

Democracy Paradox Podcast

Dan Slater Says Authoritarian Ideologies Still Matter (6/10/26)

Transcript

Introduction

Today's guest is Dan Slater. He is the James Orin Murfin Professor of Political Science and the Director of the Center of Emerging Democracies at the University of Michigan. This is his third appearance on the podcast. I ran into him at the Global Democracy Conference at the University of Notre Dame so it gave us an opportunity to discuss his recent article in the Journal of Democracy, "The Authoritarian Origins of the Third Wave."

Now I know not everyone who listens to the podcast is a scholar of democracy. But democracy scholars frequently talk about waves of democratization. The basic idea is countries tend to democratize around the same time. Democracy also breaks down in countries around the same time too. This is called a reverse wave or an autocratic wave.

Samuel Huntington wrote an influential book about the subject where he said there were three clear waves of democratization. He argued the third wave of democratization began in 1974 with the Carnation Revolution in Portugal. Scholars argue it ended in the early 2000s. Dan thinks we don't understand this idea. He says autocratic waves of the right and left have their own trajectories and it has an effect on the success of democracies to emerge and thrive.

Our conversation explores how autocratic movements of the right and the left differ. We also discuss why democracy scholars are more concerned about rightwing movements today. Finally, we explore the role of ideology within democracy.

My challenge for you is to consider whether your own ideological preferences can threaten democracy? If you're on the right, consider whether rightwing movements can go too far. If you're on the left, consider whether a radical left can become antidemocratic. Does that affect how you think about politics?

Please share your thoughts. If you listen to Spotify, you can leave your thoughts as a comment on the episode. You can also send me your thoughts as an email to jkempf@democracyparadox.com. There is also a link to the complete transcript in the show notes.

The Democracy Paradox is made in partnership with the Kellogg Institute of the Keough School of Global Affairs at the University of Notre Dame. Thank you to everyone who attended this year's Global Democracy Conference. But for now... here is my conversation with Dan Slater...

Interview

Justin Kempf: Dan Slater, welcome to the Democracy Paradox.

Dan Slater: Thanks for having me, Justin.

Justin Kempf: Well, Dan, I really loved a lot of your recent articles. We talked about your book when it came out, but you've had this series of articles, and in particular I was really fascinated with your recent piece in the Journal of Democracy, "The Authoritarian Origins of the Third Wave." It goes hand in hand with some other articles you've written about race and communism that we can also touch on, but it's this idea about the role of ideology within politics. And what I find interesting about it is that since the collapse of Soviet communism, authoritarianism is almost never really viewed through an ideological lens when we talk about it within political science. So why do we ignore the role of ideology when we study autocratic governments?

Dan Slater: I think around the turn of the century, when there was this move to start taking authoritarianism seriously in its own right, one of the main ways that political scientists did that was by taking its institutions seriously. There was a growing recognition that these regimes were organized, that they were in some ways as predictable and enduring as democracies, and that they weren't just the arbitrary products of tyrannical will. And so as people took these regimes seriously, it was sort of a big discovery that institutions really mattered – and political scientists love institutions. It gave a pretty tractable way of doing mainstream political science work on authoritarian regimes.

And then ideology seemed not to matter in the sense that Marxist-Leninism seemed to go overboard, certainly as a justification for a regime to be in existence. Certainly there are still movements and individuals who adhere to these ideas, but they were no longer the foundations of regimes in the same way. So it kind of made sense: communism died, and because authoritarianism had been almost synonymous with communism during the Cold War for a lot of people, ideology went from everything to almost nothing overnight. So a lot of what I've been trying to do is think about the consequences of that regime type – not just the legacies, but in some cases the real descendants, regimes that still exist and haven't ever really gone away from that era. And puzzle over whether left-wing versus right-wing ideology matters in the study of authoritarianism and whether we should take it more seriously.

Justin Kempf: So what's the difference between the authoritarian right and the authoritarian left today? Because in the past it was defined by communism – the authoritarian left was a communist dictatorship, the authoritarian right was essentially just anti-communist. So what's the difference now?

