Democracy Paradox Podcast
Natalie Wenzell Letsa Describes the Autocratic Voter (1/7/26)
Transcript

Introduction

Today's guest is Natalie Wenzell Letsa. She is an Associate Professor in the Department of Political Science at the University of South Carolina and the author of *The Autocratic Voter: Partisanship and Political Socialization Under Dictatorship*. I find her work really insightful. Even though this is her first book, I found many of the ideas explored in her work helpful to better understand voters in different types of political regimes.

But before we jump into the interview, I want to introduce a few ideas. Hopefully, this makes it a little easier to understand the conversation as we dive deeper into more complex subjects.

First, most dictatorships hold elections. This might surprise you, because elections are largely associated with democracy. But while democracies ensure elections are free and fair, dictators create an unlevel playing field where the opposition has little to no chance to win. As a result, elections allow dictators to claim democratic legitimacy even while they hold onto power indefinitely.

Now the way dictators hold onto power leaves us with the impression of a leader clinging to power despite the universal opposition of the people. Reality is more complicated. This is the next key concept. Even the most despised dictators have pockets of support.

This is where Natalie's work becomes important. She explores why voters in autocracies become supporters of those in power and why others join the opposition. On the one hand, it's difficult to understand why anyone would support a dictator. But it's also hard to understand why others join opposition parties when they do not have a realistic chance to win. And yet, people form strong partisan identities in these environments.

Natalie did extensive field work in Cameroon so she draws many of her examples from there, although her ideas are meant to apply to any country described as an electoral autocracy. If you want to know more about recent political events in Cameroon there is a great online exclusive from the Journal of Democracy. I'll include a link in the show notes. The interview touches on some of the politics of the country but really focuses more on the motivations of partisans which is the focus of Natalie's work.

Of course, I should note the Democracy Paradox is made in partnership with the Kellogg Institute of the Keough School of Global Affairs at the University of Notre Dame. Make sure to mark your calendar for the upcoming Global Democracy Conference on May 19th and 20th. This year's conference will take place at the University of Notre Dame. Check out the link in the show notes for more information. But for now… here is my conversation with Natalie Wenzell Letsa…

Interview

Justin Kempf: Natalie Wenzell Letsa, welcome to the *Democracy Paradox*.

Natalie Wenzell Letsa: Thank you so much for having me.

Justin Kempf: Well, Natalie, I loved your book, *The Autocratic Voter: Partisanship and Political Socialization Under Dictatorship*. It's a fascinating read because it's talking about the way voters react under autocratic environments. It's an idea that challenges a lot of our assumptions because most of us want to believe that people really want democracy. So, we're assuming that these autocracies where elections do happen exist because the autocratic government lacks public support and they are rigging elections because they really don't have anybody who wants to vote for them. But your study of the autocratic voter shows that many voters genuinely do support the ruling parties in these autocracies. So why don't we start here? Why would voters support political parties that govern autocratically?

Natalie Wenzell Letsa: That's a great question and I think Cameroon is an especially good case for this because it's been assumed for a very long time that Cameron's a deeply illegitimate state and that it's very unpopular. So it was quite surprising to me while I was wandering around the country for a year, talking to ordinary people who genuinely expressed their support for the regime. Now there's a number of reasons why that happens. Of course, the premise of the book is that many people are socialized by the people in their lives, their families, and their friends to support the regime.

But the basis of that is the work that the party is doing to legitimize its rule happens through a number of different narratives that can look slightly different depending on the context. But a lot of it is from messaging from the regime itself about its economic performance. Even if from an objective international perspective it looks bad, the regime can always pull on its toolbox to justify why their long-term rule is, on the one hand, a benefit to society and, on the other hand, evidence in and of itself of its democracy bona fides, which of

course, again, objectively from an international perspective seems absurd. But from the perspective within the regime for ordinary citizens who may never hear the other side of the story, it seems perfectly reasonable.

Justin Kempf: So, Cameroon is a country that we might call a competitive authoritarian regime. They hold elections. There's a credible opposition, but it's not a level playing field. Tell us more about what makes these political environments autocratic, because for a lot of people they might hear about the fact that there is an opposition party and there are actual elections and think that sounds a lot like democracy. It's just there's a really popular ruling party that wins every time, but that doesn't mean that it's automatically autocratic.

