Democracy Paradox Podcast
Javier Corrales on Intentional Polarization (10/1/25)
Transcript

Introduction

Host Justin Kempf: This week, we are going to do something a little bit different. To introduce today's guest, Javier Corrales, I'm joined here right now with Henry Moncrieff, a post-doctoral visiting fellow here at the Kellogg Institute. Henry, can you tell us just a little bit about your work?

Henry Moncrieff: Hello Justin. Thank you very much for having me here. I'm really excited to talk about the new article of Javier Corrales and Ricardo José Salas Díaz. Just to talk to you a little bit about my own work, I study the military responses to democratic backsliding episodes in Latin America. In the last five to six years, there have been two cases of electoral irregularities. One was Evo Morales in 2019. In this particular case, we had the military making a public statement against these actions. This public statement pushed Evo Morales out of power. In Venezuela, my own country, we have the case in which there are also electoral irregularities. But we have noticed that the ruling coalition has stayed in power. In this particular case, we also had a military public statement, but in this case was in favor of the ruling coalition.

Justin Kempf: That's really exciting work, Henry. So obviously today's guest is going to be Javier Corrales. Are you excited about today's interview?

Henry Moncrieff: I am extremely excited. Full disclosure, first time in a podcast. Thank you very much for the invitation. Also, I've been following Javier for years. He is one of those few scholars that have studied Venezuela in depth, especially the democratic, erosion process that has happened in Venezuela. If you ask me how, how it has contributed personally to my research, he created two concepts, autocratic legalism and asymmetrical fragmentation that have been fundamental in understanding the democratic backsliding processes in the region, and in particular in the case of Venezuela.

Justin Kempf: I have followed Javier Corrales for quite a while because he's a regular contributor to the *Journal of Democracy* and I've come across his work in a few other places as well. Obviously, he has an amazing book on Venezuela called *Autocracy Rising: How Venezuela Transitioned to Authoritarianism*. But it's his most recent article that caught my attention and made me feel that this is

the right time to talk to him. His article is called “Intentional Polarization: How Policy Extremism and Ideological Overuse Promote Democratic Backsliding.” Henry, did you get a chance to read the article?

Henry Moncrieff: Justin, I also read it and my first take is how timely it is. It is not only about the case of Venezuela, but it's also about the new wave of autocratization that is happening right now, including, some cases related to what we have thought about consolidated democracies, including the US. Something that to me is always impressive about Javier Corrales’ work is basically how he tends to write and how he reaches audiences through his clarity in his arguments. This one particular is a study providing evidence that backsliding is not accidental. I think that's the first thing that we want to establish. Instead, it is a strategic process. It's strategically induced by executives that are using polarization and ideology to consolidate power and I think that's one of the most basic premises in his work.

Justin Kempf: I think that idea really comes out in this conversation, and another reason why I really wanted to talk to him right now about this specific article was how I feel it dovetails with the previous episode with Susan Stokes, where I was able to talk to her and he's actually building on some of her ideas. We even talk about that in this interview. So, if you listen to the previous episode, you're going to find that this conversation builds upon some of those ideas and elaborates on how polarization has an impact and how that directly contributes to democratic backsliding. Now, like always, this is just one view. One approach to thinking about these concepts, but I think it's one that allows people that are outside of political science to be able to think about it differently.

Let me give a formal introduction to Javier. He is the Dwight W. Morrow 1895 Professor of Political Science at Amherst College and as I said before, he's the author of the book *Autocracy Rising*, multiple articles within the Journal of Democracy, this more recent article in *Democratization* and just a very prolific author in general.

Before we kind of get started, I do want to mention one more time that Democracy Paradox is made in partnership with the Kellogg Institute at the Keough School of Global Affairs at the University of Notre Dame. I want to thank you, Henry for popping in and demonstrating some of the great work that's being done with the Visiting Fellows Program. So, thank you once again for participating.

Henry Moncrieff: Thank you, Justin. I really appreciate the opportunity to be here and also to talk about Javier Corrales' work. Thank you very much.

