

THE BROOKINGS INSTITUTION  
BROOKINGS CAFETERIA PODCAST

TEN COMMITMENTS TO SAVE DEMOCRACY

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PARTICIPANTS:

FRED DEWS  
Multimedia Project Manager  
The Brookings Institution

SUSAN CORKE  
Director, Intelligence Project  
Southern Poverty Law Center

NORMAN EISEN  
Senior Fellow, Governance Studies  
The Brookings Institution

SARAH BINDER  
Senior Fellow, Governance Studies  
The Brookings Institution

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DEWS: Welcome to the Brookings Cafeteria, the podcast about ideas and the experts who have them. I'm Fred Dews.

The two-day, virtual Summit for Democracy convened by President Biden and that wrapped up on December 10 aimed to rally nations around the world against growing authoritarianism. My two guests today have long been involved in the work of supporting democracy and thwarting democratic backsliding, both in the U.S. and abroad, and they are co-authors of a new report on how to advance democracy. Norm Eisen is a senior fellow in Governance Studies at Brookings, former U.S. ambassador to the Czech Republic, and former White House ethics czar; and Susan Corke is director of the Intelligence Project at the Southern Poverty Law Center, and formerly worked at Freedom House, U.S. Embassy Moscow, U.S. Embassy Prague, and the German Marshall Fund. They are co-authors of "Democracy Playbook 2021: 10 commitments for advancing democracy."

Also on this episode, Senior Fellow Sarah Binder offers her view on the challenges that are piling up in Congress as the first session comes to a close in a matter of week.

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JOHN MCARTHUR: Hi, I'm John McArthur with the Center for Sustainable Development at Brookings.

ZIA KHAN: And I'm Zia Khan with The Rockefeller Foundation. We're the co-hosts of "17 Rooms," a podcast about actions, insights, and community for the Sustainable Development Goals and the people driving them.

MCARTHUR: 17 Rooms is a new way of getting people together to take action on the 17 Sustainable Development Goals. In this podcast, you'll hear our conversations with dynamic leaders shaping actions towards the Goals.

KHAN: “17 Rooms” is produced by The Brookings Podcast Network. You can download and listen to it on Apple, Spotify, or wherever you like to get your podcasts.

DEWS: You can find “17 Rooms” and ways to subscribe to it on our website, [brookings.edu/17RoomsPodcast](https://brookings.edu/17RoomsPodcast).

First up, here’s Sarah Binder with what’s happening in Congress.

BINDER: I’m Sarah Binder, a senior fellow in Governance Studies at the Brookings Institution.

It’s bumper-to-bumper traffic on the congressional December highway. Volume is increasing, a couple of fender-benders, and the risk is growing of a crash and a multicar pile up at the Christmas—or New Year’s—toll booth.

In some ways, though, this is just December business as usual. End of year, action forcing deadlines. Lawmakers, leaders and the president almost always come to agreement when real deadlines force their hands. Congress did dodge a bullet by passing a stop gap spending to fund the federal government into February. But the approaching debt limit, a massive annual defense bill, and the crown jewel of President Biden’s domestic agenda—the Democrats’ Build Back Better plan—are still at stake. But most expect the parties to come to an agreement on how to raise the debt ceiling and on the outstanding issues in funding the Defense Department.

On the other hand, there’s more going on here. We are of course in a world of polarized political parties. Tight competition for control of Congress and the White House complicates the making of legislative deals—even measures considered to be “must-pass bills” to prevent a government default and to fund the military.

But more than sheer partisanship is generating delays and risking a bad accident. These are both polarized and internally divided parties—both on the Democratic and Republican sides. And with a slim Democratic House majority, an evenly divided Senate, Senate rules that typically require supermajority or unanimous consent to act, and a nationally unpopular president, these intra-party disagreements inject a little more uncertainty—and peril—into these last weeks of the first session of this Congress.

So how do these party leaders get themselves, Congress, the Biden White House, and the nation out of this pickle? Keep your eyes on factors:

First, no party, no matter how divided, wants to be blamed for a bad outcome—a government default, ill-equipped troops, a government shut-down, and so forth. That desire to avoid blame certainly motivates leaders from both parties to go to the bargaining table, even when one party controls the House, Senate, and the White House. A government default risks an economic, financial, and political crises that party leaders don't want to tempt. A government shut down—possibly closing airports and national parks during the holiday season—is also off the table for party leaders. In other words, strong electoral incentives can motivate good, productive behavior by party leaders.

