



Authors of International Bestseller
How Democracies Die

STEVEN LEVITSKY
DANIEL ZIBLATT

TYRANNY OF THE MINORITY

'Concise, readable
and convincing'
Anne Applebaum

'Exceptionally
perceptive and
wide-ranging'
TLS

**HOW TO REVERSE AN
AUTHORITARIAN TURN AND
FORGE A DEMOCRACY
FOR ALL**

TYRANNY OF THE MINORITY

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt are Professors of Government at Harvard University, and co-authors of the international bestseller *How Democracies Die*, which won the Goldsmith Book Prize, was shortlisted for the Lionel Gelber Prize and was named one of the best books of the year by the *Washington Post*, *Time* and *Foreign Affairs*. Both Levitsky and Ziblatt have written for *Vox* and *The New York Times*, among other publications.

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*In memory of
Jill Kneerim and David Ziblatt*

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Somehow we've weathered and witnessed
A nation that isn't broken
But simply unfinished.

—Amanda Gorman, *The Hill We Climb*

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INTRODUCTION

In January 5, 2021, an extraordinary event took place in Georgia. In a state where politics had long been stained by white supremacy, voters turned out in record numbers to elect their first African American senator, the Reverend Raphael Warnock, and their first Jewish American senator. Warnock was only the second Black senator to be elected in the South since Reconstruction, joining the Republican Tim Scott of South Carolina. That night, he introduced supporters to his mother, a former sharecropper, noting that “the 82-year-old hands that used to pick somebody else’s cotton picked her youngest son to be a United States senator.” For many, the election presaged a brighter, more democratic future. “There’s a new South rising,” declared LaTosha Brown, co-founder of Black Voters Matter. “It’s younger, it’s more diverse . . . and it’s more inclusive.” This was the demo-

cratic future that generations of civil rights activists had been working to build.

The next day, January 6, Americans witnessed something that seemed unimaginable: a violent insurrection, incited by the president of the United States. Four years of democratic decline had culminated in an attempted coup. The fear, confusion, and indignation that many Americans felt as they watched these events unfold echo the way people in other countries have described feeling as their own democracies unraveled. What we had just lived through—a surge in politically motivated violence; threats against election workers; efforts to make it harder for people to vote; a campaign by the president to overturn the results of an election—was democratic backsliding. The republic did not collapse between 2016 and 2021, but it became undeniably less democratic.

In a span of twenty-four hours on January 5 and January 6, 2021, the full promise and peril of American democracy were on vivid display: a glimpse of a possible multiracial democratic future, followed by an almost unthinkable assault on our constitutional system.

Multiracial democracy is hard to achieve. Few societies have ever done it. A multiracial democracy is a political system with regular, free, and fair elections in which adult citizens of all ethnic groups possess the right to vote and basic civil liberties such as freedom of speech, the press, assembly, and association. It is not enough for these rights to exist on paper: individuals of all ethnic backgrounds must enjoy equal protection of democratic and civil rights under the law. The 1964 Civil Rights Act and the 1965 Voting Rights Act finally established a legal foundation for multiracial democracy in America. But even today, we have not fully achieved it.

Access to the ballot remains unequal, for example. A 2018 survey by the Public Religion Research Institute (PRRI) found that African American and Latino citizens were three times as likely as whites to be told they lacked the proper identification to vote and twice as likely to be told—incorrectly—that their names were not listed on voter rolls. Laws barring convicted felons from voting disproportionately affect African Americans. And nonwhite citizens still do not receive equal protection under the law. Black men are more than twice as likely to be killed by police during their lifetime as are white men (even though Black victims of police killing are about half as likely to be armed); they are more likely than white men to be stopped and searched by police; and they are more likely to be arrested and convicted—with longer sentences—for similar crimes. If you have any doubt that Black citizens do not enjoy the same rights under the law as white citizens, apply the Kyle Rittenhouse test: Could a young Black man cross state lines with a semiautomatic rifle, walk unmolested by police into a protest, fire into a crowd, kill two people, and go free?

