

Strategizing for the 2025 Trump Regime Change with Steven Gardiner

Inform Your Resistance: Season 3 Episode 7

[00:00:00] **Koki:** This is Inform Your Resistance with PRA, Political Research Associates. Tune in twice a month to hear experts, researchers, journalists, academics, and movement strategists explain some of the most significant contemporary threats to democracy from the mainstream and far right. With Inform Your Resistance, we distill what you need to know most.

[00:00:23] I'm your host, Koki Mendis, Communications Director here at PRA.

[00:00:34] In today's episode, I speak with PRA Principal Research Advisor Steven Gardiner to pick his brain on what has led us to this moment in history, when Donald Trump and the Republican Party has so decisively won the presidency and both houses of Congress. We discuss the likely scenarios that may play out in Trump's first year back in office, the implications of his chaotic cabinet picks for the implementation of both mundane and reactionary policy, and, most importantly, on the opportunities available to those of us committed to resisting the fascistic capture of the U.S. state.

[00:01:07] We conclude by identifying sources for hope and momentum, not just from the sheer energy of the resistance left, but by the vulnerabilities and contradictions of the supremacist right. Steven Gardiner is Principal Research Advisor and formerly Research Director here at Political Research Associates.

[00:01:25] He has been researching and writing in opposition to the politics of bigotry, violence, and authoritarianism since the early 1990s. In 2004, Gardiner received a Ph.D. in Cultural Anthropology from Cornell University. Since earning his doctorate, he has taught more than 20 different courses at eight universities in the United States, Pakistan, and the UAE.

[00:01:46] Steven, thank you so much for sitting down with me today.

[00:01:49] **Steven:** Great to be here, Koki. Really excited.

[00:01:52] **Koki:** I've been looking forward to this conversation since before the election, but no pressure. We are talking two weeks after a pretty decisive win by Trump and Republicans of both the presidency and the Senate and just last week we learned that the GOP has also captured a house majority.

[00:02:06] As you make sense of these wins in this moment, what reflections do you keep coming back to? What's niggling in the back of your brain?

[00:02:16] **Steven:** What niggles the back of my brain is the lack of imagination. Of the many folks who chose not to vote and the many Democratic voters, Democratic Party

voters, who understandably maybe voted without enthusiasm, but still didn't quite get that the Trump and the Trumpists were not joking about mass deportation.

[00:02:43] Were not joking about persecuting their political enemies, or cracking down and censoring journalists, or making it so much more deadly for people who are pregnant and seeking medical care. They just didn't quite get it, or at least not enough of them.

[00:03:01] **Koki:** That makes a lot of sense. I do wonder whether estimations of number of deaths that will be caused under this regime would have had more persuasive impact, but I think that would have also registered as inflammatory, so it was difficult terrain to navigate.

[00:03:17] Moving into PRA's analysis of this moment. One of our core analytical frameworks centers on the three-way fight. Can you explain this framework to our audience and talk to how that fight will likely manifest under a Trump administration that is so closely tied to and staffed by leading figures of the Far Right?

[00:03:38] **Steven:** Yeah, I've taken to talking about the three way fight in the simplest possible terms, which is this. There are people who like things pretty much the way they are, the status quo institutionalists, who benefit from and are willing to fight for keeping the kind of White supremacy, the kind of patriarchy, the kind of settler colonialism and racial capitalism that we're all familiar with in place.

[00:04:07] Tinkering around the edges as is necessary to maintain credibility, but they are the people who like it the way it is.

Then, there are people, uh, the left broadly understood, including progressives, some genuine reformists in the left liberal sphere, who think that the system isn't actually all that good for everyone.

[00:04:27] There's lots of people who are having their human dignity, their capacity to live long and fulfilling lives, and their basic fundamental, uh, humanity trampled upon by the systems that exist. People who like it the way it is. People who want to make it better.

And in the third space, people who don't think it's bad enough.

[00:04:49] They want to make it worse. And worse in the very specific sense of, perhaps they imagine better for them, but who think it's not racist enough, it's not sexist enough, it's not hierarchical and authoritarian enough. And that is an explicit program that is aimed at the institutions, the status quo, the people who think it's pretty good as it is, On both sides, those are social movement energy sides of the left and the right people who want to make it better, more just people who want to make it more racist and they are in competition with each other.

[00:05:24] The status quo reaches out to whichever of those sides it thinks it can draw allies from. The left or the right when it feels threatened by the other. So we'll reach out to the right if it thinks the left is a threat, we'll reach out to the left if it thinks the right is a threat. And what we have in this moment is a moment when the imagination, as I said at

the beginning, of not just the left, not just Democrats, but of the status quo has been, has failed to register just how bad things could get, even for them.

[00:05:59] Um, and we see this in all kinds of ways. We see it in the ways in which the Trump and his folks are already basically trying to humiliate the Senate to see how far they can push them. If they can be bullied and if they can, then they know they can do anything they want. If they can't, whoever resists is now on the enemy's list.

