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WEBINAR

POWER POLITICS:
TRUMP AND THE ASSAULT ON AMERICAN DEMOCRACY

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P R O C E E D I N G S

MS. PAGE: Hello, I'm Susan Page, the Washington bureau chief of USA Today. Thanks to everyone in our digital audience for joining us here today in Washington, across the country, and around the world. And our thanks to Brookings for sponsoring this conversation.

It is my honor to talk today with Darrell West about his ambitious and alarming new book. It's called "Power Politics: Trump and the Assault on American Democracy". He is a familiar voice on these issues. He has authored or co-authored almost two dozen books. Some of them have won top awards in their fields. They're on topics that range from robots to billionaires — so quite a range there. Darrell was a professor of political science at Brown University from 1982 to 2008, then moved to Brookings in 2008 as the head of the Governance Studies program. Congratulations on your new book, Darrell.

MR. WEST: Well, Susan, thank you and thanks to USA Today for allowing you to join us. I'm looking forward to our conversation. And I do want to point out, for those who are looking for a great book, they should actually read Susan's book about Nancy Pelosi, entitled "Madam Speaker". It's a great read and obviously very relevant for many current topics.

MS. PAGE: Yeah. Thanks. Thanks very much.

And to our audience, we welcome your questions and your comments through this hour. Please send us on Twitter to the @BrookingsGov Twitter account, with #PowerPolitics, or send them by email to Events@Brookings.edu, and we'll ask as many of them as we can.

Now, Darrell, we talked about your professional resume, your academic and think tank experience. I'd like to talk about a different time of your experience in life, which is growing up on a dairy farm in Ohio. And I wonder what you think — you talk about this in

your book — why is that important do you think in trying to understand the phenomenon that has been Donald Trump?

MR. WEST: Well, one of the reasons I wrote this book about American democracy is because we are in crisis right now and we see widespread polarization, extremism, and radicalization. But I think one of the distinctive aspects of my background is I've lived among both conservative and liberal tribes. So, as you point out, I grew up in rural Ohio, I grew up on a dairy farm, used to milk cows before I went to school. Many of my family members are there and many of my high school classmates are very conservative. They like Donald Trump. So I grew up in that type of environment, but then taught political science for 26 years at Brown University, which is a very liberal place. So I do think that my background helps me gain some insight into both liberals and conservatives, the populism that has enabled Trump, kind of some the authoritarian semblance that we're starting to see from the general public. So where it's relevant, I analyze the assault on American democracy both from a national standpoint, but I also try and draw on my personal experiences to kind of bring the story to life and inform people about the perspectives of a lot of different people in the United States.

MS. PAGE: Yeah. Well, I was born and raised in Kansas, so also have a background in the heartland. And I'm often surprised and sometimes dismayed by attitudes of people who grew up on the coast or who have never lived anywhere but the East or West coast. What do you think they get — people who do not have the perspective of growing up on a farm or having family members who are from the Midwest and have been drawn to Trump, what do they — do you think — what is the perspective you can offer that maybe they just don't understand?

MR. WEST: Well, I know many of my former colleagues from Brown and current colleagues at Brookings who had told me on various occasions, like I don't know

anybody who voted for Trump and how could anybody support that. And I like to remind them, like I actually know hundreds of people who voted for Trump. And so I think what that experience has given me is some understanding of what they're complaints are, of what it is that has fueled Trumpism, why we're seeing populism and ultra-nationalism arise here in the United States and some of the challenges they pose.

And then I also think it helps me on the solution side, because you have to be able to diagnose the situation accurately in order to inform possible solutions. And I think there are structural problems that have enabled Donald Trump, and if we want to get a handle on them, we're also going to need some pretty big reforms to address the concerns that the people who support him have.

MS. PAGE: So just one more question about your roots. In your book, on page 25, you say that most of your friends from high school believe that ANTIFA forces were responsible for the January 6 violence, feel liberals are traitorous hypocrites who no longer love the country. They feel that those living on the coast do not understand middle America and want to move the country in a dangerous direction.

So I'm wondering, what do they think of you?

MR. WEST: I'm sure they think a lot of different things. I actually had a great experience this summer. I had my 50th high school reunion, which it's hard for me to believe, but, you know, I saw many of my former classmates. A number of them actually stayed in the rural area where I lived. And it always strikes me — I've gone back to Ohio at least once a year for most of the decades since I left. What strikes me is how difficult the lives have been, how rural Americans have been devastated. The American dream has completely fallen apart, people's children are doing a lot worse than they themselves do. They understand that my life experiences since I left there has varied considerably from theirs. I may have had amazing opportunities at Brown and then now at Brookings. I think

at one level they like the fact that I came from the heartland and they understand that that helps me understand them and their views and why they're so discontented with the status quo, and why many of them actually were willing to turn to Donald Trump because they wanted to shake things up. They didn't like the status quo; they haven't done very well in the status quo. But some of them also are probably suspicious that I've kind of gone over to the other side in some respects. That I basically lived on the East Coast for several decades now.

But I have always found that I still have very good and open conversations with many people from my hometown, even if I disagree with their particular stance, either on Trump or some of the risks facing our country right now.

