

[Transcript] The Ezra Klein Show / This Philosopher Wants Liberals to Take Political Power Seriously

I'm Ezra Klein, this is the Ezra Klein Show.

It's no secret that liberalism has its problems.

It struggles to build as much or as fast as it used to.

Processes meant to be small to be democratic get captured by special interests or paralyzed by polarization.

Democrats have a lot of policy ideas and they even have policy wins, but they struggle with the fact they actually have to govern and so are accountable for a system that frustrates people.

On the other side, MAGA conservatism, which is pretty fully taken over the Republican party at this point, it doesn't have much in the way of consistent policy ideas.

It doesn't take responsibility for the system.

And that is one place, not the only place, but one place it gets its power.

It's able to voice the frustration people have with the government they don't feel like they have a voice in.

The two often seem to work only for elites or for somebody who isn't them.

But there are ideas out there for how liberalism can break out of this stalemate.

Some argue for a liberalism rebuilt around outcomes or on making government able to achieve what it promises.

Others emphasize directly addressing historic injustices, bringing in groups who have been left out as a way of restoring legitimacy.

But Daniel Allen's idea is a bit different.

Allen is an important political theorist and classicist who's tried to turn theory into action.

She actually ran for governor of Massachusetts.

She's used to perch at Harvard to help build these huge and really unusually diverse and interdisciplinary working groups on COVID policy, on tech policy, on democracy.

And now she runs a group, Partners in Democracy, and Allen's vision, which she puts forward in her new book, Justice by Means of Democracy, and yeah, I know I'm saying democracy a lot.

Allen's vision is something called power sharing liberalism.

To her, one mistake liberalism has made has been that it is willing, again and again, to deprioritize political quality in favor of material redistribution.

But she thinks renewal isn't going to come from people just getting more from government.

They're going to have to be more full participants in government.

And that's going to require fundamentally overhauling the system.

And maybe more than that, it's going to require potentially constructing entirely new possibilities within it.

To quote Allen, representation as design cannot work under current conditions.

We have no choice but to undertake a significant project of democracy renovation.

So what would that look like?

As always, my email, Ezra Klein Show at nytimes.com.

Daniel Allen, welcome to the show.

Thanks, Ezra.

Great to be here.

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So you had a fascinating essay not long ago where you outlined three basic strains of thinking about what the Democratic Party with the left should become. You broke it down to movement progressivism, to abundance progressivism, and to your version, which is power sharing liberalism.

So I wanted to begin with the first two, the non-Daniel Allen ideologies.

What are movement and abundance progressives?

And what do you think they get right and what do you think they miss?

So movement progressives have done really extraordinary things energizing young people, building inclusive coalitions, intersectional coalitions, and really calling out the problems in our contemporary economy.

So there's a lot of good there.

Who are they?

So they'll be familiar people.

The squad in Congress, for example, in various ways, I think Black Lives Matter feeds into movement progressives, but certainly AOC is a sort of standard bearer.

And absolutely the sort of Green New Deal perspective has had a lot of the movement progressive energy associated with it.

So then you have abundance progressives, which I'll note that I'm very associated with that set of ideas, but you're responding to it here, I think, to a version proposed by Misha Chellam, who is somebody who is in California and is a political reformer and you're responding to an essay of his in your essay.

So how do you understand abundance progressivism?

So abundance progressivism wants to get stuff done.

So they have been frustrated with what they see as sort of movement progressives tying things up in identity politics, seeking perfection as opposed to pragmatically achieving near term solutions.

In addition, they have a very different model of the economy.

So as you've been writing about sort of a model of the economy based on supply side progressivism, activating production, activating supply, not letting things get tangled up in regulation and so forth, even when those regulations are for good justice purposes.

So in that regard, they are less statist in their orientation than movement progressives.

They're also very technocratic.

They tend to have a real focus on expertise and policy solutions.

They don't, for that reason, sort of tap into the same kind of grassroots coalition building energy as movement progressives have done.

So let me offer two provocations on that as somebody who's been sort of trying to shape some of this, which is one, I often think of abundance or what I like to call supply side progressivism as being in a way more statist as its antagonist or its set of questions being around the ways in which the left is sometimes knowingly, sometimes unknowingly, made it very hard for the state to act or to achieve the goals it sets out for itself.

In many ways, one of the things that I find myself trying on earth is what I think of as the anti-government progressivism that is often lurked in the heart of progressivism without being really admitted into the national narrative.

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And then the other thing that I thought was interesting about what you were saying is I don't often think of it as intention, particularly with movement progressives as you define them, but a lot of the concerns there are about old processes that have been captured, nimbies, old regulations in California.

You have a lot of things built in the progressive era, the sort of early 20th century progressive era that people feel drifted into playing a different purpose.

And so there's an impatience or concern about a lot of process, but because so much of the process is old and the movement progressives are new, I don't really think of those two things as being quite so connected.

I think the place that I've seen people like Misha, for instance, make the case for abundance progressivism, they have absolutely focused on getting things done, effectiveness of government. So I wouldn't say that it's a statist as such.

Status is understood as sort of big state picture and an expectation that you deploy policy from the top down with as much public sector dollars as possible.

They tend to be abundance progressivists, as I see it, tend to be much more interested in private public, sort of mutual facilitation, redesigning mechanisms of governance so that the private sector can operate more effectively and the public sector can operate more effectively. So yes, I mean, there's an orientation towards process and procedure.

And I think, again, just drawing on Misha's criticisms of movement progressives, I think that's a place where he sees insufficient and he and others see insufficient attention to that question of process, what it takes to get things unstuck, to undo capture, as you put it, that's accrued over time.

I do think that point about process and legitimacy is important.

