Democracy Paradox Podcast
Amel Ahmed Says the Regime Question Has Returned (10/30/25)
Transcript

Introduction

Host Justin Kempf: So today I am joined by Javier Pérez Sandoval. He's a postdoctoral research associate in democracy at the Kellogg Institute for International Studies at the University of Notre Dame and he's here to help introduce my conversation with Amel Ahmed on the Regime Question. So, Javier, how did you understand this idea of what the regime question is?

Javier Pérez Sandoval: Well first of all, Justin, thank you for having me on the podcast. Thank you for inviting me to present what I think. It's a really intriguing and interesting book. We know from previous literature, for example, classic literature like Lipset and Rokkan, that there are certain cleavages that shape party systems, shape the contours of political contestation, and therefore shape the political outcomes and regime outcomes that we observe. But what Amel is doing is pausing that conversation and saying in addition to those traditional cleavages and divisions that we observe that are usually collapsed into left and right, or secular versus religious cleavages, there is a parallel or different dimension of that debate that we have to understand. Political actors also have differences in their preferences around institutional arrangements.

So, if you think along this line of perhaps a continuous spectrum between autocracy and democracy, what she's saying is in addition to the traditional cleavages or divisions, there's always the regime question around how actors perceive and, what the preferences are around institutional arrangements. As you said, this sometimes goes unseen or unnoticed because we assume that that is set. But what Amel is doing is putting down her finger and saying no. It's not always set and in times when it becomes more salient democracy feels more threatened.

Justin Kempf: And Javier, what I found most fascinating about this insight, this idea of the regime question, is that it's not even as dramatic as democracy and autocracy. I mean, you've got these conflicts and contestations over what democracy is within itself. You can have two different groups who think that they both represent democracy fighting over its meaning and purpose. It reminds me of this conversation I had on the podcast a few years ago with Michael Ignatieff where he's talking about the politics of enemies and how democracy is really about the fight over its meaning and purpose. But I feel like

Amel gives a much clearer idea of how this concept has affected democracy over a much longer historical trajectory. It feels like a really important contribution, especially for everything that we're experiencing today.

Javier Pérez Sandoval: I think you're right on the money in the sense that the regime question, at its core, is a normative question as you'll hear in the interview about how society should govern yourselves. What is the best form of government? It's also pointing the finger at the fact that within a democratic system there should be space to debate democracy itself. Here again, I kept thinking of a recent essay by Przeworski. He reflects on this idea of who decides what democracy is. And what's interesting about Amel's book is that she then unpacks this normative question into empirically tractable pieces. In a sense, I also kept thinking this is a book that dialogues well with Isabella Mares' *Protecting the Ballot* about specific instances in which these tensions of what democracy is and how we arrange those institutions during the first wave took place.

It is very reminiscent and very relevant for how we understand and how we think about changes in the balance of power between executives and parliaments or legislatures that define whether a country backslides or whether democracy prevails.

Justin Kempf: I love the fact that you brought in Adam Przeworski's recent work because I think it highlights that this subject is something that's really at the cutting edge of democracy scholarship. Speaking of which, Javier, why don't you take an opportunity to describe your own research and how it intersects and connects with the conversation that we're having now about the regime question.

Javier Pérez Sandoval: I see my research as sitting at the intersection of regime change in democratization studies, but also importantly at the intersection of subnational or multilevel politics. I wrote my doctoral dissertation on the historical origins of subnational regimes, so in that sense it is clearly connected to what Amel is discussing about the historical sequencing which then gives shape to democratic arrangements.

Currently at the Kellogg Institute, I'm working with Professor Mainwaring on a project that builds and expands on discussions that he's had in prior papers around the outcomes of the third wave and thinking more specifically about something called democratic stagnation that is countries that don't necessarily experience erosion or backsliding, but that maintain nonetheless a low level of democracy. So, cases like Mexico, for example, before the clear democratic

decline in which democracy sort of oscillated without any major gains. So we're trying to contrast Mexico with successful experiences in other countries like Brazil or Argentina that did manage to deepen their democracies. So we're trying to understand cases like Mexico and Paraguay where the idea of making democracy better didn't necessarily translate into more democratic governments.

