

Democracy Paradox Podcast

Thomas Carothers Says We Misunderstand Democratic Backsliding (10/15/25)
Transcript

Introduction

Host Justin Kempf: So today I am here with Marc Jacob, who's an assistant professor of Democracy and Global Affairs in the Keough School at the University of Notre Dame. He's here to help introduce today's guest, who is Tom Carothers. Marc, can you take a moment and say what you feel is the importance of Tom Carothers, who I feel has really made a mark on democracy scholarship? Put it in your own words, what do you think of as his influence?

Marc Jacob: So, when I think of Tom's work, he's trying to address one of the most pressing questions in comparative politics and beyond. Why is it that some democracies struggle these days? Why is it that we experience and see backsliding happening around the world in multiple countries? And he's been part of this debate probably since its inception, probably 10 years ago. Unsurprisingly, a lot of scholars try to understand is there a single factor, a key factor that helps us explain why democracy is backsliding.

And just to mention one thing that Tom did in the past, he wrote this very influential edited volume that focuses on the relationship between polarization and democracy. It tries to draw on different case studies to help us make sense of what the relationship between the two factors are and yes, there is evidence that polarization is detrimental to democracy. Other scholars since then have focused on this aspect more thinking about public opinion, political behavior, and polarization. So, I think what he's really doing is making sure that we are not missing anything in the debate. I think what you can also see and what I'm very impressed by is that you can also see his research evolve.

So, he started off by talking about polarization and as we will all learn in this episode now he's moving forward and thinks about maybe alternative explanations such as maybe we shouldn't really come up with one single explanation to begin with. So, it's interesting to see like a perfect example of how scholarship evolves over time. To think about one single topic, democratic backsliding, democratic development across time, across space and to really think about what evidence we can find to explain this phenomena.

Justin Kempf: What I love about Tom is that his research has really evolved. He broke out as somebody who was talking more about democracy promotion

and he wrote this very influential piece in the *Journal of Democracy* over 20 years ago about what we're getting wrong about democracy promotion. He wrote different books about it, about how we need to rethink our approach about democracy promotion, and how we oftentimes approach it, execute it, and even just think about the concept wrong at the time, and kind of got a reputation for that as very much a contrarian and what was fascinating about this interview is he even describes himself as a contrarian and that attitude lives on because again, he's being a contrarian within the idea of the way we think about backsliding yet again.

He's saying that we're misunderstanding this concept now and so I was really interested in teasing that out from him and understanding that. You also mentioned about polarization and I was kind of teasing out the idea of how his research in the past applies to his research today and how it's evolved and changed in the way that he thinks differently about some of these concepts now than he did when he wrote about some of these concepts in the past. So, I thought it was fascinating to bring him into the conversation and to get his perspective on backsliding after talking to Susan Stokes and Javier Corrales as somebody who agreed with them on many issues, but disagreed on some important aspects of backsliding as well.

Marc Jacob: Maybe what's also special about his work is that you can really see this bottom up approach. So, he has been talking to political parties, practitioners, opposition politicians, civil society activists from around the world. I think that probably also inspires his research and it also inspires him to challenge himself. Maybe there's this claim that he made in the past or that we all made and maybe just because people disagreed with him on the ground, he was willing to think about it again and look for the evidence and maybe even adjust some of the things that we believed to be true about democratic backsliding. I think being in touch with people on the ground and, starting a conversation with people who actually experience democratic backsliding is also a key component of his work in particular.

Justin Kempf: So I should give the rundown of who Tom is. Tom is the Director of the Democracy Conflict and Governance Program at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. He's the author of numerous books and articles. Some of his most recent articles and reports include "Misunderstanding Democratic Backsliding," "Lessons about Backsliding and Resistance," and "Understanding and Responding to Global Democratic Backsliding." So obviously he has a lot to say on this topic of democratic backsliding. But before we jump into the interview, I would love for you, mark, to be able to explain a

little bit about some of the research that you're doing here at the Kellogg Institute.

Marc Jacob: Yeah, thanks Justin. So, I'm working on a related question which focused a little bit more on the role of pro-democratic parties, especially in contexts where democracy is contested. I study when, why, and where parties that are committed to democratic institutions win elections and sometimes don't win them. They lose. This is happening in contests where these pro-democratic parties compete against illiberal or even anti-democratic parties. One of the key arguments of my work is that the voters who are the least concerned with and about democracy are those who are actually making a huge difference in bringing about victories for pro-democratic parties.

Think for instance of Poland in 2019 where the incumbent party faced reelection for the very first time and that incumbent party, the Law and Justice Party, undermined certain democratic institutions while in office. So, the pro-democratic opposition wasn't able to actually defeat the government. But only four years later the opposite happened. The pro-democratic opposition parties garnered a majority in that election. So I'm wondering and I'm studying what kind of electoral segments move in and out of the democratic voter coalition. What helps explain volatility in the vote shares of democratic parties.

