



Transcription

Democracy in Question? – Season 1, Episode 6

What will remain of Trumpism going forward?

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SR: Welcome to "Democracy in Question", the podcast that reflects on the crises of democracy in these troubled times. I'm Shalini Randeria, the Director of the Albert Hirschman Centre on Democracy at the Graduate Institute in Geneva, and Rector of the Institute for Human Sciences in Vienna.

I'm joined by two guests today, Ivan Krastev and Timothy Snyder, both of whom are well-known public intellectuals. You might remember Tim from our very first episode where we looked at Trumpism and its impact on American democracy. Tim specializes in the history of Central and Eastern Europe and on the Holocaust. He's Richard C. Levin Professor of History at Yale University.

Ivan Krastev is a political scientist who is chairman of the Centre for Liberal Strategies in Sofia and has written extensively on the EU and on various aspects of democracy for over a decade now.

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Tim and Ivan, thanks very much for joining me today.

Joe Biden was declared the next President of the United States over a month ago, but Donald Trump has refused to accept electoral defeat. Instead, he's trying to hold on to power by outlandish claims of a stolen election due to



rigging and so-called illegal votes. He and his supporters have filed some bizarre 50 cases in an absurd attempt to subvert the election results.

However, an interesting display of near unanimity by 86 judges across the United States from the lowest level of the state courts to the Supreme Court have dismissed each of these cases outright for lack of any evidence of irregularity or of voter fraud.

We're recording this episode today on the 14th of December, the day the electoral college electors are formally meeting to cast their votes. In this episode, what I would like to discuss with both of you is the question of what democratic legitimacy means after Trump. And whether Trumpism will cast its long shadow over liberal democracies the world over.

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Tim, let me start with you. Closer to home for me, in Pakistan, the whole issue of a stolen election has been recurring election after election. So, in a strange way, the post-electoral developments in the U.S. remind me of this trope of rigging of ballots, voter fraud, corruption at the polls, etc. And closer to home in a sense now, while I'm sitting in Vienna, in Belarus, we have the spectacle of a president who is refusing to concede defeat. The



other analogy that comes to mind for me is that of Latin American populists like Perón. What is happening in the United States?

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TS: One very banal development, which maybe is particular to us (i.e. USA), has to do with money. So, our elections cost a lot of money. A. Trump claims to have a lot of money but doesn't. B. He's about to leave office and face a world of debt, at least half a billion dollars of debt. C. He has raised more money by claiming to have won the election than he raised while campaigning to be President. His biggest fundraising month was actually after the election was over. And he raised it, these are American technicalities, but he raised it for a political action committee, which he can then use to pay himself, giving speeches on his own golf courses. So basically, what he's done is, he's conned Americans into helping him pay back the debts that he's going to face after he leaves office. So, that's one thing.

A second thing about the U.S., you mentioned the courts and how well the courts have done. And that's true. I think Trump and his team they won one case, which was trivial, having to do with setting aside ballots in Pennsylvania, and they've lost 57 (court cases). But what that says to me is that the legislature has totally failed. So our system is supposed to be



checks and balances, this classic Lockean idea that you're going to have three: You're going to have the executive, you're going to have the legislative, you're going to have the judiciary.

The legislature is falling down. That's how I see it. They were unable to impeach him. They were unable to stop his abuse of power while he was President. And now, as he puts forward these... I mean, it's not that they're absurd; it's that everyone knows that they're not true, right? As he puts forward these false claims, much of the legislature is behind him. The majority of the Republicans in our lower house of parliament, the House of Representatives actually joined in the lawsuit to the Supreme Court. So, what I see there is that we're being saved basically by the courts, and thus by one branch of government after two branches of government have basically fallen off a cliff.

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And the third thing I want to say, just heading off to Ivan, because this has been his point for a long time, in the 21st Century, what Trump is doing is really normal. I mean, Pakistan, and Latin America, Africa, all over the world, Russia, it's pretty normal to treat elections as the way you legitimate yourself but not to count votes. So, in a way, what Trump has done in the last few weeks is pushing us towards a kind of authoritarian normality. He



hasn't succeeded, but I would agree with your premise that what he's doing is pushing us towards a kind of world norm.

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IK: Listen, stolen elections, fraudulent elections, from where I'm coming from, and it's not Pakistan, but it is Bulgaria, this is something that we have been discussing a lot. But there was one important way we have been discussing it, and that is that this was a deviation. And the norm was the United States and the United Kingdom.

