

THE BROOKINGS INSTITUTION

WEBINAR

DEMOCRACY'S NEXT ACT: HOW TO BUILD RESILIENCE AROUND THE WORLD

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PANEL DISCUSSION:

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EISEN: Hello everyone. Welcome to our webinar on “Democracy’s next act: How to build resilience in the United States and around the world.” I’m Norm Eisen. I’m a senior fellow here in governance studies at the Brookings Institution and the chair of our Anti-Corruption, Democracy and Security Project, which is sponsoring today’s event. And we will be engaged on an in-depth discussion on democracy’s next act, how we bolster democratic resilience and prevent backsliding, both in the U.S. and around the world.

We are so delighted on this one-year anniversary of our Anti-Corruption, Democracy and Security, ACDS, project to be able to host my distinguished friends and colleagues for a conversation that pertains to what our project, ACDS, does. We’ve been instrumental across the globe in positively illustrating the connection between strong democracy, fighting corruption, and bolstering national security. It’s a three-legged stool of a healthy country, and when any one of those legs is wobbly, trouble follows. And we’ll talk about some of those challenges today. We’re proud of our ongoing work and engagement with stakeholders across the U.S. and around the globe that include civil society, the private sector, independent media foundations and, of course, governments. It seems like there’s more work to be done in these areas every day, given current and near-term challenges that threaten democracy at home and abroad. That’s why in 2025, our ACDS project is going to remain on the front lines of the challenge in making democracy strong, fighting corruption and bolstering security. That includes taking action, because the consequences of inaction are not an option, are not an option. That will jeopardize democratic progress and freedoms everywhere.

I’m very pleased for the participants in today’s discussion about democracy’s next act, to welcome my friend Dr. Ruth Ben-Ghiat, professor of history and Italian studies at New York University. She’s a world-renowned expert on democracy, authoritarianism, and the author of The New York Times bestseller. For some reason, it shot back up the bestseller list starting on November 6th, I don’t understand why. “Strongmen” is her book, “Mussolini to the Present.” And she even covers some strong women in that book. And also joining us also, my dear friend and a world-renowned authority is Asha Rangappa, assistant dean and senior lecturer at Yale University’s Jackson School of Global Affairs. Asha is an attorney, a former FBI agent and a legal and national security expert.

So we're going to proceed today by talking about the intertwined issues of democracy, corruption and security. And I'm going to do that by beginning with some questions for our colleagues who are going to have a little bit of a chat, and then it will be over to you in the audience. As a reminder, you can submit questions and engage with the conversation. The social media that's @BrookingsGov and use the hashtag #GlobalDemocracy. Now let's dive into the questions. I'm going to start with the democracy part of the equation, both in the U.S. and globally. Before we talk about corruption implications and national security ones, Asha, share what I just happened in the United States. And what is going on in American democracy today, in your view?

RANGAPPA: Wow. Okay. That's a big question to start off with. I was hoping you were going to tell me. But I'll say that what just happened reflects the fact that we have two separate realities in which Americans are operating, and without a shared reality, you are not going to achieve consensus. I think we discovered that after the election there were people who had fundamental beliefs about the candidates, about policies, about the world that simply were not true, but they believe it to be true. And this is the function of two separate media ecosystems that are operating here. And so the information space has been disrupted in a way that really precludes us from having a fundamental building block of democracy, which is, you know, a shared reality, basically. You can't debate policy if you're not starting from the same set of facts. So that's I think I'll just leave it there because I think there's many other things that also led to this. But I think that is really a fundamental one that we need to grapple with moving forward.

EISEN: Ruth, what's your view? What do you make of the presidential election and for that matter, all the other elections that happened on November 5th and its aftermath? And then I'm going to ask you both to put that in a global context and perspective. Ruth.

BEN-GHIAT: I think Asha's, you know, right, there were you know, half of the country was operating in a in a kind of partly fictional reality on many issues, certainly ideas about the economy, ideas about what is going to make us safe, about immigration, that have been very expertly pushed to them by Fox News, by Trump himself and all of his partners.

And there's a kind of asymmetry in this because especially after January 6th, that the GOP and their many, many partners, including Heritage, Federalists, all of these power players, they really did have a kind of party line on things. And that's, when you become, you go, you, when you undergo autocratization, like become autocratic, you consolidate your propaganda or your talking points so that and you enforce any dissent. And that happened publicly many times to Republicans who were straying, transgressing. And so it's much more effective than the democratic with a small D, but it's also capital D, the party mixed messaging, critiques of each other. And so the part of the result was the efficacy of this messaging, which we really have to that has to be one of the things we focus on, because as well as the higher and more elevated numbers of people who were disgusted with politics or checked out and didn't even vote, even with respect to 2020.

