

We don't know how democracies die

Since the election of Donald Trump, many have expressed their concern that the United States could slip into an authoritarian backslide. **Emily Holland** and **Hadas Aron** react to this claim, most notably asserted in Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt's new book, 'How Democracies Die', noting that the decline of one of the most stable, long-lasting democracies in the world can only be compared to the decline of other lasting, consolidated democracies, of which there are none.



Demonstration in Washington, 2017. Picture: [Ted Eytan](#), via: [\(CC BY-SA 2.0\)](#)

How Democracies Die, a book by Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt, has been garnering [much attention](#) in recent weeks. The book warns about the possibility of a slide into American authoritarianism and draws lessons from the collapse of democracies around the world. This new release is part of an ongoing debate on whether Donald Trump is a grave danger to American democracy. Levitsky and Ziblatt are noted political scientists, with decades of important scholarship on democratic and authoritarian regimes. While the global review of cases of democratic decline is thorough and accurate, the comparisons they draw with the American case is part of an increasingly hysterical discourse on American politics by liberal commentators. The cases Levitsky and Ziblatt employ shed little light on current developments in American politics, and they neglect to identify the crucial international shifts leading to democratic decline in vulnerable countries. The United States is a long-standing, consolidated democracy and is not in immediate danger of collapse. However, pointing out the global climate of democratic decline and accurately identifying its causes is an important task.

One consequence of the frenzied tone of the debate on the fate of American democracy is serious conflation of two separate phenomena: populism and regime type. Throughout the world, populism is on the rise, with leaders employing exclusionary and inflammatory demagoguery, and challenging liberal norms. Despite its illiberal inclination, populism is not incompatible with democracy. A populist political climate can be present in all regime types, and does not necessarily involve democratic decline. The countries that are most vulnerable to populist democratic decline are simply those that are most vulnerable to democratic decline in general. These include both [new democracies](#) and those that have suffered from [long-term instability](#). To point out the dangers facing the United States, Levitsky and Ziblatt discuss cases as varied as Russia, Poland, Turkey, and Nicaragua. Russia and Turkey have never been consolidated democracies; one could argue that they have never been democracies at all. The recent populist turn experienced in these states is simply another phase on a long path of non-democracy and instability. Poland is a relatively new democracy and, despite the rise of very radical populism, is still a democracy by any measure. It remains to be seen whether this will change in the following years, but classifying Poland as a non-democracy is simply inaccurate.

Of the cases Levitsky and Ziblatt use, the two most relevant are those of Venezuela and Sri Lanka. Both countries transitioned during the second wave of democratization in the post-World War II era and remained promising democracies for several decades. As they point out, both countries' slide into authoritarianism occurred legally within the framework of the democratic system. However, the context of democratic decline in both cases is completely irrelevant to comparison with the United States. Venezuela has been plagued with instability and coup attempts. In recent years the economy became completely dependent on hydrocarbons, and as a result, the fate of the country became tied to the global price of oil. Sri Lanka suffered from both the legacies of colonialism and protracted civil war. In addition, both countries are [highly corrupt](#).

In fact many of the cases of democratic backslide pointed out by Levitsky and Ziblatt are countries that suffer from endemic corruption. The corruption in states like Russia, Ukraine, Venezuela and others is not simply a flaw of the system, but rather it is the main feature of the political process itself. Corruption is the means by which politics and the economy are conducted and is probably one of the most stable institutions in these states. The rise of populism and the associated increase in crony capitalism has increased the opportunities for transnational corruption and is extremely damaging to democratic processes. But this type of corruption is fundamentally different from concerns over corruption in the American political system. To be sure, President Trump's refusal to [disentangle his business interests from his office](#) erodes trust in American institutions. Campaign finance is in need of profound reform, but there is no comparison between the over representation of capital in the American political system and capital being the political system. Endemic corruption is particularly dangerous to democracies because it leaves them vulnerable to backroom deals, a lack of transparency, and [capitulation to the highest bidder](#).

Looking at demagogue leaders and deeply polarized political systems can shed light on the current state of American politics. Certainly President Trump has [disrespect for the norms of democracy](#) and continues to foment polarizing sentiments. This political climate makes it difficult to make decisions through compromise as the Madisonian model intended. Trump is driving American politics away from liberal norms of tolerance, freedom of the press, and judicial independence. This is clearly troubling and deserves attention, but does not amount to democratic death. The United States is one of the most stable, long-lasting democracies in the world. As such it is not exceptional, but it is comparable in regards to democratic death only to other long-lasting, stable democracies. History does not provide us with examples of the death of long-lasting, stable democracies.

We don't know how consolidated democracies die, but we do know how empires and world systems [collapse](#). Empires collapse when power shifts in a different direction and they cannot adjust to new technological, economic, and military circumstances. It is unclear if we are in the midst of a fundamental shift in the world order, but we certainly should be paying attention to the signs. In the past decade, Russia has been playing an increasingly assertive role on the world stage. China has been expanding its diplomatic efforts throughout the globe, and is now an economic powerhouse, and a technological and environmental leader. The most notable arena for this global shift in power is the Syrian Civil War, where the United States has capitulated to Russian interests, reinforcing Russia's aggressive tactics. Most significantly, both Russia and China offer an alternative model of governance to Western liberal democracy. The model has already been emulated by multiple populist governments including Hungary, India, and Turkey. Here lies the great danger of the populist turn: the battleground is vulnerable democracies, and the United States is consciously neglecting its role as a defender of democracy. In this, President Trump continues President Obama's turn towards isolationism, and the consequences of the US withdrawal from world leadership are only now beginning to emerge. Levitsky and Ziblatt rightly identify the severe consequences of American isolationism, but their analysis fails to identify the problem.

This article gives the views of the authors and not those of Democratic Audit. It was first published on the LSE's [United States Politics and Policy](#) blog.

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