Second, secrecy usually helps. Congress generally works in the sunshine. But intense partisanship over the years has encouraged rank and file lawmakers to give more power to their party leaders to negotiate deals. And that bargaining tends to take place behind closed doors. That doesn't guarantee results, but it makes it easier for leaders to reach bipartisan agreements that both parties can endorse.

Third, rules are made to be broken. What do I mean? Legislative deals often require forbearance—holding back, not fully exploiting all of your procedural rights. And leaders often get to yes by devising creative workarounds when the rules constrain them. This is clear as day in a proposed solution to the debt limit problem. The easiest way for the Senate to raise the debt limit is to secure 60 votes to block a filibuster. But Democrats don't have 60

votes. So, instead, party leaders are considering creating a fast-track rule for Democrats to raise the debt limit with just a simple majority vote. It takes 60 votes to create that fast-track procedure, but the gamble is that the necessary 10 Republicans would vote for a confusing new procedure even if they won't vote to raise the debt limit. Why would they do that? Well, no one really wants to shoulder the blame for causing the government to default on its debts.

Now, Democrats are unlikely to enact all of their top priorities this month. The Build Back Better plan could slip into early next year. Why? Because Democratic divisions have complicated getting to the exit ramp before the holiday rush.

DEWS: And now, here's my interview with Susan Corke and Norm Eisen on "Democracy Playbook 2021: 10 commitments for advancing democracy."

Well, Susan, I want to welcome you to the Brookings Cafeteria podcast.

CORKE: Thank you, Fred, I'm thrilled to be here with you and Norm.

DEWS: And Norm, welcome back to the Brookings Cafeteria podcast. Always great to see you.

EISEN: Fred, always wonderful to be with you and this time with my old friend Susan.

DEWS: Well, you and Susan are coauthors along with Jonathan Katz, Andrew Keneally, James Lemond, and Alina Polyakova of "Democracy Playbook 2021: Ten Commitments for Advancing Democracy." And I'm going to get to the report in a few minutes. But first, Susan, you've served in the State Department's Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor. You served in U.S. Embassy Moscow and U.S. Embassy Prague, directed the Transatlantic Democracy Working Group at the German Marshall Fund. And now you're director of the Southern Poverty Law Center Intelligence Project. So, I bring those up because your career until recently was focused internationally on other countries. But now you're at a premiere organization dedicated to racial justice in the United States and

working against white supremacy, among other goals. How do those two worlds combine in your work now?

CORKE: Well, actually, I would say that I don't see it as two worlds—international and domestic—any more. To be overly simplistic, I would say that the divide is really between pro-democracy and anti-democracy. The through line of my career as much as it had been focused internationally, I've been focused on fighting to defend and advance democracy against the authoritarian forces.

In a way as the anti-democratic, far right forces moved westward from Russia, so did my career. I started out focusing on Russia and the former Soviet Union. Then I moved to Eastern Europe, then Central Europe, and then, with the election of Trump, started focusing more on the United States. And in my time working on Russia and other states and countries' leaders that were using the authoritarian toolkit, I really learned to understand what that toolkit looked like in practice. So, when Trump was elected, it was a very dark realization that America's democracy was also vulnerable.

I'd also say, too, that my professional worlds and my personal worlds have also collided in a mixed family. My spouse is African American, descended from slaves. I have a mixed-race daughter. So the fight for democracy now is not a foreign concept of things I'm fighting for abroad. It's very much something that I'm fighting for in my own home.

The other thing too, is I'd say another division that's not international or domestic is that it's less now about physical geography, it's really about this digital landscape of hate that doesn't know national boundaries. And technology is really forever changed the game of democracy. So, I think the divisions of international and domestic are not the right lens to look at this problem anymore.

DEWS: Well, thank you for sharing that. Your phrase "fight for democracy," that's going to stick with me for a long time, and I hope it sticks with listeners throughout this discussion.

Norm, in terms of your background, you've been involved in activities around democracy and government transparency, anti-corruption, and a lot of other things for decades, including serving as U.S. ambassador to the Czech Republic and co-founder of Citizens for Responsibility and Ethics in Washington, or CREW, also special assistant to the President for Ethics and Government Reform, and so much more. What draws you to this topic to this work?

