

Rise of Authoritarianism

What Happens Next – 08.06.22

Larry Bernstein:

Welcome to What Happens Next. My name is Larry Bernstein.

What Happens Next is a podcast which covers economics, finance, history, politics and current events.

Today's session is on the risk of authoritarianism. We have two guests. Our first speaker is Moises Naim who is a fellow at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace and the author of the new book entitled Revenge of Power.

Moises will tell us about how populism, polarization, and post-truth undermine the democratic process. And that there is a global trend in the past few decades away from democracies towards more authoritarian regimes.

Our second speaker will be Julian Waller who is a political scientist at George Washington University, and he has a new paper that was recently published in the magazine American Affairs entitled Authoritarianism here?

Julian will speak about why strong democratic governance in the US makes it unlikely that authoritarianism can take hold in the US because of the diffusion of power within the Federal government and how state and local control through federalism strengthens democracy.

Buckle up.

If you missed last week's podcast check it out. The topic was part three of our ongoing history of World War 2 with Paul Kennedy who is the J Richardson Dilworth Professor of History at Yale. Paul has a new book out entitled Victory at Sea: Naval Power and the Transformation of the Global Order in WW2.

This episode focused on the fateful year 1943 when the war was won. Paul explained why the US decided to invade North Africa instead of Europe, as a trial balloon. Why North Africa was followed by an invasion of Italy to knock Mussolini out of the war. And, we learned about the internal strife within the allied alliance, the disputes between the armed services, and why the allies ultimately won the war.

Let's begin today's session on authoritarianism with Moises Naim.

Moises Naim:

This past decade has been rich in world changing events. Almost unnoticed is the global crisis of democracy. There is a global onslaught against the checks and balances that define a democracy. Undemocratic systems are on the rise. They currently account for 70% of the world

population. That is 5.4 billion people live in non-democracies, according to studies by the University of Gothenburg. A decade earlier, the percentage of people without democracy was 49%. So that was a decade in which democracy became a system of governing that is in danger of extinction.

Not since 1978 has there been such a low number of countries in the process of democratizing. There are two reasons why the democratic backsliding didn't cause alarm. The first is that there were just too many other urgent problems to successfully compete for the attention of the media, public opinion: the pandemic, the global financial crisis, Brexit, and the war in Ukraine -- left little room for non-immediate emergencies. The second reason is that most attacks in democracy were deliberately difficult to detect, which made it much more difficult for people to fight back. But the reality is -- and this is according to the University of Gothenburg -- the level of democracy enjoyed by the average global citizen in 2021 is down to 1989 levels.

Of 195 countries, only 34 are overall democracies. This profound, important structural change took place stealthily. There is a new crop of autocrats that present themselves as democrats and then stealthily undermine democracy from within. They win elections, they get to power and immediately they start on weakening checks and balances that characterize a democracy. They do that by using three strategies that I call the three Ps: populism, polarization, and post-truth. Populism has always existed and is centered in the notion that requires a Messiah-like charismatic leader that represents the noble people that is being exploited against the elite. Normally, what happens is that that charismatic leader becomes a dictator, and instead of defending the interest of the poor, makes whatever necessary decisions in order to stay in power.

Some of the tricks they normally use to achieve that are polarization, deepening the differences that exist in societies. Polarization has acquired new potency thanks to the new technology, social media, and all the rest that we can broadly call the third P, which is post-truth. Propaganda controlled and centralized by dictators.

Now post-truth includes propaganda used by the state, but it also includes the messages of listeners, fans. And post-truth is casting doubts on what people believe, creating confusion, undermining trust in society. And the three Ps have been used around the world by very different regimes and leaders. And that explains the dire situation that democracy finds itself in and the decline of democracy we have seen in the past decade.

Larry Bernstein:

Democracies have always been a minority among the countries in the world. Today, we have the United States, Western Europe, and Japan, but most of the world doesn't live there. They live in Africa and Asia, and especially China. How should we consider the reality that democracies have no population growth but the rest of the world is growing pretty quickly.

Moises Naim:

You are right that there are very large underdeveloped or poor countries that struggled to obtain and retain and manage democracy. But the problem is that that is not just happening in banana republics.

