

Democracy Paradox Podcast

Erica Frantz Says Personality Parties are Democracies' Latest Threat (2/18/26)

Transcript

Introduction

Today's guest is Erica Frantz. She is an associate professor in political science at Michigan State University (MSU) and a research fellow at the Charles F. Kettering Foundation. Her most recent book is *The Origins of Elected Strongmen: How Personalist Parties Destroy Democracy from Within*. It's coauthored with Andrea Kendall-Taylor and Joe Wright.

Erica, Andrea, and Joe have written about personalist politics for years. At first they focused on authoritarian states. But in 2017 they published an article in the Washington Quarterly with the title, "The Global Rise of Personalized Politics: It's Not Just Dictators Anymore." From there they have written numerous articles until they published their most recent book in 2024. They believe strongman leaders like Xi Jinping in autocratic China have more in common with strongman leaders in democracies like Rodrigo Duterte in the Philippines.

What's surprising to me is this theory hasn't really taken off. While they've published many essays and even had their book showcased on the Ezra Klein Show, scholars rarely refer to personalism in democracies. Instead, most scholars focus on populism. Erica says this is a mistake. She says these are two distinct concepts and explains the difference in this episode.

My challenge to you is to decide whether personalism better describes recent threats to democracy than populism. Erica makes a strong case for her ideas, but the conversation also exposes some possible flaws. But like always, I don't want to tell you what to think. I want you to develop your own ideas about the meaning and purpose of democracy. Hopefully, this conversation helps you develop those ideas.

The Democracy Paradox is made in partnership with the Kellogg Institute of the Keough School of Global Affairs at the University of Notre Dame. Make sure to mark your calendar for the upcoming Global Democracy Conference on May 19th and 20th. This year's conference will take place at the University of Notre Dame. Check the link in the show notes to register today. But for now... here is my conversation with Erica Frantz ...

Interview

Host Justin Kempf: Erica Frantz, welcome to the *Democracy Paradox*.

Erica Frantz: Thanks for having me.

Justin Kempf: Well, Erica, I was excited to read your book, *The Origins of Elected Strongmen: How Personalist Parties Destroy Democracy from Within*. I feel like I've been reading your work on "personalism" for so long now, so it really was exciting to read the book and see everything

come together into a clear coherent theory with lots of examples and lots of research behind it. It was exciting to see it finally come together so thank you so much for writing it. It was really exciting to see it in print.

Erica Frantz: Well, thank you for the kind words. The book was really a labor of love. It took forever. I think we started working on it in 2016, so it took about eight years to finally complete it. And then, once it came out, the timeliness was really interesting, particularly with comparisons to the United States. But thank you very much. I'm excited to be on the show.

Justin Kempf: So, Erica, anytime that I talk to somebody about a concept or an idea I like to start out with an example rather than a definition. So why don't we start there? Can you give me a clear example of a case that really highlights what personalism or personalistic rule or a personalist leader really is?

Erica Frantz: Sure. So, Andrea, Joe and I have been writing about personalism in authoritarian contexts for some time and the book was our first foray into democratic systems. I think usually when we think of personalism, we think of the stereotypes in autocracies, so places like Putin's Russia where it is very clear who's in charge and where there are purges happening regularly of inner circle elites. There's an image at the start of the war with Ukraine where he was sitting alone at this long table and he had his military advisors at the end of this long table. That embodies personalist rule. There are no actors in Putin's Russia who can challenge them. Elites live in fear that they could be purged at any moment. Consequentially, we see a lot of misguided foreign policy, corruption, and ratcheting up of repression. That's an extreme case, I would say.

In terms of personalism and democracies, a case that illustrates all of the developments that we talk about in the book is El Salvador with Nayib Bukele. He created his own political party, Nuevas Ideas, and people will wear shirts that have an N on it, but the N does not stand for Nuevas. It stands for Bukele. That really gets at the degree to which he's everything in that political world. The choices that he's made and the trajectory of democracy in El Salvador, which in my view is gone, is very much consistent with the downstream consequences of this sort of leadership.