EISEN: Well, all of my different jobs over the past nearly 40 years in the workplace have pointed me towards this moment of helping to shore up our democracy, Fred. Susan ended up at a civil rights organization fighting hate. I started my career at one when I got out of college in the '80s at the Anti-Defamation League, the ADL, in their Los Angeles office. And that sensitized me to the threats to liberal democracy.

Then, of course, as you noted, I was a watchdog dealing with corruption issues. And corruption always goes hand in hand with disdain for democracy. Served in the White House, where as ethics czar, ethics and reform czar, all these democracy issues were a part of my portfolio. Things like redistricting and campaign finance reform, the ways in which our democracy is attacked from within. And I became an ambassador and I saw the fragility of democracies through studying what had happened abroad.

So, when this scourge of illiberal populism—what we've seen with Erdoğan in Turkey, and Orbán in Hungary, and Putin in Russia, and signs elsewhere across the transatlantic alliance and the world—when that hit home in the United States, I really was ready for that because of decades of working in different ways in this field.

DEWS: Well, as a citizen, thank you both for the great work that you all have spent your careers on in this area. Norm you just used the term “illiberal populism” and throughout the “Democracy Playbook,” you refer to liberal democracy. Can you define or summarize the core tenets of liberal democracy?

EISEN: Well, of course, the term “liberal” refers to freedom, and we think of multiple freedoms, Fred, when we’re thinking about liberal democracy. Above all, the freedom of the individual, the idea that each of us has the liberty to define who we are, as the founders of the United States put it, the right to pursue life, liberty and your individual happiness. Limited of course. As soon as you talk about freedom, you have to talk about the limits on freedom, and my ability to swing my fist around, that freedom ends where your jaw begins.

So, the second major aspect beyond individual freedom is the idea of a social compact where we freely come together in the United States—it takes the form of our Constitution—and we agree on a set of rules, the idea that the political system will fairly represent the choices of individual voters, and the other principles that go into the political freedom that lays on top of the personal freedom, in our case organized in the U.S. as a constitutional republic.

And then there are a set of ancillary freedoms that go with personal freedom and political freedom: economic freedom, freedom of the press and of speech. And again, we’ve protected those in our Constitution. So it’s those three categories of freedom that I think characterize liberal democracies and each of those freedoms coming with some limitations and some responsibilities.

DEWS: As you talk about in the “Playbook,” liberal democracy is under threat in a lot of places. Norm, you just reference countries like Turkey, Hungary, Russia, maybe we add Poland to the list, others. What are the trends generally worldwide in democratic backsliding or even we might call it the rise of autocracy?

CORKE: So, unfortunately, as I’ve been in the democracy field for almost 20 years, started in a period where there was great optimism. But for many years now, we’ve been saying that democracies around the world are under stress, that illiberal actors have been energized and they have been copying each other and undermining institutions and norms.



Countries like Russia have been moving beyond their own country, where they used the domestic situation as sort of a laboratory to test their authoritarian toolkit and to go after democracies in Europe and the United States. The goal being that they see this as a global contest, that there is a global contest essentially between authoritarianism and democracy.

Over the past number of years, there's been many democratic setbacks. There's been ones that have been sudden and alarming and capturing the news. The Belarus ongoing struggle between democracy and dictatorship has been an amazing example of the resilience of civil society and the determination of a dictator to hold on to power. But if we look at the studies, global democracy indices would show that the world is in a new wave of an autocratization, which is something that we go into in both versions of the "Democracy Playbook."

I used to work at Freedom House as well, which you mentioned at the beginning, which is the only organization that really has been, over many decades, studying the trajectory of freedom in the world. And it's recorded its 15th consecutive year of net global decline in political rights and civil liberties, which, even when I was there, which was six years ago or so, it got boring every year to just keep saying the same thing over again, that liberal democracy is in decline. But other measures of democracy, such as the V-Dem project, all would support this concern that democracy has been in decline. So at this point, to say that it's moving is maybe not the right way to describe it. It's sort of a retrenchment of democracy, and it's a pretty frightening place to be. I see us as being on a precipice in the United States as well.

DEWS: Well, yeah, I'll just add for your comment that the United States was for the first time added to a list of quote, backsliding democracies in a report recently released by the Stockholm-based International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance.

CORKE: Absolutely. And Freedom House did not use to cover the United States in its Freedom in the World Report. And, in the past few years, it has started covering the decline

in American democracy as well, particularly focused on freedom of the media and political participation were two of the key areas where the U.S. has declined.

