

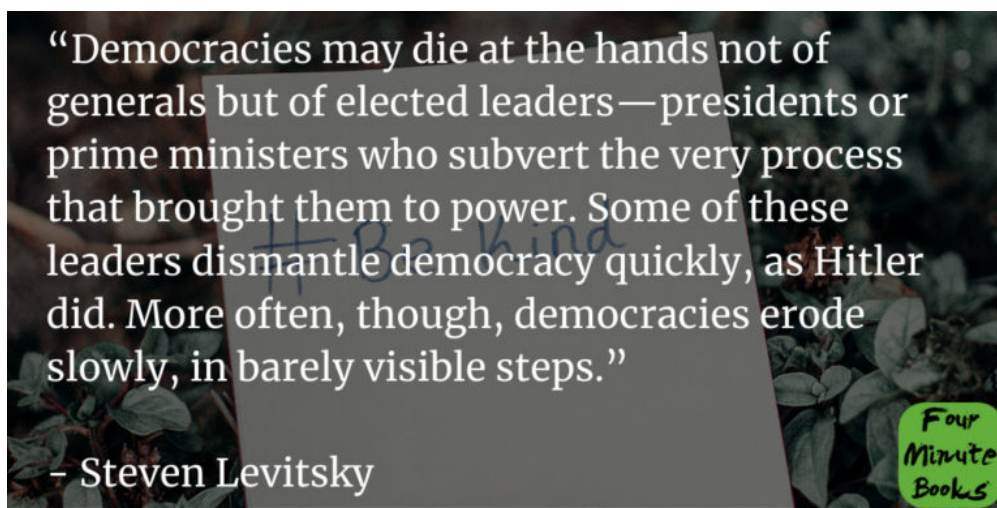
How Democracies Die Summary

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1-Sentence-Summary: *How Democracies Die* explores the foundational ideas of democracy by looking at historical events, especially in Latin America, that show how democracies have failed, whether it can happen again, and how to protect democracy from threats like mutual toleration, inequality, and political parties.

Read in: 4 minutes

Favorite quote from the author:



When Donald Trump became president of the United States, many Americans wondered something they hadn't before: Could our democracy be in danger? For two Harvard professors who have studied the breakdown of democracies across the world, the answer was a resounding yes.

Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt open our eyes to what really happens when a democratic system falls in their book *How Democracies Die*. You might think that democracy ends in some big coup or revolution but the truth in today's world is quite the opposite. They end with a slow, steady weakening of institutions and a gradual shift in political norms.

They believe Donald Trump's election is a symptom of a political system heading in the wrong direction. And if we're not careful, we could see the end of our prized democracy. They show the startling parallels between the US and other failed democracies and offer some solutions to avoid disaster hopefully.

Here's the book summarized in just 3 lessons:

1. A democracy needs solid gatekeepers to protect it.

2. With the arrival of Donald Trump in the political arena, the future of our democracy depends on our leadership.
3. We can resist authoritarianism by holding fast to democratic norms.

Let's jump right into these ideas!

Lesson 1: Strong gatekeepers are required to keep democracy safe.

You might not think of a political party as a protector of democracy, but actually, this is exactly what they do. Parties have the power to accept candidates. That means they essentially decide who they allow to come into mainstream politics.

But while it's their job to gate-keep, this doesn't mean they don't fail at this every once in a while. One example is when Venezuelan populist dictator Hugo Chavez rose to power.

Chavez was already known to be a threat to democracy. Not long before, he led a failed takeover of the Democratic Action Party and was arrested for treason. But this didn't stop him from being a popular public figure. Especially when president Rafael Caldera endorsed and eventually released him. It made him both a hero and a real political contender.

Soon he won the 1998 election by a landslide and dismantled the democratic system that Venezuela had put in place. Some of the ways he did this were by packing the supreme court with sycophants, silencing independent media, and exiling or imprisoning his rivals.

This is just one example of why gatekeepers need to keep extremists out of the public view.

One of the ways political parties can do this is by quickly rejecting extremists, so they don't become normalized. The Swedish Conservative Party did when they ousted fascist sympathizers in 1933. It cost them party votes, but the most important thing to them was protecting democracy by rejecting any anti-democratic influence.

Another way to gate-keep is by avoiding doing anything that the public could see as normalizing extremism. German Conservatives made this mistake in the 1930s when they allowed joint rallies that included Hitler supporters, essentially normalizing their extremism.

Lesson 2: Trump bypassed the gatekeepers and began to tear down democratic institutions.

So how was Trump able to get past the gatekeeping system? He had two important assets on his side: fame and money.

Those two things allowed him to enter politics without needing the Republican establishment's approval. Not only could he pay for his own campaign, but he's also a widely recognized person. And it only helped that he was constantly in the news.

Soon Republicans began to approve of him, and he basically had it made. But, along the way, there were many red flags, such as how he questioned the democratic process by saying the election would be rigged. He also encouraged violence and attempted to restrict the free press by suing journalists.

All of these red flags and the gatekeepers of the Republican Party still failed to do anything to stop him. Not long after moving into the White House, things only got worse.

Trump attempted to silence his referees. **The first of these was FBI director James Comey, who Trump invited to dinner to ask for his allegiance reportedly.** A president having any personal time with the FBI director was unheard of, let alone requesting their allegiance. Needless to say, he promptly fired Comey.

He also made an effort to sideline people who opposed him, such as certain media outlets that he dubbed “fake news.”

Then came his attempts to change the rules of the game. One of the ways he did this was by creating the Presidential Advisory Commission on Election Integrity, whose goal was to make stricter voter ID laws that targeted minorities who were more likely to vote Democrat. These were just a few of the ways he undermined democracy from the start.

Lesson 3: If we hold fast to our democratic norms, we have a chance at resisting authoritarianism.

Maintaining a democracy isn't easy by any means. Especially when you consider the diversity in political beliefs across the United States. But there are some things you can do to help protect it.

One of these is resisting the urge to fight fire with fire. When Trump was elected in 2016, many defeated Democrats wanted to get right back to the dirty tricks the Trump campaign had used.

But doing this can actually backfire. Not only can it just make the fighting more extreme if both sides reach outside the realm of democracy, but actions like this will only increase polarization by scaring off moderate voters.

Instead, fighting extremism should always be done within the limits of democracy, which means there must be a compromise.

For example, Republicans could make a hard stance against white nationalism and be more open to foreign trade agreements. Democrats could address poverty in different ways than just means-tested benefits, where poor people receive payouts based on their income level. Many middle-class voters dislike these because they feel it only benefits the poor and hurts them.

It would also help if political activists focused on cooperation rather than polarization. When we don't suggest realistic alternatives, it only hurts the democratic principle of mutual toleration. Protesters could include a broader range of races and religions and focus on finding compromise rather than polarization.

How Democracies Die Review

How Democracies Die shares some very interesting and important ideas. I felt that it was held back by an agenda, however. Not that I necessarily agreed or disagreed with that agenda, but I think people's opinions can blind them sometimes.

Who would I recommend the How Democracies Die summary to?

The 19-year-old who is majoring in political science, the 65-year-old that's curious about the current threats to democracy, and anyone who wants to find ways to protect governments that are ruled by the people and not by dictators.