

## 1



## Sala de Professores

### *Interview with Steven Levitsky*

#### Interviewed: Steven Levitsky

Steven Levitsky is David Rockefeller Professor of Latin American Studies and Professor of Government at Harvard University. He is also Director of the David Rockefeller Center for Latin American Studies at Harvard. His research focuses on democratization and authoritarianism, political parties, and weak and informal institutions, with a focus on in Latin America. He is co-author (with Daniel Ziblatt) of *How Democracies Die* (Crown, 2018), which was a New York Times Best-Seller and was published in 25 languages. He has written or edited 11 other books, including *Transforming Labor-Based Parties in Latin America: Argentine Peronism in Comparative Perspective* (Cambridge University Press 2003), *Competitive Authoritarianism: Hybrid Regimes after the Cold War* (with Lucan Way) (Cambridge University Press, 2010), and *Revolution and Dictatorship: The Violent Origins of Durable Authoritarianism* (with Lucan Way) (Princeton University Press, 2022). He and Daniel Ziblatt are currently working on a book on the rise of (and reaction against) multiracial democracy in the United States.

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**Publicum Review (PR)<sup>1</sup>:** Dear Professor Steven Levitsky, it is an honor to interview you for the Publicum Review. We appreciate you taking the time to talk with us. First of all, we know that you have a new book with Professor Ziblatt, “Tyranny of the Minority: Why American Democracy Reached the Breaking Point,” which was just released in September in the United States. Could you please share some insights about this new book and its main ideas?

**Professor Levitsky:** I'm not an expert on the United States. I studied Peronism. I studied political parties in Argentina. And so “How Democracies Die” was a strange detour for me, as well as to my co-author, Daniel, who is an expert on Europe, in the 1920s and 30s. At the same time, we looked at Trump through eyes that were different from most Americans, because we knew something about democratic breakdowns. Therefore, “How Democracies Die” was mostly a description of how democracy can weaken and break down. It was written for North Americans who knew nothing about democratic breakdowns because they had not experienced them. We wanted Americans to be able to see the warning signs before it was too late. After we published “How Democracies Die,” we got lots of questions from journalists asking us, well, what do we do? This book, “Tyranny of the Minority,” is a book that tries to dig deeper into the question of how the United States got into this mess and how to get out. We argue in the book that even though Trump was defeated, and even though a more democratic administration came to power, the underlying causes of the crisis in the United States have not changed. Therefore, we are still vulnerable to a democratic crisis.

There are two main culprits. One is the radicalization of the Republican Party. The first half of the book is about why one of our major political parties – The Republican Party – turned against democracy. We argue that over the last 50 years, the United States has been transitioning towards a multiracial democracy. In a multiracial democracy, individuals of all ethnic and racial groups have equal protection of rights. While that doesn't fully exist in the United States yet, we have been moving in that direction. The radicalization of the

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<sup>1</sup> This interview was conducted by Jane Reis Gonçalves Pereira and Patrícia Perrone Campos Mello. We would like to thank Victoria Abut for her support in editing and proofreading the interview.

Republican Party is, in our view, a reaction against that by a white Christian majority that is losing its numerical majority and its dominant status in society. As we become more diverse, as we become more egalitarian, white Christians are losing their dominance, which they had for 200 years. That is a big deal. It is not just that Trump voters are unhappy with economic or foreign policy. They feel like the country they grew up in is being taken away from them. That is a powerful existential threat, and it has radicalized many Republican voters.

The second culprit, which is the topic of the second half of the book, is our institutions. The United States, more than any other democracy in the world, has a set of institutions that allow partisan minorities to systematically, permanently thwart the will of majorities, and sometimes even to govern over majorities. First, and most prominently, we are the only presidential democracy with an electoral college, which allows the loser of a popular vote to become president. We have the most mal-apportioned Senate in the world, with the exception of Brazil. The fact that states with very low populations have the same representation of states with large populations in the Senate is very, very undemocratic. Brazil has the same problem. We have a Supreme Court where justices can have tenure for their entire lives. We are the only established democracy in the world with no term limits and no retirement age for Supreme Court justices. We have this rule in the Senate, the filibuster, which allows 41 senators to systematically block the will of 59 senators.

