**Democracy Paradox**

*Susan Stokes on Democratic Backsliders* (9/17/25)

Transcript

## Introduction

The podcast is back. Thanks to support from the Kellogg Institute at the University of Notre Dame, the *Democracy Paradox* will have new episodes every other week for the foreseeable future. It's a great association, because the Kellogg Institute is the home of many scholars featured on the show in the past such as Michael Coppedge, Laura Gamboa, Scott Mainwaring, and Guillermo Trejo. It's really an honor for the podcast to establish this association and it's amazing the Kellogg Institute valued the work of the podcast to help bring it back.

Now over the course of the past year a lot has happened while the podcast was off the air. But at least one thing has stayed the same. Most democratic scholars continue to warn about ongoing backsliding around the world. While there are certainly some bright spots, democratic backsliding remains a cause for concern. So I plan to kick off the relaunch of the podcast with a series of three episodes focused on democratic backsliding.

Today's guest is Susan Stokes. Her book is *The Backsliders: Why Leaders Undermine Their Own Democracies*. Susan is the Blake Distinguished Professor of Political Science at the University of Chicago and the chair of the Chicago Center on Democracy. Her book was just published last week and I was excited to speak with her because it's a book I had looked forward to reading for most of the year.

What I like most about her book is how it brings together different ideas discussed on the podcast to explain how they contribute to democratic backsliding. Here's an overview of her argument. Economic inequality produces political polarization that benefits populist politicians who undermine democratic institutions.

If you've listened to the podcast, these are concepts you probably find familiar. But for those listening for the first time, this is a great introduction to how different ideas relate with one another. I try not to overcomplicate the discussions, but I also don't talk down to the listeners. Ideally, I want to introduce you to new ideas and the ways scholars think about them. Hopefully, it gives you a different perspective on politics that helps you understand the world.

Before we get started though, I want to mention the Kellogg Institute will feature a lecture from Victoria Murillo of Columbia University on September 23rd from 12:30pm to 2:00pm. You can attend on campus or watch it on the video live stream. Vickie is a

scholar I follow closely, so I recommend checking it out. I'll make sure to include a link in the show notes. I also want to give a shoutout to this year's visiting fellows at the Kellogg Institute. You'll find a link in the notes to learn more about them and the visiting fellow program at Kellogg.

But for now… This is my conversation with Sue Stokes…

**jmk:** Sue Stokes, welcome to the Democracy Paradox.

**Susan Stokes:** Thank you. My pleasure to be here.

**jmk:** Well, Sue, the book is called *The Backsliders: Why Leaders Undermine Their Own Democracies*. It's a surprisingly creative title. I say surprisingly because I really can't recall anyone using the term backsliders before. Everyone talks about backsliding, but the title really leaves a lot open to interpretation. We can think of countries as backslider, but I think your subtitle implies that the leaders are the ones who are the backsliders. So why don't you tell us what the title means to you?

**Susan Stokes:** Yeah, you're right about that. I mean, the leaders are the agents of backsliding. So, it's a book that makes an explanation that's more structural about the conditions under which democratic erosion is likely to happen, but it certainly requires a certain kind of leader to make it happen - certain kinds of presidents and prime ministers who have cropped up in relatively large numbers in the last 25 years or so. There's an interplay between structure and agency in the book. You don't get democratic backsliding if you have a leader of a country who venerates their democratic institutions or history. So yes, you're right to notice it's about people.

**jmk:** So, do you feel that the structural conditions, which we'll get to in just a moment, are more important or do you think that it really depends more on the leaders who are in charge?

**Susan Stokes:** I think I'd be tempted to say that. Although as a social scientist, I wouldn't want to say anything too definitive without being able to put some numbers behind it. But I do think there's something to be said for thinking about structural conditions as allowing democratic erosion to happen and even encouraging it to happen at a greater pace with greater irregularity in the last 25 years. As I said, it really requires a certain kind of leader to come to power and

furthermore, they inspire each other. You know, they do learn from one another. They see what others are doing. They share information. Vladimir Putin in Alaska suggested to Donald Trump that he wouldn't have trouble with elections if he didn't have mail-in balloting.