DEWS: Well, you talked about Belarus, and we've mentioned some other examples of countries that are either experiencing autocratic regimes or have slid into autocratic regimes. But backsliding doesn't always happen through, I think, what we might think of in the movies as an overt military coup may backsliding is the process. Can you talk about what that process feels like or looks like?

EISEN: Well, we've seen some of that firsthand, both Susan and I across our careers. And then to my dismay, but not to my surprise, in the United States in recent years. My mother was a Holocaust survivor, and she always warned me that what they experienced in Europe could happen anywhere and to keep an eye out. And that's not to say, of course, that what we face in the United States is comparable to the horrors of what Europe saw in the 20th century saw on the 20th century. I think the greater likelihood is, the greater risk, and it's not 100 percent assured, is that we will slip into this kind of softer autocracy that we've seen in Hungary, or now seems to be a deterioration in Poland in that direction.

But what it feels like in practice, Fred, is typically you have an individual rise to power—an Orbán, an Erdoğan, a Trump—and then they will start chipping away at those three pillars that I described for you when you asked about the definition of liberal democracy. So, there's an attack on the personal freedoms of their adversaries. They start with the perceived enemies and challenging them publicly in a way that's unfair, using the instrumentalities of the state, asking the Department of Justice to go after them and denying them government contracts. These are all things we saw Trump do again and again.

And then the next assault comes on the social compact, in our case in the United States expressed in the Constitution and in the rule of law. And we saw that again and again in the exceptionally lawless nature, pick another example, of Putin constantly pushing the

boundaries of what the law does and does not allow, the same with Orbán, the same with Erdoğan. If they lose in court, then they try again.

And then finally, the assault on the ancillary freedoms, whether it's freedom of speech and of the press, examples being Donald Trump pulling press passes from the White House reporting corps.

So, it's really a thoroughgoing attack—the corruption that is the opposite of economic freedom, of true free markets, distorting markets through corrupt behavior. And the pattern is what people saw over the four years of the Trump administration in the United States, very familiar to those who've dealt with backsliding democracies around the world. It's the reason the United States was downgraded in that recent report you described, and we write about it a lot in our “Democracy Playbook” 2021 edition.

CORKE: If I could just jump in, too, having studied and worked in countries where backsliding was occurring, I remember so clearly the moment that I knew that Trump and we knew that Trump had won. And I knew deep in my heart that this was very dangerous moment for America, that he had won by employing the tools of an authoritarian, undermining the media as fake news, energizing the hard, far right, the white supremacists, going after the judiciary and rule of law, casting his political opponents as enemies, and his willingness to use corruption.

And one of the main reasons I came to SPLC was because of that. I just, I couldn't believe that the tools that I had seen used in other countries, many of them had not had a strong and long history of democracy, but the United States had. And I was just devastated to realize how vulnerable American democracy actually was. If we think back to the Charlottesville Unite the Right trial has been going on the past few weeks. And if we think back to that time in 2017, the white nationalists came out in Charlottesville carrying tiki torches, they felt so empowered by Trump's hateful rhetoric about immigrants, about

defining people as the other. And then when he praised “very fine people on both sides,” that was the great catalyst for the racists, for the white nationalists, white supremacists.

I think we were right to be worried. That’s also what was the catalyst for us founding the Transatlantic Democracy Working Group. We could see this would go in a partisan direction and we really felt like we needed to do something to have Republicans and Democrats agreeing on the core tenets of liberal democracy together.

And the final thing I’ll note is that in the process of a march towards authoritarianism, the most damaging outcome is when they can’t really be seen. It’s that there’s a longer-term erosion of citizens’ trust in democratic institutions and elected officials. And once you’ve lost that trust in the system, which is where we really are now, that is kind of the most damaging legacy of the Trump administration.

DEWS: I want to get to the “Democracy Playbook” 2021 in just a moment, but I want to stay on this question of democratic backsliding in the United States for a few more minutes. As people are listening to this episode, President Biden will have just been wrapping up his two-day inaugural Summit for Democracy. And I went and looked at the language describing the summit on the White House website, also on the State Department’s website. And seems still to be very much focused on democracies elsewhere, democracies outside the United States, and it goes to the point that you’re making, Susan. It didn’t seem like for a long time that the conversation about democratic backsliding and authoritarianism encompassed the United States. But should there be more explicit attention from the White House and from other American leaders on democracy here in the U.S.?

