Episode_134__How_Democracies_Die.mp3

Dominik: [00:00:00] Hi everyone! Dominik here, the show's producer. In a minute you'll hear our regularly scheduled episode but I want to quickly let you know that we are putting together a special episode on immigration policy and family separations. You'll see that in your feed later this week so make sure to check back for it. OK. Now onto today's show.

Avi Green: [00:00:29] Alarm bells have been rung. Across the world, democracy is threatened. From Venezuela to Turkey, from Hungary to the Philippines powerful leaders are rewriting their country's norms and laws to secure power at the expense of their citizens. And now here in America some see similar warning signs. So what can we learn from these threats from other countries? And what's behind this worldwide trend away from democracy? Hi I'm Avi Greena and this is the Scholars Strategy Network's podcast No J argon. Each week we discuss an American policy problem with one of the nation's top researchers without jargon. This week I spoke to Steven Levitsky. He's a Professor of Government at Harvard University and co-author with fellow professor Daniel Ziblatt of the new book, How Democracies Die. Steven, thanks so much for coming on the show.

Steven Levitsky: [00:01:18] Thanks for having me.

Avi Green: [00:01:20] In How Democracies Die, you make the point that in the past democracies may have died more frequently from a military coup whereas these days they die a slow sort of subtle death. Can you tell me an example of a democracy that died one of these new kinds of deaths?

Steven Levitsky: [00:01:40] Sure. A majority of democratic breakdowns or cases of democratic backsliding since the end of the Cold War have occurred precisely in this way. It's been rather then at the hands of generals or military juntas, it's been at the hands of elected leaders themselves -- elected presidents or prime ministers. So examples over the last couple of decades, Hugo Chavez in Venezuela was a freely elected president who over the course of a decade or so used democratic institutions, used elections, used plebiscites to undermine the democratic game. The AKP government, the Erdogan government in Turkey is a similar example. An elected government, initially governed fairly democratically but over time changed the rules to weaken the opposition and to advantage the ruling party and a third case maybe a little less authoritarian is Hungary, in the government of Viktor Orban. All of these are freely elected governments that use the institution of democracy to weaken democracy.

Avi Green: [00:02:42] Why the change? I mean, why don't we see military coups anymore or as frequently anymore?

Steven Levitsky: [00:02:49] That's a good question. I think the primary reason is that the electoral democracy has gained much greater legitimacy across the world than it had during parts of the 20th century. During the early part of the 20th century both communism and fascism had a lot of currency. These are regimes that don't entail elections at all. But certainly since the end of the Cold War, since the 1980s, really electoral democracy in some respects is not quite the only game in town but certainly the predominant game in town so that citizens in countries across the world -- former Soviet Union, Asia, Africa demand elections. They demand at least the basics of sort of the constitutional architecture of democracy. It's possible as we lay out in the book to undermine democracy in subtle ways but just canceling elections, eliminating the the the basics of electoral competition is really really hard to do.

Avi Green: [00:03:46] Right. It's kind of that the notion of elections has gained enough buy-in that

they might choose to abolish competition or effective competition, but they'll keep the ritual. How big of a democracy recession, so to speak, are we in? I mean, how many democracies are threatened? How widespread of a problem is this?

Steven Levitsky: [00:04:09] There are debates about that. And actually I'm on the side of the less pessimistic side of that debate. I think there are real reasons to worry. There are real threats to democracy greater threats to democracy today in the world than there were 15 20 years ago that has a lot to do with the declining power and prestige of Western liberal democracies. The crisis of Europe, the decline in prestige and influence of the United States, and of course the rise in power and influence of China, Russia to a lesser degree, Iran. So the geopolitical balance of power has changed quite a bit since the 1990s when the U.S. and Europe were really the dominant military, economic, ideological force in the globe. So the challenges are there. I actually think that the number of democratic breakdowns and number of democracies in the world hasn't changed much in the last 10 years. So there was a dramatic expansion in the number of democracies in the world starting in the late 1970s continuing all the way through about the year 2005. At that point it leveled off and some people, some observers look at that leveling off and call it a dn emocratic recession. The kind of a look at the glass that's half full and kind of interpret it as a glass that is emptying out. I don't see evidence of a growing number of democratic breakdowns. We see there are a number of breakdowns or backsliding cases like Venezuela, Turkey, Hungary, as we mentioned. Thailand is another case. These have gotten a lot of attention, rightly so and they stand out in our minds. What we pay less attention to is a roughly equal number of democratic advancers in the world in the last decade which have more or less resulted in basically zero net change.

Avi Green: [00:05:51] Let's look at the other side of that argument and particularly I want to ask what's going on now? What makes the last five or six years different from 1990 to 2010?