MS. PAGE: You have good and open conversations. That has been hard I think for a lot of Americans on both sides, to have good and open conversations with people with whom they disagree. I mean Trump is a real dividing line for a lot of Americans on both sides.

How can good and civil conversations happen in a country that is as polarized as our is?

MR. WEST: Well, that's a great question. And you're absolutely right. Like I've been studying American politics for 40 years now and the polarization and the extremism that we're seeing today I think is unrivaled. It's very intense and it does make those types of conversations very difficult.

But what I have found is like if you discuss these issues at an abstract level, people kind of quickly retreat to their corners, they're suspicious of opponents, they think their opponents are enemies as opposed to just somebody who happens to have a different point of view. What I have found is if you can kind of personalize the discussion, bring the issues down, I often have been surprised at some of the agreement that I find between

liberal friends and conservative friends.

So, for example, the loss of economic opportunity in America, which is not the only thing that's fueling Trumpism and populism, but it is certainly a substantial part of it. You know, income inequality is at a 100 year high in America right now. Our tax policy had been tilted towards the wealthy and rich corporations. And as a result of that, the average person has not done very well, economic opportunity has suffered, and the American dream has become almost mythical for many people.

When you discuss problems of economic opportunity, there are things both liberals and conservatives agree on. When you talk about threats to American democracy – there actually was a new survey that just came out of Quinnipiac this week in which it found 69 percent of Democrats and 69 percent of Republicans think American democracy is in danger of collapse. So even though you're, right, we live in a very polarized time period, there actually are some things that people agree on. And a couple of those things are the threats to democracy and the loss of economic opportunity.

MS. PAGE: How shocking is it that 69 percent of Americans have that attitude about the perils facing democracy now? It's like the only issue on which there may be bipartisan agreement at this point.

You know, the title of your second chapter is "Why You Should be Worried" — why you should be worried. I don't actually know anyone who is not worried at this moment, but to argue the reverse, you know, politics has long been a contact sport in America. We've had big debates, we've had political violence and assassination, we had a civil war, we had conflicts over the civil rights movement, over the Iraq War and the Viet Nam War, so should we be — why should we be especially worried? Is this just one more chapter in the American experience that we'll look back on and see how we survived it, or is this something that is different from what we've seen before?

MR. WEST: We should be especially worried about the current period because the rise of undemocratic elements, the rise of authoritarianism, the rise of populism, those things are not limited to the United States. They actually are global phenomenon. It's actually shocking, the number of countries that pretty recently had well-functioning democracies that have turned either illiberal and have started to dismantle democratic institutions within their own countries or turned outright authoritarian. And I would cite countries such as Poland, where the ruling party is rigging the elections in their own favor, changing the legal system to basically appoint friendly judges, Hungary — Viktor Orban, of course, is a very prominent advocate of what he calls illiberalism. You know, he has dismantled parts of civil society that were critical of him, basically forced the Central and European University to relocate from Budapest to Austria, Turkey was a functioning democracy just a few years ago and now has moved authoritarian, and then, Brazil and the Philippines.

So the fact that it's happening in many places around the world and the fact that there are democracies, including allies of ours that used to be democratic but now have turned authoritarian, this should worry Americans because I have encountered some people who basically say, look, our democracy is, you know, over two centuries old, it can't happen here. Like we see it happening in other places, but America is strong, our political institutions are strong, our civil society is strong, like we will overcome this particular moment. And I — by the way, I hope that all those people are right, but there are enough worrisome signs of how we have started already down that path to illiberalism that I think people should be worried. There are lots of warning signs out there that we need to take very seriously.

MS. PAGE: I was shocked by January 6. were you shocked?

MR. WEST: Absolutely. I mean I was watching it on TV and I live just a

couple of miles away from the U.S. Capitol, so was basically not that far away. But what to me was even more shocking, like — you know, we have seen mob violence in America on different occasions — what shocked me is the evening of that protest and that insurrection, you know, once the members of Congress had reassembled, there still were a bunch of Republicans that were, you know, trying to reopen the debate, challenge the legitimacy of Biden's victory, and perhaps even nullify the actual election. That I find even more concerning than, you know, the insurrection that preceded that.

And then in the year and a half since that time, my anxieties have even increased because, you know, when Congress wanted to investigate what happened on that day, Republicans basically did not want to cooperate with the investigation, refused to join the panel. And then we spent the summer kind of hearing all these witnesses come forward and the details are even more alarming than I thought at the time. I mean I basically finished my book last fall and at the time I didn't worry that I was being too pessimistic about the future of America, but after learning all the details of some of those hearings over the last year, I actually wondered if I was too optimistic.

MS. PAGE: You know, we've got a question from someone in our audience that relates to some I want to ask. And I just want to remind everyone that if you'd like to submit a question you can do it on Twitter to @BrookingsGov with #PowerPolitics or you can send them by email to Events@Brookings.edu.

This question comes from Martin Fleck from Physicians for Social Responsibility. And he says did the January 6 events qualify as a coup attempt? Are Americans in denial about something that is obvious to non-Americans. Was that an attempted coup?