Natalie Wenzell Letsa: Yeah, of course, the line between a competitive electoral democracy and a competitive electoral autocracy is not always crystal clear and electoral authoritarian regimes play up on that fact quite a bit to say, 'Well look, we allow for competition. You can vote for whoever you want to vote for. It just so happens that we are overwhelmingly popular.' But in fact, the autocrats toolkit, the more subtle forms of repression, the more subtle forms of removing choice are, of course, the most effective. So, there's quite a bit of work to show that these regimes prefer to use things like monopolizing the media, gerrymandering, electoral districts, making it more difficult for opposition candidates to register, slightly tweaking with the electoral commission to make rules a just a little bit more difficult for the opposition to win certain elections, and removing certain powers from elected officials into the executive branch.

Now all of these small behind the scenes things might be quite obvious to the actors who are directly affected by them. The independent radio station or the local mayor who's been elected from the opposition might be acutely aware of the autocratic overstepping that's happening. But for the ordinary citizens who aren't directly affected by it, it's much harder for them to perceive these things happening. Of course, every regime, including Cameroon, eventually under certain circumstances, has to rely on repression, on ballot box stuffing, on these more obvious tools of repression and tools of autocratic control.

But most regimes prefer not to use them for the reason that they'd like to keep up the facade to the greatest extent possible so it appears they are winning through legitimate means and not through autocratic means. This is easiest for the regime in its strongholds where there isn't a lot of repression and where there isn't a lot of opposition to the regime to begin with, so maintaining the facade of popularity is much easier in those parts of the country.

Justin Kempf: So, I got the impression that in Cameroon, they genuinely win elections meaning that if we just simply count up the votes there really are actually more people voting for the ruling party than for opposition parties. Am I misunderstanding that? Are they actually rigging and actually stuffing the ballot box there or are they genuinely winning the election, but just setting up the terms and the rules of the election in a way that make it difficult to compete?

Natalie Wenzell Letsa: I think the question of whether or not the ruling party, the RDPC, could win in a free and fair in election is a question that nobody knows the answer to today. Certainly not since 1992. Have there been periods of time in which it was popular enough to win an election outright? I think that's possible, but Cameron has never had a free and fair election, so we can't possibly know that. I think the biggest issue at hand is that because of its repression, there has never been a viable opposition, at least not since 1992, and the reporting around the 92 election, which was the first multi-party election that Cameroon held as an independent state, was that almost certainly the ruling party would've lost that election.

But because of its repression, because of its manipulation of the opposition, because of the opposition's own failures, it's unclear whether that opposition would have won in subsequent elections as it became further undermined, further delegitimized. So, one of the great innovations of electoral autocracies is that they win, not because they're overwhelmingly popular amongst a large majority of citizens, but because there isn't an opposition to vote for. So if there was a popular opposition like the SDF in 1992 and it recreated itself today, certainly the ruling party would not win. But of course, without free and fair elections in which you have an opposition that can organically consolidate itself, can organically and freely campaign around the country, that just doesn't exist in Cameroon today.

So to speak about whether or not the ruling party would win in a free and fair election today is a misnomer because there aren't free and fair elections. And so, certainly the regime is not, especially today… I wrote the book over the course of the last 10 years and the regime's legitimacy has eroded considerably during that period of time, so I would say the zenith of its popularity was probably in the early 2000s. With the aging of the president, it has been decreasing considerably since then. So, no, I hope the takeaway of the book is not that the RDPC today is overwhelmingly popular. That's not the case, but it does have pockets of genuine, deep support and those expand and contract depending on various external factors.

Justin Kempf: So, has the government become more autocratic as its support has eroded or has it not needed to become more autocratic because it's always been able to control elections?

Natalie Wenzell Letsa: Cameron has always been very autocratic and so I would say yes, the regime, particularly since the outbreak of the Anglophone crisis in 2016, has become more autocratic. It has repressed the opposition more actively particularly for Maurice Kamto and the MRC. In the last election there was a level of repression that I don't think has been quite as bad since the early 1990s and the previous election, because for the election that just happened in October, Maurice Kamto was barred from running. There was less overt repression because he wasn't rallying supporters and the main opposition candidate, Issa Tchiroma was a regime insider, so he faced less repression during the campaign because he had only just defected from the regime.