EISEN: There should be. The summit that’s taking place this week is an effort to lift up principles that are relevant to every democracy. And the history of the past four years is a reminder, if we needed one, that they’re deeply relevant here. The good news, Fred, is that as part of this summit, the United States is also making actionable commitments this week, and there then will be a year of follow up, what they’re calling a year of action, followed by

another gathering. And so it's going to be incumbent on all of us analysts, activists, and everybody who works in this sphere to make sure that the United States fully participates, follows up on its commitments. We make suggestions on how those commitments can be improved so that the United States plays its part. Because you're absolutely right, we're not immune from the risk and we need to be equally committed to solving the problem at home as we are to advancing democracy abroad, maybe even more committed.

CORKE: If I could just add on to what Norm was saying, too. Just from my own experience, you know, earlier in my career, in the early aughts, there was an asymmetry when we were promoting democracy—I was at the State Department at the time—in other countries when we were trying to set up these democracy task force or democracy working groups that were supposed to be these bilateral structures where we could talk to each other about democratic concerns. And other countries really just saw this as the U.S. lecturing and that there was hypocrisy from the United States, that there was this unwillingness for us to really open up about concerns about our own democracy, and that we saw ourselves as perfect and therefore that gave us the ability to criticize other countries.

Now the U.S. is experiencing setbacks, and this is an opportunity in a way that we have the opportunity to lead the Democracy Summit, not because our democracy is the strongest anymore, but because we embrace the transparency and that we understand that democracy is a process, that it's not an end state, that there can be advances and there can be setbacks, but that it requires constant tending and constant nurturing, constant involvement from people.

So, if the United States approaches this with humility and is willing to show that we have a willingness to learn and to grow too, I think we have a better long-term hope of sharing with other countries and learning from each other and creating this network of democracies that's stronger than the structures in the past. So if the Biden administration is

not really willing to use the Summit as that sort of opportunity, it will undermine the effort itself.

DEWS: I've come to realize that democracy doesn't just happen. It requires work. And so speaking of commitments, Norm—you mentioned commitments—the “Democracy Playbook” 2021, which is an update from the 2019 version, has ten commitments. Can you summarize for the listeners what this project is all about? I mean, who is the audience, for example?

EISEN: Well, with this incredible virtual summit with countries, civil society, and others being represented coming from all over the world, it's very important that the process of doing that be balanced with powerful content. That is, what should these participants in the Democracy Summit from across the globe do to advance democracy, to shore up backsliding democracies in each country? What must all the stakeholders—those in government, political opposition groups, civil society, the press, business, labor, everybody else, ordinary citizens—what must everybody do to make progress?

It turns out, Fred, that there is a lot that we can learn about what actually does and does that work to halt backsliding and advance democracy in the social science and the experience of the post-Cold War era of the past 30 years plus.

So, in the “Democracy Playbook” 2021 edition, what we've done is taken all of that evidence and extracted specific, measurable, actionable commitments that participants in the Democracy Summit can make so we can see, are they sticking to them or not? That's why we want them to be measurable. And then when everybody gets together in another year, we can look at, Hey, here's what people have actually done. That's the idea of this report, to suggest the content of what participants in the summit should be doing. And there's been a tremendous amount of interest in it.

DEWS: Again, that's the participants in this Summit, not just during the two days, but over the course of the next year until the follow up summit in 2022, right?

EISEN: And beyond. If we want to save our democracy, there are a set of very specific things that need to be done. And if folks look at the “Democracy Playbook” 2021 edition, special edition for the Democracy Summit, you’ll see the kinds of specific commitments that we need to make. We need to not only mouth platitudes about democracy, we need to take action.

DEWS: And that report, again, is on the Brookings website, Brookings dot edu. Listeners can go review it, see all 10 commitments. We could probably have an individual podcast episode about each of the 10 commitments. We don’t have time today, so I did want to probe into just a few of them for this episode. One of them is commitment number three, “De-politicize democratic processes.” And think “processes” is a really important term here, and it seems particularly apt in the U.S. context as we see state legislatures throughout the United States trying to change the rules of elections, election administration, voting rights, all these kind of things. Can you discuss some more about this commitment three?

EISEN: Until relatively recently, the United States election administration was recognized as a bipartisan success story where the folks who were in charge of collecting and counting and certifying and announcing the vote totals came together from both parties at every level, Fred, from the local precinct that each of us goes if we vote in person, that each of us goes to, all the way up to the secretaries of state who generally certify and oversee the statewide counting of these results and the governors who approved them.

