

Democracy in Danger S1E5: Broken Promises

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

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:00:05] And I'm Siva Vaidhyanathan.

Will Hitchcock [00:00:07] And from the University of Virginia's Deliberative Media Lab, this is Democracy in Danger.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:00:12] For the past month, we've been exploring various threats that democracy is facing in the United States and around the world, and right now in 2020, we find ourselves in a year of truly historic cascading crises. This summer, amid a global pandemic no less, we've seen an extraordinary mobilization led by black Americans against police brutality and systematic racism.

Will Hitchcock [00:00:36] Siva, these protests have resounded across the world. They resonated in France, in Brazil, Turkey, even Japan. We've seen an outpouring of support for the Black Lives Matter movement. And as you know, there is little doubt that the demands for structural change that are forcibly being made by African-American activists are surely going to have an impact on the U.S. presidential election and our democracy here at home.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:01:00] To help us think through all this, we have Leah Wright Rigueur with us today. She's a historian and an associate professor of public policy at the Harvard Kennedy School. Her work looks at race, political ideology, the American presidency and the history of civil rights. Leah, thank you so much for joining us today on Democracy in Danger.

Leah Wright Rigueur [00:01:21] Thanks for having me.

Will Hitchcock [00:01:22] Leah, it's great to have you on our show. And I wanted to begin by asking you as a historian to reflect a little bit on our current moment. So, how would you approach the history behind the protests of 2020 and Black Lives Matter. And in particular, where would you start? I mean, obviously, one could start 400 years ago, but it seems to me there is something more contemporary going on here. And I just wondered if, in your mind as you're watching these events unfold, what do you see as the narrative arc for where we are right now?

Leah Wright Rigueur [00:01:57] So I think one of the things that we can look at is, we can say that these protests have been years, if not decades and generations in the making. There's a way in which we can start this story essentially with the story of reconstruction and then ultimately the failure of reconstruction. Right? In part because the failure of reconstruction harkens to a lot of these built in inequalities, these racial inequities, structural and institutional problems that are really the underpinning of the protests that we see today. But I also think there is something unique about the protests that are happening in this moment and as a historian I have to point that out. I think one particular thing that's really, really - that has essentially changed the scope of these protests, even though it's building on these longer movements and older movements - is the fact that they're taking place in the midst of a global pandemic. And so you can't turn away. We can't pretend like this isn't happening. We can't distract ourselves, whether it be through technology and TV

or through work or through just pure ignorance. Instead, the blinders are off and everyone is now seeing what essentially black people have been saying for generations.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:03:07] Well, Leah, this is a question that has been rattling around my head for weeks now. What was it about the moment? Why was the video of George Floyd's execution enough to start a national movement, this broad, this deep, this focused and this seemingly potentially successful? Why wasn't it, you know, Tamir Rice's execution or any of the hundreds of others before it sufficient to create this moment?

Leah Wright Rigueur [00:03:43] So we now have a new audience in ways that, you know, essentially we didn't have years ago. And I don't think I can stress that enough. But the other thing is that, you know, these incidents - There's a series of incidents because it's not just George Floyd - but these incidents happened back to back. So there's Ahmaud Arbery in February. But the nation finds out about that in March and April. There's Breonna Taylor, which happens in March. But, you know, her killers still haven't been brought to justice. And so we're still marching for Breonna Taylor and protesting her death and jogging for Ahmaud when along comes George Floyd. And George Floyd's death is vivid. You can't look away. Those, you know, almost nine minutes on tape are agonizing. They're absolutely excruciating to watch, particularly as we hear, you know, a man who is dying on camera call out for his mother, who has been dead for two years. And so for many people, it's a wakeup call.

Will Hitchcock [00:04:39] Leah, that leads me into a question that I, I want to ask, because I've heard you talk a few times publicly about this problem of the structural crisis or collapse or failure, if you like, of the United States with respect to African-Americans. So you you've called the United States a failed state, and that is a powerful term. And we tend to apply it to, you know, war ravaged countries where the rule of law has collapsed, where democracy has failed, where human rights are no longer recognized. And I just wondered if you can explain how you feel it aptly summarizes the condition of African-Americans in the United States.

