Democracy Paradox Podcast
Adam Przeworski Asks Who Decides What is Democratic (11/26/25)
Transcript

Host Justin Kempf: So today's guest is Adam Przeworski. He is the Carol and Milton Professor Emeritus in the Department of Politics of New York University. But for anybody who knows political science, who studies political science. They already know who he is. He is famous. He's written so many books. He's written so many articles and he's just one of those figures that I've been waiting to have a conversation with. To help me introduce him today is Alejandro González Ruiz. Alejandro is a third year PhD student in political science at the University of Notre Dame and the cohost of the Global Stage podcast that is made here at the Kellogg Institute. Alejandro, how are you doing today?

Alejandro González Ruiz: I'm doing great. Thank you, Justin, for inviting me to open this conversation.

Justin Kempf: So, Alejandro I'm obviously really excited to talk to Adam. I feel like he's one of the key figures among Democratic theorists that's alive today. But I do recognize that a lot of people who don't read as much about democracy may not be familiar with who Adam is. How would you describe him? I mean, how do you think about Adam Przeworski's role in terms of democratic theory and democratic literature? What are your thoughts about him?

Alejandro González Ruiz: So, I agree with you. I think that he's one of the leading voices and one of the most famous and influential political scientists of our time. He was one of the first political scientists who described democracy beyond these ideal conceptions as something that has to do with alternation of power. I think that you might be familiar with this idea that democracy is a method to handle disagreement through reelections, and in fact, that democracy is, at the end of the day, institutionalized uncertainty. So, I think that's one way in which we can understand the work of Adam Przeworski. I think that this conversation we are about to hear from him has to do a lot with this idea of elections at the center of the conversation of democracy and democratization.

Justin Kempf: You know, Alejandro, it's interesting that you mention that because that was my initial thought about who Adam Przeworski is. But the more that I read his work and even in this conversation as I was talking to him, it's interesting how he continues to push a narrative that democracy comes down really to elections and that we should have the freedom to choose who it is that

we want to lead and how that can mean that democracy can lead to some unpalatable decisions, but it's something that we have to trust and believe in.

Still, at the same time, he also believes that there's something that democracy should be moving towards. I mean, there's a tension between these two. The idea that on the one hand, people have complete freedom and autonomy to decide who they want and, on the other hand, democracy's supposed to be about reducing inequality. Democracy should be accomplishing different things and sometimes it disappoints him. I mean, it falls short in terms of these bigger goals that many of us kind of link to the idea of democracy.

Alejandro González Ruiz: I think that you are right and I think that , what you said leads directly to another important point of the conversation that many of the challenges democracies face today stem not from the concept of democracy, but they are coming from the difficulty of democracies in meeting people's rising expectations, as you mentioned, economic ones. So maybe it's this disappointment that makes some citizens willing to trade democratic norms for outcomes they value, echoing Svolik's work on the tradeoffs people are willing to make between democracy and other preferences. But Justin, I think, that something that is key here is that Adam emphasizes that we should not be confused by, for instance, the rise of extreme rightwing parties with a crisis of democracy. We may not like that, but it does not necessarily mean that there is a generalized crisis.

Justin Kempf: Yeah, it's fascinating because his most recent book, which at this point came out six years ago, is called Crises of Democracy and yet now he's arguing that there is no crisis. I mean, again, this is just a very fascinating discussion, and it comes down to some of the key themes that we talk about on this podcast. For instance, one of his most recent articles was in the Journal of Democracy called, "Who Decides What is Democratic?" That is key to the idea of a democracy paradox. The question of who gets to decide what is democratic and what does that mean about democracy? What does that mean about what democracy is supposed to achieve or what democracy even is?

And so, this was really a very important conversation for me. I think Adam is one of the people who helps unlock some of those answers, but at the same time raises entirely new questions. So, it becomes one of those things that we're continuously peeling back the onion, but it never feels like we're completely done yet. That's what's so amazing about conversations like this on this podcast. What's really key to having a conversation with somebody like Adam is in many ways he challenges many of the other thinkers that exist out there and

many of the other democratic theorists. I mean, he definitely pushes back on a lot of the traditional narratives about democracy.

