

Democracy Paradox Podcast

Jeffrey Kopstein Explains Why Polarization Turns Violent (7/8/26)

Transcript

Introduction

Today's guest is Jeffrey Kopstein. He is Chancellor's Professor of Political Science at the University of California, Irvine. He is the author of the article "When Polarization Turns Violent" in the most recent issue of the *Journal of Democracy*. You might also recognize him as the coauthor with Stephen Hanson of the book *The Assault on the State: How the Global Attack on Modern Government Endangers Our Future*.

Jeff's essay stood out to me because the link between polarization and violence is often implied but rarely explored thoroughly. Far too we label polarization as a challenge for democracy rather than considering how it can endanger society. My conversation with Jeff explores the conditions where polarization becomes dangerous rather than merely troubling.

Part of what makes his work interesting are his views on the importance of the state. In recent years, new research has argued a strong state strengthens democratic governance and efforts to roll back the state are thereby a threat to democracy. You might recall past conversations with Russell Muirhead, Javier Perez Sandoval, and even my most recent conversation with Pepper Culpepper.

Jeff argues the assault on the state does not lead to a reduction in its capacity but a transformation of its authority from an impersonal bureaucracy into one governed by personal relationships with the ruler. This transformation is a critical ingredient that makes polarization violent.

My challenge for you is to consider ways to reverse the trends Jeff highlights in this conversation. The simple answer is to reinforce existing political institutions. But it's not clear how to do it especially within a polarized political environment.

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. But for now... here is my conversation with Jeffrey Kopstein...

Podcast Transcript

Justin Kempf: Jeffrey Kopstein, welcome to the Democracy Paradox.

Jeffrey Kopstein: Thank you for having me.

Justin Kempf: Well, Jeff, I came across your work recently, in particular this article that you wrote in the Journal of Democracy, the most recent issue. It's called "When Polarization Turns Violent," and it really caught my attention because I'm always focused on issues of polarization, and the potential of creating political violence is obviously something that's always on my mind.

But you also wrote another interesting book, *The Assault on the State: How the Global Attack on Modern Government Endangers Our Future*. I do think that there are some commonalities between both your article and the book, but I'd like to start with the article because I think that's touching on things that are very important for politics and democracy today.

And one of the key arguments you make within the article is that polarization does not necessarily lead to violence, but that it's an almost necessary ingredient to producing political violence. But it does raise a question for me. Do you feel that political violence requires severe or pernicious polarization to develop, or can political violence occur through completely different reasons that have nothing to do with polarization or outside of situations with severe forms of polarization?

Jeffrey Kopstein: We're living in a time when there is, on the one hand, all kinds of lone wolf violence against politicians, and not just politicians, but against the general public. But we're also strangely living in a time of decreasing homicide rates. And so the article begins with this puzzle. We assume that polarization and political violence are naturally connected, as you just said.

And it stands to reason, look, if everybody loved each other, if everybody respected each other, if everybody agreed on everything, there'd never be any violence whatsoever. I think we can all agree on that. But the opposite doesn't necessarily hold. That is, even if everybody really doesn't like each other very much, doesn't respect each other very much, or fundamentally disagrees with each other, that doesn't necessarily mean you're going to get violence.

A lot of other things have to happen to get sort of from here to there. And so what the article tries to do is tease out, using some logic and some historical examples, the conditions under which that kind of thing occurs. So the question is not whether polarization is dangerous, but the conditions under which it becomes violent.

Justin Kempf: So how do we get from a situation where people just respectfully disagree to a scenario where political violence is even imaginable because people hate each other so much? Does it happen all at once, or is there a moment in time where there's a sudden break that changes the way people think?

Jeffrey Kopstein: Well, I think you put your finger on it when you said hate. We shouldn't expect politics to be non-polarized. Disagreements can be vehement, hard, ideological, expressed using salty language. There's really no problem with that. We shouldn't be nostalgic about an era when polarization didn't occur, because that was often only because a lot of fundamental disagreements about race, about inequality, were sort of glossed over and not talked about at all.

