Democracy Paradox Podcast
Kenneth Roberts Says the Left Pays a Steep Price for Breaking with Democracy (5/13/26)
Transcript

Introduction

Today's guest is Ken Roberts. He is the coauthor with Santiago Anria of *Polarization and Democracy in Latin America: Legacies of the Left Turn*. Ken is an established scholar of democracy in Latin America. He was also a previous guest from an episode on democratic resilience and polarization in the United States with Robert Lieberman and David Bateman a few years ago.

Ken's most recent book focuses on the left turn. Unless you follow Latin American politics closely, you probably have not heard of the left turn. It was a recent period in Latin America where parties of the left came to power. But more than a political shift, it marked an ideological shift where parties were emboldened to implement more radical policies.

Hugo Chávez in Venezuela was part of the left turn. Evo Morales in Bolivia and Rafael Correa in Ecuador were also part of the populist wing of the left turn. These are political figures widely viewed as eroding democracy in their countries or in the case of Venezuela a complete breakdown. But other countries like Chile, Uruguay, and Brazil were far more moderate and did not lead to democratic backsliding.

What I wanted to explore in this conversation was why some leaders of the left pursued antidemocratic methods and others did not. I also wanted to understand the relationship between the left and democracy. For many the left has become synonymous with democracy. The left turn teaches this is not always the case.

My challenge to you is to consider why some leftwing governments suffered from democratic erosion and others didn't. But also consider whether the more moderate governments were too complacent. Have you ever wanted politicians to break through the gridlock and get something done at any cost? These are the questions democracies are facing today.

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. The Global Democracy Conference is next week 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 Ken Roberts…

Interview

Justin Kempf: Ken Roberts, welcome to the *Democracy Paradox*.

Kenneth Roberts: Thank you. It's a pleasure to be here.

Justin Kempf: Well, Ken, I was really interested in your most recent book. It was co-written with Santiago Anria, and it's called *Polarization and Democracy in Latin America: Legacies of the Left Turn*. I feel like it intersects a couple different topics that I've really been drawn to, obviously, democracy, but also the way that polarization affects democracy, and also how ideology affects both polarization and democracy itself. So, to understand that Latin America is a place to look at how all those different ideas, all those different phenomena intersect, especially with the way that ideology's really shaped its politics over the past twenty-five some odd years.

So, for those listeners who don't know much about the development of Latin American politics, why don't we start there? Can you explain what caused we the left turn in Latin America and whether or not it was inevitable or if it was a consequence of specific politicians and political entrepreneurs?

Kenneth Roberts: Well, it's an important question and it's a good place to start. Latin America went through a period of democratic transitions in the 1980s. By the 1990s you had the strongest and deepest experiment with political democracy that Latin America has ever had. The new democratic regimes in Latin America, for the most part, proved themselves to be more durable than what I think a lot of people expected. If you go back to the classic literature on democratic transitions of O'Donnell and Schmitter in the '80s, they talked about the uncertainty, the tentative character of new democratic regimes. So, despite the economic challenges and, in many cases, the weakness or even the breakdown of party systems, democratic regimes, for the most part, remained intact.

But they are doing so, of course, in a region of the world that has among the most severe social and economic inequalities in the world. You're institutionalizing democratic contestation in the context of extreme inequalities. As these new democratic regimes consolidated, Latin America was also moving towards the neoliberal model, free market model, of economic development. The political left was very much on the defensive at that time period. This was right after the end of the Cold War. It was a period where even some of the historic political parties that were left of center, more labor-based, populist political parties, even those parties were implementing free market reforms in the 1990s.

There was a certain common assumption at the time that part of what had stabilized democracy was that the region had depolarized. The assumption was this new policy consensus or convergence was helping to stabilize democratic regimes. But then what happens as you get into the 2000s is the left begins to reemerge in Latin America, in some cases, in response to social protest movements that begin to challenge the neoliberal model. In other cases, there are institutionalized parties of the left, like the PT in Brazil or the Socialists in Chile, that have been part of the new democratic system that began to win elections.

So, you're beginning to see by the late '90s, early 2000s, that there's a new political challenge that is being posed to the Washington Consensus and its free-market reforms and that is in some ways the onset of the left turn. The left turn of the region becomes a series of electoral victories in a significant number of countries in the region many of which had never really had strong political parties of the left, or at least they had never won elections before. In a number of the countries, they were also then reelected over the course of the first 15 years of the 21st century.

