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WEBINAR

AMERICAN DEMOCRACY IS UNDER THREAT. HOW DO WE PROTECT IT?

MONDAY, JUNE 17, 2024

UNCORRECTED TRANSCRIPT

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LIASSON: Hello. Welcome to our webinar this morning. As you saw from the title card, it's called "American democracy is under threat. How do we protect it?" I'm Mara Liasson from NPR. I'm going to be the moderator for today's panel. This is not going to be another woe is me session. We are going to talk about how resilient our democratic institutions are or are not. But more importantly, we're going to talk about what we can do to make them stronger in the short term and in the long term, and how we can adjust some of the institutions and practices that were invented by our founders to protect minority parties' rights, but have morphed in many ways into minority rule. And no one is better to discuss this with us than our panel today. And they are my friend Bill Galston, who you see on the screen. He's the Ezra Zilkha chair and senior fellow in Governance Studies at Brookings. Vanessa Williams, who is the senior fellow at Brookings and at the Urban Institute Brookings Tax Policy Center. And finally, Steve Levitsky, who literally wrote the book or books on this subject. He is a professor of politics of government at Harvard, and he wrote "Tyranny of the Minority and How Democracies Die." We're going to talk for about 40 minutes. Then we're going to open it up to audience Q&A. If you have a question, you need to send it by email to events@brookings.edu. Okay. So let's get to it. The first question for all of our panelists is how did we get here? With our democratic institutions undergoing this gigantic stress test over the last eight years? How resilient is our democracy and how worried should we be about it? Let's start with Bill.

GALSTON: Well, Mara, it's a pleasure to be with all of you. It has taken us, in my view, a long time to get here. I came to political consciousness, believe it or not, in the 1950s, in the era of consensus politics or so-called consensus politics. So I've gotten to see the whole unraveling of that consensus system, up to the present day. I would date the beginning of this to 1968, when we had various kinds of crack ups, you know, cultural crack up, political, political crack up, a huge racial debate, and the, candidacy of George Wallace. I would then go on to talk about Roe v Wade and the perception that the Supreme Court had taken one side in an emerging cultural war. I would say deindustrialization, the end of the Cold War. The perception of governance failure, on the part of a series of 21st century presidents. And last but not least, the near collapse of Congress as one of the three pillars, you know, of our constitutional system, which has led to all sorts of distortions. And I think we'll have a chance to talk about later in this panel. So you just heard 55 years of the other of American history in 90 seconds. But, I think I'm going to stop here.

LIASSON: So, Vanessa, this all started before you were born. And Bill makes it sound almost inevitable. The decline. What do you think? How did we get here? And how worried should we be about American democracy?

WILLIAMSON: Well, I think that are some of the issues we face, come from before any of us were born. You know, the United States has, quite anti majoritarian institutions in a number of ways. And, and many of those have been in place, you know, for longer. But, you know, to me, I think Bill's right to, to think about, the mid 60s, I mean, in particular, I tell people, you know, we're a very old republic, but we're actually quite a new democracy, right? We didn't have universal suffrage to any meaningful degree until 1965. So, you know, when we're thinking about the problems we're facing today, I think it's absolutely critical to see what's happening now as part of that long reaction to the successes of the civil rights movement, but they're also much more recent phenomenon. I mean, to me, a turning point. Well, within my lived experience, was, you know, starting in 2010, when you start to see the states diverge, right? Some states start making it easier to vote. Some states focus on voter access and increasing turnout, and other states start making it harder to vote. Right. And so the that divergence, between the sort of basic electoral functioning of our states and the sort of move to things like voter ID to, mass removals of voters names from the voter rolls, to gerrymandering, which has existed for a long time becoming far more extreme. All of those measures, which again, due in part to the reaction to the Barack Obama administration and therefore, again to the civil rights movement. I think that is the sort of turning point for me in terms of the more new recent aspect of this decline.

LIASSON: Hey, Steve, you've written, you know, several books about this. How did this happen? How resilient are our institutions and how worried should we be?

LEVITSKY: It be? We should be quite worried. There are a lot of sources, dysfunction, in, in US democracy. But I think the principal threat right now is that one of our two major parties has turned away from democratic rules of the game. A democracy cannot survive if one party in a two-party system is not committed to playing by democratic rules of the game and a democratic party, small-d democratic party, must do three things. It must unambiguously accept the results of elections. It must unambiguously reject the use of political violence. And it must break. It must be willing to break completely with violent or anti-democratic forces. And the Republican Party, unfortunately, has has ceased to do those things and now poses a threat to our democracy. Really quickly. That's a very unusual thing. It is really rare in history to find a mainstream political party that's competed in elections peacefully for 150 years, to suddenly turn away from democracy. In our research, Daniel Ziblatt, had a hard time finding other pieces, historically, of mainstream parties that just went off the rails like this. And, the best comparison, in fact, was the Democratic Party after the Civil War.