MR. WEST: I do believe it was an attempted coup on Trump's part, not necessarily on the part of all Republicans or even some of the Republicans who were

questioning the legitimacy of the election. But the more we have learned about what happened on January 6 — and I think I have found that hearings of — congressional hearings of the last few months to be very informative because almost all the witnesses were Republicans, almost all of them were people who worked in the White House, they were people who Trump had appointed. And some of the stories they've told about the violence taking place and that Trump basically not being willing to allow the mayor to call in the National Guard for the Department of Defense to call in military troops to quell the violence, I mean basically he left those poor Capitol police officers out there by themselves to get their head bashed in in very ugly ways. So that is very shocking.

Some of the details about the extent of which Trump went to try and get his own vice president, Mike Pence, to unilaterally overturn the popular vote and the elected will of the American public, that is very shocking. And I think Pence himself seems to be pretty shocked — appears to be very shocked based on his own reactions of the last few months.

So it's like there are a lot of details that have come out that have suggested that this was kind of an amateurish attempt at a coup d'état, but there was a clear effort to overturn that election. And the thing that I worry about is Trump was not quite competent to pull it off, but he actually showed everybody else where the vulnerabilities are in our current election process, as well as in the vote counting process, in how elections get certified at the state level, who decides which electors to send to Congress, how Congress decides to accept the Democratic electors versus the Republican electors. Like we could all see those weaknesses. And my hope is that Congress will close at least some of those loopholes and deal with some of the vagueness that could allow extra constitutional efforts in the future. But so far Congress has not done any. That worries me a lot.

MS. PAGE: You think we could have a similar event after the 2024 election?

MR. WEST: Absolutely. I mean there are states that have already passed legislation basically allowing their state legislature to certify the election and/or decide whether the Republican or Democratic slate of electoral college voters gets sent to Congress, as opposed to the secretary of state, which in most states that has been a relatively nonpartisan type of position. Those legislatures have removed the power from secretary of state and some cases governors and given it to themselves. That creates a lot of opportunity for mischief.

The continuing concern about ballot security and the fact that so many Republicans still believe that the 2020 election was stolen, you could imagine a situation in 2024 when all it will take is allegations of ballot fraud in a few key precincts in a few key cities in two or three key states and that could lead to the overturning of the election.

So we could all see the road map on how this can happen and there is nothing that has happened over the last year or so that has reassured me that this can't happen again.

MS. PAGE: I wonder, could it have been even worse? I mean I'm thinking Vice President Pence, no hero to the Democrats prior to January 6, he did stand up, he refused to do what Trump wanted him to do, he refused to leave the Capitol grounds for fear the Secret Service would refuse to bring him back. Could it have been much worse? Was it only — are we just lucky that it happened, that it — that we recovered the way we did?

MR. WEST: We are lucky. And it actually could have been much worse.

And I do want to applaud a number of brave Republicans who basically took on a guy who remains very popular within the Republican party. And certainly VP Pence falls in that category. There were leading senators at the time — I mean Mitt Romney certain comes to mind as people who have spoken out against this, some of the members of the congressional commission that is investigating January 6. Certainly Liz Cheney gave

the ultimate sacrifice of sacrificing her seat in defense of democracy, Adam Kinzinger. So there were a number of Republicans that actually stood up for truth telling. They understand that this issue is actually bigger than the policy divide between liberals and conservatives, that the future of American democracy is on the line. But, you know, Trump still has a pretty strong hold on the Republican Party right now. And if one wants to look ahead to 2024, it looks like either he's going to be the nominee or somebody who espouses the very same policy views is going to be the Republican nominee.

MS. PAGE: So Trump's name is in the title of your book, "Power Politics: Trump and the Assault on American Democracy". And we've got several questions about Trump, which I want to get to in just a minute, but one of the central arguments of your book is that it's not all about Trump, that Trump didn't make this, that he fed it and he benefitted from it, but you write about structural and systemic problems that created a perfect storm. What is this perfect storm?

MR. WEST: I mean what I argue in my Power Politics book is that Trumpism is going to outlast Trump himself.

So let's say hypothetically Trump tomorrow announces he's retiring from politics and is never going to make another public utterance — which of course is hard to believe. But if that happened, the threat to American democracy is still there because all of the factors that propel Trumpism still are there. You know, the voting rights issues, income inequality, kind of the cultural divide that exists in America, the vagaries in the way we conduct our elections and actually count the votes.

I have a section in the book where I talk about one thing people don't realize is there are lots of presidential emergency power bills that already are on the books that have been passed by Congress over the last few years. Everybody assumed a benevolent president and responsible president, but we can imagine if there is an irresponsible or

authoritarian president who could possibly abuse those emergency power declarations. So there's a lot that is going to propel Trumpism well into the future, certainly, in 2022 and 2024 and perhaps beyond.

And the thing I worry about is there are a number of leading Republicans who are now basically mimicking Trump. So they understand that, you know, if Trump gets indicted or doesn't run or for whatever reason is not on the ballot in 2024, they're going to step up, but they seem to be interested in running a very similar type of campaign. And from a public opinion standpoint, they actually could do very well.

MS. PAGE: You know, a lot of your book talks about what to do. It's not just here's a prescription of all that went wrong, but here's some solutions about what to do.

So I know this is a big and complicated area, but we're getting a lot of questions of people asking for concrete steps about what they can do.

Let me just read two questions.

