

■ “Is Liberal Democracy Being Undone by Liberalism?”

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Author: Patrick Deneen (interview with Steve Paikin)

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Summary Overview

In the wake of the 2016 presidential election in the United States, many conservative thinkers believed that the ascendance of Donald Trump spelled the end of liberalism’s appeal. One such conservative writer is Patrick Deneen, whose interview here lays out some of his ideas on the definition and future of liberalism in American politics. Overall, Deneen argues that liberalism broadly conceived has been utilized by liberals and conservatives alike to expand state control and infringe upon individual liberties. Trump’s election illuminated the desire for an alternative political path, focused on individual rights and a postliberal agenda of a noninterventionist government.

Defining Moment

The election of Donald Trump to the presidency in 2016 led to a period of soul-searching among liberals as well as to a debate about the appeal of such an unlikely candidate. Conservative-minded writers and political theorists saw this moment as a referendum on liberal ideals, and some argued that the two-party system as Americans knew it had seemingly been upended. Trump’s ascendance led to a sort of reckoning about American values, the merits of liberalism, and the future of the country.

Patrick Deneen’s *Why Liberalism Failed* (2018) served as one such approach to understanding how liberalism had apparently faltered in the American political sphere. The book was endorsed by former President Barack Obama, giving it some sway in the public consciousness, even among liberals. Deneen viewed liberalism as ultimately two sides of the same coin, with the classical liberalism of Thomas Hobbes and John Locke being the twin of the liberalism of left-leaning politicians. In this way, the Trump presidency served as a blanket rejection of the sort of thinking that had dominated American politics on both sides of the aisle since at least the turn of the twentieth century.

Deneen builds upon these ideas in the interview here. The context for this conversation is much different from when Deneen’s book was originally

published. By mid-2021, Joe Biden had been elected president against the incumbent Trump. The pandemic was still ongoing, and the ensuing January 6 riot, in which a mob incited by President Trump attempted to prevent the counting of electoral votes for Biden, had occurred only recently. A few months into Biden’s administration, Deneen comments upon the



A button from Ronald Reagan’s 1980 U.S. presidential campaign. It bears the slogan “Let’s Make America Great Again.” Photo via Wikimedia Commons. [Public domain.]

state of liberalism and Trump’s lingering influence on the political conversation in the United States.

Author Biography

Patrick Deneen (b. 1964) is an academic and author specializing in political theory, particularly issues regarding liberalism and conservatism in the United States. He holds a PhD in political science from Rutgers University and is currently on the faculty of the University of Notre Dame. Deneen’s most notable

work is *Why Liberalism Failed*, published in 2018, which was followed by *Regime Change: Towards a Postliberal Future* in 2023. In these works, Deneen posits a fundamental critique of liberalism and how the United States should embrace a postliberal conservatism set against the current ruling class. Deneen has been grouped among the political theorists labeled the New Right, an ideologically diverse group of conservative thinkers that rose to prominence during Donald Trump’s first term.



Historical Document

Is Liberal Democracy Being Undone by Liberalism?

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June 10, 2021

Steve Paikin: We mostly take for granted that the phrase “liberal democracy” contains two concepts that belong together. Our next guest has a more complicated view of that. He is Patrick Deneen, professor of political science at the University of Notre Dame and the author of *Why Liberalism Failed*. And he joins us now from South Bend, Indiana.

Steve continues: Professor, it’s good to meet you. How are you doing tonight?

Patrick Deneen: Pleasure to be with you. Or virtually with you.

Steve: Virtually is the best we can do these days and we’ll take it, believe me. I’m going to ask you a sort of very broad question just to get us started, and I know you could probably give a 25-minute answer to this one question alone. But it’s a scene-setter. So let’s just do a... How would you describe Donald Trump’s impact on political culture. Let’s start there.

Patrick: Well, I think Donald Trump was a kind of symptom and an effect of already existing and quite device I divisive issues across the western world today. I think we certainly exacerbated those divisions. He intensified the sense of dividedness in this nation. But I don’t see him as the cause of those divisions. And I don’t see his departure from office as difficult and controversial as it was as solving or resolving those issues in any really significant way. I think he was more of a symptom than the disease.

Steve: I take your point on that. But I well remember Ronald Reagan’s so-called conservatism, and what that stood for. And I wonder why, in your view, that view of conservatism has clearly lost to Donald Trump’s.

