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Jacob Hacker | America's Democratic Party and the Future of American Democracy

Thank you so much, Leon. And let me know if you can hear me in the back. It's a very kind introduction I have to say. First of all, if you're thinking there's a book on the future of America's Democratic Party and American democracy, you might be thinking it's going to be short. Um, and and it is indeed going to be a brief intervention. And we're still working on a title, but we're our tentative title is The Democrats Dilemma. I'll unpack that in a moment. I really appreciate you saying I'm a comparative political economist, but I'm not. Please hold your fire. Um, I've learned a lot just in the last two hours talking with the wonderful students here and post-docs here, um, who are who are doing work in comparative political economy. I was told that there are two topics on which all of you will have very strong opinions the weather and Deutsche Bahn. Um, and so I can tell you, the weather was nice when I left Berlin this morning. Uh, and that I got here a good hour after I was supposed to. Thanks to Deutsche Bahn. But I do. I think I finally understand now why at this time of year, it's hard to get Lucio to come on up. I know he's working on a book, but. But I think it might. It might have something to do with the darkness, too. It's going to be a little bit of an unconventional talk in that it's not about something I've written or even there's a lot of research in it, but I'm bringing that research to bear on a pretty fundamental set of questions about where we might go, which is not what political scientists social scientists typically do. And whenever I'm in a position where I'm feeling like I have to speak relatively briefly, I'm reminded of an evaluation I received when I was a new assistant professor at Yale, and it began with great promise. It said Professor Hacker. If I had just fifteen minutes to live, I'd want to spend it in your class, because that way it would seem like an hour. Um, so, okay, student didn't really write that, but the Yale students are very cutting. Um, so. Yeah. So I will try to make the next forty five minutes seem like forty five minutes. But I do have to I do have to thank one more person. And that's my co-author, Paul Pearson. Um, all of these are books we did together, except for the great risk shift, which the reason I put it up there is I'm going to make some allusions to, uh, rising insecurity in the United States. Uh, and that's the book in which I, in the late two thousand, two thousand and six. And then in twenty nineteen with the second edition, I made the argument that the rising insecurity now, we often say precarity of Americans is a fundamental part of what's what's transformed in the American political economy, the American political economy. So I am the American political economy fellow at the American Academy. That's because the Hewlett Foundation, which has supported the American Political Economy project, also supported a fellowship in American political economy. I know it does seem a little bit like self-dealing that I ended up being. The American political economy fellow. All I can say is I'm not the only one and the other. Chloe Thurston was not a co-author on the volume. Chloe and I have been really enjoying our time in Berlin and this volume, as Leon suggested, is really trying to develop a field of political economy in the United States. And you might be thinking, well, hasn't there been a field of political economy? But as you probably know, most of what gets called political economy in American political science is basically game theory or econometrics, and it's not a substantive field. And so all that we were doing, because we're very open, mixed methods, was trying to pan back out and

say, well, what is distinctive? What do we need to understand about the relationship between democracy and capitalism in the United States? And how can we make that an important area of study? And there are kind of three themes in the American political economy volume, and they happen to be themes in Paul's in my work that are going to come out in the context of this talk. One is that I'm going to really offer a very structural picture. I know this is going to be familiar to Germans, but to American political science audience, the first thing they want to know is like, where are the voters? What do the voters do? What do they want? I promise I'll say a little bit about the voters, but it's really about the structural changes in the American political economy. That's the second thing. I'm really going to focus on the changes, the twin changes in our polity and our economy. I'm going to argue that it's the interaction of the rise of extreme inequality and the nature of America's distinctive political institutions, particularly as it has emerged in the rise of a particular kind of right wing populism, plutocratic populism in the United States that is really behind the huge amount of democratic backsliding we've seen. And understanding this is central to figuring out what can be done to reverse that backsliding and to reconstruct our democracy on a stronger foundation. And that's the last thing I just want to say is that I'm not offering an Exceptionalist. And this is not an exceptionalist count of the United States, but the US is very distinctive in a number of ways, and those are quite important for understanding what's happened and also what might happen in the United States. Okay, so here's the talk in three parts, and I'll try to give each of them roughly equal focus. So first I'm going to talk about the crisis of American democracy. Then and here I'm going to draw a lot on the comparative literature, but try to situate what's happening in the US within that literature. Second, I'm going to talk about the crisis of America's Democrats. What what is going on with the Democratic Party? And then I'm going to ask, can and how can these crises be