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Theda Skocpol in Conversation with Edwin Amenta on Sociology, Political Science, Higher Education, and U.S. Politics

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Abstract

In this interview, Theda Skocpol discusses with her former student Edwin Amenta issues ranging from the academic, to the political, and to the personal. A highly renowned and decorated scholar, Skocpol addresses her shift from being a broadly comparative scholar, with her path-breaking initial work on comparative revolutions, to focusing her scholarly attention on politics and policy in the United States. She argues that it was not as big a leap as it might seem. She also discusses her institutional shift from sociology to political science, but indicates that this move was not an intellectual turn from sociology and notes that she could never have had the career she has had without first gaining a PhD in sociology. Skocpol shares her views on the current crisis in U.S. higher education in part from her perspective of having been dean of Harvard University's Graduate School. She also discusses her Madison Lecture from just before the 2024 election that returned Donald Trump to the White House, including her prescient predictions of his authoritarian moves, as well as what was unexpected. In the process, she situates the administration's moves away from democracy and identifies it as a kind of lawless patrimonialism. Based on her wide-ranging research, she suggests strategies for the U.S. Democratic Party to regain power. This interview took place on the morning of November 4, 2025, Election Day in the United States.

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1 From Comparativist to Scholar of Politics and Policy in the United States

Edwin Amenta: I am delighted to talk with Professor Theda Skocpol on this Election Day. She was my thesis advisor at the University of Chicago in the 1980s, where she had appointments in Sociology and Political Science from 1981 through 1986. I was also fortunate to publish a handful of articles with her from 1985 through 1989. I am thrilled to have this opportunity, as I am more than a little curious to hear her views on the crisis in higher education and our current political predicament. But before that, let's discuss your scholarly trajectory. How was the transition from being a comparativist to a scholar of policy and politics in the United States?

Theda Skocpol: I've always followed a certain philosophy in my scholarly career. I try to tackle big questions that have something to do with real-world outcomes that might matter to more than academics, although, of course, I engaged in academic literature along the way. That's what the original work on revolutions was about. I did some more after France, Russia, and China. I looked at Iran.

But it wasn't as big a transition as it might seem to move to asking questions about the development of the U.S. state in comparative perspective and then public policymaking in the United States, because I was just tackling some new substantive questions. Some academics spend their whole life defending every word they've ever written, but my philosophy is to tackle new questions before people figure out the limits of the answers I gave to the last one. I figure when I'm done with my best in answering a question, other people are going to come up with new questions, better answers. I've almost always turned down opportunities to debate whether I was right or wrong about something in the past. And it's easier to do that when you're moving on to new topics. But all the topics are about political change and changes in what governments do or don't do at the intersection of states and societies. It's a Weberian program, really, when you come right to it.

EA: I'm wondering, too, if it is still possible to do the kind of comparative work that used to be possible to do — the big comparative, historical work that you did and Barrington Moore, your mentor, did — where you could rely on a lot of secondary works. Now it seems that if you do any historical work, you have to dig into documents, you have to know all the languages — you have to do pretty much everything historians do.

It seems that if you're asking the big substantive questions, if you're examining documents and whatnot, that it's probably easier to do — and probably more relevant to your interests — to examine U.S. questions rather than to try to learn Mandarin and dig into Chinese documents. I'm wondering if that is part of the reason.

TS: You're right that what has really evolved in more startling ways over the course of my career is the kinds of evidence that I'm willing to try to dig up. I'm a really big believer — and you know this because we worked together years ago — in just using all kinds of evidence. I'm not the least bit interested in the quantitative versus qualitative divide. If something can be quantified, quantify it. It's just that often it can't be, or it can be measured in an ordinal way. And sometimes the data's not there, and you have to go out and collect it.

So, as I moved to working on the United States, I did get more into looking at original — especially, I would say, government — statistics for the breakthrough book on the Civil War pensions, which was really an important book [*Protecting Soldiers and Mothers* (Skocpol, 1992)]. It's my favorite, even though it's not the most famous. And then, when I got to the most re-

cent iteration in my career, I actually went out and interviewed people face-to-face for the Tea Party research and have also done fieldwork. A lot of that feeds into the work on contemporary American politics. For me, these were brand-new sources of evidence — very different ways of gathering data.

But I still keep the big picture in mind, and I still keep the sequence of unfolding phases or events in mind. In that sense, my approach hasn't changed at all. It's just that I'm more determined to move from the big picture to the nitty-grittiest of details. I'm very obsessive about coding my own stuff, and I just really want to know exactly what's going on, especially if I'm coding organizations. It's hard, I think, for some people to combine big picture and detailed research — like they're stuck in the details, or just all big picture and can't do anything with details, or don't know even which ones to look for and whatnot. So that's a difficult kind of thing to balance, but it obviously worked out very well in *Protecting Soldiers and Mothers*, for sure, and in other work I have done over the years on American civic life.

2 From Sociology to Political Science, and Back?

EA: I think readers of this journal are also really interested in your disciplinary move, out of sociology into political science. You've been mainly situated in the Department of Government. You focus on the American Political Science Association more than the American Sociological Association, publish more extensively in political science journals, and debate more with political scientists than sociologists. Was it just a shift in interest — obviously connected to some extent to your interest in U.S. politics and policy, which is where a lot of the action is here in political science? Was it the friendliness of organizations, departments, disciplinary organizations, journals, and so forth — a kind of institutional difference?

TS: Well, look, it's important to keep in mind that the teachers I learned the most from were not discipline-bound. Barrington Moore wasn't even in a disciplinary department and didn't go to any professional meetings at all. And Marty Lipset, who was the other really important influence for me in many ways, bridged political science and sociology his entire career. He always felt — and I agree with this — that if you're studying the societal contexts of politics, there's no point in drawing intellectually on only one of these disciplines.

Now, that said, while I was at the University of Chicago — where we worked together — I was genuinely trying to do it all. I was bridging both disciplines. I was going to both professional meetings. I can remember the early years when I would go to a sociology annual meeting and a political science annual meeting a week apart. And one year, they were both in the Blackstone Hotel in Chicago. It was amazing because the sociologists were all running around in sandals, and there were a lot of women. The political science meetings were still mostly men who were looking very serious and wearing ties at that point.

