



## S04E03: Is the world becoming less democratic?

### HOST

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### GUEST SPEAKERS

**David Runciman (University of Cambridge), Ahmed Mohamed (IAST), Kristin Michelitch (IAST)**

#### **Richard Westcott 00:03**

Hello and welcome to Crossing Channels. I'm Richard Westcott, is the world becoming less democratic? Well, that's the subject of the latest in our podcast collaboration between Cambridge University's Bennett Institute for Public Policy and the Institute for Advanced Study in Toulouse. As ever, we're going to use the interdisciplinary strengths of both institutions to explore a complex issue. Is the world truly becoming less democratic? If so, what's driving these changes, and are there ways to reverse the trend?

#### **Richard Westcott 00:47**

To explore the issues today, we have David Runciman, former head of the department of Politics and International Studies at Cambridge University. David, why don't you start us off? What does your research focus on?

#### **David Runciman 00:59**

So in relation to democracy, I'm interested in looking at it in broad historical perspective. I'm a historian of ideas. I'm interested in the varieties of democracy, not 10 years ago, 10 years hence, but maybe 100 years ago, 100 years from now.

**Richard Westcott** 01:13

Joining us from the IAST we have Kristin Michelitch and Ahmed Mohammed. Kristin, remind us of your main research interests.

**Kristin Michelitch** 01:18

Hi. Thanks for having me. My interests mainly revolve around investigating sources of and solutions to intergroup tensions and poorly functioning democratic processes, and I mostly examine this in the context of Sub Saharan Africa, where oftentimes the government is not safeguarding democracy or delivering vital public services well. And I'm oftentimes very interested in the role of political competition, mass media interventions or civil society information campaigns, as well as intergroup inequalities.

**Richard Westcott** 01:55

And Ahmed, what's the central focus of your research?

**Ahmed Mohamed** 01:56

So I focus more on the role of culture and religion in muslim societies, and especially how people think about politics, how people get mobilized into politics. Good example, this would be the, you know, the Arab Spring and its aftermath, and the role of religion in Arab countries. So that's kind of my primary area of focus.

**Richard Westcott** 02:18

Well, welcome to you all. Let's start off with the data and what the data tells us. It is a huge question. So in the year of elections, there have been increasing concerns about whether the world is getting less democratic. Recent studies contribute to this worrying trend. So according to the democracy index published by the Economist Intelligence, the number of people who have democratic rights fell from 3.9 billion to 2.3 billion between 2016 and 2023. Similarly, Freedom House reported that 2023 marked the 17th consecutive year of global democratic decline, with countries scoring lower on measures of civil liberties and political rights. And it's not just in the small states, but also in some of the world's most established democracies. Let's quickly start off. Kristen, could you give us a good, punchy definition of what we mean by a democracy? We might think we know, but what are we talking about here academically?

**Kristin Michelitch** 03:16

Well, that is a funny and hotly debated question in political science, but I think most political scientists agree that a minimalist definition is holding elections that are relatively clean with some modicum of competition between multiple political parties. However, there's a new initiative by the varieties of democracy Institute in Sweden that's "V hyphen dem.net online", and you can play around with a lot of their data. And they collect data for every single country in the world and every year since the country's birth. And you can examine thing very minuscule, things such as media bias or freedom from torture or freedom of domestic movement, all sorts of different things that have to do with rights or civil liberties. And when you look at these data, you can see that it really depends on the indicator you're looking at as to whether things are getting better or getting worse.

**Richard Westcott** 04:15

That's brilliant. Thank you very much for that definition. Now let's move on to the state of democracy. David, why do you think democracy might be in decline, and does this tend to be cyclical? Or are we seeing something unique in the last few years?

**David Runciman** 04:27

The image that used to be used for this was that democracy came in waves rather than cycles. So there's a way of thinking about the 20th century. There was a first wave after the First World War, Second wave after Second World War, third wave after the Cold War, and the view is the tide was coming up the beach. You know, democracy was spreading and spreading. I think it's not cyclical. I think the tide is receding. So the idea that somehow this is just a turning of the wheel and it's a hiatus before democracy continues its advance, would be naive and wrong. I think there are lots of signs that the high watermark of what we think of as democracy has been reached. But if you take that definition that we just heard from Kristin, I mean, as a historian, I think of democracy as a set of institutions as well. And what we mean by democracy is a very brief historical phenomenon. It's the last third, last quarter of the 20th century that high watermark, and it includes not just elections, but political parties, mass communication, media, freedom of the press, rule of law, welfare state politics, administrative state politics, all of these things came together in quite a tight package. And I think what we're seeing is not democracy collapsing or falling apart, but the package unraveling so those institutions don't sit well together anymore. The kind of media and communication we have doesn't necessarily fit modern political parties. It doesn't necessarily fit with the way the administrative state worked in the last years of the 20th century. So I would characterize it more as a coming apart, of a whole set of things that very briefly held together, and if you see it in that perspective, it's not that surprising that something that was really only tightly knitted together for maybe two or three decades should be coming under pressure. The reasons why it's coming under pressure are many and varied. What we're seeing is democracy becoming fractured, and the institution's fracturing, and that's a much more open ended scenario.

