Marshall here. Welcome back to The Re-alignment.

Today's guest is Ben Ansel, professor of imperative democratic institutions at New Field College, University of Oxford. He's the author of a recently released book, Why Politics Fails. I was really interested in speaking with Ben because his academic work and this book, obviously, is focused on the implicit meta-theme of The Re-alignment podcast. Why? Considering the rising stakes and potential new coalitions, doesn't the American Protocol System successfully address, resolve, or form new consensus on any of the big issues we regularly discuss on this show? Ben's work and this overall conversation is a great starting point and it'd be helpful and somewhat anti-pessimistic to apply this framework to every specific issue you care the most about. That said, huge thank you to the Foundation for American Innovation, for supporting the work of this podcast. Hope you all enjoy this conversation. Ben Ansel, welcome to The Re-alignment. Thank you so much for having me here.

Your book raises an obvious question. When did politics succeed? You could pick any time, place, country. Obviously, you are in the UK. You've also spent time in the United States. When would you say as a period people could look back on politics as a process succeeding? It's a great question and it's a good cold open as well, I'm not sure, to have me think about the positive moments. I'm going to answer that in a positive way, but I'm going to do so in a slightly tragic way because I think the big moments when major reforms have occurred to the apparatus of government and of public services have been in bad times, have been either in the United States during the Great Depression. I think your listeners will have different views about the merits of the new deal and the merits of all the policies created in them, but some of them have been incredibly long-lived in social security being the most obvious example of a policy that remains incredibly popular and is now almost 100 years old. In the United Kingdom, the moment that people always look back on is the transition in 1945 at the end of the Second World War and the creation of the United Kingdom's version of social security. Some of the repensions increased at that time, but the big kahuna there was the National Health Service, which was created at the end of the Second World War as well. We have had these moments of success, but the bad news is to get to those moments of success, something really bad has had to happen that's made it more possible for pre-existing polarization to dissolve and for there to be a sense of urgency about getting something done.

That's fascinating because you're getting at the core of the ideological dilemma there because obviously the two programs or periods you're referring to are periods where you had the expansion of government, whether it's the NHS or the New Deal program. If you're a conservative listener, you would say, wait, your definition of politics and success really is a definition that's focused more on the reform aspect of politics. Wouldn't successful politics be something like the 1990s? Maybe nothing big gets done, but the economy is growing. We're having stable transitions of power. I'm curious, what do you think about just a more stable vision of politics working and maybe things are put to the side and resolved through culture or just basic social economic interactions as opposed to government expanding? That's a really interesting point. To get big changes to the architecture of government, which in the middle of the 20th century were about state expansion, of course, they weren't in the late 1970s, mid-80s, 1990s. There's big transformations of government have tended to be when bad things have happened. It's an interesting

hypothesis. I haven't thought a great deal about whether the great moments from neoliberalism can only happen under peace. You could argue that much of the 19th century is developing a free market architecture during 100 years of broadly interstate peace. Of course, there are lots of non-peaceful things back in the 19th century, imperialism, the Civil War and so on. I think there's a fair point to be made. If you were a listener in the center right, big successful moments of politics look like things like the Reagan tax reform. They look like doing something where you simplify what the government does, where you broaden the tax base and you cut out a lot of

exceptions. That, I think, was made easier for Reagan by the fact that there was clearly a kind of ideological shift against what the post-war consensus looked like, but it still wasn't an easy policy for him to put through because you know who loves complicated tax codes, businesses and special interests, right? We know it's extremely difficult to get those passed.

So you might be right to say that politics is going to succeed in different ways, of course, depending on what your priors are about what you want from politics. But the success, I think, generally comes from figuring out ways of dealing with a lot of special interests at once and overriding whatever their previous concerns have been. I can give you a good example right now about

what's happening in Brazil. So in Brazil, there's a very, very complicated tax code with lots of different regional taxes at the state level and then at the federal level. The way they've been used by Brazilian businesses is largely to minimize their tax exposure by coming up with complicated tax transfer systems where you minimize your exposure by moving money from the regional to the federal level. So that is actually being simplified under the current government. And it's not because Lula won the election, because Lula has almost no dominance in the Brazilian legislature. It's because eventually there was a coalition large enough to kill the special interests. And so I think, you know, those who are from a more neoliberal change perspective are the big ones and they can happen in places with as complicated politics as Brazil. Yeah, and this is just interesting because I wanted to offer that caution just because of frustration I tend to have with the broad democracy discourse is oftentimes it's easy to define democratic success or political success as your specific policy prerogatives being able to pass or not. And I don't think that's what we're talking about, but if you just kind of listen between the lines, I do a lot of these interviews that seems to be kind of like the implicit point being made. So I want to offer that caution, but I think a useful way of understanding what politics is. And once again, this actually goes to your book is maybe and push back if this isn't correct, but my takeaway from your book is I would define political failure as the inability to translate popular will into some form of action. So if it's the 1980s and we are entering the neoliberal era and there's a clear backlash against the New Deal and the Great Society, politics succeeded. Whether or not you agree with the policy apparatus of the Reagan administration because it translated the will, which was translated by the majority's Reagan one in two presidential campaigns into tax cuts, due regulation, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera. And in the New Deal, that popular world looked like, hey, we're going to actually impose more of a state on laissez-faire capitalism. So is that a useful way of understanding what successful politics could look like then? Yeah, I think it's fair to say that in a democracy, in a political system where we think self-rule is important, we cannot assume that self-rule naturally has to benefit one side of the ideological spectrum. And I think

many commentators and many of my colleagues, it's very easy to mistake your views about what politics should look like and who you would vote for for a successful democratic system.