Dan Slater: That's exactly right. And this is sort of what the Journal of Democracy piece tries to argue: that things were structured for quite some time by a communism versus anti-communism way of thinking. When the Cold War ended, it raised the question of whether ideology mattered at all.

I would also say that although there's not much attention to authoritarian ideology, there is attention to authoritarian psychology – and authoritarian psychology has basically been defined almost completely as a right-wing phenomenon. Things like valorization of tradition and preference for order over justice. So ideology fell by the wayside, but I think it clearly matters on the right. The kind of backsliding regimes we see, cases of democratic erosion – the far right, hard right, these populist forms of ideology – but then not all regimes that are backsliding fit that model. Whether they adhere to a leftist ideology actively today or not, they have their roots in older, very much left-wing Cold War regimes. So they've all changed and reformed in certain ways, but in some cases there's a lot of overlap between the kind of regime that existed during the Cold War and what exists now.

Justin Kempf: I feel like the authoritarian regimes of the right have a clear sense of what they are. Or maybe we just have a clear sense of what they are. Let me push you a little bit on that. Can you explain what it is that these authoritarian regimes of the right actually believe? What brings them together? I would assume we're talking about regimes like Putin's Russia, maybe Orbán's Hungary before he lost the recent election. What is it that connects these different regimes that we can associate as authoritarian regimes of the right?

Dan Slater: I'd put Putin aside because I think he's a little bit of a different case – and hopefully it'll become clear why as I say more. But Orbán is a very good example. Certainly Trump is a very good example. I think Modi is a very good example. And what ties these regimes together is frankly a kind of chauvinism, a belief in a sort of purity – the idea that the people should be pure, and that the people have become impure through immigration and diversification, and a kind of nostalgia for an imagined period when there was a certain people who were all pretty similar in terms of their race, religion, ethnicity, and orientation toward gender and sexual values. It's an anti-cosmopolitan right, is how I think about it.

So to me, the big change on the authoritarian right has been this evolution from the anti-communism of the Cold War to the anti-cosmopolitanism of today – and that's often styled as cultural Marxism. There's a way in which the authoritarian right was able to travel from anti-communism to anti-cosmopolitanism, and I think we see that in pretty much all of these regimes of the right.

Although the Putin regime shares some of that, it also has deep roots in the Soviet experience. The key to that is the Soviet experience meant not just Marxist-Leninism but also a very strict monopoly on power – the idea that one group should have a monopoly on power, and that the political party should be very tightly fused with the security apparatus. So I think there are ways in which a kind of monopolistic control and authoritarian system – not a competitive system, but a pretty closed authoritarian system in which the security services play a very foundational role – and in which a big part of the justification for this kind of regime is anti-Americanism and opposition to what we call the liberal international order. These regimes have a real hunger and a natural predisposition toward complete political monopoly in a way that right-wing regimes generally don't.

Russia is a pretty good example of that. China is still an example of that. But then there are also some carryover regimes – Nicaragua under Ortega, Cambodia under Hun Sen, some of these former rebel regimes in places like Mozambique and Angola. They really are a different animal than the kind of right-wing ideological regimes we see. But a good bit of the autocratization of the world can be traced to these regimes as well.

Justin Kempf: So are you defining those as authoritarian regimes of the left, especially Nicaragua? We think of that as a left-wing dictatorship. Are you lumping China and Russia in as authoritarian regimes of the left, or do you see them as a different animal entirely?

Dan Slater: I think they're different animals from each other. China and Russia are too large to be types of anything, to be perfectly honest. And this is one of the main starting points from the varieties of communism special issue – you can try to render these things in a nice, crisp typology, but the fact of the matter is, particularly with places like Russia and China, they're so vast and have so much history that they're going to be bigger than almost any type you can come up with. So Russia and China have to be thought of as different cases from almost any category.

But I do think there are some shared features between a regime like Nicaragua on the one hand and China and Russia on the other, and then something like Cambodia, Tanzania, Mozambique, Angola. What they all share is their roots in the Cold War – and roots in a period when the proper way to rule was through a monopoly that would have completely cornered the market on political ideas. The people who are still in these regimes today were not raised in an ethos of the idea that elections are the way you decide who should have power, or that majority rule is the way to decide what the proper set of policies and governors should be.

