

Democracy in Danger S1E18 Aftermath

Will Hitchcock [00:00:03] Hello, I'm Will Hitchcock.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:00:04] And I'm Siva Vaidhyanathan.

Will Hitchcock [00:00:06] And from the University of Virginia's Deliberative Media Lab, this is Democracy in Danger.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:00:12] Will, I am so excited for this episode.

Will Hitchcock [00:00:15] Me too, Siva! It's our season finale and we're taping in front of a live virtual studio audience. We've got a panel of really amazing guests here today. And this time we're doing it in partnership with the Institute of the Humanities and Global Cultures here at UVA and with Pen America. This is the third event in their series called Free Expression and the Humanities.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:00:37] You know, Will, when I look back on all the interviews we've done in our first season, I'm amazed with what we've covered. I mean, what we've had to cover. I mean, the world sort of gave us our subjects. We've talked about anti-democratic trends and religious fundamentalism, paramilitary groups, fascist rhetoric and efforts to suppress voter turnout just to name a few potent threats to democracy.

Will Hitchcock [00:00:59] Yeah, and if what a year it's been severe. I mean, in the backdrop of those things we've lived through just this extraordinary upheaval, more than a million people tragically have died in the coronavirus pandemic. Millions more have seen their their livelihoods upended by the economic collapse. You know, in the United States, there's been an extraordinary season of wildfires up and down the West Coast. And citizens across the country took to the streets this year to protest police brutality. And hey, in the middle of this, we thought we'd have a bitterly ideologically divided presidential election.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:01:31] Yeah, well, today on the show, we have an episode that we are calling Aftermath. And we've put together a group of four star guests. Two of them are our colleagues here at the University of Virginia. And they are going to help us sort through what 2020 has wrought and what this all means for the future of democracy.

Will Hitchcock [00:01:51] Well Siva, let's go ahead and introduce our guests. First from right here at the University of Virginia, we have Ian Solomon, dean of the Frank Batten School of Leadership and Public Policy, and Melody Barnes, who is the public affairs director for our mothership, the Democracy Initiative. Melody also directed the White House Domestic Policy Council for President Obama. Ian, Melody. Thank you so much for being here.

Ian Solomon [00:02:16] It's great to be here. Thanks for having us.

Melody Barnes [00:02:17] Absolutely. Thank you so much.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:02:20] And we have brought back two of our favorite guests from previous episodes, Carol Anderson and Leah Wright Rigueur. Carroll is a professor of African-American studies at Emory University in Atlanta, Georgia, currently one of our

favorite states. And Leah is a historian at Brandeis University in Massachusetts, which is a pretty good state, too. So, Carol, Leah, thank you for joining us. One more time on Democracy in Danger.

Carol Anderson [00:02:45] Thank you for having us.

Leah Wright Rigueur [00:02:46] Such a pleasure. Thank you.

Leah Wright Rigueur [00:02:48] Well, Leah, if I could start with you. You know, the major upheaval of 2020 was the nationwide movement against police brutality that unfolded in the streets of so many cities. The Black Lives Matter demonstrators galvanized the country, electrified the country. And millions of citizens have said they want state violence to end. They want the country to come to grips with systemic racism. Now, in the presidential election, the Democratic ticket said if they were elected, they were going to begin to address these problems. Well the election's over, Joe Biden won. Kamala Harris will be the vice president. I've got a real easy question to start with. What now? What can they what must they do to make good on that promise?

Leah Wright Rigueur [00:03:29] So in a lot of ways, it's a simple answer. It's time for the Biden and Harris administration to essentially make good on the promise of freedom and the promise of democracy. So that's why I say it's simple, but also not so simple. Right, because we're talking about institutions. We're talking about hundreds of years of history. And so I like to point to a letter, a recent letter that was written by Patrice Cullors, one of the co-founders, co-organizers of Black Lives Matter, and she wrote this open letter to the Biden-Harris administration. And in the letter, she essentially pointed out the innumerable ways that black people have contributed to the flow of democracy, to the promise of freedom and to the victory of Biden and Harris. She essentially says, you know, we won you this election and points to Philadelphia, points to Atlanta, points to Detroit. Right. All of these areas that were crucial to a Biden-Harris administration victory. And she says, we want something for our vote right. Now it's our turn. And she says we don't want Democratic indifference. We certainly don't want Republican hostility. We want tangible concrete values and programs and policies that speak to the devastation and the vulnerability within black communities. And so she outlines a list of kind of the failed promises of America. And so this is really important. This is the kind of thing that we're going to see black organizers, activists, these people, mobilizers on the ground essentially pushing for now. There are some concrete things that we're immediately going to see people push for with the Biden and Harris administration. I think number one is going to be a rapid response to covid-19 and the devastation of the health care industry and health of African-Americans who have been disproportionately hurt by the virus and by the pandemic. But they're also going to be looking towards mass incarceration, criminal justice reform, and of course some kind of revolutionary politics when it comes to policing in this country. And the last thing I'll end on here is by saying, you know, they are demanding these things and they actually have leverage, particularly with the upcoming Georgia elections. They did it once. And here you have somebody like Cullors saying, look, we can do this for you again. We can be helpful. We can, you know, turn the tide of an election. But you have to give us something in return.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:05:47] So I have a question for our Georgian today. So, Carol Anderson, you came on our show near the beginning of our first season and you gave us an incredibly lucid history of voter suppression from reconstruction to Trump. And, you know, you were appropriately cynical and yet hopeful. Now, just last week, your home state of Georgia delivered the biggest electoral shock of the year. And we know that

Stacey Abrams, a political activist and former Democratic candidate for governor, had a lot to do with that effort. Can you tell us what just happened? What could happen next? Was this just a one off or is this sustainable in Georgia?