But if America is not yet a truly multiracial democracy, it is becoming one. In the half century between the passage of the Voting Rights Act and Donald Trump's rise to the presidency, American society changed in fundamental ways. A massive wave of immigration transformed what had been a predominantly white Christian society into a diverse and multiethnic one. And at the same time, the growing political, economic, legal, and cultural power of nonwhite Americans challenged—and began to level—long-entrenched racial hierarchies. Public opinion research shows that for the first time in U.S. history a majority of Americans now embrace ethnic diversity and racial equality—the two key pillars

of multiracial democracy. By 2016, then, America was on the brink of a genuinely multiracial democracy—one that could serve as a model for diverse societies across the world.

But just as this new democratic experiment was beginning to take root, America experienced an authoritarian backlash so fierce that it shook the foundations of the republic, leaving our allies across the world worried about whether the country had any democratic future at all. Meaningful steps toward democratic inclusion often trigger intense—even authoritarian—reactions. But the assault on American democracy was worse than anything we anticipated in 2017, when we were writing our first book, *How Democracies Die*. We have studied violent insurrections and efforts to overturn elections all over the world, from France and Spain to Ukraine and Russia to the Philippines, Peru, and Venezuela. But we never imagined we'd see them here. Nor did we ever imagine that one of America's two major parties would turn away from democracy in the twenty-first century.

The scale of America's democratic retreat was sobering. Organizations that track the health of democracies around the world captured it in numerical terms. Freedom House's Global Freedom Index gives countries a score between 0 and 100 each year, with 100 being the most democratic. In 2015, the United States received a score of 90, which was roughly in line with countries like Canada, Italy, France, Germany, Japan, Spain, and the U.K. But after that, America's score declined steadily, reaching 83 in 2021. Not only was that score lower than every established democracy in western Europe, but it was lower than new or historically troubled democracies like Argentina, the Czech Republic, Lithuania, and Taiwan.

This was an extraordinary turn of events. According to nearly every major social scientific account of what makes democracies thrive, America should have been immune to backsliding. Scholars have discovered two virtually law-like patterns regarding modern political systems: rich democracies never die, and old democracies never die. In a well-known study, the political scientists Adam Przeworski and Fernando Limongi found that no democracy richer than Argentina in 1976—its per capita GDP, in today’s dollars, was about \$16,000—had ever broken down. Democracy subsequently eroded in Hungary, which had a per capita GDP of about \$18,000 (in today’s dollars). The United States’ per capita GDP was about \$63,000 in 2020—nearly *four times* that of the richest country ever to suffer a democratic breakdown. Likewise, no democracy over fifty years old has ever died. Even if we take the passage of the 1965 Voting Rights Act as the moment of America’s democratization (that is, after all, when the country achieved full adult suffrage), our democracy was still over fifty when Trump ascended to the presidency. So both history and decades of social science research tell us that American democracy should have been safe. And yet it wasn’t.

America is not alone, of course, in its growing diversity. Nor is it alone in experiencing an extremist right-wing reaction to that demographic shift. The number of foreign-born residents has increased in most of the world’s oldest democracies, especially in western Europe. Immigrants and their children now constitute a growing segment of even historically homogeneous societies like Norway, Sweden, and Germany. Cities like Amsterdam, Berlin, Paris, and Zurich look nearly as diverse as America’s great cities. And the 2015 refugee crisis brought millions of North African and Middle Eastern newcomers to Europe, turning immigration

and ethnic diversity into issues of great political salience. Together with the fallout from the 2008 financial crisis, these changes triggered a radical backlash. In nearly every western European country, between about 10 and 30 percent of the electorate—disproportionately white and less educated voters who live in declining regions or outside urban centers—is open to xenophobic appeals. And everywhere from the U.K. and France to Italy, Germany, and Sweden, these voters have boosted the electoral fortunes of far-right parties and movements.

And yet America stands apart in two ways. First, the reaction to growing diversity has been unusually *authoritarian*. Rarely in western Europe has the rise of xenophobic and antiestablishment parties taken on the overtly antidemocratic form that we have seen in the United States. There are many features of western Europe's far-right parties that give cause for concern, including their racism, xenophobia, disregard for minority rights, and, in some cases, sympathies for Russia's president, Vladimir Putin. But so far, nearly all of them have played by democratic rules, accepting election results and eschewing political violence. America also differs in another way: extremist forces actually ascended to national power, whereas in Europe they have been largely confined to the opposition or, in a few cases, coalition governments.