Alejandro González Ruiz: Yeah, I agree with you and I think that's something that is key in this conversation is precisely what you mentioned about if we are actually experiencing a global crisis of democracy. Over the past few years, many scholars have written extensively about democratic backsliding. As you mentioned, Adam Przeworski contributed to this debate. However, in this conversation, he has reconsidered his position, and he expresses some skepticism. He argues that he doesn't see a generalized crisis in the sense of democracy as a regime being at risk. But instead he sees that some democracies are facing certain crises and I think that that's something fascinating about this conversation. That he brings about this distinction between problems of democracy and problems faced by democracies.

Justin Kempf: So, Alejandro, I think that this conversation is fascinating, but it's also interesting because it dovetails neatly into some of the work that you're doing at the Kellogg Institute in terms of your own PhD research. So why don't you just take a moment and explain in a couple of sentences what it is that you're currently working on.

Alejandro González Ruiz: Thank you for asking me. So, my research lies at the intersection of regimes and institutions. I focus particularly on electoral governance and the design and functioning of electoral management bodies. I am currently working on a paper that examines how different levels of autonomy and capacity within these commissions shape political outcomes. This connects perfectly with the work of Przeworski, especially in emphasizing the need to bring elections back to the center of the discussions, especially on democratic resilience.

And at Notre Dame I'm also working on a project with Professor Laura Gamboa, who's influential book on Democratic Backsliding you already know, and James Curry, an expert on, US politics and Congress. So, we are collaborating on a very exciting project on subnational democratic erosion in the US. The goal of this project is to understand why some states experience deeper democratic backsliding than others and to apply comparative tools and frameworks to analyze variations in democratic erosion, including the role of the opposition across the states.

Justin Kempf: That sounds like incredible research and it's amazing that you get the opportunity to work with Laura Gamboa, who is quickly becoming one of the most influential within political science, particularly comparative politics,

and particularly within the literature on democracy. It sounds like something that would be a fascinating conversation for those of us who are going to go to the Global Democracy Conference in May. Will you be there at the Global Democracy Conference hosted by the Kellogg Institute?

Alejandro González Ruiz: I will. I will and actually I'm very proud to share with you that I have been involved with the Global Democracy Conference. I had the opportunity to participate in the first one and also in the last one that was held in Washington, DC. So I'm really looking forward to the next Global Democracy Conference.

Justin Kempf: This upcoming Global Democracy Conference is going to be at Notre Dame in South Bend, so I highly encourage everybody to be making plans, be thinking about it, and marking your calendars for May. It's an incredible experience and I highly recommend that anyone who's interested in conversations on this podcast would try to make an effort to be there in person, to have those conversations with some of the guests, and some of the people that we talk to. But before we go I should mention, the Democracy Paradox is made in partnership with the Kellogg Institute, part of the Keough School of Global Affairs at the University of Notre Dame. But for now… here is my conversation with Adam Przeworski…

Interview

Justin Kempf: Adam Przeworski, welcome to the *Democracy Paradox*.

Adam Przeworski: Good evening.

Justin Kempf: Well, Adam, I have followed your work for a long time like many of us who listen to this podcast and in 2019, you wrote a book called *Crises of Democracy*. It is your most recent book. But a few years after that you wrote another essay called "Who Decides What is Democratic." In that essay you described it as your second thoughts meaning that you reconsidered some of your positions. That essay was actually a few years ago from now. So, I guess I want to start off by asking, where do you stand today? Does democracy face a crisis right now?