And 2020 was a great success story in that regard. Huge turnout, historic turnout, and went very smoothly. Except there’s a minority of folks in our country who have bought into the Big Lie that the election was somehow stolen. And what that did was it politicized the election procedures in a way that is unhealthy. We need to find ways to walk back from that, and not just in the United States. People need to have trust in vote counting around the world. And so we make a series of suggestions and proposals for specific, measurable things that

democracies can do to restore that kind of neutral confidence in all of the procedures surrounding elections.

Elections are particularly important because those in the vehicle, and we started out by talking about this, in our constitutional republic's and democracy's writ large. The vehicle by which the most fundamental legitimacy of the system is conferred from the people who are the ultimate authorities in a liberal democracy to their representatives is through the ballot box. So we need to have confidence and take specific steps to build up confidence in our voting and election systems.

CORKE: I would just jump in there. I think what Norm was describing, there's essentially two aspects of this. There's the actual electoral process and administration. In the presidential election, there were very few irregularities. Overall, the United States has an incredible capacity to run good elections. So then there's the perception aspect where Trump and many Republicans in particular are trying to undermine confidence in the elections and to create this perception that if they don't win, then therefore it's not fair. But that actually had nothing to do with the actual administration of the election. It was primarily serving to undermine the confidence of Americans in democracy.

But then there's a second basket, which is, as Norm was talking about, to actually undermine the democratic process in elections, to the voter suppression efforts in many states. The efforts to trick African American voters into not showing up at the polls with robocalls giving wrong dates and times and locations.

So, there's efforts just that play with people's heads to change the perception. And then there's actual efforts that are being undertaken for gerrymandering to change the numbers or efforts to actually keep constituencies that Republicans think are more likely to vote Democratic from getting to the polls. And both are dangerous, but in combination, as we've seen in the past few years, as especially toxic.



EISEN: So, what that means, just in concrete terms since we're on the "Playbook," we make a series of recommendations. And some of it calls for responsibility by existing party actors. Those who are in a position of power in political parties have to limit leaders, they cannot enable leaders who espouse anti-democratic sentiment or positions. There is a need to exhibit moral courage and we lay out the criteria of the things to look for.

The nonprofit and civil society actors have responsibilities here, too, which include modeling the responsible behavior that we want to see among elected leaders in how we manage civil society.

And then, above all, those who are acting in positions of political power, when you have democracy transgressors and violators who break the law, they need to be prosecuted. You can't shy away from that because you fear prosecution as too political. You shouldn't stampede into it, either, if the case is not ready or is not ripe. But you need to have the boldness to stand up for democracy when voting systems, for example, are attacked in a way that creates civil or criminal liability.

DEWS: I hope leaders who are involved in election administration are listening to this podcast, and if not, I hope listeners will share this and the "Playbook" with them. I want to move on to commitment number six, "Avoid toxic otherization politics." And I'm going to tee up this part of the discussion by quoting from the report: "While substantive debates and policy issues should be welcomed, democratic actors must try to limit the extent to which debates over toxic identity politics poison democracy, weaken the trust of citizens in democratic governance and institutions, and serve as fuel to empower extremists. This effort needs to be matched with a focus on local, rural, and urban-level integration, as well as a posture that eschews hateful rhetoric." So how do you achieve this when, in the U.S. case, at least, political discussion already seems so toxic, and also where the urban-rural divide politically and socially seems pretty wide?

CORKE: Yeah. I mean, this is the million-dollar question, and this is where I feel now focusing on the United States, I feel so fortunate to have been involved in other democratization processes around the world because one of the key tools in the authoritarian toolkit is the otherization, defining enemies. And, I think that's one of the more damaging legacies of the Trump years is that the political arena, is so toxic, so partisan, so divided.

You know, in our research for the first "Democracy Playbook," we brought in some of the most innovative, most successful, most resilient, most threatened democracy activists in the transatlantic space. And, their clever tactics to fight back and to think through the problem really informed our writing of the "Democracy Playbook."

And in a way that was why I was brought into the Southern Poverty Law Center, to help think about how to create a model here in the United States, you know, realizing we're one organization and I'm one person.

