



Bestselling author Daniel Ziblatt

## **The Prophet of Decline**

Harvard professor Daniel Ziblatt has been researching the decline of democracies for years. Now he has to watch as his own world crumbles.

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**Claus Hecking** reports from Cambridge

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Professor Daniel Ziblatt's office at Harvard University smells like a library, of old paper and wood, with a hint of vanilla.

Many books fill the shelves around the desk of America's arguably most important democracy researcher: antique tomes, newly printed works, historical texts alongside political ones. They often deal with world wars and social policy, with Europe and America, especially the USA and Germany —the two countries that shape Ziblatt's life and work.

And of course, the book from 2018 that made the Harvard researcher and his co-author Steven Levitsky world-famous and has been translated into around 30 languages is also here: "How Democracies Die".

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Today, Ziblatt has to watch as his own world begins to unravel.

Ziblatt, 53, with a shaved head and rimless glasses, heads the Minda de Gunzburg Center for European Studies at Harvard and the "Transformations of Democracy" department at the Berlin Social Science Center. Harvard, his university, in particular, has come under fire from Donald Trump.

"The United States has become more authoritarian in recent months than I ever expected," says Ziblatt. He furrows his high forehead. "There has never been such a broad attack on democracy in the history of the USA."

Modern democracies are slowly and quietly collapsing, according to the thesis of Ziblatt's bestseller. They are not destroyed suddenly by a coup, but rather eroded by elected politicians who gradually undermine institutions – through attacks on political opponents, the media, the judiciary,

and universities. When the book was published, some critics considered it exaggerated. Now, the thesis is virtually undisputed.

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**"Extremism never triumphs on its own. It only does so because others enable it – out of ambition, fear, or because they misjudge the dangers of making small concessions."**

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Germany, France, Great Britain. In many Western countries, anti-democratic forces are gaining momentum. If they were to come to power, they would get to work, says Ziblatt.

"The Trump administration acted much faster in its first year than Modi in India, Erdoan in Turkey, or Orban in Hungary. The instrumentalization of the state, the attacks on civil society institutions, the attempt to change the political system – that took much longer in the other countries."

The US has become a "fragile" democracy within twelve months, similar to Hungary or Turkey: "There is still political competition for power. But it is distorted in favor of those in power."

In Germany, Ziblatt learned how quickly democracy can crumble. But also how it can triumph.

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It began at the Birklehof boarding school in the summer of 1990: Ziblatt, a Californian from a liberal Jewish family, was 18 at the time. After graduating from high school, he wasn't quite sure what to do. Because his school cooperated with the one in Hinterzarten, he ended up as an exchange student in the southern Black Forest.

It was the time of reunification. On television, West German Chancellor Helmut Kohl and Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev shook hands, and at Birklehof, groups of schoolchildren from East Germany came to visit. "They were very exotic, dressed completely differently," Ziblatt recalls.

On October 3rd, they toasted with champagne at the boarding school. The young American was so fascinated that he toured East Germany. And back in the USA, he decided to study political science and German.



Reunification celebration in front of the Berlin Reichstag: Triumphant democracy Photo:Jörg Schmitt / dpa

At college, Ziblatt read Goethe, Schiller, and Thomas Mann in yellow Reclam paperbacks, as well as books on the political system of the Federal Republic of Germany. He spent his third year of studies in Marburg. After graduating from university, he moved to Berlin, the capital city in a period of great change.

Ziblatt's grandparents immigrated to the USA from Ukraine during the First World War; other relatives were murdered in the Holocaust. In Berlin, he immersed himself in the darkest chapters of German history.

He was particularly interested in the end of the Weimar Republic, when in 1933 conservative politicians and elites helped Hitler to power – thus enabling the Nazi dictatorship. Later, he earned his doctorate with a dissertation on the founding of the German Reich and Italy. Without his personal experience of German history, Ziblatt says, he would never have written "How Democracies Die".

## Warnings from Weimar

Ziblatt recently published an article in the magazine "Foreign Affairs": "Warnings from Weimar – why bargaining with authoritarians fails".

In it, he describes how in 1933 the Catholic Centre Party, a forerunner of the CDU and CSU, decided to vote for the Enabling Act in the Reichstag. In doing so, parliament de facto transferred its power to Adolf Hitler's government. It was the final nail in the coffin for the young democracy. The Centre Party was soon forced to dissolve under pressure from the Nazi regime.



Anti-Trump protests at Harvard in May 2025: Warnings from Weimar Photo: Sophie Park / Bloomberg / Getty Images

The collapse of Weimar democracy was avoidable; the bourgeois parties could have prevented Hitler, Ziblatt concludes. "Extremism never triumphs on its own. It only does so because others enable it – out of ambition, fear, or because they misjudge the dangers of even small concessions. Ultimately, those who bring an autocrat to power often relinquish not only their democracy but also the influence they hoped to preserve."

