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**Jonathan Groubert:** Bright Minds, the podcast from the John Adams Institute. It is brought to you by the members of the John Adams. Why not become a member yourself or, even better, a patron and enjoy all the extras and benefits? Find out more at [www.john-adams.nl](http://www.john-adams.nl) and click on: become a member. From Amsterdam, this is bright Mines, the podcast of the John Adams Institute, a treasure cove of the best and the brightest of American thinking, and this is the author and historian Daniel Ziblatt, detailing how to recognize a demagogue.

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**Daniel Ziblatt:** Does a politician condone or accept violence? Does a politician attack civil liberties, such as the media? Does a politician accept the legitimacy of their political rivals, or do they call their polite their rivals agents of foreign powers? And then the fourth criteria: do politicians accept the basic rules of a democratic constitutional order? And what was so striking was that Donald Trump checked all of these boxes.

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**Jonathan Groubert:** He checked all the boxes in the sense that Donald Trump respected none of these things, and this led Harvard professor, historian and writer Daniel Ziblatt to wonder out loud: how do democracies die? So he co-authored a book asking that very question with fellow Harvard political scientist and professor of government, Stephen Levitsky, and they concluded that these days, when democracies die, it's not at the hands of generals, but of duly elected leaders. Presidents or prime ministers who subvert the very process that brought them to power. And indeed Mr Ziblatt gave this talk to our Amsterdam audience in January of 2020, on the cusp of President Trump's first impeachment. But as an historian he also looks at America's current political crisis and concludes; we've kind of been here before and survived it. So first I'm going to play his talk to the audience, in which he lays out this message that is both a warning and somewhat hopeful, and then he's interviewed by the Dutch journalist, Chris Kijne, for a far ranging conversation about the history of the American demagogue and why American democracy is worth saving. So here's Daniel Ziblatt.

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**Daniel Ziblatt:** I am going to talk to you tonight about the dangers facing American democracy today. I'm going to step back from the headlines, as difficult as that is, but I think it's actually important to do that, because I think it's really important to try to think about how we ended up where we are. It's often very tempting and I find myself falling into this trap of being caught by breaking news alerts and, and the latest headlines and losing sense of the bigger story. And so I want to give us a bit of a sense of the bigger story this evening, drawing on the book that I wrote with Steve Levitsky. The motivation really is that if we are going to understand, if we're going to figure out a way out of the situation in the United States, a way to help prepare American democracy, it's really critical to understand the history of how we ended up in this situation. We have to get the history right to understand how to get out of the mess that we're in. So what I'm going to do this evening, and my 25 minutes or so, is to give you my account of how we ended up in this mess and I hope in the discussion we can talk about ways out. So I'll begin.

I think it's important to put the U.S. in a global context, and any discussion of the American predicament must recognize that there is a global trend taking place. When you look around the world today, it's clear that democracies don't die like they used to. Democracies used to die in the form of military Coups. During the Cold War, threequarters of democratic breakdowns took the form of military Coups at the hands of men with guns, generals. Since the end of the Cold War, most democracies die in much more subtle ways. They die not at the hands of generals, but rather of presidents, Prime Minister, elected politicians who used the very institutions of democracy to subvert it. So elections plebiscites, acts of Congress, Supreme Court rulings, Hugo Chavez, Vladimir Putin, Victor Orban and Erdogan in Turkey.

What's so dangerously insidious about this particular mode of democratic death is that it very often happens precisely behind the facade of democracy. So it's hard to see when it's happening. There are no tanks in the streets, constitutions remain intact, Congress or parliament continue to meet, and so, as a result of all of this, many citizens aren't aware that it's happening until it's too late. In 2011. So, 12 years into Hugo Chavez' presidency, a survey was done in Venezuela and a majority of Venezuelans said in the survey they still lived in a democracy. So understanding that democracies die in this way today is really important. Because if the road to democratic death often happens today at the ballot box, one of the keys to prevent this from happening is to prevent autocratic minded leaders from getting elected in the first place. So to prevent figures like Orban, Putin, Erdogan, from using electoral institutions to get elected in the first place, I would argue that the United States failed this task in 2016.