Watching the attack on the capital on January 6th was harrowing in many ways because we have seen this movie except that it was in Spanish. But an even more important factor is that we are seeing anti-democratic behaviors in consolidated democracy like the United States.

Larry Bernstein:

Samuel Huntington in his book *Political Order in Changing Societies* argues that society is most ripe for revolution when incomes are rising and the new elite do not have sufficient political power and demand more.

Moises Naim:

The central message is that the demands of the people grow at a faster rate than the capacity of government to satisfy them. So democracy has to face a chronic dissatisfaction by its population that they're not getting their fair share, that they're not progressing sufficiently, that social mobility is not favoring them. And when the gap between expectations and hopes create the nasty politics that Huntington predicted and that we are seeing around the world today. We are living in an age of disappointment.

We know that there are some tectonic plates in the world that are moving: demographic, technological, societal mindsets, power. And we know that they're going to affect us and our families, but we don't know exactly how, or when, in which ways. Big waves of changes alters our way of life and the ways that we understand life and expectations we have about our own future. So that too is a major source of disappointment.

Larry Bernstein:

There was an election in Colombia a few weeks ago, and a former leftist terrorist won. Do you think Columbia will remain a democracy?

Moises Naim:

Gustavo Petro, the new president of Columbia, is going to use the three Ps to govern. He's already shown to be a populist in which the division between the people and the abusive elites need him to rebalance power, income and wealth in Colombia. He's also exploiting the profound divisions and the polarization that exists in Colombia, and he is a practitioner of post truth. So, he's a three-P leader. We have seen his ilk around the world.

Larry Bernstein:

How would you compare Columbia with Venezuela? And what will it take for Venezuela to become a normal democratic country?

Moises Naim:

The tragedy of Venezuela, something like 20% of the population has literally walked for thousands of miles just to escape that harrowing nightmare that is to live in the country -- that tragedy is not sufficiently understood. And there is a variable that is never included in the conversations, and that is the role of the Cuban government. Very few decisions including cabinet appointments, economic policies, international relations are taken in Venezuela without the approval, the stamp, or even the initiative of the Cuban government. Venezuela used to be a Petro state, meaning a nation state that is reliant on oil as a main source of economic growth and income. And that it is now destroyed. The level of destruction -- institutional destruction, wealth destruction -- that has taken place in Venezuela has no parallel. Wars have proven in some cases less destructive than what we are seeing in Venezuela.

Larry Bernstein:

Why does Cuba have this power?

Moises Naim:

It all starts with a very profound and human relationship between Chavez and Castro. It was almost a father and son relationship in which Chavez discovered in Castro the father he did not have. But that is psychological speculation. The reality is that Chavez and Castro had a very, very deep, profound relationship. And they were very explicit and very open in saying that they wanted to unite their two countries. And so the influence that Cuba had in Venezuela is not because it was invited. It was an invasion that was invited.

Larry Bernstein:

Do you think there is substantial risk of expropriation of privately owned assets in Venezuela today?

Moises Naim:

The Venezuela regime and others in the region are perfect examples of what I called ideological necrophilia. Necrophilia is a perversion that some men have, an attraction to cadavers. There is an ideological manifestation of necrophilia, which is a total attachment to bad ideas, bad policies that have been tried and tested in a country several times. And they always end in tears, in corruption, in poverty and so on. The world is in the grips of a lot of these three P leaders and three P movements that are very prone to having attacks of ideological necrophilia.

Larry Bernstein:

Next topic: post-truth. I had Eliot Higgins who founded Bellingcat on the podcast a few months ago. And his team showed in real time that a Malaysian airliner had been shot down by the Russians. They followed the truck to the site where the missile was fired and we saw pictures immediately afterwards with the truck missing a missile. The Russians were made out to be liars. The open internet and the easy access to information even inside the Russian military allows independent third parties to correct lies or misstatements. I would have thought that this open world would undermine a post-truth world.