Ziblatt concludes that today's politicians and institutions must heed these lessons from Weimar, both in Europe and in America.

When Ziblatt looks at Washington, he sees a pattern reminiscent of 1933 in Germany. Many influential figures have submitted to Trump: the Republican Party, leading law firms, Columbia University in New York, and oligarchs like Jeff Bezos, Amazon CEO and owner of the Washington Post. "If such people and organizations don't oppose Trump," he says, "it sends a signal to ordinary people that they should also be afraid."

That makes the open resistance of his university all the more important to him. "Autocrats attack universities because they are alternative sources of status, prestige, and influence outside the political system." Harvard is the spearhead of US universities, he says. "Harvard is an institution that has the courage to stand up to Trump." Whoever breaks this institution breaks all the others.

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Ziblatt explains that the fact that Harvard's leadership has not yet backed down is largely due to pressure from people on campus. "Many faculty and students are loudly advocating for our autonomy and academic freedom."

In the spring of 2025, more than 800 professors and lecturers signed such an appeal to the university administration. It was drafted by Ziblatt's co-author Levitsky and Harvard political scientist Ryan Enos; Ziblatt also signed it.

So far, the Harvard fortress stands. But Ziblatt says: "The game isn't over. We can't rely on anything."

He considers German democracy to be significantly more "robust," despite a stagnant economy, endless government crises, and the rise of the AfD. Proportional representation makes autocratic rule more difficult. And: "The German Basic Law is more modern than our US Constitution. It is a source of resilience against anti-democratic forces."

Above all, he considers German civil society to be more resilient because of its culture of remembrance, the commemoration of Nazi crimes. "Many people in Germany are allergic to extremists. They don't take democracy for granted. And they are prepared to actively defend it."

Ziblatt was particularly impressed by the mass protests following the revelations by the investigative platform "Correctiv" in early 2024 about a meeting between right-wing extremists and officials close to the AfD. Hundreds of thousands of people took to the streets in Germany afterward: "It wasn't just students. Business owners, bankers, and union leaders also spoke out. We haven't seen anything like that in the US."

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Steven Levitsky / Daniel Ziblatt



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Steven Levitsky, Daniel Ziblatt

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Demonstration against the AfD in January 2024 in Frankfurt am Main: "Allergic to extremists" Photo: Thomas Lohnes / Getty Images

Two years later, CDU/CSU politicians are toying with the idea of weakening the firewall against the AfD, forming coalitions with the far-right party in eastern German states, and accepting their toleration in a minority federal government. "Highly risky," warns Ziblatt. The mainstream Republicans also thought they could use Trump to gain power while keeping him under control. That worked just as poorly as it did for the German conservatives with Hitler.

Ziblatt believes the CDU/CSU would be more politically successful if, in compromise with its coalition partner, the SPD, or other centrist parties, it were to develop concrete solutions for the everyday problems faced by people in the country. "The forces of the center must offer renewal – not just defend the old ways."

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**"If similar forces come to power in German federal states as in the USA, similar attacks on science and universities can be expected."**

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Despite his optimism, Ziblatt believes it is conceivable that the AfD could govern in the foreseeable future, especially in the east. This makes it all the more important for researchers and, above all, their universities to prepare for this eventuality.

"If similar forces come to power in other German states as here, similar attacks on science and universities are to be expected," he fears. "These institutions should already be seeking partners in society who will hopefully come to their aid: unions, businesses, churches." And they should educate people about how science and universities benefit society, for example at public events. "If they only start all this after they have been attacked, they have almost already lost the battle."

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Ziblatt has experienced firsthand what it means to criticize Trump. He has repeatedly received anonymous emails threatening him with violence from the president's supporters.

Has he become more cautious about what he says publicly? "I try to concentrate on the topics I know about – and speak about them thoughtfully. But I don't hold back criticism."

Democracy in the US is not yet dead. "Trump has destroyed a lot. But he is becoming increasingly unpopular, even within his own party, and resistance is growing." This was demonstrated by the "No Kings" protest marches of millions of people in the fall, as well as the Democratic victories in New York and several other states. "Ultimately, I believe that the majority of Americans do not want an authoritarian system."



SPIEGEL correspondent Claus Hecking with political scientist Ziblatt in his office at Harvard: "The game is not over" Photo: DER SPIEGEL

History never ends, says Ziblatt. It is constantly writing new chapters. These include Trump's Greenland threats and the violent deaths of protesters Renee Good and Alex Petti in Minneapolis. This gives democracy researchers like him even more work to do.

At the end of Trump's second term, a new book by Ziblatt and Levitsky is expected to be on one of the shelves in his office. It will be about the capitulation of America's elites to Trump. Working title: "The Great Abdication . "

Ziblatt himself is not giving up. **S**

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