So we must confront an uncomfortable fact: Societal diversity, cultural backlash, and extreme right parties are ubiquitous across established Western democracies. But only in America did such extremists actually win control of the national government and assault democratic institutions. Why did America, alone among rich established democracies, come to the brink? This is the question that should haunt us in the wake of January 5 and 6.

It is tempting to turn the page on the Trump era. After all, President Trump lost his reelection bid, and his effort to overturn the results of that election failed. The most dangerous election deniers in key swing states also were defeated in the congressional 2022 midterm elections. It appears as if we successfully dodged the bullet—that at the end of the day the system worked. And now, as Trump’s hold over the Republican Party is contested, maybe we can finally stop worrying so much about the fate of our democracy. Maybe the crisis wasn’t as bad as we initially feared. Maybe democracy *wasn’t* dying after all.

Such thinking is understandable. For those of us who were left worn down by the seemingly incessant crises of the Trump era, the (dodged) single bullet theory is reassuring. Unfortunately, it is misguided. The threat facing American democracy was never simply a strongman with a cultlike following. The problems are more endemic than that. In fact, they are deeply rooted in our politics. Until we address those underlying problems, our democracy will remain vulnerable.

To fully reverse America’s democratic retreat—and crucially, to prevent it from happening again—we must understand what caused it. What are the forces that drive a mainstream political party to turn away from democracy? This doesn’t happen often, but when it does, it can destroy even a well-established political system. We can draw lessons from other countries’ experiences, but also from episodes in our own history—including the southern Democratic Party’s authoritarian reaction to the post-Civil War Reconstruction.

We must also understand why America proved so exceptionally prone to backsliding. This question compels us to look hard at

the core institutions of our own democracy. Reactionary voters are a minority in the United States, just as they are in Europe. This is an important—and often neglected—point. The Trump-led Republican Party, like radical right movements in European countries, has *always* represented a political minority. But unlike far-right parties in Europe, it was able to win national office.

That leads us to another unsettling truth. Part of the problem we face today lies in something many of us venerate: our Constitution. America has the world's oldest written constitution. A brilliant work of political craftsmanship, it has provided a foundation for stability and prosperity. And for more than two centuries it has succeeded in checking the power of ambitious and overreaching presidents. But flaws in our Constitution now imperil our democracy.

Designed in a pre-democratic era, the U.S. Constitution allows partisan minorities to routinely thwart majorities, and sometimes even *govern* them. Institutions that empower partisan minorities can become instruments of minority rule. And they are *especially* dangerous when they are in the hands of extremist or antidemocratic partisan minorities.

Prominent eighteenth- and nineteenth-century thinkers, from Edmund Burke to John Adams to John Stuart Mill and Alexis de Tocqueville, worried that democracy risked becoming a “tyranny of the majority”—that such a system would allow the will of the many to trample on the rights of the few. This can be a real problem: Governing majorities undermined democracy in twenty-first-century Venezuela and Hungary and are threatening to do so in Israel. But the American political system has always reliably checked the power of majorities. What ails American democracy

today is closer to the opposite problem: Electoral majorities often cannot win power, and when they win, they often cannot govern. The more imminent threat facing us today, then, is minority rule. By steering the republic so sharply away from the Scylla of majority tyranny, America's founders left it vulnerable to the Charybdis of minority rule.

Why are the threats to American democracy emerging *now*, in the early twenty-first century? After all, the Constitution is centuries old. Understanding how we got here is a principal task of this book. The more urgent question, however, is how to get out. One thing is clear: Our institutions will not save our democracy. We will have to save it ourselves.

CHAPTER 1

FEAR OF LOSING

In the evening of October 30, 1983, as the votes were being counted in Argentina's first democratic election in a decade, Peronists who gathered in their Buenos Aires campaign bunker were in a state of shock. "When do the votes from the industrial belt come in?" party leaders asked nervously. But the votes were already in. For the first time ever, the Peronists—Argentina's working-class party—had lost a free election.