Patrick: I think the reason... And the argument that I make in my book is that what we typically call “conservatism,” at least in the United States... is really a variant of liberalism. We might call it classical liberalism, a kind of libertarianism. And really what we’ve seen over the last 50 years in the United States is a kind of battle or a contestation between two kinds of liberalism. One that favors a kind of free market economic approach and one that favors the role of the state in ensuring equal liberty. But as it turns out, this kind of liberalism

has not done well or not served well especially sort of ordinary typically working-class people in the kind of areas I live in in the heartland of the United States. And I think so a lot of the divisions weren't just... And a lot of the reaction against that we saw in the 2016 and then 2020 election weren't so much kind of the usual conservatism against liberalism. It was a real rejection of both liberalisms, both conservative liberalism and progressive liberalism. And I think that's the story that seems to be missed when we focus solely on Donald Trump.

Steve: Which is why you have described it yourself. This is "know thy self."

A quote appears on screen, under the title "know thyself": "Liberalism created the conditions, and the tools, for the ascent of its own worst nightmare yet it lacks the self-knowledge to understand its own culpability." (from Patrick Deneen, *Why Liberalism Failed*.)

Steve: what are the conditions and tools that liberalism created that enabled Trump to become president in your view?

Patrick: Well, in interesting ways Trump... And you mentioned Ronald Reagan earlier... Trump ran in some ways in the first and most important instance against the conservatism of the Reagan era. We tend to focus on his battle with progressives and the media and obviously with Hillary Clinton. But really the reason and in some ways the most significant aspect of his candidacy was the way that he overturned the old conservatism of Ronald Reagan, what I described earlier as a kind of liberalism. If we think of the areas that especially Ronald Reagan was for most in advancing it was a kind of free market ideology. The beginnings of a kind of globalized economy, a financialized economy, the outsourcing of jobs. The waning of the significance of the manufacturing sector in favor of a financial sector. And it was a very robust and interventionist foreign policy that saw the role of America as advancing liberal democracy in the world. And what really is worth noting is that Donald Trump defeated these two aspects of the Republican Party ... of what had been seen as conservatism in some senses you could see reflecting, I think certain commitments that might have once been dominant on the left. A kind of more interventionist kind of economic policy. One that favored domestic production. But also a much more modest kind of foreign policy, one that sought to avoid intervention in foreign wars or to create foreign wars. I think Donald Trump in some senses was a kind of idiot savant kind of... He had an intuitive sense of where a significant number of voters were in the United States who were not content with either political party. So I think his candidacy in some ways wasn't just a rejection of what we see as progressive liberalism but in a more fundamental way it was a rejection of what had been the conservative consensus of the last 50 years.

Steve: Indeed. I'm going to ask you to comment on one word. And it's a strange one word because Donald Trump's slogan was Make America Great Again. And I wouldn't be surprised if people forget the slogan Ronald Reagan ran on, which was Let's Make America Great Again. And I wonder, that word "let's" invites people to join a movement. Is there significance in Reagan's having that record and Trump's not having it?

Patrick: I actually have not considered that before. It's a good question. I suppose that there was a way in which people could have interpreted Ronald Reagan's motto. Although honestly, what I remember more of Ronald Reagan's probably second campaign, his re-election campaign was the motto "Morning in America" as the kind of motto. And I think that also evokes that sense that something is being renewed. I think it's an old... Whatever the significance of the change of the motto, I think it is a kind of significant part of the American ethos or story of itself that there's always a kind of... There's been a departure from something true about America. Something that's at its heart has been lost. And needs to be restored. I mean, this goes back to the civil war. Abraham Lincoln didn't run on sort of let's overturn what America is. He ran on kind of a campaign of let's restore the principles of the American founding. So I think beyond the change of the words, I think the significance is that Donald Trump tapped into a very old American narrative of a kind of restoration of something that had been lost.

Steve: Let's do another excerpt from your book here. And we'll ask our switcher Tony Burke to bring this up and everybody can read along at home.

Another quote from Deneen's book appears on screen, under the title "it ain't working": "Liberalism has failed because liberalism has succeeded. As it becomes fully itself it generates endemic pathologies, more rapidly and pervasively than it is able to produce band-aids and veils to cover them. The result is the systemic rolling blackouts in electoral politics, governance, and economics. The loss of confidence and even belief and legitimacy among the citizenry, that accumulated not as separable and discrete problems to behold within the liberal frame but is a deeply interconnected crisis of legitimacy and a portent of liberalism's end times. The problem is not just in one program or application but in the operating system itself."

