

HOW DEMOCRACIES DIE

(STEVEN LEVITSKY AND DANIEL ZIBLATT)

September 25, 2018

This may be the worst well-written book I have ever read. That is, most awful books are bad in their writing, bad in their organization, bad in their reasoning, and bad in their typesetting. No such badness is evident here—*How Democracies Die* hits all the points it intends to, and reads crisply and smoothly. But it is ruined by a meta-problem: its utter cluelessness and total lack of self-reference. The authors, Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt, are very much like the Ken Doll in the *Toy Story* movies—vain, preening, and, most of all, utterly unable to realize, not that the joke is on them, but that they themselves are the joke.

This is the last book I am reviewing of a spate of recent similar books. I am glad to reach the end, and this book is the right capstone, since it exemplifies its genre, and is also the one that has gotten by far the most attention. All these books were inspired by Trump’s election, and they all take as their theme that Trump represents, or heralds, an erosion of democracy. What such erosion is, to what degree erosion is occurring, and what should be done about it, are the main axes of difference among these books. But they are all variations on the Shire’s warning bell in Tolkein’s *Lord of the Rings*: “Fear, fire, foes: awake!” Or get woke, at least.

Before I trash this book, let’s talk about its skeleton, the framework of analysis it offers. Levitsky and Ziblatt are a typical modern type—the left-wing academic ensconced in the left-wing ecosystem, in this case as professors of government at Harvard. (Is “government” an actual department nowadays? Weird.) The dust jacket says they’ve written for both the *New York Times* and *Vox*; which tells you pretty much what you need to know about their background and approach, that they treat those two publications as comparable and both worthy of mention. They are leftist popularizers and chasers after the crowd.

Sorry, I’m trashing the book, or at least the authors, when I said I’m not up to that yet. It is just so hard not to do. The Introduction frames the matters to be discussed by noting a difference between a classic coup d’etat and “elected autocrats,” who “maintain a veneer of democracy while eviscerating its substance.” Such evisceration is said to consist not of illegal actions, but of some other set of actions that

runs counter to the spirit of democracy, which is deemed to constitute “backsliding.” Most of all, backsliding is not violation of the law, but of “democratic norms.” It is around this idea of norms that Levitsky and Ziblatt organize their book, with the claim that the erosion of such norms, the “guardrails of democracy,” “began in the 1980s and 1990s and accelerated in the 2000s.”

The authors then add specifics to this generalization. This first section of the book revolves mostly around the claim that what is necessary to permit erosion of democratic norms is “the abdication of political responsibility by existing leaders.” In other words, “political elites” must “serve as filters” and as “democracy’s gatekeepers,” in order to prevent undesirables from being elected by the great unwashed. This means never allying with undesirables (Hitler and Mussolini are trotted out, then put back in the stable, but not allowed to get comfortable, for soon enough, the authors will need them again), and taking aggressive action to suppress any trace of them in political life.

Of course, to serve as a filter, one must know what to filter. Thus, the authors offer four “key indicators of authoritarian behavior.” (“Authoritarian” is used by all authors in this genre as an undefined and never coherently explained doppelganger of “erosion of democracy.”) These are rejection of (or weak commitment to) democratic rules of the game; denial of the legitimacy of political opponents; toleration or encouragement of violence; and readiness to curtail civil liberties of opponents, including media. (By “civil liberties,” the authors seem to mean only First Amendment free speech rights. We can be sure they don’t mean the Second Amendment, or freedom of religion for orthodox Christians.) For each of these four, the authors offer a table with several queries illustrative, such as, with respect to violence, “Have they or their partisan allies sponsored or encouraged mob attacks on opponents?” The idea is that those who are identified by the filter must be cast into the outer darkness, but political opponents who pass the filter should be, if not embraced, at least worked with to expunge those who fail the filter from political life.