Adam Przeworski: I don't think that democracy faces a generalized crisis in the sense that the democratic regimes across the world are in danger. There are all kinds of crises. It's obvious that people have lower confidence in political institutions, politics, politicians, and everything else, but I don't think there is a general crisis. I think one difference between writing that book in 2019 - I think

it was later on - was that I became aware that we must not confuse progress of extreme right-wing parties with crises of democracy. My general perception is that when in Europe parties with even explicitly fascist pasts either joined coalition governments or became leaders of the government, they did not take steps that would undermine democracy.

Justin Kempf: So, when you wrote the book though, *Crises of Democracy*, you did feel that there was not just one crisis, but multiple crises. What changed your mind? Did you feel that you were returning to positions that you'd held for a long time or did you feel that you were genuinely changing your mind and moving in a completely new direction for yourself?

Adam Przeworski: No, I don't think it was that profound. I just wanted to clarify for myself and perhaps for others that… Well, let me step back. In 1976, Adolfo Suarez, who was the first prime Minister of Democratic Spain, in his inaugural speech to the parliament said, 'The future is not written because only the people can write it.' He had hoped that people would write it to his liking and I had hoped that people would write it my liking, but I always believed that we must be prepared that people may write it not to our particular liking. That in itself does not undermine democracy. It just shows democracy works.

Justin Kempf: That returns us to one of the central arguments of that recent essay that you wrote in the *Journal of Democracy*, "Who Decides What is Democratic?" The title is very profound. I mean, we don't oftentimes ask that question. We assume that we know what democracy is and what it is not. But as I've explored on this podcast, there's a lot of debate about the meaning and purpose of democracy. So let me pose the question back to you. Who does decide what is democratic?

Adam Przeworski: The way I think about it is the following. It's obvious that many people, or rather most people around the world, value democracy because they expect that democracy will implement some other values they cherish. It may be liberty. It may be equality. It may be, in French, laicite. It may be religion. This goes back to Schumpeter. Joseph Schumpeter wrote a classic book in 1942. That's what he says. People value democracy because they see it as a method, in his language, for implementing some values. But then the question I asked myself is what if they disagree about those values? How do we handle disagreement - profound disagreements - about norms and perhaps interests.

So, my response to it is what I often refer to as a minimalist conception of democracy, which basically says we handle these conflicts through elections.

Every so often, we have this procedure, potentially open to all, in which we can decide who will govern us and to some extent what and somebody wins. They implement some of their visions and interests. Somebody loses. They have to suffer. They suffer for some time and they come back. So, this is the way I think about democracy. That it's basically a method of processing conflict through elections.

Justin Kempf: So are you saying that we can reduce democracy just to the presence of elections, the presence of free and fair elections, let's say, because that would imply that there's no difference in how an autocracy would govern from a democracy. They could both be very repressive. They could both be very liberal. The only difference between the two is whether or not they have free and fair elections. I don't think that you go that far, but I'm going to ask you the question…

Adam Przeworski: Oh, I do go that far. I do go that far. But you have to realize that in order to have elections, which the losers can potentially win in the future, you need a lot of prerequisites: individual liberty, freedom of public opinions, some forum for discussion and maybe even as John Stewart Mill thought some material conditions because people may have a formal right to participate in politics, but have no material conditions to exercise it. Bob Dahl, a classic writer of democracy, has a huge list, I don't remember how many there are, but there are preconditions for competitive elections. So I do reduce democracy to elections, but I want to emphasize in order to have free and clean elections, all kinds of preconditions have to be satisfied, including some legal ones. Ginsburg and Huq have a nice analysis where they specify some purely legal constitutional conditions that have to be satisfied for elections to allow alternation in office.

Justin Kempf: You have this interesting line in your paper that "The conception that reduces democracy to free and fair elections sometimes criticized as electoralism is not so minimal." Now, you're elaborating on that right now as to why that is the case. The fact that you need so many different things to fall in place so that you could have free and fair elections. Do those preconditions create an environment that feels substantively different in a democracy than life would feel in an autocracy?