And so we should really discuss a lot of hard questions about immigration, race, inequality, everything. School prayer, abortion, all of that stuff should be on the table. Those are all ideological

disagreements. At its more extreme, it's ideological polarization. But where it gets more dangerous is when that turns into, "I disagree with you, and I hate you. I don't like you, and you don't like me." And our disagreements cease to be really, or even only, about ideology or principle, but they become personal. We're on different teams, and no matter what you say, I'm not gonna agree with you. So that's one thing. That's sometimes called in the literature affective polarization, meaning emotional.

So that's number one. Political opponents are not simply wrong on policy, but are experienced as sort of alien, illegitimate, immoral, or threatening. So that's number one. Second, the conflict has to be sort of a struggle over ownership of the polity. Who belongs? Who has the right to rule? Who deserves the protection of the state?

And a third condition that I say is the state has to weaken, fragment, or sort of abdicate its responsibility to protect all citizens equally. And so that kind of deadly, organized violence – that's really what I'm concerned with in this article. It's not individual lone wolf violence, as bad as that can be.

But organized violence of the sort, let's say, the Charlottesville Unite the Right rally almost became – a sort of organized pogrom in 2017. There you have to have a lot of other things come together, and most importantly, the state has to weaken, fragment, or sort of get rid of any sense of its own responsibility to protect everybody.

And under those conditions, when emotionally polarized communities believe that the rivals threaten their political future, and when political authority cannot or will not intervene, there the stage is really set for the organized violence that I'm dealing with in this article.

Justin Kempf: Clearly, we live in an age of affective polarization. I mean, it's a term I've heard a lot. I think Shanto Iyengar is one of the big proponents of that term. But it feels at the same time like there's less ideological polarization in a way that's surprising to me. I feel like we live in times where the meaning of what it is to be on the right and what it means to be on the left are constantly changing, and it means that there's bizarre agreements on policies that come up sometimes.

For instance, issues about how much regulation there should be on business, issues of redistribution – there are surprising agreements between parties. I mean, not always agreement on the exact policy, but on the big framework, it feels like people are closer on the positions sometimes, not even within the same party. The parties seem to be both in flux, both in the United States and in Europe and really throughout the entire world, to be honest.

Why is it that there's so much affective polarization when there seems to be so much flux within ideologies between different parties?

Jeffrey Kopstein: Well, I mean, you've put your finger on something pretty important, I think, because one of the ways that affective polarization is actually measured is to say, how much do people not like each other compared to how much they agree or disagree with each other?

And so you'll know that affective polarization is really present when they don't even disagree that much on the policy issues, but nevertheless, the worst thing that could happen in the entire world is

if the other team came to power. And it's the sense that if they come to power, we will never have power again. Our side will be permanently iced out. And here's where scholars don't always agree. Not only do they not agree on why it occurs, they don't even know about its impact very well. But why it occurs –

I mean, there are some obvious hypotheses out there. Politicians have a stake in mobilizing voters, and the best way of mobilizing voters – and, you know, everybody listening to this will know already – is that you try to get people to enter down some sort of rabbit hole of disagreement, and eventually they pop up really not only disagreeing, but disliking the other side.

And politicians have an interest in that, and they're quite good at that. The President of the United States is pretty good at riling people up, and that's his strength. And whenever he moves away from that, whenever he moves back to policy, he actually gets weaker. And it's not just President Trump, it's a lot of other politicians.

We see that on the left as well. The left, by the way, as we're seeing, is rapidly learning one of the best ways of mobilizing people is going for emotions. Now, the internet has a role to play in all of this, but I'm not one of these people who thinks that we're all doomed because of the internet and the rabbit holes that we all go down.

Philosophers and social theorists have been worried about the changing nature of the public sphere for over two hundred years. They worried about the spread of print media, they worried about the spread of broadcast media, and now we're worried about the internet. And so I don't think it's the technology itself that's the problem. It's the man rather than the machine, and I think that's mostly the problem. And politicians have gotten very good at riling us all up. And so I think some of the research shows that the politicians are actually much further from each other than the citizens are.