Justin Kempf: Well, Javier, I'm always very impressed with the work that you're doing. I'm always very impressed with the work that Scott does as well and I find the way we're able to see these connections between different parts of the world and different places interesting. I think that's important for us to think about where we see differences and where we see similarities.

Now, I should. Give the formal introduction for Amel. She is an assistant professor at the University of Massachusetts Amherst and the author of the book *The Regime Question: Foundations of Democratic Governance in Europe and the United States*. For me, this is something that is one of those texts that I think is going to be highly influential in conversations in the future and the Kellogg Institute would like to invite you to participate in those conversations, especially at its Global Democracy Conference coming up in the spring. So please set the date. It's May 19th and 20th. Javier, are you going to be with us for the Global Democracy Conference?

Javier Pérez Sandoval: I'm looking forward to the Global Democracy Conference. It's actually going to be around the end of my time at Kellogg, so I think it'll be a perfect way to wrap up and to take part in conversations that are not only timely, but also important both for countries in the US and Latin America, but also in Europe.

Justin Kempf: This year's theme is confronting public support for anti-democratic leaders. So, I think that today's conversation about the regime question fits in well, and we're going to continue to have these conversations on the podcast, but we'd love to be able to see you in person at the Global Democracy Conference. I should note, 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. And with that, here is my conversation with Amel Ahmed…

Interview

Justin Kempf: Amel Ahmed, welcome to the *Democracy Paradox*.

Amel Ahmed: Thank you, Justin. It's great to be here and I appreciate the work you do.

Justin Kempf: Well, Amel, I was really, really impressed with your recent Book, *The Regime Question: Foundations of Democratic Governance in Europe and the United States*. There are always a couple books that come out every year that seem so interesting and innovative and think about things in a very different way. They're usually by authors who I am unfamiliar with initially, but when I read their work, I think that they're doing something that really contributes something different in a way that adds to the conversation and discussion and I do think your book fits into that, so I'm very impressed with it. So, thank you for writing this fascinating book.

Amel Ahmed: Well, thank you and thanks for reading it and for inviting me on the show.

Justin Kempf: Let me start out here. The idea of the regime question initially came across to me - like before I started reading the book, I'm thinking the regime question is a decision between democracy and autocracy. It must be a question between these two vastly diametrically opposed concepts. But as I read the book, I felt that the question was much more sophisticated and nuanced than I anticipated. Let's start here with the most basic question, what is the regime question facing countries during this first wave of democracy, since that's kind of the period that you spend the most time on within the book?

Amel Ahmed: So, I mean, for the regime question to be broad and to cover different eras and different sets of questions. In my understanding, the regime question at its core is about how we should govern ourselves. It's a fundamental foundational question of political order. How should we govern ourselves? Now that question contains within it multitudes of questions about institutions, about participation, about various norms and practices and in every era, there are different questions within that that are going to be really highlighted.

In the first wave, and I think this actually still endures today, the very heart of the regime question was really about the power of representative government and the power of legislatures, in particular, the power of parliaments. In the very earliest stages, it was defined vis-a-vis the crown, vis-a-vis monarchies, especially in Europe. That was the kind of historical origin of this. A massive confrontation between parliaments and the crown, two bodies that had a claim to legitimate authority emanating from the people. That competition was eventually transformed into a competition between legislatures and executives where it was understood that the legislatures were the dominant governing body

and executives would be somewhat subordinate to that. That continued to evolve over time.

But I do think at the heart of the regime question, again, this big question of how we should govern ourselves, is a question that can never be settled. So, the main argument of the book is that this is an enduring question. It's essential to democratic politics. Other foundational questions that I bring up are the economic question. How shall we redistribute our wealth? The national question - Shall we function as one? These aren't questions that ever disappear. There will be times when they're more intensely fought over, more intensely contested, and then times where they might recede from view.