**Richard Westcott** 06:25

Ahmed, let's look at societies. I guess most of us have experience of a democracy that's more established in a wealthier country, but societies where democratic structures are still emerging, what do you see as the main say, cultural or societal values that shape the public faith in democracy. Are there particular elements that encourage or discourage democratic ideals?

**Ahmed Mohamed** 06:47

So I think, like one of the important things is to think about like, how people actually think of democracy. Why do they support democracy or not? So, for example, if you look at my region of expertise, which is the MENA region, one of the first thing that comes to people's minds when you ask them "what is democracy about?" They will mention economic growth. Partly because they just look at Western societies, and they're like, these societies are richer. They have democracy. They make this correlation. And like, if we get democracy, we become richer. And so the moment you start to fail on achieving this, democracy becomes comes under threat. You can see this a lot of examples on this, especially like in the countries that try to democratize after the wave of revolutions in the 2011. So take Tunisia which is the last case that kind of moved back away from democracy and back to

autocratization lately. And a big reason why this was the case because of the economic conditions and the instability that just came with the transition. And basically people start to shift their preferences gradually. So you could see that these understandings, how people think of democracy and what they understand, how they understand it, the country of the future of democracy in these places. Another, maybe, like, one of the interesting things, especially about countries that try to democratize and then fall back into the cage of autocracy, is the basically, the transitions require the level of patience to go through the pain of transition, the pain of disagreements and instabilities and societies actually, and different cultures have different levels of patience. So the one thing that's, you know, what we call democratic societies, or weird societies have, but they're actually more patient in general. So, like, if you do the marshmallow experiment, which is the famous experiment where you, like, you get a marshmallow today. Or marshmallow today or two tomorrow, and across countries, you see quite different, stark differences across societies on this. And this is actually matters for a democratic transition, because we have to wade through this period, and if you can't wait, you start to make wrong choices. And that just derails the democratic experiment away from its trajectory.

**David Runciman** 08:42

But I think it is also true that societies that were patient are becoming less patient, so that's one of the ways in which these institutions are finding it hard to hold that package together. I mean, this is not simply a product, though. It's largely a product of the change in information technology, but the threshold for the point at which people express their impatience is massively lower than it was 20 years ago, where the outlets for impatience were much more curtailed. That account Ahmed gave is very good way of thinking about not just the differences between societies, but the difference between now and 20 years ago. We have all, I think, crossed an impatience threshold. Just think of our own lives, right? Think how much more impatient we are than we used to be about certain things, and then right, that large, across a whole society. And you see, we have shifted too.

**Richard Westcott** 09:38

And do you think the biggest factor in that impatience is just access to information online, quickly and opinions online, or is it other things? Why are we less patient?

**David Runciman** 09:40

It's a very good question, and I think some of it is sort of reinforcement of certain expectations around this technology. And I think it also speaks to the fact that impatience is a bad quality for the establishment of democratic institutions. But on other measures, impatience is a democratic quality, the ability to express your frustration in real time with the things that are being done on your behalf by politicians or bureaucrats or even by corporations or the people who provide you with services. That is a democratic quality too. And I think one feature of this whole story is that the things that are eroding democracy are also enhancing it. I mean, that's true of this technology. We have far greater access for expressing our frustrations. That is a democratic value. The suppression of the expression of frustration is a way of suppressing democracy, and at the same time, it is a threat to the institutional arrangements that we relied on 2030 years ago. So it's quite a complicated arrangement here, and I think we need to be wary of thinking that anything that erodes the institutions is inherently undemocratic.

**Richard Westcott 10:46**

Kristen, what do you think are the key drivers driving the shift away from democratic values, things like inter group tensions and inequalities, ethnicity, gender, how do they contribute to democratic erosion?

