

NICHOLAS KRISTOF

Trump's Threat To Democracy

TWO POLITICAL SCIENTISTS specializing in how democracies decay and die have compiled four warning signs to determine if a political leader is a dangerous authoritarian:

1. The leader shows only a weak commitment to democratic rules. 2. He or she denies the legitimacy of opponents. 3. He or she tolerates violence. 4. He or she shows some willingness to curb civil liberties or the media.

"A politician who meets even one of these criteria is cause for concern," Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt, both professors at Harvard, write in their important new book, "How Democracies Die," which will be released next week.

"With the exception of Richard Nixon, no major-party presidential candidate met even one of these four criteria over the last century," they say, which sounds reassuring. Unfortunately, they have one update: "Donald Trump met them all."

We tend to assume that the threat to democracies comes from coups or violent revolutions, but the authors say that in modern times, democracies are more likely to wither at the hands of insiders who gain power initially through elections. That's what happened, to one degree or another, in Russia, the Philippines, Turkey, Venezuela, Ecuador, Hungary, Nicaragua, Sri Lanka, Ukraine, Poland and Peru.

Venezuela was a relatively prosperous democracy, for example, when the populist demagogue Hugo Chávez tapped the frustrations of ordinary citizens to be elected president in 1998.

A survey that year found that the Venezuelan public overwhelmingly believed that "democracy is always the best form of government," with only one-quarter saying that authoritarianism is sometimes

The president shows all four warning signs of a dangerous authoritarian.

preferable. Yet against their will, Venezuelans slid into autocracy.

"This is how democracies now die," Levitsky and Ziblatt write. "Democratic backsliding today begins at the ballot box."

Likewise, the authors say, no more than 2 percent of Germans or Italians joined the Nazi or Fascist Parties before they gained power, and early on there doesn't seem to have been clear majority support for authoritarianism in either Germany or Italy. But both Hitler and Mussolini were shrewd demagogues who benefited from the blindness of political insiders who accommodated them.

Let me say right here that I don't for a moment think the United States will follow the path of Venezuela, Germany or Italy. Yes, I do see in Trump these authoritarian tendencies — plus a troubling fondness for other authoritarians, like Vladimir Putin in Russia and Rodrigo Duterte in the Philippines — but I'm confident our institutions are stronger than Trump.

It's true that he has tried to undermine institutions and referees of our political system: judges, the Justice Department, law enforcement agencies like the F.B.I., the intelligence community, the news media, the opposition party and Congress. But to his great frustration, American institutions have mostly passed the stress test with flying colors.

"President Trump followed the electoral authoritarian script during his first year," Levitsky and Ziblatt conclude. "He made efforts to capture the referees, sideline the key players who might halt him, and tilt the playing field. But the president has talked more than he has acted, and his most notorious threats have not been realized. . . . Little actual backsliding occurred in 2017."

That seems right to me: The system worked.

And yet.

For all my confidence that our institutions will trump Trump, the chipping away at the integrity of our institutions and norms does worry me. Levitsky and Ziblatt warn of the unraveling of democratic norms — norms such as treating the other side as rivals rather than as enemies, condemning violence and bigotry, and so on. This unraveling was underway long before Trump (Newt Gingrich nudged it along in the 1990s), but Trump accelerated it.

It matters when Trump denounces the "deep state Justice Department," calls Hillary Clinton a "criminal" and urges "jail" for Huma Abedin, denounces journalists as the "enemy of the American people" and promises to pay the legal fees of supporters who "beat the crap" out of protesters. With such bombast, Trump is beating the crap out of American norms.

I asked the authors how we citizens can most effectively resist an authoritarian president. The answer, they said, is not for Trump opponents to demonize the other side or to adopt scorched-earth tactics, for this can result in "a death spiral in which rule-breaking becomes pandemic." It's also not terribly effective, as we've seen in Venezuela.

Rather, they suggested protesting vigorously — but above all, in defense of rights and institutions, not just against the ruler. They emphasized that it's critical to build coalitions, even if that means making painful compromises, so that protests are very broadly based.

"If these actions are limited to blue-state progressives, the risk of failure and/or deeper polarization is very high," Levitsky told me in an interview. "Extraordinary measures are sometimes necessary to defend democracy, but they should rest on extraordinary coalitions — coalitions that include business leaders, religious leaders and crucially, as many conservatives and Republicans as possible." □

Democracy's a very fragile thing. You have to take care of democracy. As soon as you stop being responsible to it and allow it to turn into scare tactics, it's no longer democracy, is it? It's something else. It may be an inch away from totalitarianism.

-Sam Shepard

Democracy is not a fragile flower; still it needs cultivating.

-Ronald Reagan

"The fabric of democracy is always fragile everywhere because it depends on the will of citizens to protect it, and when they become scared, when it becomes dangerous for them to defend it, it can go very quickly."

-Margaret Atwood,



On the back answer the following:

1. What is the main argument on the author?
2. Do you think Donald Trump is actually a threat to American democracy? Why or Why not?
3. Under what conditions do you think American democracy could/will fail?