I argue we haven't really paid that much attention to the regime question. We've paid much more attention to economic contestation or national unification as issues of political development and much less so to the regime question for the simple reason that early scholarship on this was that the regime question is something that is settled at founding moments. Once you decide to become a democratic political system, those questions are resolved. Then the only questions that remain are tinkering questions or questions about inclusion. Everyone acknowledges that inclusion is never completely settled within any of these polities. You have inclusionary and then exclusionary measures that follow and it goes back and forth. Everyone recognizes that about inclusion, but actual fights over the rules of the game are not well recognized. People haven't paid that much attention to it.

So much so that we seem to have concluded that these things were already settled and when these fights reemerge as they have very intensively in this current period with this whole history obscured from our view, these fights seem completely novel and all the more terrifying for their novelty because we don't have that historical memory or background. We've naturalized a period of relative calm and now what we're in seems really unsettling. But my aim is to give us a backdrop to understand and orient ourselves to this question and to the moment that we're in.

Justin Kempf: One of the things that I enjoyed most about the book was how this historical perspective that you take in the book is very applicable to the contemporary age. But I think before we can really understand how it applies to the current political moment, it does help to understand how it worked during the 19th century, during the political moment that you focus on. My understanding is the two regime questions during this period are about parliamentarianism and suffrage and that these are two different regime questions that polities mainly in the United States and Europe are struggling to

resolve during this period. How much suffrage should there be? When should they open up suffrage? And even more so than that also about parliamentarianism. How should we govern ourselves?

So, let's start out with this idea of parliamentarianism, because I find it fascinating that the United Kingdom is the ideal case of parliamentarianism since the United Kingdom is a country that still has a monarchy today. I would've thought that a more parliamentary government would be more like a republic like the United States or France or a country like that. But you think of the United Kingdom as being the earliest version of the ideal case of parliamentarianism. So, help us understand what this concept means and why it's such an important foundation for democracy.

Amel Ahmed: So, most of the attention of this book is really on parliamentarism because of what I learned when I went back and looked historically. One of the things that we try to do as historical social scientists is to ground ourselves in the period and figure out what are they actually fighting about. What is their subjective understanding of their situation? How do they understand this conflict? There was no doubt in my mind that the central conflict for them was going to be about the power of parliaments.

So, I identified the UK as a case of very early parliamentarianism and as a result, it ends up being one of the steadier cases of parliamentarianism. And you're absolutely right. It is a constitutional monarchy. I mean, the monarchy is still there. But you know, there's de facto and de jure powers. What I look for is, for example, when was the last time that the Crown actually denied Royal assent, meaning they blocked legislation coming from Parliament? That's de facto power. When was the last time they successfully did that? The last time a monarch successfully declined Royal assent to legislation was 1707. The last time they threatened… So that's another thing I pay attention to because sometimes they just threaten it as a way of getting Parliament to back down. The last time they successfully threatened and got parliament to back down was 1829.

These are pretty early stages and there you see the conflict between the legislative body and the crown, and you can understand where the crown shirks a little because they don't have that kind of power. Now along the way, parliament's been doing a lot to assert itself. Legislatures have been doing a lot to make themselves the focus of government by entertaining petitions from their constituents. They worked very hard to make themselves the problem solvers and make themselves the place where people go to when there's a conflict that they need to be adjudicated. That is part of how they really flex their muscle

over the crown. In addition, there had been successive parliamentary reform acts up until that period stripping the crown of monetary power, so they gradually eroded the crown's ability to impose itself on Parliament.

But it wasn't until 1832 that you can see Parliament ascendant and recognized in law and recognized in fact as the dominant body while the Crown is still there. Monarchy is still there. But it can't really call the shots the way it had previously. It can't, for example, place individuals in Parliament. This was a practice that they had. So there was a legislative body, but the Crown had the prerogative to place individuals within this legislative body, which are then beholden to them or to be their patrons and bankroll their elections making those seats assured. All of those powers were stripped. In addition, you get a reform act that really shifts the balance of power in 1832 to Parliament. That's bolstered in 1867 and 1884. So that is the case that I find to be the strongest and most steady in terms of parliamentarianism.