One is from Samantha Sloane. Samantha writes, what can the U.S. and its inhabitants do to reinvigorate democracy, particularly in light of vocal U.S. residents and elected representatives who ignore or deny threats to the U.S. liberal order? And here's a question by email from Lisa Hudson. She writes, as Americans, how do we combat this global trend toward populism and the rising threat of the far right to our democracy specifically?

So what can people do?

MR. WEST: I mean the way we can fight these trends towards populism and ultra-nationalism is, one, understand their basis, and then, two, undertake specific and very concrete steps that address the underlying grievances. I mean part of the reason I wrote the book is, one, I think people focus too much on Trump. And it's not like I don't share their concern about him, but it's the threats are actually much bigger than him.

So in the book I am very much focused on possible remedies and possible solutions because those listeners and watchers are right. You know, we are in a very unusual moment. We can't just sit around complaining about the threats. Like we need to think specifically of what we need to do. So here are just a few items, and I'm happy to talk about any of these in greater detail.

So one big problem right now clearly is in the area of voting rights. And one of the things I like to remind people of is a big success story from the 2020 election, and that was the very high level of voter turnout that we had. I think we had 66.8 percent of Americans — eligible Americans — turn out to vote. That is a two-thirds voter turnout. That is one of the highest voter turnouts in a presidential election we have seen in decades in the United States. And I applaud the fact that liberals, moderates, conservatives, libertarians, and people who have even more extreme views, turned out to vote. This is what democracy is all about. The thing that helped us reach that high level of voter turnout was early voting and mail ballots.

And so in terms of voting rights reforms, people like early voting because they don't want to just wait until election day and sometimes they're working that day and it creates some problems. They like mail ballots. When we made it easy for people to vote, people voted. This is important to democracy, and we should encourage that. And, by the way, there are a number of states that have actually moved in the opposite direction over the last year.

Income inequality is a huge driver of populism. And, again, I could draw on my experiences growing up in rural Ohio. Income inequality is at a 100 year high in America. You literally have to go back almost to the 1920s and 1930s to find similar levels of high-income inequality. The big culprit here is public policy, our tax policies and our social policies, which have conferred lots of benefits on super, super, super wealthy individuals and

rich corporations. There are corporations that are paying only a 5 to 10 percent tax rate. This is completely unfair. Susan, I'm pretty sure both you and I pay a much higher tax rate than 5 or 10 percent and many of the people watching this webinar are paying a much higher level.

So we need to have tax policies that address income inequality because the loss of economic opportunity, the loss of the American dream, drives populism and drives Trumpism and it makes people feel really unhappy with the status quo and willing to entertain unconventional or even undemocratic things.

The last point I'll make is just the cultural aspect of the threats to democracy. There's a bit debate going on in America about what it means to be an American. And Trump certainly made immigration one of the key cleavage points in that debate and kind of clearly distinguished us versus them — us being Americans and native-born Americans and immigrants who are crossing the river from Mexico. And I like to remind people, we should actually have a more favorable view about immigration in America because one of the things that actually has made America great over the last century has been immigration, and the melting pot, and the fact that we had people from all around the world who came to America and created businesses and helped to drive our economy. Even in the technology area, people don't recognize that half of the Silicon Valley companies had an immigrant founder or co-founder. So the one area in which America actually does excel now is in technology innovation. Immigration is a key part of that story. So I know that people in the cultural area have like all these views about immigration and minorities and the role of women in American life these days. We need to think about what are the things that did make America great and kind of have policies that support the things that actually have driven both innovation and economic prosperity in the United States.

MS. PAGE: Here's a sort of related question from Daphne Spratzar

(phonetic) from — who is a lieutenant colonel in the U.S. Army — and thank you for your service there. Here's her question: Do you think moving to a national popular vote for president would solve some of the distress in the electoral system? Do you think ranked-choice voting for congressional seats would help solve our flawed primary system?

Let me just add one more thing to her list, and that is open primaries. Because we've seen — maybe we should start with ranked-choice voting because we see the way ranked-choice voting made a difference in a historic election in Alaska last night. What do you think of ranked-choice voting?

MR. WEST: Well, my short answer is yes, yes, yes, to each of those questions. So we do need to support open primaries because it's a way to encourage moderates on both sides. It's a way to discourage and penalize extremists for both sides, extreme liberals as well as extreme conservatives.

The same is true in terms of ranked-choice voting. Actually, just yesterday we saw Alaska have a special congressional election where Sarah Palin came — a former VP candidate — lost a congressional election that Republicans expected to win because Alaska is a pretty conservative state. She lost it in part because of ranked-choice voting was used there. And, again, more moderate candidates ended up doing well.

We saw the same thing in New York City election where Eric Adams, who is a fairly moderate Democrat, was able to win over a number of more progressive Democrats running in that state. And, of course, New York City is an incredibly liberal place to begin with. And I think a lot of people thought a very liberal mayor would end up being elected there.

So these type of election reforms actually are critical to getting a handle on the polarization, the extremism, and the radicalization.

And the last thing I want to point out is just a short history lesson.

