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## **Ill Winds: Saving Democracy from Russian Rage, Chinese Ambition, and American Complacency**

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Date of publication: November 30<sup>th</sup>, 2019

Edition period: November 2019 - March 2020

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**To cite this article:** Tepe, S. (2019). Ill Winds: Saving Democracy from Russian Rage, Chinese Ambition, and American Complacency [Review of the book]. *International and Multidisciplinary Journal of Social Sciences*, 8(3), 289-292. doi: 10.17583/rimcis.2019.4854

**To link this article:** <http://10.17583/rimcis.2019.4854>

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## Review

Diamond, L. (2019). *Ill Winds: Saving Democracy from Russian Rage, Chinese Ambition, and American Complacency*. New York: Penguin Press. ISBN: 9780525560623

Larry Diamond offers a thorough and thought-provoking account of the pervasiveness and risks of the ongoing democratic recession in *Ill Winds*. Blending a remarkable number of cases Diamond not only reflects on the most talked about cases (e.g., Poland, the Philippines, Turkey) where democracy has been on a sharp decline but delves into the US case and the implications of its declining democratic capital. While many studies treat the US as an exception due to its institutions, Diamond challenges such an assumption fiercely by placing the US experiences under a global lens. Countering the voices of those who look for better and more resilient “institutional designs” as exits from the democratic recession in the US and beyond, Diamond warns against quick fixes, drawing attention to the failure of Thailand’s constitutional court, due to political pressure despite its meticulous design. Casting the analytical net wide and the theoretical scale deep, *Ill Winds* explains how democracy draws on multiple constituencies and the fetishization of any of its parts (e.g., institutions, judicial review or international community) as a panacea against anti-democratic forces can be highly simplistic and misleading.



Diamond challenges those who see the current context a hiccup on the global march to democracy. What makes the recent global slump of democracy is not necessarily the number of countries but the appearance of anti-democratic forces in regions where democracy was once seen as safe. While the death of democracies has been sudden with coups or authoritarian captures, in the current wave anti-democratic forces gradually numb the deep tissues of the democracy (e.g., constraints of independent courts, free media, business community pg. 55) thus making timely and precise assessment of democratic decay in some countries challenging. The specific events and processes that bring about anti-democratic regimes may change (e.g., Putin’s successful removal of rival oligarchs differs from Chavez’ constitutional reforms) but the outcomes are often the same—autocratization of regimes under populist leaders where basic rights are curtailed drastically, and elections become a performance to lend legitimacy to the ruling parties.

As the *Ill Winds*’s subtitles hint, Diamond contends that in the current global context hegemonic powers work differently. Russia’s ability to utilize free spaces and democratic institutions in other countries and its flexing of military power where the stakes are high makes it a global anti-democratic force. Yet, how China’s power and impact work may be less visible and more effective in the long term. China’s technological advances enable it to collaborate with many authoritarian states while it also creates alternative institutions such as New Development Bank or Asian Infrastructure Investment bank forging a new global system. China’s “sharp power” differs from Russia’s due to its ability to commit \$1.41 trillion (in contrast to the \$103 billion commitment of the Marshall Plan in today’s dollars) to its global projects (pg133).

The analyses offered in *Ill Winds* is not limited to an empirical survey of the existing global context. Instead, Diamond reviews theoretical debates such as the conditions for democracy and carefully debunks many myths about democracy. Among others, *Ill Winds* critically engages with class and culture-centered accounts of democracy. While the apathy of the poor towards democracy cannot be understood without placing it within the framework of corruption (pg. 31-32, 154), *Ill Winds* shows democracy is still favored over other methods of governance and authoritarian leaders in regions where

democracies are most challenged, including the Arab World and Africa (pg. 159).

The variety of issues covered in *Ill Winds* not only bridges some insular debates but also calls for better conceptual and theoretical terms to analyze national and transnational processes simultaneously. For instance, while many study “corruption” in distinct countries, Diamond argues that the global surge of authoritarianism rides on *kleptocracy*—the movement and laundering of stolen money across national boundaries, which involves various actors ranging from governments and business to lawyers (pg. 192-198). Diamond’s 10 step program seeks to close loopholes by not allowing anonymous shell companies and real estate purchases or empowering institutions such as the treasury department, financial crimes enforcement networks and investigative journalism, ending practices like “golden visas” given based on investments etc.. Diamond is aware that his policy suggestions might sound too ethnocentric or misplaced (pg. 202). Addressing such critique he emphasizes the importance of not imposing a singular American model and treating freedom as a universal not a regional value or opposing the use of violence to promote democracy as it was used in the case of Iraq. Though some argue that democracy is an outcome of some policies he warns that democracy is not the outcome of fast growth and failing to focus on it as a separate sphere leaves many in the hands of oppressive regimes. By including cases like Burma's democratization, Diamond shows how some democratic leaders (such as Aung San Suu Kyi) might cave in to violent policies yet others (like Zin) thrive against all odds often with the support of international recognition.

In the sections on reasons behind the declining quality of US democracy Diamond leaves no stone unturned. Among others, he notes primaries that favor radical voices, gerrymandered electoral districts and the impact of campaign donations. One of his most intriguing policy reform suggestions is the Ranked-Choice Voting (RCV) system (where voters vote not for their first choice but instead rank order candidates based on their preference (pg. 257). While such proposals are often seen as pipe dreams Diamond notes Maine’s successful adoption of an RCV, empowering independents and moderates. Such cases exemplify how reforms can be adopted under adverse circumstances with mobilization of democratic forces and how such reforms

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promise to address the polarizing and autocratizing tendencies of politics. The RCV proposal is no exception; *Ill Winds* is filled with a long list of proposals from protecting your computer (pg. 251) to how to prevent autocrats getting legitimacy by better guarding institutions like the European Council (pg. 186).

While scholarly books are rarely page-turners, *Ill Winds* might be one. It masterfully weaves personal anecdotal evidence (e.g., a lecture in Nigeria), regionally collected data, and academic theoretical debates into political and practical discussions that challenge everyone from the streets of Tahrir to the residents of Baltimore. The book affords excellent intellectual space for those who want to delve deeper into questions about democracy in the US and beyond without getting lost in a sea of pessimism or utopian escapism. Its easily accessible narrative makes *Ill Winds* a must read for those who are puzzled by the autocratic, kleptomaniac tendencies marking the policies in both the US and beyond as well as for students of democracy who want to get a deeper understanding of the ever-shifting landscape of democratization. While graduate students who search for a dissertation topic might be the main beneficiaries of this book dedications in *Ill Winds* that recognize activists from all corners of the world capture Diamond's overall message to all--democracies are not institutional designs that can be taken over by autocrats but the outcome of individuals' daily democratic struggles.

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