Justin Kempf: So if we're going to set the scene, we have democratization that takes off in the 1980s, and of course, Venezuela was democratic dating back all the way to 1958. We've got countries democratizing at different periods, but we see a proliferation of democratization throughout the region during the 1980s, during what we call the Third Wave. But despite the fact that democratization is happening against these conservative dictatorships, the democratic regimes aren't necessarily socialist or extremely left-leaning. They're adopting more conservative economic policies still and even when they elected left-leaning governments, such as in Chile or in Argentina, where you had a Peronist like Menem elected, they're still adopting neoliberal economic policies.

Even left-leaning governments are adopting policies that could be associated with the right. It feels like the left turn wasn't just a shift of left-leaning parties getting elected, but left-leaning policies getting enacted, beginning with the rise of Hugo Chávez over in Venezuela. Am I understanding that right?

Kenneth Roberts: Yes, I think that's largely correct. During the period of economic crises in the '80s and early '90s, even governments where the party or the leader, may have been thought of as leaning left for the most part governed on the right in terms of their public policies. There was a policy convergence around the free market neoliberal model in the 1990s. The rise of Hugo Chávez, is the first big expression of a pretty dramatic societal pushback against that. Chávez was certainly intensely anti-neoliberal. Eventually, after a few years, he began talking about socialism for the 21st century, and in some ways he went further with that discourse than other leaders. But ultimately, within the so-called left turn, you really had a wide range of public policies being adopted.

Venezuelan, Bolivia and Ecuador were not necessarily moving towards a socialist model of development, and yet certainly the role of the state was increasing, and there were significant redistributive reforms, even if the region was not really moving towards socialism. Even Venezuela, I would argue, was not really moving towards socialism, but was more of a state-led model of capitalist development in an oil-rich state. Some of the other countries like Brazil, Chile, Uruguay, who had more institutionalized parties to the left that came to power, modified the neoliberal model, but were very cautious and pragmatic in doing so.

They did not make an abrupt break with the neoliberal model but did experiment with social policies to provide benefits for sectors of the informal working class, for example, that were not incorporated into traditional social policy programs in Latin America. There were new family assistance programs, conditional cash transfer programs. So, they did new social programs without necessarily making a dramatic break with the neoliberal model.

Justin Kempf: Yeah, I mean, the book divides the left into more social democratic parties, such as the PT over in Brazil, the Concertación over in Chile, and the parties that dominate within Uruguay against the more populist radical parties, particularly within Venezuela, but also Bolivia and Ecuador under Correa in that category. But what I want to get at is even within the social democratic, the more moderate leftist parties, you do have the PT initiating things like the Bolsa Família. You have real versions of wealth redistribution being enacted that hadn't been implemented in the past, efforts to alleviate economic inequality.

The question that I've got is if one of the things that eventually drives polarization, which is the argument within the book, is this sense of economic inequality, did the leftist policies that are being enacted under the left turn, were they effective? Did they actually reduce economic inequality if that's the primary goal?

Kenneth Roberts: In general, there was a significant decline in economic inequality in Latin America during this time period. There's debate in the literature how much of that was driven by specific redistributive policies being adopted by governments of the left and how much of that was driven by the trickle-down benefits of the commodity boom and the creation of new employment. You certainly did see the governments of the left, both the populist strand of the left turn and the social democratic strand of the left turn were explicitly adopted to broaden the base for social programs for family allowance and conditional cash transfer programs. Also, wages were ratcheted up in much of the region where the left was in power.

What's interesting is some of the countries that did not turn to the left in this time period also saw some declines in inequality, like Peru, for example. There is debate as to how much of this was driven by other market factors and how much of this was being driven by the policy factors. But I think it's pretty clear that the redistributive policies that were adopted by the governments of the left did have significant effects in raising living standards for a lot of people around the region and reducing the levels of extreme poverty within the region.