And I think that tells you something about why this is happening. There are a lot of reasons why the Republican Party has gone off the rails, but I think the principal one is actually as a reaction to the success of our democracy, our successful transition. As Bill and Vanessa pointed out, to a multiracial democracy over the last half century, a multiracial democracy in which a long dominant majority, group is losing its dominant status. That is a big deal. Losing a once dominant status is a very big deal. Many Trump voters, not all of them. Many Trump voters feel like the country that they grew up in has been taken away from them. And that is a that's that's radicalism. Much of the Republican Party base has radicalized to the degree, where they've become anti system. And, and that ultimately I think is is the source of the problem.

LIASSON: Well, let me follow up on that. First of all, are you talking about race when you say their dominant position? The Republican Party hasn't been dominant forever. There were many, you know, Democrats in Congress for 50 years. Are you talking about race?

LEVITSKY: Absolutely. Yeah. For 200 years, white and particularly white Christian men were the at the top of every social hierarchy, every political hierarchy, every economic hierarchy, every cultural hierarchy in this country. When I was all the way through my bar mitzvah in the early 80s, every single major position, every Fortune 500 CEO, every Miss America was it was white. It's only in the last 50 years that those racial categories, it's not just racial categories, but principally racial hierarchies have been seriously challenged. That's a major change. That's a major change that has occurred rapidly and right in front of our eyes over the course of two generations.

LIASSON: I just have one more follow up about this. And I want to ask you, but maybe Bill can jump in. Bill described a gradual process over many, many, many years, many decades. You're talking about a party, the Republicans, who now kind of all of a sudden refuse to, accept the results of elections that they don't win and refuse to rule out political violence. But that's that has happened very, very recently. It's not like gradually the Republicans got to be okay with political violence. It seems like there was this break and Trump was the break. Is that how you see it?

LEVITSKY: Both things are true. Things change happens slowly, then it happens quickly. So Bill's absolutely right.

LIASSON: And then all of a sudden. Right. Yeah.

LEVITSKY: Right. This goes back to the 1960s. The Republican Party, was very, very successfully, appeal to white voters who were discontented with the civil rights revolution, of the 1960s, particularly the US south. Now that that process of, beginning with the, with Goldwater and Nixon's southern strategy took a generation and a half. It took 30 years for the US, more than 30 years for the US South, for whites in the US south to transfer transformed from being overwhelmingly Democrats, doing overwhelmingly Republicans. It was not until the early 21st century that that transition was complete, but by the time of it, by the early 21st century, the Republicans were an overwhelmingly white Christian party. Now that worked in the United States politically, really, really well in the 1970s, 80s and 90s. Being America's white Christian party paid electoral dividends in the Reagan and Clinton eras. But as this country diversified thanks to large scale immigration in the late 20th century, by the early 21st century, that was an electoral loser. So the Republican Party has won the popular vote in the United States once, one time in Taylor Swift's lifetime. That that that's a poor performance of winning the popular vote in the 21st century. So it's only in the 21st century, first of all, that the Republicans became a truly minority party, and secondly, that, many, many white Americans felt the impact of the social and cultural changes that were occurring over the last half century.

LIASSON: Right. But I want to ask Bill this, but I'm asking about the the the note, the, acceptance of political violence. I don't I understand how they got to this point, but that the acceptance of political violence and the refusal to accept the results of elections, that's new.

LEVITSKY: Trump plays a big role here. Trump plays a big role here. Trump crossed lines that no other Republican politician even thought about crossing. And he showed that it could work. It could work, at least internally within the Republican Party. He demonstrated to other Republicans that this was a strategy. Not only that, not only was it not political suicide to be, say, openly racist or openly break all sorts of norms that other politicians hadn't broken, but he showed that it could work, that it could succeed. And, and we can't unsee that. We can't unlearn that.

LIASSON: Okay.

GALSTON: I just I would just.

LIASSON: Whoops. Oh. Go ahead. Go ahead.

GALSTON: I would I would just quickly distinguish between if you're looking at a forest fire. I would distinguish between the tinder and the spark. Right. And I would argue that all sorts of historical changes over a period of more than half a century. Left the political landscape littered with dry, combustible tinder. But it was not necessary. That matters was not predetermined. That matters would take exactly the course that they did. The historical accidents of leadership. Seizing control of a situation that can be steered in a number of different directions and steering it in a very destructive direction. That is a component of all history, including American history, that should not be underplayed. It's not all structure. Individual agents matter.

WILLIAMSON: If I can just jump in here for a second. I think that it's important to remember how extreme rhetoric had become under the Obama administration before Trump, right? I mean, if we look at the Tea Party movement, that was a, conservative reaction to the early years of the Obama administration. Grassroots Republican activists were already talking about the president as a non-citizen. We're already talking about compromise with Democrats as treason. Right. Now, we can all imagine they should have, you know, we can get dramatic language in our politics, right? But it had gained a much harder edge. And at the point where you don't accept any compromise with the opposing party as legitimate politics, you are pushing very close to the line that Trump actually crossed. So I think there is there is, there is something that there was a change that occurred before Trump with the Republican Party's move to very extreme entrenched in the 90s and then again in the under the Obama administration and, the rise of a base that saw themselves as the real Americans, at odds with the other people who are, in fact, also Americans.