We have a system in which a minority party is now an authoritarian minority party. The Republican party has excessive power and is essentially able to govern over a majority party. To give an example, in 2016, the Republicans lost the popular vote for president, but won the presidency. That same year, in 2016, the Republicans lost the popular vote for the Senate, but won the control of the Senate. Over the next four years, that President, who was a minority president, and that Senate, which was a minority Senate majority, went on to fill three Supreme Court vacancies, which allowed a dramatic Supreme Court turn to the right. That's basically minority rule, and it is doing two things. First of all, it is protecting an authoritarian minority party, giving it excessive outsized power. Second, it is beginning to erode public confidence in democratic institutions. In two of the last six elections, the loser of the popular vote became president. That may well happen again in 2024. So, Americans younger than me, who came of age in the 21st century, they look at our system, and it is hard for them to believe that they live in a democracy. Public confidence in our democratic institutions is eroding.

At the end of the book, we call for a set of institutional reforms to create a more majoritarian democracy. We call for an end to the Electoral College and the establishment of a direct popular vote. We call for the democratization of the Senate, through the elimination of the filibuster. We also call for a more proportional system, where more

populous states like California or Sao Paulo have more senators than other states. Lastly, we call for a constitutional right to vote, which I think already exists in Brazil but does not exist in the United States. We also argue that when an authoritarian threat emerges, it is essential to build a broad coalition in defense of democracy. It is very important in 2024 that the Democratic Party build a much broader coalition that includes Republicans who believe in democracy and oppose Trump. There needs to be a very broad coalition that spans the left to at least the center right to isolate and defeat Trumpism. That is something that was debated a lot in Brazil between 2018 and 2022 and that was achieved with some success.

**PR: The erosion of democracy has sparked a public and academic debate about whether the United States needs a new Constitution. At the same time, some right-wing politicians claim that the United States is not a democracy but a republic. How do you assess the rise of these ideas?**

**Professor Levitsky:** There are two ways of reforming the Constitution: through individual amendments and through a constitutional convention. There are some people who argue that the United States ought to have a constitutional convention and write an entirely new constitution. The US Constitution has been very successful over time. It's very stable, strong, and legitimate. Those are valuable things. So, our approach is to reform the existing Constitution, rather than write a new constitution. We feel quite strongly about that.

This argument that the United States is a Republic, not a democracy, is both silly and pernicious. A republic simply means not a monarchy. Brazil became a republic in 1889. The US became the world's first modern republic when it overthrew its monarchy. In the 18th century, nobody in the elite believed that poor people should vote. That is really a 19th and 20th century phenomenon. It's only in the 19th and 20th centuries that modern representative democracy emerged. When we talk about democracy, we're talking about liberal representative democracy, which means that we, the masses, do not rule directly. The masses elect their governments and representatives, and majority rule is tempered by a protection of individual rights. There are basic civil and human rights that are protected from the will of the majority. When we say the word democracy, we mean liberal, representative democracy. That had not been invented yet when the US founders declared the country a republic in the 18th century.

I think that Americans who now say: “- Oh, we are a republic, not a democracy...”, either are just confused or, more perniciously, they are deliberately making a justification for turning against democracy. Many conservatives today, many Republicans today, no

longer believe in democracy. They've been working to restrict the access to the vote. They were okay with overturning the results of the election in 2020. They are terrified of democracy because what's coming in America is a multiracial democracy. Democracy brought an African American family to the white House a little over a decade ago. That was a big deal. Democracy is bringing a very, very different world. Unfortunately, many Republicans are fearful of that democracy and turning away from it. One way of legitimizing a rejection of democracy is by saying: “– Well, we were never a democracy. We are supposed to be a republic.” But that is a dishonest, rhetorical sleight of hand.