And so I think we have to be really careful about that. That's been one of the great debates we've had in this country, the United Kingdom, about the merits of the Brexit vote.

Regardless of one's views about whether this was a good idea or not, a 52 to 48 percent majority vote is a 52 to 48 percent majority vote. And presumably that reflected a shift in the general public's attitudes about the European Union from the referendum that brought Britain in in the first place. If we can't tolerate a country that changes its mind from left to right and back again, then we're simply not tolerating what it means to self-govern, because the assumption then is there's a dictatorship of whoever you prefer. So I think your rejoinder is really worth making.

I do think, and I argue very strongly in the book, that that doesn't mean that there's a simple thing that we should call the will of the people, because that's such a complex thing to define. It even means complete consensus, in which case we never get anything done. Or it means some

form of majoritarianism. And then we have the problems of losers consent and what you do about people who are in the minority from election to election, that might be fine. But if you're always in the minority, right, if you if your side never wins, then that's a challenge for democracies to figure out how to deal with. And simply claiming that majority rule is the will of the people.

And therefore everybody needs to shut up doesn't assuage the people who always lose, right? And so that's a challenge for any democracy to deal with. So let's just get to definitions then.

Can you just define what politics is? Sure. It's obvious, but it's also a complicated question.

It is a very difficult question. So what do we mean by politics? We mean

how we make decisions about what we're going to do collectively. And that's a really broad definition. Let me distinguish that from the law. Because in a way, when we write laws, and when we interpret and follow laws, we're also doing something along those lines. But when we interpret and follow laws, we're doing so with a third party that stands behind the law and can enforce it, right, that can punish us if we don't follow the law and then sets the procedures by which we have to follow if we want to change or interpret that law differently. Fundamentally, there's no third party that stands behind politics. Unless one wants to get kind of divine right about this, there's no third party that we can call on to enforce truly political decisions.

And there's an example I've been using since I wrote the book, which is the deal that we as voters have with politicians. So I'll give an example from the United Kingdom. In the 2019 general election that Boris Johnson won, he was opposed by the Labour politician Jeremy Corbyn, who was a socialist. And one of Corbyn's policies was to introduce free broadband for everybody in the country. Okay, so that's in the manifesto, that's something you could vote for. So imagine Jeremy Corbyn had one and we're in the world of this counterfactual. And a year later, you're like, where's my broadband? Where's my free broadband? It didn't happen. What can you do about it? You

can wait till the next election to punish the party for not giving it to you. But there's no one you can call on in the same way that if you asked ATT for broadband or Comcast for broadband, and then they didn't deliver, well, you could sue them. And political life is about essentially these very contingent promises that politicians make to voters, that politicians make to one another, that countries make to one another, that can't truly be enforced. I'll give you one final example on this. We talk a lot about the challenge that Ukraine has had not being a member

of NATO. It's always always been on this kind of NATO glide path, or a kind of friend of NATO. But being a friend of NATO did not compel in any way NATO members to intervene and prevent the Russian invasion. It didn't compel them to attack Russia. And you might say, bad news for Ukraine, but good news for Estonia, because Estonia is a NATO member, so we are all obliged to protect Estonia if it's invaded by Russia. But here's the problem with that. If that had happened under the Trump administration, and Trump, no great friend of NATO, had seen a Russian invasion of Estonia and

said, hey, too bad, what could Estonia have done? Again, there was no one they could call on, right? There was no third party that they could call on to arrest Donald Trump for not following NATO rules of collective security. And that makes political life really difficult. It means that even a treaty as seemingly strong as NATO ultimately can only be enforced if we want to enforce it, not by some actor that stands behind it. To me, that's a truly political problem in nature.

And can you talk a little bit about the, because I'm interested in your point around the difference between law, like the legal code, and then politics. Talk about that side of the ledger, because I do think when I'm just thinking of conversations I've had with listeners or of people who have frustration with politics, there's a real lack of, the differences between these two categories are difficult and often frustrating. So focus on the legal side of things.

Sure. I mean, I'm not an expert on law and politics, so I'll just borrow what my friends in political science would say about it, which is that what lawyers believe they're doing, and what politicians believe they're doing, are I think different domains, right? So what lawyers argue they're doing, and perhaps truly believe they're doing, is John Roberts like, or at least this is what Robert said, right? I'm going to call them as I see them. I'm behaving as an empire. There is a rigid code of symbols and rules that are out there that I am simply interpreting and applying to this particular case. And I'm doing so knowing that I have the 800-pound gorilla of the United States government standing behind me to enforce, as for example with school desegregation,

to enforce those rules if people don't want them enforced. So that's the kind of idealized take on the law. I think people's cynicism about the law is natural, because firstly, it's not obvious that judges are truly neutral umpires, even if they believe themselves to be so, right? We all come to this world with a set of values that drive how we interpret information. We can claim to be originalists, but now we've discovered that KBJ has her own form of textual originalism that's very different from Samolitos. So even then, it's not super clear how one would do that. But more importantly, judges are appointed by politicians and politicians seek to court curb