I do think of an important idea here and one that I think you challenge really interestingly as being Nicholas Bagley, who's a law professor who had on the show not long ago, makes this point that he thinks government legitimacy comes from its outcomes, comes from getting done the things that the people want done, not from having a legitimate or overly legitimate process that he thinks liberals have aired by focusing too much on legitimizing through process and have not been concerned enough about the outcomes.

So that does feel to me like one of the moves that abundance progressivism is trying to make, this sort of outcome-oriented focus as opposed to process-oriented focus.

Does that seem about right?

Yeah, no, I think that's fair except the only additional bit is that it's an orientation towards outcomes that includes redesigning process to get to outcomes, but it's not process as such, it's not a view that if you just have an inclusive process, that's okay, nor is it a view that proceduralism is the answer to everything.

So it is absolutely outcomes-oriented for sure.

And so before we get to power sharing liberalism, I want to ask about one other faction that it feels like we should talk about here but doesn't really get mentioned in the essay, which is the Biden administration, for lack of a better term for it, right?

Normie Democrats, maybe Obamaism is the right way to think about this because I think it's really in lineage to him and that administration.

How do you understand what the center of the Democratic Party is, what faction and ideology

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that represents?

Well, I think an interesting thing has been happening with the Biden administration.

I mean, I think they actually really are trying new things in that regard.

They're not really just a kind of continuation of Obama era policies.

They've really put energy and new thinking into a sort of form of industrial policy, for instance.

That's a pretty dramatic change of direction.

They're working really hard to rethink some of the sort of basic infrastructure for labor, or how you think about connecting people between labor, education, opportunity, and the like.

Of course, they're driving really hard on the energy transition, but thinking of that in sort of really systematic ways.

I think in that regard, they share some of the aspects of abundance progressivism, certainly seeking an abundance of renewable energy, for instance.

They I think are not at a place yet where they have a real read on how to be effective across jurisdictional levels.

I see some new things coming into existence in what they're doing, but really constrained by, constricted by the clunkiness and antiquarian facts of our existing institutional arrangements.

Tell me about what you call power sharing liberalism.

Power sharing liberalism is an effort to turn the dial on a long history of liberalisms that the Western world and this country in particular have seen.

Take liberalism in the first instance as committed to the protection of rights.

That's what makes it sort of liberalism, so protecting freedom of expression and freedom of association, but also freedom to participate, to vote, to run for office, to be one of the people that is co-creating the public norms and constraints that shape all of our lives.

Liberalism is that sort of protection of rights, and power sharing liberalism recognizes that all of the versions of liberalism we've had in 18th century, 19th century, 20th century have always had a fatal flaw in their heart.

That fatal flaw was to reserve power to the few.

In classical liberalism, late 18th, early 19th century, political power is reserved to people who hold property, more or less white men for the most part as property holders.

Then even in the 20th century, as we begin to move towards some kind of universal inclusion, we get the right to vote for women.

Finally, in the middle of the 20th century, we get voting protection for African Americans.

We nonetheless see a political system that is still reserving power, concentrating power in particular in elites of various forms, moneyed elites, technocratic elites, and the like.

Power sharing liberalism is really the goal to build in the 21st century a version of a rights-protecting constitutional democracy where power is genuinely shared throughout organizational structures, throughout political institutions.

There's a question in this about what power flows from.

One of the moves I understand you to be making, you should tell me if this is an incorrect understanding, is that most, I think, familiar forms of liberalism have understood power fairly materially, or at least have emphasized materialist forms of power, which is to say

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that they're interested in redistribution.

They're interested in, do people have enough money, both for sufficiency, but ultimately they're worried about power imbalances from money to the extent they think about power much at all, and that you think that there has been a, not a wrong emphasis, but an over-emphasis on the material dimension of politics, such that you have a liberalism that is fine so long as there's enough redistribution, but isn't attentive to the degree to which people actually participate in the democracy, and would be comfortable with a world where there was a lot of sufficiency, but actually not a deep form of democracy, and so that power has sort of been misdefined.

Does that track, am I reading you correctly?

Yep.

No, you've read me very well.

So material matters matter for sure.

Folks need to be capacitated for political participation.

So there needs to be a certain kind of material baseline, but it is absolutely the case that I take material questions, economic questions as being for something else, that is they are supports for the opportunity of people to live flourishing lives.

And to live a flourishing life is to be empowered in your personal life, but also again, in that co-participation, co-ownership of our public spaces and public life.

Now this is not to say that everybody has to participate, but that possibility, that real possibility for meaningful participation in public autonomy as well as personal autonomy is, I believe, necessary for human flourishing.

And yes, I think that our approach to focus on GDP as the measure for all well-being and then we take GDP and we redistribute it as needed when the economy itself is not spitting out egalitarian results, actually misses a core element of human well-being.

Focusing that way has permitted us to degrade worker power, worker empowerment.

In that context, it means that in all kinds of ways, we have blocked ordinary citizens out of steering the choices of the polity.

So I am reactivating, reanimating democratic purpose broadly and trying to embed that democratic purpose even in our political economy.

Tell me a bit about the lineage of thinkers you feel yourself to be drawing on here.

What tradition are you unearthing?

So that's a great question and kind of a beautiful one.

And another person you should have on is something named Melvin Rogers, who is brown and has a great book coming out, but it's a beautiful book about the history of African American political thought in the 19th century.

And what this book does is sort of unearth a treasure trove of ideas and thinking that have been really obscured in our traditional narratives about the history of political philosophy.

So basically the traditional narrative in the 1700s and early 1800s, you have an approach to thinking about freedom and equality and the like that goes by the name of republicanism. Small r doesn't invoke the political party.

What it means is it's a conception where well being flows from that public participation

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and not merely from what we do in our private lives.

And then in the early 19th century, that sort of smaller republican view gets replaced by the sort of classical liberal view where it really is about our private lives.

We want to be left alone, pursue our own business, accumulate wealth, do what we want to do with our wealth.

And that's it.

That's where well being comes from.