Steve: Let's dive into that. What is fundamentally wrong with liberalism's operating system?

Patrick: Well, I guess to get momentarily a little historical and philosophical, liberalism was created roughly 500 years ago as a philosophical movement with the idea being a way of organizing our politics that would allow people to live in peace with each other regardless of their deeply held beliefs and commitments. Often seen as arising from the wars of religion and that liberalism would be a kind of neutral order that would allow people to live freely under

their own lights whether as parts of religious traditions as non-believers or people of abiding faith or beliefs. In that sense it seemed to be a proposal of a system in which the government had ... and the state itself had ... no preference. Didn't have a kind of say in the matter of what the end of the game should be. It was just acting as a referee to make sure that everybody played by the rules of the game. Don't enforce your beliefs on someone else. But as liberalism's own internal logic proceeds, its core principle is the liberation of people from any unchosen identities. That one should not only be free to pursue one's own beliefs and to live according to one's life, but the imposition of reviews, the imposition of a belief system comes to be seen as potentially shaping or forming every aspect of life. And so family life, religious life, the kinds of... The places we happen to be born into, these all have to be sort of revised and revisited as potential forms of oppression. And so liberalism ultimately becomes a kind of authoritarian or tends in an authoritarian direction in kind of arranging a society that you could say to use Rousseau's phrase, forces us to be free, that sees great threats coming from any limitations on our choice of identity. And I think one of the aspects that we're seeing today is the way in which the liberal order itself is increasingly aggressive and even kind of authoritarian when it comes to more traditional beliefs and traditional believers and practices. So it no longer has laid a claim in some ways of being neutral or not having a dog in the kind of fight our life should be leading. We see increasingly a state-mandated form of life that I think is creating deep divisions across the West and certainly in the United States.

Steve: It's interesting to me that you use authoritarianism, that word, in this context. Because, of course, there are many people... I think mostly from the progressive side of the political spectrum, who think Donald Trump is the most authoritarian president of their life time. And if anybody ought to have the authoritarian tag put on to him, it's certainly not liberals, it is him. Could you speak to that?

Patrick: Well, sure. I think in some ways the... It seems like the core or the background belief is that one can live in a world without authority. We certainly know that's not the case. There's always going to be a statement or a stance regarding what should be authoritative in a society. And I think that from the standpoint of those kinds of more traditional beliefs, the religious beliefs, for example, such people would regard both past presidents under President Barack Obama and policies under the current president, President Biden as quite authoritative and even reaching the point of authoritarianism that mandates about health care, mandates about how one should organize one's religious institutions or how one should express one's religious beliefs in public. But even beyond the state, of course, we're seeing increasingly very deep forms and pervasive forms of a kind of authoritarianism in what is supposedly the private parts of life. Especially from corporations. The use of corporate power... Especially technology companies... Their extraordinary economic power that enforces a set of norms that increasingly hue to a liberal

progressive type of world view. I suppose it's the case that one is always going to confront expressions of. And forms of authority. Which, if one is subject to those forms of authority, one will regard as authoritarian. My point is really just that liberal order claims, it states explicitly, that it is indifferent to the questions or ends or the purposes of life. But, in fact, it has an authoritative set of principles it endorses. When I suggest liberalism is in a kind of crisis, it's precisely because a great many people don't agree to those forms of authoritative values and norms that today are becoming quite plain and visible in liberal states and liberal nations.

Steve: Let's find out where that puts us today. If Reagan-style conservatism is demolished and if the liberal operating system that you've referenced is also gone, is there a new and different operating system that you think we should welcome?

Patrick: Well, I think right now we're in a great obviously very titanic battle in which you see... It's interesting you say Reaganism has died. I think Reaganism has moved in some senses to the left. You saw in the last election, the 2020 election, people who had formerly been self-described conservatives like Bill Kristol who used to be a voice... Sort of one of the public voices of conservatism founded and ran the journal of the *Weekly Standard*. [He] moved decisively on the side of the Democrats. Precisely because the Democratic Party is increasingly the party of a kind of consolidated liberalism. On both the kind of ... obviously the social issues, but increasingly also certain kinds of economic issues, an endorsement of globalization to a considerable extent, to the point that someone like Bill Kristol seems more sympathetic... His views are more sympathetic on the political left today. I wouldn't say that Reaganism has died. I would just say that we're seeing a kind of realignment. Instead what you're seeing is an assignment of what had been formerly, I think more left economics. A kind of more nationalistic economics that used to be the economics of the Democratic Party... Protecting manufacturing, the working class. Those with lower skilled jobs as opposed to the kind of laptop class that's moved increasingly to the progressive side. But an alignment of a kind of economically left and a more socially right perspective. I think you see the rising number of Hispanics voting for republicans which we just saw in a recent local election in Texas which is surprising many people that reflects this kind of realignment. So I think what you are going to increasingly see in the United States and across the West is a kind of consolidated party of liberalism of both right and left, formerly right and left liberalism that used to be the divide at the political divide in the United States and much of the West. Increasingly consolidated into one party... Consolidated into one party. And its opposition is becoming a kind of anti-liberal party. And I don't mean that as if it's some great bogie man or something which should cause great fear. It combines a kind of a more interventionist and welfare family-oriented kind of welfare state with a fairly more... I would say a more conservative forms of social policy. And I think the economic forms of support... Especially for