overcome? And and that's there's a reason why I'm talking about both of these crises, because essentially, the argument I'm going to make is that there isn't a realistic path to rescuing and reconstructing American democracy does not run through the Democratic Party, but the Democratic Party is a very poor vehicle for that right now. So the question is, can it be a better one? And in that sense, this whole talk is really playing on the two meanings of democracy or Democrat here. Right. The small d Democrats, right. Which all of us should want to be. Right. Which goes beyond the Democratic Party. And a big part of what Democrats need to do is build a coalition that involves a very broad cross-section of society that is interested in preserving our democracy, small d democracy. But the fact is, is that we are in a strict two party system, the strictest, most two party system in the world. And therefore the big D Democrats are going to have to be the vehicle for small d Democrats. Now that hopefully will only be a pathway to a world in which we have a competitive two party system. Or maybe even if I can dream a multi-party system in which Democrats can lose office without us fearing that American democracy will be lost too. And one way to think about the challenge that I'm going to be talking about here today is really what are the circumstances under which we can feel confident that we will have that kind of not just fair, but not catastrophic kind of two party competition. Right. Because right now, essentially we do not. And I know a lot of Democrats can't think past the next election, but really, we should be thinking as scholars and as small-d Democrats about a strategy for for American democracy that does not consist of having the Democratic Party win every election going forward. That is not a realistic goal. It's not a good thing in a democracy. And if the right kinds of reforms are pursued, it's not a necessary thing. Let me say one last thing, which is there are huge uncertainties. I mean, I wrote this talk mostly before the about face of Donald Trump on Jeffrey Epstein. I am not going to talk about what's going on there. I'm not really going to talk much about the recent shutdown, and I am going to try to sort of present a picture about sort of structural realities that I think can hold true, even given the huge levels of uncertainty we face. But I do want to say that the uncertainty is a huge part of the strategy of the authoritarian minded Trump administration, and a huge problem for us analysts, at least if we're trying to think about what could be done to deal with that authoritarianism. All right. This first part is going to be as brief as possible, but there's a lot of stuff I want to get on the table. So this figure comes from Bright Line Watch, which is an organization that was founded by some political scientists, mostly interested in comparative politics, who wanted to bring to the American political science world the idea of democratic backsliding, which Americans somehow had not recognized, was really happening to them. And one of the things they do is they do these surveys of both experts in the public. And so I happen to be in the expert pool that was asked this question. And basically what they did is they described three typical political systems a non-democracy, an illiberal liberal democracy. Let's call it a competitive authoritarian system. And a strong democracy. And then they also asked us to place different countries,

including the United States, on a scale. Now, to be clear, we were asked first about where the US is on the scale before we were asked about these ideal, typical cases. But in any case, what's really striking here is that as of mid twenty twenty five, there's a lot of variation here. The US was not viewed as a strong democracy. In fact, it was viewed as closer to the competitive authoritarian systems like Hungary. And that might seem obvious at this point, but it's kind of striking, right? After all, there are only two things that democracy scholars can agree on about what undergirds strong democracies, and one of them is the length of democracies in place and the other is national wealth. Adam Jaworski did a regression analysis with some of his colleagues where they said, oh, yes, we could predict that there will be democratic backsliding in the United States according to the regression results. It will happen once every two point six million years. Right. So this is like it's supposed to be a really improbable thing. So why? Essentially, the answer that I'm going to very briefly sketch out is that it's the nature of what's happened to the Republican Party, which has two parts, one of which I think is familiar to everyone. Actually, both of them are pretty familiar, but one of which I think is kind of really fundamental to our understanding of how American politics works, which is the role of race. But the other of which is the very distinctive nature of how extreme inequality in the US has reshaped the Republican Party. And the second part of it, which I will get to in a second, is how this has interacted with our unusual constitutional framework. So I will just show you this figure, just to give you this sense, right, that the United States is changing dramatically demographically. If you go back to nineteen sixty five, you know, so-called white Americans represented ninety percent of the population. It's not clear the trends have been changing exactly when or maybe if the United States will become a majority minority nation. But we're heading in that direction. And and that has supercharged this form of what Jennifer McCoy calls this formative rift in the United States about race. Race and race and the black white divide has always been this huge cleavage in the United States. Immigration, anti-immigrant sentiment has always also been a huge cleavage during periods in which we've had high levels of immigration. Now, both of those are fused together, right? In a