To illustrate this, the authors give us a brief historical tour, mentioning 1930s France (where they seem unaware of what a “Popular Front” is), and offering obscure examples like the Lapua Front in 1929 Finland. They then turn to more recent foreign examples, citing European political

parties combining with their opponents to deny all political power to right-wing parties that win democratically, praising this as wonderful and the height of “democratic gatekeeping,” even though it seems to sit uneasily with, you know, actual democracy. Finally, they offer American historical examples, such as Huey Long, Joseph McCarthy, and George Wallace (where at least they are honest enough to mention that Wallace was a serious contender for the 1972 Democratic nomination). Then, citing Henry Ford getting no traction as a politician, they explicitly endorse the old “smoke-filled room” method of choosing Presidential nominees, because it prevents “the election of a demagogue who threatens democracy itself.” I wonder of whom they could be thinking?

All this is clear enough, and takes up the first quarter of the book. The rest of the book is an application of the framework, alternated with a fleshing out of the framework, shot through with ascribing all blame to the Right and trumpeting the moral and political purity of the Left. We begin with a claim that Republican gatekeepers failed miserably, and repeatedly, in the great moral challenge of their lives, by permitting Donald Trump to be nominated. They should never have allowed him to enter the primaries; they should have made him lose the primaries; and they should have ensured he lost the election. Why? Well, because he failed the filter the authors offer, of course. At this point, the reader realizes their entire framework is set up around Trump, or rather, around a left-wing vision of how Trump behaves. He “questioned the legitimacy of the electoral process” when he “made the unprecedented suggestion that he might not accept the results of the 2016 election.” He denied the legitimacy of his opponents by countenancing “birtherism” and suggesting that Hillary Clinton’s criminal activities made her a criminal. He “tolerated and encouraged violence” by his statements about people disrupting his rallies, and his supporters are just like Mussolini’s Blackshirts. He showed “a readiness to curtail the civil liberties of rivals and critics,” again by wanting Hillary Clinton’s criminal activities treated as criminal activities, and by calling the media dishonest, suggesting libel laws should be loosened. The authors then helpfully reprint their initial table-format framework, bolding all the areas where, they say, Trump failed. And good, approved, housebroken Republicans failed most of all, by not aggressively working to elect Hillary Clinton, as they should have, as proven by the authors’ irrefutable and totally neutral framework.

Having set up the point of the book, Levitsky and Ziblatt pull back the camera to analyze supposed analogues abroad, in places where democracy has allegedly eroded more than in America. We start with Alberto Fujimori, and Hugo Chávez is mentioned (he serves as a foil in this book, to show that the authors have found a leftist regime they claim not to like), but mostly we get a discussion of “referees.” The authors mean “various agencies with the authority to investigate and punish wrongdoing by both public officials and private citizens,” including “the judicial system, law enforcement bodies, and intelligence, tax, and regulatory agencies.” “In democracies, such institutions are designed to serve as neutral arbiters.” If a politician controls the referees, that is, he can get away with things he should not be able to get away with. By this Levitsky and Ziblatt do not mean Barack Obama’s subversion of the rule of law or the FBI and the Justice Department being turned into a bludgeon against Republicans. Oh no. They mean men like Viktor Orbán in Hungary, who dare to replace “civil servants and other non-partisan officials and replace them with loyalists.”

This is the crux of this book’s cluelessness. The authors appear to actually imagine that the referees, the civil servants, the employees of the federal government, who are a left-wing monolith, voting and donating greater than ninety percent Democrat, are “neutral.” They think the American press, also utterly dominated by the Left, is “neutral.” They think that the (formerly) Communist-dominated judiciary in Hungary and Poland is “neutral.” For the authors, dominance by the Left is natural and immutable, and any attempt by voters to elect people who erode the dominance of the Left is an “attack on democracy.” What they mean by democracy, in other words, is merely a permanent global stranglehold by the Left on power. Erosion of the Left’s power is therefore *ipso facto* erosion of democracy. There are thus two keys to all the analysis in *How Democracies Die*. The first is that anybody in power who is on the Left is “neutral” and “professional.” The second is that anytime government, the press, business, or any other organ of influence is dominated by the Left, it’s awesome, tasty, full democracy. Through this prism, you can see that any power the Right has is always biased, unprofessional, and the opposite of tasty democracy. Similarly, any bad behavior by the Left (e.g., illegally weaponizing the IRS or the judiciary system to suppress conservative groups and votes) is irrelevant

and not worth mention. Once you have those keys, you can write the rest of the book yourself. Though why you would want to so beclown yourself, I don't know.