Adam Przeworski: Well, I certainly think so and more than that, I've lived part of my life in a system where elections were held but they decided nothing. So, I think of it this way. In a typical election, slightly below 50% of the voters vote against the winner. There's, I think, very, very few elections, free and clean elections, in which the winners won much more than 50% of the vote.

Now, the winners in turn often become disappointed with the parties or the governments they voted for. They place expectations on it and then these expectations are not quite satisfied. A majority of the electorate ends up being unhappy with the result of the election so what do they expect of the next election? That they're going win and that the government they vote for is going to fulfill their promises. This is the main sentiment. Elections offer a siren song of hope. This time around, we're going to win and we're going to be able to implement or realize some of our interests, some of our values, some of our visions. It may seem irrational. I don't want to qualify this. That's the spirit of elections.

Justin Kempf: So you mentioned about living under an autocracy, living in Poland and growing up there. There's a book that you wrote where you have a preface that talks about the first time you came to the United States. You had lived in Poland under communism, and you came to the United States and described the experience as being disappointing because there wasn't protest against things that you saw as censorship so you found it to not quite feel the way that you thought a democracy would feel.

In the same preface, you go on and you talk about how you came back to the United States again in the sixties and felt that the political environment was different because it was much more vibrant and democratic. Do you still feel the same way as your younger self did that a democracy is something that's a more vibrant political culture or is that not necessary for a democracy to be healthy and to be successful?

Adam Przeworski: Well, as you already pointed out, sometimes it's more vibrant than in other times. You know, when I came to this country for the first time, it was 1961 and this was the tail end of McCarthyism. People were apathetic. There was a fair degree of repression. It was not an impressive spectacle. When I came back in 1967, as you point out, it was vibrant. Everybody was searching for new solutions for their life. So, I think it's just a normal life of a democracy. Sometimes it's more vigorous and sometimes it's less vigorous. The fact it is less vigorous may only mean that people are satisfied. It doesn't mean that they're quiescent. Maybe they like their leader and their life. They're not bothered by anything happening in politics. They keep quiet. But very often, even under democracy, there is some intimidation, if not repression.

Justin Kempf: Another thing mentioned, I think in the same book, was you described coming back to Poland as you're learning about democracy and learning to study democracy and study politics. I got the impression that in your

conversations with people back in Poland, authorities back in Poland to some extent, that you thought that there was a realistic chance that you could hold elections under Communist Poland. Was that really the case that you thought Poland could naturally democratize on its own or am I reading too much into that?

Adam Przeworski: I think that sentiment came much later, but there was one moment in Poland in which the communist government flirted with somewhat competitive elections and I coauthored an article studying what happened in the elections at the village level, I think, in 1964 and 1965. Basically, we analyzed the data that we had and I showed not much happened. People who were elected were not very different from people who were replaced. That was vigorously attacked by the party. They were not prepared for it. There always were some tendencies due to so-called reformers within the Communist party which was flirting with a somewhat more competitive system. But it's only by 1987, more or less, that that became open and explicit.

Justin Kempf: So, to come back to these ideas of minimal democracy and thick democracy, and bring ourselves back into theory, you have a line in the paper where you write, "The more values one attaches to democracy, the less prone one is to find it." Again, a very profound line. Do you feel that that's not just a comment about democracy, but a warning for theorists about democracy or even a criticism of democracy itself?

Adam Przeworski: Oh, I think it is certainly a warning. I've been leading a mini-crusade against excessive expectations. This experience is actually an historical experience. I was involved for many years in a project that was headed by Guillermo O'Donnell and Philip Schmitter on Transitions to Democracy. Our main, maybe exclusive preoccupation, was to end dictatorships which are brutal. But obviously on the other side there was democracy and we attached all kinds of wonderful expectations about democracy. Then democracy came and in fact, somebody joked… We had stages of this process of democratization. Namely, there was liberalization, negotiation, I don't remember, then there was democracy and then there was disappointment. Guillermo O'Donnell wrote an essay saying, 'In some places democracy is green, but in some places yellow, and in Brazil it is brown.'

