

Gaslit Nation Transcript

05 October 2022

“Laboratories of Autocracy: The David Pepper Interview”

<https://www.patreon.com/posts/laboratories-of-72657528>

[intro - theme music]

Andrea Chalupa (00:08):

Hello everyone. Welcome to *Gaslit Nation*. It's Andrea and I'm joined today with a wonderful guest, but before we get to that I wanna remind everyone that *Gaslit Nation* is running a couple of contests. The first one is the Get out the Vote contest, where we're calling on our listeners to tweet at *Gaslit Nation* at @GaslitNation on Twitter and let us know what you're doing to get out the vote this year. And these all important midterm elections and from the responses we receive, we will select a handful of folks to come on the show and hang out with us and do a big episode where we process and look back on this make-it-or-break-it election for our democracy. We'll come together and support each other. We did this in 2020 and it was a lot of fun, so we're gonna be doing it again in 2022.

Andrea Chalupa (00:56):

The second big contest is the *Gaslit Nation* Halloween Extravaganza, where we're going to do a radio play submitted by our listeners. We're gonna select a winner from the submissions we receive and produce it into a creepy, crawly radio play summing up how we all feel basically living through these really strange times. Your writing prompts can be anything from the scary monster that is Posh Trump, or what's in Trump's basement in Mar-a-Lago, Jared Ivanka... Just have fun and let loose. The deadline to submit your radio play is October 20th and you can do it by sending submissions to gaslitnation@gmail.com. That's gaslitnation@gmail.com. Now, our guest for today is the wonderful David Pepper, who is an essential follow on Twitter. David Pepper is a lawyer, writer, political activist, former elected official and adjunct professor and he served as the chairman of the Ohio Democratic Party between 2015 and 2021.

Andrea Chalupa (01:57):

In that role, he was engaged in various fights and extensive litigation over voter suppression and election laws in the Buckeye State. Stemming from that work, David appeared in *All In*, the documentary highlighting Stacey Abrams' nationwide fight for voting rights. He has written four novels that bridge real world politics and fiction, including *A Simple Choice*. His first novel, *The People's House* earned praise for having predicted the Russia scandal. *The Wall Street Journal* named David one of the best political thriller writers on the scene. So, he's here today because he does a lot of really interesting work at Laboratories of Autocracy. That's laboratoriesofautocracy.com. And he's going to walk us through what we all should be focused on in these midterms and how we can get involved to help save our democracy and whether we still have a fighting chance. Welcome to the show, David.

David Pepper (02:55):

Thank you. I'm really honored to be with you.

Andrea Chalupa (02:57):

Well, we're thrilled to have you here. All your work is so in sync with what we try to do on this show, especially really pointing folks to local elections that are all so important. But let me ask you this: So,

you've watched things change in Ohio. Ohio... The horror stories coming out of Ohio. What has that been like?

David Pepper (03:16):

It's very painful and literally, as you mentioned, I write these novels and in the middle of early last year I got so frustrated I started writing my first nonfiction book, which as you mentioned is called *Laboratories of Autocracy*. A lot of it is sort of almost a case study of how a state that's been viewed as moderate and has been moderate can go through a downward spiral into extremism and, really, anti-democracy so quickly. And the point of the book is, it starts with gerrymandered and extreme statehouses. When I call the book *Laboratories of Autocracy*, I'm referring to them. In the wrong hands, state houses can do enormous damage very quickly. And all of a sudden, whether it's Ohio or Missouri or Tennessee, you can look up and you see laws in place that are completely toxic even in your own state. But because these state houses are basically immune from the voters, thanks to gerrymandering and suppression, they just keep doing them.

David Pepper (04:12):

One of the points I make in the book, and I think this ties into so much of what Sarah writes about: Not only does it become a state of extremism, but the public outcomes in these corrupt state houses also begin a downward spiral because if all you care about, because you don't have a general election, is the extremists who can keep you from having a primary or the private interests like for-profit online schools or you name it, and you're doing them favors at the expense of the public, you're gonna see a quick downward spiral in the quality of public schools, or lack of investment in infrastructure, or things like privatizing the energy grid in Texas. So what you're seeing in states like Ohio, and this is the painful story I tell, you know, I joke in the book, but it's true.

David Pepper (04:57):

I went to a law school out East. I was literally named "Most Likely to be President of the Cincinnati Board of Tourism". I brag about Ohio all the time, but it's harder to brag when your state is seeing this downward spiral of outcomes, almost however you can measure them, be it public health, be it student debt, be it quality of public school. In Ohio and other states like ours, those results are plummeting because we have a state house that has basically been hijacked by private interests and does their bidding at the expense of the public. So it's not a very good story. But the point of the story, and this is I think what you do as well, once you see the problem, my hope is we're all a lot better at solving it than continuing to fight and losing battles because we'd actually don't see it for what it is.