Justin Kempf: Now, one of the things that happens during the left turn is a rise in polarization throughout the region, particularly in places like Venezuela and Bolivia, where you have more populist parties, but you even see it within places like Chile and Brazil, where you have polarization start to bubble up. Was it the fact that they were enacting policies to address economic inequality that was driving the polarization? Was it actual policies that were driving it or was it just the inequality itself that was inevitably going to cause polarization between different classes and between groups that would naturally align with different political parties?

Kenneth Roberts: We see inequality as being an important part of the story of polarization within Latin America. But we challenge the conventional wisdom around polarization. We remind the readers that polarization is not necessarily unnatural. It's the norm under democracy. Indeed, there are important arguments that in some ways democracy emerges as a set of conflict regulating mechanisms to allow countries to deal with polarizations. Polarization is why we have democracy, because democracy provides institutional means to address those conflicts. Polarization only becomes a threat for democracy when the key actors begin to abandon democracy's conflict regulating mechanisms to process it and they try to concentrate powers in their own hands. We argue that having different policies between parties of the left and parties of the right is natural. That's why we have party systems.

When you don't have meaningful differences under democracy, it's not necessarily healthy for democracy. It's difficult to stabilize and institutionalize party competition if you don't have meaningful differences between the parties. But we do think that under democracy, where you have the extreme inequalities like you see in Latin America, over time, as we saw in the region, eventually the poor are likely to try to seek democratic channels to address those inequalities and we think that's natural under democracy. But part of what we found in our study is that the dynamics of polarization develop and unfold in very different ways across these different cases.

One of the things that was striking to us in the book is that even in countries like Brazil and Chile, where the left really bent over backwards to avoid polarization, these were parties of the left that didn't govern on their own, they had to build broad multi-party coalitions in order to gain access to executive office and had to legislate with broad multi-party coalitions. They had to moderate their agenda. So even though they often started with more radical commitments to redistributive social and economic policies in office, they were pragmatic and cautious and moderate. Nevertheless, even in Brazil and Chile, you ended up getting some far-right alternatives emerging and you began to see real polarization take place.

This is not necessarily a push back on redistributive policies, but you do begin to see a conservative backlash against the broader efforts to break down the social hierarchy and make democracy more inclusive. In some ways it demonstrates the difficulty of trying to thread the needle and respond to those popular constituencies who do expect deeper reforms without necessarily antagonizing the more conservative sectors that are wary of seeing those popular constituencies being empowered.

Justin Kempf: One of the things I think is difficult about the book is you're applying some high-level concepts and phenomena to a region and saying, 'We're going to analyze this region, compare these countries because they have enough similarities that we can draw some bigger picture concepts from it.' And by doing so, we might find even larger picture concepts that can apply beyond that so listeners can learn from that and apply cases that they might see in Latin America and find them in Asia or the United States or other places. But I find what's very difficult here is that I keep getting drawn to how each one of these countries has its own unique story.

For instance, in the cases that are more moderate, Brazil, Chile, and I'm not as familiar with Uruguay - I understand it a little bit…. But in Brazil the big turning point for them was not so much a backlash from the right, but it was a corruption scandal. It was the Car Wash scandal. In Chile, it was a bubbling up of protests from the left that began with student protests, but really boiled over in 2019 with demands for a new constitution and protests against subway fares. It feels like every one of these countries has a very, very different story, and yet we're trying to apply universal principles about polarization. Do you feel that we're seeing more similarities than differences in terms of how polarization is intersecting within these countries or do you feel like the differences are what really stand out?

Kenneth Roberts: Yeah, that's a good question and a challenging one. Basically, we look at seven different cases in the book and six of the seven cases end up highly polarized over the course, if not during the left turn and the aftermath of it in some cases. And yet the timing and the dynamics differed in those cases. The one case that really did not experience the extreme polarization was Uruguay. That had to do with the ability of the Frente Amplio, the

party of the left in Uruguay, to moderate its agenda enough to avoid extreme polarization while still maintaining the channels for representation and voice at their grassroots that helped to bring the grassroots and the bases of the party and the social movements affiliated with them along in the process.

They did that more effectively than the Chilean case, where we argue that the technocratic logic of administering this economic model essentially distanced the party from its grassroots. You get an outflanking of the social democratic left by a new grassroots left emerging out of the student movement demanding more extensive reforms than what the party had been able to implement. So, when we talk about the Bolivarian or the populist cases, the logic of polarization is quite different. The left turn itself emerges out of a highly polarized context where you've had some sort of popular backlash against the convergence of mainstream political parties around the neoliberal model. In some ways, those are new lefts. Those are not established, institutionalized lefts like the social democratic cases, where you had political parties that really helped to construct the new democratic regimes.