Justin Kempf: So, for now, this is my conversation with Javier Corrales…

Interview

Justin Kempf: Welcome to the Democracy Paradox.

Javier Corrales: Thank you for having me.

Justin Kempf: Well, Javier, I'm really excited to have you on. I've read your stuff for a long time, so I'm a very big fan and was excited to see your new article, "Intentional Polarization: How Policy Extremism and Ideological Overuse Promote Democratic Backsliding." I was particularly excited because it fits into the conversation that I just had with Sue Stokes. So, I'm excited to talk to you about this article. But I do want to take a moment to give credit to your coauthor, Ricardo José Salas Díaz and the publication *Democratization*, which is a fantastic publication that I find just really fascinating as I read their articles on democracy and democratization on an ongoing basis.

But let me start out by asking about your title, "Intentional Polarization." So, do leaders cause the polarization that exists within society or do leaders take advantage of the political environments that are already polarized?

Javier Corrales: I think both things can happen, but what the article argues is whether a leader is emerging in a country where there is no polarization or with preexisting polarization, chances are if these leaders are interested in democratic backsliding, they will bring it to the next level. They will intentionally make the polarization worse. The article discusses why they do that, how they do that, and what's the strategy behind it - when it will work or backfire.

Justin Kempf: So, are leaders pursuing these strategies purposefully or intuitively? Do leaders go into it saying, I want to create democratic backsliding and I'm going to do it through exacerbating polarization or do they just intuitively understand that creating further polarization is going to accomplish the goals that they want to achieve?

Javier Corrales: Their initial intention is to engage in some type of power grab. They realize that this generates opposition and in dealing with that opposition, they come to discover that one solution is to hyperpolarize. The first thing that they want to make sure is that there is no disagreement within the

base. At first, the base isn't entirely comfortable with it. Some are. Others aren't. So, the first effect of polarization is to get a rally effect behind the president. Then after that, they also notice that it can also bring the opposition into disarray and they love that. They love seeing that effect unfold.

Justin Kempf: It sounds like you're making the case that the aim of the leaders is to cause democratic backsliding. Am I going too far in making that assumption or do you think that leaders actually want to erode democracy?

Javier Corrales: Very seldom will leaders admit that what they want to do is democratic backsliding. What they say is they need to break the gridlock of the system. They need to implement policies the public wants. There needs to be decisive action. They also believe that there are some actors in society, some political actors in society that need to be punished. So, the presidency needs the power to accomplish certain policy goals, but it also needs some power to punish some wrongdoers in their minds or at least in their rhetoric. This is never stated as a form of democratic backsliding. Here's the trick. It's often stated as finally we're going to have democracy.

We have seen presidents on the left and on the right follow this template. In their minds and also in the minds of their followers, they are actually thinking that they are destroying gridlock, punishing powerful agents, and finally implementing policies that the majority wants. But in effect it's democratic backsliding because the fundamental definition of democratic backsliding is when a democratically elected president concentrates way too much power in the executive branch, eroding checks and balances and degrading the degree of pluralism. That would be a political science definition. That's probably how the opposition would see it. But the president and their followers don't see it that way.

Justin Kempf: So, Javier, right now we're talking very theoretically. One of the things I love about your work is you are one of the scholars who I turn to to understand and learn about the politics in Venezuela and the democratic backsliding that happened there specifically. So why don't we use that as a test case to describe how these events actually happen in a real case scenario. In the case of Chávez, are you saying that he intentionally wanted to erode democracy for its own sake or did he really believe that he was bringing about a more democratic society?

Javier Corrales: He was absolutely convinced until his death that he was bringing about a new form of democracy that he called participatory democracy. But this is how he presented the project to Venezuelans. Venezuela, in the

1990s, was a country in real crisis. The economy had been crashing basically since 1989, and it wasn't recovering. It was an oil state that was bankrupt and generating poverty. Incredibly mismanaged. So, he arrives with a discourse that we have to come in and fix things and we have to come in and punish the wrongdoers. The wrongdoers were two groups, initially, the old party elite, the establishment, and secondly, capitalism in general or the bourgeoisie.