LIASSON: So, let's talk about the most important things we can do to preserve democracy in the short term. In the long term. We're going to start with the short term. This is an emergency response. Is it possible to Trump proof the government to reform the Insurrection Act, to make it harder for Trump to abandon our NATO allies, which he has said he would do, or weaponize the DOJ against his enemies? I guess the good thing for you guys, academics is that he's very transparent and tells you exactly what checks and balances he'd like to throw in the garbage. So, let's talk about short term solutions. Start with you, Vanessa.

WILLIAMSON: So, I think there are two things to think about here. Obviously, there is a great deal of work that is being done, and more needs to be done to protect the sanctity of our elections, right? Our elections are run at a very local level, and they are traditionally very underfunded. But a lot of folks have stepped in to try and improve those processes. Right. And I think that there is nothing, you know, sort of more immediately

urgent than ensuring that people can vote. And then the votes get counted. Right. This is the absolute baseline. The other thing I want to put on the table, though, because I think it gets a little bit less attention and you sort of gestured at it. We need to think about the defense of bureaucracy, right? You know, I normally get sort of a bad rap, but our civil service is a critically important part of democratic processes. And that's because we need the government to be a neutral actor. In elections, what you see in places like Hungary, is that, someone who wants to be an autocrat can win an election and then consolidate power by undermining the parts of government that used to operate neutrally, that used to operate without reference to a particular party, and put the power of the state behind a particular political party. And that makes the next election much more dangerous and much harder to win for opponents. So to me, those are the two pieces that election administration obviously critical first step. And secondly, just, helping American, the American people focus on the fact that the neutral functioning of our civil service is, in fact, a democracy issue.

LIASSON: So just to follow up on that, if you did professionalize the civil service, what you're saying is that all of a sudden we'll wake up one morning and we'll find out that according to the BLS, the unemployment rate is zero and inflation is zero.

WILLIAMSON: That's exactly right. We need to work. So voters can't make smart decisions if they don't have accurate data. A lot of our activity comes from the government. But it's also I mean, if anyone remembers the sort of machine politics of New York or Chicago or Newark, right, when you have the basic functioning of the state on your side as a in that case, a mayor, you can change election outcomes, right? And we need to not reproduce that kind of politics at a national level. The federal government is very, very powerful institution, and it needs to remain a neutral party that works equally for all Americans and under any partisan leadership.

LIASSON: Ok Bill. Short term solutions to triage the patient on the battlefield.

GALSTON: We're. One which I regard as the most urgent. You know, viewers with medium long memories will recall that we had some trouble after the 2020 election. Part of that trouble was attributed was attributable to an antique law, the Electoral Count Act, you know, which was passed after the controversial, you know, controversial election of 1876. And nobody knew what it meant then, and it didn't get any better with time. And so Congress came together across party lines to reform it a couple of years ago. They now need to do the same thing with the Insurrection Act, which for those who are not familiar with it, permits the

president of the United States to call out the US military for domestic purposes, in circumstances which the law leaves very vague, almost entirely up to presidential discretion, and with no clear mechanism of even judicial review. This is a bomb waiting to go off. The political parties ought to get together before this Congress ends up across party lines to to, carry out the kinds of reforms that bipartisan task forces have been recommending in recent months. That is job one. And if nothing else is done between now and September. I would be satisfied.

LIASSON: Okay. What about NATO? What? He's the. Could be Trump could be the Commander In Chief. What would stop him from telling the military to stand down? We're not going to live up to Article Five. He's already invited Putin to invade any what he calls deadbeat NATO allies. Can Congress do anything about that? This is a president, a clear presidential power?

GALSTON: I don't think so. Congress has already done what it could by requiring the president to go back to NATO, rather go back to Congress if it if he wants to leave NATO, a matter which was.

LIASSON: But he doesn't have to leave. NATO, he just has to not do anything when a NATO ally is invaded.

GALSTON: Mara, look, the Constitution, as you just said, gives him not plenipotentiary but leading power as the commander of chief of the armed forces and the chief steward of American foreign policy. That's what you get when you get when you elect a president. And if he wants to violate the terms of a treaty and betray our allies, there will be a political crisis that may turn into a constitutional crisis. But here and now, I don't think there's anything that can be done about that.

LIASSON: So, Steve, it sounds like there are real limits to what we can, what Congress can do in the short term to Trump proofed democracy or protect democracy.