Moises Naim:

We were told that the internet was going to be a tool of liberation, that it was going to help democracy. That it has done in some countries. But in other countries, it has become a tool of repression that the main user of the opportunities created by the internet are the secret police and the repressive organizations of the state. Social media and the internet are just technologies and they're a double-edged sword. And we see that with social media. It provides us access to all kinds of information, but at the same time, it makes it very hard for us to discern what is true and what is not. I am optimistic in the sense that we are going to be better in coming years in helping the digital consumer be a better informed, better protected consumer.

All around the world, we have seen the proliferation of government agencies that protect the consumer. It so happens that that has not arrived yet to the world of the digital consumers. And that is the technology that most of us use most of the time.

Larry Bernstein:

How do you explain the increasing popularity of Putin in Russia?

Moises Naim:

You're making bold statements. It is very bold to say that you can rely on existing opinion surveys in Russia. Your comment about the Russians supporting their leader – and I'm sure that there are millions of Russians that support Putin – needs to be backed by surveys that are not controlled, do not happen in a regime that gives a 15-year jail time to anybody that criticizes the government. We need to be very careful when assessing what is the mood of the Russians. And remember, when there are wars, they stir up nationalistic feelings and support for the leader and all that.

Give it a few years. Russia's economy has been unplugged from the global economy. It is going to be a very poor country. They are essentially a Petro state. And they also export some military weaponry. Where's innovation, where is the dynamism? They have a bunch of fat cat oligarchs, and oil, gas, and, and minerals and weapons. Inflation is going to bite it and the stagnation is going to be a reality. The future of Russia is not something to be applauded, especially by the Russians.

Larry Bernstein:

I want to apply your hypothesis of a growing disillusionment of democratic institutions to a Western European country. Let's pick France as an example. Le Pen has improved her electoral performance over the years. Macron won, but he seems unpopular with large segments of the French population. Is this a positive sign that a moderate center party remains in power? There is another trend in France with the rise of the Yellow Jackets and their anti-elite perspective that they do not want to be governed by bureaucratic experts?

Moises Naim:

In the recent elections, candidate Mélenchon got a substantial number of seats in parliament. Mélenchon is far left. He a Chavez supporter. There is no reason to believe that France doesn't face the same challenges of growth and government performance and societal performance that other consolidated democracy has – the same forces, demographic mindsets, the trends that I describe *In the End of Power*, the trends that I describe in *The Revenge of Power* are at work in France, very salient, very visibly so. Perhaps the essence is how difficult it is to govern successfully in today's world, how the fragmentation and the acceleration of changes. And again, we go back to the Huntington's notion that expectations of the people are growing at a faster rate than the capacity of the state to deliver. That is true in very poor countries, but it also happens to be true in France.

Larry Bernstein:

The British economist Mancur Olson in his famous book *The Logic of Collective Action* highlights that special interests have too much control over governmental decisions. Special interests care much more about their particular problems than the public and are successful at lobbying governmental officials to help them. What are your thoughts on the conflict between the public on the one hand and special interests on the other, and how that creates opportunities for a populist to push back against elites, bureaucrats, special interests and to fight for the people?

Moises Naim:

What do the opioid crisis of the United States, with hundreds of thousands of people dying, have in common with children in schools gunned down and weapons in civilian hands? The military spending -- there are studies that show that the military spending is out of control, and a lot of it goes to waste and perhaps corruption. What does all of that have in common? Money. Greed. This is a wonderful country; and we need to make sure that it continues to be. But at this point this wonderful country has black holes of malfeasance, of greed, of excess, of inequality, of special interests capturing the functioning and the performance of the state and moving the government policies to benefit a very small group of shareholders of pharmaceutical companies, gun makers at the expense of the entire society.

Larry Bernstein:

In your book, in the discussion about Brexit, you highlighted Boris Johnson's attacks against the unelected bureaucrats in Brussels. There are different ways of getting the best governmental policies: unelected bureaucrats who are often highly educated in their area of expertise versus the messy democratic process of legislatures making regulations with their staff. How do you compare policy making by unelected professional bureaucrats and elected officials?

Moises Naim:

One of the complaints is that the current way of organizing gives bureaucrats and technocrats in government too much power control of important aspects of public policy. It is true that a balance has to be reached. But you need both. I was a cabinet member of Venezuela. Its public

sector professionals, some of them were excellent and heroes, worked for very lower middle-class kind of salaries, but they were expert in what they did. And they were necessary.