The template was the same. He came in and introduced powerful reforms and took power away from the elite that had generated these problems. So, he starts out big in his first year and a half in office. He changes the constitution, the Supreme Court. He has a new round of elections. He takes over the Congress. He issues a large number of executive degrees. This is happening in just two years. It happened at the very same speed we're seeing Trump concentrate power in his second administration and it generated a huge backlash. So, by 2001, at the end of two years into his administration, the opposition was incredibly alarmed and rightfully threatened. They started to push back and then we had a big, big confrontation. Long story short, Chavez won and then he just kept on going.

Justin Kempf: So, you alluded to the United States. The United States is a very polarized country even before Trump entered the scene in 2016 and you're talking about even further down the road during a second term which is now 2025. Chávez, when he enters the scene in Venezuela, my understanding is he's almost a third way. He's viewed as somebody who's completely different than the previous options that were on the table. How polarized was Venezuela when he entered the scene? Did he create a sense of polarization or was Venezuela already polarized before he even entered his first presidential campaign?

Javier Corrales: A huge difference between Venezuela in the late 1990s versus the United States in the mid-2010s when Trump emerges is that Venezuela wasn't that polarized. Venezuela, if anything, had a significant degree of anti-status quo sentiment. Chávez's discourse was very appealing. He won a very big election with a significant degree of popularity. It's a good example of an administration that creates a new form of polarization. But in the first year, Chavismo was an incredibly popular option in Venezuela, and you're absolutely right that is one big difference. One of the things that's going to slow you down as a president is if when you come into office and you are not enormously popular.

Chavez had that advantage. He was enormously popular, and yet once he started going in the direction of backsliding, he then faced a backlash. In the United States since the very eruption of Trump and the birther movement and

Magaism, that movement has always faced resistance. The opposition has always been there, and this has slowed it down in many ways. One could argue one reason Trump episode one wasn't as powerful as Trump episode two was precisely because of that preexisting polarization that helped the opposition contain the jest behind the Trump movement.

Justin Kempf: Now the article makes the case that leaders become even more radical so that they can pursue power grabs. Chávez comes across as very radical from day one. Did Chávez become increasingly radical while in office, or was Chávez kind of always the same from the start?

Javier Corrales: Oh no, Chávez undergoes a process of very rapid radicalization in office. It's kind of what's happening to hurricanes in this area of climate change. Rapid intensification right after he achieves his biggest electoral victory after the initial turmoil. Right around 2005, so about five to six years into his administration, he has a good electoral win, not a landslide, but a good electoral win. It's a little bit like the unofficial second Chávez administration. He just goes crazy. He not only concentrates more power in the executive branch, but he hyper statitizes the economy. There is a famous video where Chávez is walking around the streets of Caracas with his advisors asking 'Who owns this building? Who owns that building?' Then decreeing, 'Let's expropriate it. Let's nationalize it.'

The nationalization campaign that Chávez undertook is something that we only saw during the deepest forms of the Cold War. Socialist countries no longer do this. The extravagance of state expansion in economics was huge. The confrontation with the United States gets big. The alignment with Cuba goes very deep. The indoctrination of the armed forces and the embrace of socialism moving away from participatory democracy to centralized socialism. All of these things happen in the second phase of Chavismo, and they represent this process of radicalization in terms of ideology as well as policy choices. So yes, in my opinion, the case fits perfectly well, and what you notice is there is a process of radicalization since the very beginning, but once you have a nice second win, you really bump it up in a big way.

I think the same thing has happened in the United States. Trump's reelection is a form of electoral validation that the movement needed. The difference is Trump came in better prepared to maintain the speed that he wanted to apply to this process. So yes, there is a process of radicalization from the very beginning, but if you have a nice electoral win along the way, then this gives you more green lights to radicalize.

