

THE BROOKINGS INSTITUTION  
BROOKINGS CAFETERIA PODCAST

WHAT CAN WE DO ABOUT WORSENING POLITICAL POLARIZATION IN  
AMERICA?

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PARTICIPANTS:

FRED DEWS  
Multimedia Project Manager  
The Brookings Institution

DARRELL WEST  
Vice President and Director  
Governance Studies  
The Brookings Institution

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

Before I introduce today's guest, I just want to remind listeners about what I've said in the past few episodes, that after eight and a half years and over 400 episodes, I'm closing the doors of the Brookings Cafeteria and ending this podcast. This is the fourth of six final episodes airing through the end of this month in which I'm talking with all five research vice presidents at Brookings and finishing with an interview with Brookings Institution President John R. Allen. In these episodes, Brookings leaders will be talking about the most important policy challenges and solutions of our time.

But this is not the end of Brookings podcasts. While the Cafeteria doors are closing, we're still producing other shows and launching new ones on a range of policy topics that will interest you, including Dollar and Sense: The Brookings Trade Podcast; The Current; Foresight Africa, and TechTank, which is co-hosted by Governance Studies Vice President and Director Darrell West, who is my guest today. Here's more from TechTank co-host Nicol Turner Lee.

NICOL TURNER LEE: Are you looking for a podcast exploring the most pressing technology policy issues of our time? From artificial intelligence to the digital divide, big tech regulation and more, the TechTank podcast is the place to go.

Produced by the Center for Technology Innovation at the Brookings Institution, myself, Doctor Nicol Turner Lee, and my co-host Darrell West talk with experts and policymakers to share new data, ideas, and solutions.

Join us as we break down all this information, from palatable bytes to bits.

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DEWS: And we have other new shows in development on topics ranging from the U.S.-China competition for human talent to rural America to fossil fuels. Visit Brookings dot edu slash podcasts to learn more and sign up for the podcast newsletter to get notified about new shows. You can also follow us on Twitter at Policy Podcasts for episode highlights.

And now on with the interview. Darrell, welcome back to the Brookings Cafeteria and for the last time.

WEST: Thank you, Fred. It's great to be with you and we've appreciated all your great work on this podcast.

DEWS: Thank you very much. Well, we last spoke on January 11th, 2021, five days after the insurrection and attack on the U.S. Capitol. And at that time, you talked about it in terms of quote, "polarization on steroids and polarization pushed to an incredible degree." How do you see the trajectory of polarization over the last year and moving forward? Is it better? Is it worse about the same?

WEST: Unfortunately, it's gotten worse. A year ago, I thought it was pretty bad, and certainly we were seeing a lot of polarization and extremism and actual violence. And it's hard to imagine things could get worse, but they actually have. Our social media situation has become much more toxic. Many of the forces that have fueled polarization and extremism still are here and in fact, probably have gotten worse.

But there also have been some new actions, especially at the state level, that are endangering democracy on a longer term basis. So, for example, a number of states have cracked down on voting rights, made it more difficult to vote. In some cities, they've reduced the number of polling places in minority communities so that people have to wait in line for hours, and the goal is to depress that vote. And that clearly is very worrisome since the right to vote is just so essential to democracy.

And then the last thing is just we're not really addressing big problems. There are just so many problems in Congress, so many problems even at state and local levels, basic governance challenges. So in our program, we actually have launched a new initiative that we're calling Strengthening American Democracy just because we are concerned about all these trends and we have a web page set up where we're listing our events, our papers, and our blog posts on this topic and trying to really come up with concrete suggestions on ways to make it better.

DEWS: And I'll put a link to Strengthening American Democracy in the show notes of this episode. So staying with the January Sixth insurrection for a moment. Is the January Sixth Commission, as currently constituted in the U.S. House, the right tool or forum to seek resolution for the events of that day. And if not, what more should the federal government be doing?

WEST: It is not an ideal vehicle because in the best of worlds what we would have wanted would have been a bipartisan blue ribbon commission, with both Republicans and Democrats committed to finding out what went wrong on January sixth of a year ago, trying to identify the facts and trying to make suggestions on ways to avoid this ever happening again. Republicans boycotted that type of commission, and so we've ended up with a panel that's mostly Democrats, although it does include Republican Liz Cheney. But the fact that both parties are not committed to finding out the truth on what happened is really a symptom of how things have gone wrong and why the current situation is just so difficult. When you have a crowd storming the Capitol building, injuring people, there were law enforcement agents who died as a result of this, you would think there would have been national unity to come together and figure out what happened and how we could avoid this happening. That has not happened and that is very worrisome.

