

We Are Sleepwalking Into Autocracy

Summary

The article describes the author's concerns about the state of democracy in the United States. The author believes that the Democratic Party needs to broaden its appeal beyond its current base and embrace a more populist economic message. The author also argues that the Democratic Party needs to be more aggressive in defending democracy and protecting the rule of law.

Senator Chris Murphy, of Connecticut, describes how free and fair elections might end in America as soon as 2026.

By [David Remnick](#) March 30, 2025

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Chris Murphy, the junior senator from Connecticut, hardly exudes the energy on the stump of the leading populist progressives in his party, Bernie Sanders and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez. He is preternaturally calm, and, when he says that his “hair is on fire” about the Trump Administration’s destruction of public norms and the rule of law, it is not initially convincing. And yet, in recent months, Murphy has tirelessly argued—on television, on TikTok, on [The New Yorker Radio Hour](#) this week—that unless the Democratic Party broadens its coalition with a primarily populist economic message and takes risks to oppose the [destruction of democratic](#)

[institutions](#), it will fail to mobilize popular support, continue to lose elections, and squander (as in [Hungary](#), [Turkey](#), and beyond) democracy itself.

Murphy, who is fifty-one, was a wunderkind, winning election to the House at thirty-three and to the Senate before his fortieth birthday. He argues not only that Donald Trump and the *MAGA* movement are threatening myriad institutions and making them bow to executive power but that the midterm elections of 2026 might be rendered undemocratic through the erosion of the infrastructure necessary for opposition to exist. And Trump, or a member of his family, may well be in position to take the White House two years later. Our conversation has been edited for length and clarity.

Senator, I wonder if we could try to define the crisis that we're in. I'm of the opinion that the Trump Administration is intent on creating an American-style authoritarian situation. Do you agree with me?

I do. Long ago, the Republican Party decided that they cared more about power than they did democracy. That's what January 6th was all about—regardless of who won the election, they wanted to make sure that their person was in charge. They believe, and have long believed, that the Democratic Party progressives are an existential threat to the country, and thus any means justifies the end—which is making sure that a Democrat never again wins a national election. So, this seems pretty purposeful and transparent—this decision to rig the rules of democracy so that you still hold elections, but the minority party, the opposition party, is rendered just weak enough, and the rules are tilted toward the majority party just enough, so that Donald Trump and Republicans and the Trump family rule forever. And, of course, this is not an unfamiliar system. This is Hungary, this is Turkey, this is Serbia. There are plenty of countries, all around the world, that hold elections—it's just that one party continues to win. And that is, I think, the very concrete, very transparent plan that Trump and his White House are implementing right now.

Why do your Republican colleagues put up with this? Do they fess up to

it when you talk to them in private?

They do not fess up to the plan behind closed doors. They are living in a self-created delusion. Most of them will tell you that it's not as bad as you think. Yes, Donald Trump is acting in a way that previous Presidents have not, but we will still have a free and fair election; what he's doing is not enough to topple essential democratic norms.

They are, of course, also deeply scared of him. They have worked very hard to become United States senators. You've sacrificed a lot to get to this point, and you don't want to stop being a United States senator once you've gotten here. And for Republicans, the only thing that keeps you a United States senator is staying on Donald Trump's good side.

I have to ask you why. Is the job so great—is being called "senator" by young staffers so great—if you have to give up and cede your principles?

Of course not. Of course not. And maybe this interacts with the third thing Republicans will tell you, which is, "Hey, listen, I'm trying to make this better." Republicans in the mold of John Thune—and I'm not saying that he personally has said this to me, but people in his mold will say, "Well, if I cross Donald Trump, I'll get replaced by somebody infinitely worse. And I can try to work behind the scenes to make this better."

So, what's the difference at this point?

Well, I'm telling you how they rationalize it. I'm not defending it. Of course, it is all treachery to lie down with Donald Trump, who is actively trying to destroy our democracy.

