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How we got here: Daniel Ziblatt on U.S.'s unique democratic backsliding

Jordan Wilkie/WITF



Daniel Ziblatt, who co-wrote *How Democracies Die* and *Tyranny of the Minority* with Steven Levitsky, chats with WITF reporter Jordan Wilkie



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< <https://www.witf.io/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/demoday2024-blur-1.png> >

This article is part of U.S. Democracy Day, a nationwide collaborative on Sept. 15, the International Day of Democracy, in which news organizations cover how democracy works and the threats it faces. To learn more, visit usdemocracyday.org < <http://usdemocracyday.org/> >.

Democracy in the United States is backsliding, according to Freedom House, which [ranks democracies all over the world](https://freedomhouse.org/country/united-states/freedom-world/2023) < <https://freedomhouse.org/country/united-states/freedom-world/2023> >. The analysis measures political rights, like effective government and freedom to associate, and civil rights, like equal treatment of all segments of the population.

The U.S. is defying the usual metrics. The country has one of the highest GDPs of any democracy in the world. It's a relatively old democracy, even considering the country only systematically allowed Black people to vote after the 1965 Voting Rights Act.

So why is the United States unique among developed democracies in the rate and severity at which it is becoming less democratic?

Earlier this year, Harvard professors Daniel Ziblatt and Steven Levitsky released a new book, *Tyranny of the Minority* < <https://revista.drclas.harvard.edu/a-review-of-tyranny-of-the-minority-why-american-democracy->

[reached-the-breaking-point/](#), tackling this very issue. In it, they apply lessons about democracy from across the centuries and around the world to our current political moment to explain why our political parties are so far apart on basic tenets of democratic governance.

Ziblatt visited Harrisburg as part of a [speaker series hosted by the nonprofit democracyFirst < https://unitedtopreserve.org/>](#), and we asked him to visit our studio for a wide-ranging discussion on the current state of democracy in the U.S.

Here's a condensed version of Ziblatt's conversation with Wilkie democracy beat reporter Jordan Wilkie, with quotes lightly edited for clarity. You can listen to or read the full interview [here](#).

Wilkie: Start at the beginning. Our elections are free and fair. We're about to have a presidential election. So what's the problem?

Ziblatt: First of all, I would agree with you that there are real sources of resilience and strength in the American political system.

That said, something pretty striking has happened. Ten years ago, the U.S. had a [Freedom House] score of 93 out of 100, which put us on par with Germany, Great Britain, Canada. Today, we have a score of 84, which is the same score that Romania has and it's two points lower than Argentina.

When you have a contested transition of power in 2021, when you have violent threats against election workers on a pretty regular basis, when there are efforts to make it more difficult to vote, then you reach a point where Freedom House gives you a score lower than Argentina.

We really see clearly that if you have politicians who don't accept election results, win or lose, that's a sign that democracy is in trouble. And if you have politicians engaging in violent rhetoric, threatening violence against their opponents, that's also a warning sign in the past that's often led to violence.

Wilkie: What actually happens to people in a backsliding democracy? Are there real-world effects, or is this just an academic concern?

Ziblatt: The thing about living in a democracy versus a non-democratic system that we sometimes underappreciate is that democracy is the best system in the world for protecting basic freedoms that most people value, like free speech, freedom of organization, freedom to associate with who you want.

When a democracy gets into trouble, some of those basic freedoms come under assault.

Democracy is the only kind of political system in the world where you can peacefully get rid of leaders that you don't like. We take that for granted, but without that, we would be in real trouble. One of the things that is sort of distinctive about the period in which we're living is that in the past, democracies came under assault through often military coups and so on during the Cold War.

Much more common around the world today is when politicians get elected in many fragile democracies, they seem to have democratic legitimacy, but once in office, they begin to attack the political system in a way that makes it harder and harder to vote them out of office.

Wilkie: You have a chapter in your book that says Republicans have abandoned democracy. Why do you see such a stark difference between Republican and Democratic parties?