In the populist cases, these are new lefts that are forged out of widespread social movements and social protests against this democratic convergence that had taken place around the neoliberal model in the 1990s. The emergence of that left itself was part of a polarizing dynamic within those societies and a backlash against that neoliberal convergence that had taken place. We see dynamics of polarization that are taking place in most of the region, not necessarily all of the region. As I said, Uruguay is a little bit different. But we do see a general process of polarization that is underway that makes the current period very different from the 1990s when people were talking about the Washington Consensus. We're in a very different era now, and yet the pathways that the different countries took towards these more polarized countries vary considerably from one case to another.

Justin Kempf: Let's simplify things for just a moment. Let's compare one case that you describe as a more moderate example, which is Chile, which ended up with strong polarization and now has pretty a far-right president in Kast elected at the end of last year, with Venezuela, which is the tragic case of when everything goes wrong that's probably the most extreme example. Let's put those two side by side. Is the difference between those two really just about procedure, the way that they want to go about implementing the reforms or is there actually an ideological difference between the people in power?

When Bachelet is in power, is she actually more moderate naturally and doesn't really want to impose very extreme policies or is she more focused on making sure that things are done with procedures in place that force her to be more moderate? Whereas Hugo Chávez just breaks the system down by calling a constituent assembly, rewriting the constitution, and shifts things procedurally as well as in terms of political policy. Is the difference just about the way they got there or is it actually the how that they wanted to put in place?

Kenneth Roberts: It's basically both. We start by challenging the notion that there's something essentially populist or radical or essentially social democratic in these different countries. In all these countries, the left has been quite pluralistic in modern times. You have revolutionary Leninist currents, you have radical grassroots participatory democracy currents, you have more populist currents that tend to look to certain kind of leadership, and you may have very institutionalized moderate social democratic currents that are strongly committed to the democratic rules of the game and limit reforms to what they can do within the

constraints of those democratic institutions. Those currents are found in the left in all of these countries.

We try to understand then the formative experiences that shaped the left in modern times in each of the countries and the institutional contexts in which they come to power and how those formative experiences and those institutional contexts tend to create opportunities and advantages for one part of the left and make it difficult for other parts of the left. In the Chilean left, certainly Ricardo Lagos and Michelle Bachelet, the socialist presidents, when they came to power after 2000, without question are moderate ideologically and are strongly committed to the democratic rules of the game. They're very moderate in the course of reforms that they follow. But that itself is a transformation. That's not where the Chilean Socialist Party was in the 1970s. We forget Allende was the moderate within the Socialist Party.

The Socialist Party supported a very radical program of socialist transformation in the 1970s and were skeptical of whether you could do that under democracy. But the Socialist Party was transformed in Chile by the experience of severe military repression under the Pinochet dictatorship. The Socialist Party became a pillar of the new democratic regime. It was one of the architects of the new democratic regime and very strongly committed to the rules of the game, recognizing that that was going to require that they moderate their transformative agenda. So, by the time they finally come back into power in the 2000s, it is a very different Socialist Party than what you had in the 1960s and 1970s in Chile. It's important to understand that transformative process.

That is very different from the formative experience that shaped Chavismo, the movement of Hugo Chávez in Venezuela, which is reflecting this social backlash against the convergence of the party system around neoliberal reforms in the '80s and '90s and the failure of those reforms. You get a popular backlash against the established democratic regime that is channeled by Hugo Chávez. The very essence of his movement was to re-found the democratic regime by electing a constituent assembly and using plebiscitary appeals in order to rewrite the democratic rules of the game, doing so in a way that tended to concentrate powers in the hands of Chávez and to close democratic space for opposition sectors. There is something different about the formative experience that Chavismo compared to the transformative experience of the Socialist Party in Chile.