Justin Kempf: Now, Bukele is an interesting case because many would say that El Salvador's an instance of a democracy that is already broken. It's a democracy that's already suffered complete breakdown. He's an autocrat. He's a dictator. Bukele himself even calls himself the coolest dictator in the world. But when we think about personalists in democracies, oftentimes we're naming people like Bolsonaro in Brazil or Orbán in Hungary. These are people that are typically known as populists. Can you help us understand the difference between personalism and populism, particularly when we're talking about it within a democracy?

Erica Frantz: That's a great question and it is somewhat challenging to differentiate personalism and populism because there is a lot of overlap in practice where a lot of times leaders who we would classify as personalist, the media or some academics would also say are populist. Orbán is a good example of that or Erdoğan in Turkey. So populism is sometimes a little bit of a fuzzy concept in that there are debates among academics over whether it is a political strategy or

whether it is an ideology and it makes it somewhat difficult to disentangle what the consequences of populism are when there is some conceptual ambiguity.

With personalism, it's pretty straightforward. When we look at Personalist parties, for example, it's the degree to which the leader controls pretty much all features of the party. I have a more academic definition of personalism that I could give later, but really it is an institutional feature of a party and we can easily observe and measure personalism. There usually is not much disagreement about which places are personalist. A very solid indicator is whether the leader created the political party themselves. For me, there's a lot of analytical leverage that you can get from focusing on something that's easy to observe and define. On top of that, however, we show in the book that a lot of times leaders are labeled populists and classified as populists using expert coding like V-DEM after they've already done things that are harmful to democracy.

It makes it very difficult to disentangle whether populism is what is harming democracy or whether it's just the codes are the way they are, because experts observed a leader was harming democracy and therefore called them populists. We're able to show in the book, looking at media references to Erdoğan in Turkey and the way which the more that he did things harmful to democracy, the more likely it is that experts were going to assess that he was a populist. So that creates some problems and some levels motivated our measurement strategy for how we coded parties and why we code personalism before the leader comes to power to get away from that problem.

But I wanted to just add that there are also examples of personalist leaders who aren't populist. One that I know is Macky Sall of Senegal who was almost decidedly antipopulist and his opponent was thought of as the populist. And yet, Macky Sall definitely governed in a personalist fashion, had a party of that he fully controlled, tried to dismantle executive constraints that ended up leading to a popular movement against him, and he was voted out in 2024. That's one example that we can latch onto where there was variance across populism and personalism.

Justin Kempf: Do you think Putin, when he came to power, was an example of somebody who was a personalist leader that wasn't a populist?

Erica Frantz: I think you could make that assessment. One of the things that's tricky with these leaders is that because they're not tethered to a party in any meaningful way, they can shift ideologically. So they will tailor what they say based on what they think is in their strategic interests. A lot of times it's in a leader's interest to leverage discontent, let's say, for migrants and adopt this nationalist populist framework to get more support. At other times, as with Trump, he's leveraging cultural backlash in the United States. So I think that a lot of these leaders sometimes have hardcore ideological preferences, but a lot of times they shift. So, what might start off as a communist leader or a socialist leader with Hugo Chávez shifts in line with what's going to keep them in power.

Justin Kempf: Now, what I find interesting about the concept of personalism is that it's much more adaptable to different types of political regimes. For instance, we can talk about

personalism within democracy, but we also talk about personalism within autocracy. In fact, we talk about personalism within autocracy even more than we do within democracy. I hear Xi Jinping oftentimes described as a personalist leader who is injecting personalism within China. How is it different when personalist politics enters a democracy from what we see in an autocracy like China or Russia?

Erica Frantz: That's a great question. So as you mentioned, we have been increasingly talking about personalism in autocracies and there is good data that illustrates that it has been increasing over time, not only across regimes, but also within them. The example you just gave of Xi Jinping is a really good one in that there is solid evidence that personalism has increased under his role. We're also observing personalism increasing in democracies and we have good data that illustrates that too. There are very large differences in terms of how personalist rule is exercised in authoritarian systems than in democracies and that has to do with the absence of any mechanisms of accountability in autocracies.