single party, the Republican Party that is on the white side of the black white divide and on the anti-immigrant side of the immigration debate. And we've never had a single party in that position before. That's in part because we suppressed these issues on the agenda to some extent. But it's important to understand that these two things are self-reinforcing in the United States in a way that isn't as true in other countries that don't have our history of chattel slavery on our own soil and a civil war. And just to give you a sense, this is from a piece that is from a group of co-authors. And I if you saw I just had a piece come out in the American Political Science Review, which looks at disparities in responsiveness between Black and Hispanic and Asian American voters, on the one hand, and white voters on the other. And basically, it's looking at basically whether Congress does the things that voters want across a bunch of different issues. And the reason I show this figure, I know I'll explain it, is to give you a sense of just how much the racial divide has become a partisan divide in the United States. So this is basically the disparity between Republican and Democratic presidential control, or Republican and Democratic trifectas. Right. When Democrats control the House, the Senate and the presidency. So basically, a bigger number means, right, that it makes a bigger difference which party is in power. And then this shows you what's the share of these different groups there. Vote for the Democratic and the Democratic House vote are lower Parliament. And so what it's telling you, basically that very straight line, is that the more democratic aligned a group is, the more it matters whether Republicans or Democrats are in control. If Democrats are in control, black respondents in the survey get more of what they want, right? Conversely, when Republicans are in control, white respondents get more of what they want. Of course, the differences are much bigger for black respondents, because the white respondents are more ideologically and in terms of partisanship, diverse group. So the point is essentially that if you look at some of these and there's a ton of stuff on here, but you look at Latino, black and white as the sort of as three core racial groups, right? That that fits, that are partisan conflict. And representational conflict in the US is very much tied up with this. Okay. So we've never had the parties aligned in this way. We've never had race as such a salient cleavage, one that isn't suppressed from the agenda as it was for much of the twentieth century. And the other thing that's happened is we've become a vastly more unequal nation. This comes from the work of Piketty and his co-authors. It's a particular paper that's done by a set of scholars, including Lucas. And essentially, it shows you average annual income growth over this period, nineteen eighty to twenty seventeen, right before the pandemic, by different income percentiles. And it's showing you this is not to scale, right. It's giving you the very, very top, not just the top one percent, but the top one ten for the one percent, one

hundredth of one percent. And it's kind of striking because these are like compound these growth rates, right. If they happen year after year after year are make for huge differences. And so this is basically the story. And this is before taxes and transfers. Right. The story of the divergence between the US and Europe. And it's a story that basically is about both hard times for those at the bottom, but especially about the pulling away of the very top. Philip Ream and I are doing a series of papers on this using the same data. And I just want to show you one figure that gives you a sense of how much the US stands out. So this shows you the share of disposable income for the top ten percent, the middle fifty, the fiftieth to sixtieth percentile. So the middle middle decile and then the bottom ten percent. And on the x axis is the share in nineteen eighty. And on the y axis is the median increase in the share of all income growth that went to that group. So what this figure tells you is that in the United States, the median increase in all prosperity in the United States that was received by the top ten percent was over fifty percent with a starting point, which is down here of around thirty percent of all income. And so when you have that right, year after year, the top one percent is getting up, or top ten percent is getting a larger share. You have massively rising inequality, and we indeed show that there's a number of countries in which you see that kind of self-reinforcing inequality, but the US really stands out. So these folks at the very top, particularly the top zero point one percent, are not just richer in terms of income, they're richer in terms of wealth. And they're also spending a lot more in campaigns. So this is a figure from Adam Bonica. The top zero point one zero one percent here is not the top richest zero point zero one percent. It's the top zero point zero point one percent of donors. And what you can see is those donors, right, are comprised went from comprising about ten percent of total campaign spending to over fifty percent in twenty twenty for the top four hundred donors, top four hundred donors right was approaching thirty percent. And the Republicans have been extremely reliant on this. And I'll just just look at the left and the right to give you a sense. Right. So the darker it is, the richer the person is. The donations are, the bigger the donations are. So the donations on the right, the blackish one, are people who gave over one million dollars, and you can see that in twenty twenty four, over half of all of the Republican dollars came from donors giving more than a million dollars each, up from a tiny share in two thousand. And this is a lot of this is because two thousand and eight, a lot of this is because of Citizens United in twenty ten, but a lot of it is also about the