David Pepper (05:41):

So the whole point of my book and what I do every day is to show people: Here is what's happening in all these states. It's a deep assault on democracy, the frontline of which is the state house of these states. And if we don't readjust our strategy and see that this is about saving democracy, we will continue to not succeed as they attack democracy. So it's a sobering story about a great state that's going downhill, but my hope is it also inspires people to see how they can get involved to change that trajectory.

Andrea Chalupa (06:12):

Ohio is experiencing a brain drain. A lot of students who go there for college don't stay. And Ohio has been looking for ways on how to stop that brain drain. Yet the far-right politicians are passing these horrendous laws, like the abortion ban law—

David Pepper:

Yeah.

Andrea Chalupa:

—making the brain drain even worse.

David Pepper (06:37):

Honestly, here's the thing that's so crucial to understanding these state houses: Once you have gerrymandered legislatures so that literally not a single one of these people ever faces a reelection. And that's what they're doing in these states. It's not only, Do they want to have control of a state house when they don't deserve it like they do in many, you know, Wisconsin and Michigan and Pennsylvania are Democratic states where the Republicans control of the state houses thanks to gerrymandering. They've created a system where almost not a single member of these state houses ever faces an election. I mean, they're so guaranteed. What happens once you have that system is public service stops being the goal of these places. So, as you were saying, the fact that people leave, the fact that our public schools are doing worse, the fact that healthcare is bad, it's not a coincidence.

David Pepper (07:24):

They're not trying to serve those public ends anymore. They are serving the ends of extremists who are in that state capital and private interests who are in that state capital. And even if those private interests and extremists, even when what they want directly undermines what's good for the public, they don't care because they have no accountability back to the public, but full accountability back to those extremists. So if you go through, whether it's people leaving or the fact that Ohio literally has the highest level of student debt in the country, or that our public schools were ranked fifth 15 years ago, now they're in the mid twenties, none of these people ever lose. And in the end, they never change any policy because, at the end of the day, public policy is not really their goal. These places have been hijacked to serve private interest. So as you said, we already have a massive brain drain.

David Pepper (08:13):

What's it gonna do to our state that we have now, you know, an abortion ban with no exceptions for rape or incest, such that a 10-year-old rape victim had to go to Indiana for an abortion. I mean, of course, you know, whether you're Ohio State or Kenyon or Oberlin, or you're Procter & Gamble or Cleveland Clinic, you think you're gonna be able to recruit young women from all over the country that you need in a state with that extremism? Of course not. But these politicians, honestly, they just don't care because in their world, the only thing that really gets them ahead is keeping those extremists happy. And being a moderate is actually how they lose office. So all the incentives in these locked up gerrymandered state houses are the opposite of what you and I think of as sort of public service and how it should actually happen.

Andrea Chalupa (08:59):

Right. And then they just stay in power and enrich themselves.

David Pepper (09:02):

Absolutely. And what I go through in the book is, we have an accountability crisis in this country. For Trump. We're seeing it now for DeSantis. But we also have it at these state house levels. They never face

accountability for either extremism or breaking the law. And so I go through examples where even when they pass things that are so toxic, as extreme as it gets, they all get reelected the next time because they can't lose and so they just keep going and going and going until we come up on our end—and we'll talk about this later in the show—with ways to start holding them accountable for being extremists, they're just gonna keep going. Because right now the only incentive they have is to be more extreme and they have a disincentive to be more moderate because that's actually what they'll get accused of in the next primary in a way that'll cost them the election. So yeah, they never will stop. And they never are punished for being extremists. They're only punished if any of them ever says, "Well, that's going too far. I can't do that."

Andrea Chalupa (09:59):

Right. When I was a kid in the '80s and '90s, Ohio was that bellwether state; whoever Ohio votes for in the electoral college becomes president. And it doesn't feel that way anymore. It feels like Ohio's just this lost cause because it's become this autocracy. How did we get here? What did the Republican Party do to get us to this point in Ohio? And what has the Democratic Party response been all these years? Where have the Democrats been all this time?

David Pepper (10:35):

Yeah, a couple responses. One reason we're not the same bellwether we were 20 years ago is for a good reason and it's that Virginia is now blue, Colorado is now blue. You don't have to win Ohio. We saw it with Georgia, Arizona. You no longer have to win Ohio to win the presidency, which I think is frankly—although I'm in Ohio and Ohio loved being a sort of bellwether—it's actually a good thing that Democrats have other paths, just regardless of what you think about Ohio. And I think Democrats can still win Ohio. I think that Tim Ryan has a 50-50 shot right now to win. Sherrod Brown did. So one thing I would caution is don't let the extremism of the state house make you think that somehow Ohio is now off the rails extreme as a populace. We're a state that leans a little red.