Victor Orban famously gerrymandered his whole country and there was a lot of communication between Orban and like-minded leaders throughout the advanced industrial world. It does take a certain kind of personality, a certain kind of belief set, a certain set of values and aspirations. But we also have instances where you get those kinds of leaders or those kinds of political parties, and they're constrained by the conditions in their countries not to attempt or succeed in carrying out democratic backsliding. So, there's an interplay between the two.

**jmk:** Let's go into the structural conditions because the book kind of lays out that there are structural conditions that produce certain types of political environments that then allow for certain types of leaders to be able to arise, who then engage in certain types of behaviors that produce democratic backsliding. In the book you write, “Reducing inequality and shoring up democracy are not separate tasks, but instead go hand in hand.” So, does economic inequality merely contribute to democratic backsliding or is the economic inequality ipso facto, like is it by itself undemocratic?

**Susan Stokes:** Well, I would say it isn't by itself undemocratic, because I rely on a more narrow political definition of what a democracy is. So, a country can be quite unequal if the leadership is elected in free and fair elections. There are constraints on leaders. There's rule of law and a number of other conditions independent of the nature of the economy. I, and many political scientists, would define that as a democracy. I think the phrase you read is trying to get across is that income inequality encourages the erosion of democracy and I have to be honest and say that the strength of that statistical finding was a revelation to me. Actually, that was something that I and a co-author, Eli Rau from Tecnológico de Monterrey in Mexico, uncovered in a paper that we wrote that came out earlier.

There's a long tradition of exploring economic conditions that are either good for democracy or bad for it, undermine it or make it more stable, or stabilize autocratic regimes. We saw ourselves working in that tradition. We were interested in just taking a look. A lot of people have had the hunch that income inequality might be part of the story of democratic erosion. I think a lot of people probably would've had a hunch that poorer countries and younger democracies are also more prone to

erosion. So, when we undertook to gather the international data from all democracies and really looked at these questions quite rigorously with the number of different statistical models, we were blown away by the results. We were blown away by the consistency and robustness of the inequality association.

So other things being equal, the more unequal a country, the greater its risk of experiencing democratic backsliding. That was a finding that was more consistent and stronger than the effect of wealth per capita of a country or level of economic development. It mattered in a way that the age of democracy didn't, which was in some ways surprising because there's a long history of studies of coup d'états and the likelihood of countries experiencing coup d'états that links it very much with both level of economic development and the age of democracy. So, income inequality is the key economic factor that increases the risk of democratic backsliding.

**jmk:** So, is it the direction of economic inequality or is it just the amount of economic inequality? For instance, if a country is historically very unequal economically, does that put it at a higher risk or is it the trajectory? So, if a country is at a low level of economic inequality, but it's increasing that amount, the trajectory is just going up very quickly. Is that what puts it at risk of democratic backsliding?

**Susan Stokes:** I can say with confidence that the level of income inequality is predictive. If you have a spreadsheet and you've got a year and you've got a level of Gini, the most common measure of inequality, that's going to give you the result that I've been describing. Now for technical reasons, it's a little bit hard to study the impact of changing levels. There are reasons to think that that might matter as well. So, for example, there's a cluster of countries in the post-communist world where democracy has eroded and it's definitely tempting to conclude that that has to do with increasing income inequality in the post-communist period. But we can't really nail that down with the data that's available.

It is the case that whatever the effect of changing levels, just having a high level of income inequality increases the risk of democratic backsliding. The other thing I'd add to that is that I do think that finding is interesting for what it says about the risk facing any given country. But it also tells us something about this particular time period and why the early 21st century has been a period in which we see a lot of democratic erosion. I don't think it's a coincidence that that comes at the end of a

long period of increasing income inequality and high levels of income inequality in the industrialized West.