Justin Kempf: One of the most obvious ways that affective polarization can occur is through other forms of identity. For example, in the United States, people might establish forms of identity based on race. And so even though two different people may agree on the issues, they may find themselves in different political parties because they find that their racial identities are represented by different political parties.

That comes back to your sense of belonging – the idea that if people think that some groups don't belong within the political community, that that's going to incite violence or be one of the necessary conditions to incite violence.

Jeffrey Kopstein: Yeah, absolutely. Thinking through this article, you know, I'm not an expert on affective polarization, but what I do know about is ethnic politics and ethnic violence. And what I really came away with is a weird insight. I'm not sure how true it is, but it struck me as mostly true, is that when people are affectively polarized, they behave as if they were from different ethnic groups with the same kinds of hatreds and distrust and dislikes and sense of kind of antipathy and disgust that you get in racial conflict.

And so it should be no surprise to anybody that when people are polarized, the easiest thing to polarize is along the politics of race, religion, and other pre-political identities. And politicians pick up on that. It's very tempting. It's a kind of a shortcut. So I think there's no doubt about it that it's there, and it was historically there.

You know, I'm mostly an expert on antisemitism. This has always been there. We should talk about that a little bit. It is certainly true in the case of the United States on race. And when communities are polarized politically, they're frequently polarized ethnopolitically, and they're affectively polarized ethnopolitically. Those things all sort of go together.

Justin Kempf: I feel like most people feel that it's wrong to say that somebody doesn't belong to the political community purely because of race or purely because of religion within the twenty-first century. There's a growing chorus of people who are starting to question that, that are on the extreme fringes and that are dangerous.

But where we do see a lot of questioning about who belongs within the political community that can get into different forms of prejudice and discrimination is within immigration. The question of when does somebody truly belong to our political community when they came from somewhere else? And that is a difficult question because it's not always clear when somebody should actually belong to the political community.

Like, if somebody comes over for two weeks and it happens to be during election season, nobody thinks that that person should have a right to vote just because they happen to be here. However, if somebody's here for ten, twenty years, and they've made a life here, a lot of people would start to think that that person is starting to behave more like a citizen a long time ago before they got to that point.

And so it's not always clear where that line should exactly be, and that's not a new problem for political science. I mean, political scientists have always questioned what exactly makes a citizen, especially when they're coming from somewhere else. Has this sense of globalization and cosmopolitanism, the sense that people actually are moving from country to country, really changed and challenged that sense of political belonging in ways that it didn't in the past?

Jeffrey Kopstein: I think you're right. I think it has. 'Cause you're asking a question, but it's a leading question. So the implication is that because of the increasing heterogeneity of our societies and people are moving from country to country, and that to be a citizen of a country... Let's put it this way. I wasn't born in the United States.

I was born in Canada, and I became an American. Becoming an American, it is not like a religious conversion. It is a change of identity. It is the adoption of a civic identity and a set of principles which I took very seriously when I became an American. That being said, we no longer believe that people should completely give up everything that was before.

I have great residual affection, including a second passport for Canada, and nobody expects me to give that up. That being said, as the world becomes more and more heterogeneous, the notion of

citizenship starts to change. So what is citizenship? It's many things, but part of what citizenship is in the modern world is you're a part owner.

It's like being a member of a law firm. That's what being a citizen is. It's my country. I own it. And sovereignty is our collective ownership over all of that. The question is, at what point do you deserve ownership rights, which is citizenship? And every country has different rules. Canada, it's three years. The United States, it's three or five years, depending on your arrangements. Other countries, it's much longer. But I think our intuition is that after living someplace for a certain amount of time and investing in it and being a good resident and part of the community and showing some commitment, you should have the citizenship rights.

The problem is we don't all agree on that. Not all of us agree on that. Not all of us agree how many new people should be able to come in, no matter how well they live, no matter how law-abiding they are and hardworking they are, and the offices that they might be allowed to hold. We have in the Constitution, no matter how good you are, if you're not born here, you can't be president.