**Kristin Michelitch 10:59**

Elections tend to generate winners and losers. And when people are election losers they actually report being much less satisfied with democracy. If people are perpetually in the losing side, then this can obviously become very, very frustrating. But one thing that my research shows is, you know, when I think of political competition, I've examined the role of the electoral cycle, the idea that elections are the apex of political competition. This is the time when who's in power is decided, and what the data show is actually polarization spikes around election time. And people can feel this. You can feel this at the dinner table. This is why Thanksgiving is so poorly timed with the election cycle in the United States, for example. But some research also shows that even around election time, people can start discriminating against people that are opposite partisans. I have research showing this in Africa, but I think this is also true in the United States, and a lot of this kind of the ramping up towards the election, the media clearly plays a role in this. So I think that that's a key thing that we need to consider, is, how do we ensure that people can have access to more neutral political information. How can people be taught to be skeptical? Maybe this is something for school. How do people evaluate information, whether it could be biased? How can they consider alternative pieces of information and become more skeptical.

**Richard Westcott 12:43**

As a journalist this is very close to my heart as well. I mean, for example, at the BBC, they are now going into schools and talking to children about sources of information and where they're getting their information from. I want to stay on this technology and media side. So Ahmed, I mean, we've just seen the US election, and that was fascinating in terms of media, because the podcasts were very dominant, because X as a platform, was very dominant, because the Washington Post didn't bother coming out for a candidate, and no one really kind of cared or noticed. It felt like there was a big shift there. But do you think there's a shift to the technology and the media make in the world less democratic because of these echo chambers? Has it the potential to also make it more democratic? What do you think the role of media is at the moment? Is it just too early to say?

**Ahmed Mohamed 13:27**

It's not an easy question. Just say, because yes, you have the issue of the echo chambers. And the echo chambers are not just based on your own, you know, choice of your social circles. You know, even algorithms propagate these echo chambers. Right when I go on YouTube or Tik Tok, or you start to see the same and same content, you start to be in this bubble. This is maybe, like, perhaps one negative thing, because that increases that relates to polarization and your exposure to certain type of information, not the other side. There's also a lot of communication that happens across different political sides outside of this. These echo chambers are now you're not locked in them. There are ways that by which you can communicate, you can evaluate, but I agree that evaluating, being able to evaluate information, being able to assess the information, think about it critically, could matter even in this world, where you can be stuck in these chambers. But again, like not snot, like you know, say that media is bad or good. Media is a tool, and it increases our access to



information. Increases our access to different opinions. We might not choose to be exposed to these different opinions. For example, myself, like I'm generally, like, always in relatively liberal circles, and happen to, you know, just, you know, look at a couple of Tik Tok videos that just dragged me into a conservative bubble. And it was very interesting for me, because it's just a whole set of opinions that I haven't seen before. Just because I'm in certain social services don't expose me. So I feel like I became more informed, maybe slightly misinformed in some issues, but like also slightly more informative, like the diversity of opinions and how people, like, you know, justify their different positions. I think that's important to be exposed to these different things. I think it's like a double edged weapon in a way, and it definitely increases polarization in society. So that's that's some another thing that might not have to do, might not affect necessarily your political who comes to power, but it might affect your social relations, interaction with other groups negatively, and that matters, of course, for society in general.

**David Runciman** 15:20

Yeah. The US election is interesting because on the one hand, it has been called the first podcast election. On the other hand, it was, and this is another label for it—it was a price of eggs election. A lot of people have pointed out it's a classic post inflationary spike election, and it is true and we haven't mentioned it, but in this year of elections, incumbents around the world of left and right have been turfed out of office because people are pissed off, and they may be pissed off with the price of eggs, in which case, this isn't particularly new. These things are going on simultaneously. It was both the first podcast election and a price of eggs election. These elections are both recognizably the same kinds of events as they were 50 years ago and they're also completely different.

**Richard Westcott** 16:08

[Cause you led a project on technology and democracy.](#) In your project, I had a look through some of the questions you were looking to answer, and one of them really stood out for me, and it was one of the implications for democracy of the pervasive surveillance now practiced by governments and corporations. I mean, you know, the use of data that sort of the way that governments can go straight in and target specific people on specific streets and potentially target them with tailored advertising and so on. But what did you sort of conclude when you looked into those implications for democracy of all the use of data by governments and by companies?