Sometimes these regimes came from political parties, sometimes from the military, but they gave a very forward role to the security services in forging a coercive, monopolistic political order in which national development and national strength would be advanced – but under the auspices of that kind of security-led political monopoly. Notice there's nothing in there about anti-pluralism or anti-cosmopolitanism or populism or nativism. Russia has some elements of that. Nicaragua has some elements of that in the kind of neo-traditionalism of Ortega's rule. Authoritarian regimes are clever beasts – they can draw from lots of different ideological streams to justify their existence. But I think there is a whole other set of regimes with these left-wing origins that, even if they've changed their ideological stripes or changed the way they talk about what they are, show some real carryover that I think we should be paying attention to.

Justin Kempf: So you're saying that these regimes can be both post-ideological and still inherit aspects of an authoritarian left?

Dan Slater: For sure. And I think one way to think about this is: what was really the deepest ideological root of Cold War communism? Anybody would say Marxism, Leninism, Maoism. But I would argue that an even deeper root is Machiavellianism. And the thing about Machiavelli is that what he counseled was, on the one hand, a certain pragmatism – but on the other, that the prince should really try to rule with the support of and through the strength of the many and not the few. Machiavelli was very much fearful, or felt the prince should be fearful, of fellow elites. So the idea that you should try to rule by crushing other elites, other sources of power, and that the prince should try to rule through the active support of the masses – that's something Machiavelli would have really recognized.

So I think in some sense, when the Cold War ended, we think: okay, that was the Leninist extinction, that was the end of Marxism as a viable regime ideology. But in some ways what it did was strip away a Marxist-Leninist-Maoist veneer over what were fundamentally Machiavellian political orders. These were political systems with no hesitation about using coercion, no hesitation about using the weight of the masses against fellow elites to rule. And in that way, the kind of Machiavellian regimes we see around the world today have their roots in the Cold War.

So in some ways, Mexico is actually a better example. Mexico under the PRI was a left-wing authoritarian regime – not a particularly strong Marxist-Leninist orientation, but very much a regime that was born through the mobilization of the peasantry and the workers as a way of destroying the power of the church and landed elites. And that then carried over. So I think that these regimes of the left today – or that we think have leftist origins or leftist legacies – are in some ways more similar to what the PRI regime was like in Mexico than to the Soviet Union or the PRC during Maoist times.

Justin Kempf: So it sounds like you're drawing a link from Machiavelli to some of the more classic communist writers – obviously Lenin, but I'm also hearing a lot of Gramsci.

Dan Slater: Yeah, I think that's right. And the idea here is that there's just a vast amount of ideological space that's not taken up by the anti-pluralist right. These ideas on the left don't necessarily have to be authoritarian, just as these ideas on the right don't have to be authoritarian.

And actually, I think one interesting aspect of the current moment is that given how much economic inequality we have in the world and the way it's growing, you might expect a lot more left-wing autocratization to be happening. So on the one hand I want to make the case that left-wing authoritarianism is very important, but on the other hand, it's also a rarer phenomenon in the world right now than right-wing authoritarianism – which I think is hard to explain with the materialist arguments we have for why people support authoritarianism. Because if it was really about the economy, I would suspect that left-wing authoritarian movements would be having a lot more success around the world than they currently are. The fact that right-wing movements are having so much more success really points toward just how important identity is – and how important these things I was talking about are, where what these movements and parties and regimes are trying to do is again kind of purify the nation, reduce diversity, try to recreate a mythic era when the people were more uniform.

Justin Kempf: Well, regarding the role of economics – which used to dominate the idea of the right and the left – nowadays the political right seems to adopt almost a left-wing economic ideology. We're talking about welfare chauvinism. Hungary has increased lots of redistribution under Orbán. Marine Le Pen wants to increase redistribution and often attacks Macron for not doing enough for the economy. It's very different than what we would've seen during the Cold War.