Carol Anderson [00:06:30] Thank you for that question. And I woke up as Friday morning to John Legend singing Georgia and Oh, oh! And so what happened? And this is the thing I teach the civil rights movement and it has been reduced in our national narrative to Rosa sat down, Martin stood up. He had a dream and we all overcame. Well, that's not what the movement was, but it has been reduced to that. So we miss all of that grassroots organizing and mobilizing that made the movement possible. And so when we look at Georgia, you get a tendency to and I'm going to put this in quotes to just say, Stacey Abrams, Stacy is bad! That is an incredible, incredible sister who is dynamic, who is smart, but she is an organizer. And what we're looking at now in Georgia is about a decade's worth of grassroots mobilizing and one hundred and fifty nine counties and organizations working together on a multiethnic, multiracial, multireligious basis to transform this state. The combination of that. And so you got to get out the vote efforts. You've got these mechanisms to get people to the polls because over 200 of them have been shut down since Shelby County v. Holder gutted the Voting Rights Act. You've got folks getting people I.D.s that they need because Georgia has one of the most strict voter I.D. laws in the nation. You have all of this effort and you have incredible litigators who are dragging Georgia's but to court for all of the mess that they're doing, blocking American citizens access to the ballot box. It is all of this effort. And it culminated in this massive, massive turnout that we saw in this election. And it's getting folks the correct information about where your new polling station is. How do you vote by mail? How do you request the ballot? Where do you send it? Well, you know, when you got Trump kneecapping the Postal Service, then you're going to need to know, is there a drop box where I can put this? So these organizations with doing that work. Yeah. Yeah. Georgia on my mind.

Will Hitchcock [00:09:04] Well, if I could jump in, I'm going to I'm going to shift our gears. We're trying to take a quick look at the whole picture of aftermath 2020. And Ian, I want to turn to you and go global from Georgia to the rest of the world. Look, we've been talking domestic politics, but this is a year, Ian I'm sure you'll agree, where we've been reminded painfully about the importance of global relationships and what happens when we don't have them. Biden's victory is probably promoting some celebration in some quarters of the world and maybe a little anxiety in other parts. I just wondered, give us your sense for the impact of the last four years on America's place in the world. But really going forward, where do you see Biden taking these relationships? What's going to happen? How is that going to going to come back into - come back home to the United States - and reconnect us in a way to the wider world?

Ian Solomon [00:09:56] Thank you, Will. And Georgia is on my mind, too. But I will talk about the rest of the world. It's been quite an election period here in the US. But what's at stake, I think, globally is a commitment to global cooperation, global leadership. If we look at the fundamental challenges that face us as Americans, but as members of the same species on this earth and other species too the problems that faces the problems of global cooperation. Whether it's health pandemics and yes, we're dealing with covid-19 now but this is not a new risk and we will see other risks, significant flus as well. Climate change and the impact that's going to have on displacement and refugees and food security, not to mention temperature that we're going to be dealing with in many cities, nuclear proliferation. These are just some examples of challenges that cannot be solved without the United States and cannot be solved by the United States acting alone. They require us to work together. So I think that's why President elect Biden was congratulated by Angela

Merkel, Boris Johnson, Justin Trudeau, Benjamin Netanyahu. Many others recognize they want to have a partner to help solve these fundamental problems.

Will Hitchcock [00:11:05] Hey, he just talked to the Pope, remember. You know, so he's got a lot of help on the way.

Ian Solomon [00:11:10] And we need and we need all the help we can get. Because this - the beauty is the potential we have to address our problems when we work together. The Paris Accords. You know, we saw tremendous steps towards global cooperation that have been undone. And I think it's a lot of work now to repair what was broken. And my hope is that this next administration will strengthen the multilateral institutions rather than undermine them. We're safer and more secure when we work with the World Bank and the United Nations and NATO with the World Health Organization, rather than dismantle them. And we need to reset on our foreign policy to take the sort of work seriously.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:11:45] Well, thank you, Ian. I want to turn to Melody. Melody Barnes now, because Melody has worked inside the domestic machinations of a previous administration. And, you know, Will and I, when we have all these conversations, like we're spectators to what really happens in Washington and what really happens in a democracy. So can you shed some light on what the Biden team is thinking about now? Like what do you think its plans are and what do you think its priorities are? Maybe what should they be? It seems like the immediate problems are daunting in 1932 level terms. Am I wrong about that? I mean, if you were in those meetings right now, what do you think would be consuming them?