Doubtless seeing the transparency of their bias, though never acknowledging it in any way, the authors next try to insulate themselves by crying "Hitler!" and talking about suppression of the black vote in the South (by Democrats, historically, but never mind). We get talk about how the Nazis destroyed the Prussian *Rechtsaat*. We get talk about the Spanish Civil War, how the parties there failed to recognize that "our political rivals are decent, patriotic, law-abiding citizens," and bad things resulted. Levitsky and Ziblatt alternate between calling for civility and comity, and excoriating anyone who doesn't work actively for Left hegemony as a racist and Nazi. Necessarily, therefore, by "decent and patriotic" Republicans, the authors mean exclusively those Republicans who work as "gatekeepers." Which is to say, those who work to elect Democrats or liberal Republicans who don't contest Left hegemony. All others must be excluded from political life no matter how many votes they get. And let's not forget that John McCain, now praised by liberals, when he was actually running for President was slandered as a hateful racist and disgusting human being. This supposed view by the Left of some Republicans as decent and patriotic is never, ever, in the present tense unless such Republicans are actively assisting the Left. The reader gets bored.

The reality is that if you apply the authors' framework, it actually applies much better to suggest that the Left is "eroding democracy," by their own terms. Let's take just one of their four key factors: "toleration or encouragement of violence." Supposedly, because Trump suggested that people disrupting his rallies be beat up (not that any were), he fails this factor. Nowhere mentioned are events such as when Trump had to cancel rallies because of the mass violence threatened by the Left against his supporters, violence openly organized by elected Democrats and their allies in pressure groups. Nowhere mentioned are the hundreds or thousands of incidents of actual violence during and since the election against Trump supporters merely minding their own business on the street. Nowhere mentioned are the mobs who descend on Trump officials eating dinner or having drinks, assaulting them and driving them out, proudly posting video and never facing any consequences. I

see upon waking this morning that Senator Ted Cruz and his wife got that treatment last night, which is, of course, reported nowhere in the news-setting media.

But it's not just this minor physical violence and intimidation. Let's review the past few week's headlines—not, of course, in the news-setting media, which had small squibs on these at most, but on conservative media. "Suspect tries stabbing Republican candidate." "Mass shooting tweet threatens Trump hotel event." "Secret Service probes actress calling for [Trump] assassination." "Wyoming GOP office set on fire." "Conservative columnist goes into hiding after rape, death threats." There are, of course, no equivalent headlines for any targeted people on the Left. I went looking for them, but I didn't really need to, since even a single, solitary, equivalent would be splashed in banner headlines across all news media for days, if not weeks. The reality is that the Trumpian "violence" that the authors claim exists was isolated events and boastful talk by Trump, nothing at all compared to anti-Trump violence during and after the campaign, and that any minor Trumpian "violence" was responsive to attacks on Trump, not the coordinated campaign of mass intimidation to which all Trump supporters were and are now subjected.

And, of course, let's not forget mass murderer wanna-be James Hodgkinson, flushed down the memory hole after he tried to assassinate the entire Republican congressional leadership in 2017. Do Levitsky and Ziblatt think with a straight face that if a conservative had tried to assassinate the entire Democratic congressional leadership, and nearly succeeded, we would not still now, every single day, be reminded multiple times in every major news outlet? If they think otherwise, they are liars or insane. Yet Hodgkinson's name and actions are never mentioned today. He's certainly not mentioned in this book. I just did a Google News search for his name. Of the top five results, the first is an article from the world-bestridding *Waterways Journal*, noting the Nola Propeller Club, a boat organization in New Orleans, honoring Steve Scalise (whose district they're in), which mentions Hodgkinson briefly as background to Scalise's life. The second is an article from the left-wing group Think Progress, about a recent domestic violence incident, claiming that domestic troubles explain most mass shootings, which in passing ascribes Hodgkinson's shooting to the same reason (without any evidence). The third and fifth are from conservative blogs. The