Sort of the public participation side doesn't really matter very much.

And so the sort of traditional story is that that kind of liberalism just sort of washed away that smaller republicanism and sort of that's what we've had ever since.

But in truth, African American thinkers throughout the 19th century fighting enslavement, then fighting the failure of Reconstruction, fighting Jim Crow have always maintained commitment to the notion that power needed to be shared, that the fundamental flaw in the American political system was the fact that power was not shared.

So in that regard, what I've done in my book is really take the sort of traditional picture of liberalism and flip it and say, actually, look, you know, you've got this sort of picture of justice completely wrong because you haven't taken power seriously.

And if we start by taking power seriously, if we start by recognizing that sharing power equally is the necessary foundation for human flourishing in a democratic society, well, then you actually get a different theory of justice.

So I think that book is called the darkened light of faith, race, democracy and freedom in African American political thought and comes out in September and does look great. It's brilliant.

But I do want to hold on this question of power because even having read a bunch of your work on this, I feel like it is still a little bit opaque to me.

So you think of more traditional democratic socialist liberalism or labor liberalism.

And in the old, you manage what you measure.

I understand what those measures are.

The poverty rate or to be more precise, maybe the supplemental poverty rate that takes into account government transfers because I'm a nerd.

The median wage numbers, the unemployment rate, health insurance rates.

What are the measures of power for you?

The measures of power for me do flow from the political sphere.

And then sometimes they're not surprising.

They are things like the right to vote, but they're also things like the right to run.

Is that actually activated?

Who's able to use it?

Who from what kind of backgrounds is running for what kinds of offices?

Who's holding which offices?

And then also what I sort of virtue as the right to see and shape your community.

I've started a new organization called Partners in Democracy that is sort of built around those three categories and indicators for them.

And if you take Massachusetts as an example, what you'll find is that the right to vote

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in this sort of actual activation of it is very amount distributed.

It is highly skewed towards property holders in Massachusetts.

People who rent are much less likely to vote.

I mean, the disparity is really quite extraordinary.

We have a huge housing crisis in Massachusetts.

As you know, I take there to be a direct connection between the fact that the electorate itself, the activated, participating electorate is skewed to property owners and the fact that we are not addressing the problems that face those who rent in the state of Massachusetts.

So those are the kinds of metrics that you can point to.

And across any given domain, whether it's the political domain or organizational domain, it is a question literally of sort of who is sitting in seats of power and then also how are decision-making mechanisms actually structured?

Are they allocating power in ways that tap into those sort of voices of all those in the community or not?

So one way it seems to me you could try to decompose some of this is to think about, and I'm sure I will miss categories here, but there's participation, right?

How many people are voting?

There's representation.

How representative are the people who sit in power?

And for lack of a better term, maybe depth or democratic depth, because participating through voting and participating through regularly going to community or local meetings and participating through deliberative democracy structures that we have not yet set up, those are very different.

I mean, you can have a pretty thin level of participation just because you show up to vote in biannual elections, and that's sort of different, I think, than really being part of steering the ship of state.

So can you go through a little bit more depth on those?

Because I kind of know by that if we got the voting percentage up just a bit or even quite a bit, if we did universal mandatory voting as they have in some countries or compulsory voting, that that would really solve your problem all that deeply.

Right.

No, I mean, I wouldn't put everything on that binding stretch to the imagination.

So I mean, it really is across all sectors of civil society and political institutions.

So take the media as an example, the question of who shapes the agenda for what stories get published, which perspectives or points of view make it into our shared narratives.

That formation of the kind of horizons of our cultural imagination is another way in which power is distributed.

I have a student named Justin Pottle who's written a great dissertation and is working on a book on exactly this and the way in which we ought to actually be sort of reorganizing some of the infrastructure for our media ecosystem with a view to achieving that full inclusion of voice and perspective.

The agenda that sort of populates our different decision-making steering bodies sort of flows

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from that media ecosystem.

So all of that matters.

When you look at any given sort of process of policy development, you sort of take COVID as an example, right, you have people sitting in private institutions, corporations, universities, making decisions, advising policy makers, really without much input or engagement from those who are most powerfully impacted by the policies that they're pursuing.

And I do think when you look at sort of basic research design in universities, you can have a different approach to how the research agenda is developed.

And there are people who are starting to build out co-designed research agendas, really digging into the question of, well, what are the actual problems people in a specific place want to solve or need to solve?

And then how can researchers work with those folks in a specific place on developing the necessary research agenda?

You change that kind of thing.

That is a reallocation of power and a lot flows from that.

So it's not just voting by any stretch of the imagination.

And at some level, I think it's a kind of people can read this and feel it's an overwhelming concept because everything that you look at can achieve a more egalitarian distribution of power than currently exists.

I'm Kim Barker, host of the Coldest Case in Laramie, a show from serial productions in the New York Times.

In 1985, I was a high school sophomore in Laramie, Wyoming, when a woman was brutally murdered there.

The victim was just a few years older than I was.

The killing stuck with me all these years, partly because of how violent it was, partly because of how emblematic it was of my time in Laramie, a town I'd always thought of as the meanest place I'd ever been, but mostly because the crime was never solved.

And then a few years back, the police arrested someone for the murder, a former Laramie cop.

His DNA was found at the crime scene, but then prosecutors dropped the charges.

Temporarily, they said, but they still haven't refiled the charges, and it's never been clear why.

How did a case that seemed this open and shut fall apart with such a whimper?

I decided I had to head back to Laramie to find answers.

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So in your essay, a critique of make-up abundance progressives on the other side is for assuming quote, there's a trade-off between modes of decision-making that are responsive and representative and getting stuff done.

And I think they might say these modes of decision-making are not responsive and representative, but the problem is that, again and again and again, when well-meaning progressives create a bunch of new processes to be responsive and representative, eventually they become captured by special interests, by the status quo, by people who own a house now, or don't

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want things to change.