Now there are many reasons, of course, why Donald Trump won the election and got elected in 2016. But in my book with Steve Levitsky we focus on one factor that we think doesn't get enough attention; that is how our political parties pick their candidates for the presidency. This is important because historically, the US has actually had an incredible number of demagogues in their history, in its history. So in the in the 1920's, Henry Ford, founder of Ford Motor company, rabid antisemite, really had presidential ambitions. Huey long, as we've just heard, In the 1930's, the autocratic governor of Louisiana. Joe McCarthy, George Wallace, the segregationist governor in the 1960's, each of these figures was very popular. In fact, there's Gallup poll data actually going back to the 1930's, and at their peak points of popularity, each of them had around 30/35% approval ratings, which is not so far from Donald Trump's base when he was elected President. But none of these figures I just mentioned, despite being very popular, ever made it close to the presidency.

These kinds of political figures, though an American issue, were kept out, not because they weren't popular, they were popular. They were kept out because of the way that political parties in the United States used to pick their candidates for the presidency. So prior to 1972, American presidential candidates were selected in the old convention system and what we often now think of as a system of smoke filled backrooms. This old convention system was not very democratic, was not inclusive, it was not transparent, but it was actually quite effective filtration system. Party leaders, who often worked very closely with potential candidates, knew their strength, knew their weaknesses, knew how they dealt with stress and adversity and crucially knew which might be potential demagogues. These were

the ones who played a critical role. These, these, the party leaders, were in effect party gatekeepers. They knew who might be potential demagogues. So despite all of its shortcomings and I would, there were many. I wouldn't argue that we should go back to a system of smoke filled rooms.

The old convention system had basically a perfect record in keeping demagogues far from power. Now, the primary system which was adopted in the 1970's, and 1972 in the United States was far more open, far more transparent, far, far more democratic than the old Convention system, but it also dramatically weakened the power of party leaders. And we clearly saw this in 2016. Republican Party leaders, almost to an individual, despised Trump. They thought he was unfit for office, but they had no means in the primary process to stop him. So primaries, and this is perhaps the least popular part of our book, are a double-edged sword. They are more democratic, but they also leave us more vulnerable to demagogues. Had the old Convention system been in place in 2016, Donald Trump wouldn't have gone anywhere near the White House.

Now electing a Demagogue extremist demagogue is never good for democracy, that's clear, but it doesn't also, it doesn't condemn us to democratic breakdown, because this is actually where our political institutions are supposed to come into play. Americans place a lot of faith in their constitution. There's actually good reason for this. The U.S. has all this written constitution, in some sense the most successful constitution in the world. Our system of checks and balances has constrained many powerful and ambitious presidents. You can think of Andrew Jackson, Teddy Roosevelt, F.D.R. And, of course, Nixon. But one of the core messages of our book is that the American constitution and, for that matter, any constitution, is not enough to save us. The words on the page, while important, aren't enough. Constitutions actually work best when they are reinforced by unwritten rules or what we call democratic norms.

So our book focuses on two key democratic norms in particular. The first is the norm of what we call mutual toleration or accepting the legitimacy of our partisan rivals. So this means, no matter how much we disagree with or in fact dislike our partisan rivals, we recognize publicly that they are loyal citizens, who have an equal and legitimate right to compete for office and if they beat us, to govern. In other words, we do not treat our rivals as enemies. The second form is a little less familiar. Perhaps it's the norm of what we call institutional forbearance. Now, what we mean by forbearance is essentially refraining from exercising one's legal right. It's an act of deliberate self-restraint an underutilization of one's and we often don't think about this in politics, but it's absolutely vital.

Think about just for a moment what a president in the United States, under the constitution, legally, is able to do, and we're minded of this. Of course, all the time these days the President can pardon whoever he or she wants at any point, for any reason. Any president with a congressional majority, constitutionally, can pack the Supreme Court. If you don't like how the Supreme Court is ruling, expand it to 11, expand it to 13, fill it with allies. This is all perfectly legal. If the President's agenda is stalled in Congress. The President can rule through executive order and declare national emergencies, again something we have seen recently. The constitution doesn't prohibit such action.