Melody Barnes [00:12:30] Well, you're exactly right about the magnitude of the problem. I mean, no one's having a spa day that's in the Biden Harris transition right now. You know, some of the things that they're doing and I believe they're thinking about come as a result of the experience that President elect Biden and now chief of staff Ron Klain and others had from the '08 '09 transition. So, one, they have surrounded themselves with people with a lot of experience to deal with the problems, the magnitude of the problem. And two, my guess is that they are setting up this transition. They they anticipated that this transition would look the way it looks right now, that we have a recalcitrant president that's having a temper tantrum and refuses to walk out of the door. I mean, what was it from Hamilton? Learn to say goodbye. And they've got to start pulling together policy and personnel even without the help of the executive branch right now. So even though we haven't been able to send in agency review teams yet, they're doing as much work as they possibly can. Knowing that the administration, the executive branch has been hollowed out over the last four years, knowing that there are significant concerns about what kind of data exists in the executive branch and understanding that we've got a magnitude of problems. As Leah was talking about earlier, with regard to covid-19, the highest number of cases that we've seen since the problem began starting to amass in front of us and the implications for both the economy and for the health care system. They also know that we walk in the door and you've got campaign promises. My guess is that they've got a binder of campaign promises, the things that they told the American public that they would do. So, you know, it's that old saw that you want to take advantage of a crisis. So in addition to dealing with the here and now, how can they align some of the objectives that Biden has with what they have to do now in an emergency situation? So the economy is in tatters, at the same time what does that mean for what they might do with infrastructure and jobs, for example? So there are a lot of pieces that are both political and policy that are front of mind for them right now.

Will Hitchcock [00:14:48] It's a totally daunting you just uncommonly difficult set of problems that they face and maybe, maybe as great as what faced President Obama when he came into office in 2009. It's pretty troubling. But let me ask you all. But let's do another round about get all four of you to comment on this same big question. You know, this podcast which we've been running now for four or five months during the pandemic was called Democracy in Danger for a reason. Siva and I really thought our democracy is facing some very serious crises, problems, obstacles, many of which are hundreds of years in the making and some of which are just a year or two in the making. So here's the question. Is Democracy still in Danger? Should we have season two? And if so, what are the continuing threats to democracy that we should be highlighting? Or should we just like, you know, take a vacation and say basically we're in the clear?

Siva Vaidhyathan [00:15:37] Yeah. Thank you, America.

Will Hitchcock [00:15:38] I want to go in reverse order. Melody, maybe you could start and we'll go to Ian, Carol and Leah.

Melody Barnes [00:15:43] Sure. You're wondering if your next season should be called Democracy is Just Fine! (Laughter) Right. Right, right, right. Right. Well, the answer to that is no. In my estimation, you're exactly right about the state of democratic institutions for all the reasons that you named. But I think that we would be we'd be lying to ourselves if we didn't recognize that democracy still faces significant threats. And I think part of that, you know, one, there is a narrative that is being hardened. And if you flip through TV channels and if you are listening on One America, if you're listening to NewsMax, you're hearing a narrative about illegitimacy. And that's being echoed by leaders, elected and appointed leaders across the country. That is extremely dangerous because once that gets into the bloodstream, it's hard to get it out. That also sets aside these challenges to democratic culture that are extremely important. When we think about democratic institutions, only four million votes separate the person who won, president elect Biden, from the person who lost, President Trump. And while ultimately the election in many ways wasn't close, that's four million votes that separated people who voted for someone who for the past four years has talked about Mexicans as rapists, that white supremacists and neo-Nazis are part of the good people on either side. Someone who has made all kinds of charges with regard to international partnerships and someone who has encouraged what I consider to be a war against the Enlightenment. Data and facts no longer seem to matter. Those issues burrow into democratic culture. And unless we take hold of that and determine how we're going to address that, I think we will continue to see a spiral downward.

Will Hitchcock [00:17:40] Ian over to you. A war against the Enlightenment. Or should we all go on vacation?

Ian Solomon [00:17:45] Democracy is in danger, has always been in danger, is a process we need to be constantly working to improve this democracy. It didn't start off great and get bad. Sorry, folks. You know, we made progress, but there's a lot more to do. We are not out of the woods yet, these Trumpist woods, we are still stuck in them. We can see beyond them now, finally. But we are very much in a moment of real risk. Going back to the questions of foreign leaders, I understand the State Department has been instructed not to share messages coming in for President elect Biden right now. That's irresponsible. That's petty. That's potentially quite dangerous. You know, I was part of the transition team in 2008. You know, the Obama Biden administration - we got wonderful help from the Bush administration. We gave enormous assistance to the Trump administration. That's

what we do. But we're not doing it. We're actually refuting it. And with this, the reality deficit that Melody talked about that so much of the country is in right now, that's that will corrode our political culture. And I hope we can dig ourselves out of this. So all of us need to be investing in more reality and overcoming the delusion in repairing this political culture, which is currently under assault. So we need to protect it and then work to repair it. We're not out of the woods yet. It's going to take some time.