I had to learn to speak different disciplinary languages. Somebody once watched me give back-to-back speeches at the University of Minnesota, where I was talking about the New Deal work, and I referred to "interest groups" when I spoke to the political science department, "classes" when I talked with the sociologists, and I was talking about exactly the same study.

At a certain point, it just became very hard to be fully involved in both disciplinary professional activities. When I returned to Harvard, I was being proscribed by the powers that be because of the way I had returned after winning an internal tenure appeal case. I was in the sociology department, but my intellectual friends — the people who were kind to me — were in the government department, which is what we call political science. Then I was defeated for

the presidency of the ASA, and I just stopped going as much because it was a lot to go to both annual meetings.

But I consider myself to draw intellectually on sociological ideas always, so I don't think of myself as having left sociology as an intellectual enterprise. In many ways, I use sociological concepts to answer political science questions. But that's not different from what people like Seymour Martin Lipset, Barrington Moore, and even Reinhard Bendix did, or even somebody like C. Wright Mills. All of them did a scholarship that inspired me.

So, the question is: which professional discipline are you trying to build in? First in my career, a bunch of us built "comparative-historical sociology". It was institutionalized; it was fine. And then the job was to build "historical institutionalism" in political science.

EA: Right. Although your work is mainly published in political science journals and embedded in political science discussions, it seems highly sociological, in both method and at least partly in argumentation. For instance, a focus on the political organization and mobilization of everyday people and their influence in political life has been more typical of scholarship in political sociology and social movements than in political science. Similarly, treating political parties as hollowed out and largely dominated by various organized groups, as per "the UCLA school", is a more sociological take on political parties than has typically been standard among political scientists, though perhaps it is becoming more and more so. You look at the recent Pierson–Schickler book about polarization [Paul Pierson & Eric Schickler's *Partisan Nation* (2024)] — you mentioned in your lecture — it seems like Lipset's overlapping cleavages argument, repurposed and altered to address a somewhat different issue.

TS: Yeah, Paul Pierson and Eric Schickler and the people that I hang out with within political science are all very sociological in many ways. They would say "political economy". But this is another way of saying that it's intellectually eclectic. And here's the thing. The sociology discipline had to be where I started. I could never have written *States and Social Revolutions* (Skocpol, 1979) in a political science department for a PhD thesis because back then, that discipline separated countries into different areas of the world. At the time, I was young in sociology, it was a free-for-all. And remember, the giants of the field were people like Daniel Bell and Martin Lipset — people who really didn't care about whether you knew the latest statistical technique or crossed subdiscipline boundaries or anything else. They were big-question people.

So, it was vital that I started in sociology, but in recent decades, political science has evolved as a discipline. It's much less boxy. People cross the boundary between American and comparative all the time now. In fact, in the strongest departments, they also combine different methodologies. And it's a big-tent discipline, a borrowing discipline. It studies politics, yet borrows from economics, from philosophy, from sociology. Yeah, political science is a higher prestige discipline, and it often has more resources, but political scientists are still intellectual borrowers. Still, at Harvard, I am affiliated with both departments, Sociology and Government.

I don't go to very many faculty meetings at all — but I stopped going to Harvard Sociology meetings a long time ago. When I returned to Harvard in the 1980s, many in the Sociology Department made my life miserable, and the Government Department initially refused to accept me as a faculty member. I had no department, really. After years of that, I finally won the top award in political science for my book *Protecting Soldiers and Mothers*, and the Government Department voted to accept me on their faculty. I just said, okay, I'm going to be in a place where I'm not excluded and treated like a witch all the time, as I was then in Sociology.

EA: I remember that because we were working together when you were moving back there. It just seemed horrific, actually — the treatment you were receiving in Sociology. I suppose that was one big push factor. The editors want me to ask you where you think social science should go more generally. I guess you already answered that to some extent, but do you want to say more?

TS: Well, social science has to answer questions that people beyond academia care about because we're not in a period where academia can just be self-referential as it grows infinitely. I think there are challenges to understand what's going on in the United States and the world and to talk about it to broad audiences in plain language, which, as you know, I've championed for a long time.

3 The Crisis in Higher Education

EA: Let's chat about higher education a little bit. Higher education is generally seen as being in a kind of crisis. And I was wondering how you see that crisis. Has it been in crisis for a long time, and it's just more of the same? Or are these recent incursions by the Trump administration the main cause or the main impetus to the crisis? How do you see the crisis in relation to some of the broader social-structural and political-structural ideas that you work with in your analyses? Is there anything specific that you gained from your position as having been a dean at Harvard that gives you special insight into this issue, more so than just as a scholar?

TS: Well, I was only the Dean of the Harvard Graduate School of Arts and Sciences briefly, and the Graduate School at Harvard is in charge of PhD programs across the university. The part I loved the most — well, there were two parts I loved the most. I loved getting to know the entire university. I spent a fair amount of time at the medical school, for example, which is a different world — a very, very different world. But they have some PhD programs. Some universities divide those up by the major schools, but Harvard has all the PhD programs — even including joint ones with other schools besides Arts and Sciences — under one jurisdiction. So, I got to meet people all over the place, and I loved that. I liked finding out what the organizational politics and structure were like in different places.

In addition, I did some special studies for Harvard President Derek Bok, where I went and interviewed people and found out why they hated each other. I like doing that kind of work and then analyzing it and writing it up.