If you have fraudulent elections, be it in Albania or in Bulgaria, the argument was that this cannot happen in the United States. And then suddenly, Trump normalized the United States. So now, the United States is a normal country. Secondly, what is very important for me is it's not simply that the Congress, the vast majority of the Republican congressmen, did not concede defeat. Only 29 of the Republican congressmen have congratulated Biden before the decision of the electoral [college], but according to the polls 80% of the voters of Trump agree with him that he has won.



And here's a basic question in political science. It is so old that we probably have forgotten the right answer. Why, in a polarized political space, does a loser of an election concede defeat?

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Adam Przeworski has the famous minimalist definition of democracy which runs like this. Democracy is a political regime in which the incumbent can lose the elections and, after that, leave power. Democratic theory is going to tell you that one of the reasons you're leaving is because, unlike in the authoritarian system, you know that losing elections does not mean losing everything. You're not going to lose your property. You're not going to lose your life. Secondly, one of the reasons you're doing this is because you're afraid that, if you're not going to concede, external enemies are going to benefit. You're going to create a level of political instability in your country. It's unpatriotic not to concede.

But certainly, and for me the most important is, you are agreeing to concede losing elections because you believe that you can win the next time. In democracy, the most important elections are the next elections. Why didn't Trump then do it? Why didn't he say, "I'm going to destroy Biden in 2024"? One of the most important things to understand was his statement from 2016 telling the Republicans, "If you are not going to help me to win today,



you're never going to win any time anymore, because the Democrats are going to open the borders. All these immigrants are going to come. They're going to have voting rights, and you're doomed."

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This is the last election. This is the last and final battle. So, you cannot allow [yourself] to lose it. And this is, of course, paradoxical, and we know that this is not true, that the Republican party is not demographically doomed, but this kind of fixation and playing on the fears of a majority that starts to feel as a future minority explains not simply why Trump is doing this but also why his voters stay with him.

And my last point is, this is also the biggest problem in a totally polarized society. If you believe that the victory of the other party is the worst danger to democracy existing, then conceding and following the rules should not be taken for granted. And in the United States now both major political parties believe that the electoral system is rigged. The Democrats, because the President, who is getting the minority of the votes is winning and this has happened to several Republican presidents till 2000. The Republicans, because they believe that the wrong people are getting the right to vote.



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So this type of nature of the constitutional crisis, in my view, will go beyond Trump, and this is going to be something that is not going to be easy to solve because in order to have a solution to the constitutional crisis, you need a consensus. And consensus is something that is not very much to be seen in the United States today.

SR: One could now see this election as being part of a series of semi-legitimate U.S. presidents, right? So Trump would be sort of in a genealogy with George W. Bush, who won due to the stopping of vote-counting in Florida; Obama, who remained for the Republican base an illegitimate President because of the completely fake news of his not having been born in the U.S. There seems to be a deeper pattern of “semi-legitimate” presidents, without total merit, but the claim that Biden has actually stolen the election would be only one more in this kind of a narrative.

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TS: We have to make some distinctions about what's meant here by legitimacy. So, in 2000, Bush v. Gore, just to remember, the issue was that Gore almost certainly won Florida, but the Supreme Court stopped the count and Bush became President. That was an authentically extremely close election and it's a slightly different situation from today because there was



relatively little fiction about it. I remember CNN was just starting to put their ticker on the bottom of the screen and, on their ticker, they had like people's opinions. And I remember being troubled, "Why are they putting people's opinions on the bottom of the screen, right? This is a factual question. Let's count the votes. Let's figure it out."

Twenty years later, we're in a very different situation. I mean, I think it's worth emphasizing, since we use the word fraud so much already, that this last election in the United States was not, in fact, fraudulent. I mean, as far as one can tell, it was much better run than 2016 and probably better run than any election in the 21st Century, precisely because people were afraid of the Russians, precisely because people who had spent a year listening to Trump talk about all the possible problems and then trying to solve those possible problems, right? So, the change would be that in the intervening two decades since Bush and Gore, we probably have better elections, but we have much more fiction, right?

