

## LAURA FLANDERS & FRIENDS

### OUTMANEUVERING MAGA: CHRISTOPHER ARMITAGE & SUMATHY KUMAR ON SOFT SECESSION

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LAURA FLANDERS: Bombings, and kidnappings, and ICE-related killings. Courts issuing rulings the administration ignores. The Supreme Court simply going along. If you've been feeling that the crisis we're living in is way too big and the tools at our disposal way too small, well, if you've been feeling that way, this special episode is for you. My guests are going to lay out a different scenario. Yes, the federal government is captured, and the resident of the White House is running amok. Yes, worse could well be coming, but something else is happening too. One of my guests calls it the largest coordinated campaign of state-level opposition in modern American history. States are using the tools that they have in the federal system not just to resist, but actively to oppose what they see is wrong. Some are considering new legislation that would add to that toolbox. Organized people, meanwhile, are acting defiantly too, making clear demands, electing new fresh leaders, and staying engaged in ways that could strengthen our democracy and our economy for all. What happens next is crucially important, and that depends largely on what people believe can be done. So let's get to it. Christopher Armitage is the founder of "[The Existentialist Republic](#)" on Substack. His handbook, "Oppositional Federalism," offers a framework for what he calls soft secession, also three pieces of model legislation, and much more. Sumathy Kumar is the executive director of Housing Justice for All and the New York State Tenant Bloc, former co-chair of the New York City, Democratic Socialists of America chapter. Under her leadership, she saw six socialist legislators elected to the New York State legislature, including Zohran Mamdani, who is now New York's mayor. Could this time of cruelty and turmoil also be when we build new models and mechanisms for a more resilient and accountable future? Well, just maybe. So let's go to it. The conversation is starting here. Welcome, both of you. It is my great pleasure to have you. I'm going to start with you, Chris. When you describe where we are to people, how do you describe it?

CHRISTOPHER ARMITAGE: The United States has been taken over by a transnational criminal organization called the GOP.

LAURA FLANDERS: Well, that's pretty straightforward. How about you, Sumathy?

SUMATHY KUMAR: I think that's accurate. I think there are these two visions. Basically, a criminal organization that is stripping people of their wealth, of their dignity, and then a different vision of what life could be like if the government actually worked for people, if they'd actually

put working class people first. The best example of that we are seeing is in New York City with the election of Zohran Mamdani.

LAURA FLANDERS: Well, you're alluding to the fact that this situation didn't just arrive overnight. How would you describe, Sumathy, some of the threads that took us to right here?

SUMATHY KUMAR: So I think when we look at what happened in the 2024 presidential election, we saw a lot of working class people vote in Trump because they believed that life would get better because, for years, Democrats hadn't been delivering anything for people to actually make their costs go down. Meanwhile, housing prices are skyrocketing. Healthcare is out of control. Groceries are too expensive. And so people needed an alternative. And so that has been building for a long time, and we see it's actually really simple. To get out of this, we just need to be talking about what people are actually going through and giving them solutions that the government can do to make their lives better, to make costs go down, and to give people a dignified life.

LAURA FLANDERS: And to stand up for them. I mean, Chris that comes to you. What would you add to that picture of how we got here, and how would you add your own story to that picture? You have an interesting background in, former military.

CHRISTOPHER ARMITAGE: Yeah, absolutely. I served in the armed forces for almost a decade and was a federal law enforcement officer for all that time. My master's degree is in Homeland Security. And I see the work that I'm doing now as continuing that work of [defending the Constitution](#). And there's no reason that pro-affordability, universal healthcare, universal childcare, that these things aren't constitutional. To me, that's very originalist, you're helping people support their ability to pursue life, liberty, and happiness by making sure that we use every resource we can to give them the best life possible. And so in this moment, how we got here is oligarchs. And I mean just, you know, even to strip it of those terms... Very wealthy, very powerful people, the haves, throughout all of human history have always wanted to have more and more and more. And everybody else has to fight for power. And that's part of the beauty of the American experiment is we were this first country that said we are going to work really hard to institute these incredible ideas of valuing human life and human dignity en masse and giving everybody keys to power rather than just a king. The Republicans represent a nihilism. The inherent philosophy that they promote is things can never get better, and so they're just, you know, rats on the sinking ship. But what Mamdani represents is this shift from hope to commitment. We don't need hope. We need commitment. And so thanks for the work that you've done, Sumathy.

LAURA FLANDERS: For many, they hear the word secessionist, Chris, and they think of Southern strategies to defeat federal civil rights legislation. When you use the term, what are you

referring to, and what is the history that goes beyond, perhaps, what many of us have remembered?