[00:06:22] **Koki:** How do you think that moving into this next administration may sway the folks in that middle category of preferencing the status quo systems of oppression that benefit them. Do you think this is going to be a wake up moment and too late or a moment to reconfigure this three-way orientation?

[00:06:44] **Steven:** This is an open question.

[00:06:45] It depends on how bad things get for whom. We already see status quo thinkers, the Jeff Bezos's of the world, reaching out to congratulate and suck up to the new Trump regime and to Trump himself because their interests don't necessarily align with his program, but they align with not being on the wrong side of persecutorial power.

[00:07:09] And so if they think they can avoid that, they will. There are others who have not been in bed with the Trumpist ideas, with the MAGA movement, who, even if they have great privilege, may find themselves in a place that they don't like. And there may be even some of those with a lot of privilege who will say, oh, I don't really want to live in that world that they're trying to make.

[00:07:36] Particularly if they show us that they're actually going to try to make it. They're going to actually try to deport millions of people in a way that would be catastrophic. Um, you know, think about the callousness of that first Trump administration when tens of thousands of people died during the first year of the COVID pandemic who didn't have to die. They're in excess of death as compared to other quote unquote developed countries and they died because of callousness and ideology, not because of lack of resources.

[00:08:05] **Koki:** Thank you, Steven. I am really interested to see how this plays out, certainly, and hope that we're able to also get ahead of waiting to see what happens. I think you and I will talk a little bit about that later on in our conversation today. Another central premise that we focus on here at PRA is that the Right is not monolithic, and that there are disparate agendas across the Right and Far Right that are not infrequently at odds with one another.

[00:08:32] We also know that these disparate movements and formations of the Far Right are willing and able to compromise to win power, which is how we end up here today. With this in mind, are there wedges available to us to weaken Trump's coalition? And how durable do you anticipate this coalition to be now that it has significant power at its disposal?

[00:08:50] **Steven:** This is a great question, and I'll point to several places. Yes, there are wedges. I mean, the first one that is coming at us is, again, with the Senate. We see outgoing leader Mitch McConnell was the minority leader in the Senate. Previous to that, he was the majority leader for many years, and one of the most, uh, ruthless politicians to ever enter Washington, D.C.

[00:09:11] and effective. Terrible, terrible man, but, um, no one can say that he was stupid. But what he is saying is that what Trump is trying to do to the Senate is basically to do away with the, not just the dignity, but that's like grates on him, but also the constitutional role of the Senate and more broadly of the legislative branch, which is of course a classic theme of fascistic and authoritarian movements is that parliamentary or legislative power has to be overcome because it is, in the words of those folks in the fascistic or authoritarian regime, inefficient.

[00:09:49] The leader has to have the power, not this diffuse group of people who have all different kinds of interests. Even if in the modern era in the United States, it tends to track closely with party and fealty to a sitting president. But even so, uh, what the nominations for cabinet positions that Trump is pushing, they are custom made, tailor made to force the Senate to say, can we even, even the most quote unquote conservative Republicans are going to look at that and say, if I vote for Matt Gaetz, you know, accused sex trafficker and loose cannon Matt Gaetz for attorney general of the United States, what is history going to think of me?

[00:10:35] What am I going to think of myself? What am I going to tell my kids? And, what am I going to do about the institution that I spent so long trying to get to, within which my identity is bound up, the United States Senate, for someone like McConnell especially. How is that going to work? I mean, how can we just surrender to this guy?

[00:10:51] Many of whom, even in his own party, think of him [Trump] as a buffoon. And yet, he's a perfect bully, learned from the best, tutored by character assassin, uh, Roy Cohn, back in New York. And he brings a lot of skills in that range of things, of bullying people, of grooming them to be broken to his will, like a mafia boss or a CIA interrogator.

[00:11:16] I think I lost track of the question there. That's how I see one of the, one of those first points where, um, there could be some wedges. Encouraging the Senate to not capitulate to this, encouraging the House, because if the Senate doesn't agree, for example, to just let all of these appointments be rammed through.

[00:11:38] And if Trump tries to use the recess appointments, this obscure congressional constitutional procedure where the Congress can go into recess and then he can make whatever appointments that he wants. Without consent or advice. Well, if the Senate doesn't agree to that, there's a weird provision that says, well, the House could do it.

[00:11:57] The House doesn't do the consent, but if John..., the Speaker of the House, uh, Johnson says, yeah, we can, uh, call the, uh, House into recess and then Trump can force the Senate to go into recess and make his appointments then. And then it would be, if anything, in the hands of the courts. So that's one place.

[00:12:12] Another place is we see pulling from the Right, uh, some elements of the Far Right, the neonazi White nationalist Right, who are keen to make sure that the boast to deport millions of people is acted out, that this is not just a campaign rhetoric. So there's that, even if it isn't practical, even if it isn't realistic.