But of course, following the election, there was repression against opposition protestors in the streets. So in general, yes, the regime has become more autocratic over time, but whether or not that is a cause of or a reaction to defection is not entirely clear.

Justin Kempf: So, what's most interesting about the book is that it doesn't focus on the regime itself. It focuses on the voters, and it focuses on the most partisan of the voters. For people who are highly partisan and support the regime, how do they think about democracy? Do they recognize that the regime has some anti-democratic elements, that the regime is autocratic, or do they think that the regime really is democratic or does their support just cloud their view that they just reinterpret things and justify things as being democratic?

Natalie Wenzell Letsa: Broadly speaking, one of the points that I make in the book is that pretty much all Cameroonians and all citizens of autocratic regimes have broad support for democracy as a system of governance. They're not anti-democratic. In the data that I look at in Cameroon, I don't see a distinct difference in how partisans define democracy. So broadly speaking, opposition partisans have a strong preference for democracy over different forms of authoritarian rule, just like ruling party partisans do. Of course, the main cleavage that I point to in the book is that they disagree about whether or not the regime itself is democratic or autocratic.

There is some work by Erin Hern at Syracuse who has a working paper looking at the different perceptions of democracy or defining democracy in Zimbabwe and how ruling party partisans define it differently. But I didn't find that in my own data, not in Cameroon, nor in the World Value Survey Data. So, I think it's

an ambiguous question about whether partisans define democracy differently. But that said, I did anecdotally encounter ruling party partisans admitting to antidemocratic behaviors in the regime, but excusing it. So oftentimes saying you have to be in the ruling party to get things, but that's normal everywhere. That's how it works, even in democracies.

So, I don't think it's a complete blindness. They realize that the regime's not perfect, but they are willing to excuse or obfuscate antidemocratic aspects of the regime and come up with excuses for why it's okay. You know, it's okay to arrest opposition supporters because they're out there in the streets throwing rocks at police officers. It's okay to shut down the media that is criticizing the regime because they're fomenting insurrection or they're creating instability in the republic, and so they're willing to excuse anti-democratic behaviors for a whole host of different reasons that to them seem like a defense of democracy, a defense of stability.

Justin Kempf: It sounds like they support democracy in the abstract, but when you break it down to specific cases, their support becomes a little bit more fragile.

Natalie Wenzell Letsa: Yes. I think that's fair to say. I think in the most objectively indefensible cases, they're going to be just as astonished like if there's ballot box stuffing or obviously antidemocratic behavior. If you see a peaceful woman protesting who's not doing anything and she's being beaten by police, of course ruling party partisans are sensitive to things like this. They won't defend anything. But I think that just like we've seen in actual democratic regimes, partisan justifications for antidemocratic behavior can go quite a ways in explaining away the actions of the regime, while still believing that the regime is democratic.

Justin Kempf: So why do they even allow opposition parties to exist if the whole purpose of the logic behind the regime is to ensure that they stay in power?

Natalie Wenzell Letsa: There's a fair amount of work on how electoral autocracies, in general, tend to be more stable than closed autocracies and how elections and legislatures allow autocrats to remain in power for longer. In part this is by allowing a larger number of actors into the political system so you can gain more information about areas of opposition through the use of elections. Instead of having to wait until a rebellion starts, you can co-opt areas of the country that aren't voting overwhelmingly for you. You can identify where opposition is before it becomes a major threat. It makes it easier to get regime

opponents into the regime instead of being forced to fight against the regime from outside of it.

It shores up legitimacy. In the post-Cold War world, the story now is a bit old, but after the fall of the Berlin Wall, there were protests across Africa and, in fact, some of the most highly mobilized protests in Africa were in Cameroon. There were major protests in Cameroon in the early 1990s that lasted for months and months and months against the regime. So, in Cameroon everybody there wants democracy. Like I said, there is a high level of support for it. It was just simply untenable to not allow for any opposition. So by allowing that opposition, for allowing for that release valve, on the one hand, for opponents to the regime, the regime gains strength in that.

