

REVIEW ARTICLE

Democracy under pressure: historical lessons for current challenges?

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Abstract

A review of three books shows that the crisis of democracy literature is exceptionally diverse. It ranges from overconfident postulations and proposals without systematic arguments and comparative analysis on the one hand to novel theorizing and balanced accounts, including cautious use of historical evidence, on the other hand. Accordingly, there is much variation in how much the different contributions succeed in drawing lessons from historical developments to better understand and reduce contemporary challenges.

Key words: authoritarianism; conflict; democracy; polarization; populism

Theo Horesh (2020). *The Fascism This Time and the Global Future of Democracy*. Boulder: Cosmopolis Press.

Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt (2018). *How Democracies Die: What History Reveals about Our Future*. New York: Crown.

Adam Przeworski (2019). *Crisis of Democracy*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

The US presidential election on 3 November 2020 was accompanied by a political farce, including unsubstantiated accusations and attempts of obstructing electoral alternation, which hardly anyone would have imagined possible a decade ago. Donald Trump, the sitting president, would not recognize his loss and in the following months, he sought to delegitimize and overturn the results. As we all know, this attempt culminated with the storm on the Congress on 6 January 2021.

Trump and his stern supporters did not succeed as the courts could not be convinced about the alleged problems and the officials responsible for election administration insisted – correctly – that the elections had been free and fair. Nonetheless, Trump continues to argue that the election was fraudulent, and he has kept a strong position within his party. Surveys also indicate that he is still very popular among a majority of Republican voters, who tend to believe his claims about the election being stolen.

While the turbulent period after the elections took many by surprise, these events in the world's oldest, representative democracy lend further support to an already dominant discourse, stating that democracy in severe crisis in the United States as well as in other parts of the world.

Democratic backsliding and sometimes outright breakdown has surely taken place in (too) many countries in recent decades, including Nicaragua, Turkey, India, Hungary, and Mali. Meanwhile, right-wing populist have taken advantage of low levels of public trust in government to secure electoral successes, and on the international scene China and Russia have directly or indirectly undermined democratic progress at home and abroad. So, it is no wonder that there is a lot of pessimism on behalf of democracy. This is illustrated by the publication of a string

of influential books in recent decades, which propose that democracy is challenged and try to uncover causes and solutions. Among many others, they include *The Twilight of Democracy* (Applebaum, 2020), *Post-Democracy after the Crisis* (Crouch, 2020), *The People vs. Democracy* (Mounk, 2018), and *Ill Winds* (Diamond, 2019).

Parts of this alarmist literature attempt to draw lessons from historical developments to better understand and reduce contemporary challenges. Two of the most prominent examples are Madeleine Albright's (2018) *Fascism: A Warning* and Timothy Snyder's (2017) *On Tyranny: Twenty Lessons from the Twentieth Century*. It is easy to sympathize with their main message: we must learn from the past if we want to protect democracy, even though history is unlikely to repeat itself directly. However, from my point of view, that of a scholar of comparative politics, these accounts suffer from five shortcomings.

First, they are characterized by biased case selection as they almost exclusively draw lessons from historical cases of democratic breakdown ('failures') and thus do not pay sufficient attention to cases of democratic survival ('successes'). This means that they provide a skewed picture of the past *and* that they do not enlist important variation in the outcome to assess the impact of different explanatory factors (cf. Geddes, 1990).

Second, the analogies made between historical periods, such as the interwar years, and our time neglect, or at least understate, substantial differences in the context, such as increasing levels of socio-economic development, longer democratic legacies, more institutionalized international cooperation, and the lack of strong ideological alternatives to democracy. This is crucial because when the context is different, we would also expect the political dynamics to be different (Cornell *et al.*, 2020).

Third, these studies are overly occupied with explaining the crisis of democracy in a single country, the United States, and to provide suggestions for how to save it. Despite the fact that this is an important case, it also has to be recognized that it is a special case. One thing is the many differences vis-à-vis developing countries. However, even in comparison with other Western democracies, the political culture, demographic developments, economic inequality, the institutional set-up, as well as the status as super power stand out. It has even been argued that the United States is the rich world's most unrepresentative country. Hence, it is questionable to what degree the historical experiences of, say, interwar Germany, Italy, and the USSR, are useful to achieve a better understanding of democratic crisis in the United States and whether insights gained from detailed analyses of this case travel to other settings today (cf. Lipset, 1996).

