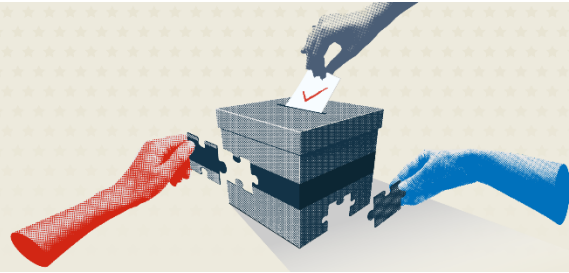


# DEMOCRACY IN QUESTION

BROOKINGS



**The Brookings Institution**

***Democracy in Question* podcast**

**“Is democracy in decline?”**

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*Episode Summary:*

Is democracy in decline? In this first episode of Democracy in Question, host Katie Dunn Tenpas explores an issue that is on the minds of many citizens and scholars alike. We’ve all witnessed numerous assaults on our democracy, Tenpas notes, including mis- and disinformation campaigns, wide ranging skepticism about election outcomes, extreme gerrymandering, and concerns about ballot access. Any one of these issues should cause democracy alarm bells to ring. But taken together, these developments point to actual erosion of democratic norms and values.

[music]

**TENPAS:** Hi, I'm Katie Dunn Tenpas, a visiting fellow in Governance Studies at the Brookings Institution and director of the Katzmann Initiative on Improving Interbranch Relations and Government. And this is *Democracy in Question*, a podcast about contemporary American politics and the future of democracy. In each episode, I'm asking my guests a different question about democracy so that we can better understand the broader contours of our democratic system. You probably noticed that there's a lot happening in U.S. politics at the moment, including a highly contested presidential race. But in this podcast, I'm trying to get at the deeper questions of how democracy in this country and abroad works or is supposed to work.

And I'm leading off with, Is democracy in decline? It's an issue that is on the mind of many citizens and scholars alike. In addition, we've all witnessed numerous assaults on our democracy, including mis- and disinformation campaigns, wide ranging skepticism about election outcomes, extreme gerrymandering, and concerns about ballot access. Any one of these issues should cause democracy alarm bells to ring. But taken together, these developments point to actual erosion of democratic norms and values.

To explore answers to this vital question—is democracy in decline?—I'm talking to two of my wonderful colleagues who have spent a lot of time examining this issue, one from the vantage point of an accomplished political scientist and the other as a public intellectual whose 40-year career observing and writing about American politics provides a unique insight.

First, Vanessa Williamson, a senior fellow in Governance Studies and the Urban Institute-Brookings Tax Policy Center. She's the author of *Read My Lips: Why Americans Are Proud To Pay Taxes* and has written about democratic erosion and the role of tax policy in American democracy. Then I'll be joined by Jonathan Rauch, also a senior fellow in Governance Studies. He is the author of eight books and many articles on public policy, culture, and government, as well as a contributing writer at *The Atlantic*.

Vanessa, welcome to *Democracy in Question*.

**WILLIAMSON:** Oh, thank you for having me.

**TENPAS:** So, tell me a little bit about how you evolved from studying tax policy and voters' response to tax policy to studying democratic erosion.

[3:04]

**WILLIAMSON:** Well, my work has always been at the intersection of taxation and democracy. But as democracy has eroded in the United States, I've sort of turned my attention more there. I think a real turning point for me was the realization a few years ago when I was doing some research on a piece of public policy, the idea of setting up systems so that taxpayers, when they filed their income taxes, could register to vote.

When I realized that this very middle-of-the-road policy, you know, making it easy for taxpayers to vote, was something that was deeply controversial and that now became a partisan issue. And, you know, the idea that the simple civic act of voting had become controversial was, you know, as you say, an alarm bell when we're thinking about the quality of American democracy.

**TENPAS:** And at the time, what was the primary objection to allowing taxpayers to vote, to register to vote at the same time?

[4:01]

**WILLIAMSON:** Well, I think one problem we've been facing as a country is rather than politicians seeking to appeal to most of the voters, they seek to pick the voters. Right? The voters are supposed to pick the politicians, but the politicians increasingly seem to want to actually pick the voters. And so, this idea of making it easy to register, making this process simple for Americans, is suddenly got wrapped up into a politics about who are the real Americans who should really be allowed to participate. And that rhetoric is poisonous for democratic culture.

**TENPAS:** Interesting. And so, when you've been analyzing and identifying forces that are causing democratic erosion, what are the primary forces and which of those forces do you think is most influential?

[4:46]

**WILLIAMSON:** So, when you talk about democracy, you can talk about so many different aspects of our society. Right? Our entire society is a democratic society. So, you can talk about the decline of the news media, which is extremely important. You can talk about civic education in schools.

In my work, I focus on the democratic erosion that has actually occurred in our political institutions, because all the evidence would suggest that rising polarization in the United States, rising extremism, has been coming from the top. It's not something that has bubbled up from below. And so, for that reason, you know, if the fish rots from the head, that's what I study.

