


HOW
DEMOCRACIES

DIE

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 CROWN
NEW YORK

2018

were party members, and neither party achieved anything close to a majority of the vote in free and fair elections. Rather, solid electoral majorities opposed Hitler and Mussolini—before both men achieved power with the support of political insiders blind to the danger of their own ambitions.

Hugo Chávez was elected by a majority of voters, but there is little evidence that Venezuelans were looking for a strongman. At the time, public support for democracy was higher there than in Chile—a country that was, and remains, stably democratic. According to the 1998 Latinobarómetro survey, 60 percent of Venezuelans agreed with the statement “Democracy is always the best form of government,” while only 25 percent agreed that “under some circumstances, an authoritarian government can be preferable to a democratic one.” By contrast, only 53 percent of respondents in Chile agreed that “democracy is always the best form of government.”

Potential demagogues exist in all democracies, and occasionally, one or more of them strike a public chord. But in some democracies, political leaders heed the warning signs and take steps to ensure that authoritarians remain on the fringes, far from the centers of power. When faced with the rise of extremists or demagogues, they make a concerted effort to isolate and defeat them. Although mass responses to extremist appeals matter, what matters more is whether political elites, and especially parties, serve as filters. Put simply, political parties are democracy’s gatekeepers.

If authoritarians are to be kept out, they first have to be identified. There is, alas, no foolproof advance warning system. Many authoritarians can be easily recognized before they come to

power. They have a clear track record: Hitler led a failed putsch; Chávez led a failed military uprising; Mussolini’s Blackshirts engaged in paramilitary violence; and in Argentina in the mid-twentieth century, Juan Perón helped lead a successful coup two and a half years before running for president.

But politicians do not always reveal the full scale of their authoritarianism before reaching power. Some adhere to democratic norms early in their careers, only to abandon them later. Consider Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán. Orbán and his Fidesz party began as liberal democrats in the late 1980s, and in his first stint as prime minister between 1998 and 2002, Orbán governed democratically. His autocratic about-face after returning to power in 2010 was a genuine surprise.

So how do we identify authoritarianism in politicians who don’t have an obvious antidemocratic record? Here we turn to the eminent political scientist Juan Linz. Born in Weimar Germany and raised amid Spain’s civil war, Linz knew all too well the perils of losing a democracy. As a professor at Yale, he devoted much of his career to trying to understand how and why democracies die. Many of Linz’s conclusions can be found in a small but seminal book called *The Breakdown of Democratic Regimes*. Published in 1978, the book highlights the role of politicians, showing how their behavior can either reinforce democracy or put it at risk. He also proposed, but never fully developed, a “linus test” for identifying antidemocratic politicians.

Building on Linz’s work, we have developed a set of four behavioral warning signs that can help us know an authoritarian when we see one. We should worry when a politician 1) rejects, in words or action, the democratic rules of the game, 2) denies the legitimacy of opponents, 3) tolerates or encourages violence,

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>1. Rejection of (or weak commitment to) democratic rules of the game</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>2. Denial of the legitimacy of political opponents</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>

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

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

Harding . . . [He is] not even considered as among the most promising dark horses." But as reporters heard rumors about the discussions taking place at the Blackstone, the most motivated of them found their way to the thirteenth floor of the hotel and quietly gathered in the hallways outside Suite 404 to catch a glimpse as leading senators—including Henry Cabot Lodge of Massachusetts, McCormick of Illinois, Phipps of Colorado, Calder of New York, former senator Crane of Massachusetts, and others—came and went.

Inside Suite 404, the upsides and downsides of each candidate were carefully reviewed and debated (Knox was too old; Lodge didn't like Coolidge). At one in the morning, seven members of the Old Guard remained in the room and took a "standing vote." Called in at 2:11 A.M. by George Harvey, a stunned Harding was informed that *he* had been selected. Word spread. By the next evening, on the tenth ballot and to the great relief of the sweltering delegates, Warren G. Harding received an overwhelming 692½ convention delegates amid rousing cheers. Though he garnered just over 4 percent of the primary vote, he was now the Republican Party's 1920 presidential nominee.

Nobody likes smoke-filled rooms today—and for good reason. They were not very democratic. Candidates were chosen by a small group of power brokers who were not accountable to the party rank and file, much less to average citizens. And smoke-filled rooms did not always produce good presidents—Harding's term, after all, was marked by scandal. But backroom candidate selection had a virtue that is often forgotten today: It served a gatekeeping function, keeping demonstrably unfit figures off the ballot and out of office. To be sure, the reason for this was not the high-mindedness of party leaders. Rather, party "bosses," as their opponents called them, were most inter-

ested in picking safe candidates who could win. It was, above all, their risk aversion that led them to avoid extremists.