But on the other hand, it gains the democratic bona fides for its own supporters to say there are opposition parties. We are a democracy, so you can continue voting for us. You can continue supporting us because we are safeguarding democracy. We are the ones that are holding these elections. We are the ones who are allowing the opposition to run, so we can be trusted with democracy.

Justin Kempf: I've heard a lot of those theoretical explanations, and I think that that makes sense at the abstract level. But what I thought was interesting about your book was that by talking to people on the ground, by having these conversations and these interviews, I got the impression that holding elections and allowing for a political opposition was just as important. In fact, maybe even more important for the most fervent supporters and partisans of the ruling regime, so that they could look at themselves and think they were doing the right thing, that they were preserving democracy within their country. I mean, it seemed as if holding elections was almost as important for those who believed in the ruling party and believed in the regime. In fact, probably even more so, more important for them than for the actual opposition themselves.

Natalie Wenzell Letsa: Yeah, I would agree wholeheartedly with that interpretation. It's always hard to think through the counterfactual that if Cameron had never allowed for opposition parties, how would ordinary supporters of the regime think about regime legitimacy. It's impossible to answer that question, but over and over again when I spoke with ruling party partisans, the ordinary people who go to rallies and vote in elections, there is this sense that the regime is the safeguarder of democracy. They ushered democracy in. Without Paul Biya, without the ruling party, there would be no multi-party election in Cameroon. We have them to thank for democracy in Cameroon today.

Which, of course, from the outside seems somewhat absurd, but from the inside you can imagine from that perspective, it makes sense that we should continue to trust them to keep holding these elections, to manage the process since they've managed it relatively peacefully all of these years and that opposition partisans have their people to vote for and their people to support, and we have ours. So, there is a great pride. But again, things are changing right now a lot in Cameroon. For a long time for many partisans, this was a point of pride that was particularly necessary in the moment of time of the 1990s, in the 2000s when democracy was the only option.

Justin Kempf: So earlier in the conversation, you emphasized the fact that if we had free and fair elections, it's likely that the ruling party would lose. One of the takeaways that I did have from your book was not that the ruling party was popular, but that the opposition parties don't have salience at this point, partly because of the way that the regime is structured with the fact that there aren't free and fair elections. It's difficult for the opposition parties to really gain traction, but another part of it seemed to be that the opposition parties were very focused on language and dialogue based more on democracy and more on changing the regime rather than what they were going to do in government. It's something that we see in western democracies too.

We see parties respond to backsliding governments by talking about democracy rather than focusing on bread and butter issues. That hasn't always been able to work. It has mixed success at the ballot box. Is that the impression that you got from talking to regular ordinary citizens, especially people who maybe weren't fierce partisans, that there was a little bit of skepticism about the ability of opposition parties to succeed in governance and that there was some skepticism of them as a ruling party?

Natalie Wenzell Letsa: It was a huge narrative for ruling party partisans. They very frequently bring up the fact that they could never vote for the opposition, because once they came to power, they would be even worse in terms of governance since they have no experience. I would say that for opposition partisans, I heard less trepidation along those lines. This is in part because as I outline in the book and has also been echoed by other scholarship. For example, Dan Paget has shown that opposition parties and electoral autocracies overwhelmingly focus on the issue of democracy when they're competing, because they can own that issue easily. They are at the front line of antidemocratic abuses and repression.

On the one hand, that's their issue because they experience it more than anybody else in society. On the other hand, they also have to hammer in on it over and

over and over again because it explains why they're losers. One of the biggest campaign issues that they face is that they cannot win the election. So if they can't win the elections because they're unpopular, that marks the end for them. They have to show that the reason why they're not winning is not because they're not popular, but because there's all of these things that are going against them in terms of the regime putting up barriers and roadblocks and repression and all of that. As a result, because they're constantly talking about that because that's constantly their messaging, their supporters, I do think genuinely echo that.

However, if you look at public opinion data, overwhelmingly the number one political issue in Cameroon and pretty much all of the electoral autocracies in Africa if you just ask what is the biggest issue that this country faces today, pretty much the top three issues are going to be economic issues, unemployment issues with education or poverty, things like that. It raises the great point that perhaps oppositions maybe would be more successful if they focused on economic issues, bread and butter issues that ordinary people care about. I should say that public opinion data is true, not just for the average Cameroonian, but also for opposition partisans. If you break it down by partisanship, even opposition partisans will say that their number one issue is an economic issue. So that's a good point.