So yes, I think that people often expect too much. One distinction that I try to make sometimes is problems of democracy and problems for democracy. Problems of democracy are involved with political institutions, access to elections, influence of money over politics, the way democracy works as a system. But democracy confronts problems: economic crises, crime waves such

as cartels in Latin America, technological change and governments have to cope with it. They're often unable to cope. But it's not the fault of democracy necessarily. It's not necessarily the fault of particular governments. Some problems are difficult to confront.

So, I have a book published in 2000 with some of my former students, where we examined the impact of democracy on economic growth. We basically found that economic growth on average is the same in democracies and nondemocracies. If you look at data on income distribution, at least as measured by Gini coefficients, coefficients of inequality, you will find again that inequality is about the same in democracies and in nondemocracies. So, there are some problems democracies don't cope with very well. And for me, the principle problem and the biggest disappointment is that democracies do not reduce social and economic inequality because for 200 years, we have expected it of them.

Justin Kempf: That's been a surprising and consistent theme within your work. When I think of you as a scholar, I think of things like minimal democracy. I think of some of the work that you've done demonstrating that economic growth doesn't necessarily lead to democracy but definitely buttresses against democratic collapse. There's a lot of different work that you've done but oftentimes overlooked in some of your work is this sense of wanting democracy to respond to the problems of economic inequality. Are you disappointed that democracy hasn't been able to deliver the kind of economic consequences that some theorists in the past just assumed democracy was going to deliver?

Adam Przeworski: I am deeply disappointed and I think that is the main reason for general feelings of dissatisfaction with the way our representative institutions work. I've summarized it in a couple of my books. Since the famous speech by Henry Ireton at Putnam in, I think, 1643 or something like this, everybody expected that democracies are going to equalize income. People equipped with equal formal political rights are going to use those rights to equalize incomes. And it never happened. I mean, I live in a city where 150,000 school kids don't have permanent residence and in this city, I heard a conversation between two rich people in which one asked another, how many houses do you have? And the answer was 14. If our institutions had worked the way we expected, though, that would not have existed.

Justin Kempf: Why doesn't democracy deliver on economic equality? Why is it that representative institutions haven't taken the steps to resolve some of those concerns even if it’s just in a more dramatic way than they currently have without eliminating economic inequality?

Adam Przeworski: I think that the only honest answer is that I don't know. I've worked on it. I have thought of it from time to time. I've thought of possible reforms. I don't know. One way to think about it is this. As citizens, we're not really equal, but we're anonymous. We are anonymous in the sense that you cannot say fat citizen, skinny citizen, tall citizens, short citizen, rich citizen, poor citizen, educated citizen, or uneducated. When we become citizens, we lose all of these qualities. But in real life, some of these characteristics generate political influence and have influence over decisions. So, my boogeyman has always been the access of money in politics.

Justin Kempf: You mentioned Bob Dahl earlier in the conversation and Robert Dahl's an interesting figure because he's known really just for his theories about democracy and polyarchy. But if you read enough Dahl, you find that he was also very focused on economic inequality as well. He wrote a lot about it and there's definitely a sense in his work that he's trying to figure out how to have strong forms of political equality while being able to produce strong forms of economic equality. Because he's concerned that if you have inequality in terms of resources, you're going to have inequality in terms of political power.

Adam Przeworski: Yeah.

Justin Kempf: There's a sense in Dahl that democracy's incomplete. That we're still trying to become more democratic. So I'd like to ask you if you feel the same way, because earlier you mentioned that democracy's really just about the presence of elections. So does economic inequality fit into your conception of democracy at all?

Adam Przeworski: I am very attached to some degree of economic equality. I am even more concerned about eradication of poverty and income insecurity, but I don't want to stick it into my understanding of democracy because some people don't value it. If we have one party which says liberty, the other one says equality, then what? That's why I think that the conceptions of democracies which attach to it substantive values, you refer to them as thick conceptions - I like that, I think that they should make us pause and moderate and think we may be on the losing side. If we're on the losing side through the only mechanism we have, we just have to wait as long as we have a chance. So as concerned as I am about equality, I don't want to associate it with democracy. I mean associate it nominally with democracy.