RANGAPPA: Can I jump in on that really quick?

EISEN: Yeah. That quick, yes. Just to add that there were there were 90 million, close to 90 million of those who didn't vote. So really was about half of those who did vote. And incredibly, the distinction between these two worlds, these two different information ecosystems, came down to less than a quarter of a million voters across three states. So if about 125,000 plus one voters in three states had been in one of those epistemological universes rather than the other, we would have seen a different outcome in the presidential election. Go ahead, Asha.

RANGAPPA: Well, I think to emphasize Ruth's point about the consolidation of the messaging, also the medium that we have now to receive that messaging is incredibly effective because it allows the repetition of those consolidated messages, right. Which creates something called the illusory truth effect. When you continue to hear the same thing from different sources, it, you believe that it's actually credible. So I think it's like the two things coming together that have created basically a toxic storm.

EISEN: Before we turn to the international context. Let me ask the two of you, because there's been so much debate about this. The media landscape has become extremely fragmented and siloed, not only between these two worlds that that you described, both of you describe, but even within those

worlds, there's so much fragmentation. How did that help produce this result and lead to the democratic backsliding we're now witnessing here in the US?

RANGAPPA: Well, there are two media ecosystems. There's the kind of extreme right-wing media ecosystem and then there's the mainstream kind of legacy ecosystem. The right-wing media ecosystem, there's analysis of this in a book called *Network Propaganda*, is a closed system, right? So this is all like self-perpetuating narratives and identity confirming narratives that kind of just keep bouncing around. There's no truth policing there. And then the mainstream media is kind of operating on traditional journalistic practices. So there is truth policing.

I think another thing that I have been thinking about, and I would strongly recommend the book "Invisible Rulers" by Renee DiResta, which was incredibly illuminating for me, which is that the right-wing media ecosystem is a bottom-up ecosystem. In other words, you have trusted sources who are influencers and podcasters and, you know, people on the ground who are shaping the narratives that then get picked up by the elites. So we saw this with the immigrants eating pets, right? This was a rumor that was started on Facebook and somebody picked it up and repeated it. And then you have the, you know, candidate for vice president now saying it on national television. That's a very different model than the top-down mainstream media, which is like, you know, we are the anchors. We are the reporters, we're telling you the truth, but they're not trusted anymore. But, you know, the people that are trusted are these influencers and podcasters on, you know, whatever, TikTok or Instagram. And I think that it's just that these two very different, it's not just the content of what's in them, it's how they are producing. And again, I want to give credit to Renee DiResta, her for that aspect of it. Her book really explores that in depth.

EISEN: Ruth, any final thoughts on the impacts of this complex, new, in many respects, media ecosystem before we turn to the international context?

EISEN: Yeah, I think I've been thinking about this for a while, how it can actually be, it has a double edge to it, because with the individualization of content, individual podcasters, YouTubers, think about all the Substacks -- a few of them are a group that most of them are individuals -- it can become,

unless you have very strict state censorship and this is more abroad, but it can become more difficult to just censor everything. You know, in the old days, you just censor the networks if you're an autocrat and now you have all these individuals. And so there's a more differentiated message. But as we know, some of the most successful ones with millions and millions of followers are Joe Rogan or within Substack, Bari Weiss, the kind of right-wing people. And so that's the challenge. That's a challenge for us. And but that speaks to the bottom-up point that Asha made. And we're just in a we're in a period of transition, which is obvious to everyone.

I would just push back on one thing. I think that the Fox News hosts are still trusted by their base, even though, and they've even weathered things where it was revealed that, you know, they were actually some of them privately were critical of Trump or even, you know, we're saying, maybe we won't get away with denying the election. And that's why so many people in the nominations for the next Trump administration have a Fox tie. Even Pam Bondi, when she was Florida attorney general, she broke precedent by hosting, while she was attorney general, a Fox News show for a few days. So they're playing to legitimize those people. They're playing on the fact that those people are still trusted by the base.