Will Hitchcock [00:19:00] Well, Carol, Georgia is the bright spot, right? Didn't democracy against a lot of odds actually have a great day in Georgia, or is it just one inning in a really long game, maybe an endless game?

Carol Anderson [00:19:13] Yeah, it is. The way to look at this is that it was a first down. (laughter)

Will Hitchcock [00:19:20] All right. Appropriate for the SEC.

Carol Anderson [00:19:25] It was it was a first down. And first downs are important because it allows you to continue to keep the ball and move it down the field. But it was not winning the Super Bowl. There's so much work to do when you begin to think about one of the things that I worry about is the assault on our institutions. And one of the key institutions I worry about is the judiciary. You had positions just left open under Mitch McConnell when Obama was in power. And then McConnell and the Federalist Society just loading those key positions up with young folk, right wing folk, folks who could not say that Brown was appropriately decided. And then you have the stuffing of Supreme Court justices so that you would rushing through ACB with 50 million votes already cast. So it reminds me of reconstruction after the civil war where you had the radical Republicans putting in the pillars of democracy so that four million freed people could revel in enjoy their freedom and their citizenship. And instead, what you got was a Supreme Court that systematically undermined the 13th Amendment, the 14th Amendment, the 15th Amendment, the enforcement acts. And so this is why we had to have a civil rights movement a hundred doggone years later. And we don't have another hundred years. We've got climate change. We've got our Arctic melting. We have a pandemic that has just wiped out communities and disproportionately what it has done to the indigenous populations, what it has done to black folk in America, what it has done to the economy. And if you have a judiciary, even if you've got a Senate, a Congress that is passing progressive legislation dealing with health care, dealing with voting rights, if you've got a right wing judiciary that has been stacked against it to overturn all of that, it is part of the delegitimizing process of American democracy. This isn't checks and balances. This is this is dangerous. So you're going to have about three more seasons at least.

Will Hitchcock [00:21:53] I mean, it sounds like basically you got to stay in it. You got to keep fighting to hold the ground. But moving forward comes at great, great cost. And I mean, I've been searching for appropriate metaphors, you know, of pendulum swinging and such, or waves or whatever. But sometimes I do feel a little bit as if, you know, just holding one's ground is an accomplishment. But, Leah, you know, what do you think is I mean, to use yet another metaphor, glass half empty, glass half full, or is that silly? We should just be thinking about, you know, getting some wins.

Leah Wright Rigueur [00:22:21] Well, you know, feel free to call me Dr. Doom because I'm part of the collective that believes that democracy is still very much in danger. But then also democracy has been in danger for a very long time. And so one of the ways that I think about democracy is to think of it as something that is incredibly fragile. We have this

idea. We have this sensibility about democracy, that it's just something that is there. Right. That it's something we take for granted that we're the United States, we have democracy. But instead, we know that democracy doesn't exist for a good portion of the population, particularly the most marginalized and the most vulnerable. And that when we do see democracy, it's often fraught, it's tense, it's bloody, it's violent. And it's something that you have to keep working on in order to actually see it enacted. So this is what I'd like to think of democracy as something that you have to continue, something that has to be worked on, and it's something that's incredibly delicate. The other thing that I would point to is that the sitting president of the United States refuses to concede the election. That is not Democratic. There is nothing democratic about what is happening right now. So as much as we want to talk about this resounding victory for Joe Biden, there's another portion of the equation that says the president of the United States does not believe that this is a legitimate victory and that there are roughly 70 million people, give or take, probably a little bit more than that, who also believe that it's not a legitimate victory. And I think part of that is that there's this idea of the illegitimacy of the state. And it comes in different. you know we've talked about this before, it comes in different formats and different kinds. So we have a kind of illegitimacy of the state that comes from people that are marginalized, the grassroots. People who have been excluded from the system, who protest and who work to make the system more democratic. But we also have a kind of investment in an illegitimacy that is all about undoing democratic institutions. So making the land less democratic. I think one of the things that we've learned over the last four years is just how many people in this country are actually really comfortable with fascism. That should make us deeply, deeply uncomfortable. It should certainly give you plenty of fodder for upcoming seasons of the show.

Will Hitchcock [00:24:33] We did have an episode called the F word. (laughter)

Leah Wright Rigueur [00:24:35] The F word.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:24:36] Yeah. Yeah.

