the second is a 21st century one, where a democratically elected government gradually undermines independent institutions, while often still winning elections, to the point of creating an authoritarian regime.

The second case is of obvious concern to Americans after the election of Donald J. Trump to the presidency in 2016. He has attacked independent judges, fired the director of the F.B.I., called independent media an “enemy of the
American people,” and called for the jailing of his election opponent, Hillary Clinton.

These events have led to fears that the United States is becoming like Hungary.

However, the authors are skeptical to place the United States in the same category as Hungary or Venezuela or other backsliding democracies. Instead, they think that the United States is entering a period of “democracy without guardrails,” wherein the norms of “forbearance” and “mutual toleration” are repeatedly disregarded. That is, political leaders do not act with restraint and regard members of the opposite party as enemies, not legitimate opponents. The authors write that North Carolina, a highly-polarized swing state with an aggressive Republican party that has tried to engineer one-party rule through election laws, gerrymandering and voter ID restrictions, is more of a window into the future of American democracy than Hungary.

North Carolina is certainly a more plausible outcome than the totalitarianism of George Orwell’s 1984, which surged in popularity after Kellyanne Conway’s comments about “alternative facts” in the early days of the Trump Administration. But the skepticism around placing the United States outside the current backsliding crisis seems misplaced given the theme of the rest of book which refutes American democratic exceptionalism. Hungary, along with Poland, had strong democratic institutions within the European Union, another body with strong institutions, and both have backslid to the point of being described as authoritarian and autocratic by The New York Times in its news coverage. We might not be so different.1,2

Levitsky and Ziblatt place the lion’s share of the blame of democratic erosion on the Republican Party and trace it back to the Gingrich Revolution of the 1990s, correctly noting that the trends away from forbearance and mutual toleration did not start with Trump. But they make a mistake in their retelling of recent American political history by treating some marginal calls as signs of the breakdown of mutual tolerance. Ann Coulter’s best-selling book “Treason” was despicable in its title and tone, but in and of itself, it is nothing but a cry for attention from a self-promoting author. On the left, it is fine to disagree with the notion that the Democrats should “fight like Republicans,” but their source of the claim comes from an article by a political science professor, David Faris, writing for The Week. It is not House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi talking. The authors are better
when they stick to cases abroad rather than using examples of varying relevance to explain American politics.\(^3\)

The book (perhaps unintentionally) succeeds as a case for the relevance of political science. The discipline has favored quantitative studies of political phenomena and has lost influence in the popular press and policy-making circles. *How Democracies Die* uses concepts from the discipline to explain contemporary phenomena. It is not a work of academic political science, but it is written by political scientists for the lay public. Thus, it is a great example of academics using their expertise to contextualize and understand the urgent questions of the day.

Levitsky and Ziblatt are refreshing in their eschewing of American democratic exceptionalism. They compare U.S. democracy to many other failed democracies around the world. The authors detail democratic breakdowns in Malaysia and Hungary, and then move on to the post-Civil War Reconstruction of the United States, where the Democratic party disenfranchised African-Americans to engineer one-party majorities in the South from the 1880s to 1965. They also reject the over-simplified, textbook-level notion that America has been a democracy since 1787, tracing it to 1965, after the passage of the Civil Rights Act and Voting Rights Act enfranchising African-Americans. The authors make a compelling case that U.S. democracy is not exceptional and faces the worrying prospect of extreme polarization. To ameliorate polarization, they suggest universal social welfare policies that reduce income inequality. This seems to be a very reasonable suggestion, though the present climate makes its implementation unlikely. What is most worrying, though, is that there are far more examples of democracies becoming far worse than the United States in 2018 before the pendulum swung back.■
ABOUT THE AUTHOR

ENDNOTES


18 year-old Yasmin cries at her makeshift shelter in the Kutupalong refugee camp in Cox’s Bazar. Yasmin’s family including her father, mother, and two brothers was burnt alive by the Myanmar army. She was taken away by her uncle when they fled to Bangladesh.