LEVITSKY: Absolutely, I feel is absolutely right about reforming the Insurrection Act and and as well as the utility of the reforms to the Electoral Count Act. But presidents are powerful. Particularly in the realm of foreign policy. So that leads me to my. Central point in terms of what we can do in the short term, which is keep MAGA out of the White House. They. And that requires a very broad, much broader than exists today, the formation of a very broad, broad democratic coalition. Coalition in defense of democracy. That coalition has to spend beyond the Democratic Party. It has to spend that's extend beyond blue states. MAGA is not a

majority. MAGA is nowhere near, a majority in the United States. If pro Democratic forces from the Republican Party, from the realm of business, from the realm of religion, stand up and publicly not only defend democracy, but publicly support Joe Biden as the only alternative to, to keeping an authoritarian force out of power. We would be in much, much better shape, but we've yet to really forge that coalition. Very, very few Republicans, even though they privately will vote for Biden or privately despise and fear Trump. Very few Republicans have lined up behind Biden. The reports that the Biden team hasn't done a heck of a lot of work in trying to reach out to Republicans. Very relatively few, high profile CEOs have taken a clear position in defense of democracy. In fact, many of them have been flirting with Trump and saying that it you know, they'll be fine either way. That's not how you save a democracy saying your business is going to be fine either way, and positioning yourself to accommodate a Trump administration is not how you to save a democracy. That's how you get to Hungary. And the same thing can be said about religious leaders. Catholic Church leaders have stood up and played a major role in defending democracy in Brazil and Germany in the last couple of years. They've been pretty silent the last couple of years in the United States.

LIASSON: Well, you know, we can understand why Republican elected officials or any Republican that wants of future in politics capitulates to Trump. We get that. But what I'm thinking about is something on a much larger scale, this kind of coalition to defend democracy that you described, that would be a much bigger version of that op-ed piece in the Washington Post right before January 6th, signed by all those former defense secretaries and including the 44 top Trump officials like McMaster and Kelly and Mattis, all those people who have been on the record saying that he would be dangerous to be if he was returned to the Oval Office. And I'm wondering if people who have who aren't business leaders, who only care about getting low taxes, who aren't looking for a future in electoral politics, I wonder if they're the people that you start with, I don't know.

LEVITSKY: Absolutely. That that, op ed by former defense secretaries was exactly the model of what we need. Precisely. So we need much, much more of that in the months to come.

LIASSON: Yeah. Okay. Let's talk about the long term, okay. The patient U.S. democracy is still breathing, but it's grievously wounded. What do we need to do? So American democracy is still functioning ten years from now. And I guess I'd ask the question, and we might as well start with you, Steve. Is it possible for a democracy that has been so degraded and devolved to come back? I mean, I'm thinking, I guess, about post Franco's Spain, something like that.

LEVITSKY: Well, it is true that the sort of. In some ways, the simplest path to starting a new and building a better democratic politics is to fully lose your democracy, like in Spain or in Chile. But, I don't think. One needs, or the United States in the case of the Civil War. But I don't think we need to lose our democracy to rebuild it. There are many, many cases of democracy across the world that have gone through periods of crisis, including our own, and have and have come out of it and reformed their way out of it. The United States in the 1970s is one example. But we do need to get back to our long established American tradition of working to reform our democracy and make it more democratic. The 80s, the US Constitution was not very democratic at birth. The the original US Constitution did not include the right to vote, nor did include basic civil liberties that came with the, that came two years later. It was the process of of creating a democracy. Vanessa mentioned we didn't reach full democracy until 1965. That was generation after generation after generation of Americans working to make our system more democratic. Expanding suffrage in the 19th century. The very important reconstruction reforms, in the 1860s and 1870s, the very important progressive reforms of the early 20th century, the important civil rights reforms in the mid 20th century. It's only really in the last 50 years that Americans have kind of stopped thinking about how to make our system more democratic, and I think it's vitally important that we get into details if you want, but I want to give others time to speak. Very important that we get back to thinking about how we can reform our our democracy and make it democratic, because frankly, we've become a laggard in many respects compared to other democracies across the world.

LIASSON: So, Vanessa, in the long term, U.S. democracy is still breathing, grievously wounded. But what do we do to make sure that democracy is still functioning ten years from now? What are the long term fixes?

WILLIAMSON: When I think of the most critical fixes, would be a fundamental reform of the way that business engages in our politics right now. You know, we've talked a little bit about the idea that there are sort of CEOs who think, oh, everything would be fine under Trump. Talked a little bit about, you know, tax cuts to sort of some sort of essential policy matter that precedes all other things, including democracy and that kind of thinking, which, you know, that sort of reorganization of business on very conservative lines, the sort of ideological capture of business on the far right. It is one of the primary factors that push the Republican Party farther and farther right over my entire lifetime. So I think that one of the most important things we can think about is recognizing the ways in which democracy is, in fact, essential to the functioning of an economy. Right. And there's so much data on this that it's not even really worth getting into all of it. But

the the fact is that democratization is not just associated but causes, substantial growth. 20 to 25% growth in GDP per capita over the following decades. You move towards authoritarianism, you get a populist authoritarian in their left or right. But it does not matter if you've got a left authoritarian or right authoritarian. You will see a 15% decline in GDP per capita over the following years. So when we're talking about whether business should be on the side of democracy, this is not about winning hearts and minds and getting people to be their better selves. This is about actually protecting your bottom line, because the reality is, if you want to think about what it's like to operate as a business under authoritarian rule, you can expect regulations to be used against businesses that are seen as out of line, right? You can see campaign contributions suddenly become something that is extorted, right? So the idea if if people in business have the idea that they can operate a business as usual under an authoritarian regime, they haven't looked at authoritarian regimes closely, you know. And so, for me, the most fundamental thing that we need to do in the long term is return to the kind of business organization we had in the mid-20th century, right, where US businesses like, you know, tax cuts, they like deregulation, but they also like things like the space race. They also like large parts of the Great Society. Right. They recognize that, in fact, broad economic growth is essential for functioning business. So to me, if there if there is a lever that could be pulled over decades to change our politics, it's that one.