"We didn't see it coming," recalls Mario Wainfeld, then a young lawyer and Peronist activist. The Peronists had been Argentina's dominant party since Juan Perón, a former military officer, first won the presidency back in 1946. Perón was a talented populist figure who built Argentina's welfare state and quadrupled the size of its labor movement, earning the deep loyalty of the working class. Those loyalties persisted even after he was overthrown in

a military coup in 1955 and exiled from the country for eighteen years. Even though Peronism was banned for much of the next two decades, the movement not only survived but remained a force at the polls—winning every national election in which it was allowed to compete. And when an aging Perón was allowed to return and run for president in 1973, he won easily, with 62 percent of the vote. He died a year later, however, and in 1976, Argentina fell prey to another coup and descended into a seven-year military dictatorship.

Still, when democracy returned in 1983, just about everybody expected the Peronist candidate, Italo Luder, to prevail.

But much had changed in Argentina. Perón was gone, and industrial decline had destroyed hundreds of thousands of blue-collar jobs, decimating Peronism's working-class base. At the same time, younger and middle-class voters were turned off by Peronism's old guard union bosses, and as Argentina emerged from a brutal military dictatorship, most of them preferred Raúl Alfonsín, the human-rights-oriented candidate of the rival Radical Civic Union. Peronist leaders had lost touch with Argentine voters. They made the problem worse by choosing some thuggish and out-of-touch candidates. Their gubernatorial candidate in the all-important province of Buenos Aires, Herminio Iglesias, was known for his shoot-outs with rival Peronist factions during the violent 1970s. At the Peronists' final campaign rally two days before the election, Iglesias stood prominently on center stage, on live national television, and burned a casket with the symbol of Alfonsín's Radical Civic Union—a violent act that most Argentines, having just suffered through a decade of terrifying repression, found appalling.

When early results showed Alfonsín ahead in the 1983 race, Peronist leaders, searching desperately for explanations, briefly fell into a state of denial. "They still haven't counted the votes from La Matanza" (a working-class Peronist bastion outside Buenos Aires), party boss Lorenzo Miguel insisted. The Peronist vice presidential candidate, Deolindo Bittel, even accused the election authorities of withholding the results from working-class neighborhoods. By midnight, however, it was clear that these hidden votes simply didn't exist. Peronists have a saying: "The only truth is reality." And the reality was that they had lost.

Defeat was hard to swallow. Party leaders, licking their wounds, initially hid from the press. But none of them considered rejecting the results. The next day, the losing Peronist candidate Luder joined President-elect Alfonsín in a press conference and congratulated him. When reporters asked Luder about Peronism's historic defeat, he replied, "All politicians have to live with the fact that elections can produce . . . unexpected results."

After the election, Peronists plunged into a heated internal debate over the party's future. A new faction, known as the *Renovación* (Renewal), called for the resignation of the established party leadership, arguing that Peronism would have to adapt to changes in Argentine society if it wanted to win again. The party needed to broaden its base and find a way to reach middle-class voters who had been repulsed by the casket-burning Peronism of 1983. Though derided by internal critics as "jacket-and-tie Peronists," the Renewal leaders eventually succeeded in sidelining Peronism's rough-edged old guard, jettisoning many of its backward-looking ideas, and improving the party's image among middle-class voters. Peronism won the next two presidential elections handily.

This is how democracy should work. As the political scientist Adam Przeworski memorably put it, “Democracy is a system in which parties lose elections.” Losing hurts, but in a democracy it is inevitable. And when it happens, parties must do what the Peronists did: accept defeat, go home, and then figure out how to win a majority in the next election.

The norm of accepting defeat and peacefully relinquishing power is the foundation of modern democracy. On March 4, 1801, the United States became the first republic in history to experience an electoral transfer of power from one political party to another. On that day, the incumbent president, John Adams, a leader of America’s founding Federalist Party, quietly left Washington, D.C., by carriage before dawn. President-elect Thomas Jefferson of the rival Democratic-Republican Party, the man who had defeated Adams in the 1800 election, was inaugurated in the U.S. Senate chambers several hours later.

This transition was indispensable to the new republic’s survival. But it was neither inevitable nor easy. In 1800, the norm of accepting defeat and handing power to one’s opponent had not yet taken hold. The very existence of partisan opposition was regarded as illegitimate. Politicians, including many of the founders, equated it with sedition and even treason. And since no transfer of power had ever taken place before, it was hard to imagine that the opposition would reciprocate in future elections. Handing over power was a “plunge into the unknown.”