And there are two aspects of democratic erosion that I think are really critical to understanding what's going on today. The first of those is the strategic manipulation of elections. Right? Now that's distinct from voter fraud. There are a lot of myths out there that people are voting who shouldn't be. But strategic manipulation of elections is definitely occurring. You talked about gerrymandering, that's a very good example. Also, just making it hard for people to vote on voting day. Right? So, when you close polling places, when you see those lines of people waiting hours to vote, that suppresses the vote and it's damaging to our democracy. So, strategic manipulation of elections is the first factor that I think is really critical to understand.

[5:54]

There's a second factor which has gotten less attention, but I think is increasingly significant. And that's something that scholars call "executive aggrandizement." So, for example, an autocrat can come to power after having been legitimately elected.

Right? if you come into power winning an election and then consolidate power, undermine checks and balances, and make it so that the opposing party can't win the next election fairly, then that's autocracy. Right? So, a challenge that the United States is facing is that increasingly as sort of the capacity of Congress to function has declined, the power of the presidency has really increased. And so, that leaves room for bad actors to consolidate power even if they actually win an election and seriously erode our democracy.

**TENPAS:** And do you find any geographic patterns across the United States? So, for instance, are some states or some parts of the country more prone to making it more difficult for voters to vote?

[6:54]

**WILLIAMSON:** Absolutely. I mean, there's actually been a really interesting divergence between the states. Right? About half of states are actually making it easier and more convenient for people to vote. You know, things like vote by mail in the COVID election and into elections thereafter. Things like longer hours at the polls, things like having early voting days so that people who are working on a Tuesday can get to the polls conveniently on the weekend. There are a lot of states that are moving in that direction—about half of them.

But the other half of states is moving the other way. Right? And so, that's where you're seeing the poll closures, that's where you're seeing efforts to strike voters from the voting rolls if they missed an election, you know, changes to registration requirements. And so, we're really seeing a divergence in our states.

And the factor that predicts which states are eroding are states that are closely contested but have Republican control. So, over and over again, we've seen these cases where a state, you know, is not particularly red or blue actually in terms of their voters, but when Republican legislatures and Republican governors have come into power, they've moved to make voting harder to do.

**TENPAS:** Okay, so it's not necessarily confined to say, the Southeast or the Southwest. It's much more a function of the state government and whether it is "purple," quote unquote, so, you know, competitive red and blue. What about if it's all ... a state that tends to be primarily Republican?

[8:13]

**WILLIAMSON:** So, the states where you've seen the most decline are definitely, as you say, the purple states. Right? the states where it's closely contested. And that makes sense from a strategic perspective, because if you win elections easily, why on earth would you try to manipulate them? You can just win. Right?

But if if you're close to 50% but not at 50%, that's where the things like gerrymandering, where things like closing a polling place, or things like requiring voter ID can tip an election at the margins. And we're seeing increasingly extreme examples of that. I mean, gerrymandering, it's an old phrase, it's an old political maneuver, but it has gotten so much more extreme in certain states recently.

**TENPAS:** And among the many forces that that seem to be eroding American democracy, do you see one as particularly egregious or harmful?

[8:57]

**WILLIAMSON:** To me, the fundamental threat to our democracy is the perception that some Americans are not legitimate political actors. Right? Talking about there being a “real America,” talking about there being people who, you know, are voting illegally and, you know, sort of encouraging those kinds of myths, really undermines the civic fabric. Because democracy is an act of faith. We have to have a faith in one another. And so, to me, the most damaging thing of all is encouraging people to not see one another as citizens. We don’t have to agree, but we can’t see each other as enemies.

**TENPAS:** And is there is there a primary source that’s contributing to that kind of tension amongst the citizenry?

[9:45]

**WILLIAMSON:** Well, it hasn’t helped to see our media infrastructure decline the way it has. Right? Long ago, if you wanted to see the news, you turned on the television and you had three choices. Right? ABC, NBC, CBS. And what it meant, first of all, was that if you turned on the television at news hour, you watched the news, you didn’t have any choices about it. So, more people saw the news than otherwise would. People who would opt out didn’t have another choice. So, more people saw the news. There was a shared basis of information.

And also, people were getting similar information so that they had a sort of a shared knowledge base to work with. So, I think the media is a critical component of this, so sort of the rise of social media, the rise of people being able to opt out of even receiving any political news, and the echo chambers that social media can create are really damaging.

And then the other piece of that, I think, is civic education in schools. I think that as we focused on turning schools into a place that would create workers, right? people who could get jobs, we forgot that the reason we have public schools is to make citizens. And so, there’s such a critical component of that shared experience of receiving information and that shared experience of working together, you know, face-to-face and voluntary organizations and other sort of civic spaces that used to exist that have really declined.

**TENPAS:** So, let me switch gears for a moment here. Because I read a very interesting article that you wrote talking about why the business community should profoundly care about democratic erosion. So, could you elaborate on that?

[11:15]

**WILLIAMSON:** So, I think it’s easy for me, and I think most people when we think about democracy, we have a moral argument in our heart about why democracy is important. And that’s absolutely fair. But there’s also an economic case for

democracy, and it sometimes gets sort of left on the sidelines. So, I thought it was worth highlighting this question.