DEWS: So you talked about the increased polarization in social media and we saw just over a year ago the violent attack on the U.S. Capitol on January six, but what are some of the other manifestations of threats to democracy that you are seeing in our social and political culture?

WEST: Well, ten years ago, we set up a Center for Technology Innovation in Governance Studies, and at that time we were just looking at how technology could fuel innovation. But the sad reality is, over the last decade tech has contributed a number of benefits, but it also has become part of the problem. And when we think about this issue of American democracy and the various challenges, this link has become very problematic between technology and basic governance challenges and threats to democracy, because technology allows extremists to organize. It used to be if you lived in a small community and wanted to find like-minded extremists, it wasn't that easy. Now it's basically one click away. You Google it and you can find tens of thousands of other people who think exactly the same way that you do.

And so that encourages extremism. It means that people can form national movements of like-minded individuals. There certainly has been a rise of what people like to call alternative facts, which are basically facts that are not true. It's easy for disinformation and misinformation to circulate online, so that certainly is something that we're quite worried about.

The other aspect is the intersection of race and governance and race and threats to democracy, because our country still has not come to grips with our racial problems, the racial injustice and the racial inequities. And this has become a real problem for democracy because every time our country looks like it's starting to move forward, pass legislation that addresses past inequities, and tries to create more opportunities going forward, it seems like there's always this major backlash. And we seem to be in an era now of a backlash that is

making it very difficult to undertake the steps really needed to address fundamental issues in American democracy.

And the problem is when our political system is not able to address challenges that are clear to everyone who lives in this country, it erodes public trust in government, it erodes public confidence in government, and that then becomes a threat to democracy itself. So between the institutional challenges, questions of voting rights, the technology issues, and our inability to come to grips with race, you have to be very worried about the future of American democracy.

DEWS: It seems like some of that backlash is taking the form of panic about critical race theory, about certain interpretations of American history, and, as you mentioned, restrictions on exercising the right to vote. But what do you think those who are pursuing those negative policies want? What do you think their vision of America is?

WEST: The thing that I worry the most about is there's evidence of support for minority rule in America. And by minority, I mean, rule by a political minority. So, for example, a lot of people don't realize Republicans have won the presidential popular vote only once in the last eight presidential elections. If you look at all the presidential elections from 1992 through 2020, the only popular vote that Republicans won was 2004, when George W. Bush beat John Kerry. In all the other elections, either the Democrat won the popular vote and went on to become president or won the popular vote but lost the Electoral College and did not become president. And this is a symptom of what is going on in American democracy now, that a number of our institutions are leaning in the direction where smaller and smaller groups of people are able to win control of major institutions and then dominate policymaking.

The Senate is another problem in the sense that the Senate overrepresents small and medium sized states at the expense of large states. That creates inequities in the process. The

Supreme Court now has 6-3 conservative majority that creates problems in terms of the way legal issues are being addressed. You look at campaign finance, it's a very small group of ultra-wealthy individuals who dominate the flow of money to politicians.

So, when you add all these problems together—the Electoral College, the Senate, gerrymandering in the House, the Supreme Court, and campaign finance—it just looks like we're in a situation that political scientists called the rise of counter-majoritarianism. Majority rule has been a big part of our history, of democracy in the United States. But all of our institutions are leaning in the opposite direction and allowing smaller and smaller groups to dominate policymaking. That creates a lot of threats to democracy going forward.

DEWS: It feels like we're possibly on a trajectory to where some countries have arrived that are nominally democratic but have authoritarian rulers who control their media, control their judiciary. Are you worried that we're headed in that direction?

WEST: When you look around the world, there are functioning democracies that have moved either towards illiberalism or outright authoritarianism. And people often cite Hungary, Poland, Turkey, Brazil, the Philippines as examples of one or the other of those things. I mean, these are places that have had democratic elections and have functioned, at least to some degree, as democracies. But in recent years have leaned in the opposite direction, and they have restricted voting rights, they've created rules in their political institutions that advantage one party dramatically over the other. In some cases, they pack the judiciary with partisans, as opposed to justices that would be well respected across the country. They've undermined freedom of the press, so there's less accountability. And they've attacked civil society—universities, nonprofits, and think tanks.