Justin Kempf: Now, Trump's second victory portrayed him as being the less radical option within the United States. He was trying to come across as more moderate than the Democrats. In fact, his rhetoric continues to say that the Democrats are extremist. Did Chávez do any of the same? Because he's obviously more radical on some issues and can claim to be more moderate on some things.

Javier Corrales: I think what we have noticed, even during the campaign, that it didn't really matter what policy topic Trump was focusing on. He always wanted to take the most extreme view. Now, what I think you are referring to is that what the supporters of the president were saying is that the other slide was more damaging. Their ideas or Biden's being in la la land were far more dangerous than anything Trump wanted to do. So, I wouldn't necessarily say that that was a sign of being a moderate. Populists, left or right, are identical.

What you want to do is really what the people want and in that sense it's democratic. It's extreme because they need important help. They need to be listened to. They need their problems fixed. So they come in with a lot of desire to pump a lot of energy into pushing for advocacy. But they also come with a discourse of… and you had Sue Stokes the other day, so I'm sure you spoke about trash talking about opponents and institutions. The idea is we're not the bad guys. The other side is the more dangerous side. That's how I would explain this notion of how he campaigned as a moderate. No, he campaigned as the savior facing evil forces on the other side.

Justin Kempf: So I was really surprised in your article to hear you use the same exact phrase as Sue: trash talking democracy. The reason why was because I don't think of Chávez as trash talking democracy, because I remember the famous quote from Lula, the current president of Brazil, and the former president, the president who was in power at the time, who said about Chávez that Venezuela suffers from an excess of democracy. Of course, everybody who was a democratic scholar at the time scoffed at that comment and we still do, but I don't think of Chávez as trash talking the idea of democracy, because he saw himself as being more democratic even while he was eroding democracy in Venezuela. How do you explain the idea of trash talking democracy within the case of Venezuela and Hugo Chávez?

Javier Corrales: When I invoke the term trash talking, I am directly borrowing from Sue Stokes and her collaborators. And you're absolutely right, they do not trash talk democracy overall because as I said, they feel that they are delivering real democracy for the first time. Trash talking is the term that we use to describe how they discuss political actors and especially institutions that

challenged them. In that sense, they just don't hold back. One of the reasons presidents who are populist and with an inclination toward trash talking love social media is because they can go crazy in social media saying horrible things about any of their opponents. It could be a politician. It could be a reporter. It could be an organization. It could be the Supreme Court.

The argument is this. Here's how they think. I represent the people. The world is divided between good people and the harming elites. I represent the good people. If you're against me, you must be against what the people want, what the community want. Therefore, you're part of the problem, and I have every right to disqualify you, to delegitimize you, to trash talk about you. This is the exact opposite of what we expect in a pluralistic society. In a plural society, you compete politically by recognizing that your opposition deserves respect, rights, and only courts establish who is guilty of crimes.

But a populist by contrast will arrogate adjudicatory power that we give to courts and become the prosecutor in chief and the juror in chief and begins to say, 'You guys are corrupt. This court is not doing its job. It's violating the law.' That's what we mean. So they do not trash talk democracy. Generally speaking, they target individuals and institutions that are trying to challenge them.

Justin Kempf: Now, of course, a supporter of Chávez, or in the case of the United States, a supporter of Trump would say their opponents are the ones who are trash talking them. That their opponents are demonizing them. How do we think about that? Should we be thinking of both sides as trash talking?

Javier Corrales: This is the essence of this argument about intentional polarization. You arrive and you raise the temperature. You do it by embracing a big agenda of policy change and you also become very ideological so that you attract people who are in love with the ideology or are in love with the policy goals. The secondary effect of this is also something that residents welcome, which is the opposition can get extremist. The opposition panics. The opposition is feeling very threatened and what they can end up doing is becoming extremist as well. This is one of the consequences and then your base will look at the other side and see the other side radicalizing in a big way. That's going to make them even more scared of the other side than they were in the beginning.