As a dean overseeing PhD programs, I also used all my social science knowledge. I recognized right away that being a dean was not a command position — especially at Harvard. I mean, try telling Harvard faculty members what to do; you can't. Before me, one graduate dean after another had tried to either boss individual faculty or boss graduate students to get them finished sooner. I just didn't do that; instead, I assembled a lot of data and put up charts showing departments how they were doing compared to each other and got them embarrassed into making changes. And I persuaded President Larry Summers (who was in office for a year during my tenure as dean) to give me more money for a graduate education year — a PhD year. Then I coupled that with saying to departments that they were going to lose admission slots if they didn't get their students done by G-8. What I did was to get the peers to pressure each other. I didn't order anybody to do anything. I mean, if you want to have graduate students forever, well, you just admit fewer. These admissions slots were worth $250,000 to $300,000 apiece. So, I mean, I had faculty colleagues telling me I was destroying their subfield, and I

would just say, well, go talk to your colleagues. So, I did use my sociological knowledge, and I used the garbage-can model of policy change from political science, which says you have policy proposals ready to go and take advantage of any governing opening. While I was dean, the administrators above me were all in chaos. Harvard was going through the Larry Summers crisis, which was endless. I would just appear with my data and my proposals and get them through with whoever I could persuade in the shifting power structure. But after a few exciting and productive years as dean, maneuvering to get improvements, I wasn't very sorry to give it up. I mean, I was glad to go back to being a faculty member and a teacher.

Look, higher education obviously has entered a different phase. You just have to look at the numbers. The post–World War II period up through the early 21st century was a period of expansion — demographics, resources — riding the U.S. hegemony and all the economic benefits that go with that. But it's been clear for some time that resources are tightening, particularly for state universities. I went to Michigan State University, so I'm well aware that state universities are the engines of American higher education — not elite places like Harvard, which admit so few people that they can't be the engine of the whole at all. The University of California system is obviously an engine, and then the public universities in the midwestern states. Sadly, they've been facing fiscal crisis for a long time as state governments have given in to anti-tax pressures and have subsidized them less, and they have thereby raised tuition and tried to compete for the same students as the super-rich private.

Then, if we get to the things that will make your readers angry at me, I do believe that we went too far in academia for a decade before Trump, in giving the impression that students' feelings matter more than what they learn. I literally have been in a university — and I know lots of colleagues around the country with similar experiences — where administrators send out constant emails saying, "You have to worry about how your students feel and their mental health, and you can't demand too much of them". All of that came to a head during COVID. We're at the point at Harvard where everybody thinks they should get an A, and they don't think they should do much to get it. That's not tenable. We in the universities also went overboard with trying to boost some groups over others. I am a big believer in equality. I fought for equality. I fought for my right as a high-performing woman to be at Harvard. But I believe in actual equality, applying the same standards to everyone, not using special quotas or excuses for particular groups. By now, we in the universities have gone from a situation where people are asking for bananas and oranges to get a special break to a situation where the Trumpists want to have their friends get the special breaks. That's what we're dealing with, and I don't believe in any of it. We should apply the same demanding standards to everyone, regardless of social characteristics or political views.

EA: Let me ask a little bit about the Trumpists and what they're doing. They're attacking universities pretty intensely. I'm wondering if at least part of this crisis is — partly the vulnerability that you mentioned, about the appearance of students being pampered on elite campuses — but also maybe how the public understands or misunderstands how higher education works. I think the public tends to see universities as largely teaching institutions — credentialing organizations that provide pathways for young people, especially those of higher classes, to get ahead — and not seeing them mainly as knowledge-creation scientific organizations, as they've long been. They're vulnerable with the heavy reliance on federal grants, especially, and I don't think the benefits of them are well understood by the public. I mean, try to explain how overhead works — they think that's just some kind of rip-off tax or something, instead of being necessary for keeping the lights on in laboratories.

The attacks from the political right initiated by Florida Governor Ron DeSantis and right-wing activist Christopher Rufo, recently supercharged by President Trump, on the "wokeness" of universities seem to have exploited and weaponized this misunderstanding of the mission of universities, which they are attacking for other reasons. They can't control universities. It's an institution they can't control, and they can't really replace it with, say, Christian universities. The right tends to try to replace institutions if they can — as with news media and think tanks — or have their own parallel set of institutions, but they can't really do that with universities. For institutions like that, they go on a full-out attack and try to delegitimize them in some ways. I'm wondering if this is part of how you see it, or if you see it differently?

TS: Well, I don't think there's any question that the Trump II regime came in with people prepared to defund all of the organizational and institutional sectors that they don't think they can control. To the degree that they have theorists, they do have people who believe that ideas are important, and they're right about that. So, influencing universities is a strategic goal for the current American far right.

But, the one thing I want to say is I don't believe this is a populist thing on the right. Remember, I spent a fair amount of time going out into the country during the first Trump presidency, visiting eight counties in Ohio, Pennsylvania, North Carolina, and Wisconsin. I never wrote a book about this, but I've used it in a lot of my fieldwork and interview findings in what I teach and write. I repeatedly visited Trump areas in rural places and medium-sized city areas and talked to ordinary people, including on the right, about what they were concerned about. Crime and immigration are what they're engaged about, whether or not they had any immigrants anywhere near them. I never — in that work and in the Tea Party face-to-face interviews I did some years earlier — I never found people actually attacking the scientific role of universities or even resenting university people once they got over the fear that I was there to pull a status thing on them. Of course, they were suspicious of someone from Harvard. My major technique for establishing enough rapport was to go to where they lived and worked, be very respectful, and never fulfill their fears that I was there to tell them what to do. That's how many ordinary right-leaning Americans think of Ivy League and university people in general — as coming to tell them what to do. And I don't know about you, but I'm in a university where there are plenty of people who are willing to go and tell people what to do — or not even go anywhere to engage communities directly but still tell them what to do.

When I did the fieldwork for the Tea Party stuff (Skocpol & Williamson, 2012) and later in the 2017–2020 Trump administration, people would treat me like a returning anthropologist when I came back to Cambridge. They were curious: what had I seen? What had I done? Well, what I had done was go to places and sit down with people across the spectrum in a series of real-world jobs and listen to what they had to say. But I have to say, I never found people actually attacking the scientific role of universities or resenting university people once they realized I had come there to listen. They were delighted to talk to somebody from Harvard. They thought, you know, good — that they're paying attention to us. And sometimes they even said that. So I don't believe the Trumpist attack on universities — which is deliberate, systematic, vicious, and intended to destroy their resource base (why else would you defund cancer research?) — is popular. That's not something the MAGA base is demanding of them. The Trump officials on the attack against universities are often frustrated Ivy Leaguers themselves. The entire Trump II administration is a set of sycophantic, angry people — different sets of them. And the people going after the universities mostly went to these universities. They're like J.D. Vance. They think, "I was smart, but the university treated other people as smarter than me." They all resent some woman — particularly some Black woman — who told them what to do or who got what

they think they deserved. It's an elite thing, not populism. That doesn't make it less dangerous, but as I see it, the attack on universities is not driven by popular opinion.