Steven Levitsky: [00:06:04] First of all, it's not clear at all that the challenges to democracy in the developing world are the same as the challenges to democracy in the advanced industrial countries. I think there is a challenge to democracies in Europe, in the United States and that there are some general causes. There are a couple. One is rising levels of of inequality here in the United States. It is more marked than in Western Europe. But we by, by most measures have higher levels of income inequality than at any time since before the Great Depression and we've got a sort of the bottom 40% or so of our society has not seen any change, any improvement in living standards since the 1970s and similar, though not as marked patterns in Western Europe. But the second thing and the thing that more directly affects democracy that's very important is the fact that center-left and center-right parties both in throughout Europe and in the United States have converged in the last 25 years or so, are on two major issues: globalization and tolerance of immigration. Mainstream parties have essentially converged and that may be a good thing for many people. In fact, in the United States there's pretty good evidence that both of those things have majority support. The majority of Americans continue to support free trade, continue to support openness openness to globalization, and continue to be fairly favorable and open to immigration. Little less so on the immigration front in Western Europe.

Avi Green: [00:07:37] But if there is a group of people who disagree with both of those,.

Steven Levitsky: [00:07:40] Right.

Avi Green: [00:07:40] Then they're shut out of both the center-left and the center-right.

Steven Levitsky: [00:07:42] That's where I'm going. There is a minority. Maybe it's 35. Maybe it's 40% of the electorate in the United States that's not a big fan of those two things. Maybe pretty opposed to one or both those things and they can't find anyone in the party system to represent

them. And this is to varying degrees in a different ways true in Western Europe as well. In Western Europe you have more partisan options and you see the emergence of anti-immigrant parties that are that are appealing to this vote. But the frustration that a sector of the electorate has with the political establishment, with politicians, with the parties I think is rooted in the fact that on these two big issues you have a real convergence among establishment parties.

Avi Green: [00:08:25] So the book is How Democracies Die. Take me take me to the bad side. You know, tell me about the process -- the actual process by which a democracy dies.

Steven Levitsky: [00:08:33] While there are many ways to die. There is no single disease, there's no single path to democratic death. And we've -- as we alluded to earlier, democracies die today in ways that are quite a bit different from from the old days and the United States is a -- is a very very different case. It has, first of all, much stronger democratic institutions than any other case that we've been discussing. In fact, much stronger democratic institutions than any other democratic breakdown in history. We are one of the oldest democracies in the world, at least if you look at our constitutional structure and one of the richest democracies in the world. Two stubborn facts that we can take out of social science research is that old democracies are quite robust and that rich democracies are quite robust. Democracies aren't like people. They don't -- they don't become more prone to breakdown or to death as they get old and being rich buys you more life in democracy but not not not for humans. So there are lots of reasons to expect that U.S. democracy should be quite secure. All that's to say that there -- the lessons that we learn about democratic breakdown in Venezuela and Turkey and Chile, in interwar-Europe are not easily translatable to to the United States. They don't provide easy clues into how, why, or when democracy would die in the United States.

Avi Green: [00:09:54] I would like to sort of ask your take on the the interaction between ethnicity, race and democratic breakdown, willingness to accept authoritarianism, skepticism towards democracy and all that sort of thing, because you know one of the big questions here is, can American democracy survive? Can it survive American demography as we become a multiracial democracy? While some people might not want to keep the democracy if that means it's going to change who's -- who's on top.

Steven Levitsky: [00:10:24] Taking a half a step back. One source of democratic instability -- one challenge to democracy that you can find across many cases, going back to interwar-Europe, Venezuela, Chile for sure in the 1970s, much of South America in the 60s, 70s, is intense partisan polarization when two parties are so far apart that they come to view one another not just as people they disagree with and not just the people that they dislike but and not even only as enemies but as an existential threat. When one side begins to perceive that a victory by the other side poses an existential threat, then they begin to find ways to break the rules, to violate the rules, to employ any means necessary to prevent the other side from coming to power. That usually is trouble for democracy. And it was -- it was trouble for democracy or for our early republic in the in the 1790s and early 1800s. It was obviously trouble for the republic in the 1850s and 60s and there's -- there are some signs that that kind of trouble is brewing today and has exactly to do with what you pointed to earlier. The stability of U.S. democracy and you could -- you might even put democracy in quotation marks. The stability of our constitutional system prior to 1965 or between the end of Reconstruction in the 1880s and the late 20th century had a lot to do with racial exclusion. It had a lot to do with the fact that both political parties were white Christian parties and both of them agreed to -- to set aside or to abandon the agenda of racial equality. We only achieve racial equality or we only really take serious steps towards racial equality after abandoning it in Reconstruction in the 1960s. And that begins a process of partisan realignment that has gotten us to polarization today. Three big changes have happened to our party system since the 1960s. One of them is the civil rights agenda which leads to a massive migration of southern whites from the Democratic Party to