But this isn't going to play with that far right element who are already, we have clan factions in the Midwest, uh, distributing these posters, these

[00:12:56] wildly racist posters, uh, with pictures of, you know, families running away, distributed by the Klan factions saying self deport before, uh, the new regime comes for you. Then we have around reproductive rights. This is something that's been sensitive. One of the areas that almost everyone agrees there's a majority of Americans who don't want to see a national law or policy that would further make it difficult for pregnant people to obtain abortions or appropriate reproductive health care.

[00:13:28] And there's going to be nonetheless pressure from the Christian Right, from the theocratic Right for Trump to push that forward, even though it's clearly not popular. So these are places where there are potential wedges, and we have to be thinking about the next election in 2026. Much of this could be reversed if enough, um, voters have buyer's remorse over what happened in this most recent election.

[00:13:52] So those are, those are some places where there are wedges that can potentially be exploited. But the problem is in exploiting them is that the success of the Trump circle and of the MAGA movement has been to encourage people to capitulate to power, their own power, even when they disagree with the particularity.

[00:14:17] So we can now have Mitch McConnell opposing these recess appointments and so on. Um, now that he's on his way out, now that he is basically an old man who's, who's let go of his hold on the Senate that he had for so many years. So it's people who have nothing left to lose, who are, who are willing to, uh, to take a bit of a stand.

[00:14:37] I think that part of the trick here is going to be for all of us to try to help people recognize that they don't want to wait until they're in that position of nothing left to lose. Until there's something that they don't want to compromise on, that the authoritarian wannabes are going to look at them and say, tough luck.

[00:14:57] We don't care if you've been with us all along. You do what we want now. In fact, you're a broken person. You've done all of these things that any decent person would never do. So you have nothing to say.

[00:15:07] **Koki:** You're compromised.

Steven: Yep.

Koki: It's interesting that you bring up sort of Mitch McConnell being on the way out and the way that that gives him the ability to actually, against his potentially best interest if he were to continue a political career, find himself at odds with majority power holders.

[00:15:25] In a similar vein, there's some thinking around the fact that this is Trump's last four years of elected governance of this is a lame duck presidency, and that there's a way in which he has a four-year timeline, potentially even a two year, as you mentioned, 2026. What stock do you put in that framework of this being sort of his last chance versus he doesn't have a full eight-years to see through an agenda that, you know, will look pretty similar to what we understand a Project 2025. Is four years enough is two years enough, uh, millions of people will be deported, but how much sort of institutional damage can be done in that time?

[00:16:07] **Steven:** Even in a year, an almost unbelievable amount of, uh, institutional damage can be done using the executive order process that Project 2025 and others who are close to the president are urging that not only be used, but they be pushed and pushed to an extent that is almost certainly going to be ruled unconstitutional in some cases, even by the current Roberts court.

[00:16:35] But who knows how long it will take to see those cases through the courts. They will clog up the courts. And in the meantime, the institutions that are being pressured will see mass exodus of people either leaving government employment or retreating into a kind of self censorship or the more hopeful possibility is that they resist from within, and when directly tasked to do something, that they, they know is unethical, that they resign at that moment, publicly, not just a quiet backing away, or I'm gonna go do something else with my time, but, no, I refuse to do that.

[00:17:17] You can't make me do that. That's unconstitutional and immoral.

[00:17:21] **Koki:** I'm certainly hoping to see a mass noncompliance campaign result from this first few years. Sorry, I cut you off. Go ahead.

[00:17:29] **Steven:** No, that's exactly, that's exactly the hope here. And I think the underlying issue, of course, is that the other part, it's aiming these appointees to the cabinet at the Senate, is part one.

[00:17:42] But he's also picking people who will aim that same kind of bullying and amoral or immoral energy and practice. A self serving or Trump serving acts at the great, uh, great, as in the sense of large government, uh, institutions at the, you know, Health and Human Services, at the Defense Department, Department of Veterans Affairs, um, uh, and, and on and on, uh, Justice Department, where there are, you know, tens of thousands, hundreds of thousands of employees in total, and they are going to be.

[00:18:16] put under pressure, especially at the higher levels, to see what they will do. And the point, part of the point is, uh, they will either submit, and then they're compromised, or, uh, they will resist, and then they're on the enemy's list. So it's a win win for fascistic government. Now, I say fascistic here, not fascist, because you can be a fascist wannabe, but there are still a lot of breaks built into the formal democratic system of the United States that's going to make it hard to break it completely.

[00:18:47] But that is the intent, to break it in terms of checks and balances against a unitary executive.

[00:18:54] **Koki:** And we know that because Project 2025 was very explicit about that.

[00:18:58] **Steven:** Exactly.