I mean, the United States in the 1980s - it rises and falls. It's not a completely monotonic sort of circular change, but in general, our country has become much more unequal. Same can be said of most advanced democracies. So, the inequality effect, helps us to explain not just the risks of individual countries, but this sort of historical phenomenon.

**jmk:** So you find that economic inequality leads to populism, but it manifests in different ways in different places. For instance, in Latin America, it's oftentimes manifested as left-wing populism. In the West, it's generally come about as right-wing populism. Why is there a difference? And maybe you could give us a little bit of a background as to why it brings about different outcomes in different places.

**Susan Stokes:** That has a lot to do with what's going to sell among electorates. It's easier to sell left populism of a strongly anti-corporate, anti rich people type, and not to try to sell hatred of ethnic others in a country like Mexico than in a country like. Hungry or the US. There's more of an appetite for what I call rightwing ethnonationalism in the advanced countries, the advanced democracies.

The story that I tell in the book is that in terms of the rise of rightwing, ethnonationalism, you really have to go back several decades into the 20th century and look at changes in the nature of demographics and economic development, which created incentives for left of center political parties - Social Democrats, the Democratic Party of the United States - to turn away a little bit from a working class electorate, a manufacturing working class electorate, and toward an electorate that was more urban and more college educated and more liberal on social issues.

That's a change that happened in so many countries. It happened so regularly that it's hard for me to accept the self-flagellation of some people in the Democratic Party. You know, we shouldn't have ever turned away from this working-class base. That may well be true now in retrospect, but it's such a common change to have occurred that it seems like it's somewhat structural. So, the traditional - call them the legacy left parties - turn toward a more affluent, educated, urban electorate, not necessarily turning their backs on working class folks and definitely not turning away from the offer of a relatively generous social spending, but losing to some extent their identity, their brand as parties of the working class.

In the meantime, the legacy conservative parties - more pro-business parties didn't change very much. So, you had an opening for political leaders - ambitious political entrepreneurs call them - who saw room for attracting voters who were working class. Also, there was a convergence in this era of globalization at the late 20th century of the legacy right and the legacy left parties around open trade, low tariffs. What the right-wing ethnonationalist did was identify a space where they were at least talking rhetoric of pro-workers. Those parties have been quite successful in many countries. Now when they when they got access to power they haven't always undermined their democracies.

I think I mentioned before you have the Sweden Democrats who are very anti-immigrant, blame crime on immigrants and so forth, classic right-wing ethnonationalists. But there's no democratic backsliding in Sweden. No one attacks the press. No one tries to undermine confidence in elections. No one says that judges are unelected and unaccountable. That's where we get back to what happens in a country like this where there still is some greater middle class and less of a gulf between the wealthy and the working class - more confidence in institutions, more faith in the much vaunted Swedish welfare state. There's less of an appetite among the Swedish electorate - an appetite for anti-immigrant parties, an appetite for parties that emphasize security and anti-crime and blame crime on immigrants, but not so much going the next step toward undermining our democratic institutions.

**jmk:** So a lot of these parties, particularly the left-wing populist parties, but even some of the right-wing populist parties, have embraced efforts to provide greater economic equality within their country. I think about over in Poland with the PiS Party. They have supported much more social welfare. It's a welfare chauvinism as people describe it. But they still support more wealth transfers than some of the predecessors, particularly on the right that had predominated in Poland in the past. We look at the left and we see countries like Venezuela where Hugo Chavez was spreading the wealth in a very dramatic fashion, at least while the oil money was coming in, when he was president.

These are things that should be reducing economic inequality and should be reducing the conditions that are producing democratic backsliding, but they're not. These are leaders who are still exacerbating it and putting oil on the fire. Why is it that when the underlying conditions are improving that we don't see an effort to be able to become more democratic? Why isn't there a rejuvenation of democracy as things become less unequal?

**Susan Stokes:** I want to start by saying there have been instances where this process has been reversed. You mentioned Poland. The PiS party didn't manage to gain the majority of seats in the parliament in the last elections. Who knows what happens in the next elections? It's a tricky situation, but it isn't always the case that democratic backsliding is irreversible. Second thing I want to say is to support and really emphasize something you said. In most of the situations where you have right-wing ethnonationalist parties who are the so-called populists, they are more pro-redistributive than the legacy right.