So, elections are one means of holding leaders accountable and exercising restraints. But in authoritarian systems elections are far less likely to meaningfully constrain the leader, and so therefore, you can see takeovers of multiple state institutions. We typically look at personalism in two domains in authoritarian systems. The leader vis-a-vis the party and the leader vis-a-vis the security forces. In democracies, we only look at the leader vis-a-vis the party. There is not that much variance across democratic cases in terms of how democratic leaders control their militaries. Usually there is much more professionalism in democratic militaries. What's going on in the United States right now with ICE and Trump's efforts to purge the military mirrors to some degree what you would be more likely to see in an autocracy. But in general, there is significantly more happening in the authoritarian landscape with leaders' control over the security forces.

So in personalist places, you're going to see... Well, actually what you're seeing happening right now in China where the news reports are constantly talking about generals suddenly going missing and Xi trying to exercise full control over the military elite. You'll see things like the creation of paramilitary forces. It's a really big indicator of personalism in an authoritarian system when the leader has their own presidential guard or youth militia or different things that can counterbalance the traditional military. That's quintessential personalism in an authoritarian system. Then on top of it, if these leaders have support parties, they totally control them. So the big difference to me is in democracies, it's limited to leaders vis-a-vis their party.

Justin Kempf: What I find interesting about China and many other autocratic countries is that we see them removing the few constraints that they have on their power. At the same time that we see personalist leaders within democracies doing the same thing and it's viewed worryingly when we see democratic leaders removing constraints on their power because we see it as democratic erosion. But we're seeing autocratic countries doing the same thing - removing many of the few constraints that they have on their power and somehow becoming even more autocratic.

What's surprising is that this is all happening at the same time, both in autocracies and democracies. Why do you think that personalism is happening all at once, all around the world, all at the same time? Is this something that you see as a recent phenomenon or is this something that's cyclical or is this something that's always happening behind the scenes and we just don't pay enough attention to it?

Erica Frantz: That's another great question and somewhat challenging to answer. I think it's fair to say that in autocracies, this shift toward greater personalism is a reversion to the past, and there are a lot of people who think that the couple of decades where we had collegial rule with strong party dictatorships or strong military dictatorships - that that was the aberration and now we're shifting back to the old times with pharaohs and emperors. It's possible that more concentrated power is the national equilibrium for politics in authoritarian systems. I don't know if there is a singular cause of personalism globally just like I'm not convinced that there's a single factor that leads to democratic backsliding globally. It seems there's a lot of nuance. We have strong red flags.

For me, party personalism is a good early warning sign, but it's possible that there are regional differences that matter. That said, we know that during the Cold War there were a lot of resources invested in political parties. Often for communist political parties, the Soviet Union would be investing in strengthening parties and in professionalizing militaries. We also know that the United States trained military officers in Latin America and did all sorts of things to make those institutions more robust. Once the Cold War ends, suddenly there's a vacuum and we're going to be less likely to see that investment in institutions. Personalism is also more likely in authoritarian systems the poorer the place. So there's a lot going on there in terms of democracies and why parties are becoming more personalist.

There is not a lot of academic research that looks at this specifically. There is research that looks at the rise of personalism in general in democracies and personalized media campaigns. But for personalism in other areas of politics and with parties specifically, there's not research that examines it to my knowledge. My hunch actually is the changing media environment has been really consequential. So there's evidence that the advent of cable television shifted how political campaigns were run and put more emphasis on the individual over the party. My sense is that the new media environment with social media and these new digital technologies has made traditional parties less valuable to leaders.

In the past in democracies, if leaders wanted to win office, they needed a strong party that had grassroots branches in various places. To win a national campaign, you have to generate support in lots of different localities. Parties are useful tools for collective action. With social media leaders can bypass that altogether and directly connect to voters with their X accounts. It has rendered the party as an organization less valuable.

Back to Bukele, he is the exemplar of the savvy use of new media, so he did not need a strong, robust party to do what he did to win a presidential campaign. He had some political experience, but he was definitely not part of the traditional political establishment. He took to social media, built his brand, and created a party for the purposes of running for office, but the party was just

instrumental in all this. It wasn't the core reason that helped him mobilize voters. So my impression is that in democracies, the changing media environment has hollowed out political parties and made it possible for leaders to create these organizations that are wimpy and weak that they use to check the boxes and run for power.