fourth is a news squib from the famous *Cosmetics Business* magazine, announcing that “FrankenChemie becomes Surfachem Deutschland,” and giving (a different) James Hodgkinson as the press contact. You get the idea, or rather, you get the reality, as opposed to Levitsky’s and Ziblatt’s fantasies.

That’s just one of the framework items that, if properly parsed, shows the opposite of the authors’ claims. I could do the same with the others—what is the entire “Resistance” but an attempt to “deny the legitimacy of political opponents?” But I want to shift the view back from America a bit, as the authors intermittently do as well, because this demand that “democracy” be equated with “Left hegemony” is a universal demand among the global ruling classes today, which must be a clue to something. Totally aside from Levitsky and Ziblatt, we can examine a recent lengthy article in the *Atlantic* by Anne Applebaum, a famous expert on the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, no leftist but definitely a member in good standing of the globalist elite. It is called “A Warning From Europe: The Worst Is Yet to Come.” We are not being warned of the Muslim invasion, or looming demographic disaster, or even of more mundane, say environmental, problems. No, the warning is that “Recent events in the United States follow a pattern Europeans know all too well.” That pattern is that formerly reliable contributors to Left hegemony have betrayed their masters and voted to support the Right, including, gasp, people that Applebaum knew, trusted, and even socialized with! The focus is on Poland; I have eviscerated the claims of “creeping authoritarianism” there elsewhere, and Applebaum adds nothing that counters my evisceration, though she does add the new claim that conservatives are hiring incompetents, but when leftists get a job, it is only ever on merit, so quality is going down. (To be fair, though, at least Applebaum admits she is personally biased by her husband’s expulsion from what is now the ruling party in Poland, the Law and Justice Party.) All Applebaum manages to demonstrate is that, once again, when democrats elected on the Right legally use the mechanisms of power to erode Left (or here, more properly, ex-Communist) dominance, they are accused of, through a neat inversion, being “anti-democratic,” a term which is conveniently never defined. Also never defined are other terms Applebaum uses for democratically elected European conservatives, such as “illiberal.” No, what we get is a long cry that vague horrors are

descending because democracy is being perverted by allowing people to choose for whom they wish to vote.

Buried within Applebaum's long article (longer than this review!) is an inadvertent admission of what is going on. Trying to tie the Law and Justice Party to Communism, another neat inversion, she says "[T]he Leninist one-party state is not a philosophy. It is a mechanism for holding power. It works because it clearly defines who gets to be the elite—the political elite, the cultural elite, the financial elite." All true. What she really means, though, is that the Left must always be the elite, and if conservatives somehow become the elite, all is lost. Hitler and apartheid-era South Africa also allowed the elite to not be dominated by the Left. And now, Poland and Hungary are just as bad. Don't forget, too—Hitler! And Mussolini!

What Applebaum never acknowledges is the real erosion of democracy in Europe. That is what's happening in places she doesn't mention at all. Such as Sweden, where a wave of raping and murdering invaders has deluged the country, invited in by the Left elites who hold all power in Sweden, and who have locked ranks across all aspects of society, from politics to academe to the media, to forbid not only any dissenting views, but any mention of any dissenting views. And when, as one could predict, the people revolt, the elites try any maneuver to suppress what the people want, such as doing anything necessary to exclude the Sweden Democrats from any role in government. Similar activities, which Levitsky and Ziblatt would doubtless praise as "gatekeeping," are occurring right now all across the continent, from Germany to France to Austria. Sure, it all may be a pathetic rear guard strategy in the long run, though who can say, but if what is being discussed is "anti-democratic" behavior, this would seem to exemplify it. Yet none of it is ever criticized by Levitsky, Ziblatt, Applebaum, or any of their ilk.