Leah Wright Rigueur [00:24:37] And then, you know, the last thing that I'll say here, too, is that I don't want us to fall into what I call the Obama trap. And then this is not a, you know, a diss or an insult to Ian, for example, working on the Obama transition team. But instead that in the moment after Obama was elected, we kind of had this lofty, aspirational idea of who we were as a country. And we projected that out onto what we were going to be able to do and the attitudes and opinions of people in this country. And what we actually found out is that that wasn't actually true about a good segment of the population and it caught us off guard when Donald Trump was elected essentially eight years later. So I don't want us to think that this really progressive thing that we've done is really transformational thing that we have done and we should acknowledge with, say, Kamala Harris as vice president of the United States. Madam Vice President. But instead think of this as kind of one step forward and one step forward always comes with a couple steps back. So we really need to think about that as well.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:25:34] We know whatever will and I get too down about the subjects we discuss on the show. We often get together before the show and talk about our day jobs and just how inspiring and enthusiastic our students are. I mean, they seem to still believe in democracy, despite having lived through some of the darkest times for democracy. And so we we think that it's because we in the academy try to model the ideal deliberative state, one in which people come with different backgrounds, different perspectives, and work through a body of evidence to try to get somewhere together. But

we also find that outside of the academy, people don't see us that way. Right. And each of you is a prominent educator and has some influence not only over the shape of higher education in America, but over the image of higher education in America. So now we hear that so many people think of what we do as too lefty, too ideological, too narrow, too elitist, too concerned with politeness and safety, and not enough with full and honest deliberation. And therefore, we're out of touch and can't speak to the concerns of ordinary Americans. So, you know, if this is the case, we see ourselves one way and so many people outside see us the other. What could and should universities do specifically to address these problems? I'm going to ask in reverse order of what we just did. Leah, have you thought through this? Like, how do you represent yourself and what we do to generate faith in what we do?

Leah Wright Rigueur [00:27:03] Certainly. So, you know, this has been a conversation that I've had at several institutions and outside of several institutions where the accusation tends to be, well, you don't represent real America. And my pushback to that is, well, why wouldn't I represent real America? I certainly am part of real America. And so what we're talking about are really two different spheres of American culture. But I tell my students all the time that when they say, well, I don't know a Trump supporter, I say, yes, you do. You just don't know that you know a Trump supporter. (laughter) And the other way around and that kind of thing. And I think it actually opens up a really vibrant conversation. More broadly, I think one of the things that I've been trying to do is figure out how can I replicate the very valuable work that we do in our classrooms? And how can I replicate that outside of the classroom and outside of the essentially private sphere? There are people who pay a whole lot of money for the exclusiveness of going to the academy, the ivory tower, to study these issues and then go back to their communities. Well, my thought is why can't we replicate that for audiences in a way that's not exclusive in a way that is egalitarian. And so I think there have been a lot of efforts to do that, particularly around grassroots organizing. We saw this kind of engagement happen with the death of George Floyd and in the aftermath of the death of George Floyd. And one of the things that I take as a sign of the promise of democracy is the fact that 26 million, at least 26 million people in roughly three month period participated in global peaceful protests around the world. That's important. And they did it from different backgrounds. You know, different kinds of economic standing, different kinds of racial groups. These communities came together around, you know, essentially a set of issues because they felt some kind of kinship in these networks. So it tells us that there's an opportunity to do this kind of learning and this kind of sharing in ways that can be transformative.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:29:02] Professor Anderson, what are we doing right? What are we doing wrong? What can we do better?

Carol Anderson [00:29:06] I think firstly we have to realize is that the narrative about the university being so elitist and divorced from America is a narrative that is designed to attack on knowledge. It is a designed attack on the institution of higher education itself. If you can delegitimize it, you can delegitimize expertise. You can delegitimize facts, you can delegitimize critical thinking. And so I don't even take that, "What are we doing wrong?" as the initial premise. But I take it as an understanding that it is an assault because of what higher education can do and can bring. And I think about the way that the GI Bill, right, really just opened up higher education. I think about the way that the Pell Grant really opened up higher education. I think that part of what we're seeing in terms of the defunding of particularly of public education, public colleges, has been part of that assault. And so it is the ways that we make our knowledge accessible. It is the way that we convey to that broader public the power of what we're doing. And we see that when you have folks

who are looking for a vaccine. You cannot create a vaccine unless you know how all of that stuff works. You can't. And I'm just using that scholarly term "stuff". (Laughter) You cannot understand how the disease is transmitted. That is a knowledge based enterprise. And so what we do is what we're doing. We just have to understand that we have forces out there who are vastly systemically anti intellectual, anti higher education. And we've got to develop the mechanisms to move around them, to work around them, to short circuit them so that we are working in communities as well as working in the academy.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:31:21] Well, Melody, you know, you you've come into this weird environment and dealt with weirdos like me and Will. And I mean, you must have a very helpful perspective on what the academy can do to bolster democracy. I mean, that's actually the job you chose to do, right?