**David Runciman** 16.36

Yeah, I think we can overstate the effectiveness of, for instance, tailored advertising. We know that ads are tailored at us all the time online, and we know that we are broadly resistant to that, so there can be quite a lot of hype around that. I tend to think of this differently, which is, with the digital technology revolution, two things happen at the same time. We got more access to information about them, and by we, I mean citizens, let's treat us all as citizens, and they got more access to information about us. These things happened together, and at the dawn of the information technology revolution, there was a lot of hope that the first of those two things would be the decisive force. This was a democratizing effect. Citizens would be better informed and better able to scrutinize to keep an eye on their governments. It turns out, the opposite is true. Governments are better able to keep an eye on us than we are on them, and I think the reason for that is clear, which is, they are more incentivized to watch us than we are to watch them at a basic level, governments,

corporations, concentrations of power, where people are employed to do this. There was a feeling 25 years ago that the Chinese political system couldn't survive the age of the internet. It turns out it survives fine, because it just employs millions of people to monitor citizens, because that's what it's set up to do. Its incentive structure is to be a monitoring organisation, and we citizens of democratic societies are not incentivized that way, and I think that is the big imbalance that we are seeing playing out. This is one of the reasons why the internet has been good for autocracy, not because somehow these people have sort of mastered how to use it, but because they have a very strong incentive to spy on us, which outweighs our incentive to spy on them. It's like an arms race, and we citizens are losing that arms race. Now I don't have the answer to what you can do to level the playing field, but we should at least give up on the naive idea that somehow we individuals and it is a collective action problem, we individuals can come together and democratically scrutinize our governments in a way that's anything like how they can scrutinize us. And that is, in part, the story of the last 20 years. It is that democratic citizens have been losing that arms race.

**Richard Westcott** 18:58

Before we do a bit of future gazing, Ahmed, I just want to bring you in quickly to talk about the role of religion in less democratic societies. How do you see religion influencing political systems?

**Ahmed Mohamed** 19:09

The first thing we can think about is just actually bringing people to participate in politics. So religion is a mobilizing force, and that gradually could actually shape how parties think about their own platforms, right? So, religion matters in its ability to mobilize, it's also ability to shape people's preferences for things and different policies. You know, you get the abortion debate in the US, and you got different types of debates in different parts of the world that around similar issues in more, I would say, like, more developing and more divided societies, you also see religion becoming a very important cleavage. So like, political cleavage. So like, it's a source of division, and politicians could exploit this to their advantage, right? So like, they could, you know, appeal to certain groups at the expense of others. So like, you need to more inequalities delivering. Policies that could discriminate against certain groups. So we see that religion could also spark these divisions. But we also don't want to look at religion mainly as a, you know, in a positive or negative lens. Again, it is one of the features of societies, and it could be channeled to positive change. It could be channeled to negative change, the religious norms or religious institutions such as mosques or temples, could actually matter in holding at least local elites accountable. So it's not a black or white picture, you know, but it's something in between. It depends on the context and it depends on what kind of outcomes you want to look at and understand.

**Richard Westcott** 20:37

Kristin, do you want to come on this?

**Kristin Michelitch** 20:38

I think we need to make a distinction between ideological polarization and effective polarization. The ideological polarization is actually whether people's values and political preferences are different and getting more and more and more and more different, whereas effective polarization is something more about distaste bad versus good feelings towards members across the aisle. So this is, you know, a very different game, the persuasion game

versus the turnout game. And in a lot of places where ideology really isn't shifting all that much, then what's being played is really this turnout game and attempts to effectively polarize people. And unfortunately, what this can lead to is that there can be more and more animosity between social groups in society that fall on opposite lines of the political divide.

**Richard Westcott** 21:39

Okay, let's do some looking to the future now. David, I'll bring you in. This is all about policies. Are there policies that democratic governments could introduce, bring in that would help spread democracy in more countries around the world for example?

**David Runciman** 21:55

I think the spreading democracy in more countries around the world, project is probably in trouble anyway. I think that brand has been somewhat trashed, so I wouldn't advise it as the central project. I would make a very confident prediction about what's going to happen to democracy, and that governments should think in these terms. The world is going to simultaneously get more democratic and less democratic at the same time. I think the kind of democracy that we associate with national governments that have been elected in these 3, 4, 5 or longer year cycles that is going to be squeezed. It is going to be progressively squeezed. Now it used to be said the nation state was too big for the small problems and too small for the big problems. That actually wasn't true in the 19th and 20th centuries, but it may well turn out to be true in the 21st. But more than that, I think all of us are going to experience parts of our lives, and national governments need to be very conscious of this, in which we have greater democratic expectations. So by democracy, I don't just mean elections. I mean the fundamental democratic value, which is people feel they have control over their own lives to the extent that they have the ability to push back against those who are trying to control them, and there will be more of that. I don't want to say it's good for democracy, but it is democracy in action. And at the same time, a lot of the way that the world is organised is going to be more and more remote from individual citizens. It's going to be in the hands of unaccountable bodies. It's going to be in the hands of international organisations. And the problems that the world faces will devolve to places that are quite a long way from electoral politics. People like me grew up in an age where our political imaginations were pretty stunted because we thought democracy was this late 20th century model, and that model is now fracturing and coming apart. And we need to broaden our imagination so that we don't think the task is to put the egg back together again, you know, to sort of reassemble the pieces, but to find a way of doing democracy which accommodates the fact it's pulling in different directions. And it's a hard thing to say, because if people hear you saying elections aren't the be all and end all of democracy, that can sound like you're giving up on it. So they are a necessary condition, but they are absolutely not a sufficient condition, and we've increasingly become fixated on it. The world has just spent 10 months fixating on the American election. Was that a productive use of our time?