all the time, right? So we began by talking about the New Deal, but the New Deal was a moment of great democratic challenge for the United States in that the Supreme Court tried to overall various parts of the New Deal and then FDR himself tried to overall the Supreme Court and to potentially pack it, right? And we had ultimately a deal that saved the Supreme Court, but that suggests the legal systems themselves are embedded in this core political problem, that they don't have any backup that they can call on, right? There's no sort of judge of the judges or judge of the political system that can enforce the way in which courts and politicians interact and to give you a really up-to-date example of that, look at what's going on in Israel currently with the attempts by the Netanyahu government to restrict judicial review, which the courts oppose, which members of Mossad

and the IDF oppose, but nonetheless, there's no third party on who they can call to enforce

the Netanyahu behaves, you know, you know, makes judicial legislation in some kind of legal way. It's not possible. It's ultimately political. So a couple of follow-up questions then. So number one, if you're someone who's looking at that Jeremy Corbyn alternate universe where he promises universal broadband in the UK, but he doesn't deliver it, do you or does the political science field have a grand unified theory of what separate from intent makes politicians actually do something

that they promised? Because I think the key pushback to, let's say, a jilted labor party voter who's mad at Jeremy Corbyn for not passing universal broadband in the scenarios of a look like public policy is actually super complicated. And that's like a very, very, very big ask. So you have to separate the fact that he probably, and I assume like knowing Jeremy Corbyn politics, he actually meant that he was going to do universal broadband, you have to separate the difficulty from intent. So what actually, especially in those difficult situations, forces something into actual implementation or action?

Yeah, I worked in government in the heights of the new labor era. I worked in for the Treasury, the Britain's Finance Ministry, for two years, 2004 to 2006. And so I now know, as I hope most local scientists should know, how very, very difficult it is to make policies and to make policies effective. So one reason why you promise that you tell the general public doesn't happen is because it's simply not possible. The money runs out in some fashion or you made a mistake and you acknowledge that. You would hope that the public are forgiving enough to acknowledge that this can happen. But I also think that it's important for politicians to be constrained by reality and not to make promises that they can't keep. And so I think the political science answer to all of these questions is, don't trust the words that come out of democratic politicians' mouths. They might happen, they might not. Trust not what people say, but your ability to punish him for it not happening. In other words, trust accountability rather than assume intent or representation is the way that you get to policies. And so for quite sort of bare-bones, formal Democrats like me, I mean, I'm not somebody who thinks countries are not democracies unless

they've accomplished a whole set of wonders in terms of political equality and social equality. I think a democracy is a democracy when you can kick the bums out. When the process by which you kick the bums out is free and fair, but ultimately what matters is your ability to do so and to do so time and time again when they don't satisfy you. And that puts me, I guess, on the kind of we're all fallen angels in the world, right? I don't expect politicians to be able to do what they say. They do at least want the ability to express my discontent of them. And so to that extent, I think a lot of the very heated arguments that political scientists made between 2016 and 2020 that the political systems of the United Kingdom and United States had somehow become undemocratic, I think are fundamentally wrong. And I argued so over social media at the time. And indeed, we have seen rotation of leaders over that point in time, right? Donald Trump is no longer president. It's a really tough question to know what would have happened had Trump successfully

overridden the votes in Arizona and Georgia and Wisconsin, right? If Mike Pence hadn't stood up for the procedure, but he did. And so we're in a world where we did have that turnover. And that's how our democracies function best, in my view.

You know, it's interesting, as you were giving that answer, I realized that part of the answer to the dilemma of how do you get politicians to translate their programs to implementation is

the referendum system, which is where the Brexit conversation started. The purpose of a referendum

is, you know, we obviously delegate authority, responsibility to implement and create policy to politicians. And I don't know the history of referendums in the UK, but if you're looking at the progressive movements in the early 20th century of the United States, particularly out west, like I grew up in Oregon, so like Oregon has the system, California has the system, Wisconsin has the system, you had the referendum to force politicians to do that.

At the same time, though, you know, so I'm obviously sympathetic to the referendum system. I'm reading a lot about the pre-war era, you know, 1936, 37, 41 U.S., UK. And, you know, one of the ideas that isolationists on the American left and right had was that, you know, hey, like we should make intervention in foreign conflict, something that's up to a referendum, which by definition is a horrible, horrible, horrible, horrible idea on a couple of different levels. So we could be sympathetic to referendums, but also notice the weaknesses. Like, what do you

think about referendums as a solution to the dilemmas we're discussing today?

I mean, I think you sit down and one quick thing. And the defense of the referendum is if I'm a, you know, UKIP or Tory, you know, voter in 2014-2015, I would not trust David Cameron's Conservative Party to actually pass Brexit if he promised it in a pamphlet. So that's where I understand the need to have a referendum to implement that 52-48 point of view.

Yeah. Yeah. I mean, I think we learned a lot about people's willingness, so-called Democrats' willingness to go through with a Democratic referendum in the United Kingdom

in 2016. You know, I was somebody who supported the remain site. Obviously, I therefore didn't want the outcome that happened. But I think it became clear to me and others over this period of time that coming up with incredibly convoluted ways to justify why you could ignore a referendum was

ultimately anti-democratic. Now, you can then get into these questions about, well, should you have multiple referendums for the same issue? If it's a complicated one, should you have a supermajority? And, you know, those are viable arguments to have. But ultimately, if you didn't have them before the referendum, it's closing the gate after the horse has bolted and coming up, you know, it's like the old kind of best of three, best of five, best of sadly, way of trying to win a game.