The transition was especially difficult for the Federalists, who suffered from what might be called the “founders’ dilemma”: in

order for a new political system to take hold, its founders must accept the fact that they don't get to call the shots forever. As designers of the Constitution and inheritors of George Washington's legacy, Federalist leaders like Adams and Alexander Hamilton considered themselves the rightful stewards of the new republic. They viewed their own interests and the nation's interests as one and the same, and they recoiled at the thought of yielding power to untested challengers.

The emergence of the Democratic-Republicans, America's first opposition party, thus challenged the stability of the new nation. Democratic-Republican societies had originally sprung up in Pennsylvania and other states in 1793. The movement soon morphed into a genuine opposition, under the leadership of Jefferson and James Madison. The Democratic-Republicans broke with the Federalists on many leading issues of the day, including economic policy, public debt, and above all matters of war and peace. They regarded the Federalists as quasi-monarchists ("monocrats") and worried that Adams's diplomatic overtures to Great Britain constituted a covert effort to restore British rule to America.

Many Federalists viewed the Democratic-Republicans, in turn, as nothing less than traitors. They suspected them of being sympathetic to France's revolutionary government—at a time when mounting U.S.–French hostilities posed a real threat of war. The Federalists feared that Republican "domestic enemies" would aid a French invasion. These fears were reinforced by slave revolts in the South. Federalists charged that slave rebellions—such as Gabriel's Rebellion in Virginia in mid-1800—were inspired by Republicans

and their ideology as part of what Federalist newspapers called the “true French plan.”

At first, the Federalists tried to destroy their opponents. In 1798, Congress passed the Alien and Sedition Acts, which were used to jail Democratic-Republican politicians and newspaper editors who criticized the federal government. The acts further polarized the country. Virginia and Kentucky declared them null and void in their territories, which the Federalists viewed as sedition. Seeing Virginia’s behavior as part of a “conspiracy” to aid France, Hamilton called on the Adams administration to raise a “sound military force” that could be “drawn towards Virginia.” In response, Virginia’s state legislature began to arm its own militia.

The specter of violence—even civil war—hung over the young republic on the eve of the 1800 election. Mutual distrust, fueled by partisan animosity, imperiled prospects for a peaceful transfer of power. As the historian James Sharp put it, “Federalists and Republicans were willing to believe that their opponents were capable of virtually any action, no matter how treacherous, or violent, in order to gain or retain power.”

Indeed, Federalist leaders explored ways of subverting the electoral process. In the Senate, they passed a bill to establish a committee consisting of six members from each house of Congress (which were dominated by Federalists) and the chief justice of the Supreme Court to “decide which votes to count and which ones to disallow.” Hamilton urged New York’s governor, John Jay, to call a special session of the lame-duck (Federalist-dominated) state legislature so that it could pass a law transferring the authority to appoint electors from the incoming (Democratic-Republican-dominated) leg-

islature to Governor Jay, who was a Federalist. In a letter seething with animosity toward his rivals, Hamilton embraced the kind of hardball politics that, as we showed in *How Democracies Die*, can wreck a democracy. Hamilton wrote,

In times like these in which we live it will not do to be over-scrupulous. It is easy to sacrifice the substantial interests of society by a strict adherence to ordinary rules. . . . [But] [t]hey ought not to hinder the taking of a *legal* and *constitutional* step to prevent an *atheist* in religion and a *fanatic* in politics from getting possession of the helm of the state.

The Federalists never actually enacted these plans, but their very willingness to consider them shows just how difficult it was for America's first incumbent party to accept defeat.

The 1800 contest was also nearly derailed by a flawed electoral system. In December, after the votes were tallied, the Electoral College delivered a vexing result: while Adams had clearly lost, the two Democratic-Republican candidates, Jefferson (the party's presumed presidential candidate) and Aaron Burr (the presumed vice presidential candidate), found themselves in an unexpected tie, with seventy-three electoral votes each. That sent the election to the lame-duck House of Representatives, where the Federalists still maintained a majority.