the Republican Party and leads to the enfranchisement of African-Americans who become Democrats overwhelmingly. Secondly, a large go process of immigration happens parallel with this but contributes to the ethnic diversification of our society. Those immigrants and their kids become largely Democrats. And third, under Reagan, evangelical Christians who had been evenly distributed between the two parties become overwhelmingly Republican. So whereas both parties back in the late 1970s were overwhelmingly white and Christian -- white Christians were evenly distributed across the two parties. Now, the Republicans are essentially the party of white Christians. They are almost exclusively white and Christian and the Democrats are essentially the party of everybody else. So we have a racial, religious, and cultural cleavage between our two parties that's unprecedented really since that since the Civil War era. The challenge in the United States is we're and this is something that no democracy that I know of has ever successfully transitioned through and you were alluding to it earlier, is that we're going through this process of the loss of majority status of a dominant ethnic group, right? This was a country that 50 or 60 years ago, all of our political, social, cultural, economic hierarchies were dominated -- were in the hands of of of white Christians. And not only are white Christians losing their electoral majority but they're losing their dominant status across society. The loss of a majority and dominant status is a -- is a difficult thing. Many Republican voters believe or have perceived themselves to be losing the country that they grew up in. They view in one way or another that the country that they grew up in is being taken away from them and that is in our view a source of intense radicalization and polarization. That's what's driving ultimately in our view the polarization in this country.

Avi Green: [00:14:35] What would you prescribe for people who are concerned about democratic breakdown in the United States? What would you recommend that they do?

[00:14:45] My co-author Daniel likes to -- likes to frame it this way. We don't know whether we are currently suffering something akin to global warming -- climate change or an earthquake, in the sense that there are some people who depict the problem, who perceive the problem as a problem that's going to get worse and worse and worse and they require really radical solutions to resolve. Another way of looking at it though is that this is -- this is an earthquake. This is a short term problem but a problem that will end. For example, if the Republican Party at some point will not be able to win elections nationally based on white nationalist appeals. We don't know for how long it can use white nationalism to win elections or to be electorally competitive. We don't know whether that's 5 years, 10 years, 20 years but we're pretty sure that at some point that strategy is not going to be viable and the Republican Party will have to become a more diverse party.

Avi Green: [00:15:42] And at that point when the incentive shifts, then the action will shift.

Steven Levitsky: [00:15:46] Right, and the polarization will be reduced. And so if that's the case if if if this is more an earthquake and less global climate change then it's a matter of preserving our institutions and sort of riding out the crisis. If it's a problem that's going to get worse and worse then then the solutions are different and I should say, Daniel and I are closer to this sort of earthquake view. We think that this is a crisis that will eventually ride out but that we have to make sure that we don't wreck our institutions in the process. So that those who who want to defend our democratic institutions, those who oppose and fear the sort of authoritarian impulses of the current government ought to be working hard to defend our institutions and our norms. There is a debate now among progressives about whether Democrats ought to be learning how to fight like Republicans. In fact a book just came out by a political scientist, David Ferris, whose title is It's Time to Fight Dirty, who argues that Democrats are essentially suffering a series of sucker punches because Republicans have begun to abandon democratic norms and to play dirty and Democrats have continued to play by the old rules and you know, maybe that the starkest example, the best example is the 2016 decision of the Republican Senate not to allow President Obama to even try to fill a vacancy in the Supreme Court created by Justice Scalia's death. That was dirty politics, is what

Daniel and I like to call constitutional hardball and the debate now is should Democrats do the same thing if they win control of the Senate and there's a vacancy in the next couple of years. Our belief, our position in that debate is that playing by any means necessary almost guarantees that this cycle, this spiraling of norm erosion accelerates. Having studied democracy in crisis also in the world in Latin America, in Western Europe -- those spirals rarely end well. It's very difficult to get off once you get on. Democrats ought to be adhering to democratic norms, ought to be responding with norm adhering or norm defending behavior. It's very, very dangerous to respond with constitutional hardball to respond by playing dirty.

Avi Green: [00:18:04] Professor Levitsky, thank you so much for coming on No Jargon.

Steven Levitsky: [00:18:07] Sure. Thanks for having me. It's great.

Avi Green: [00:18:10] And thanks for listening. For more on Professor Levitsky's research, check out the show notes at scholars.org/nojargon. As always, No Jargon is the podcast of the Scholars Strategy Network, a nationwide association of over 1000 researchers in 46 states. The producers of our show are Shira Rascoe and Dominic Doemer. Our sound engineer is JM Baez. If you like the show, please subscribe and rate us on Apple Podcasts or wherever you get your podcast.