And so the people who potentially could hold politicians accountable are basically losing power and either illiberalism or outright authoritarianism is rising. And so the fact that this has happened in so many countries suggests that the idea that it cannot happen in

America is probably wrong, even though we don't expect it to happen and we certainly don't want it to happen in the United States. It actually could happen. We are in a situation where we are seeing some of the worrisome signs of moving down that path. And if we don't stop those trends, we could end up exactly like some of those countries I just mentioned.

DEWS: Well, are there things that we, as individual citizens can do to stop that trend?

WEST: The most important thing for the average person is to get involved in the political process, regardless of what your political views are, whether you're liberal, moderate, conservative, libertarian, or something else. People need to get involved. Like we have had a series of state primaries in recent weeks, and it's shocking how low the voter turnout has been in some of those places. Texas had a primary and had very low voter turnout. And you would think given everything that has happened, like all the controversies over the 2020 presidential election, the January sixth, 2021, mass insurrection and the violence at the U.S. Capitol, that people would basically be out fighting to protect their right to vote, fighting for American democracy. But if you look at the early stages of this midterm election, people are not voting. And so as a political scientist who has studied campaigns and elections for many years, that is very hard for me to fathom, the fact that we are facing major threats to democracy and people are not getting involved. They're not voting. They're not expressing their views.

DEWS: And other steps or policies that government, maybe the federal government, maybe state governments, could pursue that you think would help strengthen democracy.

WEST: There are many things that Congress should be doing. They should be passing a national voting rights bill so that there are uniform standards across the 50 states. Right now, you have some states that have put restrictions on gerrymandering, many other states have not. So that creates problems. There are vast differences across the states in terms of the accessibility of mail ballots and early voting, both of which have been very popular with the



American public. So if Congress could pass national rules guiding the basic features of American elections, that would actually be a big step forward. So far, Congress has not managed to do that.

But even at the state and local level, there have been challenges as well. Some of the polarization and extremism that we're seeing nationally is now filtering down to state government, in some cases to local government as well. So we really need to be vigilant about that. We need to stop gerrymandering. We need to clean up our campaign finance rules. I mean, there's a whole host of reforms and or Strengthening American Democracy Initiative page, there are lots of ideas on things that people can do as well as governments.

DEWS: Well, Darrell, final question, and it's something I'm asking all the Brookings vice presidents, and that's looking ahead, what are some of the other issues that you are focusing on, both in your research and also as vice president of Governance Studies at Brookings?

WEST: I mean, I would divide our work into things that are addressing the immediate problems, some of which we've been talking about today. So, questions of American democracy, how technology can allow us to move in a positive direction as opposed to a negative direction, and ways that we can address racial inequities. But on a longer term basis, we're also working very hard to reach the next generation of leaders in America. One of the things I'm very proud of is in Governance Studies the average age of our readership has dropped to 35 years old, which is much lower than it was just a few years ago. And that means we are reaching a young audience. We can see our materials being adopted in college and high school classrooms all across the country. And so in the long run, I'm actually very optimistic about the future of the country. But I do think the next five to 10 years are going to be very rocky as we work through these issues. But if we can manage to get through the next couple of presidential elections, I think the future of the country actually is very bright.

DEWS: Well, Darrell, as always, it's been terrific to talk with you and to all the other scholars in Governance Studies over the years. And I'm very fond of Governance Studies because that's where I started my own Brookings career many, many, many years ago. So I want to thank you as always for sharing with us your time and your expertise today.

WEST: Well, thank you, Fred, and we appreciate the great work that you've done, your interest in American democracy, and this podcast has provided a great platform for many of the scholars in our program.

DEWS: A team of amazing colleagues makes the Brookings Cafeteria possible. Gastón Reboredo is the audio engineer; our audio intern this semester is Skye Sutton; Bill Finan, director of the Brookings Institution Press, does the book interviews; my Communications colleagues Adrianna Pita, Chris McKenna, Chris Peters, and Colin Cruickshank are key collaborators. And finally, Ian McAllister, Soren Messner-Zidell, and Andrea Risotto provide guidance and support.

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Until next time, I'm Fred Dews.