

## Democracy in Danger S2 E1.Cults of Personality

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

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

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

**Siva Vaidhyanathan** [00:00:14] Will, if there's one thing we've learned over season one, and, of course, by living the past four or five years, it's that democracy is fragile. You know, a clever demagogue backed by ardent supporters can present a serious, even devastating challenge to basic norms and practices of democracy. Now, as we Americans try to pick up the pieces from the catastrophe of the last four years, we ought to keep one basic lesson in mind. We should never underestimate the damage that an illiberal populist movement can do to a democratic system of government.

**Will Hitchcock** [00:00:49] That's exactly right, Siva. And much as we might want to exhale a little bit right now and turn the page on the darkness of the last few years, we still need to figure out how Trump happened. And we also need to widen our lens well beyond Trump and beyond the United States. The truth is that Donald Trump belongs in a class of politicians that goes way back, perhaps as far as Mussolini. And it still persists in many places around the world.

**Newscaster** [00:01:27] A law that Hungary's prime minister, Viktor Orban, says...

**Will Hitchcock** [00:01:30] From Hungary.

**Newscaster** [00:01:31] But those who oppose him say it will create the European Union's first dictatorship.

**Will Hitchcock** [00:01:36] To Russia.

**Newscaster** [00:01:37] These are scenes the Kremlin doesn't like to see.

**Will Hitchcock** [00:01:41] To Turkey.

**Newscaster** [00:01:42] The youth of Turkey is up in arms against Recep Tayyip Erdogan.

**Will Hitchcock** [00:01:45] And elsewhere.

**Newscaster** [00:01:45] Hundreds of university students have been protesting in Istanbul.

**Will Hitchcock** [00:01:48] There's a long list of authoritarian nationalists who have used the ballot box to get into power and then turned around and crushed democracy.

**Donald Trump** [00:01:58] To win this election. Frankly, we did win this election.

**Siva Vaidhyanathan** [00:02:02] Yes. I mean, it's not as if Donald Trump invented this sort of grievance politics that appeals to the alleged forgotten man. Right. Many leaders in many other countries at many other times have used fear of immigrants, fear minorities,

anxiety about changing demographics, fear of diseases coming from other countries, loss of status. And they've used it to build populist, illiberal movements. So as we launched this new season of Democracy in Danger, we want to look back a little and figure out how the Trump movement maps onto the history of radical anti-democratic politics. Well, today we have Ruth Ben-Ghiat with us to help us do just that. She's a professor of history and Italian studies at New York University. She's an expert on fascism and right wing politics. Her new and very timely book is called Strongmen From Mussolini to the Present. Ruth, welcome to Democracy in Danger.

**Ruth Ben-Ghiat** [00:03:01] Thank you for having me on.

**Siva Vaidhyanathan** [00:03:03] Well, Ruth, the timing of your book was pretty great, you know. Was this book inspired by the rise of Donald Trump or had you been considering addressing the role of strongmen in 21st century politics for a long time?

**Ruth Ben-Ghiat** [00:03:20] This book was definitely inspired by my alarm as a scholar of fascism at seeing Donald Trump come on the scene. The minute he started retweeting neo-Nazi memes, holding rallies, having loyalty oaths, I realized something was up. So I decided to do this book. But I also felt it was necessary to look back on a century of authoritarianism because we were living in a period globally of great revisionism to history by authoritarian nationalists. From Putin, who puts up statues of Stalin and imprisons people who say the wrong things about his gulags, to the proud boys who go around with T-shirts that say Pinochet did nothing wrong, referring to the Chilean dictator. And so I felt it was really important to look back at the evolution and also talk about the violence and the crimes of these regimes.

**Will Hitchcock** [00:04:22] You know, Ruth, before we get into some of the more grisly figures that you discuss in the book, you know, one of the closest precursors to Donald Trump in the past that one might look to is that charismatic and totally corrupt politician, businessman turned politician from Italy, Silvio Berlusconi.