Think about what Congress can do. Congress can use, and the Senate can use its right of advising consent to block a President, any pick for the Cabinet or Supreme Court of a President. And of course, the House of Representatives can impeach a President on any grounds, in effect, it chooses. So my point is that politicians can exploit the letter of the Constitution in ways that totally eviscerate the spirit of the Constitution. This is court packing, partisan impeachments, government shutdowns, national emergencies. This mode of politics is, is a kind of politics that the legal scholar Martin calls; constitutional hardball, constitutional hardball.

So let me just give you an example of constitutional hardball from a different setting: So, Argentina is a country that, in 1853, adopted a constitution that was modelled explicitly on the American Constitution. One scholar, in fact, actually has identified that two-thirds of the text of the Argentinian Constitution was lifted directly from the American Constitution. So it's a virtual replica of the US Constitution. But Juan Perón, when he was elected President in the 1940's, used that very constitution to undermine Argentinian democracy.

So one of the first moves that Peron made, when elected President in 1946, was to have Congress impeach three out of five Supreme Court justices on grounds of malfeasance. A move that actually was technically legal. Congress then passed a law-making it a crime to disrespect the President. So when the opposition leader Ricardo Balbín was arrested under this law, he challenged the constitutionality of the law and court. This newly packed Supreme Court upheld the law. All of this again was technically legal. So if you look at any failure failing democracy around the world today or in the past, you'll find an abundance of constitutional hardball.

Not only Argentina under Peróm, but Spain and Germany in the 1930's, Venezuela under Chavez, contemporary Hungary, Poland and Turkey. What prevents a constitutional system of checks and balances from descending into this kind of form of constitutional hardball, that can wreck a democracy, is forbearance. It's a shared commitment to exercising restraint in the exercise of one's institutional prerogatives. It's a shared commitment to the spirit of the law. I'll give you another example from the American setting.

If you think about presidential term limits in the United States historically, prior to 1951, as many of you I'm sure now, for a 150 years, the US constitution placed, placed no limits on how many terms a President could be re-elected. So, legally, if re-elected a President could be president for life in the United States before 1951. Famously, of course, George Washington stepped down after two terms and for nearly a 150 years no president ever even sought a third term, including very ambitious presidents. But it was not. the constitution that prevented this from happening, it was an unwritten rule of self-restraint. So, these two norms of mutual toleration and forbearance are what my co-author and I call the soft guardrails of our democracy. They help prevent normal, healthy political competition from spiraling into the kind of partisan fight to the death, that wrecked democracy in Europe in the 1930's and Latin America in the 60's and 70's.

America hasn't always had this, these soft guard rails. It wasn't born with them. It didn't have them, for instance, in the 1790's, when institutional warfare between the

Federalists, including John Adams and the Republicans, nearly destroyed the Republic before it even got started. It didn't certainly have, the U.S. didn't have these soft guard rails in the run-up to the U.S. civil War. Historian Joan Freeman has counted in the 1850's, in the lead-up to the civil war. She counts the number of acts of violence on the floor of Congress and she discovers instances of fist fights, caning, stabbing. She counts a 125 different acts of violence on the floor of the US Congress. Obviously norms of mutual toleration were not well developed at that point.

These norms remained low, of course, during the civil war and after the civil war, the late 1860's and early 1870's were replete with hard ball politics. An impeachment of a president was launched in 1868, Supreme Court nominees were blocked, Supreme Court size was expanded in 1866 and 1869 and there was a fraudulent presidential election in 1876. But for very tragic reasons that we discuss in our book, beginning in the late 19th century, Democrats and Republicans began to accept one another as legitimate and they largely avoided destabilizing acts of constitutional hard ball. In particular, what prompted this was that Republicans gave up on the cause of reconstruction in the US South, in effect giving up on the cause of racial equality in the US South and giving up on the cause of racial equality. This was a kind of tragic truce that we still live with today. In the United States, Republicans allowed Democrats to disenfranchise blacks in the South, and so southern Democrats no longer viewed Republicans as an existential threat. Mutual toleration was restored, forbearance reemerged. So again. A tragic irony of our history is that our norms of mutual toleration and forbearance, which are preconditions for democracy, were established at the price of racial exclusion and single-party rule in the US. So our democracy was fundamentally incomplete.