CHRISTOPHER ARMITAGE: Well, I want to start by saying I really appreciate this question because it's one of my favorite to answer because for so many Americans, secession means defending racism, state's rights means defending racism. But there is no reason that we should lose the greatest tool that our founders gave us for fighting back against authoritarianism. Because states rights can protect reproductive rights. It can make sure everybody has healthcare. State's rights can make sure that we have everything that we've been fighting for and struggling to win at the federal level. We can have that at the state level, and it doesn't have to be opposition because at the federal level, there's a structural imbalance that makes it very easy to regress and very difficult to progress. But at the state level, you can get ahold of your state representatives. You can say, "We want universal single payer healthcare in this state." That can happen where you have the most influence, and that's locally.

SUMATHY KUMAR: Exactly what Chris was saying. This is an opportunity in New York City to build some of that alternative, to build structures that give people the things that they need, even when the federal government is stepping away, and to work statewide to make sure that happens. New York is a very progressive state. We have the political power to do this if tenants and people across the state really push their elected officials to do it. And so we're hoping, one, you know, we have a lot of billionaires in New York. They could be paying a lot more money in taxes, and if we did tax the rich in New York state, we would have money to fill the gaps around Medicaid cuts, to fill the gaps around housing, and all the other things, food stamps, things that are getting cut right now.

LAURA FLANDERS: Mayor Mamdani, before he was mayor, when he was a state assemblyman, [appeared on this program](#) talking about his "Not On Our Dime!" bill, which had to do with reigning in charitable status benefits from businesses or charities that supported illegal settlements in the West Bank. You have a model of using state level fiscal power and corporate benefit power in your toolkit, Chris. You want to lay out, especially the Corporate Benefit Accountability Act, which seems to get at a whole lot of sins with one piece of legislation?

CHRISTOPHER ARMITAGE: Absolutely. I'm very happy to talk about that. So originally, I was reviewing the Montana Plan, which many people are enthusiastic about, but the Montana Plan is this act, it's originated in Montana, but other states like Minnesota are looking on promoting it. And it says, "If you incorporate in Montana, you can't contribute to political campaigns that benefits ExxonMobil who isn't incorporated in Montana, but hurts the local bakery." So I aimed to make something that could address overturning Citizens United at the state level. If you have the money to give to political action committees, then you do not need our tax dollars. And that

is oppositional federalism, which is another level above soft secession by saying, "We are going to actively work against the unjust laws that have been decided at the federal level."

LAURA FLANDERS: Sumathy, is there legislation, particularly on the housing front, that you think is a model that could accomplish some of the same?

SUMATHY KUMAR: You know, in New York, we have a lot of tenant protections, and they give this stability for tenants that people everywhere need. So rent stabilization, rent control, is like a model legislation that does give people basic stability, make sure that you can't get evicted for no reason. You can have a family. You can put down roots in an apartment. And your rent increases are decided by a rent guidelines board that you have some influence over. And so it gives people control over where they live, and it gives them stability.

LAURA FLANDERS: Another aspect of your model legislation, Chris, is this aspect that has to do with elections. That's the State Fiscal Sovereignty Act, which would give states a certain amount of power to withhold funds for the federal government. So sort of expand the model to withhold funds for the federal government, if it doesn't obey election law. How would that work?

CHRISTOPHER ARMITAGE: So this law was actually proposed by Republicans in three different state legislatures during the Obama administration. Originally, it just said, "The federal government is doing unconstitutional things. So we're going to order all employers in state to divert their federal tax withholdings to an escrow account." Now, that model legislation I put out says, "If you try to cancel our elections, or do not respect the results, or send federal troops into our polling places without the explicit permission of our governor and/or mayor, then we will order all employers to stop sending tax dollars to you until our democracy is restored." This is not an extreme measure. This is actually a very rational, nonviolent response to the social agreement of the U.S. constitution being violated so extremely.

LAURA FLANDERS: Let's hear some of the resistance that is out there because it's been pretty impressive, not just from Letitia James who swore in Zohran Mamdani as mayor, let's not forget, but also from Philadelphia District Attorney, [Larry Krasner](#).

**LARRY KRASNER:** Do you hear me, ICE agents? Do you hear me, National Guard? Do you hear me, military? You're going to jail, if you commit crimes in the city of Philadelphia. You will be accountable. The law applies to all of you. And I know that there are honest, decent, moral law enforcement officers out there by the bushel, including in ICE. This is not for you. This is for any one of your colleagues who thinks they are above the law.

LAURA FLANDERS: Does the DA actually have the power that he sounds like he has in that clip?