EISEN: And let's turn now from the domestic scene. And of course, we see all these features internationally to look at this, in my view, very close decision on the current vote count. Neither candidate broke 50%. Trump did get more than a million additional votes. But again, under the Electoral College, really another, the third presidential election in a row where a flip of a relatively small number of voters would have changed the outcome. What sense do we make of what's happened in the United States as we look at the stresses that democracy has come under around the world? Hungary, Poland, France, where the government barely overcame a far-right threat, now is falling. South Korea, where we have had a dramatic series of events. Are government under stress there? The pressure that Netanyahu came under, his moves and the countermoves. Can you put Ruth, we'll start with you, can you put what the U.S. election and what to expect next in global context for us?

BEN-GHIAT: Yeah, so many people have heard this that it was, you know, the Financial Times, but there are other investigations, that incumbents didn't do very well in general. There's a great disaffection with elites, with elite politicians. Part of this is the disenchantment with democracy, which is not new. It's kind of started to peak after 2008 where democracy is, you know, it makes people lonely. It's a creator of inequality. And there's a very good book by the economist Noreena Hertz called "The Lonely Century," which is a has global coverage about this atomization, alienation, and loneliness that democracy has created. So there's an opportunity to rethink democracy. And this is partly what the Harris-Walz campaign was doing. The care, economy, solidarity, different values that could infuse democracy. And this is much overdue, I think.

At the same time, so because of this, this is part of why we've had actually, you know, there's lots of coverage of authoritarianism ascendant, extending, but less coverage of the fact we're living through a global renaissance of mass nonviolent protest, some of which is anti-autocratic and some is, like in Chile in 2019, is because of, you know, inequality. And this is related to the surge of labor politics' new popularity, in many places of unions. And so you have you have countries from Chile, Belarus, Iran, China, Israel, Serbia, on and on that have had since 2019 or so either the biggest nonviolent demonstrations in decades, you can add Poland, or ever, in their histories. So something is happening here. There's an anti-authoritarian as well as a desire for a better version of democracy. And so this this is very important because we can capitalize on this in if in ways that could be very fruitful for the long term. I guess we could say recapture perhaps of our democracy, but improvement of democracy, so that it becomes a political product, so to speak, that is appealing to more people, because right now it's not, it doesn't seem attractive to enough people around the world and in America, as we saw from this election.

EISEN: And one of the features of this landscape of democracy, democratic backsliding and resurgence that we see ebbing and flowing around the world is the interaction between illiberalism, autocracy and corruption. Given your expertise on the mechanics of complicity and the oversight mechanisms that can prevent corruption, can you give us a sense of this interaction effect between autocracy and kleptocracy?

RANGAPPA: Okay. I'm trying to make sure I understand your question. I guess I'll explain it the way kind of I --

EISEN: Why is there so much corruption in kleptocratic regimes?

RANGAPPA: Yeah, you know, and I will tie it in to maybe one disagreement I have with what Ruth just said. She said that, you know, democracy creates loneliness. And I think it's really the loneliness that has eroded democracy. You know, if you look at Robert Putnam, who has written about the decline of social trust basically since World War II in the United States, and that social trust kind of he attributed to, at the time he was writing, to television, taking us away from interaction with each other. And I would suggest that social media has actually exacerbated that. So there is this lack of trust, and that leaves a vacuum for where things that bound us together are shared values in our local communities and connection, is an opportunity for autocrats to come.

Where corruption, where corruption, I think, comes in, I think of an acronym that we used in the FBI to identify vulnerabilities in people that can be exploited, called CRIME: coercion, revenge, ideology, money, ego. You know, when you don't have shared values, when everyone is not kind of moving towards shared principles, right: the Constitution, whatever, you know, loyalty that you're supposed to have, all of these other motivations can come in. And I think that's what we are seeing with, for example, all of these different nominees that are being floated right now who are motivated by these various things. Some are ideologues, some are grifters, some want revenge. You know, some may be under Putin's thumb. I mean, we don't know. But, you know, it's clearly not a love of the Constitution. I would say where what you need in a situation like that are truth-tellers. Right. People who are willing to speak truth to power and who are willing to take a risk to do it. I think Timothy Snyder, one of his steps is, you know, you have to speak out. You have to stand out. You have to be willing to stand out. And I think Ruth probably can talk about how autocratic regimes make it harder and harder for you to stand out and punish you for doing that. So I think that's going to be the challenge. But I also think that that has to happen in conjunction with recreating community and social trust at kind of a very base level.