Ziblatt: I'm a political scientist. My goal is to analyze the world as I see it.

One of the challenges of studying democracy in the U. S. today is that when you make judgments, it's easy to misinterpret it as simply being partisan. So I want to be really clear about this because it's a really serious accusation to make about one of the two major parties.

There's a book written back in the 1970s by a great Spanish political scientist, Juan Linz, written long before our current moment of polarization. He proposed a set of criteria that we elaborate on in our book to allow citizens to distinguish between politicians who accept the basic democratic rules of the game and politicians who don't.

Number one. In order to be a politician who's committed to the democratic order, loyal to the democratic order, you have to accept election results, win or lose, assuming the elections are free and fair.

Number two. You have to, really absolutely, not use violence or threats of violence to try to gain power or to hold on to power. Democracy at its core is about peaceful transitions of power.

The third criteria is a little bit more subtle. A politician who's committed to democracy has to separate him or herself from those within their own camp who engage in those first two kinds of behaviors. It's absolutely critical.

When we say that the Republican Party has begun to turn away from democracy, we use those as our criteria.

I'm really not talking about voters here. I'm really talking about politicians.

Voters can vote for whoever they want, but the behavior of politicians is the key issue. And there's too many politicians who are not behaving according to these core cardinal rules of democracy.



FILE – House Freedom Caucus Chair Rep. Scott Perry, R-Pa., speaks as he joins members of the conservative faction at a press event outside the Capitol in Washington, Sept. 12, 2023. A federal judge is ordering Republican Rep. Scott Perry of Pennsylvania to turn over more than 1,600 texts and emails to FBI agents investigating efforts to keep President Donald Trump in office after his 2020 election loss and illegally block the transfer of power to Democrat Joe Biden. The ruling, late Monday, came more than a year after Perry's personal cellphone was seized by federal authorities. (AP Photo/J. Scott Applewhite, File)

Wilkie: In Pennsylvania, as in several swing states that had narrow victories for President Joe Biden, Republican state legislators took various actions to challenge the election results. That included signing letters to Congress asking them not to certify or to delay, pending investigations, Biden's victory on January 6th, 2021.

Those legislators were democratically elected. They had their power because of democracy, and they wrote their letters to another democratic body, Congress. What about that is concerning?

Ziblatt: Our system does allow for challenging the results of elections. We have a legal process, a judicial process, which reviews those. I don't think it's necessarily problematic to say, "I think there's something wrong with this election," if you have some reason to be concerned about it.

But at the end of the day, there's a process for making the decisions about this. Dozens of courts reviewed these cases and in every single instance decided that there was nothing illicit happening in the election.

One can exhaust one's legal options, absolutely. But once the judges have accepted the election results, then that's the end of the story.

People can continue to challenge the results of elections. But if there is no evidence of it, it ultimately undermines the legitimacy of elections.

A democracy can't survive with only one political party accepting the results of elections. Playing by the rules needs two parties. I hope we live in a world in which Democrats can come to power and win elections and Republicans accept it and Republicans could come to power and Democrats accept it. That's what we need in order to have a viable democracy.



Sam Dunklau / WITF

Data security company Envoy Sage president Steve Lehr stands near Fulton County's voting equipment before a Jan. 14, 2022 inspection. Requested by Senate Republicans seeking to investigate the 2020 election, the inspection did not proceed as planned after the Pa. Supreme Court ordered a halt.

Wilkie: Doing things like writing those letters, then, are technically legal and allowable, but they're just not good for a democracy. Is that it?

Ziblatt: Democracies get into trouble when politicians don't act with self restraint. There's a lot of things one can do legally. The president can pardon whoever he or she wants at any point for any reason. The president can rule entirely by executive order. This is all perfectly legal.

The way our system has survived for so long is that politicians act with forbearance. They don't push to the max in every instance.

So if there's no clear evidence of fraud, then you shouldn't make these accusations just because you have the right to do it.

Wilkie: No democracy more than 50 years old has failed. No democracy as rich as the U.S. has ever broken down. As a country, we're special. Why should we be concerned?