David Pepper (11:21):

We've leaned a little red for years, you know, but Obama winning Ohio was a big deal because Bush had won Ohio decently well too. What's happening though is, you see, a state house can take a state that is, you know, a little red or a toss up like Wisconsin, and make it look extreme by passing extreme laws that the people can't do anything about. So all around the country, we have states that are somewhere in the middle, maybe a little more red like Ohio, maybe a little more blue like Wisconsin, but all behaving as extremist states because these gerrymandered and rigged state houses basically have created institutions, I call them fortresses with no accountability. They are launching their extremist attacks from these state houses in a way that's completely disconnected to the people of those states. Trump clearly got a hold of Ohio voters in places that used to vote more reliably for Democrats.

David Pepper (12:18):

And that's what explains, you know, he certainly won more decisively than Republican presidential candidates had, even though, again, Sherrod won by 7 in '18. So, clearly Trump had a hold on some. He generated a higher rural turnout and won some voters in some parts of the state that had used to go to Democrats. At the same time, on the flip side, you see a lot of the suburbs of Ohio that used to be very red—the heart of Ohio Republicans—are now blue. So really what's happened in Ohio that's so different is you could still see Democrats in Ohio, but the other big shift is it used to be that the Republicans that

won Ohio were moderate Republicans; George Voinovich, you know, even Rob Portman, although he's been terrible on a lot of issues; Mike DeWine. Normally the moderates would win primaries.

David Pepper (13:07):

Now you're starting to see that the Republicans that succeed Ohio are like JD Vance, way to the right. I mean, Kasich beat Trump, for example, in the Republican primary in '16. What you're seeing is somewhat of a shift, but you're seeing a shift in the type of Republican that wins Ohio. It used to be the old moderates, now it's sort of corporate types. Now, it's this far-right that is defeating the old moderate Republican Party and that's why, you know, JD Vance has become such a spectacle in Ohio. It's the first time we've seen someone who's literally full-in on the extremist stuff running for a statewide Senate seat. In the past we haven't really seen that.

Andrea Chalupa (13:43):

And so where have Democrats been all this time?

David Pepper (13:47):

So Democrats, you know, and I was Chair for some of the years so I was part of this, but Democrats, we won the governor's race between '06 and '10. Obama won '08 and '12. I think where Democrats really got caught off guard—and I was a candidate, I write about this in my book—was that the 2010 cycle, despite a lot of hard work, got away from Democrats. And Ted Strickland lost by two. I lost my race by five. I was running for state auditor. That was one of the races that would've actually determined the outcome of the gerrymandering process. And I don't think Democrats appreciated—and this is why I started writing my book because I was so frustrated by it—how poisonous the 2011 gerrymander was in Ohio. They took a state that had a majority Democratic delegation to Congress as recent 2008 and turned it into a 12-4 guaranteed Republican delegation to Congress.

David Pepper (14:40):

They locked in a state house, as I described earlier, that almost didn't have a single member ever face a reelection for the rest of their careers. And I think what caught maybe Democrats and everyone off guard was that it was a new brand of Republicanism and an extremism that basically had been structured into place by the gerrymandering of Ohio in '11. And I think Democrats potentially were caught somewhat flat-footed, although I'll give credit, not just Democrats. We immediately started fighting back once it became clear how bad the gerrymander was. We had two different constitutional amendments that passed 70-30 to actually write rules to end partisan gerrymandering. We then saw that a key part of enforcing those new rules would be the Ohio Supreme Court. So even though we didn't quite win the governor's race in '18, between '18 and '20 we took a 7-0 Republican Supreme Court and we flipped three seats to get three Democrats, three Republicans, and a moderate chief justice.

David Pepper (15:37):

That's the court that has struck down seven different times the gerrymandered maps for the last years. So we also picked up some state house seats in the middle of the decade. But overall, you know, '10 and '14 were tough years for Ohio Democrats. But the gerrymandering created an extremism in that state house that, in the past, that state house had more moderate Republicans in charge and I think it took Democrats a few years to figure out that this is a different breed. They are extremists, they are pushing laws that are way out of step and they are truly dedicated to keeping gerrymandering going even if it

means breaking the constitution of Ohio, as they've done now seven different times. I think people—and this is true in a lot of other states by the way—the 2011 gerrymandering had this effect all over.

David Pepper (16:25):

And I think people are still slow to pick up just how lawless, just how anti-democratic and just how extreme the people running these gerrymandered state houses have become. You know, we all think about Marjorie Taylor Greene, right? And Jim Jordan? There are hundreds of people like them in state houses every day who aren't in the minority, but they're in the majority every single day passing laws. And so much of the Democratic world is so focused on Washington we actually don't see that the deeper damage to democracy is happening by extremists as crazy as Marjorie Taylor Greene who are in the majority passing laws. And that's what we all have to focus on a lot more, whether it be in Ohio or everywhere else.

