

The Politics of Our Time

SEASON 2
episode sixteen

Nicholas Lemann

This is Nicolas Lemann. Welcome to the Underreported podcast. We're back with John Judis, author of *The Socialist Awakening: What's Different Now About the Left*, our latest book from Colombia Global Reports.

As I briefly mentioned in our last episode, John Judis has brought out a book with Colombia Global Reports during each of the last three national political seasons: *The Populist Explosion* in 2016, *The Nationalist Revival* in 2018, and now *The Socialist Awakening*. Together, these books have charted a rise of a new and unexpected political mood produced by widespread dissatisfaction over results of the free-market policies that emerged in the late 20th century. Thank you for joining us, John.

John Judis

My pleasure.

Nicholas Lemann

So let's start. And here I'm going to be referring maybe a little bit to all three of your books that you published with us, rather than just *The Socialist Awakening*. So let's start by talking about, you know, the working class, to use Marx's term. It's a long, long running story that the theory of socialism was that it would be the political ideology of the ruling class, I'm sorry, of the working class. And that's been intermittently true at best. Right?

John Judis

Right.

Nicholas Lemann

And, now, you have this kind of odd finding – you were referring to this a little bit in our last podcast – large portions of the American working class voted for Donald Trump, depending on how you define working class. Large portions of the European working class are voting for nativist, nationalist, far-right parties.

Are these the people – why is that happening? And, is there any hope that a growing

socialism could begin to bring in some of these folks as well as people, young people who live in metropolitan areas?

John Judis

Well, that's a that's a big question. Let's start out just with the idea of the working class and then I'll sort of work my way up on that. When Marxists and the early socialists and social democrats thought of the working class, they thought of blue-collar factory workers and craft workers. They really did not think of white-collar, what we call white-collar workers, as part of the working class.

But by the 1920s in the United States, the working class, so-called, had already become a minority within the broader people, wage workers. And you know, what we have now is a group, is a, you know, maybe 70, 80% of the society works for wages or salaries, but they're completely divided by how much they make, by the levels of authority.

You know, what we used to call professionals, many of them now work for salaries or wages. So again, it becomes difficult to imagine as the older socialist did, a kind of homogeneous working class bound together by the same – living in the same communities, going to the same bars, having the same conception of themselves, becoming a majority of the population, and voting in socialism. That really was the older idea.

Now, that's really not feasible, and you have this kind of odd situation in the United States where the – you have an hourglass for the Democrats, where the, a lot of the Democratic voters are minority voters who are lower income. And a lot of them are also more in the upper-middle-class professionals.

And then the hourglass and the middle, the so-called white working class, which includes really small business people as well, middle-income, are voting for Republicans.

You have a very similar thing in France. You have a very similar thing in Great Britain. So, you know, in the United States, the key of that is the civil rights and the sixties. That's what starts it.

But then you have an accretion of events after that. Cultural divisions over religion, over guns. The idea that the Democrats and liberals, by being the party of redistribution, are really interested mostly in this lower part of the hourglass and not in the middle. That the social programs are not going to go to the working class so-called, the middle part, but it's going to go to the lower part, to minorities.

And the Republicans are able to drive a wedge in American politics between the lower and middle parts of the society. And that's really the, you know, that's again, that's the basis of their coalition, is primarily white wage workers, plus the farmers, plus the business. Whereas the Democrats, now lower, plus upper-middle.

And the key to American politics, to having a real left, is being able to reunite those various segments into, and the kind of divisions between white and Black, white and Hispanic, and the middle and the lower.

So that's what, you know, again, that should be the goal. How to do that is a very difficult.

Nicholas Lemann

You, some years ago, before Columbia Global Reports existed, published a book called *The Emerging Democratic Majority*. Which has been described, or you might say, caricatured, as saying the Democrats can't lose over the long-term just on sort of demographic issues.

That is, they don't have to think about getting back the white working class or wage earners, because minority voters are so loyal to them and they were a growing part of the country. So can you square that?

John Judis

I'm looking at my bookcase to see if I have to quote you from the actual book. Page 66 there. Alright, Ruy, this is, our theory was completely vulgarized. I mean, what we argued was that as long as the Democrats could retain a significant proportion of their older New Deal, again, primarily white vote, which is about again, we estimated about the 40%. Now it's much – they have to just get 35%.

But we say this in the book, that, plus minorities, plus women, plus professionals, would give them a majority. And they did that in 2006 and 2008. But they lost a lot of those voters beginning in 2010, and that's really what sunk the ship from then on. Obama got some back in the Midwest.

But again, Biden's main strengths so far has been his increased support among the again, the so-called white working class. Which pollsters define as people without a four-year college degree. That's really where he's made the biggest inroads. Not among suburbanites, which is the usual, you know, upper- middle-class suburbanites, which is the usual take on why the Democrats are doing so well.

So our theory was always you have to retain that. My mistake was that in 2008, I got optimistic about Obama and I thought that he might be in the same position as Roosevelt, and that by getting us through the Great Recession, he could keep those voters and build a lasting majority. It just didn't work out that way.

Nicholas Lemann

Now, a lot of people, especially in my neighborhood, Upper West Side of New York, would say, "Well, the answer to that is simple. Those voters are just racist." Your comment on that?

John Judis

You know, all Americans are racist in a sense. I mean we're complex human beings, and these kind of sentiments get brought to the fore in certain circumstances and certain politicians. And Trump has been brilliant at emphasizing those kind of issues and bringing the dark side of America to the fore.

You know, again, as you know, a lot of the people who voted for him voted for Obama. In South Carolina, Tim Scott, a black guy, a Republican, he does fine. Those same voters don't worry about him being a Black man.

