

THE BROOKINGS INSTITUTION
BROOKINGS CAFETERIA PODCAST

IS AMERICAN DEMOCRACY FAILING?

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

Is democracy failing and putting our economic system at risk? That's the question and the title of a new report from governance studies at Brookings and the State United Democracy Center, coauthored by Brookings Senior Fellows Bill Galston and Elaine Kamarck to discuss the report's findings. I'm joined on this episode by Elaine Kamarck, who was also founding director of the Center for Effective Public Management at Brookings.

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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: And now on with the interview. Elaine, welcome back to the Brookings Cafeteria.

KAMARCK: Well, thank you, Fred. Nice to be here.

DEWS: We're going to talk about your new report, "Is democracy failing and putting our economic system at risk?" in a second. But first, I wanted to ask you to reflect on the year and a week that have passed since the insurrection of January 6, 2020. What are your thoughts about how Congress and the nation generally have responded?

KAMARCK: It's been a really strange year, frankly, because there is a question that looms over the United States right now that we have never actually faced, which is the question of democracy—are we going to continue a system of government where we transfer power to other parties peacefully? And this has never happened right? Now in the Civil War, states made a decision to secede from the union. They just they just got out. And then of course, we had a war over whether or not to keep the union. But what's never happened is a challenge to the election, where there was no basis really for challenging the election. I mean, there were a lot of lawsuits, a lot of people attempting to convince judges about the outcome of the election. None of it was meaningful. None of it resulted in any proven allegations of cheating in the election. So this was a very big turning point in our democracy and one that we hope we won't see again. But we are afraid that we will.

DEWS: Well, then that's the perfect segue way to your report, which again is coauthored with Bill Galston. And people can find it on our website, [brookings.edu](https://www.brookings.edu). You open it with a section titled "Is democracy failing?" Well, Elaine, is democracy failing?

KAMARCK: Almost, I think, is the answer to that. I think there's good news and there's news for concern. The good news is that Americans overwhelmingly support democracy as the best way of running a country. There's a lot of support for democracy.

But there's also a lot of anxiety out there and a lot of concern among people in the public about American's democracy and where it's going. And there's no agreement on much of anything. Okay? So take a simple example. Seventy percent of Republicans believe that America's culture and way of life have changed for worse since the 1950s, while 63 percent of Democrats believe they've changed for the better. It's like we have two different worlds out there, and that's problematic. So there's this great division within the public.

Now let's turn to our democratic institutions. And we look at five institutions, and it looks to us like they have stood up pretty well to the challenge that Donald Trump brought to them. Certainly, the judiciary reviewed the cases, reviewed all the allegations of cheating and concluded that there was none. And there were Trump appointed judges deciding against Trump, including the Supreme Court of the United States, where he had several judges on it. And it's not a situation where Trump judges voted for him and other judges voted against him. The Court said, No, we're not even going to listen to this. It is without merit. Okay? So even the Supreme Court said no way, and they stood up to Trump.

Congress stood up to Trump. They impeached him twice. They interfered with his foreign policy decisions. Often when the first two years when Trump had a Republican Congress, people said, Oh, the Congress was a lapdog to Trump. And an important distinction needs to be made here. Congress deciding not to do something against the president is not at all the same as Congress having weakened powers. And Trump did nothing to weaken the authority the legal authority of Congress to act. In countries where you do see an autocrat take over, guess what happens? They disband the legislature. Or they tie the legislature's hands. So we didn't see any of that. Okay?

The press, Trump railed against them all the time and how they were failing. And as far as I can tell, they're all quite healthy. The *New York Times* makes money, the networks make money, the cable stations make money. They're still in business, and they were not

cowed by Trump. Remember, in authoritarian countries, they put the reporters in jail and the state takes over the media.

The bureaucracy stood up to Trump, particularly with vaccines. And the governors—the federalist system held up to Trump, particularly in terms of making decisions about masking, about schools, about quarantines, et cetera.

So institutionally, it doesn't look like we were tending towards a dictatorship, even though Trump challenged every single one of these external institutions throughout his presidency.