Reforming our election process is as American as apple pie. You know, we've done it regularly throughout our 200 plus year history. For example, in the early 20th century there were major forces in American society that were upset about a dysfunctional national government, corruption in high places. And, by the way, there the corruption was like cash in suitcases, so it was really blatant kinds of corruption. And so the developed presidential primaries, they developed public referendums to give the public a chance to weigh in on policy issues. Like when you look historically, we have always had problems, (inaudible) politics and undue influence by special interest groups, and too much power by the business community. We have adopted political and election reform designed to address those things. We need to do the same thing today. We have big problems and it may take big solutions to address those issues.

MS. PAGE: You know, you said yes to the suggestion of a national popular vote for president, but would that not just guarantee the candidates only pay attention to the biggest and most popular states and that states like Kansas or Rhode Island would be ignored.

MR. WEST: Okay, Susan, now you're making me betray my former home state of Rhode Island. And you're absolutely right. Like smaller states would be disadvantaged. But my view on this topic actually has changed over time. I used to teach a campaigns and elections course at Brown and for years I would extol the virtues of the electoral college, bemoan the risk of direct popular voting on presidential elections, but a few years ago, as I started to see some of the trends that we've been talking about emerge in American politics, I actually changed my view and in 2019 actually wrote a paper that is on the Brookings website at Brookings.edu, entitled "Why it's Time to Get Rid of the Electoral College". I do think that is a big political reform that is absolutely mandatory that we need to do.

Now, I know people are going to say, oh, god, the electoral college. Like we're never going to get rid of it, it takes a constitutional amendment, blah, blah, blah. What I like to tell people is not to basically take a stance of political status quo-ism. Basically, a big mistake that I think people are making today is to think whatever our politics are today, it's going to be the same five years from now and ten years from now. And what I like to remind people is we're going to see two really big trends unfold over the next decade. Demographic change, where America is becoming more minority. And if you add up the number of African Americans, Latinos, and Asian Americans, they are moving to majority status in about 20 years. And, secondly, generational change. When you look at public opinion surveys, younger people are more liberal than senior citizens, they're more worried about climate change and more willing to take decisive action, they feel the loss of economic opportunity, because that's the story of their lives and the story of their generation. So things that might seem impossible today policy wise are not going to be impossible ten years from now. Like in 1896, America was completely agitated by the gold standard. Nobody cares about the gold standard anymore. The issues that drive American politics, the issues that motivate people change enormously from decade to decade. And so big political reforms that may seem impossible now are not going to be impossible ten or fifty years from now.

MS. PAGE: Yeah. Lessons from Bernie Sanders on some of that. You know, believe what you believe, and over the long haul, who knows what you can do.

You know, we've gotten a couple of questions that relate to something that we talked about earlier in this hour. Here's an email from John Goodman. He writes you highlight that 69 percent of Republicans and Democrats agree that there are threats to democracy, do they see the dangers in the same place. And let me just go back to another question that was to the same point. Let's see if I can find it. Yes, this is from Carol Sang

(phonetic). Do Republicans and Democrats agree on what the threats to our democracy are and who the threat is from and how, that is voter fraud and fake ballots versus Republican gerrymandering and legislatures countermanding votes. Because if we disagree on what the threats are, isn't that even more reason for concern?

What would you say?

MR. WEST: Yeah, both of those are great questions and they are both right on target in the sense that that bipartisan agreement on the fact that people think that American democracy is in danger of collapse does mask a very different diagnosis of what the problem is and also what the solutions are. And, of course, that is what polarization today is all about.

So you're right that Republicans and Democrats and liberal and conservatives can see similar trends, they see the high income inequality, they see the loss of economic opportunity, they see the cultural divisions that are animating people these days, but they reach very different conclusions on what we need to do.

But what we need to do is on all of these questions, there are certainly big issue divides separating Republicans and Democrats, but we need an election system that basically empowers moderation on both sides as opposed to what our current situation, which is extremism on both sides. And take the case of primaries. You know, whether it's presidential primary or a congressional primary, the — you know, if you have a crowded field of Republicans running for the GOP nomination or a crowded field of Democrats, and you have low voter turnout, in an off year congressional election, we often have voter turnout that's 35 percent or even less. Basically only a third of Americans typically vote in congressional midterm elections. When you have low voter turnout during a period of polarization, all the candidates want to play to the base. Like Democratic candidates are playing to progressive elements, Republican candidates are playing to conservative

populous or ultra nationalist elements because they know people who feel intensely are going to be among that one-third that does turn out to vote.

So this is where the structural reforms come in. Like you can have a country that is very divided on economics, on culture, on foreign policy, and a range of other issues, but if we have political institutions that discourage extremism and encourage moderation, we can deal with those issues. In fact, historically, that has been how America has handled polarization that our political system kind of rubs off the sharp edges and basically forces or encourages people to compromise and negotiate with the other side. That's where some of our best policies have come in the past. We need to get back that type of mentality.

MS. PAGE: I mean — and a kind of discouraging time. There are a couple of things that have been good. Open primaries. The only two Republicans who voted to — House Republicans who voted to impeach Trump who have survived to the general elections, both got there because their states had open primaries. So they weren't held hostage to the most extreme voices in their own parties. We've seen ranked-choice voting, as you discussed before, in both New York City and Alaska having a real effect.

You see, states adopting — often because their voters have demanded it, less gerrymandered congressional districts. I think that's also been an encouraging thing.