And they do, in fact, impede getting stuff done, and they do, in fact, make government less able to get to the outcomes that it is promising people or that is wanted from people. So I'd like to hear you answer a bit of that criticism in terms of what power-sharing liberalism might create.

What about the worry that adding on a lot of consultative process, given that that requires knowledge and interest in time, and a lot of people just don't want to be that involved in government, ends up being a boon to those who have a reason to use those processes, and it ends up as another thing that gets captured by the powerful?

Sure.

So I'm going to break that into two questions.

And I think you asked a question about capture, and you also asked a question about consultative processes.

And of course, you linked to them, but I think there are two distinct issues there.

So on the subject of capture for starters, there's this great essay from the early 20th century by sociologist Michel about the iron law of oligarchy, and he makes the argument that every human organizational form everywhere in history over time has always tended over time to oligarchy to capture.

And I take that to be basically right in an important way with the result that the work of democracy is to continuously resist capture.

There is no end of history.

There is no state of rest for democracy.

Democracy is the work of resisting capture by powerful interests and restoring power-sharing, just over and over and over again.

So we have to do work to introduce new governance mechanisms in the place of those that are not working.

Now, this doesn't always have to mean consultative process exactly.

I mean, I think one of the things that is exciting about the time we now live in is there's lots of room for experimentation with alternative approaches to decision-making. So there's a great experiment that's unfolded in the Colorado legislature recently, where the legislature used what's called plural voting to prioritize areas of legislative concern.

So this is a voting method where everybody gets, let's say, 100 ballot points when you start out, and you can vote one ballot point, you can put one vote on a thing you care about, or if you really care about it, you can put all 100 on that thing.

So every vote that you're going to place on something, you have to sort of pay more for.

So your first vote costs you one ballot point.

If you vote for something twice, it'll cost you four.

If you vote for it 10 times, it'll cost you 100 points.

So it's a sort of squared function there.

And what that does is mean that when people are indicating their preferences, if they feel something very intensely, then they have to sort of sacrifice any kind of engagement on something else.

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And so it produces a much clearer sort of mechanism for sorting out intensity for really requiring people to make choices, to make sacrifices, to prioritize and the like.

And people who are using this mechanism are finding it very productive and then productive as well for the sort of ensuing discussions about what should be done.

So I think that that's a kind of really neat mechanism that comes out of thinking and game theory and economics.

It's also the case that new tech tools, even including AI tools and so forth, will afford lots of possibilities.

We will have lots of ways of clarifying more efficiently what some kind of common ground points of view are.

I'm sure you know about the experiments in Taiwan with the V-Taiwan platform, which can take highly contentious issues and help people more quickly see it's a sort of really rapid process of social discovery to see where the potential points of agreement or solution are.

So I think it's not a matter of using consultative processes as we've known them for the last 40 years or something like that.

I think this is a time for very serious innovation.

I always find myself very caught at this point, and I think it's good here to do what you did and separate out some of the different domains you could work in.

So consultation and voting mechanisms, but you mentioned poll voting or people might also have heard of it as quadratic voting.

And maybe I am being dim about this, but a critique you make in this case of the abundance progressives is that their fundamental failure is technocracy.

Their fundamental failure is belief that the experts can get together into a room and make good decisions and that those decisions will be legitimate and that that is the way you should govern.

And I think that's actually a quite true critique of at least many people in that space.

But I think that there is definitely a form of technocracy that afflicts the conversations about democracy and governance, where people keep proposing what are, I think, just truthfully ever more complicated ways of voting when you're beginning to give people an allocation of ballot points that then as they allocate more of them, it goes up by the squares or spending their ballot points more quickly.

It's not that you can't imagine a way of simplifying that through a front end calculator system, but it is a little weird.

And I think places where we've seen people try things that are not even quadratic voting, but simpler.

We've seen experiments with things that are go by names like democracy bucks, where we actually give people a voucher.

So the broad community has money to spend on supporting political candidates, with the idea of being that we're going to democratize the money that candidates get so that everybody has something they can spend on the political ideas of their choice.

And we see very low take up of that.

I mean, it has been experimented with if I'm not wrong in Seattle.

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And it was very, very, very disappointing to the people backing that project, how few people actually spent these free bucks they were giving them.

And that was in a much less complicated structure than quadratic or plural voting.

So I guess I'd push this critique back at you.

Isn't there a danger of technocracy here and particularly a danger of thinking that too many people are like Daniel Allen or frankly like Ezra Klein, which is they'd like to spend a lot of time thinking about ever more interesting ways to be involved in government.

But in fact, like what we see again and again is people don't want to spend that much time on it, but they want us for things to run pretty well.

And beyond that, to not really be that bothered.

You know, again, I'm going to break your question into two parts there.

Break it into as many parts as you'd like.

And the first one about democracy renovators, as I call myself, as technocrats, which there's a lot to talk about there.

And then the second one about what does participation mean in the lives of most people as a person. As opposed to those who sort of most intensely are motivated by democratic commitments or something of the sort.

So I mean, yes, you are 100% right that the democracy renovation field or democracy reform field as it's often called is powerfully afflicted by the problem of technocracy.

And that is something I've also been a critic of for what it's worth.

So in the work that we're doing in Massachusetts, I mean, one of the things we're working really hard to do is to draw a connection between any given democracy issue and substantive outcomes.

So right where you started in other words.

So for example, in Massachusetts, we don't have same day voting, people have been fighting for same day voting for 20 years.

It's held up because, you know, various parts of the leadership in the state legislature are not interested in it.

But people have been fighting for 20 years.

Who is at the short of the stick of that?

It's really people who rent because they move, their addresses change, they have to have registered, you know, in prior to the last 10 days before an election, and if they haven't gotten it done, they can't vote.

And that just doesn't happen to people who own property and stay in one place.