You know, that's not a surprise finding. That story is known, but what I really focus on is how they did it, the sequencing of institutions that made this possible and made them coalesce along these really cohesive coalitions that allowed them. That's one of the tricky things about legislatures. They're not just fighting off the executive. These are contentious bodies with parties that are fighting each other and we see that today. We want the legislature to check the executive, but the legislature's busy fighting itself and one party is much more aligned. So that's, for me, an important puzzle. If democratic governance relies on this check, how does it operate? When this legislative body contains within it actors that are usually at each other's throat, how do they then come together and assert their power as a group? That's what I find most interesting there.

Again, I'm writing this and watching what's happening around us. For me, the study of democracy has always been a dialogue of past and present. I go to the 19th century, which seems really far back. But I'm looking for strands, both strands of continuity to the present, but also glimpses of battles and challenges that democracy has faced either successfully or unsuccessfully.

Justin Kempf: So, one of the challenges that I had while reading the book in understanding this concept of parliamentarianism is I found myself wanting to think of it as republicanism, like a republican form of government rather than the power of parliament, because it gives me the sense that you have maybe elections and clear divisions of power. It feels like this is a real modernization of countries. France is a great example that as it became more of a republic, it moved away from both monarchy and empire and became more democratic. It resolved some of those regime questions.

The United States is an interesting case in your book because you describe it as unsettled parliamentarianism and it's fascinating to me because it's one of the earliest republics. It's definitely the earliest republic of the four cases that you examine within the book. Why was the United States unsettled when it had rejected monarchy as early as the revolution?

Amel Ahmed: The United States for me was definitely the biggest surprise of the book in researching. As the story unfolded, I found myself constantly reading and rereading things to make sure that I'm understanding it correctly, again, situating myself and understanding the fights as they understood them and understanding what they are fighting about here. What is driving this? First to your point about Republicanism and parliamentarianism, I think you're absolutely right. I don't think you're confused there. The fight for parliamentarianism in the 19th century was to have it be part of republican government, so the ideal form of government at the time. No one would've espoused democracy as an ideal form of government. That was considered an extreme. Democracy was a component of the ideal form of government, but it had to be balanced with the monarchical element and the aristocratic element.

Most republican models, including the founding model of government in the United States follows a trinity of an executive who was modeled after monarchy because there were no other examples of executives at the time. So where else are you going to go for ideas about what this president is supposed to do? Of course, there were lots of debates about how much of a king the president ought to be and the conclusion was not very much of a king. They wanted to really constrain the executive. But the executive was certainly given more power than under the Articles of Confederation in the United States. I mean, there was no real executive there. The idea is that there would be an executive in the US. The Senate was considered representing the aristocratic branch.

But the story that I had known and understood about the United States is there was this revolutionary break. None of this should be happening in the United States. These fights between Parliament and the Crown… These were European fights. That's where they were born. That's where they belonged. They have absolutely no business in the United States. So, it was quite a surprise to me when I started looking into the history of the antebellum period, which I had studied before, but not with a view to understanding possible regime contention. You find there are lots of claims of a rising aristocracy and you think to yourself, certainly this is hyperbolic. There's no aristocracy in the United States.

This is what most of - not just the social science literature, but a lot of the historical narratives I've found thought. They dismissed these claims as

hyperbolic. They were using it to rile people up. But obviously there was no aristocracy in the United States. But again, my job as an historically minded social scientist is to really understand the words as they meant them. And when they're repeatedly talking about this in different periods, in different contexts, you've got to take it seriously. So, in the United States, the aristocratic element that really enflamed and set ablaze the antebellum period was over slavery and the power of this as it was understood, a landholding aristocracy, and the disproportionate power they had within the house. That had to do with the three fifths clause, which gave them representation for the unfree non-voting slave population in the south.