Justin Kempf: Bukele is a fascinating example because when we think about El Salvador, we have two very longstanding parties that are competing within the country for an incredibly long time. There's one that's on the right, one that's associated with the left, and voters were used to those two parties competing against each other. Bukele didn't have strong ties to either of the parties or at least not really strong ties. So when he runs for president, he founds his own party. So what's amazing about the El Salvador case is that his approval ratings are through the roof. People love him even while he's demolishing democracy step by step. Voters love him. They're incredibly supportive of him.

So that raises the question, why is it that voters continue to elect personalist leaders? Why do they not see through them and see this as a real threat to democracy in the long term?

Erica Frantz: I'm very glad that you asked that question because this is something that I am really trying to talk about as best as I can, because I think it's really important to counter some of the narratives that are out there. I should add that another reason people think personalism is on the rise is due to partisan dealignment. Voters are fed up with their traditional political establishment. A lot of that research is in Europe, but it certainly translates to the context in El Salvador where two parties were in power since 1994. They were delivering nothing for ordinary people. There's so much crime that there is a disgust with the traditional political establishment and it definitely led to a vacancy where if there was space for a new actor to come along. So that's part of the picture.

In terms of Bukele's popularity, it's not uncommon for authoritarian leaders to be popular. Putin for some time was really popular. I don't know about now. There were times when Chávez was popular people. Sometimes that is surprising to people, but if you know you have food on the table and security, then you're going to be more likely to support your leadership. With El Salvador, the security situation was so horrible that it became impossible for people to live their daily lives without fear of crime. You talk to people now who live there and they say that their lives have been completely transformed. They can walk around at night. So despite the fact that something like 1% of the population is incarcerated, for now people are willing to ignore some of those human rights violations.

But I ultimately think that his popularity will die. There's a good chance he'll be corrupt like other personalist leaders are and people will start to grow disenchanted with the lack of economic distribution. But it does raise the question that you have these leaders come to power and they're backed by these parties that are weak and just loyalists of the leader. The leader starts to do things like take over the judiciary, try to get rid of term limits, things that should be red flags for us, and they win reelection. They don't always. Macky Sall's a good example. He lost power. Bolsonaro's another example of that. But sometimes they do win reelection. It has raised

a lot of questions globally about it is the case that voters don't want democracy and that counters what we know from surveys.

Most people say that democracy is their preferred form of government, so it turns out that what's happening is a lot more nuanced. Ordinary people support democracy and are still able to elect leaders that are doing things that harm democracy because ordinary people aren't aware that an action was harmful. So often, we as academics like to ascribe a lot of sophisticated understanding of democracy to ordinary citizens, which is not true and not consistent with what we know from polling. We can't expect that people who have full-time jobs, maybe two jobs and are busy, are going to have the time to read about what healthy democratic behaviors are. That's just not the reality.

What people rely on to make sense of whether things are healthy in a democracy are elite cues. We look to our political leaders to send signals that what's happening is or isn't good for democracy. With personalist parties, elites get in line behind what the leader says and does. When you have something like the insurrection in 2021 in the United States, it should have been the case that Republicans across the board said that this was not healthy for democracy. It should be uncontroversial that using violence to force a leadership transition is not what you would like to see in a healthy democracy.

Instead, we saw that one by one Republican elites got in line behind the narrative that the election was stolen and the insurrectionists were within their rights to do what they did. That influences public opinion. Because supporters of the Republican party started to say, 'My political leaders are saying everything's fine, so it must be that everything's fine.' There's a lot of good research that shows that voter understanding of democracy is context dependent. So there's evidence that people shift their view of what is healthy in a democracy in line with what their leaders are doing. They might profess that they strongly support democracy, but they vote for somebody that's doing things that we as academics know is harmful for democracy and not realize that anything's wrong because it's incumbent on elites in their party to do something.