And you mentioned the 2020 election. I mean the fact not only that we had record turnout, but we had record turnout, a fair and free election during a pandemic that no one who was running in the election ever dealt with before, these are things I think that are a little heartening at a time when maybe we are searching for silver linings.

We've got a couple of—

MR. WEST: Yeah, and if I could just jump in on that point. I think that's a very important point. Because it is very easy to feel discouraged and even pessimistic about

America and the future of our democracy, just given all the things that are happening now, but you're absolutely right that there are some success stories. There's bipartisan legislation that has passed Congress, there have been major issues that have been addressed, there's innovation taking place at the state and local level that is moving America in the right direction. So I like to tell people I'm kind of a short-term pessimist right now, but a long-term optimist. Like I think if somehow we can get through the next ten years, which I admit are going to be rocky, chaotic, and perhaps even violent instead of being — it's going to challenge all of us — if somehow we can get through the next ten years, I'm actually very optimistic about the future of America and the future of American democracy.

MS. PAGE: We have a question here from David Penske from Prim Cab Ventures, who asked what happens after Trump? There will be an after Trump. What happens then?

MR. WEST: Well, I'm not too reassured by what happens in the short run after the Trump just because Trumpism is still going to be there even if he individually is not there. So all the things we're talking about still are going to be there. They are what I call in the book Republican copycat candidates who are basically doing the same thing and addressing the same issues as Trump is.

So if Trump disappeared, it's not going to save American democracy. And this is the reason in the book I try and focus on systemic and structural factors, because I think there are too many people who blame all of the threats on American democracy on Trump himself and they're not understanding that there are these forces that have made Trump possible that are still going to be there even after he leaves the scene.

So it's the reason why in the book I try and think about reforms that address grievances. Because it's the grievances that are dividing America right now and the grievances that are fueling the populism and the ultra-nationalism.

MS. PAGE: You know, here's a related question from Charles LoPresti from PNNL, who writes how long can we expect movements like Trumpism to persist? So it comes to the point, not Trump, but Trumpism. What's the likely life span of Trumpism?

MR. WEST: Well, there's a long history of social movements in America and they've often been quite influential in shaping our politics as well as our society. You know, the civil rights movement, the women's liberation movement, the environmental movement. And when you look at kind of past movements, I would say the life cycle of many of these movements is two or three decades in the sense that it takes a while to organize and then it takes a while for those people who are concerned about those types of issues to gain political influence. And then ultimately they gain political power, they're able to get new policies enacted into law, and then they focus on implementation. And then as we have made progress addressing the environment, like the Environmental Protection Act of 1970, then the movement starts to recede because the grievances that fueled those movements have gotten addressed. I think there's a valuable lesson for the contemporary period, and Trumpism in particular, that for me when I look historically it tells me we have to address the grievances. Like we can just assume that all Trump voters are crazy people. Because if you assume that, it delegitimizes what are some legitimate grievances on their part. And if we don't take the grievances seriously and if we're not able to make progress on income inequality and the loss of economic opportunity, Trumpism could endure for much longer and become even more threatening and actually usher in an authoritarian time period in America.

So we need to take these long-term factors seriously and take steps to address them.

MS. PAGE: Now, one of the problems is some people who are against Trump think people who follow Trump are crazy, they can't understand how they can

possibly do that. And some people who follow Trump think those who are against him are traitors, do not have America's interest at heart. During the 2016 campaign Hillary Clinton described some Trump supporters as "the deplorables". And we heard President Biden just last week say that some in the GOP were semi-fascist. And I wonder what you think of that sort of rhetoric.

MR. WEST: Well, I didn't like Hillary Clinton's use of the word deplorables I regard to the people that I grew up with, because they are not deplorable, they are people who work very hard, they're responsible Americans, they're law-abiding people. But they haven't done very well for the last 40 years, and I understand why they are upset.

When Biden talked about — it was kind of an interesting way he phrased it — he didn't accuse Republicans of being fascists, he said they were semi-fascist. You know, I don't actually know what a semi-fascist is. It's like you're a fascist or you're not a fascist. Like I don't get that intermediate category that he used. It was like he was trying to use a soft version of, hey, you guys are turning authoritarian or autocratic.

I actually think there's more evidence to support that criticism than the one that Hillary Clinton used because — and I would certainly not label all Republicans with that type of language and that type of critique, but there do appear to be significant and powerful forces within the Republican Party that are moving towards autocracy, that are willing to embrace undemocratic means in order to hold power. It's no accident I entitled my book "Power Politics", because I argue we are in a period of power politics where if you have power, you use it. That legal rights, civil rights, human rights just don't matter as much anymore, it's raw political power. And, by the way, that's true in the United States, it's also true around the world. And Vladimir Putin is certainly demonstrating that in Russia.

