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The Current podcast**

**“Inside the next Democracy Playbook:
Strategies for global democratic U-turns”**

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Episode Summary:

In this episode, ACDS chair Norm Eisen discusses the forthcoming fourth edition of the *Democracy Playbook* and the emerging research showing how democracies can reverse democratic backsliding. He explains how the new edition—released on a rolling basis—will offer practical strategies drawn from scholarship and practitioner experience to help spark and sustain these “U-turns” globally. Drawing on global fieldwork and cutting-edge research, Eisen highlights what has strengthened democracies in real-world contexts thus far.

EISEN: We've learned that when democracies come under autocratic pressure, they perform U-turns. That's what the scholarship teaches us.

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DEWS: Hi, I'm Fred Dews, and this is *The Current*, part of the Brookings Podcast Network. In January of this year, the Anti-Corruption, Democracy, and Security Project at Brookings, or ACDS, released the third edition of its *Democracy Playbook*, first published in 2019. The *Playbook* aims to quote, "help citizens and stakeholders reclaim good governance, transparency, and the rule of law, and strengthen democratic resilience in the face of dangerous autocrats."

Now ACDS is developing the fourth edition of the *Playbook*. And here in the studio to discuss that with me is Norm Eisen, senior fellow in Governance Studies and chair of ACDS.

Norm, welcome back to *The Current*.

EISEN: Fred, always great to be with you and our *Current* listeners.

DEWS: Well, it's terrific to see you again. So let's talk about the fourth edition of the *Playbook*. You and I spoke on the *Current* in February after the launch of the third edition. And at the time you said that the fourth edition was in the works. What distinguishes this next *Playbook* from the others you have published and why is the fourth edition even needed?

[1:13]

EISEN: The fourth edition of the *Playbook* will take account of the latest developments in the global authoritarian surge, but also the global democracy pushback against that surge. We're learning new things every day. We have a distinguished national and international crew of experts who as always are helping put together this signature product.

You know, Fred, there's been a cutting edge development in the literature where we've learned that when democracies come under autocratic pressure, they perform U-turns. That's what the scholarship teaches us. And we'll survey that U-turn scholarship in the *Playbook*.

The *Playbook* will be a driver's manual for undergoing one of those democracy U-turns. Exactly what do you need to do? So we're very excited to produce this edition. And we'll do that in partnership with the Harvard Kennedy School's Ash Center and its wonderful head Archon Fung, who will edit the fourth edition together with me.

DEWS: And so the third edition of the *Playbook* was built around what you call the seven pillars to defend democracy, actions like defending the rule of law, protecting elections, fighting corruptions, and protecting civic and media space. And listeners can hear more about that and read more about that on our website. Does the fourth edition use that same framework or are you rethinking the pillars this time around?

[2:52]

EISEN: The pillars are definitely critical to understanding how to do a democracy U-turn. But we are going to offer some refinements based upon what we've learned in the intervening period all over the planet. The emphasis is really on protecting the rule of law because that's how you hold back an authoritarian on having safe, free, and fair elections—irrespective of the outcome they have to be safe, free, and fair — because that's how the people of a nation eject an authoritarian regime or replace an authoritarian regime. That's why you see the Erdoğans and Orbáns of the world, Turkey and Hungary respectively, cracking down or pressuring electoral opponents.

And then the third thing we look at, we really focus on, is the element of corruption, because it turns out corruption is a uniform dimension of all authoritarian regimes. They all try to utilize that disdain for the rule of law to benefit leaders, their cronies.

We'll focus on those three pillars, and we'll also look at moving beyond the substance of how authoritarian regimes function, some main areas of contestation. For example, how does the press respond in an authoritarian regime? If you have strong press reaction to democratic backsliding, what difference does that make and how? What's the role of public protest in an authoritarian regime? And political leadership? How do politicians, whether elected at the national or subnational level, exhibit leadership or failures of leadership? And what do these additional dimensions—there's a number of others that we're going to study in depth—what do they mean across those seven pillars of primary emphasis? So there'll be a lot of new material.

DEWS: I want to pick up on this point of studying democracy, Norm. You know, I think when a lot of people think about democracy, it's people go out to vote, there might be public interest groups, we read about the outcome of elections in media, who gets elected to what office. But the ACDS, the Anti-Corruption, Democracy, and Security project, is studying democracy. Can you speak to that research, that study component of what you do?

[5:31]

EISEN: Over the past decade ACDS, which I chair here at Brookings Governance Studies, has traveled the world. And we've actually done field studies in places like Nigeria and Peru and Mongolia to discover these methodologies for doing a democracy U-turn work and which don't.