[00:18:59] **Koki:** Staying with these cabinet appointees for a minute, it's certainly an effective strategy to threaten the bureaucrats who see these

[00:19:09] incoming people as their next bosses and understand what the policy implications are going to be for their next two to four years within these state bureaucracies. But one thing I'm really wrestling with is how effective are these individuals beyond sort of these early threats? What is the tradeoff between loyalty to Trump and adherence to this very restrictive reactionary worldview and the sort of efficacy, training, skills that most cabinet appointees have to a degree in prior administrations to actually successfully design and implement bureaucratic policy across a really large and wide variety of government agencies?

[00:19:49] **Steven:** There are two kinds of people that Trump has around him. The first are basically incompetents, and that is most of these appointments. And I say that even with some compassion, because, you know, I couldn't run the Department of Defense. Most people couldn't. But, uh, the people who are being appointed have no

[00:20:06] skill set, but this is not a problem in Trump's imagination because, of course, he has no skill set for running the United States. What he has is the other kind of people who are ideologues who find him to be a useful idiot. They know that they can get him to do anything that they want, and I'm thinking now of the Stephen Millers, who are competent and motivated to convince Trump that it was his idea so that he will get behind it.

[00:20:34] And it tends to work so long as they are, one, inflammatory, two, sycophantic, and, uh, three, are the last person that, uh, talk to him before he gets on social media and pronounces the next policy. So the question is can some of these incompetents who are being, uh, appointed find their Stephen Millers who will actually do the execution for them, who will carry out the plans?

[00:20:58] Or, and this is just as well from Trump's point of view, just get fired because, I mean, they're incompetent so they're easily exchangeable with another incompetent. So the more likely outcome is not, for example, that they're going to deport 10 million people the way that the hard core of the base really wants to see them do.

[00:21:16] It's more that they're going to put brutal, violent, spectacular pressure on people and make a big show of deporting 122, 000 in a way that, uh, that will splash all over the media and show how tough they are and hurt a lot of people and scare a lot of people sort of invisibility, uh, even more than vulnerable, um, undocumented folk already are invisible.

[00:21:45] And then also try to identify resistors in the blue states. He's already talked about, Trump has already talked about going after California in particular, as a large state that's already said that they're going to try to Trump proof there state using the sort of economic and procedural power of California, which is, of course, a gigantic economy and

a large population, and the retaliation can be straightforward, uh, with holding of funds for emergencies, for, uh, education, for discretionary funding that goes to the states, but it could also be invocation of The insurrection act, if a local governor or mayor is seen to not effectively be responding to the demands of the administration after they declare a crisis.

[00:22:33] So, for example, if there are large scale demonstrations in support of people who are being deported.

[00:22:39] **Koki:** I have been wondering about that and sort of the implications for sanctuary cities, sanctuary states more broadly, and sort of beyond the withholding of federal funding, which is going to result in incredible debts incurred within these communities.

[00:22:53] But the Insurrection Act is a useful additional insight into what is to come.

[00:23:13] You mentioned sort of the distinction between fascistic and fascism. And one of the historical corollaries that's most available to us as we stand on this precipice of authoritarian regime and sort of testing the institutions of American democracy, the protections of American democracy, is that of the Third Reich.

[00:23:33] Is this a useful parallel as you look to parse our present conditions and/or are there other more compelling, more demonstrative historical parallels that we should look to in preparation for the fight ahead?

[00:23:44] **Steven:** It is useful in some ways. Now, the striking difference, of course, is that when the Nazi party came to power in Germany and created the so-called Third Reich, there was no significant history of democratic

[00:24:01] practice or investment in democracy in, uh, in Germany, in a unified Germany, which only been around about 50 years at the time of Hitler's rise to power. And there was a residual aristocracy. There was pretty much widespread understanding that the military was the most important institution in society and most respected.

[00:24:24] So, that's quite different than the contemporary United States, where the failures of real democracy are legion, but where formal democracy, having a Congress that sits every year, that is not dissolved on the whim of a leader that has regular elections that, until very recently, uh, the legitimacy of which have not been questioned by those in power, even if others can point to the many ways in which the de facto exclusion of so many who simply don't see themselves represented, is a challenge.

[00:24:57] But for those in power, for those in that status quo, we like it the way it is, people pretty much feel good about those elections, even when they lost, good about them as a formal procedure, where the courts functioned more or less independently from the legislature or the executive branch. All of that was something that the United States has or has had that was not there during the Weimar Republic that the Nazis replaced.

[00:25:23] Where we have parallels is with exactly the kind of character of folks who became involved with the effort focusing on demonizing internal others. For Hitler, it was

mostly the Jews. For Trump, it's immigrants and others who make his enemies list, internal enemies. This can include anyone, of course, who disagrees, but that was true for Hitler also.