**Newscaster** [00:04:43] ...I am by far the best prime minister Italy ever had.

**Newscaster** [00:04:47] He survived tales of bunga bunga orgies.

**Will Hitchcock** [00:04:50] He dominated Italian politics for a decade at the beginning of the 21st century. And I wonder in what ways does he fit into the pantheon of strongmen? What kind of damage did he do to Italian democracy? And of course, the question we're asking nowadays is, what kind of damage did Trump do to American democracy? Maybe we can learn by the impact of Berlusconi on Italian politics.

**Ruth Ben-Ghiat** [00:05:14] There's a lot to learn from the Berlusconi experience, and he's a good comparison because he didn't wreck democracy. He wrapped it around his finger. And it's actually extraordinary how similar the mandate was. He normalized the far right. He was the first person - he originally did this for a very brief government in 1994. He brought the neofascists into the government to make a center right coalition. Then the Cold War had recently ended and he reprised this in his two governments of the 2000s. And so by the time that was over, the far right was completely mainstreamed. So that went on. He owned television networks, which Trump never owned his own networks, and he owned television advertising. So he had more influence on public opinion and media than anyone since Mussolini in his country. And he had a genuine personality cult. So he, without totally wrecking democracy, set the tone for being able to hugely influence, to

silence critics with threats of harassment, legal harassment and other things, things that Orbán does today. And then the other thing he did, he had a very close friendship with Putin. It was more a friendship of equals because Berlusconi really was more of a real billionaire than Trump. But they had a very secretive relationship. And Italy's Russia policy was handled personally by Berlusconi. The foreign ministry was totally Xed out. And the Giuliani figure was a personal envoy as Berlusconi, Valentini, who traveled to Russia once a month to do whatever business was going on between the two of them. And then the final thing and really the the thing along with normalizing the right that's the most disturbing, he normalized corruption. He had dozens of corruption trials and he ended up being able to have these laws passed that were known as ad personam laws, laws tailored to his private financial needs and situations. When he was accused of bribery, he ended up having the parliament pass a law that made bribery a lesser offense. So by the time his 10 years in and out of office were up, the polls show that Italians had much more of a tolerance for corruption.

**Will Hitchcock** [00:07:43] That's interesting.

**Ruth Ben-Ghiat** [00:07:44] Yeah, the reputational and legal consequences of corruption charges and trials and convictions were far less than when he came in.

**Siva Vaidhyanathan** [00:07:53] Wow. Well, I mean, the socialist government that preceded him was spectacularly corrupt as well. Right. But he made it an art. From what I understand, Berlusconi was able to start rich and even richer and really leverage not only protection, but the power of his position to enhance his empire. Much like Putin has. Well, Putin didn't start rich but he certainly is when he retires or dies, possibly going to be the richest person in the world. Now, Donald Trump might not have been that rich when he started, but he clearly has done all he can to try to enhance his personal wealth through direct payments from the US government, through urging almost forcing foreign governments to do business with his private properties by advertising his properties and his daughter's businesses through all of the instruments of power and the presidency. What's the relationship between corruption and this strongman figure? I mean, are they in it for the influence? Are they in it for the payoff? Is it the same thing? And and how do they manage to use anticapitalist and anti elitist rhetoric while still enriching themselves? That seems to be the trick, right. How do they get away with that trick?