Ultimately, what drivers actually help pro-democratic parties stop at least for now, democratic backsliding. So, I'm very excited about this episode because it also directly relates to what I am wondering about and what I'm studying in my research.

Justin Kempf: Well. That's incredibly important research and I look forward to learning more about it. Are you going to be at the Global Democracy Conference scheduled next year on May 19th and 20th?

Marc Jacob: Yes, I will be there. And what's so exciting about next year's conference is that it's focusing on voters' role on ordinary citizens' role? How can we mobilize against anti-democratic parties forces around the world and so I will be there and many others will join the conversation at Notre Dame as well.

Justin Kempf: Well, Tom Carothers was obviously there last year and I would expect that he's probably going to be one of the speakers at this upcoming conference. So, if you haven't looked into it yet, mark it on your calendar. Global Democracy Conference 2026, May 19th and 20th. One last thing, the

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But for now, here is my conversation with Tom Carothers.

Interview

Justin Kempf: Tom Carothers, welcome back to the Democracy Paradox.

Tom Carothers: Justin, it's great to be with you and I'm so happy that the Democracy Paradox is back. We missed it. It's an invaluable resource for people who care about democracy all around the world, so terrific.

Justin Kempf: Well, thank you. That means so much to be able to hear that from you and I am very excited to be back and excited to be able to bring back the quality and caliber of people who've been excited to be able to talk to me since I've relaunched the podcast again. So well, Tom, in the time that I was not producing the podcast, you've written a number of different articles about democratic backsliding. Perhaps the one that I've seen referenced the most often is called "Misunderstanding, Democratic Backsliding." It was published in the Journal of Democracy almost a year ago. The title is interesting. It's the idea of misunderstanding the concept. So, I'd like to start out by asking, have we struggled to overcome democratic backsliding, because we have failed to understand it?

Tom Carothers: Ever since democratic backsliding emerged 15, even 20, years ago when we saw the very early signs, people have been racking their brains trying to figure out why this is happening. Why is this happening in a lot of different places at once? Why such a reversal of what was such an encouraging trend? So it's natural that people search hard for explanations and I found myself just, again and again, especially in the last five to 10 years in meetings, workshops, conferences, and without fail, somebody would say, 'You know what it is. Democracies have to deliver. If democracies don't deliver, then you get what we're getting.' And everyone in the room would nod their head like, 'Yeah, that's it. Democracies have to deliver.'

I would find myself initially nodding my head too. Then, I don't know, I'm kind of a contrarian in some ways. I'd be sitting in meetings and start thinking, wait a minute, Poland had the second fastest economic growth rate in the world between 1990 and 2020. It is an economic miracle. Incredibly low level of inequality, probably in the bottom 10% in the world, maybe bottom 20%, very little poverty. Yet Poland stood out in central Europe as a democratic backslider.

So, democracy's delivering in Poland for people and it's headed the wrong direction. Then I think about Israel. Israel's a miracle economy. There are books written about the Israeli Miracle, tech miracle, raising a standard of living in a very difficult region under extraordinarily adverse circumstances. Amazing. Israel's going backward democratically.

I started think to myself, 'Wait a minute, if we're expecting democracy to deliver better than Poland and better than Israel, something's wrong with the explanation here. So that's when I started trying to think harder about this question and started coming to some of the conclusions that I wrote about it together with Brendan Hartnett in this article.

Justin Kempf: Well, Tom, there's multiple variations to the idea that democracy is not delivering. Some people are referring to democracy not delivering economic growth. We think of Europe, the United States, some of the more established democracies as having slower rates of economic development and growth. But then others have argued that it's not so much that democracies are not growing, it's that democracies have become too unequal. So Susan Stokes, who I had on the podcast recently, argues that one of the underlying conditions that allows for democratic backsliding is high levels of economic inequality. Do you see any difference between these varied explanations for democracy delivers or do you lump them all into the same category?

Tom Carothers: Inequality is certainly something a lot of people focus on, and there's no doubt that inequality is corrosive in many ways to any polity, whether it's a democratic one or an autocratic one. Inequality gets people angry in different ways, but when I look at the cases of backsliding, Brendan and I put together a set of kind of sample cases that we felt was fairly representative. Looking at them, we found inequality was decreasing in most of them in the five years before backsliding started. We found that economic growth was increasing in most of them. We found that poverty was decreasing in most of them.

So, we started poking around and saying deliver what exactly. You know, if voters really want closed borders and are voting for illiberal forces because they feel that they're the only ones who are going to close the borders of the country, do we mean democracy must deliver closed borders? Or do we just say democracy must deliver whatever it is people want. It kind of becomes a truism. I mean, democracies are supposed to be responsive to the wishes of the people. But it loses its focus and its edge as an explanation. So, we felt that you can find cases that seem to confirm the idea that it's really about democracy failing to deliver.