When the socialists finally come to power in Chile, they don't have a prayer of having a constituent assembly to re-found the rules of the game. That's not the ballgame they are playing in. It's a very routinized alternation in office. It's part of a multi-party coalition with the more centrist Christian Democrats. The socialists don't have anywhere near the democratic majority that would allow them to challenge the rules of the game or to pursue deeper reforms such as the opportunities that Hugo Chávez had in Venezuela. The socialists came to power in a very different institutional context than Hugo Chávez in Venezuela. You can say the same thing with Lula in Brazil. He's also emerging in an institutionalized democratic alternation in power without the kind of popular majority that would allow them to pursue deeper and more radical reforms, either economically or of the institutions themselves.

Justin Kempf: I think sometimes we get lost when we think about the Venezuelan case in terms of rewriting the Constitution, because from an American context, the idea of the

Constitution is sacred. It's something that is part of the origin story of the United States. When we look at other countries, those origin stories are a little bit more complicated. When we think about Chile, the Constitution was written under a dictatorship. It's Pinochet's constitution that's been perpetually amended to become much more democratic. When Chile tried to rewrite the Constitution in the past seven years, it felt like it was an opportunity to create a truly democratic constitution, something that was formed under democracy.

And it was surprising to a lot of people that after going through the effort twice, once under a more leftist impulse, once under a more rightist impulse, they weren't able to get either of those constitutions passed. Venezuela was very different. Chávez said, 'Hey, we need something that's more democratic. We need something that's founded that represents the people of today.' And people got behind him. It wasn't something that the people rejected. In Chile, they rejected both constitutions from both sides of the political spectrum. They said, 'No, we'd rather just keep things the way they are.' In Venezuela, they got behind Chávez.

They went ahead and voted with him. He was incredibly popular at the time, and he had a real case to make that his vision represented the people for that very reason. He was constantly winning elections with the support of voters on a routine basis. It's difficult to remember that because we're thinking of all of the terrible consequences and all the ways that things went wrong. But at the beginning, it felt like it was a renewal of democracy to people who lived in Venezuela. So why is it that it turned from something that had the language of democracy into something that we now can see is clearly autocratic and authoritarian?

Kenneth Roberts: Yeah. It's a painful process seeing how that unfolded in Venezuela. What you're pointing to is along the lines of what I mentioned before, that within the left in all of these countries, you do have these multiple currents. Even in a case where the left turn ended up in a highly authoritarian system that emerged, at the origins of the process, there were certainly democratic processes and democratic sentiments that were part of the Chavista experiment. Now, it's easy to criticize Chávez for not necessarily following legal and constitutional procedures to bring about a rewriting of the constitution, but in essence, it's the context where you have some popular uprising against the status quo and people are clearly demanding something new and Chávez represented that.

In a lot of ways, he channeled that and they did write a new constitution. He was broadly supported in the early stages of his time in rule. He was also, it's important to recognize, highly polarizing. The emergence of that movement was polarizing, and there were opposition sectors from the beginning that were worried about where that was going to go. Part of the problem in a place like Venezuela is it's a context where the established party system, the established regime institutions, are in crisis and are crumbling. Then you replace them with something new. We talk about the autocratic temptation when you have a new leader, a new movement, that is filling a vacuum because of the demise of the old order. You fill that vacuum in ways that can be very democratic, using democratic instruments like popular referendums and plebiscites.

But there's that temptation to exercise authority in ways that concentrate power in the hands of a single leader or a single party or movement and that closed spaces down the road for other sectors of society. We feel Venezuela got itself in that dynamic. You can argue that opposition sectors contributed to that dynamic of polarization. But we feel the populist Bolivarian left, by the nature of the institutional context in which they came to power, it

created the autocratic temptation that ended up coming back to haunt the left in each of those cases. We are also critical of the mistakes and some of the choices made by the left in Chile and Brazil as well. We talk in those cases, not about the autocratic temptation, but the conformist temptation of the left that plays within the rules of the game.

But rather than bringing about changes in the system like they had promised their followers, they end up conforming or internalizing the logic of the regime that they had set out to try to deepen democracy. We see limitations and pitfalls for the left, both on the social democratic side and the populist side. In some ways, we're pushing back against the notion that there's a good left and a bad left. There was a lot of talk around that in the early days of the left turn. We're not comfortable with that. We think there were mistakes made and lessons to be learned on both sides.

