


HOW  
DEMOCRACIES  
DIE

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or 4) indicates a willingness to curtail the civil liberties of opponents, including the media. Table 1 shows how to assess politicians in terms of these four factors.

A politician who meets even one of these criteria is cause for concern. What kinds of candidates tend to test positive on a litmus test for authoritarianism? Very often, populist outsiders do. Populists are antiestablishment politicians—figures who, claiming to represent the voice of “the people,” wage war on what they depict as a corrupt and conspiratorial elite. Populists tend to deny the legitimacy of established parties, attacking them as undemocratic and even unpatriotic. They tell voters that the existing system is not really a democracy but instead has been hijacked, corrupted, or rigged by the elite. And they promise to bury that elite and return power to “the people.” This discourse should be taken seriously. When populists win elections, they often assault democratic institutions. In Latin America, for example, of all fifteen presidents elected in Bolivia, Ecuador, Peru, and Venezuela between 1990 and 2012, five were populist outsiders: Alberto Fujimori, Hugo Chávez, Evo Morales, Lucio Gutiérrez, and Rafael Correa. All five ended up weakening democratic institutions.

Table 1: Four Key Indicators of Authoritarian Behavior

<p><b>1. Rejection of (or weak commitment to) democratic rules of the game</b></p>	<p>Do they reject the Constitution or express a willingness to violate it?</p> <p>Do they suggest a need for antidemocratic measures, such as canceling elections, violating or suspending the Constitution, banning certain organizations, or restricting basic civil or political rights?</p> <p>Do they seek to use (or endorse the use of) extraconstitutional means to change the government, such as military coups, violent insurrections, or mass protests aimed at forcing a change in the government?</p> <p>Do they attempt to undermine the legitimacy of elections, for example, by refusing to accept credible electoral results?</p>
<p><b>2. Denial of the legitimacy of political opponents</b></p>	<p>Do they describe their rivals as subversive, or opposed to the existing constitutional order?</p> <p>Do they claim that their rivals constitute an existential threat, either to national security or to the prevailing way of life?</p> <p>Do they baselessly describe their partisan rivals as criminals, whose supposed violation of the law (or potential to do so) disqualifies them from full participation in the political arena?</p> <p>Do they baselessly suggest that their rivals are foreign agents, in that they are secretly working in alliance with (or the employ of) a foreign government—usually an enemy one?</p>

<b>3. Toleration or encouragement of violence</b>	<p>Do they have any ties to armed gangs, paramilitary forces, militias, guerrillas, or other organizations that engage in illicit violence?</p> <p>Have they or their partisan allies sponsored or encouraged mob attacks on opponents?</p> <p>Have they tacitly endorsed violence by their supporters by refusing to unambiguously condemn it and punish it?</p> <p>Have they praised (or refused to condemn) other significant acts of political violence, either in the past or elsewhere in the world?</p>
<b>4. Readiness to curtail civil liberties of opponents, including media</b>	<p>Have they supported laws or policies that restrict civil liberties, such as expanded libel or defamation laws, or laws restricting protest, criticism of the government, or certain civic or political organizations?</p> <p>Have they threatened to take legal or other punitive action against critics in rival parties, civil society, or the media?</p> <p>Have they praised repressive measures taken by other governments, either in the past or elsewhere in the world?</p>

Keeping authoritarian politicians out of power is more easily said than done. Democracies, after all, are not supposed to ban parties or prohibit candidates from standing for election—and we do not advocate such measures. The responsibility for filtering out authoritarians lies, rather, with political parties and party leaders: democracy's gatekeepers.

Successful gatekeeping requires that mainstream parties isolate and defeat extremist forces, a behavior political scientist Nancy Bermeo calls "distancing." Prodemocratic parties may engage in distancing in several ways. First, they can keep

would-be authoritarians off party ballots at election time. This requires that they resist the temptation to nominate these extremists for higher office even when they can potentially deliver votes.