increasing reliance of Republicans on the biggest donors. Now, in our book, Let Them Eat Tweets, Paul and I argued that there was a plutocratic populism of the Republican Party came out of this combination of racial backlash and extreme inequality. The plutocratic side was basically dictating a lot of the Republicans economic policy agenda. And the populist side, which had to do with racial and religious identity, was dictating a lot of its rhetoric as well as some of its policy stances, particularly its stances towards appointment of Supreme Court justices, and that it was this combination that was was driving the Republican Party towards a much more anti-democratic stance. And there's no question I can unpack this more in the Q&A. There's no question that the Republican Party looks very distinctive in cross-national perspective. So this comes from Let Them Eat tweets, and it's based on the manifestos project. And what it shows you is that the Republican, the Democratic Party is a sort of conventional left of center party. Of course, parties have moved probably since then. This was done. But you can get a sense, right? The Democratic Party is sort of slightly to the left of the median party. The Republican Party is way out over in right wing populist party land. So when President Trump was inaugurated in twenty twenty four for the second time, he signaled this alliance by bringing in what we should now call instead of calling them plutocrats, oligarchs to be in the audience when he was sworn in. Some of these, like Elon Musk, are also fully on board with the right wing populist side of the party. Others. Jeff Bezos here and Mark Zuckerberg. Paul, who showed me this picture first, said Musk looks like he swallowed a canary. And Mark Zuckerberg looks like he had bad sushi for lunch. But these they look differently at comfortable about where they are. But they were there not just because Donald Trump asked them to be there, but because in this new oligarchic regime, their well-being is very much tied up with the power of the Republican Party. They are much, much richer. So in twenty twenty four, Elon Musk, who had two hundred billion at the beginning of the year, ended up with another two hundred billion by the end of the year. Musk is not the only oligarch in that was there, right? You see Mark Zuckerberg, Jeff Bezos. I'll mention Larry Ellison in a moment. He comes in to play a little later. But the point is right. We have never had a class of people this rich. When Paul and I wrote Winner Take All Politics, the rich folks were like Wall Street financiers. Today they are these platform or attention merchants and whose platforms generate both wealth and vulnerability. And the vulnerability comes from both. As Cathy Thielen is increasingly pointed out, the fact

that the big investments in cloud computing and AI involve massive capital investment. So it used to be we thought these were very capital like companies. Now they're actually very deep into very vulnerable investments. They also are increasingly as media companies in many cases, and as platforms that are for commerce are extremely vulnerable to regulation. And the president has not made a secret of his willingness and ability to use that, that leverage. And I think one of the areas where this has been most clear, right, is in the media sphere. You know, we saw in Hungary and India the kind of attempt to try to capture media and and we don't talk about it as much in the United States. But in fact, there has been an enormous shift toward the right wing in the ownership of media. Perhaps the most simple example is that Donald Trump violated the law by not forcing the Chinese owners of TikTok to divest their ownership of TikTok. And then he brokered a sweetheart deal that involved these men and others. That is Larry Ellison. His son is a bigger figure in it. Ellison is up there in the in the top. He's one of the. So I think it was five of the six richest men in the world were at Trump's inauguration, and it would have been six if Ellison had showed up. But there's other people involved in TikTok, which has one hundred and seventy million US users. Peter Thiel, Rupert Murdoch do I have to keep repeating these names? Larry Lachlan Murdoch? So there is an alignment now of a weaponized state and an increasingly captured media with staggering, staggering wealth. The other side of this, the one that I can summarize more simply, is the way in which the American political institutions have turned out to be extremely vulnerable to plutocratic populism. The way I think about this is that is that the system, the constitutional system, works relatively well in the absence of having these nationalized partisan teams, where one team has an enormous advantage in in the way in which the basic institutions are structured, which is where we've ended up, right. So one thing our system does is it allows right wing populism to capture a party, you know, in other multi-party settings, the right wing populists have to get a majority or they have to get a coalition partners, and they're explicitly in coalition. In the United States, Donald Trump gets half of the Republican Party. He captures the Republican nomination, he takes over the Republican Party. And now you suddenly have the most powerful office in the world, the presidency, in the hands of a right wing populist. The other thing is that, of course, the checks and balances don't work well when you have these nationalized partisan teams. And that's particularly true when Republicans are in power, because their team is more cohesive and has more powerful resources behind it, including a much more mobilized right wing populist base where the media is very important. So you don't get Congress checking the president, you don't get the courts. I'll come back to that, or at least the Supreme Court checking the president. And that is another way in which the Madisonian system turns out to be extremely vulnerable. And then finally, and