So I think, you know, you have to go through with the system that you encouraged. When people say things like, well, a majority of the registered voting public did not vote for this. But, you know, we don't normally count the people who didn't vote in elections. So I think we have to be careful. That's a choice in and of itself in a weird way. And unfortunate. I think it's unfortunate, but it's a choice in and of itself. It's a choice in and of itself. And of course, it works really poorly for the example of Brexit, which had much higher turnout than most general elections had anyway. So you'd have to sort of throw out every other election on the same principle.

I think referendums are clearly democratic in a majoritarian sense. I think when you get 60, 40 results, which is quite often with, you know, the ballot initiatives, popular ballot initiatives that occur in places like California and Oregon and Minnesota and Wisconsin and so on, then I don't think that's particularly complicated for us to deal with. I think the challenge is emerging to close cases. One is when you have very, very narrow victories, in which case you have the problem of dealing with the losers. You have losers consent becomes

a problem in two ways. Firstly, the losers have to accept the result. And that clearly took a while with Brexit for those who voted for Remain to accept this had happened. But also the winners need to, they're going to be living in the same country as a very similarly sized group of losers thereafter. So they're going to have to figure out how to implement this policy that doesn't produce polarization that will be bad for both sides indefinitely. That said, nothing compels them to do that, right? This is just sort of political advice, not the reality of the fact that they can often ignore that. So we have a losers' consent problem when we have really narrow elections. A good example that we often forget about is how close Quebec was to leaving Canada in the 1990s. That was much tighter than leave's victory in the Brexit referendum. Quebec remains part of Canada, but it was such a, you know, kind of 1% margin that it does store up a lot of trouble indefinitely afterwards. It doesn't mean that the problem is over. So firstly, the narrowness. Secondly, referendums I think are less useful when the problems are really large. And that's unfortunate because it would be nice to solve all of our big problems with simple decisions. But the example you give about having a referendum about intervening
in foreign wars is a great example there, right? An incredibly complex question which can't normally be boiled down to either you always intervene or you never intervene. In other words, it's not really a binary. Resolving it in a binary fashion just punts the problem. Let's say you decide you are still going to intervene of how to intervene or punts the problem if you say you're never going to intervene of, well, you know, what if there are massive demands on you? Are there ways of, you know, providing lend-lease money and things like that, right? So it's normally never 0-1. And that's exactly what we ultimately found with Brexit, which is there's lots of ways of not being in the European Union. You could be like Norway and be very, very similar to being in the European Union, having free movement of goods and money and people, albeit having slightly different tariffs. Or you could be like Turkey and have the same tariffs, but none of the other stuff. Or you could be like Russia and be not part of the European Union at all. Or you could be like Israel and New Zealand, but a part of the European Union's research program, which hilariously Britain is not, right? So lots of different ways of leaving. And the problem we got to in the UK was we made the decision to leave. Yes, but how? And then that wasn't decided. And ultimately, there were another set of differences there that made it very, very hard for Theresa May, the Prime Minister at the time, never to come up to any decision. And ultimately that only got resolved by having another kind of referendum-like act with the general election at the end of the year with Boris Johnson coming in a kind of steamrollering through his preferred version. Yeah, I really like your rubric for understanding a successful, we're not even just successful, just sort of a framework for when a referendum makes sense. So for example, given what you're saying, a vote in let's say the 1990s to decide whether or not to join the EU, a referendum in that case would have been simpler at the straightforward because the question is, do we join or not? And then obviously, there's going to be, are we the Norwegian model? Are we always different dynamics? That's very clear there too. And then it also goes back to the problems with the World War II example, because once again, does Lend-Lease constitute intervention?
Does war preparedness increasing? Like, does that constitute usage of it in itself? Like, where can you deploy the Pacific Fleet if you're going to argue that's going to provoke Japan, etc. etc. etc. That's a poor example, because the referendum itself doesn't actually address