EA: I think that's right — that they're just using their position to work on their pet right-wing projects because they have the ability to do so. Their thinking is: Why not give it a try? What do you think of the response of universities so far to the various attempts by the administration to shake them down, influence their processes and practices, defund them (as you mention), and the incursions on academic freedoms?

We have seen many universities give in in some ways or make deals. They tried this "compact for academic excellence in higher education" to get nine universities to sign off on. Some of these things haven't worked — like the harder stance the administration took against Harvard doesn't seem to be working — but there does seem to be a relatively weak collective response. You don't see universities banding together to say, "None of us are doing this". Maybe it's only happening when they go way over the top in their demands, but a number of them — Columbia, Northwestern, among others — have tried to negotiate with the administration to regain funding. There hasn't been a collective response. I also want to know what you think of Harvard specifically, given its leading role among universities and in public understanding as standing in for elite universities.

TS: Well, I anticipated a lot of what would happen if Trump were reelected, but I did not anticipate the quick acquiescence of almost every American elite sector. The universities are part of a larger story. In many ways, it started with law firms — or you could say it started with the fact that we no longer have corporations so much as we have megalomaniacal multibillionaire tech bros who operate as individuals — sycophants trying to buy their way in. Musk is the most obvious, but they're all that way right now. They're inescapable because they control huge sectors of internet-enabled stuff that everybody needs. In some ways, Musk is the most vulnerable because of Tesla.

The universities are not an exemplary story of collective action, but they're not as bad as the other elite institutions. I want to be careful here because I'm not sure we know how much informal coordination has been going on among university leaders. Obviously, there has not been a big public thing. That would be very difficult to do — there are so many colleges and universities, and even so many fairly important ones. They're divided between the overly rich private universities and the major public universities and university systems. This is where Harvard was very important. I think Harvard, like everybody else, wanted to find a way to make a deal, because what nobody anticipated — and I think it's fair to say that nobody did — was the attack on overhead and the attack on scientific research.

That, along with the attack on international students, could destroy these institutions. University administrators in our era are not profiles in courage. They are picked to go along to get along. They're also picked for courting donors. And when Trump II arrived, the universities were reeling in the aftermath of the October 7th stuff, which really nobody anticipated and wasn't handled well in a lot of cases — but I'm not sure how you would have handled the explosion of conflict and anger over an intractable and tragic set of international circumstances that were gruesomely dramatized from the first moment and aroused lots of divisions on campuses. So you go into the Trump II administration with that, and then you're hit with the scientific cuts.

I do think that Harvard's push back ended up being very important — and still is — because the Trump administration is not something you can make a deal with. It's a series of competing sycophantic centers of power. They're all trying to outdo each other in whomping whatever

enemies they're focused on. They go to Trump — in between his TV appearances and his international trips, to be treated like a king and his efforts to make more money for his family — and get him to sign off on one or another extreme thing.

There have been competing centers even trying to whomp Harvard. Harvard tried to bargain, hired conservative lawyers, got in touch with its conservative donors, and tried to pretend that antisemitism was the real issue here, which, of course, it wasn't. Then Harvard's leaders got a letter that said, "We want to take over everything about you". I don't know that the Trump people were even coordinated in sending that letter. I mean, some tried to back off, but Trump never backs off from anything. So, Harvard could not sign on to that and responded, "Okay, we're going to court". They were prepared to do either, bargain or go to court, which was smart, I think. But they got backed into stiff resistance, and the next thing you know, our university administrators — I don't dislike them, and I support them. I'm very moderate on this, but I wouldn't have seen them as heroic resisters, yet they got stuck in resistance. They found themselves touted publicly for standing up to Trump II, and Harvard has symbolic status that far outruns anything real. A lot of people happy to see resistance send in money. Many of us on the faculty gave up 10% of our salaries. So Harvard's leaders are now in a position where I think they still want to make deals, they're still trying, but things are being proposed by Trump that they cannot sign on to.

The recently proposed Trump "university compact" was shocking because it was asking universities to give up their legal rights to any equal treatment. Harvard was not asked and has not agreed to such terms, but in the compact episode, the key player was MIT. Since it was about science funding — saying, "We'll give you science funding if you let us review your student admissions and go over all your faculty programs" — maybe the University of Texas or something would have gone along. I think they have, sort of. But MIT said no, and that sent a huge public message that this Trump demand would not work. If you don't give science funding to MIT, that's not going to sell to the American capitalist class — or even to most Americans.

EA: I think you're right that there was all this negotiation when they were just going after the money. But once they went after authority and control over the universities in addition to the money, Harvard had no choice but to fight them. On this compact, aside from Texas, I suppose other universities had no choice either.

TS: Texas is totally dominated by an extreme governor and GOP legislature. I mean, they're being purged. But I do think the major privates — and I would say Harvard and MIT in particular — have set an example and have drawn some lines. Harvard will make a deal if it just means giving money. I'm sure the administration is still trying, but I don't know that it's going to work, because I think the Trump II extremists are demanding individualized data on faculty, departments, and student admissions, which would set up 25 years of lawsuits. I mean, it would never end.

EA: I guess we'll see what happens here, but hopefully that behind-the-scenes coordination is going on.

TS: I think more of that is going on than we know among university administrators, consulting one another about red lines. Whether coordination crosses the public-private line among colleges is what I'm not clear about.

4 The Current U.S. Political Regime

EA: Let me turn to some political questions. I want to talk about your Madison Lecture (Skocpol, 2025) that was published earlier this year and written before Trump came back into power. There are several very prescient things in it that you thought might happen — that the president would fire federal employees, target political opponents, and deploy the National Guard for domestic repression. You nailed all that.