Back to *How Democracies Die*. The rest of the book goes on in the same vein, similar to one of those toys featuring a rubber ball tied with an elastic string to a paddle. It bounces away, but always returns to what the authors really want to thwack, Donald Trump. Moving away from their initial framework to qualitative musings, the authors send up burning sky lanterns in successive chapters, trying to warn America. Trump, and the Right generally, abuse "The Guardrails of Democracy," and "The Unwritten Rules of American Politics." They create "The

Unraveling.” The authors pick through American history, occasionally shaking a “naughty, naughty” finger at a long-dead Democrat, like Franklin Roosevelt, while shaking with rage that today across the globe the Right is allowed to exercise any of the power of the offices to which they are elected, because they then roll back the gains of the Left.

The total cluelessness goes on and on. We are told that the cause of the Spanish Civil War was that neither side “fully accepted one another as legitimate opponents.” They lacked “strong norms of mutual toleration.” The authors seem completely unaware that they themselves, throughout the book, never once treat Trump as a legitimate opponent, or any Republican who does not reliably toe the liberal line when demanded. They seem equally unaware that the entire political ecosystem of the Democratic Party is at this very moment organized around the claim that Trump is illegitimate. They can’t grasp that they show no toleration at all—their “toleration” means “join us or you’re illegitimate, and therefore intolerable.” Which, to be sure, has been the position of the Left for decades—but in a book claiming to find middle ground, it’s bizarre.

Levitsky and Ziblatt insist democracies need “institutional forbearance,” the opposite of which is to “exploit one’s institutional prerogatives in an unrestrained way.” Naturally, Trump and Republicans are guilty. For this proposition about the importance of forbearance they rely heavily on constitutional scholar Mark Tushnet. They don’t mention that Tushnet, in May of 2016, openly wrote “The culture wars are over; they lost, we won. . . . For liberals, the question now is how to deal with the losers in the culture wars. That’s mostly a question of tactics. My own judgment is that taking a hard line (‘You lost, live with it’) is better than trying to accommodate the losers, who—remember—defended, and are defending, positions that liberals regard as having no normative pull at all. Trying to be nice to the losers didn’t work well after the Civil War. . . . F—k Anthony Kennedy.” Sounds like forbearance to me! Actually, it sounds like I should load my gun.

All facts are cherry-picked to blame conservatives for everything. We are told that the filibuster is evil, and that until relatively recently, “highly qualified [judicial] nominees were invariably approved even when senators disagreed with them ideologically.” For this, the fact is adduced that Antonin Scalia was approved by the Senate in 1986 by the vote of 98 to 0. This wonderful system was destroyed, though. Not, however, by the

vicious campaign waged by the Democrats against Robert Bork in 1987, which has been duplicated and ramped up every time a Republican has nominated a conservative since, no doubt because nothing succeeds like success (and which has reached its logical end this week in the Brett Kavanaugh nomination). No, the name “Bork” is missing from this book; I looked for it high and low. Rather, what destroyed this system was the evil and unprecedented behavior of Republicans in refusing to confirm Merrick Garland in the waning days of the Obama administration, 2016. Again and again Levitsky and Ziblatt howl that Republicans “stole” a Supreme Court seat, smashing norms of tolerance, crashing into guardrails, and generally acting like Neanderthals who hate democracy. Not once are Democrats criticized for behavior in the modern nomination process, or that behavior even mentioned, nor do the authors note that the Republicans were merely implementing with Garland a process that had first been suggested by Vice President Joe Biden in 1992 when George H. W. Bush might have been able to make a nomination in the final days of his administration, the so-called Biden Rule. No, once again, only conservatives are responsible for everything bad.