So in Mongolia we studied to deal with the corruption problem the functioning of beneficial ownership rules. If you have transparency about who, including in government actually owns businesses, you can follow the money in that famous phrase of the Watergate era here in the United States.

In Nigeria, we studied storytelling. How do you convey to ordinary folks not the abstract principles of democracy—people aren't even able to define exactly what that is—but the impacts of democracy in ways that can make a difference and that really move people? Well, it turns out that people want real life narratives, including narratives about the freedoms that are most important in their lives.

And so we've studied that all over the world and accumulated data. And that will be reflected in the fourth edition of the *Playbook*. And of course, Harvard is also known as a place where they study these things. They have some of the world's preeminent experts. So we're very excited to work with the Kennedy School's Ash Center and its boss, Archon Fung, partnering with me to edit the fourth edition.

DEWS: Well, I think it's not controversial to say that we are living in challenging times for political polarization, media fracturing, widespread mis- and disinformation, and decline in trust in institutions and experts. So how do you make sure that the *Playbook's* recommendations and frameworks, those stories that you talked about, don't just float past everyone but the committed community of democracy actors? How are you planning to reach people and create real world impact? Make it stick?

[7:51]

EISEN: Well, we know that you can have challenges for democracy in terms of mis-, dis-, and malinformation—just the sheer volume of lies propagated—much more quickly now that the mediators like editors of major newspapers and broadcast and cable television have a lesser role. And anybody can use social media to get information out there, including bad information.

But we also know that the world is full of examples where truth has overcome lies. So you see, for example, in countries like, Brazil, Romania, Moldova, Nepal is another recent example, all over the world, you are seeing narratives sometimes. In the Moldovan case it was a Russian-driven disinformation. And you had a surge of truth telling in traditional media and in new and independent and social media.

Some of the things that you find are when you have big tents that crosscut parties, so you have trust that is built by having multi-partisan coalitions speaking. When you can recruit ranks of the next generation. In Nepal, that was very, very important. You had Gen Z that was so outspoken there. Public protests, you drive media narratives that counteract the false media narratives. That in fact we're able to see democracy's resilience, not just the attacks, but rather pushback and effective pushback in response.

And we are going to, because it can be tough to study the entire world, synthesize that information and describe how democracies can be resilient in the dimension of public information.

DEWS: I know that the ACDS team and you are doing a lot more than just the *Democracy Playbook* work. Can you talk about, say, Monitoring the Pillars of Democracy series, the New Transatlantic Bridge Initiative? Can you unpack these a little and address what else your team is working on heading into the new year?

[10:10]

EISEN: Yes. *Democracy Playbook* is our signature ACDS initiative. But even in between publishing *Playbooks*, we are doing things to follow up. So this year we've had a series, both blogs and then we had a huge conference of academics—they came in from all over the world to the Brookings campus—to track how the democracies of the planet are performing under that analysis in the third edition of

the *Playbook*, and to look at alternative paradigms, because various folks have different lenses to look at the democracy situation. And we welcomed dozens of academics on that occasion.

And we've published a series of essays in blog form—I believe that mine was the most recent—looking at the performance of global democracies in real time.

And then we have a particular focus, Fred, on the transatlantic democratic situation. Because we see on both sides of the Atlantic that populism is surging, sometimes in positive ways, sometimes in more challenging ways. And so we have built a New Transatlantic Bridge Initiative where I go across the transatlantic bridge, I fly across the Atlantic once a month. I attend conferences. I just was at the annual security conference in the Baltic States, in Vilnius, Lithuania.

And we talk to our transatlantic interlocutors. And we attempt to get every dimension of U.S. and European and Canadian society talking to each other. So not just government officials. Perhaps we had overinvested in heads of state, prime ministers and presidents being the sole leaders across the transatlantic bridge. We bring national minority parties to talk to each other. We bring subnational conversations to happen. And we attempt to inspire business leaders and labor on both sides of the Atlantic. Cultural figures, academics.

So our work is to build the ideas that constitute that new transatlantic bridge and to invite people to walk across it. And that's the sense in which we bring them together. And we are seeing that there's a lot more of those exchanges happening.

DEWS: Well, I invite listeners to learn about all of your activities, including *Democracy Playbook*, on our website, Brookings dot edu. And I know that additional materials will be rolling out on our website into and beyond the new year. So Norm, thank you as always for sharing your time and expertise to illuminate these vital topics.

EISEN: Thank you Fred. It's a regular stop on my efforts to get that good information and truth out there to sit with you and the listeners of *The Current*. I so appreciate you having me back.