So, Trump's story about fraud is just a story, and he's a narrator, he's an entertainer. He started telling the story basically a year in advance. And he picked up intensity on the story in June, July, and August. He said, what was going to happen, and then he just repeated it after the votes were actually cast, which is a classic storytelling method. You say what you're



going to say and then you say it, regardless of what's happening. Biden won by 7 million [votes]. It wasn't really that close. You know, even in the electoral college, it wasn't that close, really. And if Biden had won by 20 million, we'd still have a problem.

Because the reason why people think Trump won is just that Trump keeps saying it over and over again. It's like Lewis Carroll, you know, "what I say three times is true". There's the factual matter of whether your elections work, but then there's the question of faith. You can choose to believe that they don't work. And that reverses the old situation which was maybe the elections were a little bit frayed around the edges, but everyone kind of believed that they worked.

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IK: I find this point of "make believe" critically important because one of the important things that happened with Trump is that he convinced his voters that the real enemy is not the external enemy, but the Democratic Party. The Republicans don't like the Chinese, they don't like Russians, but the real enemy is Biden.

And from this point of view, you do not have simply two parties in a quite polarized political community. In the United States, you really have two



Americas. Two different political communities which share neither common reality nor a common idea of what America is about, and this is not an American phenomenon. For example, the level of political polarization against US and Europe. Look at Poland. In a certain way, you have the two political parties really populating different worlds.

SR: Tim, you raised this point earlier. 17 attorney generals and 126 Republican politicians, elected politicians, joining Trump in a suit filed with the Supreme Court to overturn the results by not counting what they considered to be illegal ballots.

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One begins to wonder if there is utter contempt for some of the basic rules of democracy, which has become part of a fundamental distrust, as Ivan points out, in democratic procedures, etc. and is something which has become really fundamental to the Republican party, because it cannot just be that they think they're committing political suicide by disagreeing with Trump even when he's out of office.

TS: No, you're absolutely right. That analysis that they're cowardly is one more example of, you know, the Democrats and the mainstream press telling



themselves a story about how things are basically okay and we basically have a two-party system.

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I agree. I think there's something deeper going on and one can start with Ivan's point about demography. So, you know, you're in favor of democracy because democracy has always ended up with you on top. Of course, you're going to win Georgia, of course you're going to win Alabama because you have in fact rigged the system. Of course, Georgia is really a blue state. I mean, Alabama is probably also a blue state. These places where the Republicans are used to winning, if black people actually vote, you know, then probably they're actually Democratic states.

So the system has been rigged in the U.S. for a century, but part of the nice faith that we've talked about, about the system working, is also, a kind of white-supremacist notion that it works for us and so basically it's okay, right?

The Republicans actually did extremely well in 2020, let's not forget. They did much better in 2020 in terms of the number of votes they got. In the House of Representatives, they almost took the House back, right? They were supposed to lose the senate, they didn't lose the Senate unless something strange happens in Georgia. Ivan is right. It's not that



demography is objectively against them, but you do have this feeling that the system is supposed to work for you and it's not really working for you.

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And then to get down then into the gritty American details, the Republican party hasn't really wanted people to vote for 50 years since the Civil Rights Act.

SR: You've always been making the point it's a voter suppression party.

TS: Yeah. It's fallen into the trap of its own logic. You get better and better at suppressing the vote—as they have. But that's a trap, because if you become the voter suppression party, then you no longer have the normal democratic incentives to come up with policies that would reach out to the whole country and get you elected.

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So, they now paint themselves into a corner where, if you just go down public opinion polling on their policies, they can't win. They don't have popular policies. They don't even have any resonant policies except abortion. So, in a way, it's logical that they would take this next step.



And then it always happens that, if you think you're going to suppress the vote of one group. One way to read this whole thing is, "Wait a minute. Now, you know, white people's votes are being suppressed." It's interesting, right, because what the Republicans are doing is saying, "The black people cheated." That's the whole story. "The black people in Detroit were counting the votes over and over again." That's what the lawsuit says. But if you disenfranchise all of Michigan and all of Pennsylvania, you're also disenfranchising millions of white people and that's the new move. And, you know, the Supreme Court is not going to take it.

IK: For me, this goes to something that at least, in my view, is critical to understanding what is going to happen, increasingly to democracy even outside of the United States.