[00:25:51] Opposition politicians, in fact, were the first to make his, uh, we're going to put you in a concentration camp list, even if they were not systematically exterminated, or in the case of Trump, systematically, in his imagination, going to be deported. And, uh, so there are some important similarities. There's probably more institutional resistance to be broken in the United States from the large bureaucracies, including the military, which is unlikely to simply do whatever

[00:26:20] Trump, uh, wants it to do if it's considered to be unconstitutional. On the other hand, they will also have a really difficult time saying, no, some senior generals may resign. And of course, there's this talk of, again, another parallel, Hitler was keen to get rid of any senior military person who was seen as disloyal.

[00:26:40] And this idea of loyalty was a big thing in the Third Reich, and, uh, it's going to be a huge thing under the Trump administration. There's this talk of this panel, of this warrior's panel, that's going to evaluate the senior military leadership and throw out anyone who is considered to not be the sort of general or admiral flag officer that, uh, Trump is interesting as in having in the, in the United States military.

[00:27:07] This is in itself a kind of, uh, violation of separation of powers in the traditional sense, in the tradition of separation of, uh, civilian and military powers and, uh, having the military as a professional force that is not subject to political machinations within the United States. Now, of course, we could talk, uh, we could spend the rest of the interview talking about the ways in which the U.S.

[00:27:33] military has been used in the most horrifying, uh, ways in other parts of the world. And that, uh, is, is a different reality of a so-called democracy that widely engages in violent imperialism of the 22nd century, 21st century kinds. Coming 22nd century, I can imagine.

[00:27:52] **Koki:** Rama Kadaimi and I had that conversation on the podcast recently, so we covered it in depth.

[00:27:58] Are there other parallels that you're looking to, especially thinking about authoritarian states that develop out of democratic election processes?

[00:28:07] **Steven:** The vast majority of contemporary authoritarian states are elected. They did not come to power by coup or by any kind of revolutionary or violent maneuver.

[00:28:19] And they depend on a coalition of right-wing forces, and once they get into power, they tend to jettison anyone they see as a liability. So here we're talking about Poland, we're talking about Hungary, both of which have moved in a direction of authoritarianism, on the support of very far-right individuals and parties and movement factions that were focused on issues of anti-immigrant sentiment.

[00:28:48] And Poland for the Poles, Hungary for Hungarians, uh, and in Stephen Miller's, uh, phrase, America for Americans. Apparently, uh, he didn't quite get the irony of that statement in a settler colonial country. In any case, yeah, I think those are potential parallels. And also you could, you could argue that, uh, with the dominionist, the Christian dominionist, theocratic influence in the MAGA movement, you could also look at some rough parallels to India and the, and the Modi government there with Hindu supremacy to Turkey.

[00:29:24] And even to Israel, with Israel less as a Jewish state than a, uh, and more of a Jewish supremacist state.

[00:29:32] **Koki:** Thank you, Steven. That's very clarifying. Moving to the fight ahead, as I mentioned, and reflecting on the analysis that you've brought to this moment in our conversation so far. By the time this episode is released, we'll be mere weeks away from Trump's inauguration.

[00:29:49] In this interim period, what is the role of the Left in preparing for a Trump administration and a captured legislature and judiciary, both in terms of organizing our communities and as individuals?

[00:30:01] **Steven:** In the first place, the Left, as compared to the Democratic Party and its allies in the, in the Center and Center Left, is not in despair.

[00:30:10] We are in anger. We are in, uh, revulsion. We are in urgency, but we are not in despair because this didn't come as that big of a surprise to us. I think many on the Liberal Left are shocked that this could possibly happen. They underestimated the MAGA movement. They underestimated Trump and they overestimated their own appeal to us voters, the six or so, six to seven million people that, uh, were not interested enough to, to vote in this election.

[00:30:45] And so that the first thing that we, that we need to come to terms with is that for the Left, some kind of bringing a reality to check to people. To push back against the narrative that, oh, it was this small group of people over here. It was people who supported Palestine. That's what gave the election to, to Trump.

[00:31:06] No, I mean, what we see in fact, is that those people who didn't vote for the most part, they are people who lived in deep blue states where Harris won anyway. In the swing states, the vote actually went up and that's where Trump won this election, uh, in those swing states. And what they were voting on is all different kinds of things.

[00:31:26] There isn't one magic solution. I mean, yes, people talk about their, you know, their worries about the cost of eggs or gas or, you know, cost of living basically, and just being mad at whoever it was who was in power already in the same way that they were mad at Trump largely in 2020 because of the pandemic.

[00:31:47] Again, not something he made, although arguably his response led to, uh, 100,000 deaths that need not have happened, uh, but people were mad about it in any case. And in 2024, people were mad about cost of gas or, or eggs or chicken or, or the

things they need to live. Understandable in both cases, but also much more complicated than that, because people don't just neatly trickle out in these, like, oh, this was my main issue, the way exit polls work.