the questions that matter in the first place. Exactly. You get into a Tolstoy's unhappy families problem, right? Like, there's one happy family, the EU, it has the same Aki that everybody has to have. There's lots of unhappy families, lots of ways not being in the EU. But prohibition was, prohibition was in part decided by referenda at the state level, right? But even that turned out to be more complex than people thought, right? It wasn't clear at the beginning about what exactly was the level at which an intoxicating liquor was intoxicating. And I think initially, in the debates, people thought that weak beer would still be allowed, and it wasn't in the end, but the way that the law was written. And then repeal was also complicated, because it turned out not simply to turn everything back to pre-1919, but actually to create this whole complicated array of different alcohol laws you have across the US states, right? So even in a case of something like prohibition, it seems like a 0-1. It turned out not to be. You know, it's interesting. Your articulation of the kind of, do you do a do-over if you're, you know, doing a Brexit referendum, and eventually the problem of just if you ask me too many do-overs, you can't have a poll. And once again, like, I'm, over time, I'm going to, you know, take a few listeners off. I've been less and less favorable towards the Brexit side. I don't know how I probably, if I'm honest, I probably would have voted remain if I were a UK citizen, but I think the post-Brexit UK is not in the particularly favorable position. People who supported it would have favored, but that said, I think it would have been, I think, politically not great to be eloquent, to kind of just do-over referendums until you get the right answer. That wouldn't have been democratically legitimate. But you're raising that point brings to mind a bit of squeamishness I have with democratic reformers. So when we just try to put the question as clearly as possible or comment, then question. I've spoken with a lot of folks who favor, hey, like, what's abolished first past the post-voting, or let's have what's have a system like Alaska where, you know, you do, you know, man, I'm forgetting all these different terms. This is really embarrassing because I've done these episodes, but you do the system or like-
Yeah, because single transferable vote and things like that.
Yeah, single transferable vote, all those different systems. I get squeamish about them because you can make all sorts of arguments in favor of them, but they very clearly are intended to produce a result. The intended result of most of these reforms. And once again, I'm moderate in my politics. So obviously, I'm policy sympathetic to this is, hey, like, let's produce a more moderate result. Let's have open primaries. You don't have, like, extremists take control of political parties. You got the campaign accordingly, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera. I'm squeamish, though, because very explicitly or implicitly, if you're being a little less honest, the result is we want to have specific policy results emerge in these democratic reforms. What is your thought on that dynamic or that dilemma?
Well, you're absolutely right, right? Every electoral system biases particular outcomes. And I begin the book, you know, we've talked quite a bit about Brexit. I don't want to bore your listeners to death on Brexit. But I start with this narrative where a colleague and I, he's an expert on electoral systems at least, I was along for the ride. We went and we advised a couple of the politicians who'd taken control during the Brexit process of what's called the order paper, which is basically the right to pull votes away from the government. This was in the most chaotic period where the speaker of the House of Commons had essentially seized control. And we went to them and we talked about different electoral systems that the members of

parliament

themselves could use. So this isn't just voters. This is members of parliament to make a decision about Brexit. And what we realized as we did that is that different systems that we offered differently favored moderate versus extreme options, right? So to give you kind of obvious examples of this, the form of the election, sorry, the electoral system of what we call alternative vote is one where you remove first, you ask everybody to rank options, and then you remove first the option that the fewest people love. But if you're in a world of extremes where people even want to leave or remain, that means that the boring middling ones get taken out first. So maybe you don't want that because you're worried you end up with extremes. But then the alternate alternative vote, the Coombs system, that takes out the most hated, the one that has the most bottom rankings first. But then the ones are the most hated are probably the extreme ones, right? So now the extremists are like, wait a second, I don't want to do that. And even worse, people can then knowing this, they can lie about their preferences. So if you're an extremist, you can start lying and say, I actually prevent, you know, I quite like this other extreme in order to take out the moderate option that you think might win. And I have seen this in departmental meetings over the years. I've seen this at the British Academy when we vote on new members, everybody always tries to manipulate voting systems, because they think that the voting system is going to produce a certain outcome. So when democratic reformers in America talk about, look, everything would be so much simpler, and more representative of people's breadth and portfolio of views, if we allow these kind of ranking systems, they forget that a different ranking systems privilege moderate versus non moderate outcomes. So which ranking system do you want? And secondly, that people lie when they have ranking systems, and they misrepresent how much

they like things. And mathematically, there is no way of resolving this problem. There is no perfect electoral system. So all I would say to colleagues in America who think about democratic reform is say to them, look, the bigger problems seem to me to be ones about malapportionment and misrepresentativeness in terms of partisan gerrymandering, and arguably in terms of the structure of the Senate, although no other house in the world is that great. But funnily enough, if you look at the House of Representatives, which is often a kind of crazy institution in terms of how it's run, it actually mirrors pretty well the overall vote, right? It's pretty representative. It's more proportional than we often end up in the United Kingdom, because there's only two parties playing in the States. So I would say be careful what you wish for with this. And don't imagine that there's some kind of system that even if you think you could get it, and it gave you what you wanted, that people wouldn't somehow undermine.

Yeah, and that's a helpful note. By the way, Roy, the phrase that was mentioned to me is ranked choice voting. That's what I was thinking. And this is where you get into the job of a politician. I would much rather, and once again, hindsight's 2020, and a lot of these activists are responding with democratic reforms in this specific period of time, because they've seen issues raise up. But I think from my perspective, the time to reform America's political system is during the 1990s. If we're saying bold economic reforms and change could happen in response to a crisis, I think that political reforms are probably best implemented in an ideal world when there are not complicated social, cultural questions up for grabs, where the two extremes in themselves are going to want to push back, because very clearly the reforms are going to advantage one side of the other. It's probably best to do progressive, giving everything from

women to the right to vote, to changing the way that senators became senators in the 1910s versus the 1930s. So what's actually getting- I think your point is things are much easier when you have economic growth. Yes. It is much, much easier to make major political decisions where there are going to be some losers, where theoretically the winners could pay off the losers. They don't always, but it's much easier to avoid polarizing outcomes when there's more to go around.

