

Inquiring Minds topic – 5 April 2019

Adair Heath, Moderator

How Democracies Die

I have edited the original longer interview. I hope my edited version will spark some thoughtful discussion on the state of our US Democracy. The interviewer's questions can serve as our guide for discussion. - *Adair Heath*

A conversation with Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt, authors of HOW DEMOCRACIES DIE

You write about the challenge that democracies face in the dual imperatives of choosing a popular candidate and keeping out extremist demagogues. How should American parties balance those goals?

This is an important issue. We are fervent advocates of democracy, but we don't think parties have to select their candidates in any particular way for a political system to be democratic. In most of the world's established democracies, including the United States for most of its history, party insiders play a big role in choosing candidates. The so-called smoke-filled room of the previous century, while at first glance offensive to democratic sensibilities, had a virtue: It actually did a remarkably good job of keeping extremist demagogues off party tickets. Whether in America's past or in other stable democracies today, party leaders are risk averse: They seek candidates who will win, and this usually means keeping demagogues far from power. Of course, the smoke-filled room has reason to be criticized for being an elite affair. This is a recurring tension at the heart of democracy: Sustaining a democracy may require keeping the selection of candidates—before democratic competition begins—partly in the hands of party leaders. This may be a somewhat controversial view, but we believe the long-term viability of democracy may require combining popular input with party leaders' gatekeeping when it comes to the selection of party candidates.

What about our society has changed that makes party gatekeepers no longer effective?

A perfect storm of factors combined to dramatically open up the nomination process,

and the effects have not always been great. Even with the post-1972 primary system, many analysts talked of an “invisible primary” in which party leaders still exerted lots of influence on the selection of candidates. This insider-dominated system still favored party insiders—from Walter Mondale to John Kerry to George W. Bush—who usually won against outsider challengers. But over the past several years, this system has been in decline. Party gatekeepers have become shells of what they once were for two main reasons. One is a dramatic increase in the availability of outside money, something that loosened party leaders’ grip on power in both parties. The other was the explosion of alternative media, particularly cable news and social media. Now, with enough money and media access, candidates can skirt the invisible primary. The Republican Party, even more than the Democrats, has been deeply affected by both of these trends, leaving it ineffective as a gatekeeper. The chance that an outsider would someday make it through to win the nomination has always been there; in 2016, the conditions were in place to make it happen.

The U.S. Constitution is one of the most revered and imitated documents in modern history. Isn’t our democracy safe as long as it remains in place?

We have to remember something critically important about our Constitution: At the end of the day, it is only a piece of paper. It is not self-enforcing. As with all written rules, the Constitution’s effectiveness has worked well in our history not just because of the words written into parchment, but also because politicians and citizens have usually acted in ways that support the words. There has been a lot of talk about norms and norm breaking since Donald Trump came into office. But for all the talk, commentators often have difficulty focusing on which norms matter the most for our democracy. We think two norms in particular carry a lot of weight in the American political system. The first is “mutual toleration”—not treating political rivals as existential enemies, but rather as fellow loyal Americans. The second is “forbearance,” or restraint—by which we mean that leaders don’t “play politics to the max,” using all the legal power you have a right to in order to destroy your rivals. Think of this example: From a strictly legal perspective, it is amazingly easy to impeach a president, requiring only a simple majority in the House. To remove a president requires a two-thirds vote in the Senate. But this action has been rare in American politics, which is a good thing: If every time we disagreed with a president we tried to impeach him, American democracy wouldn’t have lasted as long as it has. But the rarity of the use of the impeachment tool is not a function of the Constitution, or because the Constitution makes it difficult; it is because American politicians have long held a norm to act with forbearance in this domain—to use this incredibly powerful weapon only under exceptional circumstances. There are times when impeachment might be called for. But given the relatively low constitutional threshold, the only thing preventing impeachment from becoming a regular and highly disruptive tool of politics—which, by the way, it has become in other countries—

is not the written Constitution but a shared norm of restraint. What frightens us today is that there are signs that forbearance is decaying.

We have become accustomed to reading about democratic decline in other parts of the world, but you argue that America experienced its own form of democratic collapse in the post–Civil War Reconstruction Era. Can you explain?