So, what you want to do is the classic gorilla strategy. The classic gorilla strategy is to provoke the other side to become more extreme than you are and it often works. It is a bait and I have seen many, many forms of opposition to democratic backsliding fall for this. They get panicky and rightly so. They also

become extremists and therefore liable to the accusation of being obstructionist and unreasonable and loud mouthed, all those things, and this can end up benefiting the president. Now there's more. When the opposition begins to take extremist positions, you are also going to see internal disagreements within the opposition.

There are going to be some folks who are going to be saying wait a minute, this is crazy. We need to tone things down. That division in the opposition is exactly what the backslider wants, so it's one of the possible outcomes of this process. You'll get an expansion of extremism and potentially a division in the opposition. If that happens, advantage falls on the incumbent president. The one who started it all, the intentional polarizer.

Justin Kempf: So, I was thinking about your paper, particularly about how you're describing the opposition and it struck me how the opposition becomes increasingly radicalized as well. One of the things that came to mind was the fact that if the opposition is comprised of moderates and radicals, moderates tend to want to find common ground with whatever group they're in. So, I can imagine that moderates are more susceptible to radicalization just to find common cause with those that they feel aligned with. Do we see that phenomenon happen?

Javier Corrales: This becomes the central challenge of opposition politics in processes for democratic backsliding. We used to think that the opposition confronted with a new threat will unite. But you're more likely to get divisions. Some folks are going to want to be very hardline, others are going to want to be more moderate. There's going to be disagreement about everything. Everything is going to be debated. Everybody's going to disagree about what is the right strategy and that internal bickering is what the opposition needs to solve. What I have found is that it doesn't get solved.

The only thing that solves it is if the opposition manages to come together with what we call unified campaigns. They come to an agreement about the rules on how they're going to select candidates for whatever seat is available and once the candidate is chosen whether you agree with the ideology or the strategy, you just support them. So, you have an intellectual, not an ideological coalition of sorts. If that is the case, amazing. The Democratic Party of the United States met that challenge in the first Trump administration. In the first Trump administration it ran in the midterm elections and in the presidential elections as a very united front supporting the candidates that were elected. There were many disagreements within the tent, but they did not break away from it. We'll

see whether the Democratic party will meet the challenge again this time around. It's huge.

In Venezuela, more often than not, the opposition had a lot of trouble meeting that challenge. There were some cycles where they did achieve it, where they managed to maintain an electoral front and there were times when they were super divided.

Justin Kempf: I feel like an even better example is Poland, where they were able to unite a lot of different opposition groups to win the parliamentary elections – not the most recent election, but the one beforehand, the parliamentary election – where they were able to defeat PiS who had been in power for eight years. Unfortunately, we just saw them lose the presidential election in Poland. Now, of course, the presidency in Poland has a lot of power, but nowhere near as much power as a typical presidential system like the United States. Parliament has a lot more power there, but it's not a great omen for cases where you're trying to overcome an illiberal democracy or overcome democratic backsliding. It definitely gives the indication that parties have a hard time maintaining those coalitions once they come to power.

Javier Corrales: Yes, you're absolutely right and in so many ways, in a parliamentary system, it's easier to achieve this electoral cohesion than in a presidential system, or rather in a presidential election. In a parliamentary election, there are many, many seats. So, you can build a coalition by saying we'll distribute seats among ourselves, but in a presidential election, you need to choose one candidate and only one candidate. And that's always so hard, especially when there's so many divisions. So it is, in my opinion a very difficult challenge for the opposition in presidential systems that are experiencing democratic backsliding. It's good that you mentioned how in Poland they were able to do it through a parliamentary mechanism. But it's not sustainable. It's not a final victory. Things can go back.

This is what we now know. Most democracies, not just in the global south, but in societies with advanced economies, are now going to have parties, large parties that are interested in concentrating power in the executive branch and adopting extremist policies. So, you may defeat them in one electoral cycle, but we're not able to have them disappear. They stick around and they have a chance of making a comeback. Poland is such an example. The United States is another example. The United States, comparative speaking could be presented as a case where there was an episode of democratic backsliding. It didn't go very far. It got defeated and the defeated forces made a comeback.