Yeah. Let's actually, speaking of which, let's actually get into the book. What I think is very helpful is you provide a framework across five different issues where I don't want to misquote you, but it's not that there's consensus on where we're trying to go, but we want to live in a society where there's equality. We want solidarity. So just explain these five concepts that folks can take notes and go from there. Yeah. And so this, in a way, is a challenge of the book, because some of your listeners might agree with these big five collective goals, but let's reach them out as broadly as we can. So there are five things I argue that we all want, democracy and the ability to self-govern. Equality, and this is a bit tricky we can come to in a second, but let's view it as all be treated equally in some way. Solidarity, which is the idea that we would all like to be looked after when times are hard and to feel that we looked after others when times were hard for them to some degree. How we do that, of course, we can come to. Security, I think fairly uncontentiously, we'd all like to be safe. And prosperity, we'd all like to have as much as our parents and grandparents had and hopefully more. So those are the sort of five big goals in the book. And then the motif that runs through the book, sort of the simple answer to why politics fails, is that every time we try to get to one of those collective goals, our individual self-interests clash and make it harder for us to achieve that. And that's something that anyone who's taking classes in political science or economics or sociology will know about. We often call the collective action problem. There are ways in which each of our individual interests push against those collective goals and where it's very hard to stop us from either lying about what we want or cheating, reneging, slow walking, slacking off and preventing us from getting what we want. And so throughout each chapter of the book, your readers will find, okay, I get it why my individual interests make it hard to achieve these collective goals. And what I really want readers to take from this is also to understand that that's not immoral in any way. That's just sort of natural human behavior. We are all imperfect. And it's always easier for each of us to see what's in our individual interest and to hold collective goals at the same time, but not be willing to always make the sacrifices that we get. So I want to go through these five in a couple of different ways. So one, I'd love to learn your methodology. We're determining these are the five, which we can broadly say. Actually, this isn't a leading question. I have a secret follow-up where I'm going to say this is incorrect. I'm just genuinely curious. How do you come to the belief that these are the five? Yeah, so that's a great question. In a way, there's an element of the book that is doing for the field of political economy that kind of splits across economics and political science, what some other books have done for behavioral economics. So what I'm trying to do is say, look, these are the big types of questions that social scientists are interested in. I think they broadly fall into these five categories. Another way to think about it is just to look at the kinds of questions where you can get 75, 80% of people to support kind of generic suggestions in polls. So in most public polling, even in the United States, people think the gaps between rich and poor are too large. Now, do I really believe that most Americans will be willing

to undergo the types of taxation that might make a big difference to that? I don't know. But I also think when you can get three quarters of Americans saying that the gaps between rich and poor are too large, that evokes some kind of preference for equality. And I go through this in the opening chapter about most people think that there should be some guarantees to public health and public education, that solidarity. I don't know if I have to make the argument too heavily about wanting to be secure, but certainly around the world, democracy remains incredibly popular. Ironically, it remains more popular with people who live in dictatorships. But I think that's a kind of familiarity breeds contempt problem, I guess. The final thing I would say about this is there's a big one that people ask me about, but not being in here. And in my view, it's in the equality chapter, but that's liberty. That's freedom. And I think that's after all, liberty, equality, fraternity. Well, fraternity is solidarity and equality is equality. So where's the liberty? Well, in part, it's in democracy, right? It's in the right to, at least in a liberal democracy, to say what you want and vote how you want. But also in the equality chapter, it's about equal rights, equal civil rights, equal political rights, sure, but also equal property rights, and equal rights, you know, to pass on your possessions to your children and things like that are another form of equality. That's just the form of equality that libertarians value, as opposed to what socialists value. So I suppose sometimes when it looks like I'm making a plea for equality, I'm being a little bit more cunning than that. I'm actually saying, well, when libertarians talk about equality, they're not talking about equal outcomes. They're talking about being treated equally. But we can be treated equally in lots of different ways that sometimes clash with one another. So I want to understand the individual self-interest aspect. So let me give you an example from democracy and wonder if this is kind of what you're suggesting. So a broad majority of this country believes in democracy, broadly construed. I think there's a case you could make that, for example, the District of Columbia or a territory like Puerto Rico are not experiencing fully fledged democracy in the sense that, you know, they're obviously citizens, but they don't have senators. However, from an individual interest perspective, a clear reality of the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico gaining the vote, due to the demographic makeup of the states, is that the Democratic Party would get four additional senators, which would impact all these other different issues. So there's a tension between the obvious fact, I think if you talk to most people, and let's put aside, you know, people who get a little technical and say, well, the Constitution says the District of Columbia is not a state, just let's put those people aside for a second. We talked to most colloquial people. I have many of those people. Yes. And guess what? That's not it. And I'm not even being dismissive. That's actually not an insane. I think the case of Puerto Rico, especially if they wanted statehood, is much more complicated than the District of Columbia, to be frank. But that said, if you talk to most people, they would say, yeah, I get it. I get why, you know, it makes sense for them to be senators. But if, you know, I'm a conservative, I'd say, okay, interesting. Would you want ex-Supreme Court justice to come about? Because that, and I think very quickly, from a self-interest perspective, from a conservative, would say, yeah, no, there's a limit on how, quote, unquote, democratic I would actually want to be in practice. Is that a way of kind of articulating the dilemma you're talking about? Yeah. Well, look, I am a firm believer that everybody in politics acts on self-interest, and rather, we can judge them for that, right? We can judge people