Tunisia, for example, had a very heartening democratic transition in 2010. It starts not doing well across the 2010s bit by bit and more and more - a lot of economic problems, stagnation, inequality, a lot of corruption, fecklessness, et cetera. Then the president carries out a self-coup and a lot of citizens go along with it because they are fed up. If democracy had delivered in Tunisia, they wouldn't be in that boat. So, you have cases like Poland and Israel that don't seem to be about that and you have cases like Tunisia that do. And I began to say, there's clearly multiple causes.

There's one thing I've really resisted Justin in the last 10 years as people have searched for explanations of backsliding is the idea of the killer explanation. You've got that single thing and zero in. That's it. That must be it. It's social media. I knew it was social media all along. I never liked that stuff. There are factors that are probably aggravating democracy in many places at once, like social media, but I also don't think that's the killer explanation either. So, this is an effort on our part to say, unfortunately, it's just more complex than this. It's a more complex landscape than just democracy must deliver on inequality or growth.

I come to think of it now with this article having been out there for a while and talking about it with a lot of people, show me a backsliding country and I'm going to put it in one of three categories. First, maybe it is democracy not delivering something. Maybe in El Salvador it was crime. Democracy is not delivering enough human security. Maybe in the Philippines, citizens were very upset about human security or at least a leader, Duterte was able to whip them up as a candidate, make them feel that that was a central concern for them. Or maybe it's immigration in some places. In some cases, people are going to vote for somebody who turns out to be illiberal because of a desire to change what the government is delivering.

The second category of cases is quite different from that. It's cases like Israel or India or Turkey which are more about new forces, new social forces or sociocultural forces that are pushing within this system for a place and pushing for a party and a leader. Who wants to change the rules of the game? If you think of Erdoğan in his early years after he first came to power in 2003, he had a social agenda, which was revising the place of Islam and Turkish society. To do that, he began to feel he had to push at the system. Over time he began to break various institutions to do that.

You think of Modi in India. Modi's not a product of economic failure in India. Modi's supporters are those who've done better, but he represents this kind of Hindu majoritarianism, which is a social force saying, 'This is our country.

We've had this multicultural secular India for a long time. That's not the India we want. We want a different kind of India.' It's not about democracy not delivering. That's about competing national visions that clash internally and produce some ugly political dynamics. Israel - Why did Israel moved backward? Well, the religious right is pushing on Israeli institutions and in some illiberal ways. That's a sociocultural force. So that's your second category. Countries that are more about new social forces which break traditional political consensus.

Then you got a third category of countries where somebody gets elected or manages to get into power who is just not a democrat. They're like a political thug. Think of Daniel Ortega. I mean, this guy doesn't have a democratic bone in his body. We knew that first time around he was in power. When he came back to power, which he got into basically because the opposition split the vote. And once in power, he reverts to type and the guy just starts smashing everything that that's against him. What happened in Zambia in the 2010s is they elected somebody that just began taking apart democracy - not for any big ideology and not because they're elected with some special mandate of delivering something or other.

There are people who are elected who are just not democratic and the system really struggles to constrain them because it's weak. In Nicaragua, the civil institutions are weak and are easily broken. So, you show me a backsliding country and I'm going to ask myself is this where some people got elected out of clear citizen grievances around delivering. But I'm going to define delivery very widely - not just about economic growth or reducing inequality. I'm going to include crime, corruption, insecurity, lots of things. Second, is this a case where it's a country that's really struggling with different visions of the country, different social identities, different forces at work.

Or third, is it a country where... Sorry, there's some predators in this country and when they get to power, they're just going to override weak institutions and be autocrats for no particular good reason for no stated ideology or set of goals beyond, 'I'm the leader in charge now. I'm going to do whatever I want.'

Justin Kempf: But why is this happening all at the same time? It definitely felt in the nineties that countries were democratizing, as Samuel Huntington put it, in a wave of democratization. Right now, it feels like countries are all reversing at the same time and while it might be for different reasons, it seems to be happening one after the other. It's difficult to imagine that there's not something that's causing the wave of autocratization happening throughout the world.

Tom Carothers: I know it's like there must be a virus out there. If we could just find that virus that's just infecting everybody. We need to think more carefully about the set of countries where this is happening. In a way, I don't think it's surprising that it's all happening at the same time. Especially since the same time is over 20 years and we should think about it the following way. Around half the countries in the world were part of the third wave of democracy during the eighties and the nineties where pluralism rushed in autocrats fell. There was a wave of elections in so many places where they hadn't been held before. For a long time, new political parties formed.