LIASSON: And they like immigration to solve the labor shortage, especially high skilled. So Bill what do we do for long term? To make sure democracy survives.

GALSTON: I'll give you a three part agenda, Mara. Part one. Do not underestimate how much the unresolved debate over immigration has poisoned our politics, as it has poisoned the politics throughout the democratic West. It you know, it is the single most important factor in the outcome of the 2016 election. We have been trying to reform immigration now for more than 30 years. We have failed. We must get back to it with the much more open minds, frankly. I could go into detail, but I won't. Number two. Our government has become distorted by the incapacity of the Congress of the United States to carry out even routine business. This has lit and politics, like nature, abhors a vacuum. The vacuum created by Congress's incapacity has been filled by, expansions of both judicial power and executive power in ways that I think are fundamentally unhealthy for democracy. So that's number two. Number three. I don't expect our deep differences to go away over night. We need to think harder about ways of living together peacefully despite our differences, and one way that we can do that, and it's a way that has costs. But I think the benefits outweigh the costs, is to think about a partial reversal of the very long term trend towards nationalizing every issue in American

society. We ought to make more use of federalism as a way of allowing different cultures and different parts of the country within constitutional limits, to play themselves out. The instinct to reach for the single, homogenizing national solution is bound to create even more divisions than already exist. As losers mobilize against whoever happens to control the national government at the moment. So those are my three long term items. There are more, but three is enough for now.

LIASSON: Okay, Steve, do you have some kind of favorite reforms? And I'll just throw one out there to see what you think of it. Why not mandatory national service with a nonmilitary component. So that and of course, this is exactly the opposite of what Bill just said. But so that 18 to 22 year olds have a shared civic experience. Military or nonmilitary. I'll just throw that out there and then you can tell me your favorite long term solutions.

LEVITSKY: I'm okay with that Mara, I think it's a good idea. My focus is primarily. And this is the, what we lay out in the final chapter of tyranny of the minority to a set of of institutional and constitutional reforms to democratize our democracy. The United States has far and away the most counter majoritarian democracy in the world. It's the only established democracy where partisan minorities can repeatedly and permanently thwart majorities and sometimes govern over majority. So just as a quick reminder, in 2016, the person who lost the popular vote became president, and the party that won fewer votes in the Senate gained control of the Senate. That president and that Senate went on to appoint and confirmed three Supreme Court justices. Which means that if we were like other established democracies and the parties that won the most votes won the most power, we'd have 6-3 liberal majority on the Supreme Court today. That's how out of whack our institutions are. So. This is not something is going to happen overnight. But, I would call. We are the only presidential democracy in the face of the earth in which the, loser of the popular vote can win the presidency. The Electoral College should be abolished in place for the popular vote. We should constitutional ize the right to vote and take a number of basic steps, like automatic registration when you turn 18 so that, 70 or 75% of Americans, rather than 55% of Americans, vote in elections. We should democratize the Senate. Ideally, this will never happen, but ideally there should be, states with greater population like Texas and California should have greater representation in the Senate. This is what Germany and other, federal democracies do. But at the very least, we need to eliminate the filibuster so that legislative majorities, prevail over other, partisan minorities. I would also impose term limits on the Supreme Court. So that Supreme Court was at least somewhat more in line with, with, but with majority sentiment. We are the only established democracy in the world with full lifetime tenure on Supreme Court that doesn't have either a retirement age

or term limits. On the Supreme Court. So we there are a series of steps that would simply catch us up to other democracies in the world. So they allow popular majorities to actually win elections and to actually govern.

LIASSON: Would you expand the size of the house? 770,000 people if a house district is kind of big? It hasn't been.

LEVITSKY: That's for sure. I think we used to expand that the size of the house in line with population. We just stopped doing that. That's ridiculous.

LIASSON: Yeah. Let me ask you another question. If we're going to make this coalition to defend democracy, and it's going to be a broad popular movement, and it's going to have 3 or 4 simple to understand reforms that people can get behind in terms of the Electoral College. We are not going to abolish the Electoral College. But how about this idea for neutering it? What if states there's no law that mandates states give their electors out on a winner take all basis? Obviously Maine and Nebraska do it by CD. But what if states passed laws that said, as soon as a certain number of states passed similar laws, we will begin to award our electors proportionally. In California, if Donald Trump gets 25% of the vote, he'll get 25% of our electors. And that would make every state a battleground state. Democrats would go to Lincoln, Nebraska, looking for votes, and Republicans would go to Staten Island looking for votes. And no, it wouldn't solve the problem because Wyoming and Vermont would still start with two two electoral votes. They'd have a tiny advantage, but it would bring the popular vote in the Electoral College vote into sync, which is what we want. We never cared about the Electoral College until it diverged from the popular vote, which it's done, as you said, two times in the last 20 years. What do you think about that proportional awarding of electors based on the popular vote in each state?