The United States first experienced a democratic breakdown of sorts during the Civil War. Our democracy—imperfect as it was at the time—was, in effect, entirely suspended in a third of the country during the war, and after the war many Southern states were placed under military rule. Following Reconstruction, the U.S. South underwent one of the most dramatic instances of de-democratization in history. After the 1867 Reconstruction Act and the Fifteenth Amendment barred suffrage restrictions based on race, African Americans suddenly constituted a majority or near-majority of the voting population throughout most of the former Confederacy. African Americans registered and voted in large numbers. In 1880, for example, black turnout surpassed 65 percent in much of the South. But over the next two decades, every Southern state adopted laws—such as poll taxes and literacy requirements—aimed at disenfranchising African Americans. By 1912, black turnout in the South had plummeted to under 2 percent. African Americans were thoroughly disenfranchised, an extraordinarily antidemocratic act. And because black citizens were overwhelmingly Republican, their disenfranchisement wiped out the Republicans' electoral base in the South, which allowed the Democrats to establish single-party rule. In other words, the U.S. South descended into authoritarianism in the late nineteenth century—and remained authoritarian for nearly a century.

You argue that racial and religious realignment and growing economic inequality are the major forces driving the extreme political polarization in America. Can you explain?

Scholars have shown a long-standing relationship—dating back to the nineteenth century—between income inequality and polarization. The dramatic increase in inequality since the 1970s, together with the absence of serious campaign finance regulation, is clearly one of the factors pulling the Republicans to the right. But a dramatic change has also taken place in our party system. The American electorate has grown much more diverse since the 1960s: African Americans finally gained full voting rights in the South, and immigration expanded America's Latino and Asian American communities. So the nonwhite share of the electorate grew dramatically. Most of these new voters became Democrats, while Southern whites fled the Democratic Party for the Republicans. At the same time, evangelical Christians flocked to the GOP starting in the 1980s. So whereas half a century ago the Democrats and Republicans were both white and Protestant, the parties are now divided by race and religion. This is a

big deal. Partisan differences aren't focused just on taxes and spending anymore; they now encompass our identities and culture. And, crucially, the Republican Party has become the political home for white Protestants—a majority ethnic group in decline. This is the underlying source of the party's radicalization. White Protestants, who long sat atop the American social pyramid, are losing their dominant status in the face of growing diversity and racial equality. Many feel that their country is being taken away from them, which, together with disappearing economic opportunities, fuels the anger and extremism we see in movements such as the Tea Party. This, and the unraveling of the party leadership's control over its own base, has tragically pushed the GOP toward extremism.

What do you see as the greatest danger facing American democracy today?

Our greatest fear is a crisis such as a major war or terrorist attack, as crises create openings for authoritarians. Security crises almost always boost public support for presidents, often dramatically, and institutional checks—from Congress or the judiciary—tend to be temporarily suspended. That leaves presidents a lot of room to maneuver—look at FDR after Pearl Harbor, or Bush after 9/11. Unlike autocrats from Hitler to Putin to Erdogan, our previous presidents have exercised considerable restraint and have *not* so fully exploited crises for authoritarian ends. Trump has never displayed that kind of restraint. We fear that if President Trump were to confront a major war or terrorist attack, he would take advantage of it to attack opponents and restrict civil liberties.

What actions can ordinary Americans take to help fix our democratic crisis?

The answer is not for Democrats to “fight like Republicans,” as some commentators have suggested; that would only reinforce and accelerate the decline of our democratic norms. The opposition to Trump must fight vigorously, but in defense of rights and institutions. Peaceful protest is useful, but, ultimately, the most important channels are likely to be institutional—the courts, state governments, and, of course, elections. So mobilizing the vote in 2018 and 2020 is essential.

But there is something else that ordinary Americans must do: Try to build broader coalitions in defense of democracy. To ensure democracy's survival, we must build alliances that extend beyond traditional party lines. For liberals, this means forging perhaps uncomfortable alliances—with right-of-center businesspeople, evangelical Christians, and dissident conservatives, among others. A blue-state coalition is simply not enough. This is often hard work, and it involves compromise. But an awful lot is at stake.