So in that regard, there are a lot of housing justice groups, advocacy groups in Massachusetts.

And one of the things I'm doing is sort of making the case, you know, if you care about housing, if you care about changing the dynamics around the rates at which rents are rising and the like, it's really, really important to also connect that to the same day voting issue.

So I do think that the sort of critique of the abundance progressives that any given effort needs to deliver for people materially in their lives is absolutely right.

I mean, so democracy isn't just about the abstraction.

The point of democracy is it's supposed to support human well-being.

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So you know, in the ancient Roman phrase, *salus populi, suprema lex esto*, right, like the health and well-being of the people is the supreme law.

That Roman phrase is what lies behind the language of both the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution when the Declaration talks about achieving safety and happiness for all of us.

And when the Constitution talks about the welfare, the general welfare, it is exactly that same concept of *salus populi*, the health and well-being of the people.

So democracy has to deliver for that for sure.

And all those metrics that you started with are absolutely still pertinent.

But the question is getting to them depends on another set of metrics, which is about how power is distributed.

So that's where you cannot get to an understanding of the connections between the material things that people need or need to see changed and the power distributions without letting people talk from their own lives from their own experiences about the barriers and hindrances they see to what they're trying to pursue.

So I believe that that approach to thinking about the relationship between power and material outcomes gets you out of the technocratic way of thinking about democracy.

So that's sort of thing number one.

And then thing number two on the subject of, you know, well, lots of people don't really want to have to spend their time participating.

I think that's largely true, however, you can feel safe doing that only if you think that the folks who hold power are in some sense kind of loosely connected to you by some sort of tie of affinity or the like.

So the less well you actually feel represented, the more you are in fact going to want to participate.

So that really matters then that those people who are not so well represented or don't feel safe given sort of who's in leadership in a particular organization or political space, you know, that have access to that path to power.

So that's really what the story is here.

And I will say too, just from, you know, sort of grassroots work that I've been doing, you know, a lot of people feel shut out.

A lot of people feel like they don't have access to voice and choice.

And that is not just instrumentally problematic for them.

It is problematic at an existential level.

It afflicts and undermines sense of dignity, it afflicts and undermines a sense of freedom.

So I guess I would just caution against underestimating the importance of the genuine experience of empowerment and freedom in people's lives.

But it actually strikes me there's a tension between the two sides of that answer you gave, that side of outcomes and that side of representation feeling safe with the people who are in power.

So if you think of power sharing liberalism as the liberalism is doing something important there, that it is actually speaking to, you know, what we think of as liberal outcomes, liberal ideas of justice, a lot of people really, really, really don't want that.

And I mean, I'm not telling you obviously anything you don't know here, but you are

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going to have people win elections.

And one thing that has been striking to me in American politics over and over again is how unsafe as we hit higher levels of polarization and enmity, people feel, even with fairly banal, moderate, modest members of the other side.

I mean, there are many Republicans, particularly Maga Republicans, who find Joe Biden like genuinely horrifying, like they really, really, really don't like that guy.

The reaction against Barack Obama, who is I think about as pluralistic and open a major politician as we've had in national office, in my lifetime at least, in response to him arose Donald Trump, arose the entire Tea Party and Maga movements.

So I think I'm skeptical that you can find that kind of safety within a system where there really are winners and losers in a divided polity.

I guess maybe you can reassure me on this because what I see is a lot of evidence that anybody will become demonic to the other side, even if they actually do make a good faith effort of trying to absorb more opinions and I just, I'm not sure process fix can open us up beyond that.

So in my book, Justice by Means of Democracy goes well beyond process, right?

There's a different vision for political economy.

There's a different vision for how we think about culture, work and society and the like. And so I think you're describing our present conditions quite well, but I don't think that our present conditions show us the limit of what's possible for human beings seeking to build free self-government for free and equal citizens.

So the short of it is that to have the sort of power sharing that I'm talking about does require the set of stable norms and guardrails, the kind of things that Dan Ziblatt and Steve Levitsky talk about in How Democracies Die.

So instead of getting rid of those norms and guardrails, mutual forbearance, toleration, you do not prosecute the war until the last person is dead.

It's rather, it's not winner take all, it's winner take nothing or at best what winners get to do is chair the committee, but they do not slash and burn.

Like there's sort of set of norms and guiderails that are necessary for a sustainable, durable constitutional democracy.

And so if you want freedom, if you want freedom to last, then we need these norms and guardrails. So then, you know, we don't have them right now.

So to your point, that's absolutely correct.

Well, give an example of what you're talking about there, forbearance, tolerance, those are values, but what guardrails don't we have that we should that you think would make people feel safer?

It's not that the guardrails themselves would immediately and directly make people feel safer.

The guardrails are about how people make decisions together in legislative bodies.

So for example, you know, Mitch McConnell famously said, coming back into the majority of certain point, you know, well, winners make policy and losers go home.

That is the antithesis of a stable democratic norm.

The point of a democratic structure filled with committees is that the losers stay on

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the committee.

So the winner gets to chair the committee, but the loser stays on the committee.

And the point should be that there is in fact a process that does keep the losers in the mix in terms of some kind of synthetic outcome.

We are a long way from that.

I am not pretending that we are anywhere close to that at this point in time, but it is that kind of set of norms that can yield a solution space that's not visible just from a simple readout of public opinion polls on a polarized society.

And that is what the real work of democracy should be.

It's about solution space.

It's about creating more solution space.

This is where the philosopher Marcia Sen, I think it's really the person who's best articulated this.

He's got a powerful argument about the value of democracy as really a knowledge machine, knowledge engine.

And he makes the case that he was really notable that if you look around the history of the world, democracies are a form of regime type where they're not afflicted by famines. They're not afflicted by famines because the process of social discovery means that knowledge moves to decision makers in a fashion that permits course correction over time and does keep broadly some kind of concept of the public good operating.