So, again, in Trump's characterization of America and its divisions, he really does bring out our racist side. And he drives home these kind of divisions that go back to the sixties between white and Black. And also over, again over Latinos, the same kind of thing.

So again, I reject this idea that there are, you know, some Americans who are just intrinsically racist. Of course there, you know, there's again, there's an alt-variety of like 20,000 people that are impossible, just like there's an alt-left that want to burn down, you know, every town in America. But that's not America. We are much more complicated people than that.

Nicholas Lemann

As you look back on the previous two books in this series, the populist book and the nationalist book, how do you think they stand up? Have you changed your mind about any of those issues? Is there anything, I don't know if you've gone back and looked at them again, but I'm just curious, how those words strike you now?

John Judis

Well, I think we're in a period where populism might be in abeyance in Europe. And I think you and I talked about this in the very first book talk I gave. And what I said then was that there comes a time when societies are in crisis, when a lot of the leadership looks and says, "Oh my God, we can't continue with Donald Trump. We can't have the alternative for Deutschland being the main opposition party." And they move over a little and to some extent coalesce against them.

And you get an advance in politics. You get the absorption of some of those ideas but not others. And we may be seeing that happening in the United States with the Never Trumpers and with Biden accepting the idea again of economic patriotism, which comes out of Trump in 2016.

So we might have a degree of Trump populism, but not Trump. And that's again, that's the goal. It's not to have necessarily a populist America, but for some of those ideas to be accepted. And that's the, again, that's the relationship between the old populists in America and Huey Long and FDR. That's what they did.

So you look to some extent to a period of cooptation. Germany, I think that's happening again by virtue of the way Merkel handled the coronavirus. France is a more problematic. Britain, again, Starmer – I think that's how you pronounce his name – who took over from Corbyn, who has really changed the party in a way that has brought back a lot of its working-class roots. And it's very promising, I think. And he might, I mean, I'm much more optimistic now even than I was when I wrote the socialist book about where the, what could happen with the Labour party in Britain.

Nicholas Lemann

In the nationalist book, you talk a lot about immigration, and I hope I'm not misstating, you say it's okay and acceptable for people to advocate for limits on immigration. That's sort of an inescapable part of nationalism and shouldn't be understood as racism. Am I describing your position correctly?

John Judis

Yeah. You know, the nationalism book is a big disappointment to me because I think that a lot of the left just wouldn't touch it, they associate that with Trump. And politically I think they still don't understand what's wrong with such an idea like open borders.

And if you're going to have these huge social policies, people have to be assured that the people who are getting the money and getting the benefits are people who have the same broad values and commitment to the country that they have. You cannot have the idea that just anybody who comes in to America, walks across the shore, gets the same benefits as anybody else.

It's part of, again, I was amazed when I went to the Labour party meeting that some of the people there wanted anybody from the EU who happened to be living in Britain to vote in their national elections. And it just didn't make any sense to me. And to have a democracy and to have an advanced welfare state, you really have to have an idea that you are part of a nation and you're all in it together. And so you have to have border security.

At the same time, you know, we can't have 11 million illegal immigrants in this country who are defenseless, and that can be exploited by employers. We have to find a path for citizenship. My problem with the Democrats is that they don't at all say anything about border security. So they leave themselves open to all these charges that they just want to give away, you know, benefits to anybody who comes across the border.

Nicholas Lemann

When the Trump era ends, I mean, it may never end because he's now saying he's going to serve three terms, and then after that, we have Don Jr. and all that. But let's say it ends in this election cycle or the next election cycle. What's the legacy of Trumpism? Does it have a long tail or is it this sort of weird moment in our politics, of which there have been some in the past too?

John Judis

I think it's a weird moment to a great extent. I think that his, I think his election was a kind of a perfect storm, freakish event. The Comey letter, all these various things conspired to bring this guy who had never been in public office, to make him our president, who was really unprepared to be president.

And if he loses, I would expect the Republican Party to revert back for the most part to the way it was, to this sort of McConnell Republican Party. There is going to be a change in the attitude towards government and active government. Not in taxes, maybe. They're still going to want to give away all the money to the rich.

But I think in terms of industrial policy, supporting, promoting growth, I think that's

going to become much more part of the Republican agenda. And it's something on which Democrats and Republicans will be able to cooperate.

Again, the economic patriotism, I think that's going to, that will be a legacy of Trump. To some extent, we are going to try to decouple from China and to bring more of our industries home.

Whether it works out, I'm just not sure, because you can't just legislate that. That's again – so yes, some parts of Trump will remain, but politically it'll go back to some extent to the status quo before Trump.

Nicholas Lemann

Can the Democrats get back the Trump voters, especially if the Republicans become more of a Mitch McConnell business kind of party?

John Judis

Well, I think they'll become business, but I think that they'll also be – well, we'll have to see how health care and things like that work out. I mean, there's a way in which – I remember in the nineties, you remember this too, that Grover Norquist and Bill Kristol and people like that feared that if Clinton got his health care plan, the Democrats would be in power forever. Because, you know, it would be like Social Security, it'd become another third rail.

And then with Obama, we thought, you know, Obamacare, but it turned out exactly the opposite. That it ended up screwing up the Democrats. So, again, it really depends what the, how the Biden people conduct themselves. It's just as likely to me that we could be back to a Republican, but a more moderate one, in 2024.

Nicholas Lemann

Again, Jon Judis' new book is called *The Socialist Awakening: What's Different Now About the Left*. You can find links to buy this book and the other titles in this series on our website at globalreports.columbia.edu. Or by subscribing to Columbia Global Reports at globalreports.columbia.edu/subscribe. I'm Nick Lemann for Columbia Global Reports. Thank you for listening.