**Ruth Ben-Ghiat** [00:09:11] Well, the original the original template for that was set by Mussolini, who had been a socialist and then made his journey to being a fascist and kept - Mussolini defined fascism as a, quote, revolution of reaction. And this is perfect because he used this populist rhetoric, these cries that Italy had become a victim of the great powers, Italy was getting screwed over - so this template for this politics of resentment and victimhood. But in fact, the first thing he did when he became prime minister - he was prime minister of a democracy for three years before he declared dictatorship - he did sweeping privatizations. And this isn't much known about. Everybody knows that he had a revolution, but he privatized telecommunications, privatized insurance because the people who had backed him, he was appointed by the king. He was put there by elites because they liked the work he was doing against the left. Right. He killed thousands of leftists. So he was the first one to mix this kind of populist rhetoric and actually cater to elites. Today, we have all these hypocrites, Putin and Orben and Trump, who rail against globalism and then they're the biggest globalists there are. Either because Trump - his whole licensing thing, you know, he's in debt to foreign banks so he's globalist there and he licenses his name. And Ivanka has Chinese trademarks, they're globalists. But also because, you know, Putin and a lot of them have always stored their money in offshore finance things,

which is all over the world. So this is a bunch of B.S., but people fall for it over and over again.

**Siva Vaidhyanathan** [00:10:54] Right. Now, it sounds to me like Mussolini is sort of proof of concept of this model, right? I mean, we think of Mussolini decked out in his uniform, commanding military parades, the bombastic gesturing and so forth. Right. So he's often a cartoon in our minds, a brutal cartoon, right, but ultimately a failed cartoon character. I mean, do you see him as a model for this kind of strongman in the world? I mean, in terms of how you how you get paid, how you take command, how you represent your country in the world?

**Ruth Ben-Ghiat** [00:11:31] Oh, yeah. And he doesn't get his due. There's for obvious reasons, people focus on Hitler. But, you know, Hitler was, I talk about this in the book, Hitler was obsessed with Mussolini. Because Mussolini, he only founded the fascists, and he founded it as a movement, in 1919. By 1922, he was in as prime minister. And then, as I said, he had three years as a prime minister of a democracy, during which time he eroded democracy from within. And then he's also very contemporary and Trump-like. And the reason he declared dictatorship is that he had had the head of the Socialist Party killed. And even when I was in grad school, we learned that that happened. It made sense because the guy was antifascist. He was socialist. But now it's come out, because we didn't have enough research on corruption in fascism, it's come out now that the same person, Mazziotti, was an anti-corruption reformer who had compiled a huge dossier of evidence that the fascist party was taking bribes, including from an American oil company. And he was set to reveal this in parliament and then he was killed. And so an investigation opened up. The special prosecutor was appointed and Mussolini was going down. And to avoid going down, he declared a dictatorship. So the first dictatorship in modern history was actually to escape a corruption scheme, which is very Trumpian.

**Siva Vaidhyanathan** [00:13:03] So there's this weird sort of pseudo debate going on and has been going on for four years in this country about whether what we see in the Trump administration and his personality and his movement is more of an authoritarian move or more of a kind of mafia move, a mob move. But it seems to me that your story of Mussolini's rise to power and sense of self indicates that there really isn't much difference between a mafia state and an authoritarian state.

**Ruth Ben-Ghiat** [00:13:36] Well, yeah, and people call Putin's and Orban's states Mafia states. And Erdogan also. You know, they operate in similar ways, both in terms of this kind of loyalty quotients you've seen. Trump has had relations with organized crime for decades and the methods are similar, the rhetoric, the intimidation is similar. Sometimes the outcomes of violence can be similar. But the idea is to all of these guys, one thing that they do when it's more advanced is they start to seize the assets of businessmen. And this doesn't get enough attention because one of the myths about authoritarianism that doesn't seem to die is that it's an efficient system, it's productive governance. It's good for business, it's law and order. And in fact, these rulers, they're predators and they start seizing the assets of business people. And so in Putin's Russia, tens of thousands of business people have been jailed because if their properties get too successful, the state wants them and just preys on them. And Erdogan has seized over thirty two billion dollars worth of businesses and schools and other things. So we always think of authoritarianism as people following orders and people saluting, but it's also the thrill of being able to get away with it. And what Trump did was to make that kind of lawlessness exciting for people. It was a thrill for them to work for someone who had no limits. So the macho lawlessness

spreads throughout government. And then they hire people who are like them, and then it's a downward spiral.