All of that being said, we are very concerned and we're concerned for two reasons. First of all, going back to the public—the number of people in the public who said that they believe violence is the answer to our political problems is at about 26 percent. Now, that's pretty scary. And members of Congress and even lower level election officials, everybody is getting death threats suddenly. Suddenly we're in a situation where people want to kill people, kidnap the governor of Michigan. It's terrifying. And it all comes back to January 6th, which brought that to the fore. But the fact is it's going on all over the country.

Secondly, the sequel to the January 6th has been a battle that is waged at the local level, and the scariest thing that's happening right now in America is that at individual boards of election, Trump people are trying to scare incumbents out of their jobs—and the death threats are doing a pretty good job of that—and trying to replace them with pro-Trump sympathizers who in theory in 2024 would make different decisions about the vote than they made in 2020. And that's pretty scary stuff. And this is going on particularly in swing states like Arizona and Georgia, which Trump still can't admit to the fact that he lost those states.

So there are threats to democracy. They come from the public. They're coming at the institutional level, and we need to be vigilant and be careful about what's going on in this country.

DEWS: Yeah, I think when you're talking about failed democracy, we often think about those foreign countries that you referenced where an authoritarian strongman takes over, or dismisses the legislature, controls the free press. But that's not really what a failed democracy would look like in the American context, right? I mean, we're not expecting, I hope, not expecting a military coup or a fascist dictator to suddenly take over the reins of government.

KAMARCK: No, we're not. The purpose of this is to allow a minority to take over the reins of government in the presence of a majority. The purpose of what is going on at the state level is try to undo elections, particularly if you don't like the result. One of the best things that Biden said not too long ago in his January 6th speech, which needs to be said again and again, you cannot judge an election corrupt because you don't win it. In other words, in the very same election where the Trump supporters are saying that he actually won in places where he didn't win, they are not also saying that the Republicans who picked up House seats and shrunk dramatically the Democratic margin in the House, they're not saying that those elections were rigged or were false. Those were the very same elections. So there are all sorts of down ballot elections that occurred on the same day in the same place with the same people. And the only the only elections Trump is challenging are the one he lost, not the rest of them. So that that's a dangerous, dangerous step in the wrong direction.

And I guess the other thing to say about this is that to a certain extent, Trump was saved because he is a shambolic person. Shambolic is my new favorite word, it's apparently British slang, it was introduced to me in the pages of the *New York Times* by a columnist, and it's a person who is just not very organized and not very disciplined. And so they're kind of all over the place. Well, that was Trump. I mean, he's all over the place and had a very short attention span, et cetera. A Trump movement populated by people with more discipline, with more pointed ability to see the weak links in American democracy and exploit them, that's

very dangerous. And that's why I think that in the long run, Trumpism is more dangerous than Trump himself.

DEWS: I do want to get to the second part of your report on the economic system in a moment, but I want to say on this question a little bit longer. You and Bill write in the paper that "the very existence of a sizable number of citizens who cannot agree on facts is an enormous threat to democracy." Can you unpack that?

KAMARCK: Well, one of the things that we see in whether it's Hitler's Germany, whether it's Stalin, whether it's all the 20th century autocrats, is that they define reality differently than everybody else does. And we are in the middle of something we've never seen in the United States, which is a movement and a political party that is defining reality one way. Whether it be the efficacy of vaccines, whether or not face masks help you prevent COVID, or whether it is the outcome of the election, we have two different sets of facts before us, and people feel that there is no truth anymore. And that is very, very dangerous in a democracy because in a democracy, what you have to do is you have to compromise. And if you have the same set of facts, you could always meet in the middle. If you don't have the same set of facts, that's pretty hard to do. And we have seen that in Russia under Stalin and many of the Russian dictators. We certainly saw it in Nazi Germany. They would create myths out of whole cloth, and that undermines democracy.

DEWS: On to a very specific point that you make in the piece—you note your concern about the Electoral Count Act of 1887.

KAMARCK: Right!

DEWS: What is that and what's the concern?