But there were some things — we just talked about the attack on higher education as being unexpected — I don't know if anyone expected that. You thought maybe the massive deportation drive would be harder to pull off; the upward-tilted tax cuts might split the coalition of the plutocrats and the ethno-nationalists — the second group depending a lot on social programs. Yet the "Big Beautiful Bill" passed with its huge regressive tax cut, cuts to Medicaid, while subsidies for Obamacare were allowed to expire. There's been a huge build-up and cash infusion to ICE. And the deportation drive has met with some resistance — as you would have expected — but it is still continuing. And it doesn't seem like there's been a lot of resistance in places aside from the bigger cities, which are resisting reasonably well. The red states have sent some National Guard to blue states — even to Washington, D.C. I'm wondering what happened here — why the resistance isn't greater than you might have expected?

TS: Well, let's talk about what Trump II quickly turned into. The one thing I didn't anticipate was the huge — absolutely outsized and quick — infusion of money into ICE, and the ability to turn ICE and the Border Patrol—actually the Border Patrol more, because the Border Patrol is now taking over—into a secret police operation. I reread what I wrote, and I said he would pardon the January 6th people, and they would be recruited to these organizations. And I think that's exactly what's going on. So it's a secret police operation, and I don't think we've seen anything like the full extent of its deployment. And that is terrifying.

We don't yet know whether the Supreme Court is going to sign off on overturning federalist limits. I've got a lot of friends who are totally cynical about the Supreme Court, and I think there's reason to be, but I'm not sure they installed a military dictator as opposed to an executive beyond legal rules. That was in many ways the crucial step. [*Trump v. United States*, 2024, which granted the president immunity from prosecution for most official acts]. It occurred before Trump was elected. But we'll see if SCOTUS goes further to say he can deploy the regular military and move around nationalized state guards anywhere he wants, anytime he wants. If SCOTUS allows that, then I don't think there'll be a 2028 presidential election. I don't believe Trump's military style interventions in the states can unfold fast enough to prevent the 2026 midterms, but I'm not sure. So, I did not anticipate the full thrust of coercive authoritarian efforts, but I think there's more resistance going on than meets the eye.

I also want to stress that the fact that the Big Beautiful Bill passed does not mean it's all going to stick. It's unresolved whether this massive transfer of resources to the wealthiest through the tax code and through contracting — which is the other big thing — will stick in the face of the ongoing need to gut popular and much-needed subsidies. Those Obamacare subsidies are critical to red areas, and Medicaid expenditures are as well. We're going to see starting today (Election Day, November 4) whether the key player in all this — which is the Republican Party — loosens up a bit and is willing to walk the plank along with Donald Trump.

Donald Trump's not going to be president again. The question is whether Trump II accomplishments will all be institutionalized. And right now, virtually all Republican elites are on board with him. They're all on board with everything, as I anticipated, and I also wrote about

the courts as well as about the radicalization of the Republican Party. The GOP Congress and party operations and the revamped Supreme Court are more important than Trump himself. Trump personally needs all these facilitators, because he is personally unfocused and mainly interested in enriching his family and getting on TV.

EA: You mentioned the coalition between plutocrats and ethno-nationalists. As you say, in red areas, Obamacare subsidies matter, Medicaid matters, SNAP matters. The ethno-nationalist part of the coalition seems to rely on these. So far, as you say, the congressional Republican Party has been pretty much a rubber stamp for Trump. It doesn't even seem to exist as a separate entity. You see Speaker Mike Johnson. When reporters ask him, he claims he doesn't know anything. Which can't be true. It's "I don't know that Trump just gave someone a pardon". Or "I don't know that Trump said that". But he does know, and I'm sure they all know, but they just won't say it, and they will roll with him, support him, pretty much on anything right now. But it does seem to be coming to some head — you see Marjorie Taylor Greene as maybe the only rebel among them, reacting against her party's health care cuts.

TS: Well, yes, Johnson does know. There are two dynamics to watch in the Republican orbit. One is if the Democrats really sweep everything today (November 4, 2025) — and I think they will. It's all margins. There are some down-ballot things that matter in Maine and Pennsylvania. But if Democrats do really well, will some of the Republicans begin to get restless? I think so. I think there'll be a partial victory for Democrats in forcing some revisions in the cutbacks. And I don't think it matters if the Democrats keep the government closed or don't provide the votes for reopening it without overcoming the filibuster, because I think they've already won this. They've overcome the media disadvantage; they've made visible some of these upward-redistributive steps. So that's good. And if the Democrats can avoid self-destruction or left-versus-right infighting — which I'm not confident they can — then they'll probably be in a good position to have a chance to take the House in November 2026. That will matter. The other dynamic that will be underway starting tomorrow is people — this is Marjorie Taylor Greene—positioning themselves to inherit the MAGA movement after Trump. Because there are a lot of people who don't believe J.D. Vance has that charisma. The only place changes can be accomplished are elections.

EA: Yes, today will be a good one. The election results, and possibly some Republicans, after seeing what happens, reading the political tea leaves, and checking the polls on Trump's high unpopularity, will try to figure out some ways to distance themselves — possibly through policy. I'm a little worried, though. You see people voting against their economic interests all the time in the United States. As you noted anti-immigration sentiment is quite high even in places without immigrants. If these moves — this deportation drive and other moves to "own the liberals" — are compensatory — even this policy of shooting down suspected drug-running boats with foreign nationals in them, which seems completely illegal and immoral — maybe that will be enough to appease some constituents.

TS: The immigration thing is interesting. I'm looking forward to hearing Mary Waters's lectures on that in the last part of our Gen Ed class that we teach together at Harvard. I don't know for sure what the data show about how successful they actually have been in deporting the numbers they're aiming at. Above all, the key thing — which is not going to be highly visible and has to be brought out through research — is what they're doing about the fact that a lot of the industries that the aligned red states and rich people in their coalition rely on employ

a lot of undocumented laborers.