But this also meant that beginning in the early 20th century, constitutional hardball diminished. There were no impeachments or successful quarts packings. Senators were judicious in their use of the filibuster and their right of advice and consent, and outside of wartime presidents avoided acting unilaterally. So for more than a century, from the late 19th century to the late 20th century, our system of checks and balances worked. But again they worked because they were reinforced by norms of mutual toleration and forbearance.

So, we show in our book that these norms have been unravelling since the 1990. Over the last quarter-century we argue this style of politics began really in the 1990's and we, we don't attribute it to Newt Gingrich. But he's certainly one of the first actors who use these strategies that we see more frequently today. Newt Gingrich became speaker of the House of Representatives in 1995, beginning in the early, and instructed his very self-consciously distributing audiotapes to his members, Republican members of Congress, instructed his members of Congress, when talking about Democrats in public, to use terms like betray, anti-flag traitor to describe Republicans.

So, in other words he encourages republican allies to abandon the norm of mutual toleration. Gingrich was also master of constitutional hardball. He engineered the first major government shutdown of the modern era and three years later the republican House carried out mostly partisan impeachment of Bill Clinton. This was the first presidential impeachment, remember, in a 130 years when this happened, (inaudible) erosion really

accelerated in the 2000's. Of course there's elements of tit-for-tat here, but I think the evidence pretty firmly supports the contention that Republicans were really the first movers.

During the Obama era the Tea Party movement radicalized the Republicans, encouraging them to abandon mutual toleration. Republican leaders like Newt Gingrich again, Sarah Palin, Rudi Giuliani, Mike Huckabee, told their followers that President Obama didn't love America. The Obama and the Democrats weren't real Americans. The so-called Birther movement went a step further, denying that, asserting that President Obama wasn't born in the United States, thereby challenging his basic legitimacy to even be President. I'll just give you one example: a Colorado Congressman, Mike Coffman, declared at point: "I do not know if Barack Obama was born in the United States of America, but I do know this, that in his heart he's not an American, he's just not an American."

Now Americans have always had an extreme fringe, but this was no longer fringe politics. These were national republican leaders. These were Republicans on live national television at the convention in 2016, chanting "Lock her up!" about the democratic candidate for President. Leading Republicans now were, for the first time in more than a century, denying the legitimacy of their democratic rivals.

Now all of this is alarming, because what we've learned, studying other democracies in other places and other times, is that the absence of mutual toleration, if you regard your rival as an enemy, politicians are tempted to abandon forbearance and engage in an escalating spiral of constitutional hard ball. When we view our partisan rivals as enemies, when we view them as an existential threat, then of course we grow tempted to use any means necessary to stop them, and that, I think, is what is beginning to happen.

When Republicans won control of the House Congress in 2010, they adopted an overt and explicit strategy of obstructionism. There are actually more filibusters during President Obama's second term, than all of the years between World War One and the end of the Reagan presidency combined. President Obama responded with constitutional hardball of its own. When Congress refused to pass climate legislation and immigration reform, he circumvented and made policy via executive order. This action was technically legal, but it clearly violated the spirit of the Constitution, and the most stunning act of constitutional hardball of all in the Obama years, I think at least, was the US Senate's 2016 decision not to allow President Obama to even hold hearings to fill the Supreme Court vacancy created by Justice Scalia's death. This move was unprecedented since 1866.

Now all of this was before Donald Trump was elected President. So the problem is not just that Americans elected a demagogue in 2016, it's that we elected a demagogue when the soft guardrails protecting our democracy are becoming unmoored. So why is all of this happening? Well, we are in our book that what's shredding our norms? What's putting our democracy at risk is polarization. Over the last 25 years, Democrats and Republicans have come to truly fear and loathe one another.