Leah Wright Rigueur [00:05:18] Absolutely. So I think it's designed to be, you know, a shocking statement because we think of America as this democratic nation. The American project is essentially an egalitarian one, right? And one that is about outwardly about equality. But what these protests have shown and what historically protest - black protest - has shown is that that's not true. That democracy, even as black Americans keep working towards democracy and keep believing in the idea of American democracy. What they've also said is that American democracy doesn't apply to us. It doesn't work for us. We've never been fully included in the American Democratic Project. So I can give a couple of examples about this. So you have a system of capitalism that simply has not worked for black and brown people, that has left millions unemployed and underemployed. And we can see that right? The unemployment rate for African-Americans in this country has historically been twice that of white Americans in this country. You know, I like to point out that George Floyd become symbolic of this moment because he's in Minneapolis looking for work when he is murdered. You know, we can also look at something like the failure of the American health care system and the repeated health crises that disproportionately affect black people. And this is even before the pandemic. And so when we see something like the death of George Floyd, one of the things that the autopsy reports have found is that he had COVID19 in his lungs. So he wasn't exempt from the failures of America as a Democratic project and the American state.

Siva Vaidhyathan [00:06:48] Well, you know, earlier that response, which is so, so striking, so powerful, really plays into the core question that we're trying to answer throughout these conversations. To what extent is the basic foundation of liberal democracy, both in the United States and around the world, being threatened? Your response makes it clear that we hadn't even gotten there yet here in the United States, like the extent to which we have gotten there is perhaps being undermined. But we never really got there. We never really got to the point where we had a fully formed, mature, operational, liberal democracy. Right now, given the striking breadth and power of the current protest movement, do you see a necessary connection between this fight for justice, which, you know, again, I hope I'm not being too presentist and too optimistic, but it strikes me as someone who was an adult in the aftermath of the Rodney King riots and uprisings and protests and deliberation and debate, and that changed nothing - that maybe we're on to something better here. Is this fight for justice the same thing as a fight for liberal democracy? Should we conflate those two things?

Leah Wright Rigueur [00:08:18] So I think in America, our best chance at reaching some kind of sense of liberal, actual liberal democracy is through a fight for justice. Because if we can achieve democracy for the people who have been most marginalized, most excluded, you know, most discriminated against in our society - the most vulnerable parts and parcels of our society - only then can we begin talking about what democracy, what liberal democracy actually looks like. What black Americans have done through protest is actually give us a path forward to liberal democracy. This fight for racial justice, this long fight for racial justice, has really cut through democracy and offered a path forward. So when we see America at its most democratic, it is most often linked to these questions of racial justice. When we look at, for example, the 1960 civil rights movement and we look at activists on the ground, and we look even the most radical of these activists, black power activists - and then we look at the reformists who are working through the system as it exists - both of them are fighting for the same thing, although they have different means and ways and ideas of how to achieve it. And it's their successes, right, that actually move democracy forward in really powerful ways. And so I went to one of the things I'm actually quite optimistic about is that protests, while they may be signs of an unhealthy democracy and the failures of the state or even the way in which African-Americans consider the state illegitimate, are the best possible way to move us forward which is why protest is so necessary to our current moment and to our future.

Will Hitchcock [00:09:55] Leah, our listeners are a sophisticated group, but they may not know the history of black voting in the 20th century in the United States. And you've written a great deal about it, a wonderful book called *The Loneliness of the Black Republican*. And it's a story of how African-American voters in the mid part of the century in reasonably large numbers supported the Republican Party and then they moved away from it as the Republican Party moved away from them. I wonder if you could just remind us about that historic shift, but also what has it meant for African-Americans but also for democracy, that today African-American voters are very overwhelmingly aligned with one party? What are the consequences of that?