But the fundamental problem for opposition partisans is it's so hard to campaign on those economic issues. You can criticize the regime over and over and over again, but if you have no track record to point to and you don't really have an obvious alternative plan, which in developing countries, there's so few resources to go around and their economies are so structurally focused on commodity extraction and are largely at the whim of the global economy. They don't have a toolbox of economic policy to draw on to provide some clear alternative to the regime. All they can say is if we came into office, we wouldn't be corrupt if we came into office. We would distribute things better, but there is no clear messaging that they can draw upon to make their case.

I think in part that is another reason why they end up defaulting to issues of democracy even though perhaps opposition partisans or nonpartisan independents would like to hear an economic message, it might not be effective even if they got it. So, it's a difficult case. Opposition parties face a really difficult set of barriers.

Justin Kempf: Yeah, I'm definitely not trying to overlook the difficult situation that they're in, but I do see echoes of what we've seen in other countries. Russia's a great example. Alexei Navalny spent a lot of time trying to come up

with an economic message that he thought could get beyond the cities and draw support throughout all of Russia. That was something that he was very focused on to create a message that would be able to win. Now that obviously did not work in Russia. We know the story of Navalny and what happened to him, but it's interesting that we're seeing some of these same tensions exist in Africa and in other autocratic nations.

We're even seeing some of that within democratic countries where the question of how do you craft the right message to respond to autocratic inclinations. What's the best message for that? Is it to respond with fighting for democracy or is it to focus on actual public policy and actual public policy agenda that you can deliver for voters? I don't know that it's always clear and it's a very difficult position for politicians to be in. Whether you're in a country like Cameroon or Tanzania or if you're in a liberal democracy that's facing some of these backsliding challenges,

Natalie Wenzell Letsa: It's a difficult question and one that I certainly don't have a definitive answer to, but I do think that it doesn't have be a this or that question and that it's really important given the context of various countries, various constituencies to try and throw as much at the wall as you can. I think that the best strategy, in fact, is to allow for many different strategies to see what works. I think in a country like Cameroon it's a little bit more difficult. Countries like Russia or even countries dealing with backsliding like the United States or Poland or elsewhere have far more dynamic economies, are much larger, and therefore have many different constituencies to appeal to.

I think it's easier for these larger parties to try the strategy of having multiple different messages to draw on different constituencies. But I agree that ignoring economic issues to the sole focus of democratic issues is probably a mistake, particularly for opposition parties who have missed their moment. Oftentimes when we see an opposition party gain traction and might be on the verge of winning like the SDF in 1992 or when opposition coalitions come together the winning message is one about democracy. But once that moment has passed, they've lost. They've been repressed. The regime moves on. I think that that message about democracy becomes quite stale because citizens see that they failed. So, to harp on about it, I think is less effective and moving to other issues about economics might be slightly more effective.

But so much about opposition support is about timing and when oppositions are able to overcome the collective action problem. The message is almost secondary in a sense, but over the long term building messages about democracy is also important. I don't want to say that economic issues should be

the sole focus of opposition parties. A big thing about what they're doing is teaching ordinary citizens about the regime in a way that ordinary citizens would not, at least in a place like Cameron, really be getting without opposition parties.

So, another big point that I try and make in the book is that in countries like Cameroon, opposition parties are oftentimes the only actors in society that are actively going out and talking about how the regime is not a democracy. There just aren't other groups in society that are able to do that consistently. That is why we see in ruling party strongholds that millions of people rate their regime as perfectly democratic because they really haven't heard alternative views.

So whether or not that message is going to make the party win is secondary to the broader point that I think is important, which is that they're teaching citizens something about the regime that they otherwise wouldn't necessarily hear or learn about. That might not lead to a revolution. That might not lead to the opposition winning an election, but it does pave the wave for a longer term process of creating a democratic society that I think is really important and can last beyond regime changes and create cleavages and structures that will then mediate society in the long term.