LEVITSKY: Very quickly. First of all, I think we are going to abolish the Electoral College. We came very close to do.

LIASSON: With the constitutional amendment?

LEVITSKY: Absolutely, yes. Not immediately, but it will be when, Texas turns purple or something. Gets us to the point where the two parties are relatively evenly matched in the electoral. We're not far from that. We

came super close in the late 1960s, 1969 to doing it. And I think we're, the only presidential democracy in the world that retains an electoral college. Argentina was the last other democracy to get rid of it back in 1994. It is ridiculous. We will get rid of it in, I think, in my lifetime, hopefully. But that said, yes, proportional representation for the Electoral College is far, far superior to the winner take all system that we have now and would take us a long way towards avoiding this. This outcome, which has become almost regular in American politics in the 21st century, of the loser of the popular vote winning the presidency. So I'm broadly in favor of it.

LIASSON: We're going to move to audience Q&A, but do you think it's fair to say that the only way Republicans can win the white House is by winning the Electoral College and losing the popular vote? It certainly has been that recently.

LEVITSKY: Yeah, but right now there's such anti, there's such an intense anti-incumbent mood really, across the Western world, not just in the United States, but across the West, that, they, that the Republican Party in opposition will win Republican votes and votes of people who are just really grumpy. And so it's it's Trump could win the popular vote.

LIASSON: It's possible. Yeah, yeah, yeah. Okay. We're going to move to audience questions. And, the first question is please discuss Project 2025. Bill, maybe you can explain to people what that is.

GALSTON: Well, I am old. I'm old enough to remember when the Heritage Foundation, a conservative foundation, published a book called mandate for leadership in 1980 that turned out to be the blueprint, for the incipient, Ronald Reagan presidency. And now, more than four decades later, the same organization, the Heritage Foundation, although it's, you know, it's no longer a Reaganite, operation. It's a post Reagan operation has decided to do it again, with something that they're calling Project 2025, which has already produced a massive tome, filled with department by department and agency by agency policy recommendations in, you know, and plus a file of thousands of people, you know, who are deemed competent and loyal enough to execute this agenda should Donald Trump be elected president. And there are many different proposals in Project, 2025, you know, that have produced consternation in the ranks of those, not just Democrats, but independents and moderate Republicans who think that some of these proposals are absolutely scary. I could go through chapter and verse, but, I think that that will be enough, at least to introduce the topic. What can what can be done, you know, to prevent its implementation? We've

already been talking about some of the some of those things. But the answer but I think the answer is that if there is a unified government, with Donald Trump as president and the Republican Party in control of both the House and the Senate, a fair number of the things in Project 2025 will move ahead. And, you know, I think that's the only realistic assessment. So the fate of Project 2025 will be decided at the ballot box in November.

LIASSON: You know, a lot of the things that all three of you have talked about doing are acts of Congress. What what questions we got was what can ordinary citizens do not just to promote these reforms, but also to convince their neighbors, Republicans and independent voters that Trump is a threat to democracy? How about Vanessa? Take that one.

WILLIAMSON: Yeah. So I think that there are a couple of things that ordinary folks can do. One of them is to participate locally. You know, election management is to some extent a volunteer activity. The United States. Again, that's a little bit unusual by international standards. But, there are ways that you can participate locally to help ensure that the election runs smoothly. And so that's one thing that people can look at. Another thing, you know, this, the decline of, old fashioned civic organizations, the, you know, sort of things like the Elks Club, things like, you know, the grand Order of the Grange and so forth. These were organizations that used to exist that Americans used to be a part of. We all used to be volunteers who went to meetings. And in attending those meetings, we learned some things about how to be a democrats, small d democrats. We learned that, you know, we learned how to do Robert's Rules of Order. We learned how to vote on things. We learned how to show up again next time when we lost. And so I think that, you know, I think that people can do that they don't appreciate enough is to engage in politics that actually happens face to face. Right. Not just politics that happens on the internet, where you you get plaudits for saying the most extreme possible version of your position, right? Or, criticizing people who you've never met and whose views are anathema to your own, but instead to participate in local politics and to understand the sort of experience of compromise that comes with that. Right. And I think that that can meaningfully reduce the kind of demonization that occurs, across parties. It can meaningfully reduce the, you know, as Bill said, the the, obsessive attention to national issues, even when those issues have very little to do with our daily lives. And they can teach us again how to participate, in a political system that involves necessarily compromise.

LIASSON: Yeah, I think that's really good. We've talked about things that would happen if Trump was elected. What happens if Trump loses? What happens after that? There's no Republican vice president to do what Mike Pence wouldn't do.