[00:32:15] People have complex motivations, uh, and can be mad at whoever, who's ever in power, because the world isn't going, because they're not part of that self satisfied, like things the way they are, group. So what can we do? Moral leadership, calling to account, and pushing back against the grain that's going to try to blame the Left, blame particular communities and talk about the, uh, the long term failure of, of neoliberalism, but then also start to organize ourselves in the short term to take care of, to have compassion for the most vulnerable in this instance.

[00:32:56] Lots of people are scared, and I understand that, but it's like if you live in a tall building, like a high rise, say a 20-story high rise, and there's lots of disturbances down on the street. There are people who are living on the first floor. Most of us are not, even on the Left. But those people who are, they're going to need help.

[00:33:17] They're going to need shelter. They're going to need resources. They're going to need people to drive them across state lines to get medical care that they may need. They're going to need money. They're going to need, um, people to help with basic tasks like childcare and, uh, you know, finding slots for people to be educated in, uh, sanctuary areas and all this kind of, uh, mutual aid work that is going to require more

[00:33:44] courage than it did previously. So not just inconvenience, but courage, uh, since it could be seen as aiding and abetting people who are in some kind of despised class as criminals or aliens or terrorists or whatever language that the Trump regime decides it's going to use to try to alienate people and to separate us from ourselves.

[00:34:07] So compassion, activism, information. Information is going to be hard, there's going to be crackdowns on what can be said on, uh, research institutes, on institutes of higher education, so you don't combat that with the algorithms of social media, you combat that by finding your people and getting with them in real life and finding alternative modes of

[00:34:32] communicating and communicating across communities using whatever means are available, whether that's encrypted emails, whether that's old fashioned letters, whether that's telephone calls and finding out what are people actually seeing on the ground. Then there's going to be people mobilized in this moment.

[00:34:50] And those folks who are mobilized, there's a short window between their mobilization through anger and sort of adrenaline fueled, I gotta do something, maybe they go to the streets, maybe they sign up, and our capacity to recruit them and keep them as part of the Left and educate them and mentor them and love them in a way that says we actually want you to be part of us, we don't just want to preserve our now-under-threat, in any case, non profit jobs.

[00:35:20] So those are some of the things and remembering that it's two years until the midterms and we need a house of Congress. In the meantime, we need to think about how

can we build power in the state apparatuses where there is, in the Californias, in the Minnesotas, in the Oregons, in the Washingtons, in the Massachusettses, and in the New Yorks.

[00:35:40] Precisely the place, in other words, where a lot of people stayed home and said, well, it doesn't matter, you know, Harris is going to win here anyway. It doesn't matter what we do, and we're kind of silently signaling that, you know, we're kind of mad about the way things are. And finding ways to motivate some of those folks to get involved with resistance to political persecution, mass deportation, trampling, uh, the reproductive, uh, health and lives of, of people who become pregnant, or could, the, the lives and, and, uh, life chances of trans people, and, and of our educational institutions that are going to come under increased fire for thinking critically.

[00:36:18] And I think we can see in the public institutions, especially in red states, the mass dissolution of programs in the social sciences and humanities, as the institutions decline to fight back against the demands of the Trump administration.

[00:36:49] **Koki:** Thinking about local organizing and finding your community, how does that factor into fighting for local power, putting people in local office? Is this a moment to really learn from the Right and place our resources, our energy and our time into recapturing or capturing municipal governments, moving on to school boards, or do you think that more of the energy is better used in these mutual aid networks and informal networks of resource allocation?

[00:37:21] **Steven:** It's one of those moments when we have to do the mutual aid and networks of mutual support to survive. And survival is a form of resistance, but it's not a strategy for power. It's a strategy for continuing and waiting for the moment. And right now we still have time to start working towards local power and creating or reinforcing the kinds of bastions of Democratic potential, of justice potential, that can be places where if someone needs an abortion, they can go there.

[00:37:54] If someone needs a place where ICE is not welcome to come and seize, you know, someone's grandmother and throw her out of the country. If people are looking for, for work because they're refugees from the department of justice, where those people can be welcomed. And if the, the Trumpians want to create a blacklist, a sort of a McCarthyist style blacklist of people who've been forced out of government service.

[00:38:19] Let's give them jobs in Los Angeles and Portland and Boston and so on. And, and, you know, to create the kinds of endorsements locally of mutual aid and support that escapes, that is reinforced by, by local policies. So that, so that instead of clamping down on people who don't have a place to live, uh, as a, as an urban priority, we clamp down on excessive use of, uh, police force.

[00:38:49] Clamp down on the idea that healthcare for all is too expensive, and if the federal government is going to back away from the ACA and put less money into healthcare, then I think the states have to put more in, and at least the places where we can build that power. And in the process, train people up to be candidates and to seize, to take control of local party apparatuses from, uh, progressives in the Left, as opposed, in the same way that the Right took control of the Republican party and made it their own.