Justin Kempf: So, coming back to Venezuela, I find it to be such a difficult case to get my head wrapped around because, as Laura Gamboa fleshed out, Venezuela, shortly after Hugo Chávez comes to power, they try to stage a coup and almost remove him from power. I would imagine that emboldens Chávez and his supporters to claim that they represented democracy rather than the opposition. I mean, the opposition comes across as extremely anti-democratic if they're using extra constitutional means to seize power. How does radicalization, attempting anti-democratic means, affect the reputation of the opposition?

Javier Corrales: This is one of the great contributions by Laura Gamboa. I'm glad you brought her up. She argues that the most serious mistake that an opposition force can do, at least in the early stages of backsliding, is to embrace what she would call extra institutional approaches. There's no question that when you have the opposition feeling as panicky as they were, and they should have, because it's not like they were unprovoked. This is the key point. I mean, Chávez is out of control from the very beginning. They became so extreme that they were supporting seriously constitutionally questionable moves, including supporting coups. This damaged their reputation for many years to come and they came to be seen in the minds of many Venezuelans, even moderates, and many folks abroad as the extremists.

Now here's the thing, when a president breaks the law. Democracies are in deep trouble. Let me explain the complication. Let's suppose we're in society and you are a regular citizen, you have property, and somebody breaks into your property. They break the law. What do you do? You call the police. When a president breaks the law, there's no police to call. The only police that you can call is to ask the military to stop the president. The issue is that in presidential democracy that's considered extra institutional. That's never what you can do. Something that is so customary in domestic politics is completely out of the question.

So, one of the things that we see after power grabs is you're going to be very tempted to get the military involved. You're going to be tempted to get Congress to do an impeachment. These are acts of extremism and often even extra legalism that subsequently the government can use to say those are the forces who are extremists, who are not following the rules, et cetera. But it's because we face a remarkable problem. When we have a situation in which the president is breaking the law and won't stop, we cannot call the police. If we call the police, we're probably engaging in something anti-constitutional.

This is the conundrum. But the argument is that the opposition has to be super careful not to go to those extremes. And if they do, they have a high risk of experiencing what you just said, which is you tarnish your reputation for many, many electoral cycles into the future.

Justin Kempf: So how should oppositions react instead, and even more to the point, how do you take it to the next level and depolarize society? How does the opposition go about doing that?

Javier Corrales: Well, these are two separate questions. The first question is, how do you respond to an intentionally polarizing president? Let me just say there's going to be a debate about how extremist you're going to be and in many ways it's almost silly for me to try to argue there's a better way to do this. We don't really know. Maybe you need a combination of both strategies. You want to avoid being extremist, but you definitely need to press hard. You also need to have parts of the opposition that are willing to moderate.

What I can say is what would be the worst mistake. I already mentioned one. The first one is to split into multiple parties competing among themselves for office. Catastrophe. In that sense, you want to stay a little bit polarized so that you side doesn't splinter or fragment. The second mistake, and this is very important, is to contain yet another potential problem that the opposition is going to face, which is the tendency of many voters to abstain, to think that the game is over, to think that both sides are equally bad, to think that this makes no sense. The opposition needs to have a really major strategy to fight abstentionism.

So now let me go to your second question. How do you depolarize? Justin, I don't think my field, from what I have read, has the answer to that. People are working on this topic. Check with us once we start to have real findings, but here's what I think we can do. You may not be able to depolarize, but you may be able to defeat the extremists. There are things you can do to unseat them from office, at least for a while. So, bringing the temperature down is not easy, but making sure the radicals do not dominate the electoral menu is very doable with the right strategies and the right forms of political campaigns.