So part of what's going on, you know, where we're going with this conversation, is the sense of somebody being outside of the community of solidarity, where they are somebody who is worthy of the protection and worthy of our state's protection. We disagree on those things. And at a certain point, would it be possible that somebody who was, let's say, in a different political party would be considered a foreigner outside of the community of solidarity?

And when we get to that point, you know we're really at an extreme form of affective polarization. It's still not clear whether that would even lead to violence.

Justin Kempf: Yeah. I mean, didn't that effectively happen in Nazi Germany? I know that that's always the worst case that people bring up, but I am reading the *Decline and fall of the Third Reich*, the classic work.

Jeffrey Kopstein: The classic work by William Shirer.

Justin Kempf: Yeah. And in the 1930s, one of the first things that they did was they literally made all the political parties illegal, and they actually locked up a lot of the politicians from other parties that didn't pledge allegiance to the Nazi party. So I guess what I'm saying is that that's not outside the realm of possibilities within the history of the world.

I mean, if you consider totalitarianism outside the realm of likely possibilities in today's world, that's different, but it is something that's happened in the past. The question in my mind is when you say protection from the state – I find that to be interesting because I've always felt that liberalism has argued that people deserve protection from the state regardless of whether or not they have citizenship rights within the state.

And so it kind of detaches two different questions about protections from the state versus political rights within the state. I mean, I got the sense from your article that that sense of belonging necessarily challenges the idea that somebody even deserves protections from the state, not just political rights within the state.

Jeffrey Kopstein: Yes. Absolutely. To go back to Nazi Germany, of course – not only were people – let's say there were a huge number of Jews from Eastern Europe who were living in Germany with residency permits, they were immediately stripped of rights, and some of them sent back to Poland, and the Poles didn't really want them either.

But the Jews who've been longtime Germans, I mean, you know, who fought in World War I as German citizens, were also stripped of citizenship rights, exiled within their own country. But absolutely, everybody within the United States has the right to the protection of the state. But what we're talking about here is this affective polarization.

People are considered outside of that community of solidarity. Now, you can have a little bit of affective polarization. You and I may disagree on principles, and you and I may even dislike each other a little bit because of that. But the question is, how much? And you can have this relationship between affective polarization and, let's say, violence itself.

Justin Kempf: It's very slippery.

Jeffrey Kopstein: There are really good scholars who work on this. Part of what they do is they develop measures of affective polarization, how much people dislike each other, and then what they do is they ask them questions about how much would you, let's say, approve of violence to back up your political convictions.

And they find that it's actually conditional. It's not absolute. It's not everybody who thinks someone's outside of the community of solidarity deserves to have violence perpetrated against them.

But even when they find that, it's very important to remember here, even when they find that people who are affectively polarized condone violence against the other, remember what we're measuring here are attitudes, not actions. It may be one thing for me to say, "Yeah, I don't mind violence against you," or you to say you don't mind violence against me, but are you actually gonna commit it? Are you actually gonna do it? Are you gonna stand around and watch it? And that's something that's very different. We're not very good at that.

You'd need a different kind of data. The attitudinal data is never going to actually allow you to judge that. You'd need something like to what extent people who are affectively polarized are more likely to commit synagogue bombings or lynchings or other forms of racialized violence, and we don't really have data on that.

So that's why I think this relationship – polarization and affective polarization – is very important. But even if they're all there, you still need these other things to be present. And that other thing is, for example, the absence of the state. If the cops are around, it's very hard to commit acts of violence unless those cops themselves are involved in it.

Justin Kempf: So when we talk about a sense of belonging, I think that there's a general sense that that's an issue for the political right because it's viewed as conservatives – or, even more so, the far right, the radical right – wanting to limit and restrict who actually belongs within the political

community. Do you worry at all that there's a danger on the left as well, that they would also want to restrict who belongs within the political community?

Because in general, the assumption is usually that the left wants to expand the political community and the right wants to restrict it. Do you worry that that's not always the case, that the left sometimes does have those inclinations as well?