And then the majority of Republicans in Congress are fully on board with the idea that the rules should be rigged so that Democrats never rule again. There is just an exhaustion with democracy among a lot of Republicans.

This has only been going on for a couple of months—the Administration began January 20th, and it's quite different from the first term. How bad is this, and where is it going, in your estimation?

I mean, it can be true that some of the orthodoxy of the left put us in the position of being unelectable. It is also true that the bureaucracy inside the federal government, the state governments, and local governments has become so big and cumbersome as to make it impossible to get things done in this country. But that is not mutually exclusive with the belief that we have months—not a year—before our democracy is rendered so damaged that it can't be repaired.

I do think that over the last four years, those surrounding Donald Trump put together a pretty thoughtful plan to destroy democracy and the rule of law, and you are seeing it being implemented. Just in the last week—and you and others have covered this well—the assault has been trained on academia, institutions of higher education, and the legal community, the biggest law firms in this country. In democracy after democracy, those two institutions—higher education and the legal profession—are, in many ways, the foundation that undergirds the rule of law. Those are the places where people think about the rule of law, protect it, warn when it is being undermined. The legal profession is the place where people contest efforts to try to destroy the rule of law. And so it is not coincidental that Trump is trying to force both higher education and the legal profession to capitulate to him, and to commit, often through very explicit bilateral agreements—for the most important institutions—to essentially quelling protest.

And, of course, what the Administration is doing by taking on these very high-profile institutions is sending a warning to other law firms and to other colleges: if you take us on—if you file lawsuits against the Administration, if you support Democrats, if you allow for campus-wide protests against our priorities—you'll be next. And so what will happen here—what inevitably happens in every democracy in which this tactic is tried—is that the

Administration won't have to go after every institution or every firm, because most of them will just decide in advance to stay out of the way. When students are filing a petition for a massive protest against a Trump Administration policy, they may just find it much harder to be able to exercise free speech on campus.

This is how democracy dies. Everybody just gets scared. You make a few examples, and everyone else just decides to comply.

That brings us to the real crux of our conversation today—the Democratic Party. What is the Democratic Party going to do about it? Every indicator that I see, in terms of public-opinion polls, shows widespread dissatisfaction with the Democratic Party. What are the Democrats going to do in a concerted way in the Senate and the House?

First, I do think there is a vast overestimation of the power that Democrats have. We are in the minority in the House and the Senate. We don't have the Presidency. There are some people out there who think we should just be able to stop this. And the fact of the matter is that we don't have an army, and thus we are relying on public mobilization and the courts.

Second, I do think that there's an element out there that doesn't actually want to have the really hard conversation about why we lost. I mean, people knew who this guy was. He said he was going to be a dictator on Day One. He told you he was going to pardon the January 6th protesters. He still won.

People thought he was fooling around.

Nah. I mean, that might be true, but I don't know that that's the whole story. I think we're a pretty broken brand right now, and some of the people on the left don't want to go through that hard rewrite of what the Democratic Party stands for.

What's at the core of the brokenness, if we can be specific?

Well, we have become the status-quo party, and so we have reverted to defending democracy instead of explaining how we are going to break it down and reform it. We have not been a pugilistically populist party, where we name the people who have power and we build very easy-to-understand solutions about how to transfer power to people who don't have it. And then we're a pretty judgmental party, filled with a dozen litmus tests. We don't let you in unless you agree with us on everything, kind of—from gender rights to reproductive rights to gun control to climate.

We've got to be a party that invites people in as long as they agree with us on the basic economic message, and build our party with a little bit more acceptance of people who have diverging views on social and cultural issues.

How would that conversation and that process come about, among the Democrats?