In 1960, many of you maybe we heard about these survey results. In 1960, in a survey, five percent of Republicans and four percent of Democrats said they would be displeased if their child married somebody of the other political Party. Today that number is

50%. According to recent research by political scientists Liliana Mason, about 60% of Democrats and Republicans regard the other party as a danger to America. A recent survey shows that 49% of Republicans and 55% of Democrats say the other party makes them afraid. We've not seen this kind of partisan hatred since the end of the 19th century. People don't fear and loathe each other over taxes and health care. Today's partisan differences run much deeper. They are about race, religion and way of life. America's parties have changed dramatically over the last 50 years.

Their names, of course, haven't changed, but they have fundamentally changed in the social coalitions behind them. In the 1960's the Republicans and the Democrats were culturally and demographically, especially the leadership, quite alike. There were big policy differences, of course, but demographically they were overwhelmingly. Both parties were overwhelmingly white and Christian. Three big changes have occurred over the last half century. First, the Civil Rights movement and the achievement of full civil rights and voting rights for all-Americans in the 1960's led to a massive, although gradual, migration of southern Democrats to the Republican Party, while at the same time African-Americans especially in the South, became overwhelmingly democratic. Second, over the past 50 years, the US experienced a massive wave of immigration. Most of these immigrants ended up in the Democratic Party. And third, by the time of Reagan, evangelical Christians who until the 1980's had been evenly split actually between the two parties, actually more Democrats than Republicans, by the 1980's they had flocked overwhelmingly; Evangelicals had flocked overwhelmingly to the Republican Party. So what do these three big changes mean?

What it means is that today Democrats and Republicans are racially and culturally incredibly distinct. The Democrats are mostly a kind of rainbow coalition of urban and educated secular whites and ethnic minorities. Nearly half the Democratic Party's voters today are non-white. The Republicans by contrast, remain an overwhelmingly white and Christian party. This is important because white Christians aren't just any group. They were once the majority and, even more importantly, they used to sit unchallenged atop America's social, economic, cultural and political hierarchies. They filled the Presidency, the Supreme Court, the Congress, governors mansions, they were the pillars of local communities, they were the CEOs, the newscasters, the movie stars and the college professors.

Those days are long-gone but crucially they were the face of the democratic and republican Parties. No longer. Losing a majority and losing one's dominant social status can be deeply threatening. Many Republicans, not all for sure, but many republican voters, feel that the country they grew up in is being taken away from them. This, I think, is ultimately what fills, fuels both the radicalization of the Republican Party and the polarization of our politics. The problem is that extreme polarization can kill democracies. This is a major lesson from the failure of democracies in Europe in the 1930's, in South America in the 1960's and 70's, when politics is so deeply polarized that each side views a victory by the other side is intolerable, as, beyond the pale, democracy is in trouble, because when an opposition victory becomes intolerable, you of course begin to justify using extraordinary means to stop it. Things like violence, election fraud, Coups. This is what reeked Democracy in Spain in the 1930's, Brazil in the 60's, Chile in the 1970's.

Of course, Americans haven't reached that point, but Americans have reached a point where, according to exit polls in 2016, one out of every four Trump voters, one out of every four people who voted for Trump believed he was unfit for office. Yet they still preferred him to the democratic candidate. We've reached a point where, according to Gallup polls over the last several years, Republicans have a more favorable view of Vladimir Putin than of Hillary Clinton. These are dangerous levels of polarization. Donald Trump is a symptom of that polarization, not just a cause of it, and I'm sad to say his departure won't put an end to it.

So where does that leave us? I have 25 minutes. What do we do about this time for me to sit-down. no, I think I'll just conclude by saying there's two, and I hope we can talk more about these two big lessons. I would like to just emphasize, reemphasize from the story that I've just told. First, I think the way our political parties pick our presidential candidates is broken. I'm not sure what the cures are. I don't think we need to go back to the smoke filled backrooms, but a system that can give us Donald Trump is a system worth visit, revisiting as the primary season unfolds in front of us in 2020. I fear sometimes at my darkest moments that we're sleep walking to a similarly disastrous outcome. Second lesson: The driver of many of our institutional disfunctions in the United States is the kind of polarization I've described to you this evening, and I think the chief culprit behind this polarization is the radicalization of the Republican Party, and so any effort to confront America's democratic ills, I think, have to think about these two big problems. These are complicated problems with no single solution, but we need to confront them head on to really begin to address the problems in a serious way. Thank you very much.