But, you know, this is not something that you can fix in a moment. The theory of change that I'm operating on now at the Southern Poverty Law Center is that we need to focus on three pillars that intersect along a continuum of change, from homes to communities to schools to our military to voting to the courts. So, one, we need to focus earlier, have an earlier alert system, work on prevention and pre-radicalization so that we can spot warning signs and intervene earlier, build up at the grassroots, build strategic partnerships, support resiliency at the community level. So that's a long-term project.

Number two, we need to be exposing how this otherization, how these extremist identity politics, are undermining and creating dangers for our democracy. We need to create the evidentiary basis for accountability.

And then finally, we need to work on protecting the structures of democracy. We need to push back against policies and legislation that prevent inclusive democracy. We need to have accountability and consequences for politicians and leaders who are putting white nationalist beliefs into policy and legislation. And we need to really look top to bottom at the

structural racism that is part of our system. And in order to ultimately get to a more inclusive democracy, we need to be willing to work at those three levels I laid out, the prevention, the exposing what is happening, and then to be looking to dismantle the structures that have enabled the system to continue.

DEWS: Well, I will put a link in the show notes to your organization, Susan, SPLCenter dot org, so people can learn more about the great work you're doing there. And you just mentioned structural racism, which is one of the specific commitments under commitment six, to avoid toxic otherization politics. And that commitment is to address structural racism, and the recent judgment in the Charlottesville case against the white supremacist groups is heartening. But talk of structural racism feels like it's being drowned out over the last year or so by the loud voices of the anti-critical race theory wave. How do you overcome that?

CORKE: Well, I don't want to say drowned out, because the verdict in the Charlottesville judgment is an incredibly important victory. But it's one victory in many, that should energize us for the fight ahead. But it is not the be all end all. But holding those racist neo-Nazi individuals accountable for the horrific events of that day, making it clear that there's real consequences, and essentially bankrupting many of them, that will act as a deterrent. They will need to change their methods. It will damage recruitment. So it was a really significant verdict. So I want to commend Integrity for America that brought the case. I commend the City of Charlottesville that has taken real strides since then. They've been removing Confederate statues that kind of reinforce this history of racism. So, it was an important stride.

The critical race theory fight, it was essentially a made-up fight that the far-right Republican think tanks, other powerful right-wing institutions, they've been fueling the strategy deliberately. I'm sure if you took a poll, and there have been polls done, that most people who are talking about critical race theory don't really understand it. But it has been a

deliberate Republican strategy to take what had usually been local debates about school curricula and turn it into this polarized national issues that the Republicans are wielding like a weapon in state and national elections. They're doing it very cynically for political gain.

SPLC has done studies on it, and we don't use the term critical race theory, we use inclusive education, because the Republicans have weaponized that discussion so much that it's a tilted playing field at this point. But you know, the critical race theory, it really started with President Trump and his executive order, that was one of the first actions of Biden was to repeal that. That was the executive order that banned diversity training in federal agencies, had a list of ideas that were deemed divisive, discouraging teachers from making race or gender present in conversations about power and oppression in the classroom. So, Biden has rolled that back, but the Republicans still see that as a way to really stoke the culture war, and the far-right ecosystem, particularly Fox News, has really been a partner in creating this fake salience around the issue and making it a cultural flashpoint.

So we've been trying to address it through other ways, to fight back against this kind of faux divide that the Republicans have put together, because polls also show that the majority of Americans don't really understand critical race theory but do want there to be integration in the schools and understand that racism is a problem, understand our history of racism and have a desire to create more inclusive policies.

DEWS: So again, there's 10 commitments in the "Playbook," we only had a chance to talk about a few of them. But I want to turn to the question of the United States advancing democracy in other countries. It's been kind of a long-held tradition that the United States is sort of the beacon of democracy. And you write in the "Playbook" that, "the United States still has important economic and diplomatic tools at its disposal to advance democratic progress if it has the political will." And as we saw with the former administration, it seemed like the United States did not have the political will. Maybe it's been restored now, but it

could be taken away again in a future administration. Can the U.S. ever be seen as a reliable leader on democracy?

EISEN: When I was ambassador, Susan made this point also, but when I served as ambassador, Fred, I always made the point that we were, the United States and its allies, all traveling on this very up and down road of advancing democracy together. And so I think there has always been a certain amount of skepticism. Remember when the United States in the post-World War II era was advancing the democratic model against communism at the same time it was dealing with racial segregation at home, which also caused people to take our leadership with a grain of salt.