Fourth, the authors tend to exaggerate the recent democratic downturn and to confuse support for 'illiberal policies' with fascism and democratic backsliding. They use different standards when comparing historical and current developments. A protracted, large-scale democratic recession is taken for given even though the rollback is rather recent and small if we look at long-term trends. Moreover, it is evident that, historically, strong forces on both the left and the right were willing to use violence and overt repression of democratic rights to achieve their political goals. But today, many populist parties and their followers are not directly anti-democratic. They are anti-elitist, and the right-wing populists typically advocate for nativist policies that counter immigration and globalization and reduce the influence of international organizations. They use harsh rhetoric against their opponents and if they get the chance, they tend to tilt the political playing field in their own favor by challenging established democratic norms. However, they mostly support free elections as the best tool to fill political positions, pledge loyalty to the constitution, and do not engage in fist fights with political opponents in the streets (Weyland, 2021).

Fifth, the assessment of empirical evidence is rather shallow and does not follow state-of-the-art academic criteria. While this might be too much to ask from general interest books, it does mean their conclusions often rest on a shaky foundation.

In this review essay, I use these critical points to guide my evaluation of three books, which all discuss the current crisis in the light of historical examples: *How Democracies Die: What History Reveals about Our Future* by Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt, *Crisis of Democracy* by Adam Przeworski, and *The Fascism This Time and the Global Future of Democracy* by Theo Horesh.

The Fascism This Time

This book discusses current affairs in the context of longer historical developments. More particularly, Horesh proposes that a new wave of fascism is flooding the world under the guise of right-wing populism. Many historical and current cases are mentioned in passing, but the main focus is on the United States after the election of Donald Trump as president. He is bluntly described as ‘a fascist leader, with a fascist following, who has taken over an increasingly fascist party, while presiding over a largely fascist administration’ (12).

Horesh is well aware that this description might be considered a case of ahistorical conceptual stretching by what he calls ‘obsessive-compulsive disciplinarians’, and he acknowledges many differences in the manifestations of early and current fascism. For example, present-day fascism is said to be less strident and disciplined and more disorderly and absurd (12). While the original fascism channeled the energies of vigorous youths, projected the image of an orderly march into the future, and sought to unite the nation through rituals and symbols, the new variant exploits resentments of marginalized retirees, and it is backward-looking, incontinent, sloppy, discordant, and buffoonish (23–24).

Nonetheless, Horesh insists on using the term for Adolf Hitler’s Germany and Benito Mussolini’s Italy as well as for a very diverse set of contemporary political leaders, including Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil, Roderigo Duterte in the Philippines, Recep Erdogan in Turkey, Nicolás Maduro in Venezuela, Victor Orban in Hungary, Xi Jinping in China, Bashar al-Assad in Syria, Vladimir Putin in Russia, Narendra Modi in India, and Benjamin Netanyahu in Israel. Fascism is thus used as an umbrella concept that captures illiberal leaders, their parties, and many of their policies. This conceptual stretching is done with open eyes based on the argument that the underuse and neglect of the concept of fascism today is a greater cause for concern than overuse. All it takes to be deemed fascist by Horesh is a combination of populism and nationalism, where outsiders are blamed for economic and cultural evils, attempts are made to undermine the rights of minorities and political opponents, and a nihilistic worldview has replaced trust in science and rationality (28–29).

Fascism This Time highlights multiple factors, which have caused the depressing flourishing of this phenomenon, including increases in information, immigration, inequality, and globalization. These developments have in common that they represent major challenges for people around the globe that trigger negative impulses. Inspired by Hannah Arendt and Erich Fromm, Horesh’s psychological–political model links these conditions to growing confusion and dissatisfaction, which nourish fascist movements. As a result, charismatic strongmen are requested to set things right even if it means restrictions on time-honored freedoms. In the words of Horesh: ‘In an age of proliferating choices and no fixed roles, it should be no surprise that conservatives the world over have turned to fascism. Conservatives fear democracy because democracy sets them free’ (121).

There might well be some truth to this line of reasoning. Unfortunately, it is unclear what Horesh means by democracy, and he does little to back his position with systematic theoretical reflections and careful empirical analysis. His book addresses many interesting and important issues. But rather than nuanced engagement with arguments from different perspectives and thick descriptions, it offers polemic illustrated by thin pieces of evidence. To be fair, Horesh explicitly states that his goal is not to provide academic assessments. However, why should we believe his firm conclusions if the premises rest on feet of clay? Even if this is a general interest book and not an academic treatise, the plausibility of the conclusions still rests on the quality of the arguments and evidence.