not least, and I'll talk about this more in just a moment, is that there are a bunch of reasons why the Democrats, as the metro based pro-government party, are disadvantaged by the constitutional structure in a way that Republicans are not. Republicans are advantaged. So that's where we are. We have seen the rise of a strongman presidency. I don't think we can minimize just how quickly backsliding has occurred in the United States. The level and scale of corruption is truly staggering, and I think unprecedented in the American context. We've got loyalists in all of the most important sites of the executive branch. The agencies are largely under President Trump's thumb. The attacks on civil society have been widespread and demobilizing, and there's a real chance that Donald Trump can wield security forces that are increasingly aligned not just with the Republican Party, but with the social movement. Make America Great Again, MAGA that that has shaped the Republican Party's most extreme ends. The most obvious example of that is ICE, which is not a nice inner city railway, but the Immigration and Customs Enforcement Agency, which was spending, was massively stepped up for in the Republicans mega bill this summer, and which now would be if it were treated separately among the fifteen largest militaries in the world. I already mentioned checks and balances, but I will say that one thing that I hadn't mentioned is that a big check is that's of concern has to do with the use of force on US soil by the US military. And another thing which is very much in the news today, right, is these intensified efforts to keep control by rigging elections quite openly. Right. Donald Trump says if we did this, Republicans will never lose election again, right. That is, by definition, trying to rig elections. Well, fortunately, we get to part two. Democrats are ready. We've got that. We've got this. Yeah. Sorry. It doesn't cause as much humor here. More despair. But seriously, the Democratic Party is like many center left parties, viewed with some mixture of disdain and contempt by almost everyone. The number of books that have been written on what's gone wrong with the party has proliferated. And this, of course, is a genre that has a trans continental flavor. Right. So the left, the left, the center left is in crisis everywhere. And most of the people

who are writing this basically hold the view that if only the Democrats would do what I think is the right thing, then they'd be better off. And I think there's obviously a lot wrong with the Democratic Party. And I want to just like, start by acknowledging the extent to which the neoliberal turn among center left parties is a big part of the reason that they're in crisis today. The fact that that under Clinton, for example, the party became sort of unapologetically free trade and deregulatory on finance, things that came back very quickly to bite us with the financial crisis, which is an inflection point in many rich democracies with a massive increase in populist and anti-system sentiment. And it's true, too, that there are these strains within the within contemporary center left parties and the Democratic Party that are caused by the rise of the knowledge economy that has strained the connection of these parties to their traditional working class constituency. One thing I want to emphasize is that this idea that in the knowledge economy, right, you've got urban areas are the centre of economic prosperity, and they're also where educated people live. And in our territorial based system, those places are also disadvantaged in our electoral system. And I'll talk about that more. But one thing that a lot of scholars like Jonathan Rodden have argued is that that also creates a lot of pressures for fishers on the left right. In those safer places, you could expect there to be a lot of left fragmentation and pressures for extreme left policies, and the fall of Labour would fit into this story. Now, if you look at the manifestos project data, the picture you get is of a party. This is the Democratic Party that, like other centre left parties, has moved to the right and then back. And you can see that here, that actually the the higher numbers are more conservative. You can see that the Democratic Party has moved back to the left. And that's certainly true when we look at the Biden administration, I won't go into the specifics, but they were doing a very ambitious and fairly progressive economic policy agenda. But the other thing I would say, and this is before I get to the really serious criticism of the Democratic Party. Don't worry, I'll supply them. That actually, because of our strict two party system, Democrats have actually held on pretty darn well. So they are a multiracial, metro centered party, incredibly cross-class. They're the richest, some of the richest, um, sort of upper middle class, affluent places and some of the poorest, but that they actually haven't seen the kind of falloff that you see in a lot of other democracies. In substantial part, I think, because of our strict two party system, but also perhaps because, honestly, the Republican Party has left electoral money on the table by sometimes being too extreme. And, um, the governance vote share is one way of looking at this. You can look at the fact that they actually had a trifecta under briefly under Biden and did a lot of stuff. And the last thing I would say is like, you know, and so here, let me show you the diverse party. So this is to show you that Democrats are much more a party that is racially and ethnically diverse. And also you can see this U shape. By twenty twenty, the party basically had support at the top end and the bottom end dramatically. But to just come back to this really quickly, the twenty twenty four story, I think it's worth knowing was a story of global incumbent loss. Right. And Democrats are that little red dot there. They actually like did like slightly better. So now remember what I