

Is Donald Trump Fueling a Mass Extinction of Democracy Across the Planet?

The warning signs are there, cautions "*How Democracies Die*" co-author Steven Levitsky.



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Earlier this week, during a [freewheeling speech to Republican donors at Mar-a-Lago](#), Donald Trump cracked the following joke about Chinese leader Xi Jinping:

"He's now president for life. President for life. No, he's great. And look, he was able to do that. I think it's great.

Maybe we'll have to give that a shot someday."

If he was doing his best Don Rickles impression, only the most febrile members of his base seemed amused. Since Trump abruptly removed James Comey as FBI director last May, the United States has been slowly [lurching toward a constitutional crisis](#).

In January, we learned the president had [ordered the firing of special prosecutor Robert Mueller](#) last June, only to back off after White House attorney Don McGahn threatened to resign.

➤ [A New York Times report](#) published Wednesday revealed that Trump has contacted several key witnesses in the collusion probe, directly disobeying his legal counsel.

The following month, Trump lobbied the Justice Department to open investigations of Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama. Meanwhile, his administration continues to stack the courts at a breakneck pace, trampling norms and procedures to [accelerate the appointment of right-wing judges](#) in a host of blue and purple states.

For Steven Levitsky, co-author of [How Democracies Die](#), these are but two telltale signs of creeping authoritarianism. While violent coups have largely become a thing of the past, elected officials can dismantle a republic just as effectively as a military junta. Examples abound, from Eastern Europe (Russia, Ukraine, Poland and Hungary) to Latin America (Venezuela and Nicaragua) and Asia (Turkey, the Philippines and Singapore). As he writes in the book's introduction,

"Democracy's erosion is, for many, almost imperceptible."

Nearly a week before the far-right Lega Nord made huge gains in the Italian elections, Levitsky spoke with [AlterNet](#) over the phone about Trump's hypothetical impeachment and the danger he poses to the global democratic order.

What follows is a lightly edited transcript of our conversation.

Jacob Sugarman: Since your book published, Donald Trump has effectively bullied Andrew McCabe and Rachel Brand into resigning from the FBI and the Justice Department respectively. Do you believe the guardrails of American democracy are still holding, or have they begun to buckle even in the past month?

► Steven Levitsky: I think they're still fundamentally holding for now. But there's no question that the Trump administration has done what virtually every elected autocrat we've studied anywhere in the world has before him, which is go after the legal system, law enforcement and the courts in an effort to control the referees. That accomplishes two things: It creates a shield to protect the government from investigation and prosecution, and ultimately, it can be used as a weapon.

You can use the legal system to "legally" go after your rivals, and both Trump and the Justice Department have made noise about doing just that. This is straight out of the authoritarian playbook. I'd say I'm more worried now than I was when we first wrote 'How Democracies Die'. It once appeared that there was at least a handful of Republican senators who were willing to draw a red line, particularly in terms of protecting the FBI, law enforcement agencies and the Mueller investigation.

That seems less likely now.

JS: It feels like every week there's an explosive new development in the collusion probe. Democrats are unlikely to take back the Senate, but if they were to recapture the House, is it in the interests of the party and the country for them to pursue impeachment? Do you believe a push has the potential to backfire?

► SL: Impeachment is a constitutional mechanism and one of the few tools that we have to remove presidents who have committed a crime or are otherwise unfit for office. There's at least some reason to believe that Trump meets one or both criteria, so if the Mueller investigation were to uncover serious wrongdoing, it has to be considered. In the book, we look at two separate crises of executive overreach: FDR's court-packing scheme and Nixon's gross abuse of power. In both instances, a bipartisan consensus was what contained both presidents.

But things are so polarized now, and the Republicans have become so 'Trumpified', that there may not be enough votes even if Mueller uncovers egregious criminal activity. That would put us in uncharted territory, where impeachment becomes a truly double-edged sword. If Republicans actively oppose it, if it's viewed as a coup by the Fox News wing of the Republican Party, which is to say the majority, then it could tear the country apart. It might be the right thing politically for Democrats, and the probe may well demand it, but it would further weaken our norms of mutual toleration and forbearance. The next Democratic president would have to watch their back.