[00:39:20] **Koki:** That's a useful segue. My next question was going to be sort of, what is the relationship between the Left and the Center Left in this moment? Thinking about the surprise Democratic Party that put all of their eggs in the Swiftly and Beehive cultural influence mode of winning voters. You know, in addition to really changing the demographics and the agendas of Democratic Party institutions at a local level, how can the left engage with the Democratic Party in this moment of reckoning, of reconfiguring in ways that really looks at 2026 and 2028?

[00:39:59] **Steven:** I think that the first thing is the left in the United States has, if they do electoral politics at all, they do it as a party. beggars as people going and asking for favors from the Democrats. Uh us too, you know, we we have some things to say that might be kind of cool. Maybe you should listen I think we have to to build those those uh cornerstones of power in at the local level And within the party apparatus without declaring ourselves when the right decided to take over the republican party They didn't say look out here.

[00:40:34] We come They started sending people to do, uh, trainings, uh, organized through largely the Christian Right Networks and become precinct captains and party, uh, apparatus, uh, operatives, people who did, you know, crummy volunteer work of looking over lists and, and getting people out and making sure they had coffee and, and all of this kind of stuff that is not glamorous as opposed to the kinds of things that the, the left wants to, Take for itself, many of us, including, of course, people like us at PRA who operate from this incredibly privileged position of being able to think about these issues full time.

[00:41:11] So, so yeah, we, we have to rise to that, uh, that challenge of, Approaching the center left from a position of more power, and that can be consolidated in a couple of ways. First, we have to stop arguing with each other, and say, power is the issue. If not everyone agrees on every point, we still have to be able to build an effective block, and we can argue amongst ourselves, but what we publicly face to the Democratic Party, and especially the left of the Democratic Party, has to be unified.

[00:41:38] So that, as there are few enough of us, we have to speak with one voice, and we have to then speak across our, our favorite, our most urgent issues, whether that's reproductive health, or whether that's the environment, whether that's immigration, or policing, or, or health care, or housing, uh, whatever it is, we, we have to be willing to, to say all of those things are important, and, uh, rather than making a, a list of what comes first, we are a block that, uh, goes to the center left with energy.

[00:42:06] And with moral organization, I don't want to say certainty, but with clarity, uh, that the, that the Dems don't have at this moment. I mean, the, the late night talk show world is having a field day with all of the Dems who are saying, Oh, the problem is that, uh, the Democratic Party slewed too far towards, uh, the woke left and towards, uh, identity politics.

[00:42:30] And, um, I would say that what actually happened and even the talk shows. So like, well, actually I didn't see that. What I saw is a bunch of Democrats running from that and saying, illegal immigrants, no way. And I'm here in New Jersey and, uh, uh, we're going to defend our border here in New Jersey and, you know, ridiculous things like this.

[00:42:50] But I think identity politics was the problem, but the kind of identity of politics it was, was the kind that you can't talk about white identity politics. And that's what it is. Trump and the GOP tapped into, and that's what the Democrats tried to pretend to be tapping into. But it was clear that they found it for the most part repugnant.

[00:43:11] And even if they didn't, if people are attracted to it, they're always going to vote for the actual fascist as opposed to the, uh, fascist suck up.

[00:43:19] **Koki:** I think in addition, I mean, one of the insights that I'm sitting with is the way that the Democratic Party really failed to talk to working class white voters, made really no effort to do so beyond sort of white identity politics as you so aptly name it, and really thinking about the opportunities in a growing labor movement that are presented on the left as a result.

[00:43:43] Where do you think our next moves as left organizers can be and should be in? organizing labor and filling the gap of addressing working class interest from a place of not exclusionary sort of resource scarcity approaches, but from a, how do we all survive and thrive without being sort of. Sucked into the white identity politics.

[00:44:09] **Steven:** Well, I mean, I think that there are some either or choices at the level of policy. And the, the ironic thing here is that the same voters who decided that Trump would be better for them actually preferred the exit polling says policies. Uh, the Biden administration, as lukewarm as they were, they were de emphasized the pro working class, the pro economic justice policies, as tepid as they were from the Biden administration, the, the Harris campaign, more or less beyond saying they wouldn't do anything different, stepped away from them.

[00:44:42] They had little to say apart from a few pet sort of niche things that, uh, that. I'd be happy to see like, you know, not taxing tips, but that's, that's like saying the house is on fire. Let's, uh, you know, make sure that the barbecue is saved. That's just not, not adequate. However, uh, so, so being clear about the policy choices is, is one thing.

[00:45:04] And the others are going to be to take advantage of the, the moments that are going to emerge. I mean, this is kind of the situation that we're in, where we can't simply point to the past and say, this is what Trump's going to do, and it's going to be terrible for you, because. people won't believe it, by and large.

[00:45:22] But when it's happening in real time, then whoever's in power gets blamed. So when prices go up, if Trump manages to impose even a tiny fraction of his tariffs, for example, something that most on the left have little interest in, because it's kind of like, you know, this free trade stuff that we don't spend a lot of time on.