CHRISTOPHER ARMITAGE: So the the main thing I want to say, they're going to talk about qualified immunity, they're going to talk about supremacy clause. If you commit a murder, you can be arrested and charged locally. And I think one of the important things about like... Because the conversation continues to get brought, so often, to, "Is this legal?" And we need to bring it to the philosophical conversation that founded this country: "Is it just?" The law exists to serve justice, not the other way around. And so we need to hold people accountable when they commit crimes locally. And that includes police officers. You know, that includes anyone who commits that crime, whether they're a U.S. senator. We should all be held to the same standards.

LAURA FLANDERS: So coming to you, Sumathy, if the tenants and others who voted for this administration and support this AG, see law breaking happening where they are, and we've heard those officials declare that they will take action, what do you all do if they don't take action?

SUMATHY KUMAR: They need to see that popular support behind them so that they can do the brave and the right thing in that moment, and be creative, and be, you know, forceful, on resisting what's going on at the federal level. And so it's not all on them. It can't be. We are just not going to win that way. It has to be about a mass movement that is demanding that our elected officials stand up, that our local electeds do what they can to resist.

LAURA FLANDERS: Is that what you mean by mass governance? I saw you co-authored a piece in [Jacobin](#) magazine recently with that title.

SUMATHY KUMAR: Yes, I think mass governance to me is that we have to all work together to really build something that can get us out of this mess. There are a lot of oppositional forces. There's the real estate industry. There's the billionaires. There's the Right wing MAGA forces all trying to zero in, especially on the mayor of New York City right now. And he can't do it alone, and he shouldn't. He needs thousands of people to knock on doors about that, to call their legislators, to go to Albany, our state capitol, to make sure that the legislature does its job, and he needs thousands of people to talk to their city council members. He needs thousands of people to organize against their landlords and hold their landlords accountable. And so all of this is about a mass movement that's not just fighting on the outside, but actually working with a champion city government to deliver for people.

CHRISTOPHER ARMITAGE: We need to take power away from the Trump administration and from the GOP. That means taking that power and putting it locally. So the work that Sumathy is doing and that Mayor Mamdani doing is crucial to that. For example, being able to provide a good quality of life in an affordable environment for your residents is soft secession. Your

quietly taking care of business. And if you disagree with something going on in the federal government, you ignore it until they make you do something about it. And so that strategy, it needs also, you know, to, again, exploit something that the Right has succeeded in doing. We need to flood the zone with good policy that takes care of people. And you should know the name of your state legislative representative. You should know the name of your city council representatives. They should know your name, and they should know what you care about.

LAURA FLANDERS: We've been reporting on New York State's effort to pass a [public banking](#) law for a long time. The North Dakota public banking system is one that you lift up. Chris, how does that help?

SUMATHY KUMAR: You know, the North Dakota Public Bank has been profitable for over 100 years. It also weathered the 2008 financial collapse better than any other bank in the country. It's because they're run by the state, and they put that money back into the public coffers, and they take better care of the people who go to the public bank than elsewhere. And the conservatives in that state would not want to give it up because they know how good it is. That's part of why as someone who goes to the Department of Veterans Affairs, plenty of veterans complain about the VA, but they sure don't want it gone. And so by providing things like public banking, we create these non-tax funding mechanisms that provide quality public services, and also we set a floor for standards. Public housing, you know, I want to see more conversations around that and how we can create a floor of expense, not just by requiring a private landlords to set, you know, the rent limit, but also we're going to say, "Okay, we're going to buy this building. We are going to set the minimum amount that we can charge tenants. The state is going to run it or the city is going to run it, and they will make a little bit of revenue, so that we can cycle that back into the system." And that model, the Vienna Model, it's not just low income housing, but high density urban housing for all income levels run by the city to fund local services.

LAURA FLANDERS: What is Housing Justice for All actually working on at this moment, Sumathy?

SUMATHY KUMAR: We are working on creating a social housing development authority, you know, in that Vienna Model in New York State that would both build new housing that people could actually afford, and can control, and take existing housing from landlords who aren't taking care of their buildings, who don't want to take care of their buildings anymore. Taking that, renovating it, and giving it to the tenants to live in. And so that's what we're fighting for in New York. It is one piece of the puzzle. There's rent control. It's so important. It's broad based. It's universal or we're getting there. And then there's social housing and the building of housing that is actually deeply affordable, permanently affordable, and that you have a say over, that is a dignified and decent place to live. And so we're going to do that at the state level. The Mamdani administration is committed to building 200,000 new units of rent stabilized, deeply affordable

housing. So over the course of the next few years, we're going to be building that alternative. And I think that the alternative is so important because the Right doesn't have a real answer for how to make your life better. It just has distractions. It just has cruelty. And the more that we can say, "We built something in New York state, it actually makes your life easier," the more we can shift people away from Right-wing politics and towards something that is life-giving and hopeful.