Second, parties can root out extremists in the grass roots of their own ranks. Take the Swedish Conservative Party (AVF) during the perilous interwar period. The AVF's youth group (an organization of voting-age activists), called the Swedish Nationalist Youth Organization, grew increasingly radical in the early 1930s, criticizing parliamentary democracy, openly supporting Hitler, and even creating a group of uniformed storm troopers. The AVF responded in 1933 by expelling the organization. The loss of 25,000 members may have cost the AVF votes in the 1934 municipal elections, but the party's distancing strategy reduced the influence of antidemocratic forces in Sweden's largest center-right party.

Third, prodemocratic parties can avoid all alliances with antidemocratic parties and candidates. As we saw in Italy and Germany, prodemocratic parties are sometimes tempted to align with extremists on their ideological flank to win votes or, in parliamentary systems, form governments. But such alliances can have devastating long-term consequences. As Linz wrote, the demise of many democracies can be traced to a party's "greater affinity for extremists on its side of the political spectrum than for [mainstream] parties close to the opposite side."

Fourth, prodemocratic parties can act to systematically isolate, rather than legitimize, extremists. This requires that politicians avoid acts—such as German Conservatives' joint rallies with Hitler in the early 1930s or Caldera's speech sympathizing with Chávez—that help to "normalize" or provide public respectability to authoritarian figures.

Finally, whenever extremists emerge as serious electoral contenders, mainstream parties must forge a united front to defeat them. To quote Linz, they must be willing to “join with opponents ideologically distant but committed to the survival of the democratic political order.” In normal circumstances, this is almost unimaginable. Picture Senator Edward Kennedy and other liberal Democrats campaigning for Ronald Reagan, or the British Labour Party and their trade union allies endorsing Margaret Thatcher. Each party’s followers would be infuriated at this seeming betrayal of principles. But in extraordinary times, courageous party leadership means putting democracy and country before party and articulating to voters what is at stake. When a party or politician that tests positive on our litmus test emerges as a serious electoral threat, there is little alternative. United democratic fronts can prevent extremists from winning power, which can mean saving a democracy.

Although the failures are more memorable, some European democracies practiced successful gatekeeping between the wars. Surprisingly big lessons can be drawn from small countries. Consider Belgium and Finland. In Europe’s years of political and economic crisis in the 1920s and 1930s, both countries experienced an early warning sign of democratic decay—the rise of antisystem extremists—but, unlike Italy and Germany, they were saved by political elites who defended democratic institutions (at least until Nazi invasion several years later).

During Belgium’s 1936 general election, as the contagion of fascism was spreading from Italy and Germany across Europe, voters delivered a jarring result. Two authoritarian far-right parties—the Rex Party and the Flemish nationalist party,

or Vlaams Nationaal Verbond (VNV)—surged in the polls, capturing almost 20 percent of the popular vote and challenging the historical dominance of three establishment parties: the center-right Catholic Party, the Socialists, and the Liberal Party. The challenge from the leader of the Rex Party, Léon Degrelle, a Catholic journalist who would become a Nazi collaborator, was especially strong. Degrelle, a virulent critic of parliamentary democracy, had departed from the right edges of the Catholic Party and now attacked its leaders as corrupt. He received encouragement and financial support from both Hitler and Mussolini.

The 1936 election shook the centrist parties, which suffered losses across the board. Aware of the antidemocratic movements in nearby Italy and Germany and fearful for their own survival, they confronted the daunting task of deciding how to respond. The Catholic Party, in particular, faced a difficult dilemma: collaborate with their longtime rivals, the Socialists and Liberals, or forge a right-wing alliance that included the Rexists, a party with whom they shared some ideological affinity but that rejected the value of democratic politics.

Unlike the retreating mainstream politicians of Italy and Germany, the Belgian Catholic leadership declared that any cooperation with the Rexists was incompatible with party membership and then pursued a two-pronged strategy to combat the movement. Internally, Catholic Party leaders heightened discipline by screening candidates for pro-Rexist sympathies and expelling those who expressed extremist views. In addition, the party leadership took a strong stance against cooperation with the far right. Externally, the Catholic Party fought Rex on its own turf. The Catholic Party adopted new propaganda and campaign tactics that targeted younger Catholics, who had