But at the same time, the way you're describing some of these countries as almost post-ideological seems to go back to the traditional view that authoritarianism no longer really has an ideology – that it's all just the same. It's kind of the sense of Hannah Arendt's view of totalitarianism, that Nazism and communism are both totalitarian, that the impulses are the same at the end of the day. James Loxton talks about it in his recent book about authoritarianism. It feels like it's no longer ideological the way you're explaining. Why do you still say that there are right-wing waves and left-wing waves, that that's relevant, if so many of these regimes are already post-ideological?

Dan Slater: Well, if it's post-ideological, we still have to make sense of the ideological. The first thing we have to do is get the history right. This is why I critique this idea that the third wave of democratization started in the 1970s, because in the mid-1970s there was a wave of leftist peasant-led communist revolutions – but there was no wave of liberal democratization happening at all. It's a peculiarity that when Huntington wrote about the third wave in 1991, he backdated it to 1974. So the first thing I want us to do is think about waves of authoritarianism seriously, not just waves of democratization, and realize that sometimes what's really going on is some wave of authoritarianism is crashing, which may or may not then be filled by some kind of wave of democratization in its wake. It really wasn't until well into the '80s that both left-wing and right-wing authoritarianism had reached their apexes and started to fall off, which then created this opportunity for the kind of mobilization we saw in the late 1980s. Nobody in the mid-'70s would've seen things that way.

And I do think that fascism and communism – the earliest waves of right-wing and left-wing authoritarianism – were very, very ideological. The Cold War battle between communism and anti-communism was also very, very ideological. So what's happening now is not that it's non-ideological, it just takes a little more work to understand.

So if we put this in terms of political psychology: to me, the most fundamental difference between a right-wing and a left-wing orientation is what I would call a threat orientation versus a gains orientation. On the political left, the basic idea is that there are inequalities, injustices, and hierarchies in the world that are unjust – they're there for accidental reasons, they're not deserved, and therefore the role of government should be to level these hierarchies and make sure that those who have been marginalized can make real gains. But on the political right, the more basic idea is a threat orientation – that hierarchies are basically fair, they're earned, and the main problem is when people try to threaten these natural just hierarchies through pursuing social justice or diversification. And from there you can start to see how different varieties of this arise in different contexts. Things like communism, anti-communism, and fascism are just particular instances of those orientations toward politics.

Justin Kempf: In the piece, you make the case that the authoritarian wave crashes because the United States is no longer supporting anti-communist dictators, and the Soviet Union stops providing support for communist dictatorships. It gives me the impression that you're arguing that authoritarianism requires even more international support to sustain itself than democracy does.

Dan Slater: That's an interesting implication. I don't know that it has to, but during the Cold War, authoritarian regimes around the Global South did tend to have strong client relationships with either the United States or the Soviet Union. There were some that were non-aligned, for sure, but even non-aligned ones would tend to draw support from both sides.

So maybe the better way to think about it is in terms of dependency. During the Cold War, you had a lot of internationally dependent authoritarian regimes of both the left and the right. And then when the Americans started pulling back their blanket support for right-wing authoritarian regimes – really starting after the end of the Vietnam War – and when the Soviets did the same after their defeat in Afghanistan, you had these regimes that had become very dependent on outside support facing something like an extinction event. Most of them liberalized and tried to open up to foreign markets and have competitive elections.

But the interesting thing is what happened next. What I would argue is that the regimes that originally came from the left actually came back in many cases and were able to reassert political monopolies in ways that those on the right did not. Russia is the first and prime example. Russia opened things up, had multi-party elections – but where are we now? Basically in a single-party system where rule is really in the hands of the FSB, the security services, which were incredibly powerful agencies during the communist era.

So I think we just see a kind of closure and level of coercion in the former left-wing regimes that makes them stand apart. Think about Cambodia and Malaysia a decade ago – pretty similar hybrid electoral authoritarian regimes in Southeast Asia, and it was really not clear which one was more likely to liberalize. Cambodia has gone to complete Cold War-style single-party rule while Malaysia kept opening up. If you think about recent elections in sub-Saharan Africa,

Mozambique and Botswana both suffered shocking setbacks for their dominant parties. Botswana kept opening up and accepted the results. Mozambique cracked down ruthlessly.