morally on their views about statehood for D.C. or Puerto Rico. But on a self-interested basis, no one is doing something weird here at least, right? So at least it's explicable. And for me as a political scientist, I'm interested in explaining behavior rather than justifying it. And that doesn't mean that there's not a role out there for making moral claims about politics, but that's just not the role that I'm interested in in this book. I think it's sometimes just helpful to understand why the world is the way it is, right? So what you're saying is absolutely right, right? It's not surprising in any way that debates about statehood for the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico at the same time, in particular, offer nothing for the Republican Party at all. And there's a reason why state introductions have often been paired or near paired in the case of, you know, Alaska and Hawaii was a Republican, Democrat split. In the end, of course, there was no reason to believe, I guess, that it would have to be like that. After all, Hawaii was the home of the United States Pacific Fleet. So you might have thought it would be a Republican state. But throughout the history of creating states in the Union, it's been incredibly political, right? I mean, just think back to the pre-Civil War, every issue about Kansas and Missouri. So none of this is new in a way, right? It has always been a fight. What I think is unfortunate is that there's no obvious territory that would kind of be obviously on the center right that would allow a deal to be struck. And that's what means that we were only in these situations where the Democrats take the trifecta and hope that Supreme Court doesn't get involved somehow, that we can talk about statehood for Puerto Rico and D.C. And I'm sure the next time, well, even now, right, that Republicans have taken the House, that's basically off the agenda again. And I think that's always going to be the case unless you have an increase in statehood that at maximum essentially delutes the power of all the assistant states, but doesn't have a really clear partisan swing. So when should we expect something to happen? Well, either there's some other entity, Guam, or something that you think is going to vote Republican, and so you have a way of cutting a deal, or you expect it to happen under Democratic supermajorities, which it didn't. But I suppose, you know, those are the occasions we would expect it to. Otherwise, we're going to get into this crazy world of slicing up California and slicing the Dakotas in half, rather than up in the South. And good luck with that is all I would have to say. Another one I'd like to get into, and this is where I really just like you to reflect on this dynamic. The equality section is really interesting because there's a couple of different ways one could take it, especially in the light of the recent Supreme Court decision abolishing affirmative action and just kind of reparations debates you're having in the U.S. right now. So on the one hand, one could say if you're like to the center right to the conservative side, well, you know, we're advancing equality. We're judging people solely on them as individuals, we're abolishing racial preferences, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera. If you are on the left, you are saying, well, actually, we're not being equal at all because like the nature of America's historical relationship with racism is that like you need to have these preferences or these sort of programs to like ameliorate deep structural flaws that result in something being unequal. So, you know, without asking you to like take a specific step in every single, you know, American cultural issue, how do you just see and you can go there if you want to go there. But I guess what I'm really asking you is like, how do you see the battle between different ways of interpreting these goals? I mean, they are absolutely core parts of the equality trap as I laid out in the book, which is an equal rights and equal outcomes often undermine each other. I mean, in this particular case, the ending of affirmative action from a

center right perspective looks like more equal treatment by a more equal process or at least
a more impartial process not taking into account any race or ethnic based characteristics.
You know, maybe the Supreme Court will get rid of legacies whose characteristics, I suppose,
if you're a purist in that should be removed of all types, including, you know, who your grandparents
weren't. So, and from the left perspective and center left perspective, it is a, I would argue
it's not so much a failure of the quality of outcomes, although it probably characterizes that,
but they would view it as not a proper view of a quality of opportunity. The view would be that
opportunity is extremely unequally distributed and affirmative action is essentially equalizing
that playing field. Now, I think both of these arguments have merits to them, right? And essentially,
essentially they're irreconcilable with one another, but it's also not possible really for us to
truly adjudicate because they're just different meanings of the word equality. And to give you
an example of that, there is no race based affirmative action in the United Kingdom in our
higher education system. And that's protected in part by our own Equalities Act, which essentially
is our kind of 14th Amendment, if you right, right, like a kind of equal treatment. And so,
under our Equalities Act, we're not allowed to distinguish among applicants for jobs by race,
by gender, or indeed by age. And indeed, the institution I work for, the University of Oxford,
has its own get out clause from that, which means that I'm supposed to retire at age of 70.
It's got an employer justified retirement age in order to break the Equalities Act, right?
So, we have chosen in this country, or our legal system has chosen to look at this in a way that
has been out of this American debate already, again, under the auspices, though, of equality.
And so, everybody means different things. I think the debate about what equity means has
made this even more complex in the States, because equity seems to be a bit of a moving
target in what people mean by it in different conversations. And I think it is a kind of,
it's a battle where everybody's speaking past one another, and I unfortunately don't see a way
really for that to be resolved, because these are just fundamentally different conceptions
of what equality is about. So, I guess the big wrap up question, this is an
unhelpful question to ask a political scientist is, okay, so what's to be done here? This isn't
exactly like that. I think of this more as a framework slash toolkit book, understanding
and diagnosing, but just sort of to kind of push you on it then. Let's say you are in a position
of responsibility, what should one's takeaway be here? Okay, I guess what, so if you're a reader of
the book, there is something I'd like you to get out of it, which is to make peace with the fact
that people disagree on things. I think that's a really important fundamental truth of being human
that our echo chambers in social media often make us, in a way we know that people disagree with
us,
we just hate them for disagreeing. And I think I would like to for us to acknowledge that
disagreement is healthy, perhaps not the type of disagreement that we have, but most importantly,
that there isn't a way around it. And what politics does is it provides us with the
institutions that we use to deal with the fact that we disagree. And so the big kind of,
why does politics fail, psych meta answer at the end of the book is, well, it's going to really
fail if we pretend we can get along without it, and we can squeeze it out either with, you know,
through markets or technology or some kind of Elon s wizardry, or by some kind of strong leader
who
crushes our differences, essentially, that's not going to work, right? We do disagree.
And so I think what effective politics does then thinking about what the implications are of that,