EISEN: Ruth, how about that question? Let me turn it around. Not just how autocratic regimes take revenge, but how they use oligarchs and kleptocrats to exploit willing participants to achieve their autocratic goals. What is the impact of corruption? And both the buy side and the sell side, both those who are on all sides of the corrupt equation in backsliding democracies?

BEN-GHIAT: So I'd give one general principle thing and then I'll give a case, an example. I found very helpful working for when I was researching "Strongmen" the concept of authoritarian bargains. And these bargains can start when the autocracy is only ascendant or when democracy is declining. That, that netherworld that actually when we look back in history we were living in now, we are living in now. So authoritarian bargains is that these demagogues, whether they're in power or they're coming to power, they or to accelerate their rise, they make deals with elites, important elites. It could be, a very durable one has been always religious elites because they're very corrupt and they need that aura of holiness and purity around them, and so they make deals. And each one, so the elites agree to tolerate suspension of rights. They buy into the corruption because they're getting goodies back. So Putin, for example, he's long had this kind of bargain with the Russian Orthodox Church. And in return, that church has received an enormous amount of money to restore churches. Erdogan does the same thing, but just slot in mosques instead of churches. And when, if you don't want to be in the bargain -- I'm just going to keep with the religious example -- there are problems for you. So here we have Orban who's out puffing his chest out about being the restorer of Christendom going back to the Middle Ages. It's the whole Christendom thing. He's saving identity, as you know, against immigrants who are not Christian. Well, why don't we hear more about the fact that he has closed 300 churches in Hungary because those faith leaders did not join his bargain, did not want to be loyalists. So that's an example of how you have these de facto or actual alliances that that keep the corruption going.

Now, more, the oligarch question I'll give an example to do with media policy. So the old playbook of autocracy is the state. It's still going on, of course, in communist countries, the state controls all or most of the media. The new playbook is that you get your friends who are billionaires or cronies rich enough to buy a media property from perhaps an owner that was, you know, not toeing the party line enough. And so you buy him out, can be a hostile takeover, can, whatever way they get it. And then it's privately owned. So it's indirect control. But that's the that's the place of the oligarchs. And Putin

did this in the early 2000s with takeovers of NTV and other media properties. And so the oligarchs are helping institutionalize your party lines, your policy, they're promoting your policy, they're propaganda vehicles. But it's indirect and that's their value to you. So that's an example for media policy.

And one last bit on this. Orban is the master of these things. In 2018, he got the media, the owners of media properties that, among them were hundreds of them. I think the number was 3 or 400 media properties among these rich people. He got them to donate their assets to a government-allied private foundation and with one fell swoop by doing that, he had domesticated de facto a lot of the media. But it's not state-owned like in the bad old days of communism or fascism. It's, but you have to have people willing to play. And that's where the kind of corruption comes in.

EISEN: Asha, we've talked about democracy in the US and globally and the role that corruption can play in backsliding democracies. The third topic that we study here at ACDS is the interaction between democracy, corruption, and national security. And in light of your career, you joined the FBI right after 9/11. Can you reflect for us on the relationship of these issues: illiberalism, rising corruption to national security?

RANGAPPA: Yes, I've been thinking about this definitely over the last week because of, you know, the nomination of Kash Patel to be the head of the FBI. And I went back to a piece that I wrote for Politico in 2017 after Comey was fired. And it was, it's called "Five Questions About Comey's Firing Answered." And it was basically, you know, I solicited on Facebook at the time like, what are you most worried about? And it was talking people down from the ledge. So people were like, can they destroy all the files? And, you know, can the new director, like if he, they want to, you know, let Russia do whatever they want. And I was talking down from the ledge at that time because, you know, we were still in 2017, I think, largely enforcing norms still. Like you could still we still thought our institutions were going to function on norms. We thought that most civil servants were going to still be loyal to the Constitution, not a person. We also had a legal landscape that we believed would punish people who committed illegal acts even and up to including the president of the United States. So this created like an ultimate guardrail. And what I've realized is, you know, all of those things that I said in that article, like they don't hold true anymore. So, you know, 100%, you know, I'll just talk about the FBI. A director

could come in and have evidence and entire case files destroyed and eliminated. A new director could basically stop, reallocate resources away from counterintelligence against foreign targets that perhaps are helpful to this administration. They can go down on surveillance. I mean, all of these, they can sell classified information. They can sell the secrets that we are collecting or that we have collected or even that our allies have given us.