You could also think about Nicaragua versus Venezuela. We have this set of left-wing populist regimes that have popped up in Latin America, but they lack these old rebel roots and that Cold War mentality. Venezuela with Chavismo – yes, it became authoritarian, but it remained multi-party. It's never become monopolistic in the way that Nicaragua has. To me that's a genuine puzzle: why is Nicaraguan authoritarianism so much more closed than Venezuelan, even before recent events in Venezuela? And I think part of it is how deeply rooted these left-wing monopolistic movements for political power were during the Cold War era.

Justin Kempf: So why is it that right-wing Leninist states like Taiwan and South Korea opened up? Because they were also closed systems – right-wing single-party regimes. You've written extensively about them. Why do we see a completely different experience in countries like those? We could probably name a lot of other former right-wing dictatorships that were closed party systems and are now multi-party democracies or competitive authoritarian regimes. What's the difference?

Dan Slater: I think here's where an ideological commitment to monopoly from the Cold War carries over. Taiwan, South Korea, Indonesia – these were ruthless, extremely brutal authoritarian regimes. There was nothing inevitable about them democratizing. They weren't on some kind of long-term obvious path toward democratization by any stretch.

But I think the fact that it was never quite in their DNA that one and only one group must rule – well, the KMT is maybe the closest example because it was, as you say, a kind of Leninist party. But there was something different about right-wing and left-wing authoritarianism during the Cold War, not necessarily in terms of brutality, but in terms of that ideological commitment to monopoly. There was this famous essay by Jeanne Kirkpatrick that got largely dismissed at the time, where she was saying that right-wing authoritarianism is much better than left-wing authoritarianism. People guffawed, and it was laughable in a sense because it was apologetics for some terrible regimes. But decades later, she looks pretty right in terms of what they end up doing next – because she was saying, well, these regimes can democratize, and we should expect them to. And in a lot of cases, that wound up being true.

So I do think the ideology matters here, but I don't know if we have a good word for it. It's almost like monopolism – to what degree does your ideology require that one and only one group must have all the power? A hegemonic view of politics. Competitive politics is bad politics. Multi-party, non-hegemonic politics means chaos. There's just a much stronger basis for that on the left than on the right.

And maybe it goes back to this question of orientations: on the right, threats can wax and wane. And I would argue that the main reason Taiwan, South Korea, and Indonesia became democracies was because the threats of communism in those cases waned, and so that allowed democratization. By contrast, on the left, you're gains-oriented, but you don't think that the procedures and the competitive politics of democracy are going to yield the gains necessary for historical injustices to be overcome. You need a strong monopolistic movement of the left to actually produce people's democracy, substantive democracy, economic democracy – and that's a project that remains forever unfinished. That makes dictatorship more open-ended.

Justin Kempf: So one of the problems I have with the analysis you're bringing up is that the way you're describing the left, I see a lot of similarities to a thinker who's described as a democratic thinker – Chantal Mouffe, who I think is very problematic in a lot of ways. She's kind of brought back ideas from both Gramsci on the left and Carl Schmitt on the right. And we already mentioned that we can see clear examples from Gramsci that talk about exactly what you're talking about – monopolization of power. But Carl Schmitt on the right, who was a Nazi thinker – very intellectual, but so far to the right that he's identified not just with fascism but with Nazism – he's talking about the same exact thing, the fact that you need to be able to monopolize power. And when we look at fascist movements, we see them also monopolizing power. Why do you describe the right as not having the same inclinations to monopolize power, especially when we see a lot of these new movements on the right trying to clamp down on the opposition and attempting to monopolize power? Are they not doing it because they lack the political means to do it yet, or because of some ideological predilection?

Dan Slater: I think it would depend on the case, at least to some degree. But I guess part of what your question leads me to say is that during the interwar period, you had full-on fascism and full-on communist movements, certainly in Europe. Communism won World War II, fascism lost. Communism was standing very tall after World War II because the Soviets had defeated Nazi Germany. And one thing I say in the Journal of Democracy article is that we think of World War II as this global democratizing event, but what it really did was strengthen left-wing authoritarianism. That's what was really strengthened by World War II more than anything.