LEVITSKY: Ultimately that will depend. And ultimately that will depend on Trump himself and other Republican leaders. So, if if Trump were to accept defeat and go home quietly, which seems unlikely, not much would happen. If I think it's much more likely that Trump, you know, raises hell and denounces fraud, then what's really critical, what is really critical is how other Republican and conservative elites behave. Very quickly in Brazil in 2022, when Jair Bolsonaro was in many ways a replica of Trump, lost his bid for reelection. And, and actually tried to overturn the results. Much like Trump, every single major right wing ally of his the president of Congress, the president of Senate, major governors, the Ron DeSantis, the Mitch McConnell, the Kevin McCarthy of Brazil, all of them accepted the results of the election on election night, said, you know, it's too bad the other guy won. Look forward to working with the new president. And the ability of Bolsonaro then to to overturn the election was dramatically reduced. It was a much, much healthier response than we had here. So if, if, if Republican elites, if conservatives do the right thing and accept the results of the election, not much will happen if we if Republican leaders follow Trump and, and declare that that the election might've been stolen or if there was fraud. Then we will see, conflict. I mean, I don't think that the risk to democracy of a Trump defeat is anywhere near the scale of the the risk posed by a Trump victory. I think our system can handle Trump kicking and screaming, even if, there's a certain amount of, of, of sort of protest and even violence attached to that. We will be able to ride that out, but we will be much, much better off if conservative elites simply accept the results of the election this time.

LIASSON: Okay. Our next question is about social media, disinformation and AI. What role do you think that plays in undermining democracy? Bill?

GALSTON: It's not it's not helpful, but I think its effects have been overblown. I really do. And, I wrote a very alarmed article about the rising role of AI in politics a few years ago, and I've been waiting for this huge impact ever since. And I'm not seeing it, frankly. It is it is certainly there is a threat. But, you know, I could make a list of 50 other items that I regard as graver challenges to the future of American democracy than the rise of social media. No. The rise of artificial intelligence and foreign interference. If we're talking about the domestic social media and its role as an echo chamber, intensifying views on both sides. Then I think there's a deeper argument to be made.

LIASSON: Okay. One of the this is a question that says, I appreciate all of these suggestions to save our democracy, but they all sound very theoretical. How many can realistically be enacted given the timing left until the election, as well as the paralysis of Congress? Vanessa.

WILLIAMSON: Yes. I think that most of the, things that we need to do cannot be done this year. What needs to be done this year is to have this election, be protected. Right. I think Bill spoke about the Insurrection Act, but beyond. But, you know, if we're talking about things like reform, the Electoral College, reapportionment, the Senate, these are long term. These are good solutions, but they're long term solutions. I think the thing to remember for this year is, you know, this is a point, Steve, the the problems of our democracy are the problems of the rules more than the problems of our people. Right. And so I think that can be a place where we find some hope. The, the challenges we face are very much about a very arcane, ancient set of rules that have been manipulated and misused, by an increasingly extreme political party. And I think that the rules can be changed. It is very hard to do, but it is in some sense easier than if the problem were hearts and minds.

GALSTON: Let me just comment briefly, if I may.

LIASSON: Thank you. Go ahead.

GALSTON: Number one, you know, I do think that it would be possible to do in 2024, an election year. What was what was done in 2022, an election year, namely reform, an antiquated law, to make our elections and our democracy safer. The Insurrection Act reform is doable if there's a concerted effort to do it. Number two and here, you know, I disagree with Vanessa a little bit. You know, the rules are very important, and I agree with that. But, you know, the Brookings Institution and the Public Religion Research Institution have been doing an annual American Values Survey now for almost 15 years. And more than a decade ago, we found a near majority of Americans endorsing the proposition that things have gone so far off track in our country that we need a leader who's willing to break the rules in order to set things right. That, you know, that sentiment is not a function simply of the rules. It's a rising sentiment in the electorate and part of the tinder that was ready for the spark.

WILLIAMSON: If I can jump in on that, I think that it's exactly. Yeah. Just quickly, I think that it's exactly right that some of the public has been pushed to the extremes. That is absolutely true. But I think if you're asking

me about where the core problems have been in the chest rotted from the head in American politics, the polarization started at the elite level first. It has absolutely trickle down. That's completely true. But to me, I think that the the challenges we face, if the challenges were an insurmountable authoritarian streak among the American people, that would in fact be harder than reforming the Electoral College as high as that bar would be. Okay.

LIASSON: Steve, we have a question. What do you think of the role of foreign adversary adversaries in undermining American democracy by waging, you know, these disinformation wars? Can we effectively defend defend against that threat or. Is it really not that important since we're doing this all by our very own selves? The disinformation comes from Americans, not foreigners.