So that's a big problem because that's a problem for everybody that. You know, that means that our critical infrastructure could be at risk. For example, you know, like you may not be able to count on your water or your power being, you know, your water treatment being proper or your power staying up because there's an adversary that wants to shut it all down. Like, you know, we may be giving them carte blanche to do it. So I think I mean, that's a very extreme example, but, you know, if we're not monitoring those threats or we're not dealing with them in the same way because people have other interests other than protecting national security, that does, I think ultimately come and affect every person on the ground.

EISEN: Yeah, go ahead, Ruth. Sounds like you want to you want to comment on the national security aspect of it?

BEN-GHIAT: No, I'm agreeing with Asha.

EISEN: And so we've talked about the. We've talked about the problems of this interrelated problem of rising illiberalism, rising corruption and rising insecurity. What about the solutions? Here at the Anticorruption Democracy and Security program we focus every day, we're doing it all over the world, building on our efforts over a period of decades at Brookings to find out what works, to make democracy stronger, to increase integrity, reduce corruption, to bolster national security.

What are the rules? We've written about them. I've coauthored with my colleagues "The Democracy Playbook," the, what the social science evidence and the experience of the past decades tell us about what works in these areas. I want to ask the two of you a couple of questions about solutions, and then we're going to pivot. We've audience questions have been pouring in on every different platform. But I'm going to ask some of these very clever questions that the audience has been posing to us.

Asha, I'm going to start with you. You've talked a lot about Russian government-linked interference. We've sometimes been on TV together to talk about that in interference in our democratic processes and those of other nations in Europe and around the world like Georgia. And it's not limited to just Russia who is engaging in this nefarious activity. China, Iran and many others are using similar tactics. What can we do as policymakers, as media and other stakeholders to counteract the propaganda feedback loop operating in the US and global context?

RANGAPPA: Yeah, I would actually start at the individual level. I mean, I don't think that the solution really, I mean, there are definitely reforms that need to happen with how the media, you know, presents information. We talked about the trust issues with legacy media. There are a lot of things that can happen there. But ultimately, we need to think about all of these actors getting into the, you know, these influence operations as a form of hacking. Right. When we have hacking of technical infrastructure, you know, we create things to deter the people who are doing it, to defend against it, but ultimately, for example, companies know that they're going to get hacked at some point so you also have to create resilient systems that can bounce back because it's inevitable and it's going to happen. And I think we need to treat disinformation, these influence operations as basically cognitive hacking, right. And we can try to deter, we can try to defend against it. But again, if our institutions are compromised, that may not happen. They may even be encouraged. So the resilience has to come at the individual level.

And I mean, I think I'm not sure what the solution is there. I know digital literacy and media literacy gets thrown out a lot, but I do think we need to get serious about it. I mean, there are people who literally believe, like my dad, everything that they read on the internet, right? So we have a big problem with that. And then I think that is linked again to the trust problem. The lack of trust is what allows, you know, the fashion influencer on TikTok to suddenly have thoughts about COVID and everybody is like following what she says. Like this is a real misallocation of trust. And you know, I think if we look to, for example, the progressive era where we got out of the Gilded Age and kind of had this, you know, strengthening of democracy and, you know, a rebuilding of shared democratic values, a lot of that. I mean, that's all started from the ground up, right? I don't think that this is going

to be a top-down solution. I'll be interested to hear what Ruth, you have to say from studying this across a lot of different contexts. But that's my gut feeling.

EISEN: Ruth, what do you think? And can you also share some examples as we look at solutions of countries that have had democratic rebounds in the face of backsliding and how they've done it?

BEN-GHIAT: Yeah, I agree that that I mean, we're on the cusp of here. And what we see from authoritarian practice is one thing they do is it's called hollowing out. You make the institution function exactly the opposite of what it would do under a democracy. And you and really, authoritarianism is about, there are no values or ideals of decency, honor, equity, transparency, all that has to go out the window. And it's all about loyalty. So you staff the institutions with people who are going to just. Loyalty is more important than expertise, professionalism, experience. So I'm mentioning this because we are going to see this happen likely here. And it's happened other places, leading to a kind of totally bankrupt systems. And authoritarianism is showing itself around the world to be pretty bankrupt. It's why Putin has, he had ravaged the military from corruption. Now he's got North Korea, he had to call in North Korea to come in and help him.