KAMARCK: The concern about that is that it is not clear enough to prevent action being taken at the state level that would allow two or three states, all you need in these close elections we're having, to send a group of electors or verify a group of electors that the state

electoral count doesn't support. So there's a lot of people, a lot of Republicans as well as Democrats, who would like to see that Act cleaned up so that next time around, it is clear what is the metric for deciding which slate of electors is the slate of electors. We dodged a bullet this time, okay, even though we had to go through a breaching of the Capitol before they actually got around to the Electoral College vote. And Biden was duly elected in the Electoral College. But again, the way Trump ran his presidency and his campaign was chaotic, undisciplined, et cetera. The thing we have to fear is we have to fear someone with a little more legal savvy, somebody less chaotic, somebody who can develop a plan and execute a plan. And that, I think, is pretty scary.

DEWS: Let's move on to the second major thrust of the report, and that's the economy. And you and Bill write that the involvement of the private sector, America's private sector, in the defense of democracy is essential for democracy and for business. Why then focus on our economic system as the lens to explore this question?

KAMARCK: Well, because there is a link all over the world between autocracy and bad economics. It's a link that's been there for quite some time. Show me a country that has a chaotic economic system where, for instance, the bureaucracy changes hands constantly or somebody comes in and with a coup or something and they wipe out all the civil servants. All the knowledge about running government goes away. By the way, that's one of the things happening in Afghanistan right now with the Taliban. They can't retain a civil service that actually knows how to run the country and the country's starving, people are starving to death there. So it's a mess.

You cannot run a good government without stability. Stability is essential to economic growth and well-being. A lot of business people will say to say to you, and I've heard this for decades now, just tell me the rules and stick to the rules and we'll play in the rules. But if the rules are constantly changing, if they're constantly changing because the whole bureaucracy

is changing, and that's changing because you've got a president politicizing the bureaucracy, et cetera, it's a very dangerous situation. And so stability is essential to democracy, is essential to prosperity. Chaos kills it. And I think that one of the things that we have to worry about if our democracy deteriorates is we have to worry about chaos.

DEWS: So what are some of the things that the private sector can do to help strengthen democracy?

KAMARCK: Well, the private sector can mobilize particularly at the state and local level, where we're seeing so much interference with the election apparatus. And the private sector needs to step up to the plate, frankly, okay. They have a fiduciary duty to their stockholders, to the companies they represent to try and make sure that they prosper. You can't prosper in chaotic times, you can't prosper in undemocratic systems. And so they need to step up to the plate.

And we have a lot of good examples in the paper, beginning with, of course, the corporate involvement in getting rid of apartheid in South Africa, where the business world said this is unjust, this is wrong, and we will withdraw from companies that do business in South Africa. And they did. And that's a big success story in terms of getting rid of apartheid and installing democracy.

So I think the business community has acted before and they need to act again. And that's just one of the things that I think this paper was written for is to try to get businesses to understand that they have a stake in this. They really have a stake in this.

DEWS: Well, there's more ideas in the paper, and I hope business leaders across the land will take it into account. So, Elaine, last question—given this report and given what you and other analysts have said recently about the health of American democracy, are you hopeful that democracy will prevail?

KAMARCK: I am hopeful. I think our institutions are strong. I think our laws are good. I think the founding fathers designed a system where there were a lot of points in the system where you can stop bad things from happening, and I think we saw that in the last four years. So I am pretty hopeful. But the thing that bothers me most is the inability to agree on a set of facts, and the lies that are getting bigger and bigger every day, whether it is about COVID or about the 2020 election. Whatever it is, we're living in a world where a lot of people just don't agree on the truth. And I think that eventually that can erode the norms of democracy, it's already started to erode those norms. And once you erode the norms of democracy, then you start eroding the institutions of democracy. So the institutions have held, but it doesn't mean they will hold in the future.

DEWS: Well, Elaine, on that hopeful note, let's leave it there. I want to thank you as always for sharing with us your time and your expertise.

KAMARCK: Well, thank you, Fred. Nice to talk to you again.

DEWS: You can find the report, "Is democracy failing and putting our economic system at risk?" coauthored by Elaine Kamarck and Bill Galston, on our website, [brookings.edu](https://www.brookings.edu).

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Until next time, I'm Fred Dews.