How much power do you give them? There is no easy answer. You need both: you need the messiness of democracy that allows for people to participate and ideas to shape outcomes. But at the same time, you need experts. Any CEO of any company will tell you that running some government agencies is far more difficult than running a Fortune 500 company – the constraints, the uncertainties, the political pressures, the distortions, the lack of sufficient budgets, the outside pressures make it very, very hard to be an effective government bureaucrat, but we have them.

There is an onslaught against experts. Famously a cabinet member in the UK, when he was told that there was a study that showed that Brexit was going to be very negative for the United Kingdom, he said “the British people don’t need more experts. We already have all the experts we need.” There is a widespread disdain of experts. They often get it wrong, but we need them. We saw what happened with the COVID vaccines. The scientists and the experts were the heroes and the politicians, the mediocre ignorance, stood in the way of getting things done.

Larry Bernstein:

One of your defining goals is truth seeking. Post-Truth as you described is hugely problematic. Yet, we live in world of uncertainty. Most of the ideas that I believe are likely wrong. Why not lean on the democratic process over the rule by experts. I would have thought that one of the lessons of COVID was that the experts got so much wrong that we benefitted by the actions of the public.

Moises Naim:

First of all, I never said, nor I believe, that the experts should be giving influence outside and without the constraints of democratic controls. I don’t want a nation ruled by nerds that are out of touch. I want the political process. I want democracy to be at work. But then you said a different thing, which is a bigger, much larger, complex debate about what is truth, which is a debate worth having, except that it’s very easy to end up in no man’s land. There are different kinds of debates. Are we speaking during the day or at night? Now there is a truth. So, it’s daylight, right? Trump will tell you that they stole the election. It has become a debate. There are levels of debate – more complex, subjective that belong to the political process. We need to welcome that. But there are others that are being used to manipulate truth. They’re used in the service of power, which is the essence of the story that I tell in the book about post-truth.

Larry Bernstein:

What are you optimistic about?

Moises Naim:

I think science is going to surprise us in very positive ways. This onslaught of democracy will abate. Just identifying it, discussing it, debating it and showing that it exists will create

antibodies that will make it harder for three P leaders that use populism, polarization and post-truth to subject their citizens to autocracies.

Julian Waller:

So I have good news. The United States is simply not on the verge of a fascist takeover and those that counsel imminent democratic death do us a disfavor. That does not mean that politics here in the American Republic are healthy. They very clearly are not. A general political legitimacy crisis has been rumbling through American society since at least 2016 and shows no signs of abating. However, a period of heightened political tension, mistrust and division does not necessitate the full breakdown of political order.

Many scholars, commentators and policy makers have honed in on the perceived threat of democracy's gradual decline, the so-called democratic backsliding framework, which has become popular as a predictive playbook for how the end of democracy comes about. This focus on a gradual approach, usually emphasizes procedural tricks, slow institutional capture and distorted electoral outcomes. It's informed primarily by the experience of certain European countries: Hungary, Russia, Turkey, Serbia are most commonly cited. The problem is working through any convincing account of a gradual slide into electoral authoritarianism in the United States requires considerable leaps well beyond tinkering around the electoral margins by way of House gerrymandering, Senate malapportionment or the electoral college.

The problem with relying on this way of understanding predictions about the collapse of democracy is that we often presuppose that a stable consolidated authoritarian regime inevitably comes next, rather than just short-term political chaos or constitutional crisis. This leads us to the lure of unfortunate hyperbole, where we have all this talk about the authoritarian or tyrannical nature of the Republican party, for example, or the looming dictatorship resulted from populous leader like Donald Trump.

So, democratic breakdown today is this form of gradual slide into what we call electoral authoritarianism. There is another common form of democratic collapse, which is even more evocative. And that is a military coup leading to the suspension of constitutional order and the creation of a military-backed civilian bureaucratic authoritarian regime. Neither of these scenarios are especially likely in the current political and institutional ecosystem of the United States.