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**Jonathan Groubert:** And so Daniel Ziblatt was joined by the Dutch political journalist Chris Kijne for a conversation about how the American political system is particularly vulnerable to demagogues and that it's only our norms that saved us, norms that become meaningless when someone refuses to play by the rules.

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**Chris Kijne:** Why is Donald Trump unfit for office?

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**Daniel Ziblatt:** What I would argue make somebody unfit for, I mean there's many things that might make someone unfit for office. But in particular, what really motivated to write this book was the sense that somebody does even play by the democratic rules of the game. All right, it has little commitment to the rules of the game or outward overt hostility towards the basic rules of the game, because if you can't even agree on-the-ground rules, then you can't have a democratic competition.

So the thing that motivated us to really write this book was we had read, read this book by Juan Linz, Spanish, great Spanish political scientist who taught for many years at Yale and studied the breakdown of democracy in the interwar years and in Latin America, and he proposed what he called a litmus test to identify authoritarian behavior of politicians



before they get elected to office. And he, he was a brilliant guy in an inspiration for us, his writing wasn't always so clear and it was spread out over many pages. The litmus test, but we condensed it into our book and we kind of come up with this checklist of characteristics. This is, I think, what you were referring to: introduction. So does a politician condone or accept violence? Does a politician attack civil liberties such as the media? Does a politician accept the legitimacy of their political rivals, or do they call their political rivals criminals, agents of foreign powers? And then the fourth criteria that Linz identifies is; do politicians accept the basic rules of the game of a constitutional order, of a democratic constitutional order, and what Linz said is that if you ever come across a politician who is running for office, who wants to be campaign for office, who meets any of these criteria, you should get nervous. And what was so striking, you know he wrote this in the 1970's. Donald Trump was not a concept, for it was that Donald Trump checked all of these boxes, and so I think any, any politician that checks those boxes, you ought to be worried about. It's no guarantee that, it's not a full proof system. It's no guarantee that there will be a danger to democracy once in office, but it's a pretty good warning system.

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**Chris Kijne:** You spoke about the election process, and how it failed to stop Donald Trump from, from being the nominee 2016. So how come the republican party didn't see it. And why? Because that's what you said. Weren't they able to stop him from being the nominee?

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**Daniel Ziblatt:** I think here are two things that happen. One is a very common mistake and the second is a kind of structural problem. So, the common mistake is that this is, you know, something that we see repeated throughout history, is that when there is a demagogue on the horizon. So, one can think of Mussolini in the 1920's, one can think of Hitler in Germany in the late '20's. One can think of Chavez, when there is a demagogue on the horizon, who has a mass popular appeal mainstream politicians get nervous, and they often tend to be quite hubristic. They think, ah, here is somebody who is a potential threat, somebody we could potentially use. We can tap into their appeal and often out of miscalculation or out of opportunism. They think we can tap into this person, we can form alliances. What's you know, and I think american politicians weren't used to dealing with this.

What's interesting, you know, you see similar things in contemporary Europe as well in France, you know with with le Pen, and you now you know Kurt Waldheim when he ran for president in Austria a while ago. I mean that, what happens is that I think in Europe many politicians make the same mistake, but there's, there's more of a history of this mistake happening. So people are more aware of it. I think most Republicans didn't understand the full-scale of the threat and didn't realize the degree to which, when they said, well, you, we can deal with them, we can manage them. To what degree they were just parting the same things we saw politicians saying in the 1920's, 1930's, and so that's, that's the first thing. It's a kind of very human mistake to kind of underestimate the threat and have opportunism to miscalculate. So that's one thing. The second big mistake, though, I think, is a structural problem, which is that, the way our candidates are selected, it's very easy for somebody to come in from the outside and just rise right to the top, and there was.