families would coincide with that more kind of family value-oriented approach in the social issues.

Steve: Let me ask about the current president [Joe Biden]. He obviously has a huge spending program that he has proposed right now in the order of trillions of dollars. It is much bigger government. It is much more involved in people's lives or it would hope to be. If it proves ultimately to be successful, would that, in your view, do the trick of giving liberalism a new lease on life?

Patrick: I think that it's interesting. I actually think what you're discussing as the constituency that supported Donald Trump were actually quite supportive of an infrastructure bill, a public spending along those lines and it comports with what I was suggesting earlier as the growing let's say... A growing sense of acceptability, of government programs, of government expenditures by those on the political right. But, again, I think was certainly not part of the Reagan era understanding of conservatism. So I think in some ways you could say it would be potentially something supportive across the aisle. Whether it's actually supported by today's Republican congressmen, I do think you would see widespread support for it among broadly speaking working class, those who might benefit a great deal with the kinds of jobs that would be produced. I think the question is going to be whether particular blend of kind of stimulative economic policy combined with infrastructure combined with a woke progressive policies that you see being embraced by the Biden administration, whether this will be sufficiently appealing to a kind of broad swath of kind of middle America that I think Joe Biden in his heart clearly wants to appeal to. It's the tradition from which he comes. It's broadly the people with whom he identifies with having grown up. But the party has clearly changed. His party has clearly changed. And so I think he is in many ways out sourcing those kinds of concerns and policies and speaks to them. But the kinds of policies we're going to see advance by equal opportunity commission, Equal Opportunity Employment Commission, the various judicial activities of the Department of Justice and so forth. I think we're going to prove to be off-putting to a great many voters in the mid-term election and in the subsequent presidential election in several years. So whether a kind of stimulative economic policy will be sufficient to overcome what I think will be a great distaste for the more sort of woke progressive types of policies in interesting question. And I think that's the gamble that Joe Biden is taking with this administration.

Steve: Let me follow up with admittedly is a bit of a chippy question here. You are a serious guy. You teach at a world-class post-secondary institution. You are a committed Christian as well. The man who represents conservatism in your country today is an ill-tempered, vein, uncurious, ill-read... I could go on. I mean he is a pretty disgraceful guy. Fifty-eight percent of Republicans today believe that Donald Trump is still the legitimate president of the United States of America. How do you feel about all that?

Patrick: Well, I was not a... I think your question is to me personally. I was not personally a particular fan of Donald Trump. I'm not to this day a fan of Donald Trump. And as I began by saying, I think it's important to understand and view Donald Trump again as a kind of symptom of a deep disease in the American body politic. That a significant number of American Citizens had grown so discontent with the political offerings on both the right and the left that they were willing to put into office a man as you've described: ill-tempered, and bad judgment, psychotic personality, precisely to break what they saw as a corrupt system. On both the left and the right, that the candidates who would come ask for their votes, promise certain things... but then in a succession of elections... whether it was Republican or Democrat... proceeded to undo every aspect of life that they held dear. Whether it was in the economic sphere or in the social sphere. Whether it was shipping off their jobs or undermining the kinds of social values that they saw as essential to living full, decent and flourishing lives. So I see the election of Donald Trump and the ongoing support for him as a sign of the pathologies. Not of the people, per se, who supported him. But of a political system that made him the best option and the most attractive option to people. I would like that to be the focus. I think the more we focus on the personality of Donald Trump, the more we're avoiding ... and it seems to me willfully avoiding ... the kind of analysis we need to undertake to really understand the political currents that are at play. And I think they go well beyond Donald Trump, and they will be with us after Donald Trump is a bad memory in the mind of many. And I would prefer them to make the focus those political conditions that led to the rise of someone so ill-suited to the office but nevertheless revealing the illness and the pathologies of our political order.