So let's think about the authoritarian right and its ebbs and flows. Fascism was a very clear ideological project – you're absolutely right, and you're invoking Arendt here. It's totalitarian, and fascism has no less of an appetite for monopoly than communism does. But after World War II, communism was stronger than ever. Fascism was not. All you had were these lingering quasi-fascist regimes, Spain and Portugal kinds of things, but fascism had been soundly defeated.

So the version of the authoritarian right that came around during the Cold War was basically residual – basically anti-communist. And then eventually it took on a kind of neoliberal form, very focused on security, very focused on efficiency. So it's really taken time for the authoritarian right to get its footing and regain its sense of purpose. And especially with the end of communism, it kind of got married to neoliberalism – your Reagans and your Bushes and your Romneys – which I think were not really authoritarian right projects. They were conservative right, but certainly within the realm of democracy.

What we're seeing with the rise of the far right or the hard right is that it thinks about the right differently. It's not necessarily more monopolistic, but it just sees things more in terms of identity. Its goal is not so much about strengthening the nation or economic efficiency – and here's your point about welfare. It's a right that cares about this purity issue.

The most fundamental point is: left authoritarianism stayed communist; right authoritarianism did not stay fascist. And the kind of right-wing autocratizing movements we see around the world today also don't seem to be monopolistic in quite the same way. Which gives the lie a bit to the question of whether we're seeing the return of fascism. In the same way that you can look at socialist politicians in the United States and say there are certain steps toward communism, but they're not communists – I think similarly, the far right in Europe and the United States is talking about politics on the same axis as the fascists, but it hasn't gone to that extreme. One should be

aware of the possibility, but I think it hasn't. And one reason is exactly what you're saying: they're not monopolists in exactly the same way as the authoritarian left has always been.

Justin Kempf: Is the authoritarian right authoritarian because of how they think about power, or is it the ideology itself? Because we talk a lot about issues of immigration and other issues as to how much democratic parties should be adopting those policy positions to better represent their voters. To what extent are these ideologies inherently authoritarian – the way that we might think of extreme forms of communism as just fundamentally authoritarian – versus how much can we separate the ideology from the way they think about power?

Dan Slater: I think it really depends on how you define democracy. There are lots of policy positions on the identitarian right that, by a minimalist definition of democracy, are not anti-democratic – we want to win elections and have more conservative policies than you support. And there are others that I do think shade into authoritarianism, because they shade into denying the fundamental equality of human beings – the idea that people with different orientations and different races and religions have equal human value. And I think the idea that a nation belongs to a certain religion or a certain racial group is a fundamentally authoritarian idea. Not all people on the right believe those things, so this is by no means to paint everybody with the same brush.

Basically, once you get to a point where your exclusionary impulses and your impulse to punish those who are deviant reaches a certain threshold – not easy to define, but some threshold – I think that's a fundamentally authoritarian thing. And even if you win elections, that's where I would kind of draw the line.

Justin Kempf: So the article is effectively arguing that the current autocratic wave is really a right-wing wave that's cresting at the moment – which implies that the left-wing autocratic wave is dormant at the moment. What is the authoritarian temptation for the left right now? Because I'll be honest, I feel that there's a lot of complacency on the left – they assume that leftist ideas are fundamentally democratic, and I worry that that can facilitate an autocratic temptation because they think that enacting their own policies is democratic regardless of the means to get there.

Dan Slater: Yeah, I do think there's definitely a global wave of right-wing autocratization going on. That, I think, is for sure. I think the left – I wouldn't say it's dormant exactly, because there are some cases where old movements of the left are becoming more deeply autocratic as well, but it's certainly nothing on the scale of what we're seeing in places like the United States and India. These are the world's largest democracies.

So this puzzle – why is the autocratization impulse so much stronger on the right than the left at a time when, with economic inequality and environmental destruction, you could imagine the calls for radical illiberal measures – I think the temptation for left authoritarianism is very strong, and the question of why we're seeing less of it is a real one. What's happening in Mexico right now could be a pretty important example of a somewhat left-wing, somewhat authoritarian movement that's taken hold. But I think the implications of the analysis are very much that these waves come and go, and what you need is some kind of shared purpose and the stomach to use authoritarian means to get what you think is right. The political right has found that. The political left has not – which is good in the sense that we're not seeing as much pressure for an authoritarian turn on the left. But I think it would be irresponsible not to recognize that these authoritarian waves have crested and crashed before, and they crest again. We've seen the

authoritarian right crest and crash, and the authoritarian left has crested and crashed. What's it going to look like if it crests again? I think we should be thinking about that.