Leah Wright Rigueur [00:10:40] 1964 is a turning point for race and the two party American political system. So you have these two political parties that essentially come together and are pretty unanimous in their support of the most comprehensive civil rights bill that the nation has ever seen. The problem, however, is that the Republican Party chooses to nominate a figure who has voted against the 1964 Civil Rights Act and who has been pretty outspoken in his pushback against civil rights as a legislative issue. So whatever his personal principles, Barry Goldwater becomes the face of segregation. He

becomes the face of, you know, an anti civil rights platform. And in doing so, he alienates African-Americans from the Republican Party. So before this, we've seen, you know, upwards of 40 percent of African-Americans voting for the Republican presidential nominee. After this it drops down to six percent. Right. Statistically insignificant. And since that moment, no Republican candidate has gotten more than 18 percent of the black vote. So it's a really important turning point that shows the centrality of race, but particularly shows the way in which African-Americans feel forced out of the two party system and into kind of a relationship with the Democratic Party that has been deeply beneficial to them. But it's also troubling to them because they don't have the same mobility or ability to swing in ways that, you know, are really important in electoral politics.

Siva Vaidhyathan [00:12:14] So, Leah, I'm going to play the I'm old enough card once more. I did it once already when I invoked Rodney King and definitely giving away my age as I start this this question for you. I'm old enough to remember 1988 when Jesse Jackson made a very strong run for the Democratic nomination for president. And upon recognizing that he wasn't going to be able to pull that off, changed his focus and put his energies and harnessed his national support toward voter registration and turnout efforts, especially among African-Americans in the south and the urban north. And it had a tremendous effect. You could see that and people talked about it and political scientists measured it in the 1990 congressional elections and gubernatorial elections. And then most significantly, in the election of Bill Clinton in 1992. And yet, to your point, there is very little about the Bill Clinton administration, eight years in office, that echoed the themes and needs and demands of Jesse Jackson's supporters and those for whom Jesse Jackson was speaking. Right. So we get, in fact, the very opposite, both thematic and policy based agenda coming from the Clinton administration, despite the fact that it could be argued that he owed his job to Jesse Jackson and most importantly, the voters who decided that Jesse Jackson was worth following in this effort. Now, I wonder if we can look at the remarkable success of Democratic candidates in the 2018 off year elections. And once again, ponder whether the Democratic Party has learned something. You know, when you look a year earlier with the success of Doug Jones winning his Senate seat in Alabama, of all places, almost entirely because of the support of black voters, specifically black women, you know, is there any hope at this point that the Democratic Party as an institution has recognized not only its dependance on black voters, but the need to build in a policy agenda that actually speaks to the moment.

Leah Wright Rigueur [00:14:41] Jesse Jackson has a line that he loves to utter, which is that hands that pick cotton will someday pick the president. Right. So essentially saying that black people who are disempowered under this system in a country that never really wanted us for more than labor or exploitation, actually have an enormous amount of political power. And that's true, right? When we look at, say, something like the 1976 presidential election, black people are instrumental in helping Jimmy Carter get elected to the presidency. They're instrumental in getting Bill Clinton elected to the presidency. They certainly are instrumental in getting Barack Obama elected twice. What happens is that they help elect these people and then don't see their agendas, don't see their ideas, don't see, you know, their needs put into legislative action. Because there's this belief among both parties that speaking to African-American needs, African-American, once African-American agendas, is actually harmful or alienating to the rest of America. What's really interesting, however, about the 2020 election and about the connection to these protests is that since 2016, we've seen the Democratic Party really struggling to understand where they say, do we need to appeal to these people who are most loyal and consistent voters, like we know black women are going to show up. We know black women are going to turn out and they're going to vote for whoever the Democratic nominee is. But what we don't

know based on the 2016 returns is if black people are going to turn out in numbers that we need to get elected to the White House. And so we're beginning to see black people, black strategists, black civil rights leaders, even black celebrities and entertainers really say you need to push for us and incorporate what we want into the agenda if you want to stay at those numbers like we have in the past.

