

# How Democracies Die Book Summary, by Steven Levitsky, Daniel Ziblatt

by Allen Cheng

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<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5v4NTtS2f5k>

## 1-Page Summary of How Democracies Die

### Overall Summary

How Democracies Die (Crown, 2018) is a nonfiction book by political scientists Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt. The authors take examples from history to explain how democracies die out in modern times. They argue that most democracies don't fall because of violent overthrow but due to the slow erosion of democratic norms and institutions. In doing so, they analyze threats facing the United States in this century through tools of political science and warn about the possible dangers we face as a nation.

The book is broken down into nine essays that explore how democracies can be undermined by autocratic leaders. The first few chapters detail how other countries were affected, and the final chapters explain why America is at risk of being undermined as well.

In Chapter 1, the authors describe how politicians have been in a situation where they align with an outsider candidate to help them gain support. However, this tactic backfires when that candidate gains more popularity than the politician and becomes more powerful. The best way for politicians to avoid this is by identifying potential autocrats (using their litmus test) and working with rivals from other parties despite short term political losses.

The authors discuss how democracy has kept extremist candidates at bay in the past. They note that many political parties have failed to keep such candidates out of power, and they analyze what makes a candidate an autocrat. The authors also talk about Donald Trump's candidacy for president as a test case for their theories on authoritarianism.

The authors argue that institutions and norms are critical to preserving democracy, but they can be worn down in small steps. Autocratic leaders may do this while claiming to improve democracy. For example, over time democratic courts may lose their power and therefore not keep autocratic leaders in check. Democracy is also protected by certain norms such as mutual toleration: the idea that all parties should tolerate each other's existence even if they disagree with one another. It's important for these ideas to remain intact because many tragic breakdowns of democracies were preceded by a loss of respect for basic principles like mutual toleration.

The authors begin by establishing the importance of norms in society. They note that as time goes on, they strengthen and help to ensure a functioning democracy. But then they discuss how these norms have weakened in recent years, with politicians referring to their rivals as traitorous and anti-American, obstructionism preventing judicial appointments from being made, and presidents using executive action to bypass Congress. The book also explores Trump's attempts at authoritarian tactics during his first year in office.

In Chapter 9 the authors outline a plan to reverse democratic decline in the United States. This is done by shoring up values of mutual toleration and institutional forbearance. To do so, they suggest that citizens form a coalition that supports democracy, as well as reforming the Republican Party to reduce outside donors' influence on it and its reliance on appealing to white nationalism. They also advocate reducing economic inequality among citizens with different political views.

## **Introduction**

In the introduction, Levitsky and Ziblatt note how odd it is to ask whether American democracy is under threat. They've spent years studying other countries that have risen to authoritarianism, so they know what signs are present.

Some democracies end dramatically, as happened in Chile in 1973. The military took control of the country and killed president Salvador Allende.

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