There was this tremendous momentum to democracy, but the common characteristic of most of these countries was they did have much experience with democracy with fairly weak institutions, lacking both horizontal accountability and vertical accountability. They have a fairly weak rule of law, fairly weak parliaments. An independent press is shaky, not financially very strong. Independent civil society is often quite weak in different ways or when strong, still easily shattered. So, these are countries which elected people. It looks good, but they're not well primed for democracy. When things emerge as they do, once you let the air of pluralism into a society, which is a good thing, you start getting problems in these places.

You get problems such as political predators who come in and say, 'I'm going to run for office. I'm a good talker and I'm going to pick out a particular grievance you have or a particular social identity you have that you feel is not getting its due, get to power and then I'm going to take all the power and it's going to be hard to stop them because the forces of constraint in these countries are very weak. The reason it's happening in so many places at once is that so many places had a similar condition of rapid pluralism in societies with fairly weak countervailing institutions, and weak traditions of democracy.

So, it isn't a single causal but a single common condition that is causing a lot of these countries to fail democratically. We shouldn't think they've all gotten a similar bug. No, they all had a similar weakness and a lot of different bugs are eating because they're, in a way, infection prone body if you want to carry that metaphor forward.

Justin Kempf: Sounds like you're saying that pluralism, that is foundational to democracy brings about the bug that can actually create the erosion. It's like democracy itself is almost a corrosive force upon itself.

Tom Carothers: Well, that gets to why it's called the democracy paradox. You've puzzled over how democracy often contains the seeds of its own

destruction. Well, look, in the nineties there was a debate and Fareed Zakaria was an important part of it, along with others, who said, 'Elections are rushing into all these countries. We're going to have problems on our hands. They don't have the rule of law. They don't have any tradition of democracy. We should slow this down and get the rule of law first and then get elections. Look at how we did it in the United States.'

You know, I didn't really agree with that argument at the time in the sense that I didn't think you could just go to countries where autocrats were falling and tell people somebody has decided out here that you're not allowed to have elections. That just wasn't going to happen. People wanted to have elections. It was the wave. It was the feeling that the Soviet Union was out, Romanians are going to decide. He said why don't you wait 20 or 30 years and develop the rule of law and find somebody to just kind of run the country in a technocratic way. No, that wasn't going to happen.

So, I understood that view that it's going to be dangerous to open up pluralism and political competition in societies with very weak institutions. They were absolutely right about that. It's just that there wasn't really a solution for that. Of course, that is what has happened. You have had pluralism in lot of countries where, like I say, the countervailing institutions are very weak. That's why the United States is so head scratching. We are not part of that set of a hundred countries. We have had a democracy... I mean, with its limitations due to treatment of racial equality in the United States. We had a democracy for a long time before the third wave of democracy.

So, the United States is something of an outlier, as we know among the wealthiest established democracies. Let's leave that case aside because in a way what's happening in the United States is a US experience. Americans are projecting it outward. 'It must be right wing illiberal populism everywhere.' And you go, 'Wait a minute, is Daniel Ortega a right wing population? I don't think so. He's not too right wing. Are those folks in Zambia? Was Hasina in Bangladesh, a right wing illiberal. You try to impose this US/European framework that it's all the rise of rightwing illiberal populism onto a very complex landscape of democratic backsliding that's when you really get some distortions in your understanding of what's happening. You fail to see that heterogeneity and the complexity of the backsliding landscape that's out there.'

Justin Kempf: So it sounds like the solution is to strengthen institutions because if the problem is weak institutions in many of the countries that are experiencing democratic backsliding, the solution should be to continue to

strengthen those institutions. Am I understanding that right? And if so, how do we go about doing that?

Tom Carothers: The single sentence in that article that you referenced, Justin, that I think is the most important is where we say backsliding is not so much a failure of democracies to deliver. It's the failure of democracies to constrain power. The problem is how do you constrain power? Once you elect people and they begin to act undemocratically, how do you constrain them? Unfortunately, there's no magic bullet for that. Ideally, constrain them through the rule of law. That's really check number one on power - Courts, ideally, prosecutors and other institutions. It also has to be the rights of an opposition party to exert itself from the national scene and have some role, even if it's in opposition.

It's got to be independent agencies and all those elements of horizontal accountability or constraints of power. Then you've got to have your vertical constraints, free press above all, and civil society in all different forms, social voices and so forth. It's not really something new. But it's not something that many democracy promoters were trying to do. They often had, instead, I think a rather generalized, let's just do quote institution building and it wasn't really targeted at the strengthening of constraints.

Let me tell you a story. Twenty years ago I was in Mozambique doing some research. I met with the circle of donors who were there working on democracy and this was at a time that the ruling party was really starting to take over the country. You saw the merging of the party state, which is just the classic step towards authoritarianism when you have a dominant party winning every election and pretty soon it's gobbling up the state and putting party people into the state apparatus.