This was from day one contested and it was increasingly identified as an aristocratic arrangement. They had more power, as a result of land ownership, as a result of their ownership of property in enslaved persons. So, the issue was really about the house, because the house was supposed to be the democratic element. You've got the Senate. That's the aristocratic element. We can put that aside. We've got the executive. That's the monarchical element. But at the very least, the house needs to be the democratic element for that republican vision to be upheld. This was an ongoing, endless fight throughout the Antebellum period and in my discussion of it was a major contributor to bringing the country to civil war which was about the issue of slavery, but also was really implicated in the regime question of the time.

Justin Kempf: So, your fourth case is Germany, which doesn't democratize during the 19th century. I mean, it takes World War I before we get to a point where we think of Germany as a democracy and it was really a brief and fleeting period during the Weimar Republic. But we do see some important political reforms such as opening up mass suffrage during this period. Again, it's difficult to think of opening mass suffrage not being connected to parliamentary power. And you think of that period, the fact that they opened up mass suffrage, but didn't necessarily create a parliamentary system, as a destabilizing force for their democratization route. Can you help understand that difference between the way that we should think of them electing people to a representative body and having true parliamentarianism? What's the difference between those two Within Germany?

Amel Ahmed: So, typically those things are considered to go hand in hand. I tease them apart because for me the sequencing of these two things is really critical to long-term democratic development and stability and it is hard to understand how you have mass suffrage without parliamentarianism. But the key here is really the parliament in Germany didn't have much power. You can elect people. They have elections, I wouldn't say exactly free and fair, but they

become more so and certainly by the turn of the century, you would consider those competitive elections. These are elections to a body that doesn't have some of the crucial powers that parliament needs to have. One of the things that is really important is that they have some power over government formation.

But really the key thing here is that the chancellor, the executive, has the power to dissolve parliament when it does not behave in a way that pleases them and that makes really all of their powers obsolete. You know, if you don't produce legislation that the executive likes, the executive has the power to dismiss parliament. That means that they fall short of that measure of parliamentarism and fighting over the power of parliament really consumes them. It becomes the focus of these legislatures. I'll just give you one other analogy. I know it sounds like a weird arrangement, but it's super common today when we talk about elections under authoritarianism.

So today it is not at all uncommon for countries that feel pressure to democratize in some way to hold elections, but their legislative bodies actually don't have much power, they can be dismissed and the executive exerts a lot of power over them. We actually have a lot of this today and it's one of the things that for me was really interesting about the German case because it gives us an example of a country that experienced about 60 years of elections under authoritarianism for those who want to draw lessons for the contemporary context. In my analysis, it becomes a really destabilizing force because you wonder what legislators do if they can't pass legislation. Well, they fight about the power to pass legislation and that becomes how they identify.

So, you had the group that wanted parliamentarism and the group that didn't want it. That defined legislative coalitions throughout the imperial period in Germany. The groups that were pushing for parliamentarism were the Social Democrats, the Catholic Center party, and the left liberals. Then there was a group that enjoyed the patronage of the crown that resisted this. They were too afraid of what would happen, so it became the main axis of conflict within the legislature and the coalitions that they had formed carried over after democratization. So even once they got the thing that they were fighting about what I call their repertoires of conflict remain in place. They've been fighting for so long that their coalition partners remain the same and it ended up being super dysfunctional.

You know, the partners that you choose to fight over the regime aren't the partners that you would choose to pass economic policy, for example. They couldn't really rearrange in that way. So, you see constant legislative failure. This is one of the things I really try to emphasize also in the book. In the study

of democratization and democracy and autocracy, there's so much focus on the executive and not enough on the legislature. We focus on executive aggrandizement and that's been the focus in Germany as well. The Weimar Republic fell because of executive aggrandizement. What we often miss is that these instances of executive encroachment and aggrandizement are almost always proceeded by legislative failure. Why are these legislatures failing? Why can't they do their job? Why can't they pass legislation?

If they do that repeatedly, it opens the door to the executive to come in and say, 'They want the powers of parliament, but they can't wield them effectively. So, I'm going to come in and do it for them. We're going to cancel this parliament. This is not an explanation for the rise of Hitler or the rise of the Third Reich, but it is an explanation of what happens in situations where you have constant legislative dysfunction and failure where legislatures can't do their job and essentially abdicate. Here I'm looking at a crucial period, the economic crisis following the market crash, where they're unable to produce any policy and invite the executive to come in and expand presidential power. For many years, even before Hitler comes to power, Germany's run by presidential decree.