So we have an opportunity to rethink our institutions in terms of values, the values I mentioned before, equity, transparency, accountability. Whose interest are they serving? And we will have to have a kind of an inventory of the things that in our democratic system that in fact are not very democratic, which are known to all, the influence of dark money in politics. If we don't solve these things, people are going to remain disaffected and the inequalities and the problems will remain. So that's from an institutional level.

But I agree with Asha that it does have to be a bottom-up thing. And even starting with having difficult conversations at the individual and community level, and there's a world of bridge building organizations in the United States. And the media does not, you know, kind of publicize them. And they're doing incredible work bringing people together. But we can do this. Everyone, now, Asha, you mentioned, you know, a parent, I've got my mother was radicalized in England watching RT, Russia Today during the pandemic. And every almost everybody has a family member or somebody who is, I

call it dwelling in the disinformation tunnel. But all the research shows, whether it's from people like me, people who do disinformation or people who study people who have been conned, like defrauded. It all comes back to trying to reach these people, not judging them, not condemning them, trying to have a bond with them, a dialogue with them. And Jacques Ellul, famous, you know, expert on propaganda, had a saying in his book that propaganda ends where dialogue begins. So that's something that we all can do and we can do in an institutional setting. There's many groups that do that. And so that's one thing.

Quickly, I'll just go to Poland, which is an example of a country that succeeded in, you know, defeating a far-right government in 2023 at the elections. And Poland, you know, the Poles lived through a Nazi occupation. They lived through many decades of communism. They know the stakes and they did everything right. They exposed the hypocrisies and the corruption of the far-right government, which was posing as usual as a kind of fake populists. The prime minister had been an international banker for Santander. He represented all these big banks. So these are, these are the global elite posing as populists. So they exposed that. They exposed corruption practices in the bureaucracy, visa buying schemes to immigrants that, you know, made a mockery of its anti-immigrant, you know, propaganda. They also made people, you know, see with their messaging what they were losing, what they had almost lost to reproductive rights. And so many people came out to support the six-party coalition. They had unity of the opposition. And you had many people who said, I'm here for my daughter and my grandchild. And they had finally a recourse to optimism, to togetherness, to solidarity and even love. They had a heart as their symbol. And Donald Tusk made, he kind of conjured an atmosphere of, "we can do this together, we are destined to succeed," to restore people's faith in their own agency. And that's very important. And we're going to have to work very hard in our country because Donald Trump's been telling us we're a garbage can or a garbage pit. Right. That's all by design. And there in Poland, he said, "we can do this together. When I see these faces," -- it was the largest rally since 1989 in Poland -- "I know we will prevail." Giving optimism, giving confidence back. And so these are things we can study, to, some are difficult to apply in our country because we're bipartisan and others, there is great potential for them.

RANGAPPA: Can I add something here, Norm, real quick.

EISEN: Please.

RANGAPPA: I think the agency piece is really, really important. So when I was talking earlier about we need more truth-tellers, people who are willing to stand out. And as I'm doing research on kind of truth-tellers that have come out in different contexts, one of the commonalities about them is that they believe that acting and speaking, acting, you know, and speaking up will have an impact. In other words, they not only have an other-regarding orientation, they see the impact of their actions on people outside of themselves, in other words, they have empathy. They're willing to take a risk to stand out. But they believe that their actions will have an impact. And I think that that -- and Ruth, you can correct me if I'm wrong -- I think part of the authoritarian agenda is to make people believe that nothing they do matters. That there's no power. And this is also, I think, a commonality of people who believe in conspiracy theory. So there is a link between people who have no sense of agency and who feel like everything is out of control, out of their control, end up believing in conspiracy theories. So, you know, democracy and certainly being resilient against authoritarian creep or, you know, or an authoritarian creep, is believing in your agency and making sure that that message is internalized by people.

EISEN: Yeah. And we're going to go now to some of the questions from audience members. And I want to begin with one that asks, how do we deal with the view of democracy by some as being perceived as disproportionately beneficial to the elites but not benefiting average folks? Both of you touched on this. And why has defending democracy not carried the day? In the U.S. election this time, although as I explained, it was this close margin in those three states, but also globally in a number of places, that pro-democracy message has not worked. Asha, Ruth, what do you think?