Justin Kempf: So, Javier, one of the underlying premises of your article's argument is that aspiring autocrats are using polarization to distract people from executive power grabs that they're making. It assumes that voters care about those executive power grabs. Do you think that electorates do care about executive power grabs? Is that something that even factors into their support for candidates?

Javier Corrales: The opposition will always care about it in a big way. Now, what happens to the opposition? There's a debate. Do they worry more about the power grabs or do they worry about the other side coming back in? Is it a situation where they just love the policies and the ideology so much that they're willing to give the president the tools to achieve them? The thinking behind the decision by many presidents to polarize is to bet on the fact that potential supporters of the president are not going to care so much about power grab. If you're delivering the policy outcomes or ideological crusades that they want to see, if the president is delivering on that kind of agenda, they'll be very accepting of power grabs. That's how I see it.

It seems to be that when we try to get voters to get excited about the importance of the rule of law and the importance of limits on powers, they're like okay in the abstract. But what really gets people excited is to talk about the policies that they want to see implemented and to talk about ideologies. This is what brings passions out and we have discovered that when voters think that a particular president is truly championing policies and ideologies that they care a lot about, they will give a lot of free reign.

Justin Kempf: As I read your article and as I hear you talk right now, it very much sounds like you're building on the work of Milan Svolik who's talked about voters who care about democracy, but decide to lean into their ideological preferences. That it's going to be a secondary concern for them. I guess the question I have in my mind is whether or not the supporters of those candidates, particularly in Venezuela, actually cared about the executive power grabs at all. Were they upset about the executive power grabs, but were willing to dismiss them because they liked the direction the country was going or did they support the executive power grabs because they didn't really care about the ideals of democracy to begin with?

Javier Corrales: I'm so glad you mentioned Milan Svolik because I do draw from him and he has a fantastic formulation and I'm going to see if I can remember it and use it correctly. So in every country you're going to have autocrats but Svolik says you also have democrats and partisans. Within this group you're going to have some folks who are primarily defenders of democracy and are partisan secondarily. Others are going to be primarily partisan and secondarily defenders of democracy and in many ways agree with that. The idea is that a president has the ability to get even democratic respecting voters to accept erosions of democracy, if you appeal to their partisanship, if you appeal to the type of policies and ideologies that draw them to a particular party with a particular brand.

If you say you are finally going to get the banquet that you really want, then they're like okay, we'll go easy on the illiberalism of your administration for now. That's how they strategize that they're going to get away with this. You always have committed autocrats in the electorate, but then you have democrats and partisans and some of them are partisan before they are democracy champions.

Justin Kempf: Well, it definitely sounds like there are fewer democrats first than we expected based on the experience that we've seen in Venezuela, Turkey, and many other countries around the world. To dive in even deeper into this, not just democrats, but also small "l" liberals. In the paper you write, "At this point, these voters become more likely to support the executive despite his or her illiberalism." I guess the question that I wonder about is whether the voters are supporting the executive despite illiberalism or because of illiberalism. How often do you think voters are really liberal, but just stomaching the direction that the president goes versus people who lean into illiberalism because they're convinced that that's the right direction to go based on their own ideology?

Javier Corrales: Justin, I think you get both groups. You have a coalition of these two groups. They don't necessarily emerge, but you have those who have always been illiberal and then those who have become liberal only because they think the other side is worse and they really love the new policy and ideological orientation of the president. You get those two together to cooperate. You're absolutely right. I like that formulation. This idea that I think we're discovering that the commitment to democracy doesn't seem to be a super priority for most voters. It's not non-existent. It's just that it occupies a lower level of priority when democracy is defined as should the president have limits to his or her power.

On that question, we see a lot of people saying sometimes they should. Depending on the kind of threats and depending on the policy that they're pursuing, the ends would justify the means. This is the great Machiavellian lesson.

Justin Kempf: Now in Venezuela, we saw a democracy completely collapse and we saw the economy collapse too. I mean, we see real crisis happening there. That's clearly a worst-case scenario for any country that's facing democratic backsliding. But do you think that there's hope that populism and political extremism wears itself out over time? That if democracy can hang on, that we get to a point that we move past this phase in this era.