Jeffrey Kopstein: I think the left has those inclinations, and I'll talk about them. I didn't talk about them very much in the article 'cause I really started off with Charlottesville, which was an act of the right – with the great replacement theory, saying the Jews will not replace us, meaning that the Jews are gonna allow for open borders, which will allow some demographic change in the United States, which will unseat the owners, the rightful citizens, the white people of the United States.

So that's how I framed the article, and then I talked a lot about other cases. But your question was really about the left. Could I see something like that happening on the left? It's a bit of a stretch, but I can. Let's say something like the following. What if I said, "Israel does bad things. Why does Israel do bad things? Because the United States lets it and arms it. Why does the United States let this happen?" Somebody could come along and say, "The reason the United States lets this happen is 'cause guess who controls the United States? The Jews." A nice left-wing paranoid fantasy. And therefore, the Jews are more loyal to Israel than they are to the United States – the standard trope that's been asked in survey questions since the 1950s.

And therefore, they are, in effect, placing themselves outside of the community of solidarity, and they're acting anti-American. I don't believe any of that, by the way, but I'm just giving you a set of propositions which you could find on the American left. It's not that hard. It's relatively easy today. The violence has not yet been largely on the left.

There have been left-wing lone wolf violence, right? There's been synagogue bombings, there's been driving cars into synagogues, that kind of stuff, which is associated with the left. But most of the real violence has been from the right at this point. What I've given you is a potential ideological manifesto for left-wing violence. You could see that happening, absolutely.

Justin Kempf: It's interesting how today I think we think of the left as being very pacifist, that they are ideologically opposed to violence. It's interesting because historically, the left was not opposed to violence. The far extreme left, the ones that were pushing for Marxism and communism – again, we're talking about the extremes – literally wanted the violent overthrow of the state, and a lot of people were leftists that were in armed guerrillas around the world.

And so the idea of the political left being pacifists doesn't always fit well with historical reality.

Jeffrey Kopstein: It doesn't. But what I'll say is that the left never had a problem with violence. Violent overthrow of the existing order was fine. But what they were historically – 'cause we've had a bit of slippage in our conversation, Justin, right? – what they were historically is they were universalists. Violence was in the name of some universalism that would eventually lead to some kind of utopian outcome down the line. The resolution of all great conflicts through these acts of

violence. In practice, however, even communist guerrillas tended to be involved in ethnic conflict because the way that they were mobilized was often along ethnic lines.

Not always, but frequently. So I wouldn't exclude them from that, but by and large, the ideology of the right was always more particularist, was always more, we would say, nationalist, than that of the left. But I agree with you that at the extremes of both, the use of violence is completely condoned.

Justin Kempf: But the key part of your article is that even if you have affective polarization and even if you have groups within society that don't accept that some people within the political community actually belong, strong state institutions prevent that from happening in the end. Is it state capacity that's necessary to avoid political violence, or is it something else that's linked to the state?

Jeffrey Kopstein: You know, I think it's both. You need to have, at a minimum, a police force to fairly enforce the rules of society, but that fairly is a big loaded term there. If you have rulers who are determined to, let's say, make the state their own private police force, then the state itself is no longer a kind of fair referee in the disputes within society.

But what's true is that in all of the cases – and I talk about lots of cases in this article, everything from Russian pogroms in the beginning of the twentieth century, Alexandria in 38 CE, lynching in the American South – all of these cases, the police functions of society have all but disappeared. These are under-policed societies. And even in Charlottesville, where the police didn't completely collapse in the Unite the Right rally in 2017, the police sort of temporarily abdicated. They didn't quite know what to do. They weren't sure whether it was a freedom of speech issue or whether it was a public safety issue.

And so when the state disappears, that's when you get terrible violence. Even at the beginning of the Holocaust, in the summer of 1941, when no one even knew there was gonna be a Holocaust yet, and the Germans invaded Eastern Europe, eastern Poland, western Ukraine, and public authority disappeared – it's at that point when the locals used the opportunity, Poles, Ukrainians, Romanians, Lithuanians, to massacre their Jewish neighbors in about ten percent of communities. As soon as the police show up again, as soon as any force shows up again, these massacres stop. And that was true in Charlottesville, by the way.