LAURA FLANDERS: One of the fears that I hear from people right now is that they are afraid and even maybe some of their electeds are afraid to act because they say the White House could invoke that Insurrection Act." We could see our streets flooded with troops in addition to the federalized National Guard and the ICE agents. And that could be seen or used as a pretext to cancel elections. Chris, I'm assuming you've looked at that possibility. Is it real? It is real. How do we think about it?

CHRISTOPHER ARMITAGE: We have an abuser in the federal government, and we are trying to intercede to stop that. This administration has not faced obstruction or at least, well, there's been some, but nowhere near the levels that we're capable of. And they are quickening their pace. Their goal is to have a single party-rule federal government where they can control everything everywhere and continue to raid the coffers. That's their goal. Things like tax escrow legislation, plus 100 other ways of obstructing, denying, refusing, building parallel structures, prosecuting corruption even at the federal level, these are ways to fight back that are not inherently escalatory. People act as if it's a binary between don't prosecute ICE officers for horrible crimes or we end up with the Insurrection Act. There is no reason that we can't send the National Guard and police officers with body cameras to follow ICE around, look at everyone's ID. If they commit crimes, they'll get prosecuted later. So that way we don't have one law enforcement officer arresting a federal officer in that exact environment.

LAURA FLANDERS: And the White House might invoke the Insurrection Act no matter what. Sumathy, coming back to you. Tenants are some of the most vulnerable people in our community. You organize them. What are you telling people who, many of them, fearing ICE, are afraid these days more than ever before.

SUMATHY KUMAR: Tenants are half the state in New York State. They're 70% of the city. I think that, you know, we're actually a powerful force. And so what I tell people is that "You're not just by yourself. You're with thousands of other people, millions of other people who want this." And it is scary to stand up and to resist what's happening, especially when we see what ICE is doing, what the federal government is doing to people who do stand up. But they are doing that because they're also feeling threatened by what is happening, by the resistance that we're seeing, by the loss of control that they're feeling over the country because people are not buying what they're selling. They don't believe in this hateful vision. And so, you know, the answer is

always going to be collective action and working together with other people. And that is what makes you brave when you are with thousands of other people who are willing to fight for a different future.

LAURA FLANDERS: Alright, so I think we're ready for the question I ask all our guests at the end of these conversations, and that is the story that the future will tell of now. And let's start with you, Christopher. What do you think is the story the future will tell of this moment?

CHRISTOPHER ARMITAGE: The story of this moment is the same story in World War II. In many ways they're very analogous. We faced unprecedented threats and the deepest shadows of humanity in those moments. And what came out of it, because we confronted our shadow as a species, is we created so many positive programs and mechanisms for international ethics enforcement that are just now being dismantled almost 100 years ago. They were very robust. And so we are confronting our shadow once again, and we're on the front lines of fixing that, and that's where we are in that story.

LAURA FLANDERS: What about you, Sumathy?

SUMATHY KUMAR: I would hope that what happens in New York City over the next few years sparks cities across the country, sparks movements across the country, it already is, of people who want to take power back at their city level, and then at their state level, and then at the federal level. And we build a mass movement that builds off of everything that we've been experiencing over the last few years, everything that we've built. And people see a real inspiration from what we've been able to build in the city. And we can make this country work for working people again.

LAURA FLANDERS: Sumathy, Christopher, thank you both so much for being with me.

CHRISTOPHER ARMITAGE: Thank you so much for having us.

SUMATHY KUMAR: Thank you for having me.

LAURA FLANDERS: 2026 is shaping up to be one of this country's better angel moments. I am sure of it. As President Lincoln reminded us, we always have choices about which voices to listen to. And while our history is full of terrible ones, we have our share of better angels also. Just take states' rights. In the 1950s conservative states were using their rights under the federal system to enforce Jim Crow and oppose civil rights. But go back 100 years and anti-slavery states were using their rights to pass personal liberty acts banning collaboration with federal forces in the enforcement of the Fugitive Slave Act. That act, passed in 1850 and signed by President Millard Fillmore, required federal forces to detain and return Black Americans fleeing

from slavery. The anti-slavery states couldn't overturn that law, but they could make it hard to enforce it. And that's what they did. And in so doing, they not only saved lives, they also reframed legitimacy and redefined what it was to be a moral American. What will happen today as states across this country collaborate to enforce sanctuary acts and ban collaborating with Stephen Miller and Donald Trump's mad fascist deportation plan? Well, we'll see, but it's worth noticing that today the Underground Railroad and Harriet Tubman are heroes, and Millard Fillmore is a laughing stock. You can find my full, uncut conversation with today's guests through a subscription to our newsletter, or my Substack, or our free podcast. All the information's at the website. Till the next time, stay kind, stay curious. For "Laura Flanders and Friends," I'm Laura. Thanks for joining us.

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