Justin Kempf: Do you think we're overlooking the authoritarian temptation from the left because it's more technocratic rather than ideological? I mean, it just looks completely different than it did in the past, the same way that the authoritarian right looks very different than it did in the past. Piketty, in *Capital and Ideology*, talks about a Brahmin left and a merchant right. If we're thinking about a Brahmin left – this intellectual, upper-class, highly educated left – that sounds like a temptation towards technocratic solutions. And we do see that in a lot of places: the left isn't as focused on redistribution or inequality the way it used to be, but seems more focused on technocratic solutions where the professional class makes the decisions. Is that something we might be overlooking when we think about autocratic temptations in the world?

Dan Slater: Yeah, I think that's a pretty good depiction of what's happened to the left and center left around the world. It's become much more the parties of the educated rather than of the working class – that's undeniable. That doesn't mean to say that the working class is on the right, because that's mediated by race. If you say working class American and you picture somebody who's white, well, a lot of the working class in America is not white, and they are not MAGA.

But look at what's happening in Bolivia right now – a real eruption of unrest from miners and indigenous people. This is not the left of Nancy Pelosi. And Sri Lanka, the uprising we saw there a couple years ago – real economic anger. The educated left is not an authoritarian left for the most part. A pretty bourgeois middle-class left is less likely to fall to authoritarian temptations than a working-class left or a peasant left, which is much more desperate. If it sees itself not being well-served by procedural democracy, you're more likely to get that kind of pressure from those who lack the most, those who are being the most materially denied.

Justin Kempf: In the past, left and right-wing dictatorships saw each other as threats. Nowadays, right and left-wing dictatorships feel almost more like they're allies. We see Venezuela working with dictatorships we would associate with the right – though obviously Venezuela has changed recently, and we don't really know the direction it's going. But under Maduro, we saw them cooperating with states like Russia, and Russia working with Iran, and it felt very much like an axis of autocratic nations without any sense of ideology. What changed?

Dan Slater: Well, that's one way of thinking about Machiavellianism – pragmatism in pursuit of power and monopoly. I think autocracies around the world are happy to take resources and build networks with other regimes internationally that help sustain them, and I don't think those networks are strictly autocratic either.

Regimes like North Korea and Myanmar have strong relations with China and Russia, but they also have increasingly strong ties to a lot of democracies, to the international economy, to international criminal networks. There are just a lot of ways these regimes can sustain themselves with external resources. And this is a big difference from the Cold War, where these were really client states in a bipolar world – you picked your champion. Now we're in a much more networked world where there are really no more poles. What that means is these regimes have very pragmatic balancing strategies, trying to extract resources and support from lots of sources.

So it might look non-ideological, but I think the ideology that really matters for the authoritarian left is this kind of commitment to monopolism – the idea that monopolism is proper and right, that it's in fact the only way to produce a just political system – and a kind of anti-Americanism, anti-liberal international order way of thinking about things, the belief that what's called the liberal international order was just a cloak for American hegemony. That idea is widely held among these regimes, particularly those steeped in the Cold War era. So the fact that regimes with different ideologies are working with each other doesn't mean they're not ideological. But if you want to understand the nature of international order right now by just looking at who has similar ideologies following each other, we're certainly not in that kind of world. In that sense, ideology is not structuring the world the way it did during the Cold War.

Justin Kempf: Oftentimes I ask people what is going to spearhead a new democratic wave. Your article begs the question: what's going to cause the current autocratic wave to crash? Let me ask that question. What's going to cause the current right-wing autocratic wave to come to an end?

Dan Slater: What happened to prior right-wing authoritarian waves? They had to be defeated. I think mostly authoritarian waves have to be defeated by somebody – whether that's democratic movements, their own failures, their own exhaustion, their own overstretch. And so it depends on where.