Although Adams grudgingly accepted defeat and prepared to return home to Quincy, Massachusetts, many Federalists saw an opportunity to use hardball tactics to stay in power. Some floated the idea of a new election. Others wanted to elect Burr, presumably in exchange for a Federalist role in a future Burr administra-

tion. Such a move was entirely legal, but because the victorious Democratic-Republicans had clearly intended for Jefferson to be president and Burr to be vice president, it would have, in the words of one newspaper at the time, violated “the spirit of the Constitution [which] requires the will of the people be executed.” An even more controversial idea emerged in Federalist circles that December: extending the debate past the March 4, 1801, inauguration deadline, which would, in the words of Senator Gouverneur Morris, “throw the Government into the Hands of a President [pro tem] of the Senate”—a Federalist. Such a move, which Jefferson decried as “stretching the Constitution,” would almost certainly have triggered a constitutional crisis.

Federalist leaders’ consideration of these hardball tactics reinforced Democratic-Republican fears that the Federalists were planning to illegally “usurp” power. This led Jefferson and his allies to contemplate, in Jefferson’s own words, “resistance by force.” The governors of Pennsylvania and Virginia mobilized their militias and threatened to secede if Jefferson’s election was blocked.

On the snowy morning of February 11, 1801, the House of Representatives met to resolve the Electoral College tie. The Constitution stipulated that each of the sixteen state delegations had a single vote, and a majority of nine votes was required for victory. For six painful days, over the course of thirty-five ballots, the results remained unchanged: over and over, eight states voted for Jefferson, six for Burr, and two states were unable to reach a consensus within their delegations and thus abstained. At least one Federalist would have to vote for Jefferson to break the deadlock. Finally, on day six, the Federalist congressman James Bayard of Delaware (the state’s only representative) announced he was with-

drawing his support for Burr, eliciting shouts of “Deserter!” from the floor of the chamber. Delaware, which had backed Burr, would now abstain. Soon Maryland and Vermont, which had been abstaining, cast their votes in favor of Jefferson, giving him a solid ten-state majority. Two weeks later, Jefferson was sworn in as president.

Why did the Federalists relent? In a letter to a friend, Bayard explained that he changed his vote because he feared that the alternative to Jefferson was constitutional breakdown or even civil war. He wrote,

Some of our [Federalist] Gentlem[e]n from an intemperate hatred to Jefferson were disposed to proceed to the most desperate extremities. Being perfectly resolved not to risk the constitution or a civil war, I found the moment arrived at which it was necessary to take a decided Step.

Grudgingly, then, the Adams administration oversaw America’s first transfer of power. It was neither entirely peaceful (the threat of violence loomed throughout) nor inevitable. But in accepting defeat and leaving office, the Federalists took a major step toward solidifying the constitutional system that would eventually become American democracy.

Once parties learn to lose, democracy can take root. And once democracy takes root, alternation in power becomes so routine that people take it for granted. In December 2021, seventy years after German democracy was reestablished following World War II, the country’s long-serving chancellor, Angela Merkel, retired from office. That fall, her Christian Democratic Party had

been defeated by the opposition Social Democrats. The simple swearing-in ceremony of the new Social Democratic chancellor felt more like a marriage ceremony at the county clerk's office, marked by the signing of papers and handing over of documents. Observers were more worried about catching the latest COVID variant than the possibility of violence or an illegal seizure of power. When the new chancellor, Olaf Scholz, met his vanquished opponent, the Christian Democrat Armin Laschet, on the floor of the Reichstag building, they greeted each other with a friendly fist bump.

How does a democracy get to where Germany is today, where the transfer of power is drama-free? What enables the norm of accepting defeat to take hold?

Two conditions help. First, parties are most likely to accept defeat when they believe they stand a reasonable chance of winning again in the future.

The Peronists might have been shocked by their 1983 electoral defeat, but they remained Argentina's largest party, with more members than all other parties combined. Confident that they could win again, many leading Peronists quickly set about doing just that. Carlos Menem, who had just been elected governor of the small northwestern province of La Rioja, started preparing his presidential bid soon after his party's 1983 defeat. Menem would go on to win the presidency in 1989, and the Peronists would win four of the five presidential elections that followed.

