

Book Review

HOW DEMOCRACIES DIE, BY STEVEN LEVITSKY AND DANIEL ZIBLATT, NEW YORK: CROWN, 2018.

Clay G. Wescott

Keeping democracy is hard work. There are four elements that political leaders have to get right:

- Accept the written and unwritten rules of the game, including allowing citizens to exercise their legal rights, accepting the legitimacy of elections and accepting defeat;
- Accept the legitimacy of opponents;
- Don't tolerate or encourage violent protest;
- Don't curtail the civil liberties of opponents, including the media.

When democracy dies, it's usually a slow and peaceful death, not the result of a military coup or another dramatic event. Leaders are typically elected and play by the rules for a while. Then they move to constitutional hardball tactics: playing by the letter of the rules but not by the spirit. Then they start breaking the rules and the other elements listed above. Often potential tyrants gain momentum by gaining the support of mainstream politicians that take advantage of the popularity of the tyrant and assume that the tyrant won't last for long. In some cases, tyrants beat the odds and stay on. In other cases, mainstream politicians recognize potential tyrants and keep them from gaining popularity. Belgium and Finland in the 1930s, and Austria in 2016 are examples where mainstream parties that disagreed on many policy issues got together because of their opposition to potential tyrants to defeat them.

The authors paint an intriguing picture of how democracy has played out in the USA. Political leaders scorned opponents for a few decades after independence and granted little slack or forbearance in keeping things civil. That changed for a while, then it went back to mudslinging in the run-up to the civil war. After the war, the hatred threatened to continue until the Republicans, mainly northern, agreed to stop federal pressure on the Democrats, mainly in the south, about civil rights. By this account, 100 years of civility in US politics was at the price of removing the civil rights of African Americans. In the few cases where politicians tried to violate the norms of civility: FDR trying to add justices to the Supreme Court, McCarthyism, Nixon's Watergate - the guard rails worked, and the norm-breaking stopped. For the most part, the business of government went on.

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Senators had the power to stop any bill using a filibuster but rarely did so. Courts could declare laws unconstitutional but rarely did. Presidents could rule by executive order but rarely did, except during wartime.

With the civil rights protests and laws of the 60s, the political landscape started to change. The Republican revolution, led by Gingrich, took on a cut-throat war for power. The approach was never to compromise, stop using Boy Scout words, and win at all costs in a slugfest. Gingrich and his team distributed hundreds of training audio tapes to supporters, using a similar technique used by Ayatollah Khomeini in Iran around the same time. They called Democrats pathetic, sick, bizarre, anti-flag, antifamily, and traitors. Starting in the late 1970s, the strategy gained momentum under Reagan and Bush and triumphed in the midterms of 1994. Another trend feeding this change was increasing polarization, as emotional issues of abortion, immigration, civil rights, and religion divided the country into opposing groups that interacted with each other less and less. This was the foundation that brought Trump and a credible threat to democracy today. Ironically, two crucial democratic reforms enabled this: the civil rights movement and laws of the 1960s that made Dems and Republicans less cooperative, and the open primaries where winners were guaranteed votes at the party conventions, thus weakening the guardrails that kept unsuitable candidates out of the race. The democratization of media also supported this trend. CSPAN, Fox News, Facebook, and Twitter took away the guard rail of news controlled by system-preserving moderates and allowed over-the-top rhetoric to go on air. Democrats fought back using similar tactics, successfully electing Obama and Biden and getting control of Congress sometimes. However, Republicans have proved to be the masters of this extreme hardball politics.

How can we fix this? Look at historical examples of countries that have won back their democracies: Germany after 1945 and Chile after 1978-85, for example. In the case of the USA, Republicans need to rebuild their party pushing extremism to the margins, with party leadership not so beholden to donors and clear messaging supporting individual freedom. Democrats need to support universal programs that help families with health, education, and other basic needs to achieve greater equality. Together you get greater freedom and equality, the American creed. Without these changes, we could keep going down the authoritarian rabbit hole.

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