Justin Kempf: One of your recent articles, I believe it was in *Perspectives on Politics*, touched on revisions about how you thought about autocracies. In that article you write, “The very idea that autocracies may enjoy popular support is

hard to fathom for democrats." What does this understanding about autocracies teach us about democracy?

Adam Przeworski: So, I sometimes think of a Miss Zhou who lives in the Chinese province of Guandong. She's satisfied with her life. She stays completely away from politics. She's quiescent in every political sphere that can be. She sees the country grow. She sees her income grow. She saw, until recently, her kids being better off than she was at their age. Then she just gives up on anything else. I think that what it teaches us about democracy is that when people obtain important things they value, they are willing to give up on democracy to some extent.

As you would know, there is a long line of research initiated by Milan Svolik at Yale who has done all kinds of experiments imitated around the world which basically says people are willing to close their eyes to, and this is Milan's work, minor transgressions of democratic norms in exchange for outcomes they value. There's also a line of research by Carles Boix and his collaborators, which says, if you ask people, are they willing to give up democracy, then they're not willing to do it as much as Svolik finds.

So there must be some point in between which maybe one day somebody's going to catch. You know, we are willing to vote for Republicans who break campaign finance laws because they oppose abortion. Maybe not quite willing to give up democracy, at least in one sweep, but I think that that's what the experience of many people under autocracy says. There's a nice quote from Tom Pepinski, which says, life under autocracy is boring. It's kind of boring because there are all kinds of things you cannot see, read, say, but it's okay. It's boring. It's not necessarily miserable.

Justin Kempf: You mentioned that you grew up under an autocracy and lived part of your adult life in Poland under communist rule, under an autocracy. But most of your career is focused on political theory and political science and researching about politics. Do you ever regret not getting more involved in the actual politics itself to produce political change?

Adam Przeworski: I tried timidly twice. I was twice timidly repressed twice. The main instrument of repression before putting people in jail was that you couldn't travel abroad. But Poland was a somewhat softer autocracy by the time I was growing up. If you knew somebody who knew somebody who knew somebody, sanctions were lifted after some time. So, in most cases, I survived. When I was growing up or rather when I entered the university in 1957, Poland was an interesting country. It was a post-Stalinist period. It opened up and

discussions in the cafes concerned absolutely everything. No holds barred. You could say it - anything. We discussed things in depth. That was just fine.

The university even had a lot of autonomy until 1968. My professors could pretty much say anything they wanted. You could not publish. That's where the barrier came. You could not diffuse your thoughts. You would end up in jail. When you live in a system like that, you calculate. You try to come up to the border, but not further because it's futile.

Justin Kempf: So up until recently, Poland was governed under the Law and Justice Party, PiS. Many people saw PiS as contributing to democratic backsliding and a few would even argue that it crossed the line from being democratic to being something that's not completely autocratic - maybe competitive authoritarianism or something like that. How did you feel about that moment in Poland's history? In terms of its governance under PiS, did you see that still as completely democratic? Did you see their warning signs in terms of democratic backsliding or crisis within that country before the recent elections that brought Tusk back to power?

Adam Przeworski: Well, I thought PiS took standard, classical, anti-democratic measures. It tried to dismantle the judicial system. It tried to dismantle public control over the media. It tried to have its cronies buy the media and then direct government subsidies to it. It repressed some demonstrations. It was trying. The monkey was the electoral system, so that's very important. But it did try to undermine democracy there. Look, I think politicians want to stay in power forever and they want to do whatever they want while in power. That's universal. Some end up doing it. Most don't end up doing it, which is a fascinating question, but some end up doing it or they try to do it and they fail.