Sometimes I look at the example of the United Kingdom with Boris Johnson. Here we have a leader who is behaving somewhat chaotically and ultimately, members of the Conservative party sanctioned him. In the end, it was the COVID lockdown parties, but there were constraints on Boris Johnson from the Conservative Party leadership and this sends a message to ordinary people supporting the Conservative Party that what's happened is not something that we should tolerate. With personalist parties, when these leaders try to do things like purge their judiciary and fill it with their loyalists, the party elite say, 'This is great. This is what democracy needs. This is going to save democracy.' So their supporters digest it as politics as usual.

Justin Kempf: I agree that some of the behaviors that leaders do are difficult for the public to understand as being an actual threat to democracy. However, Bukele is an extreme case. I mean, he did send in the military into the legislature to force them to bend to his will. That's pretty clear example of democratic backsliding. Other leaders have tried similar things in terms of trying to change the constitution, which again, Bukele has changed the constitution to allow himself to pursue a second term and will likely pursue a third term the way that it looks.

Another leader in Latin America who did the same thing was in Bolivia where Evo Morales tried to run for a fourth term and when they put it on the ballot for voters to decide, voters rejected it. He got the Supreme Court to approve it so that he could run again. Anyway, they tried to rig the election from what we can tell and then people protested. He ended up leaving power. Again, this was an example of somebody who was clearly pursuing a personalist path. Bolivia was a textbook case of personalism and by pushing the envelope too far, voters did rise up and oppose him. Do you think El Salvador's gone so far down that path, that Bukele's concentrated enough power that that's impossible? Is El Salvador's no longer a democracy? Is it clearly a consolidated autocracy at this point?

Erica Frantz: I consider El Salvador to be authoritarian starting in 2024. That's because despite that Bukele would have won free and fair elections, it was not a level playing field for the opposition. The members of the opposition were harassed. They were targeted by the state and they also did not have the same ability to campaign as Bukele did because Bukele was using his access to the state to ensure that he had a superior campaign. Once that happens, once the opposition can't reasonably compete in the electoral process and have a reasonable chance of winning, then we can't really call it a democracy anymore.

We can debate whether it has slid or not, but to me it's pushed over the edge into the authoritarian world. One thing that we know, regardless of how you classify El Salvador, is that with incumbent power grabs, a little bit of power leads to more power. Then it leads to even more power. For pro-democracy supporters, it becomes increasingly difficult to do anything. The more that the process gets going, the more difficult it is for pro-democracy groups to challenge the leader and the resources. Advantages become too great to do anything. I talk about this a lot because people are often asking what can you do to stop democratic backsliding. And there isn't a lot of great research in this area, but we do know that timeliness is important and that elections, while they are still reasonably free and fair, are meaningful windows of opportunity.

So Bolsonaro was voted out. Macky Sall was voted out. Janša in Slovenia was voted out. The Law Justice Party in 2023 in Poland lost their legislative majority. So there is a small window where ordinary people can exercise their discontent. Sometimes these leaders miscalculate what the voter's appetite is for things like extended term limits. When these miscalculations happen and they go a little bit too far, that can mobilize the broad-based coalitions that you need to do something about these cases. With the United States, we're seeing that leaders will float the idea of a third term or of changing the constitution so that they can run indefinitely. They're trying to get some sense of what the pulse of public opinion is.

The more they float the idea and normalize things, the more likely they have a chance of voters thinking that this is a normal option and not doing anything. But elections are certainly windows where you have the potential for change, so long as there is reasonable chance, it'll be free and fair.

Justin Kempf: So is El Salvador an example of what a Democratic collapse from a Personalist leader would look like, because it doesn't feel like there was a complete collapse? It feels like things just slowly shifted from one category to another.

Erica Frantz: That is the new mode of democratic collapse where rather than military coups being the mode of transition through easily observable, often single day events where everybody knows exactly what happened, there's no scholarly debates over what happened. Today we have slow and subtle accumulations of power. Ultimately, these leaders end up tinkering with the electoral process in ways that advantage them. Pro-democracy supporters are left stunned. The subtle and incremental nature of incumbent led backsliding today makes it tremendously difficult for supporters of democracy to leverage an effective response. They get into debates over whether what happened is harmful. They're confused and usually we see leaders intentionally try to draw out the process and avoid any singular event that could create a huge backlash.