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**Chris Kijne:** And there was a scattered field in 2016.

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**Daniel Ziblatt:** And it was a scattered field that didn't, that didn't help, but you know. So, we actually tracked over time. I forget, if we included this in the book, the number of outsiders. So people who had never held elected office running for the primary since 1972. And that number has increased since 1972, going back to the 1980's. And you had guys like Pat Robertson and people who had never held elected office. But the number of people not holding elected office running in the primaries has increased over time. And so you know the fact that in the Democratic primary today you have Tom Steyer, who's never had an elected office, Andrew Yang, you know, who has never held elected office. These kinds of outsiders have always been there, but the system makes it hard to stop these kinds of figures.

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**Chris Kijne:** But then again, I mean, the Republican Party wasn't really accommodating Donald Trump during the primaries, which of course is a competitive period, so you wouldn't expect that, but but even I mean, even after the convention there were moments that that I mean maybe the dime could have fallen to the, to the other side. The "grap the pussy" tape moment. I mean, there was an enormous amount of pressure then on the top of the Republican party to stop the candidacy, because they thought it was lost. So, so, isn't there a deeper cause, maybe in the line of the fears that you just mentioned. The racial, religious, lifestyle fears in the Republican Party that stopped them from stopping Donald Trump then?

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**Daniel Ziblatt:** Yes, certainly, and you know it's not just about the selection of candidates, because we see this wave around the world of similar kinds of candidates arising, no matter what the democracy is, and so what's driving this is partly these kinds of demographic trends that I have emphasized. What's also driving this kind of populist wave around the world is also economic, you know, growing economic dislocation, driven by increased inequality and declining social mobility, stagnating wages. All of these factors make this terrible brew which demagogues can take advantage of.

I guess my point, though, when talking about Huey Long and these other figures, is that I think it's a mistake to somehow assume that we're in a new era where it's a totally different world and the old rules of politics don't apply. You know we've seen these kinds of demagogues before, in the US and in other countries, and I think really what's changed is the way in which these guys are allowed into office or not, and so that's that's why I'm kind of emphasizing this change, and so you know it's, it's, it's, sometimes, you know, when we talk about the crisis of democracy, it reminds me a little bit of discussions about climate change. It's sort of like history is just moving in this one terrible direction. Things are getting worse. The tides are of disaffection arising, and when it comes to climate change, I agree. I believe that, but when it comes to democracy I don't think that's right. I think it's much more kind of. You know better. Natural kind of world metaphor would be of earthquakes. We kind of live through periods of earthquakes. The question is how well built our institutions to cope with these shocks and I would say the American party landscape and these kind of very weak parties where you can run on your own with your own money. You don't need the party to actually gain the nomination. This makes us vulnerable to these earthquakes.

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**Chris Kijne:** Because that's another thing you stated in your book that. Where my first hunch would be, democracy is in the hands of the people, so it should be the electorate to stop demagogues, demagogues, because we vote for them. You say it's the parties that have to protect democracy, not the electorate. Why is that?

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**Daniel Ziblatt:** Yeah, you know, and it's you know could be charged of being in an elitist here or something, but I guess the, the voters of course matter, but I think voters, it's it's hard to know. The tides of vote or disaffection move quite slowly, in fact, when you aggregate up every single individual citizen in the country, there's periods of disaffection, there's periods of satisfaction and I think really what's changed is the way we select and it's a bit of a roll of the dice. I mean, you know you could say we've changed, the U.S. changed the system in 1972 and only two, and actually 1972, when this reform was carried out. There are a bunch of political scientists who thought this was a disastrous reform and warned of demagogues.