The big exception to that, of course, is United States where we have a rightwing ethnonationalist leader who is rhetorically populist, but the policies have not been redistributive in the least. That's different from most of these other cases. Even a place like India with Narendra Modi where you get a more right-wing ethnonationalist version of democratic backsliding. But Modi has undertaken some very serious major redistributive and infrastructure building campaigns for poor people. So that's definitely the case. Then you have left populists who we haven't talked about that much, but they also have tended to pursue policies that are more redistributive.

So, then the question you just asked, which is excellent: Why does that not then undermine authoritarianism? Why don't you have a reversion to democracy? The answer to that question is if you are, say, an Evo Morales in Bolivia and you come to power talking about the need to redistribute national wealth, build a welfare state, improve the pay and retirement and so forth to the poor. You win support in that way to an extent that allows voters to say I'm not crazy about the fact that he's attacking the courts or undermining confidence in elections, but look at all the things that he's doing for us and if the other side comes to power, we're going to get the same old right wing guys taking stuff away from us. I don't think it would go over well to say ‘Here I am. I don't really want income inequality to be less because that would undermine the conditions of my power.’

I think voters are expecting performance, so when they elect an AMLO or Evo Morales, they expect them to actually produce social programs that will make things better and we do see some of that. This is something we haven't looked at systematically, but to the extent that we've explored some of the data on this, you do see some improvement in the countries in which it was a left populist who came to power and undermined democratic institutions.

**jmk:** One of the key ingredients that I got is it's difficult to turn back towards democracy once aspiring autocrats come to power because they exacerbate polarization. But they also, in your words, trash talk democracy, which makes it difficult to be able to reverse and come back to democracy even after the underlying conditions of economic inequality have improved. Tell me a little bit about what you mean by that, and whether you think that that's something that you see in all of these cases, or if it's in just some of the cases. Because I find that a lot of populist leaders and even authoritarian leaders try to claim the mantle of democracy rather than trash talking it.

**Susan Stokes:** You're absolutely right, and when I use the phrase trash talking democracy, really what I'm talking about is they denigrate and criticize particular institutions, so the courts or the press or election administration bodies, the central bank. They go after those institutions. They describe them as corrupt and ineffective and expensive and out to get or people and so on and so forth. But they don't say democracy as a whole is a bad thing. You're absolutely right they claim to be democratic leaders and the fact that they're not advertising their goals or their program of undermining democracy is important because it makes it much more confusing for the opposition, for voters, to understand what's going on here.

They say they're democrats, but they do seem to be undermining these particular institutions, so trash talking democracy is really trash talking particular democratic institutions. It's not as though these things are irreversible. I think that it's early in a sense. I think there are many of these dramas that haven't played themselves out entirely, so I honestly don't think we know as much as we will in coming decades about how this thing works out. But I do think that there are two things. One is realistic strategies for resisting democratic erosion and for restoring confidence in democratic institutions and also for depolarizing publics. We know much more now about those things than we used to and there also are internal contradictions to these kinds of governments.

One of them that we just have been talking about is they claim to be democratic, but eventually people sort of figure it out. ‘What about protections of the rule of law? It looks a little chaotic to me. Can I really think of this as a democratic country when the military is on the streets and when things seem to be going so badly?’ Autocratizing leaders often staff their governments with cronies and loyalists and don't include very many naysayers and experts and people who will say to them, ‘That's not a good idea. That's going to get you in trouble.’ That's more true of some of these leaders than others. So, they misfire. They overdo it.

I think the United States today is a good example where there are many things the government is doing that are running real risks in terms of economic performance. If economic performance under the Trump administration turns out to be pretty bad that is going to be really tough for the Republicans and for the MAGA folks because that's why Donald Trump was elected in 2024. There were lots of things going on, but one of the key factors was high inflation early in the Biden administration, which was really tough on people and I think that the administration didn't understand that well enough and didn't know how to talk about it well enough.