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In 1953, after the anti-communism riots in East Berlin, Brecht came with his famous poem "The Solution" in which he said, if the government is so disappointed with the people, better elect a new one [people]. But what people don't understand is, in a democracy, there are always two processes going on at the same time. The people elect the government, and the government tries to elect the people. And they're trying to let the people historically decide who has the right to vote, either formally or informally.



You can have universal franchise but, like in the Southern states, make it impossible for people to vote.

That's why migration became such a big issue. Exactly because democracy is the political regime that is very sensitive to numbers. In a democracy, it's very important to be a majority. And when you're a majority, be it an ethnical or racial majority, it could be an ideological majority, and you have the feeling that you're losing power because of the demographic change, you have several strategies.

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One is to try to empower yourself by putting in the constitution all things that matter for you. Another is to try to define the very nature of who is a majority. In the Republican party, you're going to see many people who said, "Listen, we can offer to the Latinos something the Democrats cannot. We can offer them to be white." So, in a certain way, the very meaning of white is going to change, and the way it has been changing in the United States all the time, neither the Italians nor the Irish were white. Yet, at the end of the 19th Century, it was very much about creating political coalitions around race and whiteness. And this is going to be the same about ethnicity.



And the third story is, which by the way we see in Europe, which we see in places like Hungary and others, you understand that society is going to change, that there are going to be foreigners coming, working in your market and so on. But then you say, "We can open the market, but we are not going to open the body politic." So, this is like in Dubai. There are going to be a lot of foreigners, but they're not going to vote.

And I do believe these tensions between society and the body politic is at the center of what is happening. This type of a majority who are declining in numbers and try to see how they should try to preserve their power in this new situation in which democracy is the only game in town that is perceived as legitimate. I do believe this is the real kind of crisis that we're talking about.

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SR: I have been looking at the court decisions across the U.S., from the lowest courts to the Supreme Court, with a great deal of interest. These are judges, men and women, young and old, inexperienced and experienced ones, people who have been judges, who have been in power, and very recently put into place by Trump and the Republicans, Republicans and Democrats—everybody has agreed that the independence of the judiciary is important.



One of the puzzles for me was: is one of the reasons why a lot of the Republican judges are going this way because that they are...actually it's a conservative reaction by judges who are against executive overreach. So that the reasons for this unanimity may be various, but all of them have really stood up as the bulwark against authoritarianism.

TS: I mean you're a student of this, and I'm sure you see deeper than I. I would point out one thing which is that the State Supreme Court votes have been often 4 to 3. So, it's not that all judges all the time have been resisting this. The second thing I would point out is that, among the Republicans, what we're seeing is a division between the people who think we can keep working the system and the people who think it's time to throw the system away. Trump, the Senate, the House Representatives, you have a lot of people ironically who are saying, "We can throw it away."

When you get down lower to the states, to the people who actually draw up the electoral districts, to the people who actually count the votes, those people are more on the side of, "We can keep working the system the way that it is." Neither of those positions are particularly democratic. One position says, "We can manage democracy." The other position says, "We can't manage it anymore." That's now the fight within the Republican party.



The judges are going to be closer to the "we can manage the system" side of the argument.

The Supreme Court threw out this case from Texas a few days ago, this outrageous case, is also the same Supreme Court that all the way across 2020, every single time ruled against measures that would make it easier for people to vote. So, I would characterize it rather that way.

But not to be entirely cynical, there's another factor here, which is that we are a very lawyerly society and that there is a certain level of honor, you know, and a desire not to be shamed. And, the Trump lawsuits were so poor, and so transparently poor, that I think the fact that some lawyers could shame other lawyers and some judges could shame other lawyers [judges] could also play a certain role here.

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IK: Just one very brief point, because unlike the two of you I don't have a deep understanding of courts. What struck me is that there are two institutions in the United States that turned to be most resilient in the Trump period: It was the courts and the army. In a certain way, where professional identity is much more important than political identity, because your career very much depends on the view of your peers, not on the view of the general public. And the fact that, in a certain way, these two types of



groups were not particularly democratic in terms of being integrated into a bigger democratic society allowed them to be much more resilient.

The army was critical. What happened in June that basically pulled people, like Jim Mattis and others message to Trump "Don't put the army on the streets" was critical to avoid violence in the post-election period. And secondly, the courts, irrespective of for what kind of reasons, they made America have a legitimate president at least in legal terms.