Although Federalist leaders' uncertainty about the future made America's 1801 transition more difficult, many of them ultimately exhibited confidence that they would soon regain power. "We are not dead yet," one Federalist declared three days after Jefferson's

inauguration. Fisher Ames advised his fellow Federalists to embrace their new opposition status, because they “should soon stand on high ground, and be ready to resume the reins of government with advantage.” Likewise, Oliver Wolcott Jr., Adams’s Treasury secretary, expected the Federalists to “remain a party, and in short time regain our influence.” Indeed, a New Jersey Federalist who had recently begun work on a new house declared he would suspend construction until the Federalists returned to power. (That proved to be a mistake.)

A second condition that helps parties accept defeat is the belief that losing power will not bring catastrophe—that a change of government will not threaten the lives, livelihoods, or most cherished principles of the outgoing party and its constituents. Elections often feel like high-stakes battles, but if the stakes are *too* high, and losing parties fear they will lose *everything*, they will be reluctant to relinquish power. In other words, it is an outsized fear of losing that turns parties against democracy.

The lowering of stakes was critical to the 1801 transition in the United States. Amid the polarized campaign, many Federalists cast the Republicans as an existential threat, associating a Jefferson victory with a Jacobin-style revolution that would condemn Federalists to poverty and exile, or worse, cause them to “wade in blood,” in the words of the Federalist U.S. senator Uriah Tracy. Ultimately, however, Hamilton and other founding leaders recognized that Jefferson was a pragmatist who would work within the existing system. As Rufus King wrote to a Federalist friend during the campaign, “I have no notion that our Government or the security of our property can or will be, in any material degree, affected” by a Jefferson victory. Backroom negotiations appear to have con-

vinced key Federalists that their most cherished priorities—such as the navy, the Bank of the United States, and the national debt—would be protected under Jefferson. For good measure, the outgoing Federalists packed the courts, creating sixteen new federal judgeships and filling them with allies. The Federalists thus left power believing that a Jefferson presidency would not be calamitous. Upon hearing Jefferson's conciliatory inaugural address, Hamilton concluded that "the new president will not lend himself to dangerous innovations, but in essential points will tread in the steps of his predecessors."

Accepting defeat gets harder when parties are fearful—fearful that they won't be able to win again in the future or, more fundamentally, that they will lose more than just an election. When defeat feels like an existential threat to politicians or their constituents, they grow desperate to avoid it.

Such fears often arise during periods of far-reaching social change.

Research in political psychology teaches us that social status—where one stands in relation to others—can powerfully shape political attitudes. We often gauge our social status in terms of the status of the groups we identify with. Those groups may be based on social class, religion, geographic region, or race or ethnicity, and where they sit in the larger societal pecking order greatly affects our own individual sense of self-worth. Economic, demographic, cultural, and political change may challenge existing social hierarchies, raising the status of some groups and, inevitably, lowering the relative status of others. What the writer Barbara Ehrenreich called the "fear of falling" can be a powerful force. When a political party represents a group that perceives itself to be losing

ground, it often radicalizes. With their constituents' way of life seemingly at stake, party leaders feel pressure to win at any cost. Losing is no longer acceptable.

Existential fear thwarted the emergence of democracy in early twentieth-century Germany. On the eve of World War I, imperial Germany was only a partial democracy, still dominated by a small circle of high-status aristocrats, industrialists, and bureaucrats. There were national elections, but real power lay with Prussia, whose highly restrictive suffrage rules heavily favored the rich: a tiered voting system effectively gave wealthy people more votes. Prior to 1903, there was no secret ballot; voting in the open allowed local elites and government officials to keep close tabs on how their communities voted. Even after 1903, landowners and industrialists pressured government officials to tamper with the vote.

There was a great deal of public demand for political reform. Germany was an industrial economy with a big middle class and a robust civil society. Yet democratic reformers confronted a reactionary, shrinking, and thus increasingly terrified conservative elite. Long dependent on a rigged electoral system, German conservatives and their landowner allies were convinced that any tinkering with voting rules would dilute their power and bring electoral defeat. And electoral defeat, they believed, would hasten the demise of the entire aristocratic order. Democracy thus constituted a threat to everything they stood for. Big landowners feared they would lose their grip over cheap labor in the countryside. They feared they would lose the protectionist tariffs that sustained their outmoded agricultural system. Factory owners in the booming industrial heartlands feared they would lose control over

workers who were becoming emboldened by the growing labor movement.