Clearly a case like Hungary shows that there are certain places where the ballot box and elections could be sufficient to remove some of these autocratizing parties from power. There are places where that's not true. It's hard to imagine at this point what stops the Ortega regime or the Hun Sen regime in Cambodia. These regimes are quite entrenched. And one thing that a history of leftist authoritarian rule does is it really, really destroys opponents – so there isn't the same kind of natural opposition there to defeat them.

In the world's wealthy democracies, the kind of more democratic, neoliberal version of the right is really on its heels, really battered by this more identitarian right, which I think is much more comfortable with authoritarian measures, much more comfortable with tossing aside democracy if it leads to impure outcomes in which the impure people win. And I think we have to buckle up for a long battle on many, many fronts. The key is going to be: can you build pluralist democratic coalitions in these places that can actually compete for and win elections, and also maybe in some instances do the dirty work necessary to make sure that elections stay relatively free and fair, which might take some hardball at times. It's going to remain a tough road. I don't think the crashing of the right-wing authoritarian wave is anywhere immediately in sight.

Justin Kempf: So this conversation has pretty much centered on authoritarianism. Let me turn it to democracy as we come to a close. Can democracy itself adopt an ideology of the left or the right? Because the way we're framing this, it sounds like if you adopt a right-wing or left-wing ideology as a regime, it automatically means you're going to move towards authoritarianism. Does that mean that democracy has to be non-ideological, post-ideological, or even just centrist – where it allows views of both sides to succeed at the same time? How do we think of democracy?

Dan Slater: Well, I think democracy has to be multi-ideological. It's pluralistic – it has to make place for conservatives, liberals, all these different streams of thought, and allow them to compete in the public sphere to win majority support and shape policy. There's nothing about

being on the left or the right that means you're authoritarian. The question of whether or not you're willing to entertain authoritarian measures in pursuit of your vision – whether on the left or the right – largely depends on what kind of obstacles you face, and whether you feel like within procedural democracy even the basics of political justice or preserving the nation can be done. If those things can't be done with just procedural free and fair democracy, then free and fair democracy becomes of secondary importance.

So you can definitely have democracy of the left. Think about social democracy in places like Sweden for decades. That was certainly democracy of the left. America and the UK have in some ways always been a kind of democracy of the right – even when labor's in power or the Democrats are in power, there are certain features of our economies and our constitutions that mean there's only so much they can do, which causes a lot of frustration on the left. At this point, that has not led to a whole lot of authoritarian temptation on the left, but it's not hard to imagine what happens next. Another five or ten years of this, and I think you could see a lot of people on the left being willing to jettison democracy to make sure that the policies of the left have some chance of prevailing.

Justin Kempf: But it does mean that neither side ever really gets what they want. Democracy always feels like a compromise – the left never really gets a fully left-wing political project, the right never gets a fully right-wing political project. Does that mean that democracy is dissatisfying, or is that really a feature rather than a bug?

Dan Slater: Well, I think democracy is always going to be dissatisfying for people on the ideological extremes. Both the rotation of power and the need to build majority coalitions means it's going to look more like the median voter, more like median ideology. Democracy will generally not provide a lot of people with their absolute ideal outcome, but it'll in most cases protect you from the absolute worst outcomes.

So I think it's a little bit like having insurance. No one likes paying for insurance, but it's better to have it than not – because something could really go wrong. A lot of what democratic institutions do is provide that kind of insurance, and it isn't necessarily thrilling, but it is pretty necessary when people on the extremes can have some pretty violent and nasty political projects they would love to pursue if facing no constraints. I would hope that when policy gains are made in a direction you believe in, people see that as a reason to support the system and not make the perfect the enemy of the good. But yeah, I think politics is dissatisfying. I think human life is disappointing. Nobody ever gets everything they want, so I don't know why politics would be any different.

Justin Kempf: Well, Dan, thanks for joining us today. We've mainly centered on the article "The Authoritarian Origins of the Third Wave," but I do want to note that you're a very prolific author. I feel like I'm reading your material constantly, and it's always insightful and always interesting. So thank you so much for joining us today and for writing this article.

Dan Slater: Always a pleasure, Justin. Thanks.