So beyond El Salvador, recent cases are Georgia with the Georgian Dream and Benin with Patrice Talon. There's a lot of parallels with Talon and his inner circle and Trump and his cosing up to the business sector. Turkey, Venezuela, and Hungary are also more well known examples. Vučić in Serbia is another case where we have this slow and incremental backsliding. So that is the new norm, the new model, of how democracies fall apart today. It has created a lot of challenges for pro-democracy movements precisely because of the way in which it can lead to debates and confusion over what's happening. It's just more difficult for pro-democracy supporters to do much to push back.

Justin Kempf: So I want to circle back to Brazil for a moment. You just described Bolsonaro a few moments ago as a personalist leader who was voted out of office. However, the person who defeated him, Lula, seems to me like he's also a personalist leader in his approach to leadership. I mean, he's been the presidential candidate five times now for the Workers' Party and he's in his third term of office. He's thinking about running for a fourth term. Even when he wasn't the president, it kind of felt like he was the shadow president still in terms of the leader of the party. It feels like he's governing that same way and yet we think of him as saving democracy in Brazil. How should we be thinking about Lula in terms of personalist styles of leadership?

Erica Frantz: So I can't remember the data off the top of my head in terms of how the PT is coded. My guess is that it has grown more personalist over time to the degree that the party is synonymous with Lula and to the degree that it is simply a vehicle for him and his career that is certainly something that we would see as dangerous to democracy. For me, beyond the personalism in the party, it seemed like a positive for Brazilian democracy that Bolsonaro lost. He didn't hide his authoritarian tendencies and disrespect for democratic institutions. On the other hand, is it healthy to have the same political leader always in charge and not see a regeneration of leaders?

I think it's too early to say whether Brazilian democracy is going to be on its feet again, and not just because of the Lula question, but also because of the long lasting damage that Bolsonaro did to Brazilian society. It continues to be very polarized in ways that are challenging for democracy. Another case though, where we have to be careful about the health of democracy is Ukraine with Zelensky because he governs atop of a personalist party. The war has served as a big distraction in terms of the health of Ukrainian democracy. There have also been indicators that there's quite a bit of corruption and problems with corruption in Ukraine, so that's another case where it

remains to be seen whether this style of leadership might be challenging for democracy in the years to come.

Justin Kempf: Zelensky would not be the first leader that we thought of as defending democracy that turned out to have autocratic inclinations when he came to power and was in power for a very long time. We've seen that happen with lots of leaders who were fighting for democracy and fighting for freedom. A lot of people turn to them as being a very impressive leader and somebody that we could get behind and then things didn't necessarily always turn out well.

Erica Frantz: Erdoğan and Orbán are good examples of that precise thing. Sometimes observers are quick to say that it's something unique about the leader's personality that is allowing what's happening to happen. In the case of the US, is it that there's something unique about Trump that has led to everything that's happening? It's important to remember that we can't always know a leader's intentions. A priori Erdoğan was hailed by *The Economist* as this potentially game-changing democratic leader in Turkey. The same thing with Orbán where he was a major pro-democracy activist. There was no cause for concern when Bukele got elected. If anything, people thought this was a rapid breath of fresh air. We can't really know what kind of leader or type of leader you're going to have.

One thing that we do tend to observe however, is that most leaders think that their country would be better off if they were to have more power and I think that's just human nature. A lot of times it's for genuine reasons. We've seen in the US with FDR where there was an expansion of executive power in a time of crisis. The idea is that the leader genuinely thinks that their political system and their people will be better off if they were to have more power.

Justin Kempf: So would you describe FDR as a personalist leader in terms of his style of leadership?

Erica Frantz: I think a lot of leaders would like to be personalist in terms of decreasing the ability of other actors to stand in the way of their policy agendas. What differs across cases, however, is the health of their party. So, if the party is a traditional party that is based on a policy platform where elites in the party see themselves as having careers and political futures that are not dependent on the leader, we're not going to see leaders totally dismantle democracy. Traditional programmatic parties serve as a critical guardrail for democracy. So there's not research that I know of that gets into the specific steps of incumbent led backsliding, but I can name so many cases where step one is they get rid of executive constraints and nobody's too alarmed.