Well, I think first is making the decision that economics is the tentpole. And *populist* economics. That means that you are going to have a party that, frankly, sounds a little bit more like Bernie Sanders or Elizabeth Warren. You are talking about billionaires and corporate power. You are proposing really easy-to-understand ideas on how to shift that power—whether it be a cap on rent increases, or a massive increase in the minimum wage, or the regulation of every single drug price, not just the ten highest-priced drugs. And then it is just making that decision to go out and ask people to come into the coalition who might not be with us on issues that I care about, like guns, and to nominate candidates that signal that the Party is a big tent—people who are populist economically, but may not line up with us on all the social and cultural stuff.

Can you explain the split we're seeing between Democratic senior leadership and more junior members of the Party?

I don't know that it really breaks down along generational lines, but I can

explain what the basic argument is right now. Is this a normal moment, where you can just keep on punching Donald Trump, and pushing down his approval ratings, and eventually win the 2026 election, and set up a potential win in 2028? Or is there a pretty good chance that we're not going to have a free election in 2026?

You believe that's a possibility?

A hundred per cent. Every single day, I think the chances are growing that we will not have a free and fair election in 2026.

What does that look like?

It may not even be that the mechanics of the election are rigged. I'm not suggesting that there will be election officials out there stuffing ballots. What I'm talking about is that the opposition—the infrastructure necessary for an opposition to win—will have been destroyed. No lawyers will represent us. They will take down ActBlue, which is our primary means of raising small-dollar contributions. They will threaten activists with violence, so no one will show up to our rallies and to our door-knock events. This is what happens in lots of democracies around the world; the opposition is just kept so weak that they can't win. That's what I worry about being the landscape as we approach 2026. And, if you believe that, then everything you do right now has to be in service of stopping that kind of weakening or destruction of democracy.

So, to me, the essential difference in the Party right now is that some people think that that has a very low likelihood, and so we should just engage in normal politics—try to become more popular than Republicans. And people like me believe that it won't matter if we're more popular than them, because the rules won't allow us to run a fair election; and so everything we are doing right now, both inside the Capitol and outside the Capitol, should be geared toward trying to make Republicans stop this assault on the rule of law and democratic norms.

Do you think it's possible that Donald Trump wants to stay in office past 2028? How would he do it?

I think it's absolutely possible. People very close to him are saying that it's already a foregone conclusion. If he breaks the Supreme Court and breaks the Constitution and pays no consequence for it, we could ultimately be living in a situation in which the President just declares that he will stay in office. He could also hand power to a relative—maybe Donald Trump doesn't run, but a Trump family member runs and the Trump family just stays in power. I think all of those things are possible.

The Democrats ran, in no small measure, on the preservation of democracy, and that failed. Why do you have any confidence that the public would mobilize for democracy in the future, if not now?

The public was not convinced by our argument, in 2024, because we were shilling for the existing version of democracy—which is deeply corrupt, which does not work. When I got into politics twenty-five years ago, something like campaign-finance reform, government reform, democracy reform, was a top-three issue for Democrats. It was something we talked about every single day. Somewhere along the line that stopped; somewhere along the line we stopped talking about reforming democracy. So it became easy for voters to just believe that we were all corrupt, and that neither Republicans nor Democrats were actually sincere in fixing what was wrong with democracy.

Trump is giving us this opportunity—because this is the most corrupt White House in the history of the country—to run on an anti-corruption message. But we will only win if we actually run an anti-corruption platform. And so, for me, the two things that matter most are populist economics and government reform. If Democrats run on cleaning up Washington with real, actual plans—to, for instance, get private money completely out of politics; to pass the *STOCK* Act, to make sure that not a single person inside government can use insider information to trade to benefit them financially—and we run on

populist economics, I think that's a winner, and it's a way for people to stand up and support democracy, but only a reformed version of democracy.

You mentioned corruption, and we now have a situation where members of the Trump family earn tremendous fees from foreign governments. Seems to me that that's a colossal form of corruption, and it's not something we don't know about. It's published all the time, and then it falls into a black hole. Why?