Andrea Chalupa (17:08):

Right. It's the strangest thing. There's a sense of, you know, with all the craziness in the world, that we might face a future where America breaks apart. Right? There's an uptick in political violence and disinformation and Trump's cult is going strong and clearly is going to outlast him unfortunately. So there's this feeling that America will come apart. And we see that through this extreme gerrymandering bringing these autocracies to power in states like Ohio where we're going to have two very different Americas, right? The failed states of Texas and Ohio and Missouri and elsewhere, where people are criminalized for basic human rights, like a right to abortion.

David Pepper:

Right.

Andrea Chalupa:

So that's what's really scary is how this could really, if it continues to go unchecked, pull our country apart.

David Pepper (18:02):

Yeah. And but lemme just say, I wrote the book because I remain an optimist that we can keep that from happening. I believe that over time, but it's happening as we speak, if we're smart, if we continue our same game plan of only focusing on federal swing states for federal elections, then what you're describing could very well happen. But in states like Ohio, we saw with Kansas, they are getting so extreme, the public outcomes are so indefensible—for example four days of school a week in Kansas, a failed energy grid so people froze to death in Texas—that even though they've rigged these places, their outcomes, their extremism is getting so indefensible that if we fight hard in these places, like we saw with that Kansas ballot measure just a few weeks ago, we can win. Yes, there is a risk of what you're saying. I think there's an opportunity to keep it from happening, but only if we get really smart, really quick about how to fight the battle.

David Pepper (19:00):

And what we have not been doing, because I think Democrats and the media and others have been slow to perceive that this is not politics as usual. This is not simply playing to win elections on a fair playing field. The other side is going for democracy itself. How can they undermine democracy to oppose a

minority world and extreme viewpoint on all of us, and they've chosen state houses. That's where they do it because state houses, through gerrymandering and other things, can be locked up and be anti democratic. Once you see that, it calls upon all of us to broaden our battle plan so we're not just about Tim Ryan winning—and obviously we want him to win—but we're also about contesting state house seats, contesting secretary of state seats, taking on extremism, holding extremism accountable. You never know where your winds are gonna be, like Kansas, if you don't try. So the point is we have to broaden our game plan, see that it's a battle for democracy that starts in states. Once you see that, actually the plan and what you have to do becomes quite clear. The problem is we haven't seen enough of an adjustment yet to do it, but I think if we do it and we do it well and smartly and aggressively and understand that the stakes are democracy itself, I think we can avoid what you're describing. I think if we continue to do the same thing that doesn't work, then we won't avoid it. So it's up to us collectively to figure it out and to figure it out very quickly.

Andrea Chalupa (20:19):

What do you advise someone in a state like Ohio, Missouri, Mississippi, even in states where, you know, it's fairly blue now, but things could always turn like Colorado, Virginia, what advice do you have for these folks?

David Pepper (20:37):

In these states?

Andrea Chalupa:

Mmhmm <affirmative>.

David Pepper:

So in my book I go through 30 steps that everyone should undertake and they're very similar to what you guys have on your website about sort of the action steps you recommend—

Andrea Chalupa:

Our action guide on gaslitnationpod.com.

David Pepper:

Yeah, your action guide. It's very similar. So there are some very political things to do and then there's some things that are just about uplifting democracy. And in some states the biggest challenge in democracy is the purging of voters. Hundreds of thousands or millions of voters and people, places like Georgia, Florida, Ohio, get yourself organized in a way that you're lifting voters through not just your traditional voting registration activity but, you know, I could always give an example in Ohio: Sherrod Brown convinced McDonald's to have on every single tray a voter registration form when he was secretary of state.

David Pepper (21:24):

Think about all the ways that in your footprint in life you also can lift voters. You know, whether it's the residents of your apartment building or senior center, whether you're the mayor of a town that has rec

centers and libraries, are you registering people in those locations? Whether it's restaurants you attend, convincing them to help voters or a homeless shelter or food bank. There are so many ways that we can all be lifting democracy in a way that fights back against the purging that people like our secretary of state in Ohio and others are doing. And I go through a lot of examples in the book, but the second thing is politically we all have to start seeing that the front line of the attack on democracy are state houses. Why are they the front line? For a lot of reasons. State houses have a lot of power that no one knows about over every issue we care about, whether it's abortion or banning books or you name it. State houses also have control over democracy.