Gatekeeping institutions go back to the founding of the American republic. The 1787 Constitution created the world's first presidential system. Presidentialism poses distinctive challenges for gatekeeping. In parliamentary democracies, the prime minister is a member of parliament and is selected by the leading parties in parliament, which virtually ensures that he or she will be acceptable to political insiders. The very process of government formation serves as a filter. Presidents, by contrast, are not sitting members of Congress, nor are they elected by Congress. At least in theory, they are elected by the people, and anyone can run for president and—if he or she earns enough support—win.

Our founders were deeply concerned with gatekeeping. In designing the Constitution and electoral system, they grappled with a dilemma that, in many respects, remains with us today. On the one hand, they sought not a monarch but an elected president—one who conformed to their idea of a republican popular government, reflecting the will of the people. On the other, the founders did not fully trust the people's ability to judge candidates' fitness for office. Alexander Hamilton worried that a popularly elected presidency could be too easily captured by those who would play on fear and ignorance to win elections and then rule as tyrants. "History will teach us," Hamilton wrote in the *Federalist Papers*, that "of those men who have overturned the liberties of republics, the great number have begun their career by paying an obsequious court to the people; commencing demagogues, and ending tyrants." For Hamilton and his colleagues, elections required some kind of built-in screening device.

The device the founders came up with was the Electoral

when they protested once, you know, they would not do it so easily again. But today, they walk in and they put their hand up and put the wrong finger in the air at everybody, and they get away with murder, because we've become weak." (March 9, 2016, North Carolina)

In August 2016, Trump issued a veiled endorsement of violence against Hillary Clinton, telling supporters at a Wilmington, North Carolina, rally that a Clinton appointee to the Supreme Court could result in the abolition of the right to bear arms. He went on to say, "If she gets to pick her judges, nothing you can do, folks. . . . Although the Second Amendment people—maybe there is, I don't know."

The final warning sign is a readiness to curtail the civil liberties of rivals and critics. One thing that separates contemporary autocrats from democratic leaders is their intolerance of criticism, and their readiness to use their power to punish those—in the opposition, media, or civil society—who criticize them. Donald Trump displayed such a readiness in 2016. He said he planned to arrange for a special prosecutor to investigate Hillary Clinton after the election and declared that Clinton should be imprisoned. Trump also repeatedly threatened to punish unfriendly media. At a rally in Fort Worth, Texas, for example, he attacked *Washington Post* owner Jeff Bezos, declaring, "If I become president, oh, do they have problems. They are going to have such problems." Describing the media as "among the most dishonest groups of people I've ever met," Trump declared:

I'm going to open up our libel laws so when they write purposely negative and horrible and false ar-

ticles, we can sue them and win lots of money. . . . So that when the *New York Times* writes a hit piece, which is a total disgrace—or when the *Washington Post* . . . writes a hit piece, we can sue them. . . .

With the exception of Richard Nixon, no major-party presidential candidate met even one of these four criteria over the last century. As Table 2 shows, Donald Trump met them all. No other major presidential candidate in modern U.S. history, including Nixon, has demonstrated such a weak public commitment to constitutional rights and democratic norms. Trump was precisely the kind of figure that had haunted Hamilton and other founders when they created the American presidency.

Table 2. Donald Trump and the Four Key Indicators of Authoritarian Behavior

<p>1. Rejection of (or weak commitment to) democratic rules of the game</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>
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<p>2. Denial of the legitimacy of political opponents</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>
<p>3. Toleration or encouragement of violence</p>	<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>

<p>4. Readiness to curtail civil liberties of opponents, including media</p>	<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>
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This all should have set off alarm bells. The primary process had failed in its gatekeeping role and allowed a man unfit for office to run as a mainstream party candidate. But how could Republicans respond at this stage? Recall the lessons of democratic breakdowns in Europe in the 1930s and South America in the 1960s and 1970s: When gatekeeping institutions fail, mainstream politicians must do everything possible to keep dangerous figures away from the centers of power.

Collective abdication—the transfer of authority to a leader who threatens democracy—usually flows from one of two sources. The first is the misguided belief that an authoritarian can be controlled or tamed. The second is what sociologist Ivan Ermakoff calls “ideological collusion,” in which the authoritarian’s agenda overlaps sufficiently with that of mainstream politicians that abdication is desirable, or at least preferable to the alternatives. But when faced with a would-be authoritarian, establishment politicians must unambiguously reject him or her and do everything possible to defend democratic