Why Charlottesville did not become a pogrom, why violence did not spread, is the police eventually... The governor essentially says, "You gotta stop it. It's gotta be stopped now." Arrests were made, and that stops it from spreading. But you could conceive of a situation in which the police didn't care, in which it was not in a liberal university town, but had taken place somewhere in the Deep South with a much weightier African American community where there was affective political polarization and the state had stepped aside. The preconditions would have been there for a much larger tragedy than actually occurred in Charlottesville, as tragic as it was – a woman died.

So those are sort of the conditions that you have to have present. If each one of them is not met, you mostly don't get violence. You mostly don't get this large-scale violence.

Justin Kempf: I think one of the things that I'm struggling with is if we think of it as state capacity – the idea that if we just fund the state and make sure that they have the resources they need, these events wouldn't happen – it feels like in those examples, the state was not just absent, but was complicit oftentimes. They actually sign off on these events, whether they actually engage in them directly or not, actually encouraging people to do the atrocities. So even if the state is fully present and has full resources, that's not the barrier that prevents the state from getting involved.

Jeffrey Kopstein: Yes. It's a good point. Not every one of the instances that you talked about was the state completely absent, and in some cases, the police take a side and participate. For the most part, though, I think I'm correct – it is about the breakdown of public authority. And your point is that when the playing field is so tilted that public authority sides with one side and decides that it's going to rid itself of its enemy once and for all, or at least put them back in their place.

Justin Kempf: Yeah. I would say in India that the public authority is siding with the Hindus against the Muslims within the states where we're seeing that happen. I would say that in the American South, if you define public authority as the United States military being within those areas, then I understand your point, but the local police authority was oftentimes complicit with those who were lynching the freedmen, the former slaves, African Americans.

In a lot of these cases, the people who were public authorities did side. I mean, they saw themselves as part of that community that was engaged in the violence rather than somebody who was supposed to prevent it.

Jeffrey Kopstein: So let's dig a little bit more deeply into the cases. In the American South, the post-bellum American South, the era of lynching really gets going. A third of communities in the post-bellum South never had a lynching. That's worth asking why, and it can't simply be because the policing was more friendly towards African Americans in the places that did not have lynching. Something else was going on. It's not that you're not correct, and in some cases, the police do absolutely terrible things or step aside and let it happen, turn their back, look away – in the German expression, *wegschauen*.

But still, a third of all places never had lynching, and that's worth asking why, and there are other factors at work. And the factors that I point to are the same kinds of political and affective polarization as manifested in democratic politics. So we have to take a step back first. The word pogrom comes from the Russian *gromit*, meaning to smash or break or storm. It starts in the nineteenth century, and then it gets adopted everywhere in the world. Everybody starts using the word pogrom. And in fact, scholars who worked on the first case of anti-Jewish riots in 38 CE in Alexandria, Egypt, thirty-eight years after Jesus – they call that the first pogrom. Public authority breaks down.

You have a local Greek population who resents the attempts of the Jewish population to gain citizenship rights, which of course meant a different thing back then, but it mostly meant not paying taxes and having the right to go to the gymnasium and to enter their version of the Olympics. And then fast-forward – the Jews are emancipated after the French Revolution. That is, they gain

citizenship rights, and at that point, they become threatening in the same way that African Americans became threatening after the end of slavery, and they became threatening because they threatened to become citizens. And where Jews were in large numbers, they were perceived as politically threatening to the local non-Jewish power structure, and especially where they were in large numbers in Russia and Poland and Ukraine.

And the same goes in the United States, where Blacks were in large numbers, and especially where they could team up with tolerant whites to try to gain local political power. Scholars have come to the conclusion that these lynchings in the post-bellum American South were not simply random acts of racist violence.

