

**Overall Rating:**

☆ ☆ ☆ ☆ ☆

**Did you complete the book?**

Yes  No  Almost

What was your overall opinion of the books?

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What was your favorite part of the books?

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What did you not like?

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Your favorite quotes:

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01. In the introduction, the authors say that “History doesn’t repeat, but it rhymes.” How does looking at the history of events in both other countries and our own help shape our understanding of current events?

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02. The authors argue that American democracy is not exceptional, and that the Constitution alone is not sufficient to preserve it. Democracy depends on established political norms, gatekeeping, and alliances. In what ways has political polarization contributed to the tossing aside of established norms that we are currently seeing?

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03. Why might politicians partner with those they view as a threat to democracy and how does the failure of establishment politicians to distance themselves from extremists influence the opinions of the electorate?

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04. The authors argue that the evolution of the political primary process is one way by which the gatekeepers of the political system lost power to the electorate. How did this process contribute to the election of Donald Trump? Is the primary system too democratic? Should voters have the power to nominate presidential candidates or is this a job that should be left to the party leaders?

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05. Do citizens in a democracy overestimate their influence and how, outside of elections, can the average citizen aid the gatekeeping process?

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06. According to the authors, two “guardrails” of American democracy are forbearance and mutual respect. At what point in American history did the degradation of these norms begin and what major factors have lessened the adherence to these norms?

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07. How have the widening partisan gap and the perception of the media contributed to political polarization?

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08. The authors explain that the upholding of political norms in the past has depended in part on an acceptance of racial inequality. What events in recent years, specifically relating to race relations, have contributed to the degradation of civility and cooperation? How do politicians and the media influence the discussions surrounding racial equality and what role has Donald Trump played in influencing the rhetoric surrounding race relations?

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09. The authors make the claim that America's great challenge is, in the words of Danielle Allen, to establish: ". . . a multiethnic democracy in which no particular ethnic group is in the majority and where political equality, social equality and economies that empower all have been achieved." Is this type of democracy a possibility in the United States? What specific actions can the United States take to ensure a more multiethnic democracy?

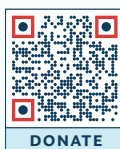
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10. *How Democracies Die* was published after Donald Trump was elected, but more than two years before the events of January 6, 2021. Do you think the book foreshadows those events, and if so how?

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## QUOTES

“ Once a would-be authoritarian makes it to power, democracies face a second critical test: Will the autocratic leader subvert democratic institutions or be constrained by them? Institutions alone are not enough to rein in elected autocrats. Constitutions must be defended—by political parties and organized citizens, but also by democratic norms.

“ The erosion of democratic norms began in the 1980s and 1990s and accelerated in the 2000s. By the time Barack Obama became president, many Republicans, in particular, questioned the legitimacy of their Democratic rivals and had abandoned forbearance for a strategy of winning by any means necessary.

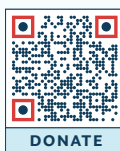
“ Collective abdication—the transfer of authority to a leader who threatens democracy—usually flows from one of two sources. The first is the misguided belief that an authoritarian can be controlled or tamed. The second is what sociologist Ivan Ermakoff calls ‘ideological collusion,’ in which the authoritarian’s agenda overlaps sufficiently with that of mainstream politicians that abdication is desirable, or at least preferable to the alternatives.

“ Because of the gaps and ambiguities inherent in all legal systems, we cannot rely on constitutions alone to safeguard democracy against would-be authoritarians.

“ The immense powers of the executive branch create a temptation for presidents to rule unilaterally—at the margins of Congress and the judiciary. Presidents who find their agenda stalled can circumvent the legislature by issuing executive orders, proclamations, directives, executive agreements, or presidential memoranda, which all assume the weight of law without the endorsement of Congress. The Constitution does not prohibit such action.

“ But it is not only media and outside interests that have pushed the Republican Party toward extremism. Social and cultural changes have also played a major role. Unlike the Democratic Party, which has grown increasingly diverse in recent decades, the GOP has remained culturally homogeneous.

“ When American democracy has worked, it has relied upon two norms that we often take for granted—mutual tolerance and institutional forbearance. Treating rivals as legitimate contenders for power and underutilizing one’s institutional prerogatives in the spirit of fair play are not written into the Constitution. Yet without them, our constitutional checks and balances will not operate as we expect them to.



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# FOUR KEY INDICATORS OF AUTHORITARIAN BEHAVIOR

## 01. Rejection of (or weak commitment to) democratic rules of the game

Do they reject the Constitution or express a willingness to violate it?

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?

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?

Do they attempt to undermine the legitimacy of elections, for example, by refusing to accept credible electoral results?

## 02. Denial of the legitimacy of political opponents

Do they describe their rivals as subversive, or opposed to the existing constitutional order?

Do they claim that their rivals constitute an existential threat, either to national security or to the prevailing way of life?

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?

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)?