And so I have a chapter in my book on public opinion and I actually present data analysis from those surveys at the rise of authoritarian sentiments among the American

electorate. And I was actually shocked at what I found. I mean there are different surveys, and they have slightly different results, but there are up to a third of Americans who are willing to embrace attitudes and/or behaviors that are authoritarian in nature, meaning being willing to overturn the popular vote if you think there is ballot fraud, even if you can't prove there was ballot fraud, being willing to override judges who consider ballot fraud cases. Even though, you know, there were dozens of court cases after the 2020 election on the alleged ballot fraud and in virtually every one of those cases, including cases decided by judges appointed by Donald Trump, Trump lost the case. So there wasn't much evidence there. But from a public opinion standpoint, Trump has been very effective at poisoning our discourse and convincing so many people that the 2020 election was stolen. And if people think that, if they think the other side would resort to those types of illegal and unfair tactics, it then allows them to rationalize, well, if the other side is acting in an undemocratic way, then I can do the same thing. That is a very dangerous public opinion development in the United States.

And so when I saw some of the survey results on that, it — one, it completely shocked me, and two, it completely worried me.

MS. PAGE: Darrell, yes, as you know from having done so very many books, there are always things that surprise you when you're researching a book, things that you didn't understand or didn't realize. What was the most surprising thing for you in thinking about this book and writing it?

MR. WEST: I mean I think the most surprising things was how all these factors have become what you described earlier as the perfect storm. Like if there was just one kind of vaguely anti-democratic element taking place in American society, I actually wouldn't worry too much about that because, as you have mentioned, there have been other times in American history where we've had radical social movements, extremism, anti-

immigrant sentiment, racism, and other such things, and we have managed to overcome it. Sometimes it took a lot of effort, but we did make some progress on doing that.

What surprised me about the current period, when I actually got systematic and just started looking at the variety of things, is how so many of these problems are actually inter-related and they feed onto one another in ways that are very dangerous. And so the high income inequality, the rolling back of voting rights, the cultural divide that Republicans have actually played to very great political effect, the structural political elements in terms of having an electoral college that kind of ends up undercutting the popular vote. One of the statistics that I discovered in the course of research for the book that I'd never seen before, and it did completely shock me, was Republicans have won the presidential popular vote only once between 1992 and 2020. That happened to be the 2004 election when George W. Bush beat John Kerry in the popular vote. In every other election either Democrats have won the popular vote and then won the electoral college and became president, or Democrats have won the popular vote, lost the electoral college and the Republican has won.

And so Republicans actually are doing really poorly politically in terms of public opinion. Like they've lost most of the presidential elections at the popular vote level, but obviously because of the electoral college, I think they control the presidency at least 40 percent of the time over the last 30 years. That has allowed them to dominate policy making because the Senate has — you need 60 votes out of 100 in the Senate in order to pass legislation because of the power of the filibuster that gives Republicans greater influence. It's allowed them to now get a 6-3 majority on the Supreme Court, and that Court is rolling back protections that Americans who used to think — so this is a thing that both surprised and shocked me, how all of these elements are intertwined. It's the perfect storm that is problematic because as we all know from hurricane season, you have the perfect storm, the

damage is widespread.

MS. PAGE: Yeah. And new technology too is something that you've written about in this book and in others as a factor in changing the way people communicate, changing the way you can organize, changing the sense people have about whether they have control over things. That would be one more element.

So we talked about some of the encouraging things that have happened on elections, but here's a question from Thomas Horton, who is a policy advisor in the Michigan House of Representatives. And he writes given the deepening political divides of our time, which is more likely, reconciliation and bipartisanship or deterioration to a second American civil war? Is talk of a civil war hyperbolic or do you think that is something we ought to be worrying about?

MR. WEST: Actually, I don't think either one of those scenarios are the most likely ones. I've actually written about both of them. Brookings had a project on reconciliation a couple of years ago and we kind of talked about ways that we could reconcile with one another. That is probably not a high probability event, at least in the next few years. Polarization is still going to be the dominant political threat.

But I also don't believe we're headed for a civil war. Bill Gayle of our Economic Studies Program and I actually wrote a piece on this six months ago of is the United States headed towards a civil war. The thing that shocked me is we've had almost a quarter million page view of that one piece alone in the six months that we wrote it. And I view that as a very negative indicator about our future. But despite that, I don't think we're headed for a civil war because if you compare the current situation with the 1860s, what made that civil war possible was the geographic basis of the conflict. You know, it was the North versus the South, the pro-slavery states versus the pro-freedom states. Like it was a very clear distribution. Today we have conflicts basically between rural and urban areas in

each of the 50 states. Like Lincoln, Nebraska is much more liberal than the State of Nebraska. Austin, Texas is much more liberal than the State of Texas.

So, from my standpoint, I think it's hard to have a civil war unless you're going to have civil wars in each of the 50 states that basically pit the cities versus suburban and rural areas. I just don't see that as a likelihood.

But the scenario that I think is actually more realistic, but also quite worrisome, is just the rise of violence in America. And the violence can basically be one off violence where somebody basically shoots somebody for political reasons — and we certainly have seen a number of examples of that, two, a January 6 style insurrection where a bunch of people come together, they plan an attack, and they actually execute it. Only there we shouldn't just assume that the object of that attack is going to be the U.S. Capitol. I mean they chose that on January 6 because they wanted to stop the election certification that was going to take place on Capitol Hill on that particular day. But you can imagine situations in the future where local courthouses get attacked, state capitol buildings get attacked, state and/or federal administrative agencies and offices get attacked. Like there are a variety of attacks that could take place. And I hope the FBI and the Department of Homeland Security are taking these types of domestic threats seriously because there's so much anger out there and so many guns, this is actually the scenario that I worry about. Because I think it's more realistic and more plausible than either outright reconciliation and we all lived happily together, or an outright civil war.