Steve: Well said and totally fair point. I have 10 seconds to ask you about the fact that Barack Obama the other day said he has read your book and really liked it. What do you make of that?

Patrick: I take it as a high compliment that someone with high intellect like Barack Obama can read someone with whom he probably disagrees but can find relevance in those words. I'm not doctrinairing what I say but I believe we need to confront those with whom we might disagree and come to a deeper understanding of where we are today. I appreciate you having me on to do precisely that.

Steve: A delighted to have you. Patrick J. Deneen: *Why Liberalism Failed*. He joined us from Notre Dame University at South Bend, Indiana. Thank you.

Patrick: my pleasure.

[Source: www.tvo.org/transcript/2660262.]



Document Analysis

In this interview with the Canadian journalist Steve Paikin, Patrick Deneen lays out some of the main points from *Why Liberalism Failed* and comments on the current political moment in mid-2021. By Deneen’s reckoning, both the Democratic and Republican Parties represent twin sides of the same liberalism employed by American political elites, with Deneen suggesting that “conservative liberalism and progressive liberalism” are equal facets of an overarching political philosophy. Deneen’s idea of liberalism is rooted in this philosophical definition, not the popular understanding that it is only the purview of left-wing politics. While conservatives tend toward a more classical liberalism, progressives invoke liberalism in the state’s intervention to ensure individual freedoms.

With Trump’s loss in the 2020 election, there was a sense that the former president had been an anomaly in the American political system. Deneen disagrees with this idea, commenting, “[Trump] intensified the sense of dividedness in this nation. But I don’t see him as the cause of those divisions.” In essence, however flawed a politician, Trump represented a rejection of the dual liberalism that Deneen has in his crosshairs. Just as Deneen sees Trump as a rejection of traditional conservative ideology—exemplified in Reagan-era economic and foreign interventionism—he also senses that Trump tapped into an alternative to the liberalism agenda that many American voters felt had forgotten them. Deneen suggests that antiliberalism rejects the expansion of the state’s control of the market and its infringing on individual rights, predicting that liberalism will consolidate itself into one party opposed to an anti-liberal one centered on family and working-class issues.

Deneen, however, is somewhat inconsistent in his predictions for the future of American politics in this interview. He seemingly offers an alternative to both the liberal and conservative brand of politics but also gives a glimpse here of his distaste for left-wing politicians. He sidesteps the issue of whether Trump is an authoritarian figure to argue that left-leaning liberalism embraces its own “authoritative values.” Deneen ventures into a subtle critique of identity politics—a common conservative talking point—lamenting that liberals have participated in a set of “woke progressive

policies” in the Biden administration in order to impose their own nontraditional viewpoints on the public. These sorts of critiques of the left explain Deneen’s particular popularity among certain conservative politicians.

Essential Themes

Why Liberalism Failed received praise from a diverse group across the political spectrum. By pointing out liberalism’s internal contradictions, many felt that Deneen had tapped into a sentiment that could explain this complex political moment. However, many found that Deneen’s arguments were popular only because they were broad enough that readers could find at least one aspect to agree with. In this way, Deneen has been criticized for grouping together different facets of liberalism under one all-encompassing term; by passing over distinct strands of liberalism, he fails to recognize some of its merits.

For one, by taking a partly moral stance against liberalism—especially in terms of cultural issues and social policy—Deneen overlooks how liberalism has changed and improved upon itself throughout its history. The political philosophy rejected by Deneen wholesale has a long history of reformers working in the liberal tradition, and Deneen appears to avoid discussing this nuance. For example, progress in the expansion of civil rights and other signs of society’s moral progress are not part of Deneen’s thinking on liberalism. In addition, Deneen overlooks the profound changes brought about by market capitalism, including the decrease in global poverty and the expansion in access to healthcare and education.

Deneen tapped into the feeling that the American system was unfair for the average citizen. His rejection of market capitalism as a driver of governmental policy, and the rise of an unfair meritocracy favoring elites, reflected the broad appeal of a populist agenda at the time. This political philosophy rests upon a scaling back of government overreach in favor of more local governance and traditional cultural authorities. And Deneen’s ongoing popularity among conservative politicians reflects how some Republicans see the future of their party as in line with a postliberal order.

—Chris Bingley, PhD

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