So, I said to them, 'What are you doing in Mozambique?' They said, 'Well, we're promoting democracy.' I said, 'That's good.' And they said, 'You work on this lot. What would you do to promote democracy here?' I said, 'It looks like your problem is you have a dominant party, which is trying to override every form of constraint and gobble up the system and so you better make a list of your six or seven or eight key areas where there's still some independence in Mozambique and try to strengthen it as a counterweight to this overweening power. Really put your finger on this and say that's what we're going to do.' They thought about that and they said, 'I don't think the government would like that if we did that.' And I said, 'Yeah, because you'd be strengthening democracy in this country.'

So, the problem that I saw with the democracy aid community was it's hard to be assertive in the face of backsliding. They were in the 1990s model of we'll be a partner and strengthen lots of institutions in the country and the government nods it's head and say, 'Why don't you come give our cabinet office training on how to organize agendas? See, we're strengthening institutions,' as opposed to we are focusing on the constraints on power and are going to bolster them. Then the government would be, 'Whoa, we're not sure we want you here doing that.'

Justin Kempf: Now, those constraints are still institutions though. So I mean, you're still talking about building up institutions, but you're talking about building and strengthening those institutions that serve as a constraint for the government. Right?

Tom Carothers: Yeah, that's right. You can use the general term building institutions, but if that means we're working with this group of investigative journalists to give them the kind of support and diplomatic backstop they need to carry out very delicate investigations of power holders - Is that building an institution? Well, if the investigative journalist group's called an institution then yes. It's just that building institutions is often a very general way of talking about fairly soft parliamentary support programs, fairly soft governance programs and training judges, and how to use new software to make the courts more efficient. There's a lot of institution building that actually isn't really very much about bolstering capacity for constraint.

Justin Kempf: You've kind of entered into the conversation some of the work that you've done in the past in terms of democracy promotion. Do you find that there are a lot of similarities between efforts to promote democracy within countries and efforts to resist or overcome democratic backsliding?

Tom Carothers: You know, I don't think the categories are really that clear. Within the democracy support community, there's the general sense that in some countries we're helping the government, which has good political intentions to move forward and in some countries the situation does not look so good and the government's not going well. We're still trying to help, but we're in a different posture. It's hard to have a strategic differentiation within the democracy community and be really crystal clear about our role in different places or what the role of democracy supporters is so that it's clear in what category this country really fits and therefore what the role is. The term democracy support covers a very wide range of things. That's not fatal flaw. It just means that organizations have to be very clear internally about what they're really trying to do.

You know, there is a problem. At the same time, democratic backsliding grew, sensitivity on the part of these backsliding governments about the role of external actors also grew and they were like, 'Hey, we don't want these people coming in and telling us our elections aren't free and fair. We don't want those investigative journalists.' It was completely co-terminus with 2005. That was the year Putin passed the NGO law in Russia and started a wave of pushback against Western assistance, both through civil society and other forms of democracy more generally. That was coincidentally at the same time with the wave of the backsliding.

So, the problem is at the very time in which democracy promoters to be effective had to step up and be more pointed, and ultimately, in some ways more confrontational, they're getting a lot of pushback against that. That's been a slow moving crisis for the democracy community that we're still living in.

Justin Kempf: Do you think though, that the idea of democracy promotion might have fallen a little bit short because if you think about promoting democracy in the country, you're thinking of trying to get to a point where democracy happens. How much follow-through was there after the point where we classify a country as a democracy? Did we continue to work with those countries to strengthen their institutions, particularly institutions like the media and the courts and institutions that provided constraints on power? I mean, it sounds like we did not do any of that once the country became considered a democracy.

Tom Carothers: You know, there wasn't really a bright line between when a country is quote a democracy and when it is still trying to become one? So, no, I wouldn't say that. I don't think it's that as aid communities graduated countries too quickly and then walked away from them. The US and a number of European democracy supporters and others were still working in countries that were under stress. In many cases, though, the assistance was not that well focused. In other cases, I think the assistance was good, doing the right things, but the power holders were just too strong.

You can help support a group of investigative journalists or some civil society types, but if you've got a really nasty government in there that's cracking down on these groups and making it illegal to provide funding, it's not clear that you can do very much about it in many cases. The forces of retrogression and repression in many cases were just very strong.

In Nicaragua, Ortega just smashed the protests with massive repression, violence against protestors who were completely homegrown and were just

ordinary Nicaraguans trying to fight back against growing autocracy in Nicaragua. But unless you really went all out with some kind of a formal resistance to Nicaragua, there's not much you were going to be able to do about it. Venezuela's another such case. There was a lot of democracy assistance to Venezuela. I think a lot of it was well targeted and well-intended and well executed, but the forces of repression have just been very, very strong.