Democratic collapse is really, truly genuinely difficult. You have to understand that the lessons we draw from foreign countries -- they have to make sense. We hear a lot about the Hungarian case. It's a very soft electoral authoritarian regime, but this an ethnically homogenous country of 10 million people, the population of Michigan. It experienced the massive discreditation of the current political opposition in the wake of the financial crisis, leaving the now current government very well placed to not only win elections heavily, but to do so while promising to rid the system of what was widely perceived to be a deeply corrupt elite. It has a parliamentary

system with a tendency to produce lopsided electoral outcomes in big swing elections. This allowed the quick capture of all state institutions by the ruling party, enabling them to change the constitution easily.

The United States is absolutely nothing like this at all. Here in America, one must be able to control a vast set of political and economic organizations in order to fashion a genuine stable authoritarian regime. The US is a country of 330 million people spread across an entire continent containing a smorgasbord of overlapping racial, ethnic, and class segments divided into a multitude of powerful state governments whose legitimacy and political authority are centuries old and practically meaningful to the lives of their respective citizens.

We need to be very careful about the lessons we draw from foreign cases and the realities of what authoritarian regimes and their paths to power actually look like in an ideal world. This shouldn't be a particularly controversial opinion, but things are quite heightened and tense these days. And it's very easy to fall into extreme interpretations or even wish casting disaster, which is something we need to be careful to avoid.

Larry Bernstein:

Samuel Huntington wrote a book called *Soldier and the State* in 1957. Huntington explained that the American soldier's oath to the constitution is taken very seriously and that there is no American tradition for military coups. And that the military sticks to fighting wars and staying out of the political realm. What are your thoughts on Huntington's classic work?

Julian Waller:

The professionalization of the US military -- It's one of the reasons America is so exceptional. One of the major takeaways from the Huntington thesis is that the military does not get involved in politics. While the military remains quite a professional organization, there was concern during the transition of power between President Donald Trump and President Joe Biden, when it was not clear that the commander in chief actually was in control of the military, actually in control of the nuclear codes, for example. We did not have a coup. However, that was a very tense moment when it was not clear that the sitting civilian president was actually calling the shots.

Larry Bernstein:

We had Edward Luttwak speak on the podcast, he wrote *Coup d'Etat: A Practical Handbook*. He said January six was not a coup, it was a bunch of yahoos attacking the capital. What is your view of that?

Julian Waller:

The problem is we get into definitions. There's a whole argument in the political science literature about what is a coup. These matter for coding decisions in quantitative research. A lot of my colleagues have come around to the idea that it was a coup. I have not come down to that. The standard definition of a coup involves the military. We had this poorly defined concept of the self-coup. It comes out of Latin American history, and it tends to be elected

presidents who suddenly close their legislatures and arrest all their judges. And then they just rule. And that's happened recently in Peru, under Fujimori. That's not a coup, but we kind of call it a coup. So the definition is really convoluted. I think if you were to pull 10 comparative political scientists, you'd get kind of 10 different answers.

When is it just political violence? There is violence that happens at national legislatures in countries, and we tend not to call those coups. Chilean parliament was caught on fire. Serbian parliament was attacked. Sri Lanka parliament just got raided by a mob of people. I wouldn't call it a coup. There's a prudential reason to not nail yourself to a very specific word for these sorts of things, unless you're in an academic discipline where you need a tight conceptualization.

My own view is it's more like a riot that got out of control and is deeply disturbing, than that it is a proper coup that was planned and executed. But people disagree on that.

Larry Bernstein:

We've had a number of very close elections that reflect a divided electorate. Is that an example of success? And how do you view close electoral results in the context of fears of increasing polarization?

Julian Waller:

Polarization is the norm of most of American history. We have this golden sense of how things used to be very pleasant, and it used to be just basic policy distinctions. That's kind of a figment of the postwar consensus. We had these 30 glorious years, which Western Europe also experienced.

And people assume that's the American baseline and that's not true at all. Our political history has always been contentious. There's usually been some political violence actually. And we also forget even our recent past. It's not just the Republican party that has said that election were illegitimate. If you look at the early two thousands: "George W. Bush isn't real president" and trying to find procedural ways through dirty tricks to get around it. That was very much so part of the dissident left at the time.