**PR: Turning our attention to Brazil, some argue that the Brazilian Supreme Court has played an important role in defending democracy during Bolsonaro's government. Others believe that the court crossed the line by employing strategies that some scholars call constitutional hardball. What are your thoughts on the role of the courts in democratic resilience? Do you believe extraordinary times allow for bolder decisions?**

**Professor Levitsky:** The role of the courts in defending democracy is always going to be ambiguous and double edged, because the courts are not democratic institutions. Courts are counter-majoritarian institutions. They can be wielded against democracy very easily. You see many cases in the world where courts have been powerful allies of undemocratic actors, such as Turkey and Thailand. But at the same time, courts are very important countervailing powers against populists, and they can be liberal forces. We've seen that in many countries, including in Brazil, Mexico, and the United States. Courts will never be easily cast as the hero or the villain. They are always going to be in that gray area.

I personally think the Brazilian Supreme Court played a very important role in blocking Jair Bolsonaro's authoritarian ambitions. I think it is clear that Bolsonaro was a threat to democracy. It is clear that he attempted to weaken democratic institutions. Courts really were a principal actor in blocking him. It is probably true that the court overreached. Certainly, it was very aggressive, if not overly aggressive, in taking on Bolsonaro. I guess history will debate whether it was worth it. I think there are potentially negative long-term consequences for that overreach. However, it was successful in thwarting a pretty authoritarian president who had potentially quite a bit of power. It is not clear that absent the Court's intervention, Brazil would have had a free and fair election; and the results of that election would have been respected. The courts were arguably decisive in ensuring that that happened.

Sometimes courts have to assume this sort of extraordinary role during an emergency. But then, once that emergency is over, the next task is putting the courts' powers back in the box. No institution, no actor, ever willingly or easily gives up the power that it has gotten. An analogy can be made to the military. There are some circumstances when the military intervenes to stop an authoritarian force or restore democracy. However, there is a great cost to that because once you bring the military into politics, it's really hard to get it out. Now the courts are ultimately an actor in a democratic regime. So, they are less dangerous than the military. But it is the same analogy. Even if the courts do save democracy, they still have to step back when the extraordinary threaten is over.

Ideally, the court should limit itself. This is more a question of informal norms and practices than it is of actual legislation or rules. In a democracy, regular laws and regular policies should be made by elected leaders. So, whenever you give the court the power of judicial review, that may be necessary to protect rights, but that it can also threaten democracy. The easiest way to curb undemocratic behavior is for actors to curb themselves through norms of self-restraint. That is hard to do, because nobody likes to restrain themselves. The second-best way is through legislation, although the Brazilian legislature is a very mixed bag and not entirely democratic itself. The third way is through popular mobilization. But that is also pretty tricky. There is not a recipe for reducing the power of a court that has overreached, even when it has overreached for the good of democracy.

**PR:** It is often said, and your research has shown, that democratic backsliding can be incremental and that the second term of an authoritarian leader can lead to the consolidation of an authoritarian government. When this topic is discussed, it is usually in the context of a second consecutive term of the same politician through re-election. How would you evaluate this phenomenon when a second term is not consecutive?

**Professor Levitsky:** First of all, turnover is really important. The fact that the autocrat was removed once and did not stay a second term is a big deal. Had Trump managed to stay in power in 2020, his ability to continue to pack the judiciary and the key institutions in the State would have allowed him to get a foothold in power and entrench himself up in ways that proved to be impossible because he was removed from the presidency. The same happened in Brazil. Had Bolsonaro stayed in power for four more years, imagine what he could have done to the judiciary and other institutions. Turnover is really important. That

said, I don't think we can generalize, because there are cases of autocrats who come back to power later and govern more democratically. Peron is an example, as is Vargas, or Banzer in Bolivia. But there are also cases of exactly the scenario that you guys are kind of depicting. Daniel Ortega's second time around, he learned his lesson, having lost the 1990 election, and swore he would never lose again. In fact, Nicaragua has the worst dictatorship outside of Cuba. Viktor Orban is another example of an autocrat who had lost power and spent four years taking a series of steps to ensure that he wouldn't lose anymore.