said. Right. It's not a viable strategy to stop authoritarianism if when you lose an election authoritarianism wins. So for Democrats, that was a very fateful loss and there were a lot of mistakes behind it. The point is that you can interpret this in two different ways, and I interpret it mostly as it was a terrible time for incumbent parties to be in power. And that was true. The Conservative Party in Britain, it was true for the Liberal Party in Japan, parties that were on the right, and it was true for parties on the left as well. Now I will get to some of the real serious problems that we need to talk about with the party. Okay. So the party's reliance on these metro areas has led to what Paul and I call a density paradox. So the density paradox is basically like in the knowledge economy, it's good to be in dense places. But in our American electoral system, it's bad to be in dense places. Right. And so this is just from a piece, the piece that you mentioned, Leon, that we just did. Right. So Democrats have increasingly come and this is just since two thousand and six from dense areas. If you look at the longer term trend, the rural urban split is bigger in the US than almost any other country, I think, than any other, any other Anglo country. And that at the same time, the districts where Democrats come from have gotten much richer. But the fact that the Democrats are crammed into these tiny little places geographically means that they are deeply disadvantaged in our system, most obviously. Right. If you're going to draw an apportionment system that would disadvantage dense places. You could not do much worse than the Senate, right? Every state gets two senators, even Wyoming, which apparently only has two escalators in the whole state. One, I guess one senator per escalator. Um, now you think that you'd think the House wouldn't be subject to this, but it is, because, of course, it's easy to gerrymander concentrated voters. And also there's a kind of gerrymandering that occurs. How big that effect is is a debate. And it will say that

as Democrats have attracted more suburban voters, they've reduced some of that advantage. The Electoral College also carries over some of this. Right, because, of course, the Electoral College is the number of House members plus the number of senators. So even Wyoming with one congressional district gets three Electoral College votes. But I think the most important thing to understand is that this Senate, the Senate is really the big story that this bias carries over this pro-Republican bias carries over to the Supreme Court. And in fact, if you think about the Electoral College and the Supreme Court, almost all of these of the six conservatives that are now shaping policy on the Supreme Court are either or both. From a president who won the Electoral College but did not win the popular vote, or confirmed by a Senate, where the senators that voted to confirm them represented a minority of Americans. Right. States that that contain a minority of Americans. There is only one exception up here that doesn't have at least one of those, and that's John Roberts. So Alito, Gorsuch, Kavanaugh, Barrett and Thomas, because his vote was so close, all either have one or both. And in the case of Gorsuch, Kavanaugh, Alito and Barrett, they were both put on by a president who did not win the popular vote and confirmed by senators that did not represent a majority of Americans. Okay. I said I would talk about the real problems Democrats face, and they have many of them. But I think we can sum them up as the Democrats have a brand, a big brand problem. They are seen as. And I'm not going to say whether this is accurate or not, but it's definitely comes out in all of the research. They're the party of educated elites. They're too far left on many social issues. Woke is the term that gets used sometimes in the United States. They're less able to secure prosperity. They're geriatric. And I think most important, which is why I put it in bold. They're seen as the party of the status quo. That's not good. Like that's bad. Like if you're a political consultant and I told you this is how your party is seen, you would be you would be very unhappy. Here's an even bigger problem. Democrats have limited influence on how their brand gets defined. But let me just talk about I'm going to talk. The last part of this talk, as I said, will be a bit more optimistic and I'll be forward looking. I promise it will be brief as well. But let me just talk for a moment about one aspect of this. I'm going to talk a bit about the status quo aspect of it and the Establishment aspect of it in a moment. And that is a geriatric. It's not false. This is the distribution of Democratic senators. And this is the distribution of registered Democratic voters. Right. You can see, you know, Madame right does well, he gets all these young voters to come out, and then we split screens, cut to the Senate. You know, the shutdown where the eight senators defect and they're all like eighty years old, right? And that's the distribution of Democratic senators. Half are over sixty seven. Adam Bonica, in a wonderful little piece, tried to figure out, can we find another institution in our society that looks like the senators? I was going to say the Supreme Court, but but here's another one. The Villages in Florida, which is the largest retirement community in the in the nation and probably in the world, was eighty thousand superannuated Americans living together. And their distribution looks very much like the Senate. So there's a there's a real problem here, as Bonica has argued, has a lot to do with campaign finance. And I think the the status quo problem is a huge problem, because if you think about it, what's happened isn't that the Republicans have become a dramatically popular party. It's that Americans have come to hate politics and hate politicians, distrust government and feel that it's not looking out for them and that both parties have