That's the long picture of it, but I'm trying to follow the chain of events that lead us to this point. How you get to this point, and this is one of the puzzles I started with, is you think of legislation as one side says yes, and one side says no and then the side that has more wins. But how do you get to a situation where you cannot pass anything? No one can pass anything. It was like a circular firing squad of coalitions that formed and fell apart and formed and fell apart. In the end, it wasn't that they passed the wrong policy, it's that they didn't pass any policy. They couldn't pass a budget.

Justin Kempf: So, you said that there's a lot of parallels between these types of parliaments and contemporary examples and you mentioned electoral authoritarianism. I think it takes a specific type of authoritarianism for that to happen because in authoritarian regimes where the executive manipulates elections so that the legislative body is supportive of the executive, I don't know that you see these fights. But where I can see a very close parallel is in the parliamentary bodies within the Middle East within monarchies. For instance, Kuwait, Morocco, and some of those countries where you have legislatures that exist, you have real parliaments, but they don't have much power to do much.

Kuwait's a great example where they're actually having issues where the parliament might actually get shut down in the near future. They're having real contestation battles. I think of that as a very close parallel. I don't know that I would think of Russia as the same thing, particularly under Putin's late regime

where the legislature's very much a handmaiden of the executive. Am I reading the contemporary situation right in terms of making this parallel to Germany?

Amel Ahmed: In terms of that kind of dysfunctional legislature, I think that is correct. But for what I was interested in, we have a lot of examples of this. So you've mentioned a couple, but there are a lot of examples in post-communist regimes and Latin American regimes. Not so much in Latin America now, but certainly in post-communist regimes. There's a book called *Practicing Democracy* about Germany where they talk about how this transforms the identity of legislatures and how it makes certain members of the legislature become more amenable to the wishes of the regime. I think this practice certainly has contemporary analogs, but I also think there's possibilities for legislative failure and dysfunction. One of the things I try to draw out in the book is that the dysfunction has everything to do with the salience of the regime question.

I'm not actually looking that far afield. I'm looking right here to the legislative dysfunction that we are seeing in front of us in the United States and throughout Europe where countries can't form governments. So, when I'm saying that the regime question is enduring, and this has been going on since the start, I don't mean to say that it's fine, carry on. These are dangerous fights. When the regime question becomes salient, when people start fighting about, this, it becomes debilitating for all politics, not just in newer emerging democracies, but in established democracies as well. It's something we haven't paid attention to, but you can see it historically and you can see it in the current context.

The problem with the regime dimension for me is that fights over the regime question are unlike other fights that we have in many ways, because they're much more polarizing. The stakes are really high and they are existential. So, in contrast to other policy areas where entrepreneurial elites and politicians can engage in log rolling that makes compromise more likely once the regime question becomes activated, once it becomes a real vector of conflict you're going to see compromise become much less likely. You're going to see polarization within legislative bodies and across the board become much more intense.

The argument of the book is once this dimension becomes salient, it's going to disrupt everything else. It's going to disrupt our typical left right coalitions that are typically economic coalitions, which is not to say that we shouldn't be having these fights. We absolutely need to have these fights. But we need to be aware that while we're having these fights, we're not governing and democracies fail, not just because authoritarians come in and want to take over. They often

fail because they fail at governance. They fail at doing what they need to be doing. So that's something that I am really locked in and trying to pay attention to in the contemporary context in the US and in Europe where governments are absolutely struggling.

Legislatures are struggling and that compounds the problem of rising populists and regime challengers look at them and say you're not doing what you need to be doing. You're not governing effectively and these institutions are not serving the will of the people. It feeds into a narrative that you know isn't completely wrong, that these legislatures are not functioning properly.

