

BOOK REVIEWS

**Steven Levitsky & Daniel Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die*, Viking- Penguin
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The book of Harvard professors Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt appears at the moment when threats to democracy, including to the American one, are vigorous and new forms of authoritarianism are emerging around the globe. Populist governments have assaulted democratic institutions in Hungary, Poland or Turkey, extremist forces have registered important electoral gains in Austria, Germany, the Netherlands and other European countries, while in the United States a president with little commitment to constitutional rights and clear authoritarian tendencies was elected in November 2016. What does all this mean? The authors are trying and doing very well to explain us, during the nine chapters of the book, that we have reasons for alarm. Appealing to older and newer examples, they show that democracy can die not only with a *coup d'état*, but also slowly, from the inside, step by step.

The first chapter, *Fateful Alliances*, starts from examples of leaders such as Mussolini in Italy, Hitler in Germany, Hugo Chavez in Venezuela, who, despite the differences, followed routes to power that share striking similarities: "Not only they were outsiders with a flair for capturing public attention, but each of them rose to power because establishment politicians overlooked the warning signs and either handed over power to them (Hitler and Mussolini) or opened the door for them (Chavez)" (p. 19). We should learn from these experiences how to keep extremists and demagogues far from the centers of power. And what matters more than mass responses to extremists' appeals is whether responsible political elites and parties serve as filters. Having as reference point the Juan Linz's book *The Breakdown of Democratic Regimes*, published in 1978, the authors develop four key indicators of authoritarian behavior: rejection or weak commitment to democratic rules of the

game; denial of legitimacy of political opponents; toleration or encouragement of violence; readiness to curtail civil liberties of opponents, including media. These behavioral warnings can help us to identify antidemocratic politicians.

The following two chapters -*Gatekeeping in America* and *The Great Republican Abdication*- are dedicated to American democracy, where both Democrats and Republicans succeeded for decades to keep extremist figures out of the mainstream. Until 2016, when Republican Party failed to keep Donald Trump, real estate developer, reality-TV star and a man with no experience in public office, from gaining the nomination. The book examines the factors that contributed to Donald Trump's stunning political success, emphasizing that, first of all, there is a "story of ineffective gatekeeping": "Party gatekeepers failed at three key junctures: the <invisible primary>, the primaries themselves, and the general election" (p.57). Applying the grid of the four key indicators of authoritarian behavior to Donald Trump, the authors found that there were all signs of concern before his nomination. Despite the opposition of some Republican leaders who refused to endorse Trump, the abdication and the transfer of authority to a leader who threatens democracy could have two explanations: "The first is the misguided belief that an authoritarian can be controlled or tamed. The second is what sociologist Ivan Ermakoff calls <ideological collusion>, in which the authoritarian's agenda overlaps sufficiently with that of mainstream politicians that abdication is desirable, or at least preferable to the alternatives" (p. 67). The book also makes an "authoritarian report card" of Trump's first year in office (chapter 8), noting that, as president, he exhibited clear authoritarian tendencies. He attempted all strategies by which elected authoritarians seek to consolidate power and which are described in a distinct chapter of the book (chapter 4- *Subverting democracy*). These strategies are: capturing the referees (judicial system, law enforcement bodies, intelligence, tax and regulatory agencies, institutions that, in democratic regimes, are designed to serve as neutral arbiters); sidelining or bribing the key players (such as opposition politicians, business leaders who finance the opposition, major media outlets, intellectual/cultural or even religious figures whose popularity or moral standing makes them potential threats); and, not least, rewriting/changing the rules of the game ("reforming" the constitution, the electoral system and other institutions in ways that disadvantage or weaken the opposition). All these strategies are carried out piecemeal and with the appearance of legality, so as the citizens are often slow to realize that their democracies are dismantled, even if this is happening before their eyes. As the authors point out, "one of the great ironies of how democracies

die is that the very defense of democracy is often used as pretext for its subversion” (p. 92).

The question is if democratic institutions are so easy to sweep away. The chapters 5 and 6 of the book (*The Guardrails of Democracy* and *The Unwritten Rules of American Politics*) emphasize the factors that sustain democracy. They include not only written rules (constitutions), but also unwritten rules and norms, shared codes of conduct that serve as guardrails of democracy. All functioning democracies rely on informal rules that, even if not stipulated in constitution or any laws, are widely known and respected. Unwritten rules were everywhere in American politics, two of them- mutual toleration and institutional forbearance- becoming the foundation of American much-admired system of *checks and balance*. “Mutual toleration refers to the idea that as long as our rivals play by constitutional rules, we accept that they have an equal right to exist, compete for power, and govern. We may disagree with, and even strongly dislike, our rivals, but we nevertheless accept them as legitimate” (p. 102). The other one, institutional forbearance, can be understood as avoiding actions that, while respecting the letter of the law, violate its spirit. “Where norms of forbearance are strong, politicians do not use their institutional prerogatives to the hilt, even if it is technically legal to do so, for such action could imperil the existing system” (p. 106). Without the two interrelated norms, not written in the American constitution, the constitutional *checks and balances* will not operate as we expect them to.

The importance of these norms is also underlined in the final chapter of the book (*Saving democracy*), in which, ascertaining the recession of democracy worldwide, the authors review possible scenarios for a post-Trump America. The most optimistic one is a swift democratic recovery, but it is not easy to accomplish it, because the polarization of American society and the weakness of democracy’s guardrails began well before Donald Trump ascended to the White House. A second scenario, much darker, is one in which President Trump and the Republicans continue to win with a white nationalist appeal and the third, most likely in the authors’ view, is that one in which Trump will fail but this failure would do little to narrow the divide between parties or to reverse the decline in mutual toleration and forbearance. The authors’ call is to learn from history. Both Republicans and Democrats need to reform their parties and to address adequately the two underlying forces driving American polarization: racial and religious realignment and growing economic inequality.

The equalitarianism, civility, sense of freedom that were the essence of mid-twentieth-century American democracy are today under assault not only in the



United States, but also across the industrialized West. Restoring democratic ideals and norms must be today accompanied by their extension through the whole of increasingly diverse societies. The book ends with the hope that we will face this challenge, reconciling democracy with diversity: “Previous generations of Europeans and Americans made extraordinary sacrifices to defend our institutions against powerful external threats. Our generation, which grew up taking democracy from granted, now faces a different task: We must prevent it from dying from within” (p. 231).