But then ultimately the desire to hold onto power becomes too tempting and these leaders start to fiddle with elections. They change electoral rules like Hungary with Orbán, so that Fidesz has super majorities. The quest for power ultimately becomes too tantalizing, so oftentimes it's the case that when there aren't many institutional constraints on the executive, we do see them mess with elections in ways that undermine democracy.

Justin Kempf: So it sounds like you're saying that personalism isn't really about the style of leadership, but is a lot more about whether or not a leader's own political party poses constraints upon their own leadership.

Erica Frantz: Yes, I am all about institutions and what sort of rules are in place. What does a political environment look like? I tend to have a pessimistic outlook when it comes to the ambitions of political leaders. You learn early on in grad school if you study rational choice theory that leaders are going to behave in ways that maximize their power. If we take that as an assumption, then we don't get as distracted by personalities and charisma and these intangibles. You can see what the environment looks like. Is there an opportunity for a leader to get away with maximizing power?

Focusing on personalist parties enables us to get at that angle. Because we can see the leader controlled party nominations, the leader personally funds the party, there aren't very many local branches. These are all things that we show in the book and there's other indicators as well that suggest that leaders are going to do whatever they want once those parties get legislative majorities.

Justin Kempf: So that would help explain why a leader like FDR or even a more recent one, like Barack Obama, who comes to power with a large electoral mandate doesn't dismantle democracy to implement their agenda. It's not just the person. It's also constraints that aren't even in the constitution, but are embedded within their own political party.

But let's turn to a different leader who's viewed as saving democracy in his own country and that would be Emmanuel Macron. He is a leader who founded his own party to be able to get elected. His party was clearly a vehicle for his own personal ambitions. The name of his party, the initials, *En Marche!*, are literally his own initials and he has taken steps to consolidate power to pass certain legislation. At times, people have protested things that he's done, but we still think of him as somebody who's centrist enough that he is not really a threat to democracy. What makes Macron different, even though he seems to have a lot of the same traits as a lot of these Personalist leaders and even his party looks like a personalistic party.

Erica Frantz: That's a great case because it is a very good example of a situation where there is high party personalism and we didn't see democratic backsliding. There's some subtle things that Macron did, but in general, French democracy is as it always was. It wasn't this big shift when he got in. I mean, *En Marche!* is definitely a personalist party. I can't remember what it's called now, but it was originally *En Marche!* EM for Emmanuel Macron. We looked into that case in some detail because we were curious. Like, what's the difference here? Is it that he's just different?

It's difficult to know with much certainty, but one thing that we did observe looking at this case is that elites in the party, elites who were assigned high level positions of power, were competent. They had the relevant political experience for their posts. That is unusual with personalist parties. Oftentimes you see loyalists or family members get into positions of power, but with Macron, you saw people who were qualified career civil servants. Potentially it is a

difference in his decisions, a difference in his perspective of who he should appoint. Maybe he is a genuinely different sort of leader than these other personalists. But we do know that that staffing, hiring and firing, pattern was quite different in France than it is in virtually every other case that I know of.

It's likely that was consequential because it's not the sort of situation where elites are incredibly fearful that their careers are going to fall apart if they speak out against the leader. It's a very different political environment given that it functions more like a traditional party would where people are appointed to positions based on their qualifications rather than loyalty.

Justin Kempf: But it does raise the question of how an opposition should be able to fight back against a personalist leader, because in the case of France, they turned to a personalist leader to fight back against what they thought of as a far right opposition in Turkey. They're starting to turn to a personalist leader, in my opinion, to fight back against Erdoğan. It feels like a lot of countries think that the best way to fight personalist leadership might be to lean into personalism themselves. Is that the wrong approach or should those oppositions really behave differently? What's the right strategy?