I went to see the Harvard administrators right after the election and said: You've got to be prepared. They're going to do a lot of theatrical stuff about immigration. They're going to come into liberal areas — just like when they grabbed that woman [Rümeysa Öztürk] at Tufts — and try to rile up everybody in the liberal cities. But they're going to have trouble with the numbers because the numbers are in places like Texas and Florida as well as California, where industries depend on these workers.

EA: Do you think right now that they're going to keep doing this high-pageantry move of going into cities and having these roundups — while they're not going to touch their supporters who rely on labor. They'll just go into Chicago and keep grabbing people off the street?

TS: Well, they have a problem because they've got the outright fascists — Stephen Miller and others — in charge of "mass deportation". And they've got some of these red state governors, like in Florida and Texas, who are true believers. They're not getting the memo that this is just theater to provoke liberals, I haven't seen any research, but things cannot be good in the Florida labor market. They depend on construction workers, agricultural workers, elder care workers — you name it, they need undocumented people to do low-wage essential jobs.

So I don't think we know yet whether Trump II is going to reach promised deportation numbers, but we do know that they're building a secret police force, which I didn't fully anticipate. And we know that Congress voted a huge amount of money for this new force under Trump's personal control. It's very important that the Democrats retake the House of Representatives, because then they can cut back on those resource infusions, and they need to do that. Because that police force is self-propelling — probably already unstoppable in many ways. And the thing is, whatever the economic consequences, these Trump II aligned people are acting like they're not going to face another election.

5 On the Road to Authoritarianism?

EA: I don't know whether they're right about that. Well, let's address the authoritarian question here. A lot of people think we're well on our way to authoritarianism — scholars, commentators. And there do seem to be many moves in this direction — especially, as you say, with ICE and the new national police force, with the Republicans in Congress and the Supreme Court giving the president pretty much anything he wants. They passed the One Big Beautiful Bill Act, and there's really nothing else on their legislative agenda. All the stuff the administration wants to do is through the executive branch. You see all these moves that seem obviously illegal — refusing to spend funds Congress appropriated; decimating cabinet departments created by law; allowing ICE and the Border Patrol to detain people based on appearance, language, occupation; killing foreign nationals who are not combatants. These things are piling up.

The lying is over the top. As we mentioned, Mike Johnson has been a straight-up and persistent liar about what he claims to know. The Homeland Security secretary says, "ICE has arrested no U.S. citizens". She'll make a statement like that, despite video after video on social media of them arresting citizens one after another.

They have a kind of media control. The main media now are right-wing media, including social media, as you noted. And it's getting worse because the administration's rich allies are taking over one news outlet after another. Anything said by the administration is eagerly

backed by right-wing media, centered on Fox News. If news is negative, it is conveniently ignored, with right-wing media dropping the Jeffrey Epstein story. The professional news media seem not to push back much on this, usually going with a "both sides" approach. The professional news media are somewhat on their heels. CBS and ABC caved to frivolous lawsuits by Trump, and CBS News is now under the control of the right-wing activist Bari Weiss, after Paramount was sold to or merged with Skydance. David Ellison, the son of pro-Trump megabillionaire Larry Ellison, the second-richest person on earth, is now the chairman and CEO of Paramount Skydance, parent company of CBS. David Ellison installed Bari Weiss as editor in chief. He wants similarly to take over Warner Bros. Discovery and so possibly CNN could go that way next. Jeff Bezos at the *Washington Post*...

TS: Oh, it's been gutted.

EA: They fired a columnist [Karen Attiah] just for posting things that Charlie Kirk had said. Yeah, it's completely gutted. They recently had an editorial in favor of the literal gutting of the East Wing of the White House, a project which Bezos is funding to some extent.

TS: They're all competing to pay bribes–media moguls, tech moguls, organizations that want regulatory favors, criminals who want pardons. And by the way, that is what Democrats should be talking about — the open corruption — because that is an old thing. And people can see it. More and more Americans see that we're already in a lawless and corrupt regime.

I would call it a corrupt patrimonial regime. There's a book by a couple of political scientists [*The Assault on the State* (Hanson & Kopstein, 2024)] that I find even more convincing than the analyses of some of my historical-institutional allies. I think this Trump II regime is the oldest form of rule in the world, where an enabled autocrat tries to make sure everybody has to come to him for favors and exceptions. Now, of course, if you marry that with transnational tech capitalists, you've got a juggernaut. And that is pretty scary. On the other hand, it doesn't always work. The plutocrats all tried to defeat Mamdani in New York. That's not working. Musk tried to fix an election in Wisconsin. That didn't work.

As long as people's right to vote is protected the patrimonial corrupt regime may not lock in — and electoral protection has to be the top priority. [Illinois] Governor [J.B.] Pritzker and other governors have got to worry about protecting those ballot boxes and the ballot-counting process. We are going to see the Trump Justice Department trying to take over election administration and vote counting for 2026. And that will accelerate after today, because the minute the Trumpists think they're really threatened, they triple down and quadruple down and ten-times down. So we haven't seen anything yet. And I don't know how it's going to turn out. We already are in a lawless regime, because if the Justice Department will not enforce the laws, all that's left is state prosecutors.

EA: Right. And the lower federal courts have been doing what they can to uphold the law for a while. Just recently, *The New York Times* published its list of 12 benchmarks of authoritarianism: stifle dissent and speech, persecute political opponents, bypass the legislature, use the military for domestic control, defy the courts, declare emergencies on false pretenses, vilify marginalized groups, control information and the news media, take over universities, create a cult of personality, use political power for personal gain, manipulate the law to stay in power. A lot of these have already happened and others are on their way to happening.

TS: I've studied the left, the right — everything in this country — and people do not like to be told what they can say. That one is not going to work. The media landscape needs a lot more research from people in our fields, because there are contradictory things going on. There's very

rapid concentration of outlets of the kind that enabled the Hungarian authoritarians — faster even than the Hungarian transition — but at the same time, there are many different kinds of outlets. And that's not so easy to control. Audiences matter, too. Look what happened when Trump tried to get rid of Jimmy Kimmel, of all people — who's not even a particularly militant comedian. That just didn't work.