The problem with racism as an explanation is racism was everywhere. It's not like places that did not have lynchings were any less racist than places that did have lynching. Otherwise, if you're gonna say your measure of racism is lynching, then you've got a circular argument. You've got a circular argument because you're saying that lynching was caused by racism, and how do we know where racism was at its highest? Where lynching took place. And that really is sort of circular.

And it's the same with pogroms. Where is antisemitism at its worst? Well, people say that's where pogroms took place. But how do we measure where antisemitism is bad? Well, by pogroms. Again, circular. It's not that racism or antisemitism did not matter. It mattered, but it was too present everywhere to explain why these kind of mass outbreaks of violence took place where they did.

It's the same in India. It's not that Hindus loved Muslims any more in places where pogroms did not take place than where they did. I know it sounds convoluted, but it's important to keep your eyes on the prize here. What explains this violence? It can't simply be dislike or affective polarization, to bring it back to where we started.

There's gotta be something else going on. And so I point to these other factors in the article, and those other factors are really important within democratic politics because democratic politics is about mobilizing groups. And what that really does is it makes the existence of groups who are outside of the majority especially dangerous.

I mean, even in Alexandria, Egypt, the Jews were considered especially dangerous. Fine, but there were other ways of handling that in non-democratic politics. But once you get to democracy, where democracy translates very efficiently into political power – where that happens, that's where these groups team up with each other against someone who wants to claim ownership and does not wanna give up that ownership over the state. That's where you're most likely to get a pogrom in India, a lynching in the United States, and a pogrom historically within Eastern Europe.

Justin Kempf: I'd like to ask about how this links back to your book, because the book is called *The Assault on the State: How the Global Attack on Modern Government Endangers Our Future*, and it's part of a recent wave of scholarship. I feel like there are a few books that have come out recently. For instance, I had Russ Muirhead on to talk about his book, *Ungoverning*. A very similar concept. Not the same, but very similar. The idea that the rollback of the state is very much a threat to – I don't wanna say just modern democracy, but modern wellbeing as a whole.

I guess what I'm asking is, are you effectively arguing that those social conditions are going to produce more violence in the near future as the current zeitgeist is to roll back the power of the state?

Jeffrey Kopstein: Yes. And I'm glad you asked that question 'cause I've given it a lot of thought. The book, by the way, I co-authored with Steve Hanson, and we've co-authored many things over the years. And in that book, we maintain that within the current order – and the United States is simply one example of this – there's a trend around the world exemplified by Donald Trump. But not just Donald Trump: Vladimir Putin, Viktor Orbán in Hungary until recently, Netanyahu in Israel.

And they come to power, and they view the state itself – that is the modern state apparatus – as their personal property. We use the term from Max Weber: patrimonialism. That is a view of authority whereby the leader pitches himself as the good father of the nation, and he views the state as a family business.

The current wave of patrimonial rulers, including Donald Trump, what they're doing is trying to take us back to a much older form of rule. In fact, the oldest form of rule. This oldest form of rule called patrimonialism, in which the state is the personal property of the leader. And in order to do that, they need to demolish the existing state apparatus – not in the name of libertarian freedom. That's not what Donald Trump's about. It's not a libertarian project. It is a project of then restaffing the state with personal loyalists.

Now, what's the problem with this? Here we get to the connection between the two studies. The problem with this – when you do that – you're going to get incompetence and corruption. You're going to get lousy administrative processes that will lead not only to the decay of public infrastructure, bad public policy, wars that we perhaps should not get into, but also a decay in policing powers. The police themselves, which is a bureaucracy in the final analysis, will itself start to decay.

You're already starting to see that in the United States. You certainly see it in Israel, where you not only have... Forget about Gaza for one second. That's a separate issue. Within Israel proper itself, you've got a gigantic spike in violence and murder within the Arab Palestinian communities, within the Jewish communities. Why is this happening? Because the police themselves are decaying because the heads of the bureaucracies are all being personally put into place by Bibi. And the Likud party is no longer a party. It is really the Bibi party.