If those kinds of problems are not solved and in fact become worse… We already see very low approval ratings, really high disapproval ratings of the administration, if it really goes sour, that's going to be tough. It's not just the happenstance of what's going on in the economy. They are bad decisions that are being made because autocrats tend to insulate themselves and not take in the kind of expert advice that they should. They create a system of people around them building their own careers by saying what the autocratic leader wants to hear, not what they think they should hear in order to perform best.

**jmk:** So, some of the examples of institutions of democracy that you brought up were things like central banks, like the Federal Reserve, and even the judicial system. Oftentimes those have been described as institutions within democracies that are not necessarily democratic, particularly within Europe. Within the European Union, there's so many different silos and different things involved within the European Union and their own central bank that many people have talked about as being somewhat of a democratic paradox. Things are very democratic at the national level, but at the European Union level it doesn't necessarily feel as democratic. It doesn't feel like citizens really have as much of an ability to shape it outside of influencing their own national leaders.

So when some of these populists are trash talking democracy and they're trash talking things like the judiciary or trash talking institutions like central banks or trash talking institutions like the European Union, should we think of that as attacking democracy itself or in some cases, are they advocating a different type of democracy, a different way of thinking about democracy?

**Susan Stokes:** I mean, there's so much room for improving the institutions that we have in the United States, the European Union for sure, any of these countries. There are lots of ways that one could reform and improve the performance of

institutions, no question about it. I think the difference between an effort to reform institutions so that they perform better and what I'm calling trash talking democracy is that the flaws of the institutions become exaggerated and sometimes completely distorted. The solution they suggest is to give the executive more power.

So, when in Mexico or in the United States, the leader complains about unelected judges, the ones they're complaining about are not elected. But a system is not democratic because every actor in it is accountable to the people. It's a concatenation of institutions, some of which are directly accountable to people and others which are meant to be somewhat insular from popular pressures and to hold the government to account. So, in Mexico, Lopez Obrador spent years decrying the Mexican judiciary every time that it got in the way of his plans to weaken the electoral body. He would badmouth them and say, 'These unelected judges, we need to change this and so forth.'

Now they have just gone over to an entirely elected federal judiciary. It looks like a complete disaster. I mean, I happened to be in Mexico and had a chance to talk to colleagues there who study the courts and study judges. What you have now is, first, they had elections for the courts where it was a 7% participation rate. Very few people took part. There wasn't much interest in driving up participation because the ruling party knew that if participation was low it was going to favor them. So you had a very small number of voters electing highly unqualified people, many of whom their only qualification was that they were party people.

So that doesn't look like producing a higher quality, more responsive, more effective judiciary. It just looks like turning the judiciary into a lacky institution under the control of the ruling party. It's important to think about democracies as constituted by a set of institutions. It's an array of institutions some of which are designed to be directly accountable to the people and others are designed to have independence of voters and more particularly of elected leaders.

**jmk:** So populist leaders don't come out of nowhere. They arise under very specific conditions. One of them we've already described is economic inequality as an underlying structural condition. But the second one is polarization and to some extent, economic inequality drives polarization, but there's also a feedback loop where populist leaders start to rise up and then they feed into the polarization and then people become more polarized. It encourages populist style leadership. Those leaders push polarization even further and it feeds off of itself on an ongoing basis.

Again, I don't want to give the impression that once democracies backslide that there's no way out.

But it does explain why some of these countries become entrenched in autocratic behavior and democracies seem to be backsliding over time and can't seem to pull themselves back to where they were before. So why don't we talk more about polarization? What makes people susceptible to polarization and how would we go about depolarizing society?

**Susan Stokes:** You're absolutely right that that's a key factor in democratic backsliding. I think you may remember there's a figure in my book that shows that the countries that didn't experience democratic backsliding or wouldn't in the first years of the 21st century and those that would start out in around 2000 - or 1995, I think it was the beginning year - start out at pretty much at the same level of political polarization and then those that will erode, diverge and become much more polarized and those that don't experience democratic backsliding stay more or less at the same level that they were at in the late nineties.