Larry Bernstein:

Anti-elitism and anti-experts are fundamental to the new populism. And there is a frustration with the media, how does these views relate to fears of authoritarianism?

Julian Waller:

So the trouble with populism is that it describes normal politics too frequently to be a useful concept that determines whether or not you have democratic decay. For as long as we've been alive, one of the best things to run on is how the beltway is terrible, and we need to get back to the average American. And that is true for both parties. I certainly wouldn't make a causal claim between the rise of this viewpoint, which is the norm, and some sort of sudden democratic threat.

You can have a tighter understanding and a better sense of populism. It's not just the capital is bad and the establishment or the status quo is bad, but it is that uniquely the elites, which are a singular and coherent whole, are bad. They're trying to destroy you. And that only by overthrowing them and the places they sit in, the institutions that they run, will you be able to have greater outcomes. It's a higher bar than just saying DC is a swamp. Everyone knows DC's a swamp. But that doesn't mean there's a cabal of elites that are running the show and that they are unitary. They're also non-national. They're not part of the people; they're somehow different.

It's a different kind of politics. Insofar as the anti-institutionalism is followed through by a populist who's been elected, then there's going to be a degree of chaos. It doesn't mean that there's going to be an authoritarian regime that follows afterwards, but it does absolutely mean that there's going to be discord, because this upsets the system in major ways. But what we found very interestingly was that Donald Trump did not govern really as a populist.

Larry Bernstein:

How would you compare 2020 with 1968 when we had political violence especially surrounding the Democratic Convention?

Julian Waller:

People deeply underestimate the degree to which political violence was pervasive in the 1960s and 1970s, even into the eighties. Just easy examples are major assassinations of political figures. John F. Kennedy, Robert Kennedy MLK. In terms of major riots, the riots at the democratic convention, all the sort of domestic terrorist groups and pipe bombings. Things like the Black Panthers, variety of right and left wing extremist groups or radical groups -- however you want to phrase them -- committing acts of violence. Again, the reason why January 6th is such a big deal, is that it's this really clear evocative sense of political violence that you've gone beyond words to action.

We haven't had assassinations and God help us, we haven't had this degree of political discord that we had in the sixties and the seventies, where people were willing to put their actions behind their words. It ushered in a new era, in which you have very non-violent political ecosystem, Reagan onwards, that has probably gone through its lifespan.

And now we're in a different era. I would be very concerned about further political violence in the coming decade or so.

Larry Bernstein:

How do you think about Howard Zinn's interpretation of the democratic process, where he viewed political parties as a charade and that the two major parties were too similar and didn't offer real choice?

Julian Waller:

First of all, there is a very, very strange, naive view of what democracy is for a lot of people. There's this view that all my rights are democracy. All my policies are democracy. All your policies are dictatorship. There's a conflation between a given view of the world and democracy when democracy is not that. Democracy is a system of government in which the apex political offices are chosen through a competitive struggle for the people's vote by way of multi-party elections, in which outcomes are uncertain and suffrage is broad. Democratic system is a way of choosing leaders and choosing their successors. It has a benefit of kicking out elites when you stop liking them and putting in a different group of elites. It has a benefit of a very good track record of not having things like coups. It has a decent track record of creating its own legitimacy, that tangible sense the political system is at least semi responsible to me and that I matter in this political system. It's not the end all be all. It is a specific system of government. And the United States is the oldest and greatest democratic experiment the world has ever seen. And it's still an experiment. And for most countries, democracy is less than a hundred years old for many countries. It's less than 50, or less than 30, in many countries.

In order to buy into democracy, you have to accept that sometimes your political enemies are going to run your country. If you can't get that into your head, you have a huge problem because that means you can never relinquish power. If you genuinely believe that the other side cannot take power, then only you can. And you've just convinced yourself into a dominant party authoritarian regime, because you're just going to prevent the other side from happening.