JS: Your book does an excellent job of explaining why norms are so essential to a functioning government, but can a rigid adherence to them pose a danger to democracy itself? I'm thinking specifically of Obama's refusal to pursue the perpetrators of the 2008 financial crisis, as well as certain members of the Bush administration for their crimes in Iraq. Doesn't that generate an apathy that a demagogue like Trump can exploit?

► SL: It almost certainly can, and there's really no easy way out of that dilemma. We're definitely not advocating an unthinking preservation of all norms. Societies evolve, and politics change all the time. But I think I was sympathetic to Obama's predicament, even if a lot of my progressive friends were not. There is a real cost to pushing for, or even permitting, the prosecution of your major political rivals. It's led to the failure of any number of democracies in Latin America.

Look at what's happening in Brazil right now. I wouldn't go as far as to call it a coup, but the impeachment of Dilma Rousseff was highly politicized. The Democratic Labour Party has every right to be angry about it, and now Lula may be barred from running for president. The corruption charges against him are likely legitimate, but the right has created an environment in which the PT no longer trusts the political establishment.

JS: I'm glad you brought up Brazil, because democracy would appear to be in retreat across the globe. I was a little surprised to see that your book largely rejects this narrative.

► SL: I want to be clear that the decline in power and prestige of the United States and the European Union, along with the rise and increasing self-confidence of Russia and China, clearly do not bode well for democracy across the world. The horizon is darker than it was 20 years ago. The challenges for new democracies in central Europe, in Africa, in Latin America are much greater than they once were, so there is real reason for concern.

But the number of democracies in the world is the same as it was 10 years ago. The notion that we're in a global democratic crisis simply isn't true. It may well happen in the next five years, but it hasn't happened yet.

JS: Given the scope of America's wealth and influence, does Trump pose an existential threat to global democracy?

► SL: Because the United States has completely abandoned even the pretense of promoting democracy abroad, Trump's presidency could end up expediting a democratic recession, yes. We're already seeing some signs of it. Duterte in the Philippines faces no external pressure, despite massive human rights violation, while Honduran president Juan Orlando Hernández recently held an election whose results have been widely disputed. Autocrats are learning that they can get away with more than they have in a decade.

JS: What kind of threat does Trump pose to American democracy? Do you see a scenario in which the United States elects a *blood-and-soil fascist*?

► SL: Trump may ultimately lead us into a devastating war, but I think we're actually fortunate that he doesn't have a political project. Or if he does, he doesn't have the discipline, the intelligence or the attention span to build something really destructive. If there's another major terrorist attack, I think all bets are off, but if we can get through the next three years crisis-free, I'd bet our democratic institutions muddle through.

Trump's attacks on the press and the integrity of our elections can't be minimized, but the lasting damage of his presidency will likely be his explicit appeal to white nationalism. Once you let that genie out of the bottle, it's almost impossible to put it back inside. As long as the GOP is an exclusively white Christian party in a society as diverse as the United States in 2018 and 2020, it will remain vulnerable to extremism and authoritarianism. We saw it in South Carolina during Reconstruction: if Republicans, in this case, fear becoming a permanent minority, they could try to hold onto power by any means necessary.

JS: Where do you think we go from here? The people who voted for Donald Trump obviously aren't going away, so how do we rebuild our democratic institutions? And what can the Democrats do as an opposition party?

SL: If I had the answers to those questions, I would be in a much more powerful position than I am today. The answer is, we really don't know. But if our republic is truly under threat, which none of us thought possible just a few years ago, then normal politics has to be set aside and we need to build much broader coalitions. This is not a concrete formula, of course, but a way of thinking—one we want to encourage because it's been a very long time since progressives found partners outside their traditional ideological camp. Maybe that includes some evangelicals or members of the private sector, as distasteful as the idea might sound. Once we successfully defend our democracy, we can go back to fighting for economic and social justice.

As for the Democrats, they're not the only center-left coalition to set aside economic redistribution over the past 25 years. Basically everybody has, but that's the problem, and there's no quick fix. Taking up the cause of inequality is probably their best hope right now of combating this wave of right-wing populism we're facing.

□ Jacob Sugarman is a managing editor at AlterNet.