Justin Kempf: In the book, you make the case that the United Kingdom resolved the regime question through the sequencing of its democratization process and Germany struggled with the regime question because the sequencing was off. It pursued mass suffrage before it adopted strong parliamentary institutions and parliamentarianism. In contemporary democracies that are well established we're well past the sequencing point. It's difficult to understand how those historical examples can teach us how to be able to move beyond the regime question, because we can't follow the United Kingdom's process of sequencing the democratization process. We have to be able to find a different path to resolve it. So what lessons do we actually take from their historical examples to help us understand how to resolve the regime question so we can be able to govern better?

Amel Ahmed: I first want to say I do talk about sequencing in the United Kingdom, but I just want to make sure that it doesn't become too euphemistic. That's a technical term. I do use it in the book, but effectively what it means is that the United Kingdom got to suppress suffrage for a very long time, for 150 years. After the glorious revolution, they refused to expand the franchise and that is what made it more stable. That's what aligned their coalitions in a certain way. I certainly wouldn't want to follow that. I don't think we should follow that and the book talks about a menu of manipulation that each country tried because nobody wanted to give up power. Nobody wanted to have this inclusive political system.

In terms of the United Kingdom's path, it's not just that it's not available today. It wasn't available to most at the time. The United Kingdom had a lot of time to experiment with these different measures, and like I said, were able to delay suffrage for 150 years beyond the initial founding, the Glorious Revolution. That is not really available. The book covers three big cases and a big span of time. The conclusion that I reach is that is that you can't really make the regime

question go away forever. What we're doing now is kind of normal. We're not accustomed to it and we're not familiar with it.

So, the conclusion really deals with the post-war period. I think the post-war period is probably the biggest source of our political disorientation right now. It is our reference point for everything. How many times have you heard people say it wasn't like this in the 1950s. So, we've naturalized this period and no, it wasn't like this in the 1950s, but in the 1950s you have inter-party collusion to support Jim Crow. There are lots of things about the 1950s that supported an apparent regime consensus through the suppression of people who were dissenting through suppression, not just on the right, but on the left too.

In Europe, it was suppression of social democratic and communist parties that dissented from the economic order in the United States. It was those who dissented from the racial order that were marginalized within parties and beyond that. So, we've taken from this post-war period that was a kind of regime consensus. It was stable. We refer to it as the golden era of left-right politics, but in my rethinking of it, it was a manufactured regime consensus. It was a manufactured stability. That wasn't sustainable and it starts falling apart as soon as the 1970s. So, I think we have naturalized this period. This is our reference point and it's not surprising. We talk about the history of the discipline - Political science as a discipline is born in the 1950s and so these are our major reference points.

And there isn't a lot of attention paid to the United States within the field of democracy studies. But the point that I really want to come across in that conclusion is we can look at this and say this period was the pinnacle. We have this progressive narrative, and yeah, we had some trouble in the past, but then we get to the post-war period and everything settles down. Politics is more civilized and it becomes increasingly inclusive. In 1965, we have the Voting Rights Act, so everything's settled then. We could tell that story. But the story I see in front of me as a result of researching all of this is that the post-war period is the exception. In every other period we've been fighting and having these intense knockdown drag-out fights about the rules of the game, about the regime question, and not little fights.

I'm talking about fights, about the rules of the game. In every period we've had this except for the post-war period. So, what if this were the exception and what we're doing now this is a part of fighting. Fighting over the rules is a part of democratic politics and we need to orient ourselves to that fight in a way that really grounds us and helps us engage productively.

Justin Kempf: So, what is the regime question for the current political moment? I feel like we're dancing around that question. What is the regime question? Is it as brutal as democracy or authoritarianism or is it something more subtle and nuanced that exists today?

Amel Ahmed: I would say it is potentially even more challenging than democracy or autocracy. That seems easy now. I wish that were the choice in front of us, but in the period that we're in democracy is so ideologically hegemonic that all of our fights are going to be with and through this category. Everyone is democrat now, which is not to say everyone is actually a democrat, but democracy is a broad concept. There are any number of values that you can attach to it, any number of institutions. There are lots of ways to configure it. The period that we're in is very much like the previous period in many ways, but unlike previous periods today regime contention goes hand in hand with democratic contention.