Melody Barnes [00:31:38] Exactly. I agree with so much of what's been said. One, that this is a concerted attack on the academy and on universities and many of the things that Carol was talking about. At the same time, and you're right, I've been in this world for two years. When you all were talking about, you know, renowned educators and everything, I was like, oh, wow, really? I mean, this is new territory for me. And in being here, there's so much vibrancy and so many things that are wonderful about the academy. But I honestly think that parts of the academy and some faculty and scholars do this much better than others. I think the Academy in some ways can incent a cloistered lifestyle. And but then there are people who want to break out and to engage in a really fulsome way. You know, my our colleague, Andrew Karl, who's an historian and I wrote a piece a few months ago and we talked about the fact that universities can't be ivory towers on a hill. That they've got to be places of, yes, thoughtfulness, of deep scholarship, but also places of engagement and activity. And we certainly see that at, I know, at the University of Virginia. I think about the work, for example, of the Equity Center that is also part of the Democracy Initiative that has a joint governance structure with community members. They have been very active with Charlottesville City Council and policy issues, Covid and making sure that people are getting tested. And the list goes on and on and on. I also think that universities have to be places where people can respectfully and safely also sit in discomfort. And by that, I mean places where you can engage with people who have ideas that are different than your own. You might learn something. You might come out thinking the same thing you thought when you went in. But that process of engaging and engaging respectfully is extremely important. And that I'll close by also coming back to something that Leah was saying when she was talking about the Obama administration, or at least the perception that people had after Obama was elected. I don't think any of my colleagues thought that we had entered into the post-racial promised land after the president was elected. Leah, I don't I don't think that you were saying that. I do think, though, a lot of people did. And I do think that part of that was the desire to say, wow, we changed. We're better, we fixed it, we're done. As opposed to sitting in the discomfort that we are now seeing that has been realized. It's kind of like people saying, we've got Oprah, everybody's rich. (laughter) And, you know, those two things don't sit together. So now we've got to dig in and grapple with it. And that's something that the academy can and should also teach and be a part of.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:34:32] Well, I think we are all currently sitting in discomfort. So just to finish up real quickly, this is your gig now. You're a dean of a public policy school, a school specifically designed to engage students and faculty with real world issues and try to come up with ways to address our greatest problems. So how are we doing?

Ian Solomon [00:34:55] Yeah, I think it's a tale of two cities in some ways. Right. We have the aspects of the academy that are at the cutting edge of creating knowledge. Of asking

the tough questions, of pushing beyond boundaries and making huge contributions. And many parts of the academy remain very comfortably elitist and not dealing with discomfort and not becoming engines of social mobility to take the poorest of the poor and bring them into the middle class to help them to see leadership. We're not great at having very diverse faculties, typically. There's a lot of work to do to make the academy what we want it to be. And I see one of the biggest contributions that we try to make here at the Batten School of Public Policy and Leadership is evidence based. Can we get people to take evidence seriously? Can we say let's try to put an emphasis on facts and testing data and making sure we kind of close this reality deficit I referred to earlier so that people actually can make better decisions? And I think that's where the academy, that's where schools of public policy, that's forums like this: Are we challenging ourselves to make sure we're seeing clearly? Because a big portion of this country and I'm sure I have my gaps, too, because I live in my own bubbles, too, we're not seeing clearly right now. And that is, I think, fatal for democracy.

Will Hitchcock [00:36:11] Yes, indeed. And you know what I'm hearing, if I could just digest it real quick, democracy is still in danger, but I think we're getting better at naming what those dangers are. What the nature of the obstacles are. One of the one of the things we've been trying to get out of the show is specifically where those dangers lie. Where the potholes and how can we begin to address them? It's not just despair, but really clear eyed thinking about the problems. The struggle goes on there's no doubt. I don't think anyone was under any illusion that it would somehow end. But also that universities are engines of creativity, but also modeling how to disagree about how to interpret evidence. You know, we all know this, but we don't do a good job of saying this publicly. So I'm going to turn it over to see what he can...

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:36:52] Yeah.

Will Hitchcock [00:36:52] We're going to try something a little different here and go to our live audience.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:36:56] So I'm looking at our chat box, and I think we should first go to Shannon, who is joining us on the line from Washington. Shannon, welcome to Democracy in Danger.

Shannon [00:37:07] It's wonderful to be here. Can you hear me?

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:37:09] Yeah.

Will Hitchcock [00:37:09] We can.

Shannon [00:37:10] Great. Thank you so much for, I agree, a wonderfully rich conversation. And I'm calling I work for the Chautauqua Institution which has been trying to do the civil dialog stuff for about 148 years. And I'm so struck by this thread I'm hearing about this is a point in a long arc of history. And so my question for you, I'm reading Begin Again, Eddie Glaude's book, and he sort of is looking at this current point as the third in a series. First being civil war reconstruction, second being the struggles for freedom in the 1960s, and now. And I'm just wondering for anyone who has some thoughts on it, are there learnings from those times either inspirational or constructive or are we do we need to throw the playbook out? Where are we in history?

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:38:04] Well, let's let me turn to Leah and then Carol to maybe help clarify where we are in this history.