The reality is that autocracy damages the economy in fundamental ways. Right? There's amazing recent research on this question, and it all points in the same direction. Democratization, when a country democratizes, it can expect to see its GDP per capita grow by 20% over the following decades. That is an enormous increase. Right? It's hard to think of what a comparative point would be. It would sort of be like the '90s didn't happen. Right? The entire economic growth of the 1990s in the United States, that's the kind of growth you're talking about when a country democratizes.

And then the flip side is also true. If you look at places where democracy erodes, when you get a populist leader on either the right or the left, by the way, you see a sort of equivalent level of decline in GDP per capita. So, you damage growth. And the way that that happens is by undermining investment in public goods, and undermining investment in education. These are things that are very common effects of autocracy.

And also, the rise of cronyism. I think sometimes people imagine particularly right populists are going to shrink government because they use conservative rhetoric. So, if you think about small government. But autocrats don't create small government, they create very very big government. It's just that the apparatus of government is now dedicated to protecting the power of the person in charge. So, it's not that regulations go away. And you can see this in a place like Hungary. It's not that regulations go away, it's just that the regulations are now applied to punish potential political opponents and to reward political insiders. Right?

So, when we think about the reasons for democracy, we should hold the moral reasons in our hearts. But we need to think also about the economic costs of democratic erosion.

**TENPAS:** Right. And I imagine just the sheer uncertainty that comes along with a populist leader also shakes the markets and makes things more difficult economically.

[13:23]

**WILLIAMSON:** Absolutely. There's a really remarkable instability that accompanies authoritarianism. And the reason for that is that you don't have public rhetoric about whether the government is doing a good job. Right? You can go out today and read every single poll about how the Biden administration is doing. Which means the Biden administration has an excellent idea of how it is perceived by the public, and it can adjust its planned policies with that in mind.

We also have very regular elections, you know when they're coming, even if it seems like the election season lasts almost the entire four years now, but the, you know, we know they're coming, there's just stability in that. And what it means is that leaders make choices with better information than they do under autocracy.

And so, what you end up seeing is that autocratic leaders will suddenly raise taxes, suddenly newly regulate an industry that they see as threatening to their power. Right? So, there are these remarkable shifts of policy in autocratic regimes that are simply less common in a functioning democracy.

**TENPAS:** And because it's autocratic, they can implement those changes very quickly, as opposed to our system that really clings to the status quo. And it takes decades to make major change, policy change.

[14:30]

**WILLIAMSON:** That's exactly right. I think one of the best ways to think about the difference between operating in a democracy and operating in an autocracy is that democracy is a repeat game. Right? Maybe you don't like the policies that a particular president or Congress implements. Well, you know there'll be an election and you can give money to an opponent. Right? If you don't like the policies that an autocrat puts in place, you don't have that lever in just a few years. And the lever you might have had, right? you might be able to contribute to a campaign, someone you support, the lever that you might have had disappears.

And so, one of the things you see is, you know, there's still political contributions in autocratic regimes that hold, you know, noncompetitive elections, but people still make contributions, but that's extortion now. It's not political influence.

**TENPAS:** What kind of vehicle would the business community need to sort of organize them in a way where they could do things to reduce the erosion of democracy in the United States? Would it be like the, you know, the Chamber of Commerce or what would it be?

[15:28]

**WILLIAMSON:** Well, the Chamber of Commerce is a really good example. A really critical act that the Chamber of Commerce took in partnership with the AFL-CIO and some religious organizations was simply to validate the outcome of the 2020 election. They said congratulations to Joe Biden, who won the election. Right? And those third-party validators are incredibly important when people are receiving extraordinary levels of misinformation. Right?

Business is actually one of the most trusted institutions in the United States. So, they have a role to play simply in helping Americans sort through the misinformation and the lies that they will be receiving in the lead up to the election and thereafter. So, that's one thing: validation of election results.

The other thing is that, I mean, business is a powerful actor in our politics. And unfortunately, that power has eroded in certain ways. Right? That might be surprising to hear. You might think, oh, business is such a powerful actor. Well, business is very good at mobilizing for a tax cut or rolling back regulations.

**TENPAS:** Or donations.

**WILLIAMSON:** Or making donations to a candidate. Right? So, there are parts of our politics where business is really strong.

[16:27]

But the kind of politics that business did in the mid-20th century where it wasn't just arguing for a specific tax code or a particular regulatory reform, but, you know, business was critical to things like the Marshall Plan. It was critical to supporting some of the major elements of the Great Society. It was critical to supporting the funding for the space race. Business didn't just look at sort of narrow policies with short-term benefits. They encouraged legislators to pass policies that encouraged growth, that, you know, really built an extraordinary economy in the United States in the mid-20th century.

So, unfortunately, those business institutions have largely declined, and far more ideological ones have replaced them. And so, I think that business in some ways is poorly equipped to do the kind of job it used to do.