Javier Corrales: Let me begin by saying that we, in my profession, are desperately looking for data on what we call near misses or U-turns. We have had a great number of U-turns in the 1980s and 90s when we experienced what is called the third wave of democratization. Many of those cases were cases that used to be democracies and fell to autocracy and then turned around, but this time around, we're seeing fewer of those. We're not seeing a transition to democracy, and it could very well be, it's not the only explanation, the reason we may not have that many cases is because the Venezuelan case is not the most typical. As you mentioned, Justin, the Venezuelan case is a case of full autocratization going all the way to the bottom.

What we're now seeing with autocratization is that you backslide, but you stay in some kind of hybridity. You are not fully authoritarian. You're certainly not fully democratic and while you're there, it's harder to come out of it. It's hard to come out from a place where everything is dark and dismal, but if it's a mixed environment, it's just much, much harder. So that is why in this current era of democratic backsliding where we're seeing very few cases autocratize all the way to the bottom as Venezuela did and most staying in this hybrid system, there are many, many, many people who still feel that the country is democratic and there isn't a hole to come out from.

So it makes it really hard. It makes it hard to create a strong widespread anti-status quo sentiment. That said, Justin, let me now make a new argument. Even if you are a hybrid regime with many voters thinking that this is still okay and maybe even democratic, one of the things that you see in hybrid regimes is the economy begins to go badly or more precisely the president makes many policy blunders. Hybrid regimes do not excel at governance. They are going to make huge policy mistakes. What's interesting about this is that over time, this creates opportunities for the opposition to succeed intellectually and maybe fix things.

So, we do have evidence that the governance performance of hybrid regimes is not stellar. There are policy blinders. I don't know if you've interviewed Kurt Wayland, my colleague from UT Austin. He published a very important piece about this that in hybrid regimes, populist, hybrid regimes, you should expect to see a higher degree of policy mistakes that then may give opportunities for the opposition to try to dislodge them from office and perhaps fix things. But you're absolutely right that a big question is do we have a lot of cases of reversals of fortune coming out of the doldrums and we don't have a lot right now with this particular episode of backsliding, but folks are working on this very same topic.

Justin Kempf: So, as we look to wrap up, Javier, I do want to ask you about Venezuela one more time. I mean, it's a country that is on the minds of

everybody who's focused on democracy. Do you have faith that Venezuela will overcome its autocratization, even if we're thinking maybe… Well, we're definitely going to be thinking a few years down the road before that happens. What kind of faith do you have that Venezuela will become more democratic, especially because it's a country with an incredibly law and democratic legacy dating all the way back to the 1950s?

Javier Corrales: Some days I wake up feeling optimistic about it. Some days I feel very pessimistic. I don't want to sound naive. I think for reasons I've discussed, the conditions for reversals are not that favorable, especially when you are deep down in this hole. But here's what still gives me hope about Venezuela. Number one, the regime is incredibly unpopular and internally very divided. They are constantly repressing their own internal forces, sometimes even more severely than they repress outside actors, which tells me it's not a regime that is fully consolidated, because the amount of internal repression is still huge.

I don't think we're going to see a democratic uprising, but there is always the possibility that the internal cracks of the state will lead to a collapse of the state apparatus. And then we'll see what happens. That's a possibility. Civil society and opposition forces can do things to either weaken those cracks even further or reseal them so the opposition can play a role there. This is what always gives me hope. They compare Venezuela many times with countries where the opposition is fully decimated and we're not there yet in Venezuela.

Justin Kempf: Javier Corrales, thank you so much for joining me today. Like I said earlier, I've been very impressed with your work. I highly recommend your most recent article, "Intentional Polarization: How Policy Extremism and Ideological Overuse Promote Democratic Backsliding." Thank you so much for writing it. Thank you so much for joining me today.

Javier Corrales: My pleasure, Justin, and thank you for the PR. I appreciate it. Stay well.