Leah Wright Rigueur [00:38:10] So I think there are a couple of key takeaways from this longer arc of history. The first really big one is that we have always had the blueprint for how to be successful and how to reach equality and egalitarian-ness. So that it's actually not it's not a surprise. It's not like we're sitting around scratching our head, like, how do we do this? We had it. We had it with reconstruction. Radical reconstruction. Right. And, you know, shout out to Carol for mentioning that earlier. I was so happy to hear that, because one of the things that we learn about reconstruction is here is this radical plan essentially to change, fundamentally change the nation by incorporating formerly enslaved individuals into the body politic through a redistribution of resources, but also political power. So understanding that you have to change every single aspect of society if you want to make society equal for all. We had that blueprint. We had it in the 1960s. We had many conversations around this. So I don't think that it's surprising. The other thing that I'll point out here is that we don't have a real appreciation for failure and how necessary failure is in order for us to get to success. So I think of an organization like the NAACP which failed repeatedly across various platforms, various engagements immediately after its founding. It failed by going through the executive office. It failed by going through public opinion. And it wasn't until the 1920s/1930s that they realized that they could use the courts to their advantage where they saw some kind of passageway into success. And so I say that because oftentimes we look at these things and think we should have a solution, we should have an answer, we should be successful by this point. But actually the long arc of history tells us they're going to be a whole lot of failures along the way and those are necessary in order for us to get to success.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:39:57] Well, Carol, you mentioned a first down, we just got a first down. And of course, as someone who's watched the Falcons over all these years, you know, from failure. (laughter).

Carol Anderson [00:40:16] That was eight ways to Sunday wrong!

Melody Barnes [00:40:16] That was mean! (laughter)

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:40:22] So, can you give us a sense of where we are on this story? In the long story?

Carol Anderson [00:40:27] When I wrote *White Rage*, what I was looking at there was that when African-Americans have achieved a success, some access to their citizenship rights, there's a wave of policy. We often think of rage as the violence. But this is a bureaucratic violence. And every time the bureaucratic violence hits, we're like *sacre bleu!* We get surprised that the bureaucratic violence is there. It is there. So we need not to be surprised. We need to be prepared for it. And so as we are moving to, you know, as Eddie is laying out this movement, this movement and where we are now in what could be our third reconstruction, because the civil rights movement was called the second reconstruction. We need to be prepared for the bureaucratic violence. We need to be prepared that there are millions of people in the United States who do not believe that African-Americans are real citizens. So when you hear about legal votes, the problem that they had was that black people voted. Indigenous people voted. Hispanics voted. Asian-Americans voted. So we're getting to a very narrow definition of who is American, who has rights, who should be in the body politic. We need to understand that and not be surprised

by it, but know how to move around it, know how to thwart it and know how to keep moving forward.

Will Hitchcock [00:42:01] Well, any time I can get a French expression like *sacre bleu* in the conversation, I like to use it. So *sacre bleu* here comes a question from Kevin Driscoll, who is a colleague here at UVA, and he's got a question about democracy and public trust. Kevin, are you there? Welcome to Democracy in Danger.

Kevin Driscoll [00:42:17] Thank you. So the act of voting and the election felt different this year. Despite the suppression efforts and all the requirements of social distancing, we seem to have had relatively high turnout. Yet we know that year after year, a substantial number of eligible voters do not participate. So following this election, how do we make sense of these nonparticipation statistics? What are they measuring? Is it more suppression? Is it indifference? Alienation? What do - what does nonparticipation tell us about public trust and democracy?

Will Hitchcock [00:42:54] Well, Melody, I think this is what the Democracy Initiative is going to solve, right? It's going to get everybody voting. We're going to get 100 percent turnout next time. But really, that's a great question about how to continue to expand the franchise, rebuild trust in public institutions in the process of deliberation. Is that something you've given, you and your team are giving thought to?

Melody Barnes [00:43:11] It's something that I think about quite a bit. One, just going into this election, I would look at the data and then I would listen to interviews and people saying, you know, I don't know, I don't know if I'm going to vote. And the people who write before the election said, I'm not voting. And listening to that and understanding I think there are several things at play. Yes, there are people who have had negative, bad experiences before. People who receive misinformation. But I also think for a number of people that they don't think it's worth it. That democracy in their minds...

Will Hitchcock [00:43:44] Doesn't deliver.

Melody Barnes [00:43:44] That doesn't deliver. It hasn't given them anything that they see that they believe affects their daily lives. Now, I would like to spend some time with those individuals to connect the dots. You know, when you put toast in your toaster in the morning, democracy is at work. There's a regulation that's passed that says your toaster is not going to blow up when you put toast in it and you plug it into the wall. Democracy and laws and regulations, all of that is everywhere. But people don't feel it and they don't understand it and it hasn't been made real for them. I do believe a couple of things. One, I think there's significant work that can and should happen connecting people to democracy in their communities. And I think as someone who is a progressive, for too long we've looked at this as a binary, as an either/or. That work, you know, doesn't happen, shouldn't happen on the local level. It should happen on the federal level and vice versa if you're a conservative. And I think it is a both/and proposition. And community and places on the ground are often the places where people can connect to other citizens, to non-citizens, to understanding problems and to feeling a part of the process that resolves problems. There is more that I could say, but that's part of it.