Justin Kempf: In some of the papers you've written, you mentioned the fact that voters oftentimes don't initially vote for somebody because they're illiberal or they're promoting anti-democratic ideas. But it does seem like voters do reelect those leaders back to power time and time again. Why is it that these leaders once they are exposed as anti-democratic or illiberal are not thrown out of office? Why is it that they continue to win subsequent elections?

Tom Carothers: Well, there's two important ideas in your question there. The first is, as you say, voters often vote for people who turn out to be autocratic, not because they thought they were and were voting for autocracy. That's in addition to democracy must deliver. The other half of that idea that I was pushing back against was that if it doesn't deliver, voters will embrace autocrats. They'll say, 'Democracy's not giving what we want. I want autocracy instead.'

When you look at the cases where voters voted into office people who became autocratic, you look back at those original decisions and you don't see them embracing autocracy like Bukele in El Salvador when he first ran for national office, he presented himself fairly effectively as the force that was going to renovate El Salvador. Democracy had these two tired parties that had been trading power back and forth for a while, were fairly corrupt and not very effective. So, he said, 'I'm going to make democracy work in this country.' That's the same story in many of these cases. Voters were actually trying to renovate democracy, saying, 'We need somebody to come in and shake up the system.'

I hope Americans listening to this podcast will be thinking of their own country and thinking about this question because polls showed last year in the United States that as many or more people who voted for Donald Trump voted out of a concern about the health or the fate of American democracy as people who voted against him. Now I don't happen to agree with their point of view of who's a threat to democracy, but they were not thinking, 'I don't really care about democracy. I'm just going to vote for this person.' Many of them were thinking, 'I care about democracy. That's why I'm going to vote for this person.' It can be hard for people to accept, but that's the reality. Then as you say, they come into power and they start really acting autocratically.

How do they keep getting voted back in? You know, there's a couple of different answers for that. It's a mix of two things. First, let's not forget that they often control the press. They begin to squeeze out political opposition and they're able to dominate the narrative. They use state resources for their campaigns, and they're acting autocratically, so they're able to override public opinion. Look at Hungary. I can tell you when you go down the streets of Budapest in an election year, there are big posters everywhere, gigantic posters, on these cylindrical things that are all over Budapest for public announcements. They're all in favor of the government. Who's paid for them? I don't think it's private party funds.

I think government resources are being used and the opposition has no access to those places and very little access to funds because the business community's afraid of working with them. It's an unlevel playing field. Autocrats create an unlevel playing field and then govern accordingly and say, 'See, we're so popular.' Yeah, you're so popular because you've created an unlevel playing field where you've squeezed the independent press almost out of existence. You're using state resources. You're intimidating. So, let's not forget autocrats are ruling autocratically. Is Putin really so popular? Well, if he's so popular, why does he have to repress so much? Just let the country breathe normally politically or breathe democratically. One reason is autocrats govern autocratically and they control the narrative.

The second is autocrats are giving the voters something that they want. It could be a feeling of national strength and decisiveness. Erdoğan is saying, I'm putting Turkey back on the map internationally. 'We're important and respected again. I'm giving you a new Turkey.' They may be giving them security like in El Salvador by saying, 'Crime is way down. I smashed the gangs. Had to break a few eggs to make that omelet, but would you rather go back to what you had before?' So, they're delivering on certain things that voters want. Those were so important to them that they're willing to say, 'I'm not so crazy about some of these other things, but this is a high salience issue for me. It's really important.' They are willing to make that trade.

But again, the voters aren't saying, I love autocracy. They're often saying, I love the decisiveness. I love the anti-crime or whatever it is. But that's different than saying, I love autocracy. The good news in all this, Justin, is in the work that I have done research on, I think others have done, is we don't see voters around the world saying, 'I just don't care about democracy. I really want autocracy.' They're just making political choices that are helping autocrats in some cases, but they're not necessarily embracing autocracy per se.

Justin Kempf: Something that surprised me about your most recent work is I don't hear much about polarization. The reason why it surprises me is because there was a period where you were writing a lot about polarization and its relationship to democracy. Where do you stand now? I mean, what's the relationship between polarization and backsliding in your current worldview?

Tom Carothers: Thanks for asking that, Justin. It's a very important question because as I really got deeply into the study of polarization and the book I did with Andrew O'Donohue in 2019, *Democracies Divided*, I began puzzling a lot over the question of whether polarization was a cause or a symptom. Was it a cause or an effect? It turns out to be a very hard question.

Of course, the easy answer is some of both. It's sometimes a cause of democratic backsliding. The system is very polarized and therefore actors won't work together across the political aisle. They're very hostile to each other so it's causing democratic problems or you can say it's an effect of this illiberal leader who gets voted in and starts governing in a very divisive way. It's because he's so out of bounds politically. He doesn't respect political norms. He's oppressive in his instincts so it's polarizing the country because people have to react to that and say it is beyond the pale.