And again, we have led a lot of the kind of norms that sustain that erode.

So I think your questions are fair ones from the point of view of how could we ever get to a place like when you're describing Danielle because we're very far from that now, but I don't think we can read out from contemporary realities like what the actual possibilities for a healthy concept of democracy are.

I think Mitch McConnell is a good figure to think about a bit here because I think one of the innovations he is most associated with, and he did not start this, but I think he's taken it to or did at various points, take it to an extreme, is the utility of the filibuster to enhance division as opposed to deliberation.

And so I think if you step back on the US Senate, you might say, hey, this is great.

This actually implements what Daniel Allen is saying.

The losers don't have to go home because in fact, the Senate has a super majority requirement such that the winners cannot pass very much without bipartisan support because very rarely does anybody have 60 votes in the Senate.

And so you might think, okay, great, the more filibustering there is or the more powerful the filibuster is, the less polarized the Senate is going to be, the less polarized we're going to be as a country.

And we've seen the exact opposite because in practice, it isn't actually valuable or valued or rewarded for the minority party to engage in cooperation and something I think McConnell understood very, very clearly is that if he could use methods that were built for deliberation, for slowing things down, for making sure both sides had a say to simply stop the Democrats in this case from being able to move forward at all, that would make the Democrats look ineffective.

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It would split their coalition.

It would excite his own base.

And on the other side, the kinds of Republicans who over and over again at various moments did decide to try to move into a bipartisan space.

I mean, many of them got primaried out in the Tea Party primary waves, they got knocked out in primaries by people like Donald Trump and the voters who supported him.

I think the theory, this has been a long war for me in American politics, the theory the filibuster should work.

It just said it doesn't because it doesn't seem to be the thing like voters could reward the politicians who acted as if filibuster says they should act and come together.

But in fact, we've seen, particularly on the right though, not only, that this actual rule that should create a ability for the minority to be always involved actually creates a way for the minority not to be involved, but to be obstructive and in being obstructive to have a quicker path back to the majority and in doing that to further divide things.

So what did then the filibuster get wrong?

How does that fit with your thesis here?

Yes, I would not hold the filibuster up as an example of what I'm talking about.

So I share your view about the filibuster, but for a very specific reason that does in fact align with my theory.

So many people when you ask somebody to define democracy will start off by saying, oh, it's majority rule.

And that's not actually quite right.

Democracy is about equal empowerment across a body of free and equal citizens.

And that is achieved through a combination of tools.

Majority rule is one of the most important tools, but you also need a variety of minority protecting devices.

So you need a whole kind of toolkit, but you have to be balancing them over time.

And the filibuster is an example of a mistaken use of a minority protecting mechanism.

The mistake about it is to connect it to ordinary legislation.

And here there are literally sort of centuries of work on understanding what kind of vote should be used under what conditions if you want to have effective functional government that is doing reasonable processes of social discovery, pulling voices in from the different size and the like and synthesizing and so forth.

And you know, you use that 50% plus one threshold for most things, for most ordinary contingent legislation where context change and legislation needs to change and so forth.

So super majority should be reserved for things that rise to a constitutional level.

So from my point of view, the filibuster is actually a perfect example of the misapplication of a principle of minority protection.

So you were a co-chair of this big bipartisan commission reinventing American democracy for the 21st century, and that report is available freely on the internet.

I really like it.

I think people should download it and look at the recommendations, but I wanted to talk about the third section of that if I'm remembering the number incorrectly here, which is to ensure

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the responsiveness of government institutions.

And I would say it's more about deliberative democracy.

It's more about ways you could have things like citizens assemblies and meetings and other ways you could have a thicker kind of participation and advisory role for the public than you currently do.

Now I think it's fair to say that the concern typically about deliberative democracy is it doesn't scale very well that, you know, you can have it in a New Hampshire town hall meeting. But when you're talking about the number of issues we face nationally, when you're talking about how big the country is, you just can't really make that work.

But we also live in this world of new digital tools, so maybe you can.

So I'd like to hear you talk a bit about the recommendations of that section of the report. You mentioned the Taiwanese example, which has shown up in a lot of your work across different domains.

How do you think about deliberative democracy and how do you think particularly about digital deliberative democracy and what that might enable?

So my original training, my original background is as a scholar of ancient Greece, right?

So that is kind of the first example of deliberative democracy, the 30,000 citizens, white male citizens of ancient Athens gathering in the assembly, some 6,000 of them usually showing up for an assembly in a city that was 200, 250,000 population, there across from the Acropolis with orators standing on this big stone stage and in fact somehow managing to project across space through to the 6,000 people who are there.

So in that regard, deliberative democracy, I have a soft space in my heart for it for sure and always have.

That said, I do think that representative institutions are a powerful invention.

And so I see the value of the deliberative tools and techniques that we have as things that can help us improve our existing structures of representation.

So by and large, our common purpose report also pursues that approach.

That is to say, we seek the sort of integration of these tools into existing structures of representation rather than their replacement.

So yes, I mean, the V-Taiwan example, the use of a tool called Polis is a good one.

It's a tool that can surface the spread of opinion, help people see potential areas of consensus and common agreement more rapidly.

Members of Congress would benefit from access to tools like this.

They're sort of significantly improved beyond opinion polling, in other words.

One of the problems with opinion polling is precisely that it doesn't actually provide any opportunity for reflection that is built on learning.

One of the greatest values of democracy is precisely that together we can in fact be much smarter than we can be as individuals.

So all the places in the report where we proposed integrating elements of deliberation, whether that's participatory budgeting at the municipal level, whether that's having members of Congress have access to deliberative assemblies and deliberative tools to improve their own learning about what the issues are in our society.

Those are really about improving that process of social discovery where we learn together

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about the shape of the hardships that we're facing.

We see solutions that can emerge into visibility because of that collective work when we can't actually get to them from any specific point of expertise or any single isolated position.