Justin Kempf: So far the conversation is focused on differences between autocracies and democracies. But one of the things I was most fascinated by was how I noticed parallels in terms of their lived experience within politics with the experiences that I have within a democracy. The fact that partisanship really shapes a large part of a person's identity, whether or not they're supporting the regime, or whether or not they're opposed to the regime. I felt like there were a lot of parallels to life in democracies and parallels in ways that I did not expect. In what ways does partisanship in an autocratic environment, in your opinion, differ from a democratic one? And in what ways do you find similarities and shared experiences?

Natalie Wenzell Letsa: Well, I'll say one of the main points of the book is really to try and make the point that partisanship political identities in autocratic regimes are not fundamentally different than they are in democratic regimes. I make different points in the book about how they can differ and why they do differ, but broadly speaking a point that I like to make is that we study political behavior and autocratic regimes very differently than the way in which we study political behavior in democratic regimes. But I don't think that that is doing a great service to us. I think that it's become increasingly problematic given the rise of electoral autocracies, given the Democratic backsliding that's going on.

I think that we have more in common between these subfields of studying democracy and studying authoritarianism than I think the past literature has made clear and I'm certainly not the only person who's making this point right now. Partisan identities do act in very similar ways. They lead to motivated reasoning. They lead to similar processes of political socialization through social networks and they filter the way in which ordinary people get their political information and internalize that political information. There are three primary ways in which they differ that I highlight in the book. One is the content of those identities. Opposition partisanship as a thing, as an identity, is unique in electoral autocracies, as is ruling party partisanship and those two identities don't look the same in more democratic systems.

What makes them unique is perceptions of the regime that I already talked about briefly. Ruling party partisans view the regime as legitimate and democratic and opposition partisans do not. They believe that they live in an autocratic regime and if you look cross-nationally that gap in perceptions only exists in electoral autocracies. It does not divide partisan groups uniformly and other types of democratic regimes. Even the concept of opposition and ruling party partisanship doesn't really make sense in a democratic system because of course, broadly speaking, in most democracies we see the alternation of power. Of course, not all democracies act that way, but you can see that sort of broadly makes that identity different between regime types, but then also similar across electoral autocracies.

What opposition partisanship means in Cameroon in that way is very similar to what it means in Kazakhstan or in Russia or in Venezuela. There are these kernels of similarities. Even though opposition parties are all different from each other within Cameroon and then even more different from each other across electoral autocracies, there is that kernel of similarity that ties them all together. Another difference is that processes of socialization. Partisan socialization in democratic regimes should be roughly mirroring one another. That for me to be politically socialized as a Democrat should look roughly similar to me being politically socialized as a Republican in the American context. Whereas in an electoral autocracy, that socialization process is slightly different. Because opposition partisans are a much smaller group than ruling party partisans, there are by definition, more ruling party partisans in electoral autocracies than there are opposition partisans.

And so, one thing that I show is that opposition partisans face far more cross-partisan pressures than do ruling party partisans. Many ruling party partisans can basically go their whole life and never even meet an opposition partisan or never really have one in their social network. As a result, it's pretty easy for

them to go through life without having to feel any cross pressure, whereas opposition partisans almost no matter where you live, even if you live in a hardcore opposition area are probably going to know a ruling party partisan. So, it's much more likely that you'll have one or two or more in your social network that are creating that exertion. I think it's generally just harder to be an opposition partisan and that makes that social identity different than in a democratic context.

Justin Kempf: But even in the United States, we're seeing geographic sorting happening here and in states such as Indiana or states like Utah, if you live in a rural community, you really might not know many people who are Democrats.

On the flip side, if you're in a university town or if you're living in a highly urban area, you might not know many Republicans. You might not know any Republicans within your professional field depending on where it is that you work and what type of job that you have and where it is that you choose to live. Again, I'm seeing some similarities that I didn't really expect between democratic life and the way that you're describing sorting within autocratic regimes.