Now you can look at that and say that tells you that polarization is causing democratic erosion or you can look at it and say democratic erosion is causing polarization. I think both things are true. It's a sort of symbiotic relationship and it's certainly the case. The first thing to say is that income inequality does tend to encourage polarization, partisan polarization. That's something that people have found studying different parts of the world. So, there's sort of a sense of frustration and a kind of grievance with the way the economies are going. People sense that their children aren't going to do as well as they did that they've been unfairly cut off by people who have better advantages and so on.

But it is helpful to would be autocrats to operate in highly polarized environments. So, they push polarization. They exacerbate polarization. They do things like trying to insist that all differences among people line up that we have societies of what social scientists call - not cross-cutting cleavages, but overlapping cleavages so you can get people to believe that those differences all overlap with one another. Furthermore, the people on the other side hate you and all the things that you're suffering is because of people on purpose are doing that to you. That exacerbates what social scientists call affective polarization, which is independent of any kind of policy differences. ‘I just hate you. You're a Democrat, I'm Republican. I hate you.’ So that dynamic gets under way.

Now, why is that good for backsliding leaders? Basically, because the more you think the end of the world is going to occur if the other side gets in office, the more willing you're going to be to tolerate undemocratic behavior on the part of your leader. So, I may not like that my party is going around trashing the press all the time. I may think the press doesn't deserve that, but God forbid that the other side get in. I'm not going to pay too much attention to that problem that they're badmouthing the press. These politicians are good intuitive psychologists. They know that they can make people hate each other more and make these divisions between parties stand out more in people's minds by using those kinds of strategies. Now, there's a lot of good social science on how you can get people to stop thinking that way.

So, if you remind them they actually have a lot in common that is quite effective. There's one intervention that some social scientists did. They call it the exhausted majority. They tell people, remind people, that they're tired of partisan conflict and bickering and they just want the government and politicians to get things done. That can be quite effective in making them shift their focus away from this idea that the other side represents everything that's bad and is different in every way from one's own side to an idea that we're really all human beings. We have some differences and then we have some things in common.

Likewise, there's research that indicates, including some research that I've done with colleagues, where you can, going back to this idea of trash talking democratic institutions, boost confidence in institutions simply by giving people more accurate information, more positive and accurate information about them. Now, that's going to be a push and pull when you get into the real world, but it's not impossible to restore people's confidence. Obviously, good performance is a great way of making people think that the government is worth it and it's not all a bunch of corrupt, inefficient folks.

**jmk:** One of the examples that you gave was that you can try to find commonalities with different people and you can say we all want to get things done in Washington or whatever country it might be. The politicians just aren't getting things done. We should put me in office. We should put my group in office because we're here and we're serious about getting stuff done.

On one level, I understand what you're saying, that you're establishing commonalities, but it also sounds like it can easily turn into a new axis of polarization where instead of saying that we are Republicans who hate Democrats,

it's we hate politicians, we hate the rich, we hate academics, whatever it might be. It can be a different type of polarization that simply demonizes a different group and it seems like the easiest way to change polarization is not to depolarize, but just to change the conversation to a different group to demonize.

**Susan Stokes:** That certainly can happen. I think one of the things that people can point to is a kind of growing cynicism or nihilism. We call it democratic nihilism sometimes where all of these institutions are empty and hollow and corrupt and I'm just going to turn away from them. You do see some of that. On the other hand, we have great examples of politicians who inspire people. They inspire confidence. They make people believe that good can come out of working together and just as cynicism and skepticism and attacks can be effective in politics, so can optimism and enthusiasm.