Trump has been so public about his corruption that it ends up being normalized. If it were so corrupt, why would you do it in public? It must not be corrupt if you're doing it in public. We're used to corruption being done in secret. We're used to there being a sort of shamefulness about it. And so it is interesting that his boasting of his corruption ends in people believing that he might not be corrupt.

I'm just shocked that the Trump meme coin isn't, like, the *only* thing that we're talking about. It's probably the most massive corruption scandal in the history of the country. You literally have an—I guess—legal, open channel for private donations to the President and his family in exchange for favors. And we just think that it's part of Trump's right to do business in the White House. It's gross. It's disgusting. It's deeply immoral. And the fact that we didn't talk about that every hour of every day, once he released that coin, was kind of a signal to the country that we weren't going to take the corruption seriously.

Senator Murphy, is Chuck Schumer the right leader for the Democratic Party in the Senate for this moment?

He can be. Listen, it's not easy to be leader of this party. There are diverse views inside the caucus, and the whole caucus has to make up their mind that we are going to start fighting, that we are not just going to do business as usual. The State of the Union was an interesting moment. We could have engaged in an extraordinary act of protest: we could have chosen, as a party, to not go; to decide that we were not going to legitimize this President, this

level of corruption, and the amount of lying in the State of the Union speech, by not showing up.

Did that conversation take place among the caucus?

I mean—it was judged, I think, too extraordinary and too risky a tactic.

Were you for it?

I chose not to go, and I certainly made the case that we should at least consider not going as an option.

Chuck Schumer's argument about voting the way he did on the continuing resolution was that, if you shut down the government, it gives the Trump Administration carte blanche, for a potentially boundless period of time, to do whatever they like in terms of shutting down agencies—not that they're not doing it to a great degree now, but that it would be open season. The opposing point of view—let them do it, let them own it—seemed to Schumer a gamble that one couldn't take.

He has a compelling argument. It does feel odd for Democrats to protest Republicans shutting down the government by shutting down the government. And it is also true that the President would have extraordinary powers during a shutdown.

I came to a different conclusion. I thought that the public would actually blame Republicans for the shutdown of the government, because they saw them shutting down the government. But it is true that voting no on the continuing resolution would've been a big risk for Democrats. Not showing up for the State of the Union would've been a big risk for Democrats. Both could have backfired.

But we need to be engaged in risk-tolerant behavior right now. Because ultimately, the only way to save the democracy is for there to be a national

public mobilization—of not thousands, not tens of thousands, but hundreds of thousands of people—when the five-alarm fire happens. If the public doesn't see us taking risks—tactical risks, daily risks—then they are not going to take what will be a risk on *their* part, standing up to a repressive regime where it's clear that the government is willing to make you pay a personal price if you exercise your voice.

This is in line with what [you said](#) to Jon Stewart recently. You said, “I don't think you can ask the people of this country to do these exceptional things that are going to be necessary to save our democracy if we are not willing to take risks”—meaning yourselves. What kind of risks should you and your colleagues be taking right now going forward?

In the Senate, the minority has power—you cannot proceed to any legislation without the consent of the minority. Now, we have regularly been providing the votes to the Republican majority to move forward legislation that they care about, including the continuing resolution. We could choose not to do that. We could say to Republicans: Unless you work with us on some targeted measures to prevent the destruction of our democracy, we are not going to continue to pretend like it's business as usual. We could make that decision as a party. Now, that would mean that occasionally Democrats would need to vote no on legislation that, on the merits, they may support. But, if you think that democracy is the No. 1, No. 2, and No. 3 story, then you have to act like it, and you need to show that you're willing to take a political risk, like voting against an otherwise popular bill in order to increase and create leverage to try to save the democracy.

You mentioned the possibility of public involvement, public demonstrations, people out on the street. What would bring them there?

Well, there aren't daily political rallies happening in the country. But anytime you set one up now, you're seeing not thousands of people, but tens of

thousands of people attending. You saw what happened with Bernie and A.O.C. over the weekend.

I think they reached thirty thousand at one of [the rallies](#).