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So interestingly enough, we always believed that part of the problem of democracy is that not everything is democratized enough. It can turn out that having sectors of societies that are not democratized enough is a precondition for democracy to work.

SR: This is an interesting paradox that Ivan points to, but let me come to my last question. Now that we've discussed all the pitfalls and all the backsliding of democracy, the question is, what remains after this election, on the one hand, of the long shadow of Trumpism the world over for soft authoritarian regimes elsewhere? Or, what are the positive lessons we can draw from the resilience of some paradoxically, as Ivan points out, non-



democratic institutions for the robustness of democracy also outside of the United States?

TS: I think the U.S. here provides a very interesting warning for the Europeans, because there's also a social welfare state aspect to it.

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These people have fallen faster and harder than they should have fallen because we don't have trade unions and we don't have a social welfare state. The decline of the U.S. in relative terms, the decline of industry, the decline of the white middle classes, maybe that was all inevitable, but we took a choice in the 1980s to make it as fast as possible. That was Ronald Reagan. And now we're paying for that.

So, if you want to avoid this, you should make sure you have some kind of a welfare state because what people are now used to in the U.S. is a lot of physical pain, a lot of unnecessary deaths. A lot of Americans just think this is normal. And picking up on Ivan's point earlier, I mean then you can just use that energy in different ways, right? The welfare state is not going to stop populism, but I think it does slow things down.



The second thing is old-fashioned political mobilization turns out to work. Trump got a lot of votes, but Biden got 80 million votes. More Americans voted in this election cycle than ever in recent history, and that's a result of old-fashioned mobilization. It's a result of people going out in the streets in the summertime. An unfortunate side effect to a conversation like ours is we can get all cynical about voting and votes. But the main reason why Biden is going to be in the Oval Office is that so many people worked so hard for it.

And then, I mean, in terms of optimism, I just want to make my talking point about the Republican party because if you try to do this kind of thing and fail, I think you do face consequences. I mean, if I were a paid advisor of Republicans, which I'm just happy to say that I'm not, I would have said the first person who says Trump is lying is going to be way out ahead in 2024.

What they've done instead is they've said, "Okay, Trump gets to have this stab in the back myth. We're going to let him say he's the victim of all this. But the problem with that is, once you go into that reality television show, you're just players and it's his reality television show. The story is all about him and it's going to be about him. So as long as we're talking about the "fraudulent election", and the Republicans who go along with that have basically committed themselves to a story which, A, isn't true but, B, keeps



Trump at the center of the party. And what are they going to do in 2024? I think Trump is going to be very weak in 2024, assuming that he's alive, not sick, not in Russia and not in prison, I don't think he's going to be a strong candidate in 2024. He lost in 2020. He barely won 2016. If I were the Republicans, I'd want to be running someone else.

So, I think they got themselves into the situation where basically having attempted a kind of coup, the party's going to fracture into a Trump and non-Trump part. And that in a kind of way could be a positive lesson, right? The lesson can be, "Hold on, maybe you shouldn't try to break institutions from the inside because if you can't actually do it," that's the cynical part, "if you can't actually do it, you're then going to pay a price."

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IK: I very much agree because this is very important. We took Trump and the development of Trump as the only thing that the Republicans could have done, and this is not true. In 2000, it was Karl Rove, the person behind George W. Bush, who said the next majority in America is going to be a Republican majority because the Latinos are our voters. They're Catholic. They're pro-abortion. They share our values.



This is what democracy is based on. You should try to convince yourself that the next majority is your majority. Democracy is very bad for a fatalistic outlook. If you believe that you are doomed, democracy does not work for you, irrespective of class, of race, of ethnicity.

So strangely enough the success of democracy very much depends on the fact how the two parties see the future. Both parties should believe that the future belongs to them. And I do believe this is the thing that, in a certain way, we are learning from the Trump experience.

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Being gloomy can help you win one election. It cannot help you win two elections.

SR: This has been a fascinating discussion for me which has sort of gone from the nitty-gritties of the American electoral system to how optimism is actually necessary because the temporality of democracy is such that one needs to have faith that the next election is able to change things. And parties which are trying to destroy precisely that faith by putting into place either constitutional measures, as we have seen in many parts of Europe, or other measures—legislative, voter suppression measures—such that their



victories are permanently locked in, are the ones which are going to be the long-term losers of this process.

This concludes this episode of "Democracy in Question". Thank you for listening.