Will Hitchcock [00:16:37] Leah, you are a professor of public policy as well as a historian. And you're also a public figure. As you look at the policy landscape, what do you think are really the key policy innovations that need to be made? If you could wave a magic wand and just say, well, I would hope that we could do A and B and we could get that done. Are there things that you feel that really are the most urgent policy issues to address systemic racism today?

Leah Wright Rigueur [00:17:07] So I think that in policy schools, you know, across the country, we have been failing our students and we've been failing our students because we don't teach them at the very least two things. We do not teach them about race. And we do not teach them about history. And I guess technically this would be a third thing, but we don't teach them about the intersection between race and history and its implications for policy and politics in the present day and its connection to democracy. We just simply don't. And I think that is, you know, if I could wave my magic wand today, that is the thing that would change with every policy school in America. That we would actually start instructing future policymakers on what race means and what it historically has meant for implications on policy. I mean, it's egregious that we don't teach that, you know, fair housing actually wasn't fair housing that the federal government was invested in, you know, denying mortgages, denying loans, putting a pejorative terms and negative punitive terms on blackness as part of legislative policy. We don't teach that education is a civil right and that it's a battle that's fought. We don't teach them about these deep rooted ideas of institutional inequality, inequity and systemic racism and discrimination. So I think that absolutely needs to change. The other thing is that we don't actually listen to what black constituents are asking for. You know, we do a lot of polling. We do a lot of, you know, surveying. And we come up with these lists that say things like, you know, black people really care about economics. They really care about jobs. They really care about, you know, health care. But we don't actually read between the lines to understand what that means. Black people have been asking and actually - no demanding - reparations for over a century. It has consistently come up. And yet we ignore it in favor of simply saying, well, that's not possible. Right. We don't actually have the imagination or the creativity to even discuss reparations. Again, if I could wave my magic wand, one of the things that I would hope is that we actually begin listening to our black constituents, but also thinking broadly and creatively about solutions to inequality based on the work that activists that protesters, that scholars, have been doing on this subject for a very, very long time.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:19:40] So Leah, your invocation for a richer, broader and deeper historical appreciation, historical analysis within policy schools, I think is right on. I, I can't help but think that that's what we need way beyond policy schools. Right. Because you think about the dominant narrative of the history of the United States or for that matter, the history of of black people in United States. It is very whiggish. It's very much about the unfolding toward justice. And we are constantly reminded about that every MLK Day, every Fourth of July. We are reminded about just how much better things are than they were before. And there's no deeper, serious analysis of the failures - which are just as important, as you pointed out. With housing policy, right? A record of trying to make up for the clear, brutal discrimination in housing in America is not a simple story of it getting better. In many ways, especially over the past 70 years, it's gotten worse. So is there a

better story we can tell to the public? And I think just as importantly, is the level of activism that we see right now, especially among young people - is that an indication that that whiggish narrative of the bend toward justice just isn't working anymore? It doesn't have its persuasive power anymore. Are we ready for a much richer, more complex, truer story of American history?

Leah Wright Rigueur [00:21:24] Well, we're certainly on the cusp of something that is both fragile, but has the potential to be transformative. I mean, two years ago, the majority of Americans could not say black lives matter. They just couldn't. They wouldn't. They didn't want to. You know, and there are all kinds of debates and, "oh, well, what about all lives matter" and all of this stuff? And now in the span of one month, the majority of Americans can actually sit there and say, yes, black lives do matter. Now, that's what I call a cultural shift. That means something is changing. Something in the zeitgeist is cooking. Right. We're now locked again in a conversation around, you know, Confederate statues, Confederate institutions, Confederate names. But we're also beginning to have a much richer conversation about the origins of those things. Rather than saying something about heritage and past and, you know, blah blah blah - we're actually talking about the fact that they emerge in the 40s, 50s and 60s alongside civil right's incremental gains as a deliberate way of shutting down those conversations. You know, a concept like defund the police, which I would describe is as pretty radical, which couldn't even be discussed in polite circles five years ago, is now at the top of the agenda. And we're actually seeing cities beginning to kind of carry out this idea of reimagining, policing and reinvesting those funds into the communities that have been most harmed and most neglected. So something is happening and the potential for something big to happen is there. Will it actually happen? I'm not sure. But I do know that the protests are an instrumental part of pushing any kind of change forward. That is why they're so necessary. Why they're so valuable.