Erica Frantz: That's another great question and something that I'm asked a lot from a slightly different angle. But I'm asked a lot about whether pro-democracy groups need to fight dirty, just like the incumbent. Backing up a little bit though and thinking about some of these issues, we know that the supply of parties has changed in that most new parties today... I know this looking only at European parties, but my guess is that it would translate elsewhere. The menu of parties that are available today are mainly personalized parties, so increasingly new parties are personalist. Again, I think that might be because of the changing media environment where more leaders are aware that they don't need to rise up the ranks of a party. They can just create some vehicle.

There aren't that many options for voters because most of the parties that are out there that are new are personalist. So let's say you have these traditional parties that people are fed up with. The only other option is going to be some new party that is based on some aspiring political leader. I think that's part of the story in terms of why the opposition parties are personal. I don't think that it is a good strategy to fight fire with fire, partially that's because I think you lose all credibility if you try to use the same dirty tactics as these power hungry leaders do. Then let's say you defeat them at the polls, but you're not healing society in ways that would set the stage for healthy democracy. You're engaging in their inflammatory rhetoric, which they intentionally do to polarize society.

If you're doing the same things, that polarization is going to persist or deepen and create challenges for democratic restoration. So, in my view, do not fight fire with fire. Try to build broad-based coalitions that can unite around shared values. Polarization is the autocrat's best weapon. So to the degree that you try to combat that and not fall into the trope of thinking that society is super divided. It's better for democratic futures.

Justin Kempf: So Erica, I have followed your work for a long time and early on it definitely felt that your work focused almost exclusively on autocracy and different types of authoritarianism. But even as you began to study personalism and do this research with Andrea and Joe, you focused first on personalism within autocracies before you started emphasizing growing personalism within democracies. In fact, I felt that some of your early papers on personalism within democracies almost had this aha type feel to them when you wrote them or published them. It feels like you've learned a lot about democracy through this journey. So, I'd like to ask you, what has the study of personalism and autocracy taught you about the meaning and purpose of democracy?

Erica Frantz: It was very uncomfortable to do research in democracy. For one, I felt like I had no anecdotes at my disposal and I really am someone who wants to talk about real world examples. It really bugs me when people don't make connections to what's actually happening in politics and I knew nothing about democracies because they were never in my data set. So it felt very uncomfortable. But we had a hunch that some of the things that we'd been talking about in our research on dictatorships were happening in democratic systems. Joe and I have done a lot of work on Latin America earlier on when we were grad students. Andrea had done a lot of work in Europe or Eastern Europe and so we had seen Hugo Chávez in Latin America, Ortega in Nicaragua, and there's multiple cases in Eastern Europe.

So as some of these incumbent takeovers happen and we noticed in the data that they were happening more frequently than coups. We noticed in the data that they were increasingly serving as a springboard for personalist dictatorship and we started to think what's happening here? There were parallels with autocracies in terms of what leaders were doing with their parties. I've done a lot of work on foreign policy mistakes in dictatorships and how personalism leads to these situations where leaders are surrounded by yes men. We started to see that happening in democracies too. It was like the door opened for research that we could do and these seemed like important questions that we could weigh in on.

But I would be lying if I said it wasn't uncomfortable to suddenly give talks and be answering questions about France. So, through the research I have learned about a lot of new cases and it has been stunning the degree to which there are parallels with how democracies are falling apart and how authoritarians entrenched their rule. Now, is it disheartening to see that the book came out and there's just been even more of this happening globally? Yes. You don't want to be right that personalist parties are going to destroy democracy, but at least it's a first step into having better insight into what some of the warning signs are for democracies today and helping democratic systems rebound.

Justin Kempf: Well, Erica, thank you so much for joining me today. I've been really excited to get the chance to finally speak to you. Thank you so much for writing the book once again. It's called *The Origins of Elected Strongmen: How Personalist Parties Destroyed Democracy from Within*. Thanks for joining us to help explain this concept. Thank you so much for writing the book.

Erica Frantz: Thank you so much for having me and thank you for all of your excellent work in promoting this research. I read what you do all the time. It's a great way of connecting scholars with others in the community, so I appreciate all that you've done. Thank you.