## 03. 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?

## 04. 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?

**The four basic rules of loyal democrats:**

- Expel antidemocratic extremists from their own ranks
- Sever all ties—public and private—with allied groups that engage in antidemocratic behavior
- Unambiguously condemn political violence and other antidemocratic behavior
- Loyal democrats join forces with rival prodemocratic parties to isolate and defeat antidemocratic extremists

01. The 1965 Voting Rights Act was passed overwhelmingly by both parties. But between 2011 and 2016, 13 states—all led by Republicans—passed strict photo ID laws for voters. Why was there a change in the party line, and in what ways do these laws make it harder for certain Americans to vote?

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02. According to a 2015 survey, a large majority of African Americans, Hispanic Americans, and religiously unaffiliated Americans said that life had changed for the better since the 1950s. In contrast, 57% of whites and 72% of white evangelical Christians said it had changed for the worse. How do you explain the difference in these perceptions?

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03. After the 2020 election, the majority of Republicans in Congress backed Donald Trump's claims that the election had been stolen from him. In fact, two-thirds of House Republicans voted against the certification of election results. In addition, 17 Republican state attorneys general filed a lawsuit to invalidate election results in certain swing states. What duty did these attorneys general and members of Congress have to their constituents and their party, and did their votes go against that duty?

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04. The Senate filibuster gives power to the minority party to prevent legislation from advancing. In recent years, it has been increasingly used on both sides. Do you support ending the filibuster and if so, why?

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05. Twice in recent history—in 2000 and 2016—the person who won the presidential election was able to do so without securing the popular vote. How does the Electoral College impact the outcome of elections, and what can be done to mitigate that impact?

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06. Due to the nature of the Electoral College and the Senate, it's possible for Supreme Court justices to be nominated and confirmed by leaders who represent only a minority of Americans. In fact, four of nine current justices were confirmed by a Senate majority that represented less than half of the American population and three of nine were nominated by presidents who did not win the popular vote. What changes to the Supreme Court could be made that would help to correct this inconsistency?

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07. Many of the country's founders thought that direct election was the "fittest" way to choose a president, rather than the Electoral College that we ended up with. The historian Alexander Keyssar called the Electoral College a "consensus second choice," which was adopted by a convention that could not agree on an alternative. Why do you think the Electoral College has held on for so long?

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08. In the 1960s, there was strong public support for abolishing the Electoral College. A measure to do so passed the House of Representatives in 1969, but was shut down by Southern segregationists in the Senate. The bill failed to pass the Senate several more times in subsequent years. How would our country be different today if the measure had passed? How would it change the importance that we place on whether an individual state is "red" or "blue"?

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09. The authors make a number of recommendations for making it easier to vote, including automatic voter registration, expanding early voting and voting by mail, moving Election Day to a Sunday or making it a national holiday, and restoring the protections from the 1965 Voting Rights Act. How would these measures help to ensure that election results reflect the wishes of the majority?

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10. In 2016, only 39% of voters aged 18-29 voted, versus more than 70% of those over age 60. Although the percentage of young voters increased in 2020, it is still far below that of older voters. What can be done to convince younger voters that voting is worthwhile and that their vote counts?

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## QUOTES

- “ 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 have to save it ourselves.
- “ America’s conservative party is now consistently given a leg up by political institutions that remain frozen in place despite sweeping societal change.
- “ In January 2022, when majorities in both houses of Congress—and more than 60% of Americans—backed voting rights legislation, it was blocked by a minority in the Senate. How did we get to a place where partisan minority can wield such power?
- “ The United States, once a democratic pioneer and model for other nations, has now become a democratic laggard. The endurance of our pre-democratic institutions as other democracies have dismantled theirs makes us a uniquely counter-majoritarian democracy at the dawn of the twenty-first century.
- “ The threat to democracy goes beyond the thwarting of public opinion. There is a risk today that America’s counter-majoritarian institutions will reinforce or even entrench minority rule.
- “ The emergence of minority rule matters not only because it allows losers to win. It also has insidious effects on public policies that affect people’s lives.



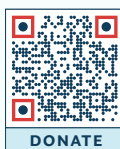
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## ADDITIONAL READING

01. **Fascism: A Warning**  
Madeleine Albright
02. **A Higher Loyalty: Truth, Lies, and Leadership**  
James Comey
03. **Evicted: Poverty and Profit in the American City**  
Matthew Desmond
04. **Trumpocracy: The Corruption of the American Republic**  
David Frum
05. **The Death of Democracy: Hitler's Rise to Power and the Downfall of the Weimar Republic**  
Benjamin Carter Hett
06. **The Breakdown of Democratic Regimes: Crisis, Breakdown and Reequilibration**  
Juan J. Linz
07. **1984**  
George Orwell
08. **The Plot Against America**  
Philip Roth
09. **The Color of Law**  
Richard Rothstein
10. **Can It Happen Here?: Authoritarianism in America**  
Cass Sunstein



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