suffered. But who do you turn to when you feel that way? You turn to the to the anti-system party. And as I said, this isn't always fair. Democrats are. As I said, they do not get to define their brand. This comes from a paper by my colleague Josh collar, and it was an experiment where they incentivized Republican voters to watch CNN instead of Fox News. I'm not going to focus on the experiment. Short answer if you watch Fox News, you get more conservative. But I'm going to focus on this really nice graph. They said they watched all of Fox News. I didn't have to. And they said, here are the top topics that were on Fox News in the summer of twenty twenty, right? If you can read them. Biden Democrats support for extreme racial ideology protests. Negative consequences of extreme racial ideology, protests, and so on. Right. So this is the landscape that the Democrats have to grapple with, a landscape in which this comes from another nice recent piece where essentially the Republicans dominate the field. So this is showing you all of the major shows across YouTube, Rumble, Twitch, Kik, Spotify, Facebook, Instagram and TikTok. And I only know what half of those are. And eighty two percent, the total shows were were right leaning across these platforms. Okay. Just in a few minutes. How can we get over the crises? Okay. So let me start because I've been pretty negative with some hopeful news. What are the potential sources of resilience? Well, the most obvious is that Donald Trump is not popular. And even more deeply, that we've been living in a politics of backlash for thirty years. And whoever is the incumbent president is the subject of that backlash. But

Donald Trump is actually even less popular than you would expect, given that he creates his own additional backlash, and he has governed in a way that is deeply unpopular right now. I know that I'll get into a moment why that didn't necessarily make us feel reassured, but there's also institutional sources of resilience. They have very narrow margins, right? They're dealing with a highly legalized governance structure. Yes. The Supreme Court has sided with Trump a lot, but the lower courts have not that it slows things down. It is a big and diverse country, right. It's like conquering Russia or something. It's not easy. And then our constitution means that, like they're not going to follow the Orban strategy. They're not going to be able to change the constitution fundamentally. What they're doing is just running roughshod over the Constitution. And there is this question of like, what happens after Trump? So you guys think about it, but I feel like he has some unique political gifts. And it's not clear there is a leader who could bring together the Republican Party in the way he has so very unpopular, very, very unpopular. The only president until recently more unpopular was Donald Trump in his first term. But now he's actually doing even worse than he did in the first term. He's underwater on all the issues. The one that gets me here is like the thing he was most important. It's why all those incumbent parties lost inflation, cost of living. And he's down there right at the very bottom. People do not approve of it. I have to plug my work with my postdoc, Patrick Sullivan, and we together did an experiment looking at the one big beautiful Bill act, the Republican mega bill. We gave a set of voters information about the distribution of the bill. First, we showed them the distribution of the tax cuts. Then we showed them the distribution of the tax and spending cuts because there's tax cuts, but then there's cuts in Medicaid and the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program. And the thing that gets you here is, first of all, Democrats hated the bill beforehand, and they hated it even more afterwards. Independents move a lot. And that's quite telling because they're like this, you know, to the extent we have swing voters in the US, that's where they are. And then you see down here that even Republicans, right, you were able to they went from basically over two to one in support, right to over three, almost three to one opposition when you gave them the information. Now you're like when you gave them the information, right. What about that media ecosystem? Totally understand that. I'm just saying this is not popular. This bill is not popular and in a lot of ways, right. It's a continuation of the plutocratic populism I was talking about. Right. Where the Republicans are pursuing a set of policies that are that are popular with the plutocrats but aren't that popular with their voters, and therefore they're, they're they're pursuing a much more hot button kind of social issues to try to keep their voters in the fold. The latest generic congressional ballots, as we call them, right, suggested that the Democrats are doing pretty well for the next election. The backlash is showing up in party ID, and this is Gallup data. So how much this really translates into registration. We'll see. But if you don't believe in any of the polls, you can believe your own lying eyes, which is looking at the actual off year elections where Democrats just crushed. Right? Okay. Yes. Mostly in blue and maybe somewhat purple states, not red states. But still, the proof in the pudding is people are not happy. And not only are people not happy, there's a lot of mobilization. It's still not very specific in terms of what needs to be done, but it is substantial. And the second No Kings protest was, according to most estimates, the largest single day of protests in the United States since Earth Day in the nineteen seventies. Okay, but we are going the wrong way very quickly. Maybe we're just a little more slowly and it's not clear. Right. Whether Trump. Right. Trump controls the state. Now, all of these institutions, it's not clear whether Trump needs to be popular to get what he wants. For all the reasons that we've talked about. Right. These minoritarian Institutions, the degree to which