Nonetheless, the historical data makes clear that business can be decisive in protecting a democracy. In the original democratizations in Europe, the role of business in sidelining the far right and in agreeing to participate, right? within the, you know, generally the center right party, the center right party's role in sidelining the far right and just participating in the process, making the calculation that they could win in that process, which was clearly the case, was critical to the stabilization of democracy in the first place. So, I think that business leaders have an extraordinary power if they're willing to exercise it.

**TENPAS:** And this sort of gets back to an earlier part of our conversation. But you mentioned Hungary as an example of a populist leader where the economy has sort of been thrown on its head in the sense that the authoritarian regime makes it more difficult for business. Are there other countries that you might say that the United States could look to as sort of we're slipping down the slope and we could end up like you, X country? Do you see, do you have any examples of like that?

[18:20]

**WILLIAMSON:** Well, I mean, the Hungarian example is a useful one because I think that the, the kind of politics that Orbán engages in appeals to a certain part of our far right in the United States. So, I think that's a critical international example.

But if you're really thinking to yourself, what does the United States look like without functioning democracy? We don't have to look at other countries because we've only been a democracy since 1965. So, until the passage of the Voting Rights Act the Southern states were subnational autocracies. Right? They didn't have two parties. They had one party, and it was the Democratic Party. And they didn't allow free and fair elections. And so, when we're thinking about places that have some bearing on our contemporary case, we don't actually have to look abroad.

Now, what does that example tell us? Well, I can tell you for sure that the stagnation of the economy was startling in the American South, and that stagnation only ceases with the success of the Civil Rights Movement. You know, there were epidemics of diseases that didn't exist in the rest of the United States, like pellagra, diseases of malnutrition because poverty was so endemic to the American South. And that poverty existed in the Black population, but it existed in the white population too.



You know, there would be industry in the South, but that industry didn't do what it did in the North and in the West, where it built a middle class. It was an extractive industry that made a couple of people rich, often northern industrialists. It made a couple of people rich and left the rest of the population in poverty.

The other thing about the American South it's, this has been alleviated to some degree, but still the South stands out in this regard, they didn't invest in public education. Because public education lifts all boats and autocrats don't want all boats to be lifted. So, if you're thinking to yourself, oh, well what would it be like if America saw a serious democratic decline. We've already seen it before. We can look to our own case and know full well what it means for our people.

**TENPAS:** Interesting. That's fascinating. And, and I'm sure that people who are listening are thinking, wow, what can I do? Are there things that individual citizens who care deeply and cherish American democracy can do at the margins?

[20:22]

**WILLIAMSON:** Absolutely. You know, it can be really hard to look at what's going on in Washington, D.C., and imagine that you can make a difference. Right? There're not that many competitive elections. Maybe you're in a state that votes strongly one way or the other, so you you feel like your vote doesn't matter.

But there are things you can do. For one, politics happens at a local level. Right? For example, votes get counted at a local level. So, helping shore up the very localized election administration that occurs in this country. You know, you can do that as a volunteer almost anywhere in the country. So, one, you can help with election administration locally.

You can get involved in local politics and get to know your neighbors. And that feels like a cop out sometimes. But frankly, face-to-face politics can help draw people back from the extremist politics that dominates our national rhetoric. Right? Because it's easy to demonize people who you don't see and who you've never worked with.

And I think one of the real losses in American civic culture in the last 3 or 4, 5 decades has been the decline of civic participation. You know, it used to be, you know, you learned about democracy in school. Yes. You voted, yes. But you also participated in organizations like the Elks Club. Right? And those organizations meant you went to meetings, you voted on things. And sometimes you lost, but you didn't go home and never come back. You know, you stayed and figured out how to compromise. Right? I mean, unions played a critical role for working class people. And in that kind of civic political education that allowed people to, you know, go on and and participate in in politics at a higher and, you know, a state level, a national level.

Putting yourself in places where you can participate in democracy in a face-to-face way and actually get to know people whose views are maybe not the same as your own is a critical piece.

**TENPAS:** Yeah. Of course. And do you think that the rise of technology and kind of, you know, the ability to be on your phones and to do things or the ability to sit down

and watch, binge on Netflix has caused people to become more asocial and therefore less participatory?

[22:21]

**WILLIAMSON:** I certainly think it's true that it's it's easy to just get lost into your phone and to select into, you know, online environments that are not very like the country as a whole, that have a lot of people saying the same things that you already believe. And, you know, that's a very bad environment for, one, for getting accurate information. And it's a very bad environment for learning to participate in politics where it's it's not just about asserting your views as strongly and as loudly as you can. It's about finding places to compromise, you know, and recognizing that people have different views from you, but they're still legitimate political actors. They are Americans as much as you.

So, I think that you're absolutely right to see technology as potentially damaging. I think technology also has, you know, some upside. Right? You can organize with people to meet in person through technology in a way that was far harder to do before. Right? I would not want personally to have to return to the phone tree in terms of a way of getting everyone to a meeting, you know? So, there's, there's opportunity there too.

**TENPAS:** So, I'm curious, as somebody who studies this very carefully and has dedicated a lot of their time to it, on a scale of 1 to 10, how worried are you about the future of American democracy?