So that's really the picture.

And so, I mean, you're asking a different kind of question really, I think, which is about that experience of participation.

And I think you're asking both what makes us think that people are going to want it and why do we think that it is valuable to beyond the sort of payoffs that I'm describing.

I think we see a lot of evidence that people want it, where participatory budgeting is used around the world.

People love it.

People enjoy it.

People are really glad of the opportunity to help steer the direction of their municipal budget or identify needs that are going otherwise unnoticed by their central administrative bodies.

So the reason we see a lot of people sort of feeling the drag of participation is because right now it's really hard to participate.

And it will always be hard in the sense of taking time and a tax on time.

But that's where I think we need an economy that supports that.

We need a workplace where we're not talking just about work-life balance, but we're talking about work-life civic balance so that people have the time to participate.

And then we actually need non-opaque structures to participate in.

We have a huge opacity problem, which is a real tax on people's experience of the kind of creative joy of participation.

One of the things I think is interesting is how actually little innovation there is around small-day democratic governance.

It's like we, whatever we had 50 years ago, we're just remixing that back and forth.

I would like to go more deeply into an example, because honestly, I think this can be a little airy.

So can you talk in some detail about whichever one you think is the best example for grounding this theory a little bit?

What makes this kind of depth of participation possible?

What does it feel like?

You mentioned being able to feel a little bit of that joy of being in the process.

What have you seen and how does it work when that occurs?

Well, this is not a fancy example.

It doesn't draw on new technologies, although it did at the time.

But if you go back to the 0708 Obama campaign, the first campaign, particularly in the primary, what the Obama campaign did was produce all these sort of DIY kits.

It was 0708, so it was still super early in the days of social media.

And people were empowered to run their own community groups, basically their own community organizing spaces.

People learned how to organize.

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They learned how to recruit other people into participation.

They were empowered to use the time and space to name the issues that mattered most to them.

But at the end of the day, I think that the Affordable Care Act came out of that because across the country, people at a grassroots level were figuring out that the thing that was hardest and worst in their life was the health care system.

And those conversations transformed people's lives.

I mean, the number of people who experienced that, who participated in that, who continue to be politically active today because of that is really quite remarkable.

So that sort of body of people, what they experienced with tools, put their hands that were sort of empowering and that then yielded a process of social discovery that yielded a major social transformation, that realization that it's possible has, as I said, kind of motivated people to continue participating.

So as you know, lots of folks were then very disappointed in the Obama administration that that basic aspect of the experience of participation didn't flow through into the pattern of governance

but it is the case now that there are experiments all over the country of people trying to do quite similar things and now the resources really are amazing, they're much better.

So I was yesterday, again, here in Massachusetts at a launch of a new tool called the Massachusetts Platform for Legislative Engagement and what this is, is a combination of a bill tracking tool but also a tool that permits people to post testimony and the purpose is to try to bring into the light the sort of actual process of who's testifying on what bills, which voices are legislators listening to and the like, we, as it happens in Massachusetts, we rank very low on transparency scales, there are no sort of public records requirements for the legislature, it's very hard to know who's testified on what bill at all and so forth.

So there's a kind of community of people that have formed around the work of creating this is a pure volunteer effort and now they're working to connect all the different sort of advocacy organizations in the state and as they do that work, I mean what they find over and over again is there's a very profound hunger for things that link clean information to the ability to see what's happening in decision making bodies and then contribute your voice to shaping that.

So about a year ago, maybe two years ago now, you were one of, I think it's six authors on a paper called How AI Fails Us and I think it's an interesting paper from this perspective because one of the main points you make there is that the way AI is being built, designed, conceptualized and potentially implemented is very centralizing.

There's a neat move in the paper where you and your co-authors say, look, when they say they're solving the problem of intelligence, if you really look at it, what they're trying to do is solve the problem of central planning.

They are trying to solve the problem of how you can have a system that plans effectively without actually all that much input at all.

So we are now in this era where AI is kind of everywhere and everybody's talking about it and we do seem to be at this inflection point for how it will develop and how it will be implemented.

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So can you talk a bit about what you were worried about in that paper and what you've seen since?

Sure.

So the paper is sort of really focused on some of the kind of core concepts that have governed a lot of AI development and AI thinking, even some of the concepts that are a little bit more 30,000 foot or metaphorical.

So for example, singularity.

So the idea that the goal is to achieve an intelligence that aligns with a sort of singularity of human intelligence.

And our sort of basic starting point is the recognition that human intelligence is plural and human societies are pluralistic and human flourishing is at its most robust when that pluralism and that plurality of forms of intelligence is supported, that as a species, we maximize our capacity not by sort of resolving ourselves all into a singularity, sort of homogenizing force, but rather by activating and supporting the sort of full deployment of our plurality.

So the paper is sort of arguing for a different paradigm for technology development, the idea that we could design to support and activate the many kinds of human intelligence to support and activate healthy forms of human pluralism.

And there are people who are experimenting in this regard.

There's a new institute, the Plurality Institute, and it is a convening space for technologists and academics who are trying things out.

There are folks who are sort of working to design technologies that help people bridge lines of division.

So instead of, you know, rewarding people for ever more outrageous things that reinforce division, you can really structure different kinds of incentives into social media platforms and the like.

So there are those kinds of experiments going on right now.

And in terms of the current moment, I mean, it's a really big moment, as you've known, as you've already written about in such important ways.

So with the release of GPT-4, right, we really are at a phase shift in terms of what the kind of capacity for these tools is.

And so things are moving very fast.

There's just a real imperative for all of us to do the work of figuring out what the sort of combination of societal norms, legal guardrails, and the like should be for the use of these technologies.

One of the things I was thinking about when I was reading that paper is it's a very profound point that intelligence is collective, it is relational, it is situational.