RANGAPPA: I mean, I would put a theory out there that part of it is that many Americans have been can become convinced that the that there is an internal enemy. Right. I think when we were strongest is when there was sort of an external enemy and ideally like kind of an abstract enemy, right. Like we were fighting fascism, you know, later during the Cold War, it was, there it was an entity, was a Soviet Union, but I think, you know, you have to, you unite around something in opposition to something

else. And when that opposition becomes your fellow citizen, right, then it becomes easier to feel that your misfortunes or the things that you don't have are because of those other people who are your fellow citizens. And so I think that those go hand in hand. And, you know, now we have a political party that wants to create that us-versus-them mentality domestically, right. And I think that that's part of the problem. And I think this gets to the dialoging and bridge building and things like that.

EISEN: Ruth.

BEN-GHIAT: I agree. I actually call this survivalism and it's killing people. It's not just a me, me versus you in terms of we don't agree, it's me or you, and only one of us can survive. And so you have great replacement theory, which is the specter of white extinction or annihilation. You have narratives -- and these, by the way, these, I just finished a class, teaching a class on coups and these narratives, so you know, kind of racial, white annihilation, annihilation because of Marxism, of crime and anarchy, of immigrants, some of whom are Marxists, that was used a lot in Cold War, juntas. There's always got to be this threat to your security and your safety. And the solution is to turn against that, the internal enemy as well. So that's kind of the survivalism.

But I want to mention the question of how to deal with democracy as being beneficial to elites. Well, here we have the hand of neoliberalism. That's been weight, you know, it's been this is what I mean when I was saying that democracy can create loneliness, it's democracy informed overly by neoliberalism. And we're going to see a whole lot of that if the Musk and Ramaswamy and various GOP people get even, and Project 2025, privatizations. And privatizations, it's not just Pinochet's Chile, Mussolini did privatizations to get the elites on board. And this creates of course, that is where, but even outside regimes, democracies have, I believe, been compromised by, you know, this kind of ethos that is congenial to neoliberal aims. And it's not, and indeed, as we see from corporate gouging, it doesn't benefit people. Things, profits could be distributed in a totally different way. But we have a system that has allowed egotism and selfishness to prevail rather than solidarity. That's also what I mean by solidarity, not just horizontal, also vertical, a sense of a care and responsibility for those who have less. But our system has not, our system has allowed people to get away with the opposite.

EISEN: Asha, I have a question here. In your capacity as a veteran of the FBI about the announcement of Kash Patel to lead the FBI that has raised concerns about his rhetoric and his relevant experience. What should be the criteria to oversee America's top law enforcement agency? And what does the announcement of Mr. Patel tell us about this moment?

RANGAPPA: I mean, I think, you know, you look at all of the directors since J. Edgar Hoover. I know that William Sessions was removed by Clinton for some ethical lapses, but I think otherwise they were, you know, senior DOJ officials, judges, you know, former FBI agents, some combination of those, and I think largely saw themselves as stewards of the institution, of its norms and, you know, as upholding the rule of law. You know, even J. Edgar Hoover, who, you know, is obviously a very controversial figure, the norm of the FBI's independence is one that he established. That the idea that the FBI is not beholden to any presidential administration, that it can investigate them even if it leads to the doorstep of the White House, all of that, you know, began under Hoover. And so I think where we are now is really, you know, I think someone who wants to, is very happy to potentially break all those norms and to become an investigative arm of the president. And I think that people need to understand that there really are few guardrails in place to prevent that from happening. You know, the FBI constitutionally falls under the president's Article II authorities. And we have a Supreme Court that believes in a unitary executive. They're not going to establish any guardrails, in my opinion. The FBI doesn't have a legislative charter. There's not a lot that Congress can really do to pull its authority. So a rogue FBI director can do very, very bad things, as I mentioned earlier. And now I just, you know, because of this immunity decision from the Supreme Court, there is not even the threat of criminal punishment, because obviously, you know, the president can get, has immunity and he can, of course, pardon anyone who does his dirty work for him.

EISEN: Okay. The next question from one of our viewers is, what is your advice? We talked about this a little bit, but what is your advice for average citizens? What should they do in this moment in the U.S. in the face of the democratic backsliding, the kinds of threats against democracy that have been made by Mr. Trump and others associated with him? After all, with the president-elect saying he wants to be a dictator on day one, what can an average person do? Ruth, we'll start with you.

BEN-GHIAT: I think that's a question that many, many are asking for good reason. And it's easy to feel overwhelmed because there's so many threats and so many likely bad actors who are and scary people who are going to be in charge of very making consequential decisions. So one thing we can do is to strengthen ourselves. This is where I've often talked about that compared to other countries, it's not good that there's so much time between the election of a president and inauguration, and we saw in 2020, 2021 the things that can happen because you've got a lot of time. In other countries it's very quick. But here it's good preparation time for us, so we can embed into our communities. This is a time to reach out to people and have real life, you know, conversations and not just for the reasons we said before to --

EISEN: Does this count? Does this count?

