

The Destruction of American Democracy

A Review of How Democracies Die

[ALEX GASCOIGNE]

Few days in the year are notoriously associated with a single catastrophic event - January 6th being one of them. It is on this day that Americans saw the very stability of their nation hang in the balance, posing a threat to democracy itself. The observance of such constitutional decay has been the impassioned life-long pursuit of Harvard political science professors Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt, who paid heed to the direction taken within American politics. Through their research, spanning widespread geographical landscapes and time periods, they articulate the fundamental principles that facilitate authoritarian regimes. "We should worry when a politician 1) rejects, in words or action, the democratic rules of the game, 2) denies the legitimacy of opponents, 3) tolerates or encourages violence, or 4) indicates a willingness to curtail the civil liberties of opponents, including the media."¹ Upon outlining the rudimentary characteristics of such individuals, they found a remarkable resemblance to those of the forty-fifth president of the United States. Therefore, this report aims to support this very notion by relaying the events of January 6th - as it is on this day, Donald Trump fulfilled all the criteria of an autocratic leader.

Adding on to the philosophies of esteemed political scientist Juan Linz, Levitsky and Ziblatt outline the cardinal indications of potential authoritarian leadership. In doing so, they suggest that the events of January 6th show Trump satisfying the third requirement - tolerating or encouraging violence. While considerable debate can be made as to whether Trump encouraged violence, he certainly displayed tolerance. At a time of substantial influence, he displayed little impetus to lessen

¹ Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2018), 21-22.

the tensions brewing in Washington D. C. “For more than 187 deadly minutes, Trump watched his armed mob take over the Capitol and did nothing about it.”² When an observable threat was posed to both his political opponents and fellow GOP members (including that of his running-mate), he utterly failed to protect their civil liberties. It is this obnoxious protection of self-pride that not only humiliates the legitimacy of a nation but endangers its own citizens. One’s worries extend far beyond Trump’s general disregard for democratic happenings to the wellbeing of those he leads.

As this was all in the pursuit of denying the results of the 2020 presidential election, Trump (rather effectively) further executes the two preliminary requirements of an authoritarian. By denying the validity of the country’s electoral system, Donald Trump rejected the democratic norms and denied the legitimacy of his opposing political opponent to office. This incitement of widespread distrust for governmental processes was previously discernible in the 2016 presidential election: “A Politico/Morning Consult poll carried out in mid-October (2016) found that 41 percent of Americans, and 73 percent of Republicans, believed that the election could be stolen from Trump. In other words, three out of four Republicans were no longer certain that they were living under a democratic system with free elections.”³ This notion is particularly monumental, as the United States was founded on the grounds that underlie a basic respect for individual belief. Those Republicans who feared the loss of these basic democratic principles understandably felt inclined to take action - leading historian Douglas Rinkle to state: “No major presidential candidate had cast such doubt on the democratic system since 1860. Only in the run up to the Civil War did we see major politicians ‘delegitimizing the federal government.”⁴ It is this very delegitimization that was blatantly displayed on this infamous January day - beckoning one to contemplate the very stability of this “free” nation.

Most soberingly, it is this very concern of “freedom” that has run rampant in the hearts and minds of modern Americans. “All of us here today do not want to see our election victory stolen by emboldened radical-left Democrats, which is what they’re doing. And stolen by the fake news media. That’s what they’ve done and what they’re doing. We will never give up, we will never concede.”⁵ It is in this video, provided by PBS NewsHour, that Trump displays the final basic attribute of a totalitarian leader - the willingness to undermine the constitutional rights of his opponents (including that of the media). In his January 6th speech, he villainises the “radical” left and poses in a position of victimhood suffered at the

2 Center for American Progress, “January 6 Hearing Day 8: 187 Minutes of Trump’s Inaction,” YouTube, August 10, 2022, 0:04 to 0:15, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YGT-MCLxecA>.

3 Levitsky and Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die*, 61-62.

4 Levitsky and Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die*, 61.

5 PBSNewsHour, “Watch Live: Trump Speaks as Congress Prepared to Count Electoral College Votes in Biden Win,” YouTube, January 6, 2021, 43:26 to 43:42, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pa9sT4efsqY>.

hands of journalists. Whilst this combative disposition did not directly summon an insurrection, one must contextualise this address in unity with the assembly of people who listened on this day. “Many Republicans latched on to the saying that whereas Trump’s critics took him literally but not seriously, his supporters took him seriously but not literally. His campaign rhetoric, in this view, was ‘mere words.’”⁶ It is this exact belief that brings danger to a figurehead, such as the forty-fifth president of the United States. Authoritarianism alone is not powerful enough for destruction - however, with an abiding following, it must be feared.

Therefore, the events of January 6th provide substantial evidence to validate the philosophies proposed by professors Levitsky and Ziblatt. In modern times, we have been presented with an individual that poses a threat to the very internal security of the nation. Whilst these Harvard academics give warning of the creation of such a societal agitator - the danger is now clear. Though humorous to observe an extravagant businessman turn himself into a political agitator - that is where amusement abruptly ends. The ideological divide of the United States has only grown more gaping, to the point of violence and distrust. To a point where epistemic bubbles have evolved into epistemic chambers - where opposing views are greatly undermined. Thus, one must not purely assess the principles discussed, but take action to prevent its further growth. As it was on this day, that the American people saw the greatest danger to democracy in the twenty-first century...their own president.

6 Levitsky and Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die*, 60.