We fight about what democracy is and should be. We fight about what rules we should attach to it, what values we should attach to it, and those fights can be just as brutal. But this is part of the political disorientation. We look at the fight and we think that's illegitimate. One side is democratic and one side is autocratic. The problem is right now all of this is being done through the language of democracy. Populists speak the language of democracy, but in a different register. In my reading of it, it's still really about representative institutions and populists come in and see representative institutions as an obstacle.

These legislatures, these various institutions of government are an obstacle because the will of the people is not being accurately reflected where those who are defenders of liberal democratic regimes are still relying on a model of pluralist politics that they seem to not understand fully isn't delivering. We live in a period of unprecedented inequality. We live in a period where people's basic material needs are not being met, but also in a period where inequality is a problem in its own right. But it's also a problem for procedural democracy. When you have vast concentrations of wealth, you're going to have vast concentrations of power. People feel this. People absolutely feel it. They understand that the voices of the wealthy are much stronger.

So, when you throw all of that into pluralist competition, it doesn't work. The liberal democratic model is based on pluralist competition assuming that there aren't dramatic differences of wealth. I was recently reading Robert Dahl's *Who Governs*. He was talking about this community, I think in New Haven, where you don't get these vast differences of wealth. And I thought how different that

is today. So, Dahl, one of the ideologues who has given us one of our most praised models of liberal democracy, was writing for a time and place where there was somewhat equality of wealth and that translated to equality of power. Now we're writing or we're observing conditions that are very close to oligarchical in terms of the concentrations of wealth and how that translates to power.

Justin Kempf: Now it sounds like the regime question is not just something that happens in democracy, but I get the impression that for you, it's almost central to democracy. It's almost endemic of democracy. The regime question is going to boil up the longer you have democratic governance. If that's the case, what does that say about the meaning and purpose of democracy, if a big part of it is arguing over what democracy is?

Amel Ahmed: For a lot of people that's really nerve wracking. Like if we can't even have stability of meaning in this term, then what are we supposed to do? I don't see it that way at all. I think our job is to fight for a vision of democracy, and for me that is the most grounding thing. All we can ever do is fight for a vision of democracy and we have to own that. We have to be willing to own that and say even if democratic government can look like that, that's not what I want. That's going to be especially crucial right now as we're seeing radical reinterpretations of democratic norms and practices and even laws that have been in place for decades or centuries.

Everything is open to reinterpretation now and reinterpretation on democratic grounds. It is something that's really different about the current moment. Usually when we think about democratic erosion, we are looking for rule violations, rule changes, something new. And to me, what is quite fascinating about the current moment is what we're seeing is not really either of those. We're seeing radical and really broad attempts at rule reinterpretation. That might sound narrower, but actually the playing field is expansive.

So, it's going to be incumbent on individuals, people, institutions to fight for a vision of democracy and really stand their ground, because when we get into this fight and say, no, that's autocratic, we end up not really having much to stand on because they're following the rules. They're playing the game. When we stand our ground, we should say that's not the vision I want. Those aren't my values and I'm going to defend my values. I'm going to engage politically.

I think much of what we've been doing has been engaging ideologically by saying, democracy, democracy, democracy. Here's my definition of democracy and this is democracy and this is not. That's one way to do it. I'm not saying we

should stop doing that, but you need to also fight politically. What I mean by that is that you're fighting in a space that's not entirely rule bound. Once the terms are contested, the rules that you thought were there aren't actually there. There's no referee that's coming in to blow the whistle and say this side is right and this side is wrong. You have to be willing to fight for the ideals you believe in. Historically, this has been essential to the regime question, but you have to really be willing to get into that fight to see it as necessary and to see it as legitimate

Justin Kempf: Amel Ahmed, thank you so much for joining me here today. The book one more time is called *The Regime Question: Foundations of Democratic Governance in Europe and the United States*. I do highly recommend this book. This is one of the books over the past year. It really stood out to me. Thank you so much for joining me today. Thank you so much for writing the book.

Amel Ahmed: Thank you, Justin. It was a pleasure.