And then I felt like you could also make an argument, the particularly large language models being trained on the corpus of internet text, that their vision of intelligence actually is very much collective, relational, pluralistic in the sense that for good or for bad, whatever they know is this huge inhaling of everything that not literally everybody, but huge numbers of people have written, have put out, and their averaging is a little bit too simplistic of a way to put it, but they're drawing connections, correlations, and trying to kind of predict what this collective would say next.

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So in some ways, aren't these systems exactly what you're calling for?

I mean, yes, I think the large language models do have a kind of pluralistic construction for sure, and not only that, but they can do things, they can embody forms of intelligence that are not accessible to us.

So in that regard, they are themselves already another yet different kind of intelligence. So we have in that regard yet another meaning of the kind of concept of plural intelligences.

So the question, in some sense, is really, given that they have that capacity, can we help steer the direction of development of technologies in ways that support this good feature of human existence, or will the capacities to accelerate the creation of misinformation, to accelerate fraud, to destabilize institutions and things like that, will that be what leads with these technologies?

So that's where we just are at a really kind of critical moment for figuring out what the policy guardrails are.

And it's just like the invention of any other kind of game-changing technology, gunpowder, nuclear power, whatever.

I mean, it can do bad, and it can do good.

And so the question is, how long does it take us as a world at this point, as an entire globe, to achieve the kind of conventions, structure, and regulation that ensure that this technology operates primarily in the direction of the good?

One of the things I thought was an interesting bringing together a lot of these ideas.

So one of your co-authors on the paper, Divya Siddharth, she is now a co-leader of the Collective Intelligence Project, which you're an advisor to.

And I was speaking to her the other day, and they're standing up these alignment assemblies. They're trying to basically build a deliberative democracy platform on which people are going to be able to come together using the tools that have been designed for participatory budgeting and climate deliberative democracy and so on, to try to develop senses of what people want in AI governance, in AI systems.

They I think have some openings into the major companies right now, and are working with them a bit, but have an ambition that this will eventually be used to feed into things that are more publicly created standards.

And I thought that was interesting, because if one of the concerns about deliberative democracy is it doesn't scale that well, but actually the way AI is being created is incredibly narrow by a couple of companies and a couple of places.

It actually seems like a quite promising space where you could have citizen assemblies that do have a little bit more of a role in trying to create a somewhat more legitimate sense of what people who go through a process on this would want.

I'm curious to hear your reflections of somebody sort of supporting that project.

Yes, I think Divya and Saffron's work building out the alignment assemblies is just one of the most important things that's happening right now.

So they are using digital tools to build citizen assemblies.

They are seeking to build a structure that will provide meaningful public input to key steering decisions that the AI labs are making.

The challenge, of course, is to figure out what exactly does meaningful public impact

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mean in this kind of context, got to make sure that you're capturing perspectives from many different parts of the world.

So there's a kind of necessary element of scale in it, but of course, there's also a real imperative for speed.

We're all at this point, I guess, expecting chat GPT-5 by the end of this calendar year.

And so things are moving really fast, and we just don't actually really know what the impacts of these capabilities are likely to be.

So the kind of pressure is how do you design for speed and reasonable scale to support legitimacy in the near term.

But yes, I mean, and they can do this, right?

They can do this work and they can get meaningful public input in a way that governments at this moment in time can't do, can't move fast enough to do.

So that's what brings us back to the beginning of the conversation, yeah, when you were making the point about abundance progressives and their kind of concern about the sort of lack of nimbleness that our current governing institutions have, we're feeling the pressure and strain of that now as we seek to grapple with the implications of the really remarkable new models based on the large language learning models.

One critique you could offer, though, of that project, which I think is a very common critique made of deliberative democracy and more broadly just democracy, but it maybe bites with real force when you're talking about something like AI systems, is that what is the value of having people without technical expertise weighing in and controlling things that are highly technical?

I mean, if the assembly comes up and says, hey, we want this to be legible and we want to be able to know what the system is doing, and the people who are making them say, that's not really possible, we don't know how to do that in these models.

To do that is to basically break the whole approach, you know, who's right and who's wrong there.

I think there's always a suspicion that to have deliberative democracy means you'll be having people who don't have enough expertise to have well-founded opinions coming up the works or maybe coming up with ideas that are really bad, and that has been an impediment to it and I think probably would be here too.

So how do you think about that?

Or how do you answer that?

Well, I think that is somewhat of a misconception, honestly, of sort of what deliberation can and should do.

So, I mean, the first job of deliberation is to establish the steering direction with regard to basically values, like what do we actually care about here, what matters to us and why, and that is something that you cannot use technocrats to do.

That is exactly a human question over and over again.

It is the sort of the first human question, it is the human question that royals politics, of course, but that's the thing that you need deliberative assemblies to address.

And so if the assembly say we want to know what's going on and then technologists say, well, you can't, if we have systems of this kind, then there's a thing to negotiate, then

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that's the work to do.

So what's the relationship then between that desire to know, that need to know, and the fact that technology can't deliver it?

Does that mean we try to call halt to it?

Does that mean that we develop a different kind of bridge, et cetera?

So the fact that there's a kind of discrepancy between the values people may articulate and what technologists think they can deliver is the beginning of the work, not the end of it.

I think that is a good place to end this conversation though.

So all is our final question, what are three books you would recommend to the audience?

Well, there's the Melvin Rogers book that I am still failing to remember the precise title of.

So you'll have to say the title of it again.

It is the darkened light of faith.

The darkened light of faith, exactly, thank you.

The Melvin Rogers, the darkened light of faith.

And I'm sure you probably know Max Teckmark's Life 3.0.

And third one, Helene Landemore, Open Democracy.

Danielle Allen, thank you very much.

Thanks Ezra, good to be with you.

This episode of the Ezra Clanchos produced by Emma Fogawu, Jeff Geld, Kristen Lin, and Roger Karma.

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