Justin Kempf: Yeah, it's easy to get lost focusing on Venezuela because it's the absolute worst-case scenario. But a lot of the literature about the left turn, especially at the time, was very concerned about the populist impulses that were happening within it. We can think of the case of Bolivia with Morales, who tried to stay in power for four consecutive terms before he was removed by both a popular rebellion and what some describe as a military coup. We've got Ecuador, where you have Correa, who was consolidating political power and people were very concerned about what was happening there before his successor shifted it in a new direction and Ecuador has its own story today.

Argentina, though, is the case that I think is the most fascinating because we have a party in power there, not today, but at the time of the left turn that is almost just the definitive case of populism. It's the Peronist party, the Peronist legacy. Peron is like the godfather of populism itself and the Kirchners are exactly what we think of as populists. And yet democracy did not collapse within Argentina during that period. It didn't fall apart the way that it did in Venezuela.

But at the same time, there were tendencies that they had and a real fear that democracy was eroding within Argentina at the time How should we be thinking about that today? Should we be thinking of it as the Kirchners really were a threat to democracy and the institutions just held things in place or was it an overreaction to them?

Kenneth Roberts: I'm not one of the scholars who believes populism is intrinsically anti-democratic or anti-pluralist. Populism, though, certainly can take an authoritarian turn and, and often does. Populism is essentially a way of drawing the cleavage lines in any political system between the people, whoever you think of as being the people and some elite or establishment. I don't think it's necessarily anti-democratic to draw that cleavage line as long as you're not denying the other side of the cleavage line democratic rights such as the right to participate and vote and to run for office. I don't think it necessarily means that you don't recognize institutional checks and balances. But I do think populism tends to play on the democratic axis of what we call popular sovereignty, of empowering the people.

If you empower the people in ways that doesn't recognize any institutional checks and balances or the rights of political minorities, then clearly you're shading in an authoritarian direction. I think populism may be prone to that, but I don't think it is inevitable. The Kirchners in Argentina are an example of the Peronist populist tradition and articulated that

in particular ways and they did things were very popular at least in the early time of their period in office. They ran into trouble, as much of the left did as the commodity boom ends and the economies turned down. There was tension between Cristina Kirchner and the media.

But for the most part, they did play within the rules of the democratic process. It's an example of how you can have leaders and parties that do articulate at least some of the populist forms of representation and those images of the people and still do so within the context of democratic institutions. I don't see populism as inevitably trending towards autocratic forms of political authority. It's important to recognize that those temptations are often there and a lot of it has to do with how populism constructs the people and constructs the elite and whether or not that is done in a way that recognizes pluralistic democratic rights for those on the other side and the legitimacy of institutional checks and balances within the democratic process.

Justin Kempf: I felt that the criticism of the Kirchners came in two different directions. One was an ideological argument that people didn't like the policies that they put in place and that's a debate that should exist within a democracy. But there was also a procedural argument and a concern that they were consolidating power The most recent evidence of that is the last Peronist president, Kirchner, Cristina Kirchner, was the vice president under that administration. There was a sense that she didn't want to leave power. There was a sense that that president was really a puppet of Cristina Kirchner as well. At least during the election, there was a fear of that.

I'm raising that because I feel the concerns about the Kirchners at the time gets forgotten and the concerns about the Justicialist party in terms of having some anti-democratic tendencies as well as populist tendencies, because there's now concerns about Milei on the right. It feels like Argentina's getting torn in two different directions with questionable democratic credentials on either side.

Kenneth Roberts: This is one of the real challenges that you find in places where you do have political leaderships that are very popular and the challenge then of trying to implement procedures for rotation among elites for democratic alternation in office. I have become very, very wary of any leader that never wants to leave power. This was the case perhaps of Bolivia with Evo Morales, which you mentioned before. He tried to stay for a fourth term in office, which I think was a big mistake. Unlike Venezuela, when Bolivia did their constitutional refounding that came out of this mass mobilization, there was a constitutional mechanism to do that, which for the most part they followed.