It is hardly comforting that numerous statements in the book seem to be highly sweeping and questionable if not blatantly incorrect. For example, ‘Elections can sometimes be used ... to oust a tyrant from power, as in the case of Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe’ (112), ‘the world [from an anthroposophical point of view] is probably in worse shape today than at any time since the Second World War’ (231), ‘Everywhere, it seems the liberal and tolerant, the compassionate and

sincere, are losing, while racists and nationalists rise to the top' (73). Mugabe notoriously lost power after a military coup, people are generally much better off today than 75 years ago (see, e.g. Pinker, 2018; Nordberg, 2020), and although right-wing populist has gained strength in several countries, there are many exceptions to the (overly) gloomy picture painted by Horesh (Meyer, 2022).

But what about solutions? According to Horesh, saving democracy requires that liberals, socialists, and cosmopolitans unite against fascism as they did in popular front coalitions in the 1930s (195). Moreover, democrats need to form an international alliance against fascism.

A band between progressive forces might indeed be effective for a short time. However, it is key insight from the interwar years that successful alliances of democratic forces normally had to include (moderate) conservatives – who in this period would sometimes lean in an anti-democratic direction – in order to tip the balance in favor of democracy for a longer period (Ziblatt, 2017). Moreover, it appears both unrealistic and potentially counterproductive to let nothing but idealism determine foreign policy. This is clear despite the fact that Russia's invasion of Ukraine has recently led to more unity among western democracies.

How Democracies Die

Also Levitsky and Ziblatt's book is motivated by – and centers on – political developments in the United States. It quickly becomes obvious to the reader that both authors have solid backgrounds in comparative politics with expert knowledge of Latin American and European political history, respectively. The book's point of departure is the fact that the typical democratic breakdown is no longer abrupt and at the hands of men with guns (i.e. the military). Instead, elected presidents and prime ministers subvert democratic institutions in piecemeal and deceptive ways: 'The tragic paradox of the electoral route to authoritarianism is that democracy's assassins use the very institutions of democracy – gradually, subtly, and even legally – to kill it' (8).

The authors suggest that the key to understanding why these processes unfold is the behavior of elites and political parties. More particularly, they emphasize two mechanisms. The first is mutual toleration (i.e. the extent to which competing parties accept each other as legitimate rivals) and forbearance (i.e. the extent to which political leaders exercise restraint regarding the use of institutional powers). Formal institutions thus need support from informal norms in order to safeguard democracy (8). This focus on proximate conditions – the strategies and behaviors of key actors – fits the goal of the book: to draw lessons from other democracies in crisis, historical and contemporary, that can guide the strategies of ordinary citizens and, first and foremost, political leaders and parties, who would like to defend their democracy.

The focus on elite agency is well-known in the democratization literature (see, e.g. Linz, 1978; O'Donnell and Schmitter, 1986; Capoccia, 2005; Higley and Burton, 2006). Inspired by the seminal work of Juan Linz, Levitsky and Ziblatt develop four warning signs that can be used as a 'litmus test' to identify authoritarian tendencies and wannabe autocrats: (1) rejection of (or lack of commitment to) democratic rules of the game, such as questioning constitutional rules and credible election results; (2) denial of the legitimacy of political opponents by referring to them as culprits who are enemies of the people/nation; (3) toleration or encouragement of violence, and (4) readiness to curtail civil liberties of opponents, including media.

Levitsky and Ziblatt use this framework to assess Trump, and they convincingly demonstrate that he can be ticked off on all four boxes, even before his inauguration (61–67). The erosion of democratic norms in the United States did not begin with Trump in 2016, though. According to *How Democracies Die*, the process took off decades earlier. It originated in the 1980s when new patterns of racial inclusion stimulated tougher competition between the major parties, and GOP Newt Gingrich played a prominent and unflattering role in this change. Levitsky and Ziblatt also blame the Democratic Party for failing to support basic democratic norms, but they emphasize that the Republican Party moved first and that it has undertaken the most radical negative change regarding mutual toleration as well as forbearance.

This trend is correlated with the polarization in the American electorate and among members of US Congress (see Iyengar *et al.*, 2019; PEW, 2022). While *How Democracies Die* does not offer systematic analysis of the relationship, Levitsky and Ziblatt do suggest that polarization can harm democratic norms: ‘when societies grow so deeply divided that parties become wedded to incompatible worldviews, and especially when their members are so socially segregated that they rarely interact, stable partisan rivalries give way to perceptions of mutual threat. As mutual toleration disappears, politicians grow tempted to abandon forbearance and try to win at all costs’ (116).