Larry Bernstein:

Let's talk about norm changes in the political process. Recently, the Senate has been questioned as an institution on whether or not it's fair that each state has two votes when populations differ so much. Also, the desire to pack the supreme court. The filibuster has been challenged with opposition to bipartisan compromises to pass legislation. There's been threats of adding new states to pack the senate. Do these attacks on democratic norms have anything to do with the argument that we are backsliding?

Julian Waller:

The court is deemed to be really off kilter by one party. And the other side also has deemed the court to be off kilter in a variety of ways. This is going to provide a political opportunity to open up new ideas. It's an Overton window kind of argument. The court's not going anywhere in the short term. It's going to be meaningful to people's lives. It's going to be a part of the political system. And there are going to be hard, genuine political questions over its future. And that's going to be measured in decades. It's not going to be measured next year. Institutional changes are always iterative processes.

It's a similar situation with the Senate. The Senate has a very strong basis for existing, because of the federal structure. In fact, all federal systems have upper chambers that represent states, not people. And most large countries like the United States are federal systems. So, people talk about abolishing the Senate and that's never made any sense to me. It's a huge country and states are very meaningful. They are real political entities. We were reminded in the pandemic

that states mattered. Crossing a state line mattered a ton for whether you were locked down or not, whether you were forced to vaccinate depending on your occupation.

Adding states -- hey, we've always done that. We've always gerrymandered the Senate. 19th century American history is adding states for political purposes, usually to prevent the spread of slavery and packing whatever party was running the country at the time. So adding states for political reasons is a valued American tradition.

There's an increasing realization in the American public that you cannot assume that anti-politics or technocratic solutions are going to save you. Politics is the only way through. Politics is the democratic process; that's representative government. It can be very hardball. You should be careful about one side stacking the deck too much. You should be very aware of that and you should be fighting against it, whatever side you're on. But at the end of the day, Americans are realizing that, only through politics, are they going to get what they want because the dreams from the 1950s onwards of managerialism -- of just solving all policy problems through scientific method, through properly educated elites -- it just doesn't work.

Larry Bernstein:

In the Supreme Court case *West Virginia vs. the EPA* that came out this term, the court decided that the bureaucracy could not make laws, that this power resides solely with Congress. Is this a victory for more politics?

Julian Waller:

It's absolutely a victory for politics. At the end of the day, the administrative state is very big. You can't run a complex, modern political system without it. So there has to be a degree of presidential discretion. But we have to remember that Congress is the locus of political sovereignty. It is the representation of the people in all their diverse forms. And so the degree to which the court has pushback against executive aggrandizement, further taking of major policy decisions away from the bureaucracy, brought it back to Congress -- I think that's a good thing.

It is missing something, what we would call we call post legislative scrutiny, the idea that after legislature, parliament passes a law, a parliamentary committee is then obligated to check in five years down the line and maybe even reaffirm. So this is a question of creating institutional incentives for oversight. And the US Congress is extremely good at theatrical oversight. Congressional hearings are not about learning things. They're about playing to the population. That's extremely important to be able to showboat and showcase to your constituents, what you're doing, who the people to trust, who the people not to trust, that you're active.

This is a genuine form of oversight. Oversight is grandstanding. Oversight is sticking the finger in the eye. That's what real oversight is because oversight translates into the political process, by which the population then elects new people.

So to get back to the point, it would be extremely useful if Congress started writing in more of the legislation that it passes that certain committees must review. It's going to cause difficulty in long-term planning. It's going to increase the workload of Congress, but at the end of the day, that's our political system.

Larry Bernstein:

We have a major tax and spend reconciliation bill coming in front of the Senate this weekend. And the expectation is that all 50 members of the Democratic Party will vote for this bill. And all 50 members of the Republican Party will vote against this bill. Is political party coherence and agreement a sign of success or failure?

Julian Waller:

This bill that's coming across the Senate floor right now that should pass is exactly this sort of compromise that a legislative institution is designed to do. It's not a bureaucracy, right? Where your outcome is little widgets that you produce in terms of policies and regulations and texts, and there is coordination and consensus within the bureaucratic institution whose membership is chosen by an opaque process that has nothing to do with popular inputs, right? Whose leadership is chosen by the singular executive? No, it's a legislature, and you compromise on things. And you push together a package that will work given the senators there who have this plan.