Will Hitchcock [00:23:12] Leah Wright Rigueur, thank you so much for joining us on Democracy in Danger.

Leah Wright Rigueur [00:23:17] Thank you for having me.

Will Hitchcock [00:23:35] Siva, I think you and I both agree when we hear Leah talk that this is the voice and the intelligence of a great teacher. And I think what makes her a great teacher and a great communicator is that she's brave. She has a lot of courage in what she has said and maybe nothing more courageous than her indictment of the United States as having failed black people in health care, and education, in jobs. Capitalism, as it's practiced in the United States, has simply not worked for people of color. And so when she talks about Black Lives Matter and the protests of the moment, she's putting it into a larger context of structural crisis that goes back decades and generations. And I think that's what makes her message so powerful. What gives it so much punch is it so heavy with historical resonance.

Siva Vaidhyathan [00:24:24] You know, Leah is also rare as a scholar. She's a scholar who is trained as a historian, who works in a public policy school. And yet her sensitivity to the dynamics of culture and cultural change really give her work a special level of value. It invites people into her work who might not have a way in, or even think they have a way in. And it also really brings some extra dynamics, some extra texture to the work she's describing, to the trends she's describing.

Will Hitchcock [00:25:00] She also made a really important point, which is that, you know, protests are on the one hand, upsetting, frightening, intimidating. But what she's telling us is that protests are about asking to be heard and for black citizens, black voters, people of color across the country. There comes a point in which you feel that your voice has not been heard. And yes, it means taking democracy out into the streets. Nothing could be in a sense, nothing is more indicative of a vibrant democracy than public protest. But also it works. It works. She reminded us that it was not too long ago, a matter of weeks, that the very phrase Black Lives Matter was a phrase that people were frightened of. And now it has become, in a sense, embraced. Defund the police - thinking about police reform - we're in a new place than we were just a couple of months ago. And that's a sign that protest as a part of democracy can really work.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:25:55] You know, we often forget that the act of protest or the act of civic recognition is a crucial step in reinvigorating people's belief that they actually might matter. You know, I mean, we can retreat from that the demands of democracy so easily if we're convinced that nothing we have to say is going to be heard or nothing we have to say is worth hearing. And moments like this give people by the millions that opportunity to say, you know what? What I think, what I have to say, might matter to somebody, and I'm just going to take that chance. And so in a way that I hadn't quite expected before I talked to Leah, I now get a better sense of the connection between protest and a lively democracy.

Will Hitchcock [00:27:01] That's all we have this time on Democracy in Danger, but we'll pick up the conversation on racial injustice in America next week with Yale scholar Elizabeth Hinton, an expert on mass incarceration and the history of policing.

Elizabeth Hinton [00:27:13] Policymakers spend more money on locking up young people than they do on educating young people. And so, you know, one wonders, what does that say about the health of American democracy?

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:27:24] We'd love to hear from you in the meantime. What do you think about the Black Lives Matter protests? Do they inspire you? Do they concern you? Do they enrage you? Have you participated in them? What did you learn? Please get in touch with us. You can tweet @UVAMediaLab, or you can find us online at Medialab.virginia.edu

Will Hitchcock [00:27:47] You subscribe to Democracy in Danger wherever you get your podcasts and share our episodes on social media. It's a great way to help us reach more listeners.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:27:58] Democracy in Danger is produced by Robert Armengol with help from Jennifer Ludovici. Our interns are Kara Peters and Denzel Mitchell.

Will Hitchcock [00:28:07] Support comes from the University of Virginia's Democracy Initiative and from the College of Arts and Sciences. The show is a project of UVA Deliberative Media Lab. We're distributed by the Virginia Audio Collective at WTJU Radio. I'm Will Hitchcock.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:28:23] And I'm Siva Vaidhyanathan. Talk to you next time.