I think Brazil has done a better job of taking steps to ensure that Bolsonaro does not return to power than the United States did. In Trump's case, he did not read the authoritarian playbook before 2016. He did not expect to win. He did not have a plan or experience. He did not have a team. This situation was terrible for American society, but it also helped to protect democracy. Now he knows much more. He is still not very smart. He is still not very organized, but he knows what he needs to do now. He is more aware of the authoritarian playbook. He has made it very clear, and his allies have also made it clear that they need to purge and pack state institutions, and fill key agencies of the state with loyalists. This is something that most autocrats already know. Trump took a little while to learn, but now he knows. He knows that his party and his cabinet have to be full of loyalists, and he will do that. He will not share power with the mainstream Republicans. He will not appoint independent technocrats to power. He will have loyalists in power who do his bidding. This will be a much more dangerous government the second time around. It is better that we removed him from power, and he was not able to continuously pack the courts or the State for eight years. But there's no question this will be more a dangerous president the second time around.

**PR: In a March 2022 interview with CBS News, you stated that the January 6th, 2021, US insurrection did not represent “the end of the brink” of US democratic backsliding. You made a similar statement in another 2022 interview with NPR, where you argued that the January 6th insurrection, while a bad symptom, would not, on its own, be how American democracy would die. Indeed, you have since argued that the response in the aftermath of the insurrection, particularly the Republican Party's inability to denounce political violence, indicated even further democratic backsliding. How do you assess the January 8th, 2023, insurrection of Brazil's Congress and the Brazilian response to it?**

**Professor Levitsky:** That's a great question. I actually think Brazil comes out looking pretty good relative to the United States. Democracy is not going to die through some kind of spectacular armed insurrection. It's not going to be like Chile in 1973 or Brazil 1964. It is going to be a gradual decline, led by elected leaders who themselves subvert democracy. Therefore, January sixth and January eighth were both very spectacular. However, that's not going to be the path of democratic death. It is going to be much more gradual, much less spectacular than that.

What I found most troubling, and what convinces me that American democracy is still in grave danger, is the Republican Party's response to the 2020 election. Here I'm going to make a comparison with Brazil. Very rarely can a single autocrat like Bolsonaro or Trump kill democracy by themselves. They need mainstream allies who will protect them, legitimize them and remain quiet rather than denounce them. That is exactly what the Republican Party has done. When Trump lost the 2020 election and refused to accept defeat, Republicans did one of two things. Either they mimicked Trump and said yes, the election was stolen, even though they knew that it was not, or they just remained quiet. They were worried about the political consequences of telling the truth and saying that Biden won, which is what you have to do in a democracy. The cardinal rule of democracy is you must accept the results of elections. The vast bulk of the Republican Party leadership refused to do that.

Trump said the election was stolen, so the Republicans either remained silent or they mimicked Trump. That made almost half the country to believe that the election was stolen, and contributed to the atmosphere that led to January 6<sup>th</sup>. When January 6<sup>th</sup> happens, the Republican Party refused to support an independent investigation into the assault on our democracy. They blocked that and refused to impeach and convict Trump. An impeachment would have signaled that this was behavior that was unacceptable and would have legally kept him from running in the 2024 election. All the Republicans had to do was vote to convict him in the Senate. They refused to do that. They allowed his political career to continue. Donald Trump had the complicity, the cooperation, the protection of the entire Republican Party, which is why we are where we are today. A coin flip chance of Trump returning to the presidency.

In Brazil, I think the political right behaved much better. On election night, just about every major right-wing figure in Brazil came out and said Lula won. Lula is the winner. Almost nobody on the Brazilian right did what Republicans did in the United States. When January 8<sup>th</sup> happened, the Brazilian right-wing figures were very quick to denounce the violence. Many on the Brazilian right pushed for an investigation into the events of January 8<sup>th</sup>, which is not something Republicans were willing to do in the United States. As a result, Donald Trump is the dominant force in the Republican Party, the very likely nominee in the

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next election with a decent chance to become president again. By contrast, Jair Bolsonaro has become a pretty marginal figure today, and I think Brazilian democracy as a result is better off for it.