So, I think you can help lead while dealing with your challenges at home. In some ways, it makes us more relatable that we're going through this issue. We had a great national referendum on the continuation of our democracy as we know it, and the country voted against the backsliding that one of the candidates represented. So that's an endorsement, that's a bipartisan endorsement, of the democratic model in the United States. So I think the answer is yes.

Obviously, there's always a certain amount of uncertainty and we want to emphasize the enduring pillars of the American experiment, such as our Constitution. Our Constitution has not changed. And, Fred, to hammer the bipartisan point, it was Republican judges, elected officials, election officials, and others who refused to go along with the false claims about election administration that we were focusing on a few moments ago. That's a larger lesson, and we emphasize that need for bipartisan courage in the "Democracy Playbook." And we're hearing a lot about that at the Democracy Summit this week.

Let me just emphasize again for listeners that the "Democracy Playbook" encompasses not just countries outside the United States, not just the United States, but democracies worldwide. As we wrap up this conversation, Susan and Norm, I want to ask

each of you to reflect on the question what, if anything, gives you hope that the project of liberal democracy will prevail over illiberalism?

CORKE: Democracy is not perfect sort of by definition. I wouldn't be in this field if I wasn't optimistic. It is the only political system that legitimately holds governments accountable, and it has shown over decades since World War II that it has provided us with a more peaceful and prosperous world. People are at the heart of democratic improvement. So, to have ... I believe in people, and I believe that if people take responsibility and see it as an active sport, then democracy is our best chance.

And I'm also optimistic because I have seen amazing breakthroughs in countries where I've worked in. Slovakia, electing the first woman president. In Belarus, I'm constantly inspired by the resilience and creativity of the pro-democracy actors operating in that country. In the Czech Republic and former Czechoslovakia, which Norm knows better than I can, but I know a lot of the student leaders from that time. And, they have said to me, we didn't know when the moment of opening would be. We knew that we had to work towards it, that we had to unite, that we had to have clear goals, we needed a strategy. All the things that we outlined in the "Democracy Playbook." You don't know when the opening will be for transformation, but we do know that the steps that you need to take to prepare for it.

And the final thing I'd say, coming off of the point about the Czech Republic and the student leaders, I'm incredibly hopeful for the young generation. The silver lining of some Trump's attacks on our democracy has been this incredible political activism among young people that more people are running for office at younger ages, Black Lives Matter movement is incredibly broad and diverse and young. My daughter, seven years old, she understands the fight. Trump's simplicity of his message was very clear for young people to understand that she had a visceral reaction to him that he is bad. So I think the young people now know that this fight is out there, and as I've seen in other countries, when young people

unite and use creative tactics and have a strategy and a clear message, remarkable transformation is possible.

EISEN: The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice, and it also bends towards democracy, to quote the 19th century Unitarian minister Theodore Parker. It's a condensed quote; as so often with these famous quotations, his actual words are a little different. Favorite saying of Dr. Martin Luther King's and has passed into the broader culture of optimism.

The power of democracy and its ultimate attractiveness is compelling, and nobody can predict when we will get there. There are many ups and downs along the way. We're going through them together with our allies. We've had a vivid reminder of them. But if there's one lesson from coauthoring with Susan and our other wonderful coauthors the "Democracy Playbook" 2021 edition from the Democracy Summit, it's intended to inform, and from all the decades of experience that we started out discussing on the podcast, Fred, that Susan and I bring to this work, if there is one lesson, it is the power of democracy to overcome those struggles and push forward decade after decade. Yes, there are steps forward and steps back, but democracy ever marches on, and I'm confident that will continue to be the case.

DEWS: Well, Susan Corke at the Southern Poverty Law Center, Norm Eisen at the Brookings Institution, I want to thank you both for sharing with us your time and expertise in this very fascinating and important conversation. Thank you.

CORKE: Thank you, Fred, and thank you, Norm, I truly enjoyed the conversation today, and I hope an outcome of this Democracy Summit will be a recommitment to democracy and a new energy from the grassroots to help hold democracy accountable.

EISEN: Thanks, Fred. Thanks, Susan. It was a fascinating conversation and a very important one. Nice to be back on the podcast.

DEWS: You can find “Democracy Playbook 2021: Ten commitments for advancing democracy” on the Brookings website, [brookings dot edu](https://www.brookings.edu). And to learn more about Susan Corke and her colleagues’ work at Southern Poverty Law Center, visit [SPLCenter.org](https://www.splcenter.org).

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Until next time, I’m Fred Dews.