I started feeling that it wasn't very satisfactory as the lens for trying to understand why backsliding was occurring, because it was both. I wanted to get beyond that layer of analysis on polarization into why are such leaders being elected. Why aren't they constrained? That's what led me into this other work. So, polarization is still out there. It's very important, but as a way of analyzing, why is democratic backsliding happening, I think it's actually only of limited utility.

Justin Kempf: Now, polarization doesn't just work one way. It's not just the leaders who become more extreme. Oftentimes it's the opponents that become more extreme too. I've been hearing within the democracy scholarly community more and more calls for what's known as democratic hardball and I've even seen it to some extent put into effect in places like Poland and Brazil and even the United States during the Biden administration at different levels. Do you feel that democratic hardball is an effective approach or reaction to Democratic backsliding?

Tom Carothers: I'd hate to say that so generally, because I think it's that democratic hardball can mean different things to different people. So, let's be more specific. The Polish government that's elected in '23 comes in and it finds a judicial system that has really been undercut in terms of political

independence by its predecessor. What should it do? It's got these judges who are now there in place. To get them out, it would have to do something contrary to the established legal procedures in the country. But they were put in in ways that are illegitimate. That's a hard ball question to me. How hard should they push on the procedures? Should they override that? So that's a real hard ball question. It's a hard, hard ball question.

I happen to think that they should be fairly decisive. They're going to have to push at the limits of what's allowed for the sake of trying to correct it. If the goal is judicial independence and trying to restore a procedure of choosing judges that respects political independence, you have to be willing to push fairly hard on it. That's different than saying, 'I've come back to power. My opponent pursued political revenge and retribution against his opponents. I'm going to do the same thing.' That's not political hardball. That's just violating a democratic norm. What's your goal there? It's just revenge and retribution.

So, democratic hardball is too broad of a term. It covers a lot of sins and so I think we need to be very careful in saying we need democratic hardball in response to hardball coming from other people. Like I say, I'm wary of that concept. I think we should think very carefully case by case and think about what's needed.

Justin Kempf: If we're going to get more specific, we could look to examples like Bolsonaro's trial. I mean, that one I feel like is a very difficult question because, on the one hand, if he broke the law, you should be tried for that. But then, on the other hand, you have many people who see him as a political leader and you're removing him from the political game. It can make the other side of the political aisle feel that it's not a level playing field. How do you feel in terms of prosecutions for people who have misbehaved within office?

Tom Carothers: Now in the case of Bolsonaro, it was a very important thing to hold to account somebody who it appears was engaged in some significant planning for a coup in Brazil. Brazilian analysts I trust and respect, like my colleague Oliver Stuenkel at Carnegie, feel that it was a significant move for Brazil to do that to hold to account a leader who seems to have been engaging in that. You're right, there's a big political risk in the fact that that person is a political leader and now could be a political martyr in some ways or cause people to feel the system has closed us out, but if they've crossed that line and gone that far, then holding them to account I think is necessary.

If they've done a few things wrong and engaged in the kind of corruption that most political leaders in this country have engaged in over the years, if you're

going to try to use that to knock them off the political stage, when many other political leaders in the past were not prosecuted for similar levels of corruption, then I think you have a problem on your hands. So, I think it's a question of what's the wrong. How significant was it? You do have to be very careful about using political means for getting political opponents off the stage. But if it rises to the level that I think it did in Brazil, then it needs to be done

Justin Kempf: Now. David Bateman, for instance, has called for some policies that are traditionally viewed as anti-democratic as a means of democratic hardball, such as gerrymandering within districts that would promote pro-democracy candidates, such as packing the courts to overcome situations where maybe a Supreme Court leans too far towards anti-democratic actors. A lot of this is within the context of the United States, but we see these conversations happening within the international context as well. Do you think it's okay to break democratic norms in order to promote democratic recovery?

Tom Carothers: No, I don't. I think that's a serious mistake. I understand the temptation. But once you do that, where does that road take you? Nowhere good in my opinion. You've got to live within constraints of the democratic norms and you've got to keep trying to articulate to say I believe in democracy and I'm going to respect those norms even if my opponent isn't and that's a reason you should vote for me. Because otherwise all bets are off. You are then in a constrained political warfare and that means you going to work it.

Justin Kempf: One of the findings you had in some of the different papers was that it's rare for democracies to fully recover after an episode of backsliding. Why is that the case?

Tom Carothers: I did a paper with my colleague, McKenzie Carrier, on democratic recovery after the voting in of a government that comes in promising to recover from the previous backsliding. We found, as you say, Justin, that it turns out to be very hard to recover. It's not impossible and there's a good article in journal democracy this year on the difficulties of democratic recovery. Why is it so hard? Well, for lots of reasons. First, they may have lost the election, but they don't go away. They're still fighting tooth and nail against you there with everything they have using popular narratives, persecution, and this and that, and significant forms of resistance.