You know, this is the first instance, other than in Sri Lanka a long time ago, in which a backsliding government lost an election. So, this is telling, and I think it's illuminating. It lost an election because the opposition parties, which were deeply divided, because, one, they feared the erosion of democracy under PiS, and two, we're successful in telling their supporters: ‘First, we're going to restore democracy and then we're going to resolve the conflicts between us through democratic means’ Those were basically about abortion.

They somehow persuaded a majority of voters that once democracy was reestablished or reinvigorated, at least, they would be the winners. Well, the coalition lasted about two months and then fell apart after they won and now

they're in trouble and what not, but it's interesting. I mean, it's an unusual case. Anyway, my point is, I think, yes, PiS was undermining democracy and it lost.

Justin Kempf: So, do you see a difference in quality of democracy between different countries? Because when I think of minimalist democracy, I think of it being a question of whether it's a democracy or not. Do you see there being varying levels of democracy within countries?

Adam Przeworski: I certainly see it. About, I would guess, ten years ago, quality of democracy was a very popular term. I think some of your colleagues were involved in it. Now we all talk about backsliding and the steps that undermine democracy. There are many important differences, I think, among democracies. They may not be unidimensional. Democracy is more vigorous in some countries in some aspects and not in other aspects. In many countries, there exists, say technology for coming to the street to protest.

Think of Argentina. Argentina has a president whose program, economic program is very similar to Mr. Trump: dismantle the state, reduce expenditures, everything else. He lost a provincial election, and what did he say? He said, 'We lost. We have to learn next time. We're going to win.' And he won the next one. Why? I'm not sure that he's a democrat. But if he hadn't, if he tried to do something about it, he would get a million people on the street. Same in France. The government does something unpopular and there are hundreds of thousands of people on the street.

So, in this sense, democracies are at least vigilant, if not wise. In other countries, Sweden, for example, Costa Rica, people never come to the street. So, from that point of view, it's less vigilant, but it works for other reasons. Swedes would say it is because these values are within us, which I don't buy, but that's what they say. So yes, I very much believe in quality, but I'm not quite sure how to measure it.

Justin Kempf: So one of the running themes that we've had in this conversation so far is the sense that things that we feel right now are new or novel we've experienced in previous episodes in the past. You had a book come out in 2010. I think it was called, *The Limits of Self-Government*, and in it you wrote, "Nothing is new about Putinism" and you were giving the impression the idea of a leader like Putin coming to power and claiming popular legitimacy and governing is not different than what autocratic leaders have done in the past. Do you feel the same way about things like democratic backsliding and a lot of the other concerns that we have right now that we've gone through those experiences before in different ways?

Adam Przeworski: If I wrote that nothing is new about Putinism, I was wrong. I think that Putin is a technological innovator. He has monopolized and consolidated power, killing a few journalists here and there, killing a few oligarchs, perhaps maybe some political opponents. But since 1991, there were no tanks on the street. Think of Tiananmen. The Chinese, when they confront a political crisis, they have to roll out tanks on the streets of the capitol. Putin stays in power. He has elections. He creates opposition parties in every election so that some people would vote against him and he stays in office. He stays in power.

That is a big technological innovation. It has spread to many other countries. Think of it this way. Since 1997, if I remember correctly, there were only two anti-democratic coup d'états in the world, both of them in Thailand. Before there were lots of anti-democratic coups. I think in part because these new Putin like leaders, some of them imitators, learn you repress a little bit here, maybe you kill some political opponents. You'll have your cronies buy the media. You control the judicial system and you survive. So, I think Putin is new. I'm actually doing a project with Jose Cheibub and Fernando Limongi trying to study whether the longevity of governance in the past was due to the same mechanisms long ago as it is now. And I don't know.

Justin Kempf: So, there was a book that came out a few years ago. I'm interested if you read it. It was by Sergey Guriev and Daniel Triesman.