**Richard Westcott** 24:26

Ahmed, where do you see the next, say, 20 years going in the world?

**Ahmed Mohamed** 24:30

It might go either way, right? We don't really know. But I think that the bottom, the bottom line is, like, at the end, would people be better off. If not, I think, like, you know, yes,



technology and change that happen could empower people. They could also give governments new ways of subverting people. There is a process of learning, adaptation and evolution. So people learn adapt, find new ways. Governments learn adapt and find new ways. I tend to be optimistic that at the end, actually, things are still going to be better than the other historically, even if we look at the moment we're in, it's still probably better than the moment we were at, like 100 years ago, in terms of representation of people's preferences, having more maybe responsive and accountable governance than it used to be. There will be ups and downs. There will be times where we are upset and it's hard, but also, like, you know, that's it. Again, depends on which side you're on. Sometimes you're going to be on the losing side, and you'll think that, you know, the system is not working for you, and sometimes you're on the winning side, and you think, well, it's finally actually moving forward. The equilibrium is that probably everybody is better off in the long run, but the process itself. And again, we said, like, you know, democracy is a process of investment. You're investing in a system hoping they will get you something in the future. And it might fail. There's a chance, but it might also succeed. And generally, it tends to succeed more than fail, even if we, you know, have lots of frustrations, but and it's eventually, it might be better than other systems that you know, you get stuck in, and it's very hard to get out from. So, you know, maybe the bar is low in these expectations, and, you know, that's very but I think, like we should think of history as moving forward. Yes, there will be hiccups, but at the end, you know, the hiccups are just a small period on a long trajectory of our experience.

**Richard Westcott** 26:25

Kristen, I'll leave the last word to you. As an American, I'm interested, do you think the last American election, and actually there's one before that as well, has that changed democracy and elections in what we would call the Western world, I guess, forever?

**Kristin Michelitch** 26:39

Ah, that's a big question. I think that the elections recently in the United States have been shocking because of the anti democratic values that have kept in in particular, you know, the violent riot that stormed the capitol being like, a very good example of that, but also a lot of the rhetoric around the elections, and so I think that that scared people, but what I'm hoping is that the pendulum will therefore swing. And here's how I think that we can help it swing in a positive direction. I think that we really need to focus on youth in the country, and this could be any country, not just the United States, but I think there's a very important role for school. And in school, I think it's very important that broadly, you know, when you're a teenager and you're coming of age, you're about to vote, you're about to participate as an adult in society that you have had exposure to, what are democratic values? What are debates about these values? What are authoritarian values? How has this looked in the past? How has this looked cross nationally? I think it's important also, as we were talking about before, to have data and information literacy. This involves statistics classes. Where do statistics come from? How can they be manipulated? And then finally, I think that we need to have classes about history that are honest. And in most countries, we don't have it. Germany might be an exception, but in most countries, there's no historical honesty about what happened between different groups in society, which groups were disadvantaged. But we need to have some historical understanding of what actually happened in an honest way, and conversations about, how do we live together moving forward? And I think one thing that's on everybody's mind after this last American election is this whole idea of, you know, men, whites and Christians who feel oppressed. And of course, we commonly think about

these groups as being historically advantaged in this country, but currently these groups feel that they're disadvantaged. But also we need to have active dialog about the role of these groups moving forward. So rather than having, you know, women's studies, I think we need to shift the focus to men's studies. What is masculinity now? What does it mean to be a good, good guy or a bad guy? So that's something I task with men to figure out.

**Richard Westcott** 29:30

Okay, I'll get thinking on that one. Thank you so much. That's all we've got time for for this episode, fantastic insights from all three of you. So thanks to David Runciman from Cambridge University and Kristin Michi and Ahmed Mohammed from the Institute for Advanced Study in Toulouse. Now let us know what you think of this latest episode of season four of crossing channels. Do please leave us a review. Your feedback really does help us shape future episodes, and it helps people find us as well. So we do appreciate it. And do please listen to other crossing channels, episodes, including our last one, which was on mental health amongst young people. Join us next month, where we'll be talking about how data impacts our lives.