**PR:** Latin America has a long tradition connecting authoritarian governments and the military in politics. During the 90s, this participation in Brazil decreased. Fernando Henrique Cardoso was the first democratic president to appoint a civilian as defense minister. Recently, this decision has changed. What is your perception of the recent Brazilian experience on this issue and this new wave of military participation and involvement in politics?

**Professor Levitsky:** I think it is one of the greatest risks facing Latin American democracies. As you rightly pointed out, for most of Latin American history, both the 19th and the 20th century, political regimes frequently died through a military coup. In the vast majority of countries, including Argentina and Brazil, the tradition of military intervention went well into the 20th century and was a major cause of democratic instability and failure. There is a lot of evidence that coups beget coups. Once you bring the military into politics, it is very hard to get it to leave politics. Once you have a coup, it dramatically increases the chance of another coup. One of the greatest achievements of Latin American democracies in the late 20th century was pushing the military out of politics. The partial return of the military in many countries is therefore tragic and frightening.

There has been a creeping increase of military participation because of the terrible problem of violent crime in Latin America. Politicians have promised to bring the military in to combat crime. Voters like that. They vote for that. However, it generates increased military participation in cabinets. Even more troubling has been the return of the military as kind of an independent political actor. I was terrified to see active military leaders put their thumb on the scale in the corruption trial against Lula, with a tweet that got national attention and made it very clear where the military stood. That is not the role of the military. That is an incredibly undemocratic act. Bolsonaro bet on military cooperation to stay in power. He courted the military with the idea that the military would become his political ally. He ultimately failed, but we are still learning today how close he came. Obviously, there were elements within the military that supported the idea of overturning the election. Ultimately, the military did the right thing. That is very important.

However, in general, the situation in Latin America is not dire. Still to this day, the military is completely out of politics in countries such as Argentina, Uruguay, Mexico, and Chile. But there are disturbing signs. There were disturbing signs in Ecuador, Bolivia, Peru, and Brazil. Given the history of the role that militaries have played in killing democracy, it is a big flashing red warning sign that we have to pay attention to. Again, it's very important and very good news that the military has not seized power anywhere in Latin America. There has only been one coup, one traditional military coup in Latin America in the 21st century, and that was in Honduras. So, if we take a step back, it is good news that we are still not seeing coups. We are still not seeing military rule. But it would be crazy of us not to be worried about the signs of greater military participation in politics in Brazil and in the Andean countries.

There is a strange kind of polarization in the last decade, with elements of the right talking about a communist threat more now than they were 20 years ago. I really do not understand what the threat is. I mean, go back to Chile in 1973, or go back to Brazil, in March of 1964. I get the threat. I think the coups were terrible, but people were seizing land. They were talking about land reform. In Chile, there was a nationalization of a bunch of industries. I understand why people on the right felt threatened, seriously threatened, in 1964 in Brazil, in Argentina in the mid-1970s, and in Chile in 1973. What's the threat today? Nobody is talking about seizing property. There's no property at stake. Workers are not seizing factories. Unions are much weaker than they used to be. The Marxist left does not exist. There are no guerrilla movements. There used to be guerrilla movements in Latin America. Real threats, right? There is no chance of Cuba. There is no chance of Allende. There is no threat whatsoever, at least in traditional terms. Yet we are seeing an increase.

When I was in Brazil in 2018, I talked to a whole bunch of business leaders in Sao Paulo. They talked about the possibility of a PT government. They supported Bolsonaro because they were afraid of the PT turning Brazil into Venezuela. I just thought to myself: “– You lived eight years under Lula and nothing happened. You did great!” But they were terrified of a Venezuela. I don't know where this is coming from, but the point is, there is a fear, an exaggerated fear of the left that did not exist 20 or 30 years ago. It is reminiscent of the 70s and it is worse, because if the military still holds a Cold War mentality, and the right fears communism, that could bring pretty undemocratic outcomes. But I really do not understand the threat.

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