Natalie Wenzell Letsa: The third piece is political and I argue in the book that political geography is different in electoral autocracies because opposition parties and opposition strongholds are so disadvantaged and so quarantined, particularly after several cycles of electoral competition. Opposition parties get really pigeonholed into a handful of constituencies within the country and it's hard to access their narratives outside of their strongholds. The point that you make about the United States where there's very clear parallels I think speaks to the fact that there is this backsliding that's going on in the United States that's being driven by political polarization. It's surprising that we see the parallels on the one hand, but on the other hand it's because even though these are two different types of regimes. They are related to one another.

The more and more we can imagine a parallel universe or an alternative timeline in which polarization increases and a ruling party emerges that constructs more barriers for the opposition party in the United States in which opposition areas do become as quarantined in the United States as they are in Cameroon. We sense that and we feel that, but I would like to underline the point that it is not currently the same in the United States as it is in Cameroon. There is just not the same access to information in Cameroon as there is in the United States. I would also highlight that Cameroon, which is one of, I think, 19 electoral autocracies in Sub-Saharan Africa is also fundamentally different in

this way from some of the more prominent electoral autocracies like Russia or Turkey, where there is a lot of international coverage of those regimes.

So actually, it might not be that hard for the ordinary Russian or the ordinary person in Turkey to find dissenting information about the regime, to see accusations about the regime being democratic or autocratic. That's not the case for a lot of electoral autocracies in Sub-Saharan Africa. There's just not a lot of international coverage of Gabon, for example, unless something is happening. There might be a couple of days of coverage. You know, if you are sitting in Cameroon and regularly watching the BBC or listening to RVC, you're not getting tons of information about Cameroon from that source. It really is genuinely hard to get information about the regime being autocratic unless you are in an opposition stronghold.

That is an order of magnitude different than the types of geographic sorting that we're seeing in the United States. Again, it could get to that point with further backsliding, but it is just simply far more exaggerated in a place like Cameroon.

Justin Kempf: So would you call these electoral autocracies highly polarized? Is that the experience that you have from Cameroon and other countries? Are these highly polarized political environments as well, because again, that would be another parallel to some of the backsliding democracies that we see in the west?

Natalie Wenzell Letsa: Yeah, I think the nature of electoral politics in electoral autocracies bakes polarization into the cake, so to speak. The premise of opposition politics for the need to prove, to show, to constantly talk about the regime being autocratic builds into itself this polarization that we see around perceptions of the regime to constantly say that the ruling party is antidemocratic, dictatorial makes it so that polarization, this anti-outgroup sentiment, this affective polarization against the ruling party, is almost foundational to party politics in electoral autocracies.

That said, I don't think that polarization reaches the same levels in all electoral autocracies. Some ruling parties are much more inclusive and mobilizing. We can look at the CCM in Tanzania. This again, is changing. There's more unrest now in Tanzania than there has been historically. But for a long time throughout the 90s, the early 2000s, the CCM was genuinely popular. You know, going back to your question, analysts argue that it would probably have won a free and fair election. There wasn't really, as far as I know, high levels of outgroup animosity or hatred towards one another. So, I think that there is variation amongst electoral autocracies in terms of levels of polarization just like there is

in democracies. But I think that the starting point, the sort of lowest level of polarization is probably higher just because of the nature of partisan politics.

But I do think a point that I would like to make is that. I think this study of polarization has been dominated by scholars of democracy, in part because now we're experiencing this in many democracies around the world and it's leading to democratic backsliding. Also to point out that in democratic regimes, polarization is also a structuring factor of democratic politics. The whole point of democratic politics is that you create factions. You then compete with one another through elections and so that can quite easily lead to polarization.

Historically, autocratic regimes did not feature elections and so we didn't see obvious forms of polarization. But now that the most common form of authoritarianism is electoral authoritarianism, we are seeing that polarization can arise under dictatorship. In many autocracies in the world like Cameron that have never experienced democracy, you can still have polarization even if you've never had democratic politics.

Justin Kempf: As you just mentioned, we need to be a little careful when we talk about polarization because there's always going to be some form of polarization whenever you have elections. There is going to be a difference between different candidates, between different parties, between different factions, but we might be able to use maybe a more precise term like pernicious polarization as what we're seeing in these electoral autocracies and these backsliding democracies. What I wonder is authoritarian governance causing pernicious polarization or do you think pernicious polarization is leading to authoritarian governance?