Adam Przeworski: Yeah, yeah,

Justin Kempf: yeah. It was called *Spin Dictators* and they had written a few articles beforehand called “Informational Autocrats” on that same topic. It sounds like you really buy into their argument because they saw Putin as the archetypal spin dictator, although, if I remember right, they saw Lee Kuan Yew over in Singapore as the original innovator.

Adam Przeworski: Yes.

Justin Kempf: He was the first one to create a repressive system that didn't utilize violence the way that previous autocrats had, such as Stalin or Hitler or the other violent autocrats we think of from the past. Lee Kuan Yew was able to have a very stable autocracy while making people feel that they had a wide range of freedoms that they didn't make them feel that they were living under an autocracy. So, is that something that you're kind of alluding to?

Adam Przeworski: Yeah, look, I stand corrected. I think Lee Kuan Yew was the innovator. That was the first system, which had all the nice aspects or decorations of democracy. It worked very well. He was reelected. His successor, his son, was reelected. But I don't agree with Guriev and Treisman on something very important. Namely, they neglect the material infrastructure of the autocratic regime. They put too much weight on propaganda, censorship on information. As I say in the article, you cited, autocrats pave streets, they issue dog licenses, they govern, and one of the interesting aspects of successful cases of backsliding is that they have been accompanied by very rapid economic growth.

Milan Svolik is the one who noticed that first. Even Chavez, when the oil was still flowing, the economy was growing like mad. It's only after his death that it really collapsed. PiS produced growth. Modi produced growth. Orbán at the beginning produced growth. Now collapse. Erdoğan produced growth. These people want to satisfy material needs as long as people don't contest their power so they do things in order for countries to grow. I think that the emphasis by Guriev and Treisman is misleading. Let me say something controversial. Namely, I don't think that I know a case of complete economic shambles in which people believed propaganda. In technical language, for me, it's not a substitute. It's a compliment. It may reinforce rule but cannot substitute for other outcomes.

Justin Kempf: So, if people can be happy and satisfied with government. They live under an authoritarian, autocratic regime. What does that say about the meaning and purpose for democracy? Because if people are happy under autocracy, why is democracy still important?

Adam Przeworski: There is something about being able to express your views in public or to have a conversation such as we're having now. That's, I think, integral to our lives and our values. I don't quite buy this line about the eternal struggle for freedom or justice. Let's put it this way. Democracy can be much more personally fulfilling. I don't want to say it always is.

There's a beautiful line in John le Carre's novel, *A Small Town in Germany*, in which one of the characters says freedom is real only when you're fighting for it. Once you have it, maybe you don't know you have it and maybe you don't exercise it. But when you have it, there is something deep to it. I can't tell what it is. That's not my kind of philosophizing, but I know it. I mean, I know it. Sitting in front of a television these days and watching election results is a unique spectacle. Something about it is extremely deep.

Justin Kempf: So you're definitely considered one of the most influential political scientists living today and so a lot of people would be interested in which active political scientists, which active scholars in general, that you look to as some of the most influential in your work now. Who is it that you think is making really profound and influential differences within how we think about politics and how we think about the world?

Adam Przeworski: I will not give diplomas to my living colleagues. My influences about democracy are certainly Hans Kelson, Joseph Schumpeter, Bob Dahl, Norberto Bobbio. All of them are dead. But this is the line that I follow. I am not sure that in recent times we said something truly new and truly profound about democracy. There's a whole movement of democratic reforms. Some of them I find attractive. Others I find less attractive, but I don't think that the realization would really change things in a drastic way. So, in a way, both how to think about democracy and how to reform democracy, I think for these questions, we find them very hard to answer and I don't know that answers from my younger colleagues have really shaken the world.

Justin Kempf: Well, Adam Przeworski, thank you so much for taking the time to talk to me today. It's been an honor to talk to you and thank you so much for so much that you've written and so much that you've been able to discuss with us today. Thank you.

Adam Przeworski: I very much enjoyed our conversation. So, the pleasure is mine.