It was more constitutionally grounded in the Bolivian case than the Venezuelan case and there were a lot of democratic things that were going on in Bolivia under Evo Morales, at least in the early years. This was certainly the most inclusive democratic regime that Bolivia had ever had. It incorporated the indigenous majority of the population in ways that no Bolivian regime had ever done before. There was certainly an argument to be made that Evo Morales was deepening democracy. Nevertheless, you saw this tendency over time through manipulations of the judiciary, of the media, and then wanting to stay in office even though he had lost a referendum on whether or not you could have another term in office. He actually lost that referendum, but then they got the courts to allow them to do it again.

Ultimately, I think that damaged the democratic legitimacy of Evo Morales. The problem we often see is that popular leaders of movements, whether it's Chávez or Evo Morales, the fact that you've got a broad popular majority at one point in time doesn't mean that you're going to have that for perpetuity or that you should stay in power indefinitely. It's a big mistake for populist movements and leaders, for parties, when they don't institutionalize rotation in their leadership. This is a challenge now that the PT is facing with Brazil, even though they've clearly operated within the parameters of the democratic regime. But where does Brazil go after Lula? Where does the PT go after Lula? We just don't know. So, I think this is a problem and it's not exclusive to populist leaders or movements, but I think they are prone to this problem.

Justin Kempf: Bolivia is such a fascinating case because Morales was oftentimes viewed as implementing more moderate economic policies, even though he was viewed as a populist in terms of sentiment. So, a lot of people thought of Bolivia during the early years as being almost the best-case scenario. He was bringing in lots of new people into participation within the government, bringing indigenous people, making them feel represented for the first time. The policies weren't super far on the extremes, so the business community didn't feel alienated at first. It wasn't really until he refused to leave power effectively that the sentiment really turned on Morales and what was going on in Bolivia and his political project.

But I think it raises a question here, because right now there's such a fear coming from the right in terms of anti-democratic sentiments, particularly within Europe, but even within Latin America. I mean, we're concerned about people like Bolsonaro over in Brazil. There's a fear of Milei over in Argentina. There's a fear of Kast over in Chile. There's a real fear that democracy is threatened because of the rise of these right-wing leaders, and sometimes it's incredibly legitimate, such as in the case of Bolsonaro. There was an attempt to overthrow the Brazilian government after he lost.

But I think it creates a sentiment that the right is bad and the left is good. I think understanding the left turn starts to raise questions about whether or not leftist movements are just inherently democratic. That things can go wrong even among a left-wing ideology. So, I guess my final question for you, Ken, is how should we think about the relationship after studying the left turn between the political left and democracy?

Kenneth Roberts: I think one of the lessons we can take from the left turn is that the left pays a very steep price when they break with democratic norms and procedures. You see that price being paid in Venezuela. You see it being paid in Bolivia and to some extent in Ecuador as well. So even though it may in the short term allow you to do some things to make some reforms you wouldn't do otherwise by changing the rules to your advantage, I think at the end of the day, it comes back to haunt the left. In particular, at a time when we do see authoritarian currents percolating on the right wing, not just in Latin America, but elsewhere as well, it becomes especially important for the left to recognize the centrality of democratic norms and values to any sort of progressive leftist project.

The left pays a steep price when it abandons the democratic terrain. That can be frustrating for the left. They're playing within the democratic rules of the game. It's constraining. That's what the rules are there for. That can be very frustrating, but I think the alternatives can get the left in deep trouble and the Venezuelan case shows that pretty dramatically. This is not just a case where the left has failed, but this is a tragedy for the Venezuelan people. It didn't

have to be that way. I don't think it was inevitable. We don't see any of these endings as having been inevitable, but I think that is, for us, one of the strong lessons coming out of the book. Our cases show that the left can bring about meaningful reforms socially, economically, politically.

There are things the left can do to try to expand and deepen and strengthen democracy and there's nothing about democratic institutions and procedures that nullifies a progressive leftist project. But in recognizing how to play within those constraints is part of what the left has to do. I think in challenging these more authoritarian currents we are seeing today reappearing on the right, I think it's especially important for the left to recognize how integral democracy is to any progressive political project.

Justin Kempf: Well, Ken, thanks so much for joining me today. To mention the book one more time, it's called *Polarization and Democracy in Latin America: Legacies of the Left Turn*. It's co-written with Santiago Anria. It's a great book. Thank you so much for talking to us today. Thank you so much for writing the book.

Kenneth Roberts: Thank you, Justin. It's been a pleasure to talk with you.