[00:45:38] But if he does do it, It's going to not turn out well for, uh, anyone who has to, to go to the grocery store and keep track of how much money they have in the bank. You know, if you're someone who will benefit from your competitors being frozen out of the market, that might help you, but that's a minuscule portion of, of the U S and they're all amazingly privileged.

[00:45:58] So we wait to exploit the things that are. We're actually going to go wrong. We have a clear language to talk about the things that people actually don't want to see. Even when they talk about immigration enforcement, even when they're tantalized by white identity politics, they don't actually imagine people in tactical gear kicking down the doors of some house in the suburb and people being dragged off to a concentration camp.

[00:46:22] That's not what's in their mind. What's in their mind is the narrative of some violent gangbanger coming across the border or two. Sell drugs and people on the streets of Los Alamos or whatever.

[00:46:34] **Koki:** I was going to say, you know, I think that you're providing a lot of clarity on what's next, what we need to prepare for the opportunities that are going to be available to us as we build a broader left, build a more empowered, more aligned block to contest, really contest for power, instead of depending on the Democratic Party to do the small favors of listening to its more progressive constituents.

[00:47:03] But I want to end on a slightly more, more upbeat note. And I want to ask you, Steven, you've been doing this work your entire career. What is keeping you going in the fight? What is giving you a sense of possibility for the U. S. left for countering right wing power, for building a transformative future?

[00:47:27] **Steven:** I actually have a lot of hope in this moment, and it comes from the people that I'm working with at PRA, but much, much more broadly, people in the Working Families Party, people in Rising Majority, in the Movement for Black Lives, in all kinds of immigration and reproductive justice organizing, of People in my local community who are looking around and saying, okay, what, how can we keep each other safe?

[00:47:51] How can we check in with each other? How can we give ourselves compassion in this moment and recognize compassion for each other? And the fact that we might be overwhelmed and ready to scream, give us some slack. for a minute and give us time to, to regroup and, uh, and to move forward with purpose together.

[00:48:11] So that, but also history, not because history repeats itself, but because when you have a regime that is essentially driven by narcissism and incompetence, its natural tendency is going to be to drive itself into the ground. So our task is to not, not to drive it into the ground more quickly, but to exploit Every weakness that we see, so that the end point comes before they manage to kill a lot of people rather than after.

[00:48:38] I'm also hopeful that there will be institutional defections. Maybe not as many full on, I object, I'm not going to do that, statements, but foot dragging and I don't know what you mean, and I'm sorry, I'm sick, I can't come into the office today, and you know, the kinds of more passive forms of resistance that a bureaucracy can put up very effectively, especially if it sees its own power and dignity being, uh, usurped and, and safety, which is the one thing that people who work in bureaucracies think that they, they will have as a secure place.

[00:49:14] Um, when they see that threatened, they're not going to like it. And, uh, even the people who are broadly aligned with the Trump administration are not necessarily

secure in departments that could very well be downsized by 60 percent or, or broken. And you know, who, who even knows who's in charge of them.

[00:49:33] So we'll wait to see what's going to happen with that. But also I'm encouraged by the conversations that I'm having with people in my family, in my community, in my circle of friends and beyond, including people in the veterans community where I'm, I'm very active who are not necessarily progressive. I am active in Veterans for Peace, which is It tends to be left and progressive, but also in other circles where people are like, well, you know, I voted for Trump, but I'm not quite sure about child predator Matt Gaetz as, uh, Attorney General of the United States.

[00:50:04] That doesn't seem right to me. And, uh, so we'll see how that plays itself out.

[00:50:09] **Koki:** That is the kind of hope I can get behind, the kind of hope that looks to both passive resistance, questioning one's own assumptions about what the status quo actually offers us, and the hope that also encompasses sort of the work that we do on a day to day basis.

[00:50:26] In our local communities, organizing in our professional work in the nonprofit left, you know, spending 32 hours a week, thinking deeply about what we need to do next. I hope that encompasses a really broad swath of the American public, I think is what we need right now, both to keep moving, but also to win power.

[00:50:45] Thank you, Steven. This was a really illuminating conversation was fascinating, and I hope that it provides our listeners with a lot of really clear takeaways from this election, but also what to do in the weeks to come. Thank you for sitting with me today.

[00:50:58] **Steven:** Thank you, Koki. It was a pleasure to be here. Thank you for having me on.

[00:51:04] **Koki:** Thank you for listening to inform your resistance with political research associates. Today's episode was hosted by me, Koki Mendis. The podcast is produced and fact checked by Olivia Lawrence-Weilmann. Harini Rajagopalan created our communications and marketing materials, and Frank Lawrence, our music.

[00:51:22] Sound design and mixing by Alicia Crawford. If you haven't already, rate, review, and subscribe. And the best thing you can do to help us is to tell your comrades about the pod. Resisting authoritarianism is better with friends. Until next time.