Here's the thing, and I did say this in the Madison Lecture: in the final analysis, this is a movement — the MAGA movement — trying to use tax revenues collected from blue-state constituencies to tell blue states what to do. And what nobody's figured out yet is how to change the fiscal dynamics. I'm a little bit disappointed that there isn't a more concerted response — visibly concerted. For example, "You're going to cut off SNAP benefits? Okay, well, we're going to take advantage of existing nonprofit legal entities that people could be encouraged to contribute to and reduce their federal tax obligations".

You don't create new things where you have to apply for legal approval; you use an old shell. But the trouble — this gets us to the weaknesses of the left in this country — is that the left is highly invested in professionally staffed organizations. And we know — this is a sociological idea political scientists miss — that when an entity has a staff they're trying to maintain, they displace the goal. I see that as a problem.

EA: You mentioned in your lecture as well that there are various well-organized groups on the right — such as gun owners, evangelical Christians, police — and they're better and more strategically organized than groups tied to the Democratic Party. I'm wondering, if you see this sort of organizing as important for a long-term Democratic comeback, which groups can do this? I know you can't have just, as you say, advocacy groups in Washington representing groups. But how do you get from here to there?

TS: We ended up with very distorted immigration policies because advocacy groups were listened to more than rank-and-file Hispanics. Look, I think changes of direction and listening better are already happening. The question is whether that is happening enough or thoroughly on the center left. Democrats have to focus on state and local races. The state level, particularly, was completely ignored for way too long. And it turns out state governments — state legislatures — are critical. You just have to make gains in those. Some of that was happening after 2018 — the first resistance — and I think more can happen. But it's really important to build from that kind of bottom-up approach across the country, which means outreach and accepting that Democrats are going to be different and stress different issues in different places. I don't buy this idea of left versus right in the Democratic Party.

People tell me that Mamdani is going to be the face of the Democratic Party. I say, well, in New York, yeah. But, no, he isn't going to be the national face because New York City is a weird place. And the guy can't run for president — he's foreign-born. There should be many faces. And I think that's already happening.

EA: I think it's right that the states have to be targeted, but a couple of things there. With the nationalization of politics, the John Tester [former senator of Montana] and Joe Manchin [former senator of West Virginia] type can't really win anymore. What about someone who's trying to be a different type of Democrat in states like that?

TS: Here's the test case for 2026: Sherrod Brown. He is running against the things that the Trump administration is doing to ordinary people who live in Ohio, issues that are going to give him plenty to work with. So we'll see. Also, my husband and I are involved in Maine politics because we have a Maine summer home. Jared Golden — people on the left of the Democratic

Party don't like him — but he's the guy who can win. He's always there when the votes count. And so there is something that Democrats have to tell their purists. You've got a lot of them in California, don't you? We have them in Massachusetts too. People who think that preening a moralistic position and using the right word is more important than power. The big difference between the left and the right in this country is the right has had its eye on power. And the left has to keep that focus too, and that means embracing strange bedfellows in Democratic coalitions — it means a diverse party. That is even more necessary for the U.S. left than the right because Democrats cannot win national clout by prevailing in university towns and big cities alone.

EA: As you mentioned, at the state level many things can be done, but to really change things like the tax structure, that has to happen at the national level. Even things as important as public health — the Democrats have to have national control at some point, and maybe this is the way to do it.

TS: Well, in the public-health area, you're seeing very promising developments. You know the RFK Jr. craziness — he has fired so many people out of the federal bureaucracies that you're seeing consortia on the West Coast and on the East Coast. And I think they're linking up and will create an alternative public-health regime. So that's one answer. One answer is that state governments should be hiring some of these people. In areas where they can — you can't do it in immigration policy — but you can do it in public health. Also, a few people have written about this, and I haven't mastered the mechanisms yet, but there are ways you can choke off some of the funding going to the federal coffers. Trump is trying to replace income taxes on the rich with tariffs that tax the less well off. He is trying to go back to the 19th century. But I don't think that's going to work. And they need the money from blue state taxes.

To some degree, you say to the Republicans, "Fine — do some tax cuts. We'll take more of those". For example, in the Big Beautiful Bill they had to compromise on the SALT [State and Local Tax] deduction. There are a lot of progressives on the left who think that's terrible because it's redistributive toward the well-to-do. Okay, that's true. In an ideal world, that's not the way to go. But in the real world, the SALT deduction subsidizes a strong public sector in California and the Northeast.

EA: Right — if you could start from scratch, you wouldn't have that state and local tax deduction, but under the circumstances — given that the states are so important, especially for filling gaps in social welfare and supporting universities — you need something like that now. You seem kind of optimistic here. I'm a little worried that — let's say Democrats do get back in power. But there's been a historical pattern of Republicans really messing things up and then Democrats having to put things back together again at the expense of their wider agenda — a kind of recovery and reform dilemma. With Bush, you had the Great Recession and the Iraq War; then Obama tries to put the pieces back together, while creating Obamacare. But there are many other things on the Democratic agenda they can't get to, including regarding climate change and the labor movement. Then Obama gets blamed for Bush-created unemployment, and his congressional support is gone. Then Biden comes into office and has to clean up Trump's policy messes — especially badly handling the COVID crisis. Biden passes the Inflation Reduction Act and temporarily ups the child tax credit, but then gets blamed for the resulting inflation like every other regime around the world. He and the Democrats are back out of power before getting very far on a policy agenda. Now you see huge deficits, social-policy cuts, the decimation of entire federal departments and agencies, and as you note,

all these undermining moves of the rule of law in the Justice Department and elsewhere. What would be the easiest thing for Democrats to do if they get back to power, and what would be the most difficult? If they develop a Project 2029, what could they do with it?

TS: I do not believe you can go back to what was there before. I do not. I've also discouraged people from talking about 2028 because I think 2026 is so important. 2026 is about getting a foothold that can throw roadblocks in the way of what is already a lawless Trump II regime.