Think back to, I don't know if you would remember Ronald Reagan, city on the hill, morning in America, those were inspiring and optimistic words and those are very effective. This isn't just casual observation. We have good social science behind this as well. Social psychologists tell us that there are different kinds of emotions. There are so-called approach emotions and then there are withdrawal emotions. Approach emotions are the ones that make us want to get together, want to go out and do things like vote. Withdrawal emotions are ones that make us want to go to bed and stick that pillow over our heads. So, approach emotions are good for politicians. It gets people mobilized and active.

Approach emotions can be anger and moral outrage. Certainly, we see a lot of that with democratic backsliding and polarization. But optimism and enthusiasm are also approach emotions. Barack Obama like Reagan was quite adept and intuitive about building enthusiasm and optimism with a very different kind of discourse. People get enthusiastic about some kind of good and then they get tired of it and they're attracted to something new. I think you can see openings for a different kind of tone in politics.

**jmk:** So we started out the conversation talking about how leaders are the ones that you're describing as the backslider. That a lot of the agency behind whether or not a country merely has the conditions that could produce democratic backsliding or actually tips the scales and becomes a country that engages in democratic backsliding depends on the behavior of the leaders. It's also the citizens who put those leaders into power and, oftentimes, it's the citizens who don't just put them into power the first time, but continue to reelect them time after time. So how

much blame do citizens deserve for democratic backsliding within their own countries?

**Susan Stokes:** Wow, that's a tough one. I don't know that I would talk about blame. I think it's easy to understand why some voters don't like, but tolerate democratic backsliders and then others actually have a taste or it's appealing to them. But there are instances, as we were mentioning before, of voters deciding this is not a good thing and withdrawing support. So, look at what happened in the UK? So, the UK, I coded as a case of a near miss where under the Johnson, the Boris Johnson government, there was an element of right-wing ethnonationalism encouraged during the Brexit efforts, which Johnson had been involved in. He closed parliament in a way that was that later deemed by the Supreme Court to have been unlawful. So, moving a little bit in that direction.

But British voters got very tired of him and they got tired of him for particular reasons that had to do with the COVID Pandemic and his breaking of his own rules about not having public gatherings at that time. Brits have a strong sense of fairness and maybe class consciousness that we don't always have in our country so that the fact that this very posh guy was telling everybody they had to stay home and accept lots of hardships during COVID, while it turns out that he was having what they call drink parties in number 10 Downing Street didn't go over well. So, he lost support among the population, including among conservative voters. That was the key. I think voters were discerning.

Sometimes we let our emotions get the better of us. Sometimes we don't fall back on common sense as much as we should when it comes to conspiracy theories and some wild claims. On the other hand, I give us a break in the sense that it's hard to know the truth about a lot of stuff. So, when we buy into or accept things that somebody else might think is a crazy conspiracy theory, we get a little grace because it is really hard to know. So, I think when it comes down to it, there are a lot of people who are not super engaged in politics and really want to see governments do something right for them and become persuaded that governments haven't done things right for them and that somebody was trying not to do something right for them and is out for somebody else, but that can be overcome.

I think that there are both social science lab experiments and things like that, but also real world experiences of people deciding that it is helpful to have institutions that allow us to resolve conflicts in peaceful ways. I mean, we haven't talked much about international relations, but it’s one of the things that we should all be quite

worried about. Political scientists showed a long time ago, and it turns out to be a very stable finding, is autocracies are more bellicose than democracies. More particularly, democracies very rarely go to war with other democracies.

So, a world with more autocratic governments is going to be a world that's more prone to war and people don't like war. That's another way that people can step back and pinch themselves and say we want governments that are able to keep the peace. We want governments that can control prices and that can encourage housing prices that are reasonable so young people can find places to live and that can avoid wars. At the end of the day, those considerations can overcome the emotional manipulation that sometimes goes on with democratic backsliding.

**jmk:** Well, let's end it there. because that's a message of hope. Sue, thank you so much for joining me today. The book one more time is called *The Backsliders: Why Leaders Undermine Their Own Democracies*. Thank you so much for taking the time to talk to me. Thank you so much for writing the book.

**Susan Stokes:** Thank you, Justin. I really appreciate it.