And that, of course, is what Vladimir Putin had already done in Russia and what Donald Trump is trying to do in the United States – to turn the state apparatus into his own personal property, the family business, as it were. And let's put it bluntly, business is booming. And in the case of Donald Trump in the United States, they're doing quite well, thank you.

And the impact of this – we're less interested in that book in democracy because everybody's written about the threat to democracy. And that's there. We don't disagree. But we think the problem is even deeper. The problem is the modern state itself. The modern Weberian legal rational state is

under attack almost everywhere in the world. This is a gigantic wave, and we depend upon the modern state not only to keep our air clean, our children educated by non-quacks, our public health, but of course, as well, public safety.

And so Justin, that's the kind of longish answer to your question. Yes, we would expect to the extent that this patrimonial project is carried to its fruition, you will get public policing where it serves the interest of the leader. So it's not to say you get none. Patrimonial orders had order, but only insofar as it serves the interest of the ruler as opposed to following an impersonal set of laws. And so you would find your point about the police starting to side with one side or the other – we could see more of that.

Now, this is a giant project in the United States. You can't dismantle the American administrative state overnight. Trump is having a terrible time of it. And so back in 2017 in Charlottesville, it didn't become a pogrom largely because the state was still there, the police were still there, and there was a certain amount of deference, even affection for the public order. But once the patrimonial regime is fully in place, it will only police insofar as it serves the interest of the ruler. That's the way patrimonialism historically works.

Justin Kempf: So when you describe it as patrimonialism, it makes me wonder if describing it as an assault on the state is the right frame of mind as opposed to describing it as an attack on the rule of law. Is the greater threat a rollback of the state itself, or is it really a transformation of how we actually apply law, like a shift away from rule of law to what Francis Fukuyama will sometimes call rule by law? I mean, that feels like that's really the issue, 'cause when we talk about rollback of the state and assault on the state, it can kind of get into some technocratic decisions about whether or not we want more bureaucratic regulations or less. That doesn't feel like that's the point. I mean, the point is about how we enforce the regulations and the laws that we have, not about the exact size of the government by itself.

Jeffrey Kopstein: You know, Steve Hanson and I, my co-author, we disagree about the size of the state. You know, he's probably more on the left, I'm slightly more on the right. That's not the issue. The issue is whether you believe there should be this impersonal rule of law order. I wouldn't use the term rule by law. I would say the rule of men as opposed to the rule of law. Let's go back to classical political theory, Aristotle. And that's really the danger. And of course, that's a danger to democracy itself because democracy itself is an administrative function. It requires a rule of law state in order to operate.

Now, you can have fine democracy for a long time with a less than Weberian political order. Americans love to hate the state. That's our sort of national pastime. But without it, our air would be poisonous, our water would be undrinkable. And think about what happened during COVID, how much worse that could have been. We were relying on the residual state, even as the person who was running the state didn't like the state. But they want to roll that back, and that's just a debate that's been long-running in the United States. It's not a new one, it's a very old one, and that's what constitutes our right-left disagreements.

But the question of whether we should have a ruler who considers the entire state his personal property – to take as much money as they want, to take whatever gifts they want, to build whatever they want, to put their name on everything, to change the names of everything – that is something that's really new. That is patrimonial in character. That is when you view the state as your own. And to tie it back to the article, that's very dangerous for public safety. That's when all of these things that I talk about in the article – about affective polarization, about the disputes over ownership of the state – that when that can become very, very dangerous.

And so to the extent that this is allowed to happen, we'll live in a world as we did before, which is much more dangerous. To take it all the way back to the beginnings of modernity and Hobbes, when life was nasty, brutish, and short, we would not wanna go back to that.

Justin Kempf: Well, Jeffrey Kopstein, thank you so much for joining me today. To plug your work one more time, the article is "When Polarization Turns Violent." It's in the current issue of the Journal of Democracy, and the book is *The Assault on the State: How the Global Attack on Modern Government Endangers Our Future*. Thank you so much for joining me today. Thank you so much for writing those.

Jeffrey Kopstein: Thanks so much.