EA: I think you're right that Democrats' getting control of one House puts roadblocks up. It allows for investigations that will get high public visibility because there's a lot of vulnerability there — which may lead to more momentum against this lawless regime in 2028. In the *New York Times* authoritarianism list, it includes developing a cult of personality and manipulating the law to sustain power. You mentioned people trying to be Trump's successor. In other authoritarian places, one person stays in power, but Trump can't really do that. And this might be the vulnerability of this authoritarian lawlessness you're talking about. Do you see it that way? Because you mentioned Trump cares about different things — he wants to enrich himself and his family, maybe win a Nobel Prize. A lot of Republicans are trying to position themselves to pick up the pieces, but I don't think they have Trump's cult of personality. With J.D. Vance — it doesn't seem like it could work.

TS: It can. Because they control the military, the Justice Department, and the secret police operation. They may not have to be popular. Look, I think 2026 is what the center-left needs to focus on. But there does need to be — and maybe this is a role for academics — some thinking about what a revitalized American representative, accountable government should be working for, and at what level. Apparently, a new book on the Justice Department argues that the damage done in the first Trump administration was enough to slow any reconstitution of an effective DOJ. And we know it wasn't effective under Merrick Garland — they waited too long to prosecute Trump. If non authoritarians get another chance at the federal level, they need to move quickly to put new practices and people in place and break the power of those who would revive the authoritarian project.

We need creative thinking about how to bolster the fiscal capacities of states and compacts of states. I think J.B. Pritzker is making a list of the things ICE agents are doing. At some point, I expect some state and local authorities to arrest some of these people who are doing vicious things. But those are aggressive, defensive maneuvers. Somebody has to be thinking about building a more resilient and responsive system. You're beginning to see that.

You're seeing people saying Supreme Court reform has to happen. I agree — except how will you do it? You've got to win all three branches and get rid of the filibuster. The courts are a huge problem, what I called "McConnellism", referring to the use of quasi legal forms to promote authoritarianism minority control. I think we underestimate how much McConnellism and its remake of SCOTUS contributed to all of this. It's the interplay of MAGA-ism and McConnellism that produced where we are. Playing hardball on the Supreme Court — McConnell's [Republican Senator Mitch] main concern for years — really paid off and ended up empowering Trump and the whole MAGA group who also use coercive, extra-legal tactics.

For Democrats, the advice is so simple that they may not do it: you have to know that you've got people in every district and every state. You have to work with those people. You have to enable them to communicate in low-tech ways with their neighbors and break the communications monopoly that the right has. It's not a high-priced consultant thing. It's not a "throw a lot of money at TV at the last minute" thing. There's lots of opportunity to push back and build an inclusive coalition. Mary Waters sent me this article about a retired doctor

in a conservative area of Wisconsin who finally just bought ads in the free supermarket handouts and started offering explanations of what's going on. His neighbors are all reading it, and they know him and respect him — and that's the key. They know him and they respect him. He's breaking the hold of the lying — of the propaganda — and helping people understand what's happening in their schools and clinics. That's what you've got to do. And I think there are green sprouts happening.

Back candidates who can win in their communities and states. Back people who are doing creative things like that. The ground is there, but it's not going to happen overnight. And it's not going to be a restoration of what was there before.

6 Conclusion: What Is to Be Done?

EA: Yeah, there definitely has to be something new — and a lot of creative thinking is needed, as you suggest. Let me wrap up on something personal. You talk about the importance of local engagement in politics — before the recording we discussed your history of participating in the civil rights movement. It'd be interesting to know your history of political engagement, especially lately — in local politics, local Democratic parties, other types of engagement. How's it gone for you? You mentioned Maine.

TS: Well, my husband Bill is retired as a physicist from Boston University, and we have a summer home in a swing county in Maine. And so he's actually been going door to door. We both support events and candidates in Maine and keep an eye on it. I do everything I can. I'm not the director anymore, but the Scholars Strategy Network had encouraged that kind of federated idea from the beginning. We have people all over, in all kinds of states, who are in touch with civic groups. But as for me, I'm an academic. That's what I do.

I think my major effect is through my teaching. I'm privileged to teach at Harvard, and I mainly teach undergraduates now. It's not that I don't work with graduate students — I do — but mainly in research projects. I teach undergraduates in the classroom. And those undergraduates are going everywhere. I've got a bunch running for offices in key states around the country. It's great for me because they keep me informed about what's going on. Even if I don't have the energy to travel a thousand miles as much as I used to — though I love to drive — I can hear from them.

That is very important to me: teach how American politics really works and encourage people to go back to their home states. I have somebody in North Carolina, somebody in Pennsylvania, somebody in Florida right now. They're running for office or supporting key people who are. And another in Michigan. States are where action is. I encourage people to do that. Don't just travel to Washington or New York.

My side project is I study African American fraternal groups. I've got that on my website, and I teach a course. It is about the past, but it's very pertinent to the present — how people organized to get through Jim Crow. A lot of the students — so far, they're all African American — who take this seminar get it. They understand the point: connect to organizations that real people belong to. That's what I tell every Democratic consultant who gets in touch: forget the polls. Polls assume people are individual attitude carriers. Find out where people are hanging out, where people influence one another every day.

My husband and I have breakfast every morning at 6 a.m. with a group of people from all walks of life at the diner. We hear how they talk and think about things. And we can say a few things, too. Interspersed between the comments about the New England Patriots can

be a few points about what's happening with healthcare. But it's not heavy — it's relational. Democrats have to learn to do such social engagement. There are natural advantages on the right — gun clubs and church congregations — but Democrats can figure out where people hang out and where we know people who are part of that. That's how you shift the political ground over time.

EA: Both angles seem to matter. Helping to teach the past — in a way that is not the sugar-coated version the Trump administration wants — will be increasingly important. Having people spread out around the country with the motivations your students have, and engaging people where they are — as you're doing in the diner — and local events will also matter. This is making me somewhat more hopeful that things could turn — if not quickly — and that there are roles for all of us. Well, we have gone to the end of the time limit. Thank you for this interview.

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