LEVITSKY: In the last part of the question, largely. answers it. I agree with Bill that, the, you know, foreign intervention is is something that we constantly have to be on guard for. This is not a it's not a new thing. Some of the tools, some of the technologies are new. And so it it takes a lot of work on the part of our national security establishment and others to constantly fend off foreign intervention. But, one thing the Americans ourselves have learned during the Cold War, it's really hard to influence how individuals in other countries vote really hard. We tend to really vastly inflate the degree to which, you know, Putin's hacks can can influence our election outcomes. I don't mean to, to to set it aside entirely, but the reason why it may have had some impact in 2016 was principally because the election was so damn close that the weather patterns affected the outcome of the 2016 election. Anything could have affected election in which 70,000 votes in three states may made the difference. So, but normally we have to understand that it's our own polarization and our own radicalization that is opening Americans up to disinformation. And the vast bulk of the disinformation, the vast bulk of the radicalization is, as the questioner, Herr himself put it, coming from from within. So the the problems are mostly homegrown, and, and it's our own radicalization, our own polarization that leaves us vulnerable to external intervention.

LIASSON: Right. And we've never had a president or a presidential candidate who spoke so warmly about some of our biggest adversaries, like Vladimir Putin.

LEVITSKY: That's something that we should be campaigning against and something that something to tell your neighbors.

LIASSON: Right. What another question we got. What messages and strategies work against a would be dictator, especially if courts cannot be trusted? I guess they meant the Supreme Court.

GALSTON: Well, yeah. Fortunately, the Supreme Court is not the only court. And, one of the messages I hear, I think we took away from the 2020 election where our institutions held. Is that, you know, our court system was called upon to do its duty, and it did so magnificently. And I am, you know, and although the Supreme Court has made some decisions that I don't agree with deeply, don't agree with in recent years, I am not of the view that it would refuse to defend constitutional electoral processes. You know, of all of the things I'm worried about right now. You know, in the run up to the 2024 election and in its aftermath, the judiciary is way down towards the bottom of the list. And here again, I can put a lot of things ahead of it as things to worry about.

LIASSON: Hey, we got another question that said, how do we convince people, I guess are our friends and neighbors that democracy is hanging by a thread? Vanessa. Steve, what do you think?

WILLIAMSON: I mean, I'm not sure that you need to convince them that democracy is hanging by a thread, even if you think that. And I think there's good reason to at least be extremely concerned. But what is worth doing is convincing your neighbors to vote, and to think seriously about the candidates in front of them. And which of them, are committed to giving up if they lost. Right. It is the lowest possible bar we could set for a candidate in a democratic election that they will admit defeat. But I think that, you know, encouraging people to see that as issue one, right, is, in fact, a critical factor this year. And it's not something that you should be weighing against any other policy considerations fundamentally. Right. Because if you can't trust people to say they lost, then you can't trust them to run the country.

LEVITSKY: Very quickly. Yeah. Vanessa. It's very hard. Very hard to convince people. I think it's particularly hard to convince people about. I care a lot about democracy, Vanessa and Bill do. We all do. But voters, it's a pretty abstract thing when you start talking about institutions and political regimes. So I think it's more useful to talk about some of the concrete consequences. And here I'm repeating that that's what would happen if these guys got into office and what they, what it would mean to have a politicized, bureaucracy that no longer reports the facts, what it would mean to have a foreign policy that shifts away from being, defending Ukraine, but to supporting Putin and what that would mean for the West, what it would mean for

the poor, the economy, etc.. I think that that's much more useful than than talking about democracy in abstract terms. As much as I'd love to do that.

LIASSON: Yeah. I just want to follow up on something, Steve, you said earlier about the Republican Party. Never before have we had a party that refused to accept the results of an election that they didn't win. In other words, a party that did not accept the peaceful transfer of power, which is the bedrock of democracy. We've talked a lot about, how we can pass laws. People can get involved and engaged. How can we you you can't pass a law telling a political party to change what it believes in. What do you do about the Republican Party? I mean, what do you do when one party doesn't want to play by the rules?

LEVITSKY: Look, there are there are a bunch of options to deal with an authoritarian threat from within the the the way the United States we've we sort of go, use the laissez faire approach and drawing on philosophers like Mill and Madison and, and we sort of hope that competition and an open area of debate will be sufficient to just sort of weed out the bad apples. And I think we know from history that that's not quite enough. The the other extreme is what the Germans, developed after World War Two, called militant or protective democracy, which empowers government officials of powers. The state sometimes judges to ban or to suspend political parties that are deemed to work against, against democracy or threat to democracy. Now, obviously, or, you know, article three of the 14th amendment was a way of potentially, empowering government officials to do that. Now, since we decided collectively not to exercise that option. I think absent that, the only thing that a society can do to weed out an authoritarian threat is, is mobilize a broad coalition against it, to shame it, to shun it, to isolate it and defeat it politically. That's really the only tool we've got at the end of the day.

LIASSON: Okay. Just really quickly. We're we're at the end. I just want to thank everyone for being here and listening. There are a lot of things that can be done. Most of them are pretty hard, but it sounds like it's going to take a commitment of everyone who cares about democracy to work hard over a very long period of time to make sure it stays alive. So thank you very much for participating. And, tune in next time to another Brookings webinar.