David Pepper (22:16):

But another reason state houses have become the perfect place for the right wing to impose their worldview is because no one's paying attention. Why do you think Mitch McConnell tells Lindsay Graham, "Don't bring that abortion ban here!"? It's because he knows they're doing it in state houses where no one pays attention. It's why he tells Rick Scott to stop talking about their economic agenda. They'd much rather push everything through state houses where no one can be held accountable and where no one's paying attention because no one can name these people, even if we know Marjorie Taylor Greene. So a big political mission for everyone is, figure out in your state who the good guys and bad guys are. Make sure you are challenging extremists in every single district of your state. Go after the swing districts, but also go after the districts that we may not win but where an unchallenged extremist acts a lot worse than if they actually have a competitor who's explaining every time you knock on our door what it is that that extremist is doing.

David Pepper (23:11):

So once you realize that the frontline attacking democracy and the frontline of that advancing extremism, it's not even the US Supreme Court. The US Supreme Court is simply upholding laws that start in state houses. It's the shield. The swords are the state houses. So start reorienting your politics to be all about the state level levers over democracy that are largely state houses and other offices. That includes things like, if you're in a district where no one's challenging the opponent, run. Call up Run For Something and run, or get your most impressive friend to run. Convince someone to not let that district go unchallenged or, secondly, do an event for that person. If they tell you it's a tough district, don't hang up the phone and say, "Well, I'm only gonna help someone in a swing district." Tell them, "Thank you for running the tough district. That is patriotism. How can I help you?"

David Pepper (24:01):

We have to really start going after the extremists at the state house level. What do democrats too often do? Every time something we don't like happens, we simply say we need to elect more federal office holders. That is allowing the state house level extremists who are passing most of the bills we don't like to literally get away scot-free. Again, we never know where the next Kansas victory will be because we usually aren't running campaigns in many of those places. So if you are in a state that's red and you think... And by the way, after I wrote my book about a few states (it's about all states, but a lot of it's Ohio) I got emails from all over the country: "Oh my god, you just described my life in Florida, in Tennessee, in Missouri." If you're in one of those states, it's frustrating. But that's also where we can do the most work to start holding accountable and running for offices that too often we aren't even challenging. And so there are a lot of ways that you can be part of that as well.

Andrea Chalupa (25:00):

What about the gerrymandering? Is there any sort of federal response? The federal government had to step in on a number of occasions during the civil rights movement.

David Pepper:

Yeah.

Andrea Chalupa:

And it's not pleasant. It was a war that the Jim Crow South was waging. So what could be done? I mean at this level, it's autocracy. It's what we see in Russia. It's what we see in Hungary. Orbán is in power in Hungary thanks to extreme gerrymandering.

David Pepper

Right.

Andrea Chalupa:

So what could the federal government do to force an end to extreme gerrymandering?

David Pepper (25:34):

Well, here's the thing. So most of my book is about what you can individually do to take action, but the Senate has a bill in front of it that would basically lock in really robust rules to end partisan gerrymandering. And they have every right to do that. Even recent Supreme Court decisions said that Congress can do something about gerrymandering. It's sitting there because two senators think that a filibuster can stop it, which is absurd. If you read the Constitution, a filibuster is not a legitimate obstacle to legislation protecting democracy. I think Democrats, not just those two senators but all of them, should be fighting a lot harder right now to get that bill passed before the end of this cycle. So there is the federal government right now, the House has passed the bill, the Senate is staring at it.

David Pepper (26:23):

They tried once in January and stopped after they didn't succeed there. And I worry if this cycle closes and we don't win both House and Senate this November, you and I will spend the rest of our lives saying, "Why didn't the Senate do this when they had the chance?" But secondly, I wanna say, now this isn't true in every state, but in many states like Ohio—and you guys have, again, this in your action guide—go right to the people to end gerrymandering. People do not like that all their elections are predetermined. Although our state house is breaking the Constitution and we're trying to hold them accountable, when this was put up to the people of Ohio thanks to an amazing grassroots effort for a vote up or down on gerrymandering, it passed 70-30 twice. So if you can get this passed in Missouri—before the legislature got in the way of it—if you can go to the people directly (not every state can), you'll have results, I think, like Kansas did because people are sick of gerrymandering turning their states into bastions of extremism.

David Pepper (27:20):

So call your senators. Call your Democratic senators and tell them you expect them to fight harder to end gerrymandering than they're fighting right now. But also, in your own state, there may be something you

can do about it. Michigan had a really good reform pass. Other states have passed reforms. But even if you can't end gerrymandering, this is gonna sound counterintuitive but I really believe it to my core: Even if you have a gerrymandered system, do not let those who gerrymander your state win by not running against them. They don't want people to even pay attention to a state house. They don't want even challenges. They love it when 30 seats are uncontested. It's a gift. Don't give it to them. Run hard against them even in gerrymandered districts because again, their extremism at this point is so out of touch.