[23:33]

**WILLIAMSON:** That's a tough question. I would say I'm more worried than not. Right? I think that there are very real dangers that any empirical study would show. That doesn't mean that you should throw up your hands and give up. I think, historically, the United States has had a very strong civic culture, and that gives us a lot to work with. But yeah, I think by any reasonable standard, you know, if you were looking at the United States from abroad and just trying to summarize the quality of political life, you you would have serious concerns. So, 1 to 10? Seven.

**TENPAS:** Wow. Wow. And in just in closing, do you have any final remarks, or can you tell us about where your future research is going along this vein or anything in that regard?

[24:27]

**WILLIAMSON:** Well, it would be wonderful for my work on democratic erosion to erode. Right? It would be wonderful for this to be a chapter, and we close it, and then I can get back to doing tax policy, my first love. But I suspect I'm going to continue doing this work for the foreseeable future.

One of the things I want to focus on is thinking about what our history can tell us about how to re-democratize. Right? I talked about the Jim Crow South. But, you know, that is evidence that we can re-democratize. Right? After the Civil War, for a brief period of time, Black men could vote in the South. And that was something we

lost, and universal voting is something we regained. And so, I think that turning to our history to think about what it would mean to rebuild stronger than before is probably going to be the focus of my work for the foreseeable future.

**TENPAS:** Yeah. That's fascinating. And it does seem as though there are moments in American history where our institutions in particular have figured out ways to sort of self-correct. But it seems to me at this point, anyway, we're at a kind of an inflection point where I'm not sure the self-correction will be as effective as it has in the past.

[25:37]

**WILLIAMSON:** You know, I think that's exactly right. There's there is always an opportunity to recognize that the ship is pointing in the wrong way. Right? And it's just a question of whether we have the will to, to redirect, you know, to recognize our fellow citizens as citizens, to recognize that politics is not a venue where we're supposed to go to our most maximalist position, insist on winning it, and if we don't win shut the system down.

That is not politics. Right? Politics is the art of compromise. Right? It is the art of recognizing that there is so much that we can agree on, and so much sort of straightforward good that we can do together that we can put aside this very, very destructive rhetoric, and rebuild stronger.

[music]

**TENPAS:** Well, Vanessa, I want to thank you for being our first guest on the podcast. Thank you so much. It was a fascinating discussion.

**WILLIAMSON:** Oh, thank you so much. I'm so glad to be here.

**TENPAS:** And now Jonathan Rauch. His most recent book is *The Constitution of Knowledge: A Defense of Truth*, published by the Brookings Institution Press in 2021. Jon, welcome to *Democracy in Question*.

**RAUCH:** Happy to be here. Though I don't like the "in question" part as much as the "democracy" part.

**TENPAS:** So, one of the blurbs on the back of your book I thought described you quite well. And it was very impressive. It said that "Jonathan Rauch is the James Madison for this era."

**RAUCH:** Well, I am short and thin, so perhaps in that respect I'm like James Madison.

**TENPAS:** So, I think I'd like to start with the same question that I posed to Vanessa in the first segment. And the question is, is our democracy in decline?

[27:34]

**RAUCH:** I'd say it's at risk. I don't think we know yet if it's in decline, and we won't until we see the outcome of the 2024 election and its aftermath. But we are clearly at

a time when the country's core commitment to liberal democracy—that's not just majoritarianism, but that stuff like rule of law, peaceful rotation in office, pluralism, not trying to slaughter your opponent, instead trying to get along with them—when all of those premises are under fire as they've never been before in my lifetime.

**TENPAS:** And Jonathan, you're considered one of the nation's foremost public intellectuals and have been covering American politics for probably the last 40 years. In all your years of observing American institutions and elections, when did you have the first hint of some sort of democratic erosion?

[28:28]

**RAUCH:** Probably Sarah Palin's acceptance speech at the Republican Convention in 2008.

**TENPAS:** Really? Sarah Palin?

**RAUCH:** Yeah. Sarah Palin. We have had outbreaks periodically of less than fully democratic forces going back to the very beginning of the Republic. Think about Aaron Burr who wanted to establish his own little monarchy out in out in the West. Think about George Wallace and Pat Buchanan. But what I thought we were seeing at the 2008 Convention was the start of the mainstreaming of a more radical, anti-establishmentarian, deeply polarizing kind of politics, which was taking root in the Republican Party primarily, though we also see echoes of it on the left and the Democratic side.

And that's when I first start to think, hm, this is a different kind of political rhetoric than we're used to seeing. It's more nakedly populist, anti-elitist, anti-everything, really. Not as clearly attached to the fundamentals of of a civic democracy as I was used to hearing.

Now, and that was very early on. And it's just a note that I picked up at the time. I didn't think all that much of it. And then of course, the Republicans nominated Mitt Romney in 2012. And he's as straight-shooting and mainstream as they get.

The big wake up call for me was 2015 and 2016.

**TENPAS:** And at that time, was there ... did you think there's no way that the Republican Party would nominate someone like Donald Trump?