Anyway, I could fill twenty pages with examples of lies and partial facts, all of which inevitably absolve the Left of any bad behavior. Every single thing bad about American politics is wholly the responsibility of the Right—that is, any Republican or conservative who dares to challenge the hegemony of the juggernaut of the Left. Richard Hofstadter is excavated, yet again, to claim that conservatives are haters who are paranoid racists with “status anxiety.” (Is that supposed to be an example of toleration?) I could fill another twenty pages with specific examples of behavior far, far worse, and far earlier in time, by the Left that Levitsky and Ziblatt ascribe solely to the Right. But I am tired, it is late, and you get the idea. This book is an atrocious, hate-filled rant, and emblematic of why we are, ourselves, on the path to the Spanish Civil War.

Let me pause for breath and note a non-political problem with this book. That’s that the authors don’t understand the actual structures of law beyond the ninth grade level (well, maybe the AP ninth grade level). For example, administrative agencies, those organs of Left domination of the entire federal government, are nowhere mentioned. You cannot understand how government actually works if you think Congress has much to say about anything. Naturally, the authors ignore the

long-standing norm of administrative agencies issuing regulations only to implement Congressional intent, not at the behest of the President to implement his policies, a norm destroyed by Bill Clinton (and a tool, as I have discussed elsewhere, only available to the Left, since administrative agencies are weaponized nests of leftists). Such examples of lack of understanding abound. Historical examples do too, as when the authors claim that King Richard II (died A.D. 1400) was bound only by non-binding custom, as opposed to law. They don't seem to realize that in England, even to a degree today, custom *is* law, something that was the bedrock principle of England for more than a thousand years. For the English medieval, statute law was something that barely existed. Richard's opponents weren't pleading for him to deign to observe non-binding norms or guardrails; they were demanding he obey the actual law. Nor did "the Supreme Court reject [Lincoln's] suspension of the writ of habeas corpus." You would think that in a book that revolves around the law, the authors would know about their subject, but their legal knowledge is about on a level with the rest of their thinking.

Finally, the authors do get around to offering a plan for "Saving Democracy," by which they mean shoving Republicans back into their box, or more accurately, coffin. True, they say, Republicans are "extremists" (a word as applied to Republicans I lost count of at sixteen; never once applied to anyone left of center). Yes, certainly, Democrats must not abandon identity politics; it is "a terrible idea [and] the wrong way to reduce polarization." It's racist to demand less racism! Instead, what we need to "save democracy" is a coalition, where a subset of conservatives, namely evangelicals and businesspeople, join the Left to keep the Left in power, while the Left agrees not to emphasize their ongoing and never-ending demands for more abortion and higher taxes (though, of course, in no way offers their new "allies" any actual concessions in actual policies). Blah, blah. For some reason, this kind of plan is beloved of leftists horrified at the erosion of the power of the Left—never calling for any actual compromise, just suggesting some lying lip service to hoodwink conservatives and soothe their stupid fears. The classic example of this is Joan Williams's 2017 *White Working Class*, but there are many, and I have never seen a counter-example, where any actual compromise, any at all, from the Left is offered. Fooling nobody, this is just a demand that enough conservatives betray their principles to

keep the Left in power in a democracy, because, don't you know, if the Left is no longer in power, it's not a democracy, so conservatives need to buck up to save our democracy. What piffle.

On one thing at least, though, I agree with Levitsky and Ziblatt: American democracy is in its death throes. Unlike them, I don't really care about democracy, and think democracy in the sense of universal suffrage is probably fortunately headed for the trash heap. Mine is a coherent, if (for now) minority, position. What's not a coherent position is saying you love democracy and want to save it, but only the type of democracy that results in power for people you agree with. I have no doubt that norms of mutual toleration and so forth have broken down, and that is unfortunate in a polity. Sure, it's really the fault of the Left, but whosoever's fault it is, it is no way to run a society, and no possible way to run a society. We see this today in the Kavanaugh nomination—obviously his accusers are liars, just as water is wet (*cui bono?*), but aside from that you can't run a functioning polity when reality, evidence, and truth are no longer allowed to have any role in politics at all. At some point, the talking is just going to be over.