David Pepper (28:07):

Again, a 10-year-old rape victim being sent to Indiana from Ohio, I'd say 5% of Ohioans agree with that. We should be running in all 99 districts telling the voters, "Your state rep voted for that. If you ran in every district bringing it up, you could actually flip some seats that you never thought you could flip, but you'll never know unless you try." So we could end gerrymandering, the Senate can do it, some states can do it, and even if it's a struggle, run everywhere because the extremism is so outta control you never know where you might win. And we always have to hold these people accountable.

Andrea Chalupa (28:39):

It sounds like we're still dealing with a Democratic Party that doesn't have a full, committed response to this. They're not running people in every district in these states. They're not creating enough noise and excitement around these elections. Would you say that's true? And what more can the Democratic Party do?

David Pepper (28:59):

Yeah. So I'm good friends with Jaime Harrison. He was the head of the South Carolina Democratic Party. He understands all this. I quoted in my book about it. What's happening though is at the highest echelons of the party, including the leaders of the country and big donors, although I think people are starting to see more and more of what's happening at the state house level, I still think the overall infrastructure is very much about helping in a few federal swing states, win those Senate seats and the House districts and in the end electoral college states for the president's election. And readjusting the game plan so that you're actually giving enough money so you're challenging in all districts of states and you're holding people accountable and so you're giving yourself a chance to have results like that Kansas referendum all over, the adjustment has not been made yet.

David Pepper (29:49):

You know, here's a great example of not winning: In the federal swing state mindset that we have because that's a mindset that essentially is not seeing the battle for democracy where it's happening, we thought we'd won everything we were supposed to win in 2020, right? We win the presidency, we win the Senate, we win the House. Hooray. Well, six months later, it's clear to everyone, Whoa, wait a second. We're not winning the battle for democracy even though we won everything we were supposed to win. And that's a wake up call. If you thought you were winning but you weren't, you're doing something wrong. We have to start saying, Yes, we have to elect Fetterman and Ryan and Val Demings but if we continue to win federal offices and we don't win secretary of state offices this year, for example, where election deniers are running everywhere, and we don't gain majorities in states like Michigan and Arizona where we can gain majorities, we're still not winning the battle for democracy.

David Pepper (30:42):

We have to broaden that game plan. And I hate to say it because a lot of people I know are part of the overall operation; I still don't think the dollars and the broader infrastructure that it takes to do that broader battle plan, it still is not happening nearly as much as it needs to. And we're still not communicating to people—and this is, again, why your guide is so great and what I put in my book—we still are seeing, you know, small dollar grassroots donors think that saving democracy basically is about winning a few Senate races. And I want those donors, those small dollar grassroots donors to get as excited about helping the secretary of state candidates beat off the election deniers in Arizona and other states, you know, Michigan, where they're running, or understand that gaining the majority of Arizona where we're only two seats away, or Michigan, has as much impact on democracy, maybe long term in these secretary of state races as anything else, or that if we can pick up or retain certain Supreme Court seats in North Carolina and Ohio, that will have as much long term impact on democracy as winning a congressional seat in those states. We have not communicated well to our base, our grassroots donors of volunteers, that democracy is at stake as much in those races—in some cases more—than it is in the federal races that we always talk about. And we have to do that in every way possible.

Andrea Chlaupa (32:08):

So we're recording this conversation at the end of September. We're running it the first week of October. So that gives us a few short weeks, five or so weeks until election day. In this final home stretch of these all important midterm elections, where should folks be investing their time and how do they do it? Which races? Give us sort of like a menu guide of races that are worthy of our precious time in this final home stretch.

David Pepper (32:37):

Yeah, so I would say obviously, you know, pick several priorities. We have to keep the Senate and hopefully gain two seats to do what we talked about. So if you've got the ability to volunteer for or help a little bit Tim Ryan, John Fetterman, Kelly, you name it, or Val Demings, who's an amazing candidate. I saw her in person a few weeks ago. She was stunning and amazing.

Andrea Chalupa:

And she's going against Marco Rubio in Florida.

David Pepper:

She's going against Marco Rubio in Florida. We need to gain a couple seats to protect democracy and obviously do the same with the House. But here's my number one thing: Do not stop there, which is normally where people stop. That's the only thing we've told them to do. I'll mention a very high priority this cycle, uniquely more than usual: There are election deniers running for Secretary State in Arizona, New Mexico, Nevada, Michigan.

David Pepper (33:28):

If Mastriano becomes governor, he'll appoint one in Pennsylvania. We could win the Senate and lose our democracy if we lose those races because they will be the ones counting votes in every state I just mentioned. These are election deniers who basically have sworn that they won't, you know, they won't even recognize Biden's win. So if you're interested in that, and I tweet about this often, there's an organization called the Democratic Association of Secretaries of State. Look them up online, give if you can, and they will push the money to help support the people who are taking on those election deniers.