[30:10]

**RAUCH:** Correct. I remember—this is not something I'm proud of, Katie. So, I'm not bragging about this. It shows how out of touch I was, as were many others. But I remember having dinner with someone who told me that Bill Clinton was encouraging Donald Trump to run for president. This was in 2015. And I remember chuckling and saying, well, that's a really clever way for Clinton to pick a nominee the Democrats can beat.

Well, joke's on me. But I don't think we realized how unhappy the electorate was with business as usual, with the condition and performance of our institutions, with the kind of politics that that they were seeing. And we wildly underestimated how willing

they were to throw the whole deck of cards into the air. And the person who did that, of course, was Donald J. Trump.

**TENPAS:** Throwing the whole deck of cards in the air—that's quite an image. What vulnerabilities do you think are sort of most salient right now? Like, what are our weaknesses? And if you compared our democracy to other countries, like, where are we... what do you feel like our weakest parts are?

[31:18]

**RAUCH:** Well, a lot of countries are moving in the same direction, unfortunately. We've seen what's been called by Larry Diamond, a scholar at Stanford, a democratic recession that began around 2007. So, we're not alone in the things that I'm about to say. It's more compare than contrast. But we've seen a couple things which are very worrying, at least to me. One is a retreat from the rule of law. And that's the notion that it really matters that politicians and people in public office dot their i's and cross their t's about law, about being scrupulous, about being non corrupt.

We saw behavior—of course, we've seen corrupt behavior in many administrations—but in the Trump administration we saw, for example, the president try to use his power to quash an investigation. That's something Nixon tried to do. It was a scandal when Nixon tried to do it. Trump's party rallied to him.

A second area that worries me a whole lot is peaceful rotation in office.

**TENPAS:** So, the transitions.

**RAUCH:** The transitions. The notion that if you lose an election, you should be willing to say so, and you should be willing to step aside and fight another day. Our whole system, in fact, all liberal democracies, are premised on the parties and the politicians and especially the public buying into that notion. And of course, we saw a sharp break with that tradition in 2020. Without any evidence at all, we saw fraudulent claims that the election was stolen, and we saw a president use extraconstitutional means to try to stay in power. That's new in the United States, and that's ... that's poisonous to the very core of a liberal democracy.

[33:14]

The third area that worries me, subject to the book you mentioned, *Constitution of Knowledge*, is what's called epistemic. And that's our commitment to facts, to basing policy on facts, to using facts to determine who won the election. To a basic willingness of public officials, especially the president of the United States, not to lie, not to make things up. A society in which the government makes up facts about, for example, whether you or I committed a crime; a government that can throw people in jail, for example, made ... based on made up facts; that can make regulations and policies based on made up facts. That's an impressive—excuse me ... that's an oppressive and tyrannical government. And that's the road we started down under a president who was perfectly willing to take a Sharpie pen and alter a weather forecast.

**TENPAS:** Right. And do you see deterioration in other institutions? So, Congress, the courts, or is it mostly, largely a function of the Trump presidency?

[34:23]

**RAUCH:** Well, we've certainly seen dysfunction in Capitol Hill, in Congress. Congress, actually, it's paradoxical. It's working badly. It's not working quite as badly as people think it is. Actually, we still got some very significant bipartisan legislation through under President Biden. We eventually got aid through Ukraine through. It shouldn't have taken so long because there was a strong consensus on Capitol Hill to do it. It was held up by a small minority for an inordinate amount of time. But Congress is functioning much more poorly than when I came to Washington in the '80s, and I think all observers of it would agree on that.

The courts have been resolute. They have been a bright spot over the last number of years. Many Trump appointees rejected attempts to overturn the election. The Supreme Court and the lower courts have gone by the book in terms of dealing with efforts to indict and prosecute officials for whom that was appropriate. We've seen a consistent, I think, a consistently brave application of the rule of law by the courts.

Now, in a second term, I predict that what we'll see would be open defiance by the White House of court decisions, something that the Trump administration did not do in its first term that I expect it would in its second. I think it would say to the courts, "you and what army?" when it gets unfavorable rulings. And that will put the country and the courts to a much more severe test than we've seen in a very long time.

A third area is the press—the media—of which I'm a member. A lot of people complain about this or that. You know, the treatment of COVID, the treatment of Hunter Biden's laptop, did the COVID virus originate originate in a lab? I would set all of that to one side and say, fine, have those arguments. But we have seen extraordinarily brave and hardworking performance by our core journalistic institutions over the past few years. Most of the wrongdoing or misbehavior, malfeasance, that was discovered by various investigations was known earlier than that because the newspapers told us.

So, I think one of the main constraints on the abuse of power these past few years has been exactly as Thomas Jefferson predicted: a free and robust press. That's not to say we haven't had some problems with one sidedness, with oversight. There have been some poor judgments here and there. But I'm proud of how the press has rallied over the last few years.

So, what does all that add up to? Kind of a mixed scoresheet depending on where you look.

**TENPAS:** Yeah. And how would you factor in sort of the recent ethical scandals on with the Supreme Court and things of that nature? Do you think that that further decreases the credibility of the institutions, or is it sort of specific to that individual justice?