In short, Prussian conservatives feared more than losing elections. They feared losing their dominant position in society. In May 1912, during a final prewar effort to reform Prussia's voting system, the Prussian Conservative leader Ernst von Heydebrand took to the floor of the parliament and passionately defended the old order, insisting that "rule by the undifferentiated masses . . . is an attack against the basic laws of nature!" During World War I, General Erich Ludendorff, a prominent government official, embodied the most extreme form of German conservatism. Writing to a friend, Ludendorff described democracy as "a terror without end." "With the equal franchise we cannot live," he wrote. "It would be worse than a lost war!"

So German conservatives voted again and again (a total of sixteen times) to block political reform. Driven by a deep-seated fear of the working class and socialism, they resisted democratization until the final days of World War I.

German conservatives never really learned how to lose until after World War II. But on occasion even established democratic parties lose the ability to lose. To see how and why, consider a very different setting: twenty-first-century Thailand. The country has had a rocky political history, with more than a dozen military coups since the 1930s. In the 1990s, however, democracy seemed to be consolidating. Popular protests had brought an end to military rule, and the middle-class-based Democrat Party, a longtime opponent of the military, triumphed in the 1992 elections. A new

constitution, a decade of double-digit economic growth, and an expanding and increasingly self-confident middle class all left Thailand's democratic future looking bright. Some observers even surmised that Thailand was on track to join the ranks of other wealthy East Asian democracies, like Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan.

But things went awry in the early twenty-first century. A succession of military coups destroyed Thailand's embryonic democracy and restored the army to a position of dominance. And surprisingly, the Democrat Party, which had led the fight for democracy in the 1990s, embraced these coups. What happened?

A telling moment came on the first Sunday of February 2014. It was Election Day. In Bangkok, a massive city of ten million, getting to the polls had always been difficult. But on this day, it was harder than usual. Protesters, drawn mainly from Thailand's educated middle classes, clogged the streets. For months, the protesters had been organizing carnival-like gatherings in Bangkok's central squares, shopping malls, and major intersections. Political speeches were mixed with live music and public large-screen TV viewings. University students and professionals returning home from their office jobs gathered in the streets with Thai flags painted on their faces, posing for selfies to post on their Facebook pages. Actors, pop stars, and scions of some of Thailand's wealthiest and most famous families were there. In a high-profile moment of radical chic, Chitpas Bhirombhakdi, the twenty-eight-year-old heir-ess to the \$2.6 billion Singha beer family fortune, rode a bulldozer through police barricades. When officers began to use tear gas, she posted Instagram pictures of herself washing out the eyes of her compatriots. "People you would normally see in the society pages

were out there,” the editor of Bangkok’s fashion magazine the *Thailand Tatler* told a Reuters journalist. “All the people from big families used to be called the silent minority. Well, they’re not silent anymore.”

Despite the festive atmosphere, the gatherings had a serious purpose: protesters were calling for the resignation of the elected prime minister, Yingluck Shinawatra, whom they attacked as corrupt. And now that Prime Minister Yingluck had called an election, the protesters had taken to the streets to *oppose* it. Many of the movement’s organizers, surprisingly, came from the Democrat Party. Led by the former Democrat Party general secretary, Suthep Thaugsuban, a group called the People’s Democratic Reform Committee (PDRC) had organized an elaborate campaign to prevent the election from happening at all. PDRC and Democrat Party activists physically blocked candidates from registering, and protest leaders called for a boycott of the election. The Democrats—apparently in coordination with the protesters—ultimately decided to stay out of the election in protest, and two days before the polls opened, a team of lawyers working for the Democrats petitioned the Constitutional Court to have the election declared invalid. On Election Day, protesters interfered with the distribution of ballots, pressured election officials to close polling stations, and intimidated voters. Voting was disrupted in nearly one out of every five districts. In many instances, election officials simply couldn’t reach polling stations through the crowds of protesters. Frustrated voters stood in line, voter registration cards in hand, chanting, “Election! Election! We want to vote today!” But the mostly middle-class Bangkok protesters had given up on elections. One of their slogans, proposed by the real estate magnate Srivara