They go by the acronym of DASS but it's the Democratic Association of Secretaries of State. If we all get excited to get the 62 Senate seats but we have lost secretary of state races in the states I just mentioned, '24 is gonna be a very risky election even if we win.

David Pepper (34:21):

I'm talking here about people who were there on January 6th, people who are Oathkeepers, people who are part of the far-right fringe that does not recognize the Biden victory. We cannot afford to let those people be running the elections of those states. So that's one place to really focus on. Another, like I said, and you guys mentioned them on your action guide, don't go beyond your own state first. Make sure you're focused on the state house races in your state that can have an impact or one that's near you, but if you're in a blue state feeling pretty good about things, there's several great organizations. One is called the States Project. It's on your action guide. Look them up. I speak to their groups all the time. This is an organization that basically creates a mechanism where you as a donor in a blue state or an activist can, with your friends or your activist group, adopt a red state legislature to help flip.

David Pepper (35:15):

And right now some of the priority states I mentioned were Michigan, Arizona, Pennsylvania, the Minnesota Senate, the Michigan Senate. These are places that we're only a few... North Carolina's got some opportunity. We're only a few seats from picking up majorities or reducing their super majorities. And so all around the country there are people who are adopting other state houses and saying, "Yep, I'm gonna help Tim Ryan and Val Demings, but I'm also gonna put some money and volunteer time into flipping state houses in strategic places." There's another group called Sister District that does the same thing. So I would look them up. One other area, again, these sound very... It may sound like a laundry list. Once you realize that we're at a battle for democracy itself and the other side is seeking to use state houses to basically get their extreme views into place without really a democratic process, you realize how important these races are.

David Pepper (36:07):

The other set that are really important, if you're interested—and by the way, anyone follow me on Twitter @DavidPepper, I tweet this stuff all the time—the Supreme Court races in states like Ohio, in Michigan, North Carolina, Illinois also, especially after Dobbs, are gonna be critical in protecting democracy in these states, keeping a rule of law in place, and in some cases like Ohio, potentially saving the right to have an abortion that a federal court won't protect but a state court may. So beyond what you're typically looking at, you know, I would say state houses, secretary of state races and Supreme Court races in certain states are really critical right now. If your mindset is, "I'm here to save democracy and not only sort of chase down a few federal senate seats that everyone tells us about." Is that helpful? I know that was a lot at once.

Andrae Chalupa (36:54):

Yeah, no, that was a fantastic overview. Play that part back again everyone and pick your races to invest time in in these final weeks. Okay, so before we let you go, I wanna just touch on your background researching Ukraine and having lived in Russia and Vladimir Putin. Could you just give us a quick look at what that was like and where you think things are headed now?

David Pepper (37:18):

Well, one thing real quick on the... The good thing about the States Project and the Democratic Association of Secretaries of State is you don't have to do your homework to figure out where the opportunities to races are. They do that all for you. So if you go to their websites or their Twitter feeds, they will guide you as to what the most strategic opportunities are. I call it my Forest Gump part of my existence. I worked in St. Petersburg, Russia in the early to mid '90s. This was back when we had Yeltsin and Clinton getting along and it was this very heady time. We were gonna help Russia. Obviously in hindsight, it was quite naive in terms of the overall optimism, although there was a moment of optimism. And I was there to help do some technical assistance in St. Petersburg.

David Pepper (38:01):

And the mayor who was essentially the head of the project was Anatoly Sobchak. He was a very small D democratic champion, but his vice mayor was Vladimir Putin who was this very serious, sober guy. We knew he was a former spy. And he was given the assignment of being the liaison of my project. So yeah, in a very strange way, I met with him all the time. He would set up the meetings we would have in St. Petersburg. And I will tell you, I was shocked when he became prime minister and then president because in St. Petersburg when I was there, there were a lot of really impressive Western minded leaders. He wasn't one of them. I was always wondering how he became vice mayor. I actually enjoyed my time in Russia in the early to mid '90s and everything since is a tragedy.

David Pepper (38:49):

Obviously it's a much bigger tragedy for Ukraine and the people there. But just that this moment where we could have gone in one direction by one man and a lot of other reasons has gone in this horrible direction. But I'll say my experience in Russia, whether it be with Putin or others, is I really think you have to be very strong and tough when you're sitting down with the leaders of Russia. I think Putin is always sizing up the person across the table as to whether or not they're strong or they're not. And I think Donald Trump, for them, was perfect. They saw him as weak and compromised and they ran him over. They loved that he was there. I think they did not anticipate because they'd seen America not be as forceful in recent years. They didn't anticipate, in the end, a unified and strong response to what they did in Ukraine.