he controls coercive apparatus, and because he has the support of these oligarchs. And so. And I promise, I'm very close to the end. The Democrats response is really crucial. And in many ways, the Democrats are the only thing I know. This is frightening that stands between the United States and authoritarianism. They are not going to do that. Save it alone. And maybe they won't save it, but they are in a two party system like ours. They are the essential opposition. And and it's particularly worth noting that in this sort of democratic backsliding literature, right, it's both elections and opposition party activities that are kind of the focal points for trying to to reverse and sometimes successfully reversing authoritarianism. I really want to emphasize that this is not a story about although there's a lot of discontent. It's not a story about like, how do Democrats come up with a better message to win over voters? I'll say a word about that, because a lot of this is structurally determined. If the economy goes south, that's a that's going to make a fundamental difference, right? Democrats. The Epstein thing is sort of only marginally in Democrats control. Um, so this there's a lot of structural factors that are going to determine whether Democrats have the opportunity. The question is, and they can contribute as they have

with the shutdown, I think, to that discontent. But the most important thing is they have to be ready. And so I get to the book we're writing. We're writing it. So that's why it's only going to be a minute at the end of the talk. Right. So here's the dilemma that Democrats face. You can see the pendulum starting to swing back, but you can win an election and still lose our democracy. Right. As I said, for Democrats, it is not it is not the right strategy. The right response to the creeping to the authoritarianism of the Republican Party is not we have to win every election, right? It has to. You have to figure out how to reform our creaky constitutional system in a way that allows our democracy to be more responsive because it wasn't working well for voters beforehand, and to be more authoritarian proof because it's not. And the thing is, is that we're hearing a lot about how Democrats need to moderate or they need to bring on board disaffected Republican voters, which makes sense for winning an election. But they also need to do these really, really big things. And that's the dilemma, right? There's huge tensions between these two goals. And Paul and I have a few key arguments right in the book that we're working on. And the the most important one is that for Democrats, the number one thing they have to be thinking about now is how are they going to fix the system? And they're not, for the most part, thinking that to the extent they are thinking about it, they're thinking about like, filibuster. Do we get rid of the filibuster? That's like the lowest hanging fruit, right? How do we deal with the Supreme Court? Should we be changing the Senate balance a little bit by giving statehood to key to key territories? How do we deal with our electoral system in extreme gerrymandering? And how do we do what Biden didn't do in twenty twenty one to twenty four, which is to really put in place and support a sort of statutory revitalization. Right. Dealing with the emergency powers that are being used, dealing with the degree to which the Supreme Court gets to decide what the administrative state can do through the major questions doctrine. If the Supreme Court likes it, it's fine. But if Congress clarified what the Supreme Court and the Supreme Court doesn't like it, it's not fine. But if Congress clarified that it would, it would make a huge difference, especially if there is some effort to deal with the Supreme Court, too. And so one question I have is like, how much do Democrats need to do to address voter backlash? And what like, does policy matter as much as we might want it to? Biden did a lot that actually was very progressive and was broadening prosperity. And and he did not get much credit for it, but maybe that was just washed out by a particular set of post-pandemic circumstances. Another challenge, which is the one that Paul and I have been staying up at night thinking about, or at least lying in bed thinking about, which is how do you deal with this oligarchy challenge. Right? So I kind of call it the Lina Khan problem. So like Lina Khan is one hundred percent correct that we should break up all these monopolies. Lina Khan is a major reason why the oligarchs turned toward Donald Trump. How do you reconcile those two realities? And and anyway, all of these things are going to make it hard to build a bigger tent. I will leave you, though, with a little bit of hope about this, and this has to do. And forgive me. This picture is from the New York Times. This is Dan Osborne, who ran as an independent in Nebraska on a populist message in a state where he had to run as an independent. No Democrat is going to win, but he would have caucused with the Democrats. You know who this guy is here, over here, there is a new kind of affordability, economic populist message that's resonating an anti-corruption agenda seems to be resonating. And perhaps the sort of potential silver lining for for my argument, if you will. Right. They have to do these big things is that maybe the party would actually be able to really rehab, rehabilitate its very, very soiled brand by becoming a bolder party. So could we move essentially away from this progressive versus moderate divide, try to create a broader coalition, but that the price of entry into that coalition isn't ideology, it's boldness, right? The price of entering that coalition is. Are you serious about tackling the things that have made Donald Trump's rise possible? I don't know if it'll work, but I can tell you that in a lot of ways, to quote Abraham Lincoln, the Democratic Party is, for better or worse, the last, best hope of American democracy. Thank you.