Will Hitchcock [00:44:55] Well, Ian I want to definitely want to hear you on that, because it really does speak to the core of what public policy schools are doing, is trying to figure out how to crack this question of engagement.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:45:05] But let's, um, we should turn to Ian for a particular question that's come in through our chat box. We've got we've had all of these chat questions coming in. We're really kind of overwhelmed by the audience response. And in this case, Justin Whiteaker has given us a question I think is really ideal for Ian to help us through. And Justin is wondering if there are other democracies either in the history of this Earth or currently from which we could learn. Is there a better model for democratic culture and democratic execution? What does the global or historical perspective teach us about how to strengthen our democracy?

Ian Solomon [00:45:43] I think one of the things that the global perspective suggests is you have to look at each place has a unique history and its unique collection of people. I can point to a very homogenous societies that do democracy really well. I'm not sure they offer the very best examples for us in a very diverse and vibrant country like we have. So I do think that some places make voting easier. That's a lesson we should take. Right. So Melody's talking about connecting the dots. Let's connect the dots between the very high percentage of youth who say they want to vote, and the very low number of youth who actually do vote. Let's find ways to connect those dots to make voting easier. Not to mention those things that, Carol, I've learned from Carol's book and Carol's work. It's not an accident that democracy is hard and that voting is hard. It's a very deliberate effort over and over and over again. Whether you're talking about prisoners or poor people or people without cars or people without ID, we make it really hard. So that's a lesson we've learned elsewhere. Look at money in politics. We could take lessons from other countries that realize that if we want people to feel like their voice is efficacious, let's actually equalize the power of their voice in the polity. Right. So I think there are lessons about getting money out of the political process, money out of campaigns. Take those lessons, change our Citizens United opinion here, which I think actually make people feel less efficacious in the democracy. Third, gerrymandering. I mean, over and over here we have these aspects of our democracy that other countries look at and say, we would never do that. That's anti-democratic. And yet we not only do them, we've been doubled down on them. So if we can fix some of these aspects of our democracy and of our failures - and again, I'm not suggesting they're easy and they're not accidental - those often have a history behind them. But if we commit to making democracy more efficacious, people will see that, yes, it's not hard. And my voice really does matter without having to kind of kill myself to get to the polls.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:47:34] Yeah.

Will Hitchcock [00:47:35] Just to wrap up, does any of the rest of you want to just get in on that? Is there one example out there in the world that you wish for? Can't why can't we do that? Is it you know, the Scandinavians do it better or I mean, is there one little tweak we could do that might be available win we could get buy in for?

Leah Wright Rigueur [00:47:49] I know I would be very much in favor of having a federal holiday or two federal holidays for voting, automatic voter registration, easy and early access to voting. All of that would be delightful. In fact, we are one of the you know, we are one of the democratic nations in the world that doesn't do pretty much any of that.

Carol Anderson [00:48:09] And I think we don't do that because of our history of slavery. And that's part of what we must reckon with, is the ways that we have targeted African-Americans in this nation for disenfranchisement. So we've only had a small time from '65 to 2013, and we need to reckon with that if we're going to be the nation we say we are.

Will Hitchcock [00:48:32] Yeah, we have got a lot of work ahead of us. But look, I hate to say this. We have used up the hour. We we're going to roll credits, but I just want to take a minute and thank you, our esteemed guests, one more time. You are so inspirational. It's been enlightening to listen to you, to think through these problems, both on this show and earlier in the season. Ian Solomon and Melody Barnes, both colleagues of ours here at University of Virginia, along with Carol Anderson at Emory University and Leah Wright Rigueur of Brandeis. You are fabulous. You are stars in the firmament for us. And thank you all so much for joining us on Democracy in Danger.

Guests [00:49:05] Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. This was terrific. Thank you for having us. Great to be here.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:49:11] And we also need to thank our studio audience. Our it's not really a studio, our virtual audience, scattered around the universe. That's all we have not only for this episode, but for season one of Democracy in Danger. Will, I know I'm speaking for you when I tell you it's been cathartic. It's also been a joy. We've learned so much and we've been inspired as well as chastened by what we face. And look, we're not out of the woods yet. We will be back with a new series in February with a whole new lineup of guests and subjects and urgent conversations.

Will Hitchcock [00:49:47] Hey here on Democracy in Danger. We bring you up, then we take you down. We bring you up and take you down. It's just this is what we do. If any listeners out there have ideas for new episodes, honestly, we'd love to hear them. You can shoot us a tweet @UVA MediaLab or catch up on our past shows on our homepage it's medialab.virginia.edu/democracyindanger.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:50:08] And Democracy in Danger is produced by the amazing Roberto Armengol, who really walked us through this terrifying experience here. And he does it with help from Jennifer Ludovici. Our interns are Kara Peters and Denzel Mitchell, two of the best young talents we've ever imagined working with. So thank you all.

Will Hitchcock [00:50:27] And support comes from the University of Virginia's Democracy Initiative. Thank you very much, Melody, for your support. And from the College of Arts and Sciences. The show is a project of UVA's Deliberative Media Lab, and we're distributed by the Virginia Audio Collective. At WTJU Radio in Charlottesville. I'm Will Hitchcock.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:50:46] And I'm Siva Vaidhyanathan. And we look forward to talking to you again in 2021.