Another important change concerns traditional party gatekeepers. Historically, these elites have hindered the nomination of extremist outsiders, but changes to the media landscape in the form of cable news and social media and a large increase in the influx of outside money have undermined the power of these gatekeepers (56). The book also emphasizes economic crisis – with reference to Weimar Germany – as a factor that has the potential to weaken democratic norms via grievances. This situation is especially dangerous when the traditional parties lack legitimacy (15–16).

Interestingly, Levitsky and Ziblatt do not consider the crisis of US democracy as part of a worldwide wave of democratic regression. Even though a series of countries have indeed experienced downturns, others have improved their performance, meaning that the number of democracies has been relatively steady since 2005 (205). There is much to worry about in many democracies in Western Europe, but so far the democratic norms have remained intact. Elsewhere, they do emphasize that a limited focus on democracy promotion in US foreign policy (under the Trump administration) and the fact that the declining status of US democracy a role model might have a negative impact on prospects for democracy.

What are the solutions in the US case? Oppositional groups seeking to preserve democracy have to use the institutional channels that exist but should give in to temptations about using undemocratic methods. Do *not* fight fire with fire! Moreover, broad prodemocratic forces need to be build, and in order to be effective, historical examples tell us that they have to ‘bring together groups with dissimilar – even opposing – views on many issues’ (217–219). Another option is cut the roots of polarization, that is, ‘racial and religious realignment and growing economic inequality’ (222). However, this is easier said than done in a system with many veto powers and deep cleavages.

This brings me to my biggest concern about the theoretical framework. It is crisp and the explanatory leverage of the two democratic norms seems high. Nonetheless, *How Democracies Die* tends to disregard the constraints (and opportunities) imposed by structures and institutions. Levitsky and Ziblatt argue that elite behaviors do not just reflect deeper conditions; interests, ideas, and incentives, which can be manipulated in the short term, matter independently. In general, their perspective is open to the same kind of criticism that previous actor-centered accounts of democratic development have faced, namely, that actor-centered explanations are near-tautological and the outcomes tend to be highly correlated with background conditions (see Kitschelt, 2003; Møller and Skaaning, 2013: Chs. 9, 11). Maybe additional analyses, based on more systematic use of relevant data, could provide more robust support for the conclusions. This would have been hard – if not impossible – to achieve without costs regarding reader-friendliness and thus the broad audience it deserves. However, it would have been helpful to include at least a few descriptive graphs to depict developments in key variables and to show to what extent the American trends are different from what we have seen in other countries.

Crisis of Democracy

The aim of Przeworski’s book is to assess ‘whether the current situation is in some ways threatening and whether there are signs that the traditional representative institutions are being affected’ (10). The baseline is a minimalist conception of democracy, and similar to Levitsky and Ziblatt he emphasizes that ‘[t]he specter that haunts us today ... is ... a gradual almost imperceptible,

erosion of democratic institutions and norms, subversion of democracy by stealth' (13). The point of departure is healthy skepticism about the highly pessimistic tone in current debates about the state of democracy and the many suggestions for how to solve the problems.

Crisis of Democracy is divided into three parts, concerning the past, the presence, and the future, respectively. In the first part, Przeworski carries out descriptive statistical analyses and case studies of two democratic breakdowns (Weimar Germany and Chile in the 1960s and early 1970s) and two crisis-ridden democracies that survived (France in the 1950s and 1960s and the United States in the 1970s). He uses the analyses to identify structural and institutional factors that influence the risk of democratic breakdown in times of crisis.

The analyses identify some visible signals of when democracies are in crisis: established parties suddenly lose support, popular trust in and support for democratic institutions, parties, and political leaders declines, overt conflict between political opponents over democratic institutions, the lack of capacity to maintain public order without repression (12). These situations and trends have typically been driven by economic challenges (low income levels, low or negative growth, and unequal distribution of resources), limited experience with electoral alternations in government, intense political and social divisions, and political institutions that do not allow governments to act decisively without allowing them to abuse their power to undermine contestation (78).