BEN-GHIAT: Yes, this counts. This isn't, unfortunately, we're not in the same space, but it counts having conversations. And but embed in your community. For example, there's just so much suffering going on now. There are stories of, in in in very red areas, there are faith leaders who are afraid of their congregations. There's a lot of thuggery. I don't need to tell any of you. There's a lot of militias that are getting activated, a lot of that. So embed in your communities and have that kind of solidarity. And work on yourself. You have to pick your battles. These are things I'm saying to from reading the experiences and talking to dissidents in in actual regimes that are long term. You, that's what resilience is. That you don't expect a quick, a quick fix, but you have to go back to this, goes back to the belief that what we do, what we are doing does matter. It does make a difference even if it's, even if it doesn't have a solution this week or next week, and even if it seems that it's just one rain drop in in the river, it's a collective action, a collective belief in our agency. And to do that, we have to be grounded in ourselves, too. Maybe I'm getting a little too, I am from California, from Southern California.

EISEN: Me too.

BEN-GHIAT: This kind of strength in ourselves and grounding is very important. If we're doing a long, if we're looking at a long-term struggle.

EISEN: Asha.

RANGAPPA: Yeah, I mentioned Robert Putnam earlier, the author of "Bowling Alone." He has a new documentary on Netflix and it's called "Join or Die," which is basically, you know, the best thing you can do is join a club. Like and it doesn't even have to be a political one. But I think the idea is exactly what Ruth is saying of, you know, getting back into the communities, being a part of it in a very real sense, not a Facebook group or, you know, your whatever, Twitter group, but something in real life.

Another practice I have been trying and I haven't been super consistent, but I've been trying to speak to a stranger every day and just have a conversation. And there's actually research that says that if you're talking to strangers can make you happier because you start to rebuild that sense of trust. Right, I don't know about you, but after the election, I just walked around looking at people, like, wondering, you know, like, whose side, are you? You know, whose side are you on? Right, like, you kind of have this, this deep mistrust of like, what has just happened. But I think to rebuild that, it's again, in our own hands.

And then I think ideally to start being civically engaged at the community level. So, you know, Alexis de Tocqueville talk about talked about the habits of democracy that Americans built, and they built it by doing things at the local level, right. You know, debating whether the stop sign should go up at the corner or being in your PTA or, you know, learning to do the debates and find the consensus even on those smallest things. And those things that when they scale, when everyone's doing them, builds, builds that resilience, I think, in the fabric of the country.

BEN-GHIAT: It's like a reverse precinct strategy because that was the, that's how the fascism started to in Italy. You start at the local and you ruined everything, but we can start at the local and build it back up and restore trust.

EISEN: And I like that slogan, "join or die." I think we're going to use that as our marketing slogan for these webinars. That's how we got so many hundreds of participants. One lesson that I'll add to that

from my own experience, and my two great teachers in surviving autocracy: my mom who survived the Holocaust, actually both my parents, my dad was a refugee and my mom was a survivor of the Holocaust, and President Václav Havel, the great Czech playwright who took me under his wing when I was ambassador in Prague. And they both emphasized to me the importance of having a sense of humor, that how that will also get you through. In fact, Havel's entire body of work, the plays that made him and writing that made him famous in his homeland and around the world were absurdist takes on totalitarianism and making fun of the regime.

So we will try to keep, try to keep that good advice. Talk to strangers. Rebuild trust and democracy at the local level. Take care of yourselves. Keep a smile on your face, as well as bearing in mind some of the larger strategic insights about the interrelationship between anticorruption, democracy and security that we've heard today from our brilliant guests here at the ACDS Anti-Corruption, Democracy and Security program and Governance Studies at the Brookings Institution. Dr. Ruth Ben-Ghiat and Professor and Dean Asha Rangappa, we're so grateful to you for all that the two of you do in so many ways to keep our democracy strong, to champion integrity, and to build up our national security in the United States and with our allies around the world.

I want to also thank our audience. Thank you for your wonderful questions. I took a few small liberties with some of the questions for the sake of time but I basically was true to their spirit. Please join us again here at the Brookings Institution for our webinar series on democracy. Thank you on behalf of all of us. We'll see you very soon. Thanks, friends.