David Pepper (39:40):

So they moved in and obviously I think they were surprised by that. My bigger picture view takeaway from having worked there and having sort of seen... I'll give an example. Henry Kissinger was involved in what we were doing. You would think, Well, that'd be a problem because he was a big Cold Warrior and they wouldn't like that. Actually, they loved it because they liked that he was this tough person. That's sort of what they want to deal with. And so I think being strong, being tough minded, you know, negotiating tough, not looking like you could get run over, you'll get more done that way than if you do all the nonsense that obviously Trump was doing. And I think that the minute they sense weakness—and this is true of the world—you have to stand up to bullies. And I think Putin is a classic bully.

David Pepper (40:25):

If he senses that you're gonna cave or roll over, he'll move right into that space. And I think you have to stand up. And that's kind of, you know, my sort of 30,000 foot view of having worked there is that you'll get more done being very tough. And obviously in hindsight I think they viewed Hillary Clinton as actually being quite tough. That's why they didn't want her there. They'd much rather have a weak person like Trump than someone who they knew would stand up to them. So it was an interesting time and it's

obviously tragic now that we're seeing not only what was this moment of optimism in Russia implode, but now we're seeing the worst fears of Russia trying to become an empire again play out in a way that we can only hope is not successful.

Andrea Chalupa (41:04):

And that's good advice for the autocrats and wannabe autocrats here at home. You have to stand up to bullies.

David Pepper (41:12):

Absolutely. I mean, it's Trump's whole life. When they do not see accountability for what they do, when they do not see a hard pushback, they go further. They don't learn just to keep going, they learn to do even more. I mean, that's the history of Trump and these failed impeachments. And so whether it's Ron DeSantis, I'm so glad that Texas sheriff is looking into any criminal implications from kidnapping those migrants. Whether it's the Ohio legislators violating the Ohio Constitution, whether it's Merrick Garland being tough on Trump not just for classified documents but for January 6th, until bullies like these people—lawless thugs is what they've become—until they see real accountability in court, in the rule of law or at the polls, they will never, ever stop. The more moderate wing of the Republican Party has learned this. They didn't stand up to Trump and they let someone who, when he went down that escalator, was fringe take over their party because they never stood up to him.

David Pepper (42:10):

And I think the rest of America has to learn that lesson. These folks that are violating laws left and right, that are extremists, we have to be tough as nails taking them on, holding them accountable whenever we can and standing up to them. The opposite approach has been tried for far too long and it's simply not working. And that's why I say we have to run everywhere. Whoever passed that Dobbs law, they should have a Democrat fired up running against them in that state house district. Everyone who voted for it should have a candidate against them. Everyone who voted to send that Ohio 10-year-old rape victim to Indiana, every one of them should face an opponent calling them out at every door they knock on for doing that. We have to stand up to the extremists and bullies or they'll just keep going. But if we all of a sudden force the issue, like they did in Kansas, all of a sudden make them fear us as opposed to fear the extremists. And we just have not had that aggressive mindset that I think we need to take all that stuff on. That has to change right away.

Andrea Chalupa (43:10):

And for more ways than how to change that, check out the Gaslit Nation Action Guide at gaslitnationpod.com as well as our 2022 Survival Guide also on the website, gaslitnationpod.com. And check out David Pepper's book, *Laboratories of Autocracy*. You can find it through his website, laboratoriesofautocracy.com. That's *Laboratories of Autocracy*. Thank you so much, David Pepper. Everyone follow him on Twitter. He is one of the wonderful voices that is going to get us through these critical next years.

David Pepper (43:44):

Thank you so much. Great to be with you.

[outro - theme music, roll credits]

Andrea Chalupa:

Our discussion continues and you can get access to that by signing up on our Patreon at the Truth-teller level or higher.

Sarah Kendzior:

Pakistan has been decimated by record floods and people need help. To help the victims of the floods, donate to Pakistan Emergency Flood Aid at www.launchgood.com/campaign/pakistan_emergency_flood_aid. Climate and economic crises are everywhere, so please consider supporting your local food bank as well.

Andrea Chalupa:

We encourage you to help support Ukraine by donating to Razom for Ukraine razomforukraine.org. We also encourage you to donate to the International Rescue Committee, a humanitarian relief organization helping refugees from Ukraine, Syria, and Afghanistan. Donate at rescue.org. And if you wanna help critically endangered orangutans already under pressure from the palm oil industry, donate to the Orangutan Project at theorangutanproject.org.

Gaslit Nation is produced by Sarah Kendzior and Andrea Chalupa. If you like what we do, leave us a review on iTunes. It helps us reach more listeners and check out our Patreon. It keeps us going.

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Our production manager is Nicholas Torres and our associate producer is Karlyn Daigle. Our episodes are edited by Nicholas Torres and our Patreon exclusive content is edited by Karlyn Daigle.

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