There was what political scientist Nelson Polsby at UC Berkeley who said: you know this is paving the way for demagogues. You know it took him a long time for its prediction to come out true, but I think there was something to it. So, it essentially increased the probability that this would happen. This combined with the financial crisis, increased disaffection of voters. I wouldn't deny that there's increased dissatisfaction of voters as an outgrowth in the United States of the financial crisis, but it just lowers the threshold and makes it easier for these kinds of figures to get in. I mean, you know again, you know, sometimes when I'm in I've been living in Berlin for the year and when I make this argument people say well, it sounds you know very elitist, primaries are about letting voters choose the candidates. But no German political party, including the Green Party, would ever allow system like this where you have Bernie Sanders, he's not even a member of the party running as a nominee for the party, and the other two guys I've never even held elected office in the party, Tom Steyer, Andrew Yang. No party in Europe would allow this, and so I think the American parties are incredibly open, which in some sense allows. I mean it's a double-edged sword. It allows outsiders, it allows somebody like Barack Obama to be, to win the nomination over Hillary Clinton. That may be a good thing, but it has this other side.

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**Chris Kijne:** On the other hand, as you say, Donald Trump is not the cause of this, he may be the result of it in a way, but he's also, also riding a wave that that we could have seen coming for a long time, and you, you mentioned polarization, mutual tolerance and institutional forbearance, that that were all undermined since, well, Newt Gingrich was speaker of the House in the book, I see, I think you say, since Newt Gingrich entered the political stage, which was by the end of the 70's. But I mean it wasn't Newt Gingrich, he was riding a wave himself. You pointed at demographics now and, and white fear in fact, which, which is terrible irony, because that that's the same fear as the other period, after the reconstruction at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, that you mentioned, when Republicans gave up the black vote for, for, for making this truce with the Democrats. I mean, are we still on square one, Is it still white fear that is determining American politics?

00:38:57

**Daniel Ziblatt:** Yeah, I mean this. This period is often called the second reconstruction and I

think that's a useful phrase. Because what that, what that suggests is that, you know, just as the first reconstruction, there's nothing permanent about our politics, that it's possible to undo democratic reforms. And so the period of the passage of the Civil Rights Act, the Voting Rights Act, is kind of analogous in the 1960's, is analogous to a series of constitutional amendments in the 1860's which enfranchised African-Americans. What I would hope is that we've learned from that experience and to reduce polarization, we don't throw the baby out with the bathwater in effect or, you know, carry out a process, reduce our commitment to democratic norms.

I mean, I think the implication of our argument is not obviously to reduce polarization, we should stop addressing questions of racial equality. The challenge is how to remain committed to racial equality and full democracy, while at the same time maintaining the stability of the system. And you know that's, that's a hard kind of comment to make because it suggests that all these things that we like don't fit together so easily. But the reality, I think, is that in a, you know, most democracies don't undergo kind of major demographic change and stay democracies. I mean this is something that's historically unprecedented is a real experiment and I think the US is a country, I would hope the US is a country that can achieve this experiment and I think you know the reason. The reason this is not back to square one is, I mean we have to remember the US has never been more democratic. I mean I have this book with this very dark cover. How democracies die. But you know we have to remember this country. There's, there's, the lighter cover. The United States know. You know our democracy is not so fundamentally flat. I mean the sense that the political system that gave rise to Barack Obama, that allowed Barack Obama to be elected President twice, is the system worth defending.

00:40:56

**Chris Kijne:** Professor Ziblatt, thank you.

00:41:02

**Jonathan Groubert:** Harvard historian and the author of how democracies die, Daniel Ziblatt, in conversation with Christina back in January of 2020, did you know that you can go to our website, <https://www.john-adams.nl/videos/>, where there is a link to the video of this extraordinary event, and I'll also put the YouTube link in the show notes. We also have a newsletter you can sign up for and a veritable treasure trove of great American thinkers and speakers at <https://www.john-adams.nl/>, and while you're there, why not become a member of the John Adams? Not only will you support what we do, you get a discount on future live events. In the meantime, you should go to wherever you get your podcasts and leave a review of this show. This will help get the word out and then we can keep on sharing the very best of American thinkers in Europe with you, free of charge. Well, that's it for this week's show. Our theme is called La Prensa by the Parlando's. Our editor is Tracy Metz from Amsterdam. This was Bright Minds, a podcast from the John Adams Institute. I'm Jonathan Groubert. Thank you for listening