Przeworski duly acknowledges potential limitations of his perspective, that is, the attempt to learn from historical experiences: we cannot be sure that past is a suitable guide for the presence and the future. However, as a reader one is left with the feeling that more reflections about why this might be the case are warranted. Przeworski does list a different ideological landscape where openly antidemocratic parties are absent and the military's disappearance from the political scene. But what contextual factors could have changed the historical relationships? One factor that could be a game changer is technological developments (see, e.g. Boix, 2019), which, for example, have had a huge impact on the availability and consumption of information. But Przeworski is virtually silent about this issue.

In the second part of the book, he takes a closer look at current signs and potential causes, including the stability of traditional party systems, right-wing populism, political attitudes and behavior of ordinary citizens, and the economy. It is worth mentioning that Przeworski, unlike most of his previous research, does little to adjudicate between different signals and explanations.

These overviews in the first and second parts constitute the background for the final part of *Crisis of Democracy*, where Przeworski takes a step back and reflects upon democracy as a means of peaceful conflict resolution and prospects for democracy in the United States and beyond. To him, it is particularly worrying that an increasing share of citizens do not think that living conditions will continue to improve in generational terms and that traditional political parties are facing a lot of instability and declining support.

Paraphrasing Winston Churchill's famous statement, Przeworski still believes that democracy 'is the least bad way of organizing our lives as a collectivity' (199), but he concludes that 'I am moderately pessimistic about the future. I do not think that the very survival of democracy is at stake in most countries, but I do not see what would get us out of the current discontent' (206). Institutional reforms would be too little, too late, and other suggestions also seem stillborn. It is emphasized, however, that voters ought to be consistent if they care about democracy. This implies that they should be willing to reject violations of democratic norms and institutions – also when the result is policies not in line with their ideological preferences.

The reluctance to provide solutions is both refreshing and disappointing at the same time. Refreshing because more scholars, pundits, and public intellectuals should acknowledge their limitations in terms of predictions and provision of effective solutions; disappointing because one would expect someone with his sharpness and knowledge to be able to take a stronger position – or at least point out areas where more research is needed to increase our understanding and inform our choices.

Table 1. Presence of shortcomings associated with the ‘historical lessons’ literature

	Lessons merely based on cases of democratic erosion	Insufficient attention to differences in context	Primary focus on the United States	Conceptual stretching and exaggeration	Shallow empirical analysis
<i>Fascism This Time</i>	X	X	X	X	X
<i>How Democracies Die</i>		(X)	X		(X)
<i>Crisis of Democracy</i>					(X)

Conclusion

In [Table 1](#), I have tried to summarize whether the different books share the shortcomings, which I associated with some of their forerunners in the introduction. In my view, *Fascism This Time* commits all the ‘sins’ listed in the overview. While this book offers some interesting thoughts and catchy one-liners, scholars interested in democratic developments will not gain much from reading it.

How Democracies Die is heavily focused on the United States, and the treatment of evidence, including the diachronic and synchronic comparisons, could be more robust. However, the book does provide a novel theoretical framework focusing on interesting proximate conditions. It is based on historical insights, and it is well-suited to structure systematic assessments. Moreover, the discussion of political developments in the main case of interest is very rich. I therefore recommend comparativists interested in democratic backsliding to find inspiration in this book.

Finally, my positive evaluation of *Crisis of Democracy* reflects that it is written by a scholar who has spent the major part of his life thinking about both substantial and methodological issues related to democratic development. The analyses are less robust and the conclusions less assertive compared to we are used to see from Przeworski’s hand. But the conceptual discussions are razor sharp, and the use of the relevant literature and historical facts is impressive. Evidently, Przeworski has, like Horesh and Levitsky/Ziblatt, attempted to reach a relatively broad audience with this book. Whether he succeeds is questionable. Unfortunately, many of his enlightening discussions are, after all, mainly of interests to other scholars, who should definitely read it. Przeworski’s ability ‘to formulate questions, entertain possibilities, and invite the reader to think together’ (xii) is outstanding.

Taking a step back, my review of the three books has shown that the crisis of democracy literature is exceptionally diverse. It ranges from overconfident postulations and proposals without systematic arguments and comparative analysis on the one hand to novel theorizing and balanced accounts, including cautious use of historical evidence, on the other hand. Many democracies, including the United States, are indeed facing serious challenges. Nonetheless, there is much variation across cases both historically and today, and there has been a tendency to exaggerate the magnitude of global democratic erosion. In general, public discourse is characterized by whole or partial myths that tend to nurture a general sense of democratic crisis (see Møller and Skaaning, 2022). Many more books are about to be written on the topic. Hopefully they will avoid the pitfalls identified above, so we improve our understanding about how to safeguard democracy in times of crisis.

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