Saving Democracy: What can we do?

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Overview

The purpose of this dialogue is to answer the question: What can we do to save democracy? The focus of discussion is our role as citizens—what is required of us for a democracy to work. What we can do requires an understanding of what power we possess and how we can exercise it.

The United States of America is a democratic republic that derives its power from the consent of its citizens. Citizens exercise their power by electing leaders to represent and act on their interests, or to replace leaders who do not. An individual citizen with only one vote has power only when it is part of a majority. For a democracy to succeed a majority of its citizens must be committed to, and defend, the principles on which it was founded.

This is the democracy challenge; citizen vigilance in defense of core democratic principles and practices, and a commitment to the common good. The pursuit of wealth and power must not eclipse our commitment to core values and to one another. This discussion guide is divided into three parts:

1. The Political Problem: What are the democratic norms we should use to hold our elected representatives accountable to their oath of office?
2. We the People: Are we up to it?: How do we find shared values and common cause with those whose beliefs we may not agree with?
3. The Democracy Problem: What are the essential citizen behaviors necessary for a functioning democracy, and do citizens have to change to do their part?

# Part I: The Political Problem

Doctors Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt are professors of government at Harvard University. They have spent years researching how democracies fail. They found that in the 20th century most democracies were destroyed by democratically elected officials. In their book, *How Democracies Die*, they apply their research to current conditions in America.

“We feel dread,” they wrote, “as do so many other Americans even as we try to reassure ourselves that *things can’t really be that bad here*.” However, “Over the past two years, we have watched politicians say and do things that are unprecedented in the United States—but that we recognize as having been the precursors of democratic crisis in other places.”1

They examine how extreme partisan division has polarized America caused in part by the corruption of the democratic norms that have sustained our democracy for much of its history. have “There are … reasons for alarm,” they warn, “extreme polarization can kill democracies.”3  “When partisan rivals become enemies, political competition descends into warfare, and our institutions turn into weapons. The result is a system hovering constantly on the brink of crisis.”4

They describe how democratic norms have been the embodiment of our personal values and a behavioral defense of the founding principles contained in our constitution. They have sustained American democracy for much of our history, but not today.

We are losing our democracy because our elected leaders have abandoned the norms they swore to protect in their oaths of office. And, citizens no longer hold them accountable. The authors conclude, “To save our democracy Americans need to restore the basic norms that once protected it.”5

# Part II: We the People: Are we up to it?

Levitsky and Ziblatt tell us what needs to be done. But, they don’t tell us how. Two recent books based on the social science research of three university professors may provide some answers.

Jonathan Haidt, author of *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion,* , also observed that Americans have become “polarized and embattled to the point of dysfunction.” 9 He explains this has happened because people are primarily, innately, driven by their feelings and emotions which gets them sucked into tribal moral communities. “Once people join a political team, they get ensnared in its moral matrix which makes it difficult for them to connect with those who live in other matrices. ”10 He argues we need to engage others in conversations about the core values we share—those we hold sacred. “If you want to understand another group,” he urges, “*follow the sacredness*,” and open your heart.14

Christopher Achen and Larry Bartels, authors of the book, *Democracy for Realists: Why Elections Do Not Produce Responsive Government* explain how their research expands on Haidt’s description of humans as first and foremost intuitive rather than reasoning with an examination of group behavior. “The primary sources of partisan loyalties and voting behavior, they write, “are social identities, group attachments, and myopic retrospections, not policy preferences or ideological principles.”16 They offer a description of how voters actually behave in their group theory of democracy based on the following psychological observations:

* + “the powerful tendency of people to form groups,
  + the ensuing construction of ‘us’ and ‘them,’ and
  + the powerful role of emotion rather than reason in directing group activity”21

# Part III: The Democracy Problem

I have only one vote. Where is the power in that?

The one vote must become part of a majority.

This is the democracy problem—creating common purpose out of individual, often competing, expectations and interests.

It is not a new problem. In 1927, the American philosopher, John Dewey observed, “The prime difficulty[of a democracy], … is that of discovering the means by which a scattered, mobile, and manifold [diverse] public may so recognize itself as to define and express its interests.”24 He understood it as a moral problem to be solved by education and communication.

# What we can do: A starting place

We can begin by asking the question: *If we are not able to protect and defend our democracy today, how were we different in the past and how do we need to change?*

We can begin by listening to those whose beliefs we may not share for the values they hold sacred and how they find meaning in their lives.

We can begin a new, national conversation about:

* the one political question that should transcend, supersede and dominate all others facing Americans today: How can we save our democracy?, and
* how we can prevent the poet’s fear that “*Things fall apart, the centre cannot hold”25* from becoming our reality.

*The Second Coming*

by

William Butler Yeats

Turning and turning in the widening gyre

The falcon cannot hear the falconer;

Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;

Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,

The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere

The ceremony of innocence is drowned;

The best lack all conviction, while the worst

Are full of passionate intensity.25

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# Sources & Citations

1. Steven Levitsky & Daniel Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die* (New York: Crown, 2018), 1.
2. Ibid., 212.
3. Ibid., 231.
4. Jonathan Haidt, *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2012), 274.
5. Ibid., 312.
6. Ibid., 312.
7. Christopher Achen & Larry Bartels, *Democracy for Realists: Why Elections Do Not Produce Responsive Government* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016), 267.
8. Ibid.,215.
9. John Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems* (Athens Ohio: Swallow Press/Ohio University Press, 1927), 146.
10. W. B. Yeats, *The Second Coming,* ed. Michael Schmidt (London: Quercus, 2008), 22.