[37:41]

**RAUCH:** Well, we'll see, I guess, is the answer to that. I very well remember *Bush v Gore* in 2000, when a lot of people predicted that that would essentially tank the institutional credibility of the Supreme Court. That credibility took a hit. But for the most part, the court retained its respect. It does seem like we have some individual court members who are not being as careful as they should be. I would not go so far as to say that's influencing their actual decisions, but I think it's starting to become clear that they have an appearance problem. My hope is that they'll remedy that.

But we'll see. You know, Americans are now so cynical about institutions that even when institutions are really doing on the whole a good job, really trying to stand up for themselves and for their constituencies and do well, a lot of the time people just won't believe it.

**TENPAS:** Right. There's the whole adage of bad news is news. Good news is not.

[38:42]

**RAUCH:** You know, you think about for all the people who, I was going to use another verb, but I will say disrespect Congress think about how promptly and decisively Congress reacted to the COVID epidemic to keep our economy afloat. Think about how expeditiously the Trump administration, to its eternal credit, got that vaccine out and had to butt a lot of heads together, and push through a lot of red tape in order to do that. Think about the Great Recession of 2008 and how much more our economy would have suffered if not for what were then called the bailout packages, the rescue packages. Yet somehow, we take those and other things for granted.

I'll give you one more and then I'll shut up. But, you know, if you had told me on September 12th, 2001, that the number of successful al-Qaida style terrorist attacks on American soil over the next 24 years would be zero—I guess that's 23 years—if you told me that would be zero, I would have said you're smoking something. But guess what? I mean, this is really good performance in the things that government most needs to do: backstop the economy and defend our shores. But it's just very hard to get people to notice.

**TENPAS:** And along this more positive vein, are there things that you think that institutions, either nonprofits or governmental, could do to sort of advance Americans' faith in their government or their civic education programs? Is there anything that could be done to restore things the way they were before?

[40:26]

**RAUCH:** Well, giving up on civics education was a catastrophe. You know, I remember when Justice O'Connor stepped off the Supreme Court and said she was going to devote herself to iCivics. I remember thinking, well, that's a strange way for her to spend her her talents and her or the latest, the last part of her career. Well, she was she was absolutely right. Americans have never known all that much about their system of government, but they know much less now. And one of the results of that is that a lot of people have kind of magical thinking about government. You

know, if you just change who's in office, if you just elect a different president or if you elect someone who just makes big promises. Elect me, we're going to end global warming. Elect me, we're going to solve our health care problems. It's going to be easy. We've all heard this rhetoric. Well, it's not easy. It's really, really hard to run a government. And a lot of Americans don't understand how hard that is.

So, this kind of magical thinking, I think, is feeding a lot of discontent. So, yeah, one place that I would start is civics education. Bring it back. Get serious about it. There's a bipartisan civics education curriculum that's that's been put out. It's has buy-in from both center left and the center right. It's a good starting point.

[41:45]

Something else we can do is work on toxic polarization. In a deeply polarized political environment, what happens is we're no longer just disagreeing with each other about tax rates or funding for the military. I'm thinking that your side is evil and dangerous, and you're thinking the same thing about my side. And that makes it very hard for institutions of government to do what they're supposed to do, which is compromise and find solutions.

So, I'm involved with a group called Braver Angels, one of a number of such groups, which is working to try to bring Americans together, not in agreement, but reteach us how to do that crucial civic job of communicating with each other, opening our ears and our minds to each other so that we can begin once again to share civic space together.

And I think, finally, I'd like to see more positive stories told in the media and in the public that highlight some of the stories about some remarkable work that's done by people in the federal government, for example, as well as in state and local governments. There are a lot of these stories. There actually is a group that is giving awards and trying to tell these stories, but I think, I think the good stories need to be amplified.

**TENPAS:** Were you referring to the Partnership for Public Service?

**RAUCH:** Yeah.

**TENPAS:** And their awards? Yeah, that's that's outstanding.

**RAUCH:** Yeah. We should link to that.

**TENPAS:** Right.

**RAUCH:** Just multiply that by about a hundred or maybe a thousand.

**TENPAS:** Yeah. Yeah. Those are all really good suggestions. I like this project that you're working on about sort of trying to understand the other side better and not demonize other opposing ideas, but to kind of try to understand where they're coming from.

**RAUCH:** Yeah. Braver Angels. Check it out.



**TENPAS:** Yeah.

[43:31]

**RAUCH:** One of the initiatives that Braver Angels is working on, along with a number of other groups like Bridge USA and the Association of College Trustees, but a bunch of groups that overlaps with civics education is bringing debate into our schools, into the curriculum, not just competitive afterschool debate with tournaments, but integrating it into the curriculum so that students get the experience of arguing for the side that they might not actually agree with. And they they learn to gather evidence and make arguments and think about stuff they wouldn't have to think about. Turns out students love this. They like it way better than writing a dry report and getting graded on it.

**TENPAS:** Or memorizing.

**RAUCH:** It's team based. You're working with other kids to build a case and a presentation, and it also turns out this is a good way to learn how to cope with ideas that you might not agree with, and how you can sometimes have to understand the case that you might oppose.