Second, they may have been able to entrench themselves in the system in different ways, like through judges they put in, or other things that make it hard for you to do what you need to do. So, the entrenched nature of backsliding makes it hard. Third citizens. Maybe they've elected you in part to try to fix all

this, but once you're in office, they're like let's move on. Let's get that inflation rate down. Let's get the growth going. Why are you spending all your time on this commission on reform of institutions. Invest your energy and your capital in making my life better day to day. So, the democratic recovery agenda may not be as front and center for citizens as it is for you.

For all these reasons, it's surprisingly difficult to come back. And bringing in polarization, the polity is damaged. It's a non-cooperative society. It's often a state of low-level conflict politically with very little cooperation, very little trust in what you do and if you pursue a legal case against so many, people are going to assume the worst of your intentions. It's not surprising. The election is refreshing and feels like a new day, but then you wake up the next day and this is a murky and difficult situation that we're going to have to navigate day by day and see if we can pull this country towards somewhat better.

Justin Kempf: Something that you said just a second ago that really caught my attention was you mentioned that politicians get focused on trying to make people's lives better rather than reinforcing and building constraints necessary to protect democracy in the long term. I found that really interesting because it sounds like you think the democracy delivers agenda can even get in the way of establishing those constraints. Because if you're completely single-mindedly focused that the best way to protect democracy is to deliver for people and any focus on constraints or any focus on institutions is a distraction, it sounds like that kind of approach exposes you to further backsliding when the opposition comes into power. You need to win an election.

Tom Carothers: You know, if you're a reformist government, you come in, maybe like in Poland there was a lot of anger about the anti-democratic PIS government in Poland prior to '23, but once they were in power, a lot of their supporters also wanted to pursue some key elements of their progressive agenda like on the abortion front. Another thing they said is we want some wins now on the things that we care about. You're right. Whereas Tusk was very preoccupied with the media situation, trying to resurrect greater protection for independent media and state broadcasting and on the judicial agenda, but his supporters were impatient for gains in some core social and cultural issues that they had supported him for as well. So, voters are restless and impatient. They want everyday gains as well as they want reconstruction and renovation of the country.

Justin Kempf: Freedom House has emphasized in their annual reports that democracy has faced setbacks every year for close to 20 years. Now, your paper says that we've misunderstood some ideas about Democratic backsliding. So, to

bring it all together, what do we know today about Democratic backsliding that we didn't know 15 or 20 years ago?

Tom Carothers: We know that it's the consequence of the weakness of many new and struggling democracies in the first case, and that it is going to be a long, hard slog throughout the 21st century to make democracy work in all these countries. That the Democratic momentum of the 90s blinded us to the deeper difficulty of consolidating democracy over the long term. We also know that the wealthiest established democracies, due to a combination of factors that we don't have time to get into - a mix of sociocultural dilemmas and uncertainties are part of many people in those countries, as well as economic pressures and lots of other things means that the wealthiest established democracies are more fragile than we thought.

So those two things together are fairly tough news. For the democracy crowd, it means it's going to be long and difficult all around the world. In a way I take encouragement from that. I think once we realize that it's not that surprising that of the hundred countries that made the transition to democracy, that 30, 40, 50, 60 of them would have serious problems was actually fairly predictable in hindsight. I wrote an article back in 2007 in *Foreign Affairs* called... uh, no, 1997 in *Foreign Affairs* called "Democracy Without Illusion" that it's going to be hard. You know, democracy without illusion is going to be tough. It has been. So instead of thinking we've got a weird virus that we can't contest, say, the common condition of democracies is it's very difficult to maintain.

And even established democracies are weakening in various ways. It's true technology is not helping. That the strength of certain authoritarian regimes is not helping. Those are definitely factors. We know that we're in very tough times, but we also know that these problems were fairly predictable in many ways. It's not a mysterious virus that has hit democracy sort of all at once or suddenly being turned into zombies. We know what the answers are that it's just they're hard to achieve.

Justin Kempf: Well, Tom, thank you so much for joining me. There's a wide number of articles that you've written over the past two, maybe three years on democratic backsliding that have been incredibly impressive from a variety of sources, "Misunderstanding Democratic Backsliding," "Understanding, and Supporting Democratic Bright Spots," Lessons about Democratic Backsliding and Resistance," "Understanding and Responding to Global Democratic Backsliding..." I could go on and on. Thank you so much for writing those. Thank you so much for joining me today and discussing those ideas.

Tom Carothers: Justin, it's great to be back on Democracy Paradox. I wish you well and look forward to talking to you.