is it finds ways to channel that disagreement, healthily, and over a medium to long run. So I think a problem with United Kingdom is, yes, our electoral system, which is first past the post, and so does tend to leave some people out, by the way, including people who voted for UKIP, right, who were sort of left out of parliament, despite 10% of the population voting for them. But the other problem with it is it's really short termist. And I do think that countries that get into this kind of scorched earth politics that we're having in the UK and the US where Labour or the Democrats come in for four to eight years and are followed by the conservative sort of Republicans, that everything is sort of stripped out, removed to Sunday when we start again, is unhealthy for all of us, right? Most of us make decisions in our lives that last longer than four to eight years, right, when you get a mortgage, when you're thinking about where you'd like to buy a house and live with your children, where they were going to go to school, what your pension is going to look like. And if we tie ourselves and our politicians tie us to essentially the political equivalent of the quarterly earnings report, then we're just going to end up with this kind of, with this volatility that I think has been really unhealthy. I do think when people talk about what the good news about proportional representation is, is that because it's hard to assemble a coalition, you have lots of parties that are often in power. And that might mean it's unaccountable and you think, why are the damn liberals always in power? Or why is the Christian Democrats always in power?

But it does lead to some kind of stability over long run policymaking. And I think that's what we really lack at the moment. And so why we just encourage people not to want to get rid of the few institutions that we do have that are kind of long looking like the Federal Reserve, or even the courts, right, which are supposed to think about longer term decision making and have a horizon that's beyond simply four years either side. Those types of institutions are often anti-democratic, but they think they're important for us to be able to attain the kinds of stability we need for each of us, you and I, to actually make the decisions that are important in our private and personal lives. You know, you actually helped me think of an actual final questionnaire, which is a common, I'm obviously intellectually sympathetic to this complaint, but I also just as a person who just does this for a living, doing experience, this is a problem. A lot of folks complain that politics has infected everything. Everything is political. I'd against on this week who was saying, you know, why does abortion have to become political? Like, why does, you know, why are athletes like kneeling and making like the NFL political and to go to like the left wing version of this critique? Like, why are conservatives turning Bud Light and Dylan Mulvaney and targets decision to offer some LGBTQ products political? But just from my perspective, these are, that's just like an obvious separate from like how one feels with these issues. Obviously, like that's the place. Like if you're an NFL star, you have one of the biggest platforms in a society is increasingly decentralized. Obviously, you're going to utilize that venue to advance your perspective. If you are a conservative who sees yourself not in charge of cultural institutions, you are going to say, Hey, I'm going to make Bud Light political as a means of like actually fermenting political backlash. So that's politics. So it seems to me, once again, like I have a hard time sympathizing with the complaint because it's just, it's just, it's like someone's describing the way the word is sometimes it rains. Sometimes you wake wake up with a slight hangover. So just what is your kind of advice or like response to people who feel, but at the same time, I definitely will recognize things probably were not quite as political.

And let's say a calm, like late 1990s, end of history period. What's your kind of reflection on
this dilemma? So, you know, I think everybody disagrees, right? Like I've already made that
point out. And this is just that sort of pervading other areas. I do think the internet amplifies
our ability to see that disagreement everywhere. But cost, you know, your mind back to the 60s
and 70s, right? Not the 90s for the moment, although I'm sure that there was discontent in
the 1990s. But in the 60s and 70s, you had things like Marlon Brando refusing to take an Oscar,
right? And having a Native American woman go up and receive it on his behalf with John Wayne
scowling in the audience, right? Charlton Heston became the head of the NRA, right? So our
entertainment politics was suffused, sorry, entertainment industry was suffused with politics
throughout most of the late 20th century, right? I mean, think about Hollywood and Blacklist thing
and so on, like Xan, Ronald Reagan. So we've always been like this. I think it is, I think the speed
and velocity of the media that we consume just makes us see ever more of this. And everybody goes
through political cycles, but also cycles of being good guy, bad guy. I mean, look at Lizzo
over the last week, right? Like she's done a kind of 180 and how people feel about her.
Look at Kanye. So the speed with which we're able to see artists who are often some of the most
fundamentally flawed people in society, and that's why we love what they do, but we're able to see
all
the different views they have on everything. I think our access to that makes it seem that people
are more politicized than they were in the past. And I'm just not sure that's true, right? And in
accounting of the 60s and 70s in Hollywood, certainly doesn't look like a kind of peaceful
world in which everybody agreed. We can just see it more and also we don't have a distance of time
with us, right? We're always seeing what's most immediate to us and getting wound up about
Bud Light this week when perhaps people were wound up about Chick-fil-A five years ago
and wound up about an alcohol industry throughout most of the 20th century and so on.
Yeah, that's really well stated. Well, Ben, this has been really great. Could you
shout out the book for folks who want to go to the links I have in the show notes to learn more?
Yeah, absolutely. The book's called Why Politics Fails. If anyone's watching on video and I don't
know if they can, I'm showing it, but it came out with Public Affairs back in May. It's available
at all good, bad, and mediocre bookstores, so please do read it. This was fun. Thanks for
joining me on The Realignment. Thank you, Masha.