Ziblatt: Age and wealth don't automatically inoculate you from problems. Democracy's not a machine that just runs on its own.

Age protects democracy because over time, politicians and citizens develop a set of democratic norms and practices and habits that help protect the democracy when facing challenges. Democracy is coming to challenge all the time. Those norms and habits are the things that are supposed to protect us.

The concerning thing is that those norms and habits have come under assault.

When politicians engage in the kind of rhetoric that they are engaging in in the United States, this is usually a sign of a democracy that's deconsolidating. I don't necessarily think that we're going to have an outright democratic collapse in the next several years, but unless we, unless citizens, actively work against it and vote for politicians of the right or the left who are committed to democracy, then democracy will get into trouble.

If each election — every four years, even every two years — feels like a potential national emergency where everything is at stake, then what this means is that we can't address the real pressing issues that face our society: climate change, inequality, possibility of epidemics, national security risks, because we're not talking about that stuff.

We're sitting here talking about these basic rules. We can't even get to the stuff of politics. What this means is that people's lives are not as rewarding. There's not as much opportunity for people to have rewarding jobs, to have our children be raised where they can go play in the park and feel safe.

That's why I think it's important to have this conversation.

Wilkie: U.S. democratic backsliding has happened in the last 10 years. Ten years ago is about when Donald Trump began running for the presidency. Is our backsliding a single-politician phenomenon? Or is fixing what ails us going to take longer than another election cycle, just four years?

Ziblatt: We have to think short term and long term. We're not going to solve all of these problems before November 2024. But there are things that can be done in the short run, like the building of broad coalitions of citizens and politicians who are committed to democracy.

In other words, not voting for candidates who represent a threat to democracy, whether that threat comes from the right or the left. Citizens have to make that judgment about which kinds of parties and candidates are questioning elections, threatening violence.

These longer term issues are going to require more work.

In the past, it took more than a generation of women working very, very hard to mobilize politicians to get them to finally grant women the right to vote. Hopefully it won't require that now, but we need to be inspired by those who preceded us.

If we get through this election, then we can begin to do the work of repairing our democracy.

In order for our democracy to be stable, we need to have two political parties that are diverse, that represent different policy views, but they have to accept the rules of the game. I think the only way you get there is through a party losing and realizing that its extreme agenda is just not popular with voters.



Republican presidential nominee former President Donald Trump looks at supporters after a town hall with FOX News host Sean Hannity at the New Holland Arena, Wednesday, Sept. 4, 2024, in Harrisburg, Pa. (AP Photo/Evan Vucci)

Wilkie: Other countries have been reforming their democratic institutions, but the U.S. has stalled out, without many reforms since the 1980s. What happens when our work to improve our democracy stalls out?

Ziblatt: We are in a system of high polarization, of low citizen engagement and threats of democratic backsliding.

I think one of the reasons is that the Republican Party isn't reforming itself in the way that it should if it wanted to win majorities, because it actually doesn't need to win majorities to win national power.

Donald Trump won the presidency in 2016 with 46 percent of the vote. He then lost the popular vote in 2020 and it's possible he wins the 2024 election without winning the popular vote. So knowing that he doesn't have to win a full majority of Americans allows the Republican Party to double down on its extremism.

If you had a national election where the president had to win a national popular majority, the incentives to break from the extremism of the party would be much greater. I think some of these institutional reforms, like the John Lewis Voting Rights Act, would make competition more viable.

There's collective wisdom in the crowd. The more people who participate, the better off we all are as a society.

Wilkie: Even in a flawed system, is it worth voting?

Ziblatt: Absolutely. At a minimum, everybody should.

If you're concerned about the kind of nature of our politics, the one thing you can do is vote.

If you're worried about tyranny, if you're worried about the powerful elite and media interests or business interests,

there is this incredible power that the power of the majority holds within it.

My single individual vote doesn't matter. But, the one thing that can put a stop to abuse and tyranny is the power of the masses. There's real power in that.

I think people need to grasp it.

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