**TENPAS:** Yeah. That's terrific.

**RAUCH:** Yeah. It's called debate centered instruction. A Brookings, Brookings scholar wrote a wonderful book about it called *Resolved*, which people should have a look at.

**TENPAS:** And earlier in our conversation, we referred sort of briefly to other countries that are sort of struggling with kind of these anti-government movements within the country. Can you talk more about international comparisons? And actually, what I really want to know is what do you think the root causes are? If it's not just happening in the United States, it's not sui generis, what is happening across the world? Is it fueled by technology? Is it fueled by immigration? Like, what is causing this to happen in many other, sort of, I would say, developed democracies across the world?

[45:12]

**RAUCH:** Well, the real answer to that is how the heck would I know? It's such a big problem and so many explanations have been offered. But I'll tell you some things that are on my suspect list. Technology, of course. It's hard to explain global disenchantment with institutions and the sense of global social anomie and discontent happening in a lot of places at the same time without casting some suspicion on technologies that are having us staring at our screens a lot of the time, meeting each other virtually instead of in person. Where sometimes ... You know, you go to the barber shop or the beauty parlor, you're going to have to interact with people who don't don't necessarily agree with you. So, that's suspect number one.

[46:01]

Suspect number two is migration. The movement of people on a much larger scale than humanity has been accustomed to for many years is a global phenomenon. It is

just so much easier now for relatives in the United States to phone relatives in Guatemala and say, hey, there are jobs here, or for someone in Poland to call up someone in Britain and say, you know, I'm a, I'm a certified plumber, and figure out how to work there. And there's so much ... there's so many forces like cartels in Mexico, so many war-torn areas which are producing refugees in large numbers that we are seeing movements of populations across bigger scales than we are accustomed to.

And people, you know, it's not that they're bigots, but when you see large influxes of people in an uncontrolled way, people get very nervous about that. So, it's clear that immigration, mass migration, is driving a lot of unhappiness in the United States and Europe and no one has really figured out how to cope with that.

[47:21]

And then a third thing, which I can't prove, but I think it's fundamental, is the retreat from organized, mainstream religion. We've certainly seen in the United States, we're seeing what's been called the Great De-churching, the rise of the "nones," N-O-N-E-S, people who are not affiliated with an organized religion. We see this globally. And for a while people like me said, well, that's great. People are finding other sources of fulfillment. Well, some of them are. But it turns out that organized religion is able to transmit values and create a sense of transcendent purpose and build bonds in communities that SoulCycle just can't.

Moreover, people are taking a lot of the energies that they traditionally put into missionary work, for example, charitable work, proselytizing work—you know, the effort to involve yourself in a world-saving cause—and they're transporting that into politics. So, they're treating politics as if it were a religious crusade. And politics is not made to have that kind of pressure put on it. Politics is meant to be a transactional arena for the most part, where people bargain over stuff and sometimes you win and sometimes you lose. But the stakes are not supposed to be about existential moral issues. When you start thinking about politics as an existential moral issue, when politics and partisanship becomes your religion, politics breaks.

And we're seeing some of that as well. So, I, I'm secular. I'm an atheistic Jew. There was a time in my life when I celebrated the secularization of society. I don't anymore.

**TENPAS:** Wow. And that's also, this is the topic of your next book, too? Right?

**RAUCH:** Yes.

**TENPAS:** Wow, fascinating.

**RAUCH:** To be called *Cross-purposes: Christianity's Broken Bargain with Democracy*. Christianity in the United States and Europe is by far the biggest element in all of this, because it's been the dominant and defining religion, and because in so many places it is breaking down as a major social force, as an effective social force, as a kind of social glue.

**TENPAS:** Wow, that's fascinating. I look forward to reading that. On a scale of 1 to 10, how nervous are you about the future of American democracy?

**RAUCH:** Well, can you ask me again on January 21st, 2025?

**TENPAS:** Yeah, I can.

[50:02]

**RAUCH:** You know, people say about many elections, this is our most important election. I think 1860 would probably have to be number one on our list. Or maybe 1800. But this one is really right up there. This is not your ordinary choice between two more or less equivalent politicians with different views or from different parties. This is more like a choice about what kind of government, what kind of polity we want to have. It's a choice about the rule of law. It's a choice about whether to turn, for example, the Justice Department into a political weapon. It's about whether court orders will be obeyed. It's about whether we're going to see the organs of government used for Russian-style mass disinformation.

So, ask me again. It's a very close election. It's entirely possible, okay, it's entirely probable that Republicans, should they lose on the numbers, will not accept that result. But we'll see.

[music]

**TENPAS:** Right. Well, Jonathan, thank you so much for your time and for coming to *Democracy in Question*, and and speaking with me today. I learned a great deal. Thank you.

**RAUCH:** Well, thank you, I enjoyed it.

**TENPAS:** *Democracy in Question* is a production of the Brookings Podcast Network. Thank you for listening. And thank you to my guests for sharing their time and expertise on this podcast.

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I'm Katie Dunn Tenpas. Thank you for listening.