Natalie Wenzell Letsa: That's a very good question. That's a great question. I'm not sure I have a satisfying answer to it. Surely it goes both ways to an extent. I'm imagining it like a bell curve. So, when there's very low levels of repression that the regime is exerting, then you're probably going to see lower levels of polarization. As repression increases against the opposition, the opposition is going to be harping more and more about the autocratic nature of the regime and pointing to these abuses and trying to polarize their partisans and supporters against the regime. But once the regime becomes too repressive, it becomes too dangerous to speak out and we start moving towards a more closed autocracy as we see in a place like, for example, Rwanda or increasingly in Russia, where society appears once again to be depolarized.

But in part, that is a measurement issue, because once society becomes so repressive, it's hard to know what percentage of the population is actually

genuinely supportive of the regime or not. That's the trajectory of polarization. In terms of governance, I ascribe, at least at the moment, to the argument that elite actions drive polarization more than mass polarization drives elite polarization and repression and backsliding. I think that social identities are made by political actors and as a result polarization, even though it goes both ways is primarily driven by democratic backsliding, meaning driven by elite actions rather than the other way around.

It would be the same way in autocratic regimes. It's the actions of, as you put it, the autocratic governance and the reactions of the opposition parties and the opposition leaders themselves to that autocratic governance that then more deeply drives polarization rather than the other way around.

Justin Kempf: So Natalie, I know that your book is about electoral autocracies and about the way that voters and partisans develop identities and the way that they interact within these environments. But I can't help but think that this study that you did teaches us so much about the way democracy works. So, in learning about the autocratic voter, what surprised you? What did you learn about the meaning and purpose of democracy that maybe you didn't fully understand before?

Natalie Wenzell Letsa: I think the biggest surprise that I had doing field work in Cameroon related to political geography and the experiences that I had going around the country. I started my field work for my dissertation and spent a year there doing a public opinion survey. I did the survey myself. I was going door to door knocking on people's doors and talking to them around the whole country. I started in Yaoundé and Douala in the central part of the country, which is for those who don't know, a fairly competitive part of the country, and of course generally more urban.

Then I went to Bamenda, the Northwest Regions, Bafoussam in the West and that part of the country and had the experience that I think you would expect to have in an electoral autocracy. Everybody was against the regime. Everybody was complaining about corruption. Everybody was angry. Everybody wanted change. Everybody wanted a new president. Directly from there, I went to the east. Which is a political backwater. It doesn't have very high population densities. It's not ethnically related to the president, but it overwhelmingly votes for the regime mostly just because there's not really an opposition there.

Going straight from Bamenda to a Abong-Mbang in the east was shocking. I might as well have traveled to a different planet. People just spoke very clearly and openly that, ‘Yeah, of course I vote for the regime. We've always had the

same president, and so why would I vote against him? Look at the great things that they're doing and what a wonderful thing that we have these elections and that I can answer this survey for you.' It was just this sort of overwhelming contentment with the political system. Of course, there were complaints about the economy and things like that, but nobody was out in the streets furious about dictatorship and I found that really shocking in part because so much of the coverage of Cameroon is from a Western perspective is this is an authoritarian regime that is not legitimate or popular.

There are a whole bunch of reasons why we think that about Cameroon and why the coverage looks like that. It's not false that the regime is a dictatorship, of course, but that two citizens of the same country could have such insanely different views of their own government, I was really genuinely shocked by that.

And so maybe one of the greatest takeaways that I have, or one of the things that I find most surprising or that I learned the most about democracy, is that you really can take this cognitive bias so far down the road that you can live in objectively a very clear dictatorship and sit there and say that I live in a democracy. With a lack of information, with a sort of isolated news environment and in the context of all of your friends and family believing the same thing and saying the same thing about the regime with the presence of a social identity that binds you to that community and to that set of beliefs, you can buy almost anything and that should be a word of warning for democracies that are facing these same issues with social identities around partisanship.

Justin Kempf: Natalie, thank you so much for joining me today. Again, I really do recommend this book, it's called *The Autocratic Voter: Partisanship and Political Socialization Under Dictatorship*. Thank you so much for joining me today, Natalie. Thank you so much for writing the book.

Natalie Wenzell Letsa: Thank you for having me, Justin.