And Senator [Richard] Blumenthal, my colleague in Connecticut, was telling me that he went to this tiny, last-minute Tesla protest at a dealership in Milford, Connecticut, and there were six hundred people who essentially shut down Route 1 in Connecticut. People are ready to mobilize. We just haven't been organized enough to give them those opportunities. And this speaks to the actual need of the Democratic Party right now. We have to be better when it comes to our tactics inside Washington, but we actually have to build a political infrastructure that can plug people in. And that's what we've been really terrible at doing over the years. The Republicans have a permanent political infrastructure—mobilizing, legal, messaging, intellectual. The Democrats have a very thin permanent infrastructure.

So how do you go about winning back voters who don't agree with you on some of what you say are orthodoxies, without ceding ground on things that you believe in?

I think about a really transparent ask of people, which is to say: we want you to work with us because you believe the minimum wage should be ten dollars higher. You believe that corporate power has become so consolidated as to become an evil. And we're willing to hear you out, we're willing to listen to you about your concerns, about how far our party has moved on guns or climate or cultural and social issues. To just have a little bit less judgment when it comes to the non-economic issues. I think that that builds a bigger coalition.

I get that. But, if you read Martin Luther King's "Letter from Birmingham Jail," or "[Why We Can't Wait](#)," he is addressing centrist, or center-left, clergy and activists who are always counselling him: You have to wait a little longer. It's not time yet. And I think a lot of people, a lot of groups—

and the most obvious one that Trump took advantage of in his ads were trans people—want their rights, want respect, and they want to be able to exist in the world as easily as you and me. Are we asking them to wait?

No. Listen, we're trying to win power so we can protect those people. We just aren't going to be able to protect them if—

If we mention them.

No. If we don't build coalitions that allow us to win elections. Listen, one of my colleagues, [Georgia Senator] Jon Ossoff, gave a great speech over the weekend. He talked, in the meat of his speech, about the trans community, as I do, and said, "Listen, don't let the right blame your problems on trans kids or on immigrants. Your problems are created by a fundamental corruption inside government. Your problems are created by a government that prioritizes the billionaires and rigs the rules against you." That is a message that can win. So I don't think you run away from your defense of those communities. You talk about those communities in the context of a message that is anchored in fighting concentrated economic power, and fighting the billionaire class that is taking over our government.

Senator, you've been on TV a lot lately. You've been out there quite a lot. Are you in the process of asserting yourself for national office?

No. And to the extent that my messaging has broken through a little bit more than others, I ascribe to the fact that there is not actually a personal motive attached to it. Sometimes, even if you're not saying it out loud, people can kind of tell when you're putting yourself out there for personal political gain. I actually believe that there is a good chance that we are not going to have an election in which people can make an actual choice in 2026. My hair is on fire about it. So to the extent that people are picking up what I'm putting down, I think it's because they see that I am motivated—first, second, and third—by my fear that we are going to sleepwalk through the transition of our

country from a democracy to an autocracy.

And you believe that's what we're doing right now?

I think we are at risk of sleepwalking through this transition. We desperately want to believe that we can play politics as normal because it's uncomfortable—really uncomfortable—to play politics as not normal. It involves taking really big risks. And, of course, you just want to wake up and believe that you live in a country where people wouldn't make a conscious choice to move away from democratic norms. But while some people are being hoodwinked into being along for that ride, others are making the conscious choice because our democracy has been so broken for so long.

So, yes, I believe that there is a chance that we miss this moment. We just wake up one day and we are no longer in a democracy, which is why I think we have to start acting more urgently right now.

And is it like the boiling of a frog? Or is there a more immediate flash point, when you know that you've passed the point of no return?

No, I think it's like the boiling of a frog. We believe that there are these Reichstag moments, but there normally aren't. Normally, you just lose an election, and then you lose another election, and then another one. And you start to look around and say, wait a second. I don't think the minority party can ever win again. ♦