MS. PAGE: Yeah. Here's an email from Aleen Secklar (phonetic), who writes my sense is that democracy worldwide needs success worldwide. It means much more boldness, creativity, communication, and understanding from the leaderships democratically elected.

What could be such a major success in the U.S. or beyond its borders?

And to re-pose that question, is there a place that is like a model of dealing with — you've mentioned that this is in some ways a worldwide phenomenon. We're seeing what we see in the United States happening in other democracies as well. Is there a place that is handling these challenges particularly well?

MR. WEST: I mean you're certainly right, there are many challenges all around the world in kind of the forces that we're seeing here, we're also seeing in a lot of other places.

The places that I actually think are handling it better are mostly European countries. Not Eastern European but Western European countries, in the sense that they have found a sweet spot in the sense of political institutions that are more broadly representative and encourage moderation as opposed to extremism. And in some places it's a parliamentary system that encourages that.

And maybe there are multiple parties in some of these countries, so there often is not a dominant single political party, but even a more extreme party has to compromise and form coalitions with more moderate parties in order to actually achieve a governing majority. Some of these countries also I think have done a better job on the income equality issue. And, again, I emphasize that just because of its link to populism.

That they actually have lower levels of income inequality than we do, because they have fewer tax policies. So there are success stories around the world. We need to look at some of those places. Not all of their lessons are applicable for the United States because we have a different history and a different culture and kind of differing political expectations, but I think the person is right that democracies need to do a better job and the key thing is they have to perform better.

It's poor performance in my view that is driving some of these public opinion trends towards populism and authoritarianism.

MS. PAGE: Poor performance in not addressing the problems people see in their lives?

MR. WEST: Absolutely.

MS. PAGE: Yeah, yeah. So we're just 60 some days away from the midterms. What are you watching for?

MR. WEST: Voter turnout. I want to see as high a voter turnout as possible. And that means across the political spectrum. You know, I want the Trump people to turn out to vote, I want the Bernie people to turn out to vote, I want the moderate elements to turn out to vote. Like the bigger the turnout, the more likely our political system is going to elect moderates, the less likely we are going to elect extremists.

And the problem is historically only about a third of Americans vote in congressional midterm elections. And if that trend continues, we're likely to see many more extremists in the halls of Congress.

MS. PAGE: So we're almost at the end of our hour and it's been a really interesting conversation. So I have a lightening round of questions to ask you.

In the next Congress, which party controls the Senate?

MR. WEST: I am much more optimistic about Democrats right now, given some of the poor qualities of the Republican nominees, so I would say Democrats.

MS. PAGE: You know, it could be the second time Donald Trump has cost Republicans a majority in the Senate because two years ago his meddling in Georgia helped Democrats get to that 50 point.

In the next Congress, which party controls the House?

MR. WEST: Republicans. That seems very clear. Just gerrymandering and inflation and Covid.

MS. PAGE: If Republicans control the House, is Kevin McCarthy speaker?

MR. WEST: I think he probably is, but obviously the margin varies a lot. He's less likely to be the speaker if he has a margin of ten votes or less. If he has ten more Republicans or more, his prospects go up.

MS. PAGE: I'm sorry, how close does it have to be for him to really be in danger do you think?

MR. WEST: If Republicans have a seat margin in the House of ten votes or less.

MS. PAGE: He could be in trouble?

MR. WEST: Yes, absolutely. Because that would empower the extreme elements within his own party.

MS. PAGE: And if not McCarthy, who? If they've got a seven-seat majority, who is the speaker?

MR. WEST: I think that probably will not be McCarthy, but I actually would not predict who that would be.

MS. PAGE: That is a hard one.

In the new Congress, will Nancy Pelosi be leading the Democrats?

MR. WEST: No. Since I think Democrats are likely to lose their majority status, I think she will exit at that stage and probably retire politically. And if she hasn't read your book by then, she will have the time to actually read it.

MS. PAGE: And, finally, it's silly to make predictions about a presidential election two years out. Let me just ask you this one. Will 2024 be a Biden versus Trump rematch?

MR. WEST: If the election were tomorrow, yes, I believe that would be the case. But the longer — obviously we're more than two years away from that — the longer it goes on, there are more things that can go wrong for Trump, such as Republicans not

winning the Senate when they should win it this year.

That would be a big negative for Trump within the Republican Party. Or, obviously, if Trump gets indicted. That becomes a big negative too.

MS. PAGE: Now, being indicted would be a big problem. That wasn't going to be my last question, but do you think Trump will face an indictment?

MR. WEST: I think on the national security stuff and all of the classified documents that he and/or his staff took to Mar-a-Lago, he has major legal vulnerability. If you or I had done that, we would be indicted.

MS. PAGE: Yeah. Darrell West, thank you so much for this hour and thank you for your new book, "Power Politics: Trump and the Assault on American Democracy". Thanks so much to Brookings and thanks to everyone who joined us this hour for this conversation.

MR. WEST: Susan, thank you very much.

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