**Will Hitchcock** [00:15:19] That's crucial. You know, on that theme of what stays the same and what changes how the strong man imposes his power in different times and how that has changed over time. We might want to talk about how strongmen come to an end. You know, Mussolini was captured by the partisans and executed. Hitler, of course, took his own life. Saddam Hussein was finally captured, put on trial and then executed. You know, look forward with us. You know, here's Donald Trump. He has left office in disgrace. He's been impeached a second time. We don't know what his political future is. He may still have another chapter to write. But those kinds of endings don't at the moment seem very likely for some of the contemporary strongmen if we look to Turkey or Russia or Brazil, the Philippines. So how does a society retake its democratic freedoms once a strongman has settled himself in and positioned himself at a position of enormous authority?

**Ruth Ben-Ghiat** [00:16:25] It's really hard because look what's happened with Putin. Putin's trust ratings and popularity ratings are way down and he has to resort to jailing and poisoning people like Navalny to keep them off the ballot, to keep them out of the public sphere. And so, you know, Navalny and Sobol and others, they decided to pursue an electoral strategy instead of only mass demonstrations or only anti-corruption research. And that's when he has upped his poisoning. In a way, it's such a sign of weakness that he has to poison people to keep them from running for office because they would win. And yet he's in control. And it took him 20 years to finally have enough power this year to get the Russian constitution amended so he could stay in power till 2036 now. And it's very sad. Over the time I wrote the book, both Putin and Orban finalized the state capture.

**Will Hitchcock** [00:17:25] We started with Berlusconi. Maybe, maybe we should end with him. What became of him after he left office, as we're thinking about what where Trump is going to go?

**Ruth Ben-Ghiat** [00:17:35] Yeah, he's full of lessons for us. So in 2006, he was voted out. And this is important for us right now. He was claiming to be Jesus Christ and have economic miracle and he didn't meet expectations. So he gets voted out and the center left comes in and they decided they didn't want to prosecute him because he had numerable corruption trials and they didn't want to focus on his lack of accountability and those things. They wanted to turn the page. So they didn't really pass much anti-corruption legislation despite the huge things that Berlusconi had done that no one else had done. And this is how populism before 2008, the populist movement of Beppe Grillo, this comic, it became the Five Star Movement, which has been in power in Italy. It started then because people got enraged that it seemed like no establishment politician of right or left was caring about corruption, was caring about populist grievance. And so Grillo organized, excuse my language - it's his language - a Fuck You Day. And it had hundreds of demonstrations and hundreds of thousands of people in 2007. So this is before the 2008 crisis. And guess what? Berlusconi, less than two years later in 2008, comes back in. He was reelected and then he was more corrupt than ever. And so then he finally leaves for good in 2011 because of the eurozone crisis. And it wasn't his corruption. It wasn't a sex party scandals with underage girls. It was that Merkel and the others kind of - he needed to leave and so he forced to resign. But another lesson is that he was still very popular. He still had his personality cult. And in 2013, the next time they had elections, his party only lost the center left by less than one percent.

**Siva Vaidhyanathan** [00:19:27] Wow.

**Ruth Ben-Ghiat** [00:19:28] Despite all that he did and the incompetence, there was a rash of suicides in 2012 due to that hardship he caused that didn't really affect him that much.

**Will Hitchcock** [00:19:39] Ruth, it sounds like what you're saying is one of the lessons from the Berlusconi period is that while the violence that these strongmen have done to politics and society is still fresh in everyone's minds, there has to be a period of confrontation and of accountability. And the worst thing you could do is, quote unquote, move on.

**Ruth Ben-Ghiat** [00:19:56] Yeah, I do agree with that. And that is the lesson of of the Berlusconi years, certainly, that right after they leave, unless you stand up vigorously for these bedrock principles of democracy, which is transparency and accountability, then it becomes harder to do it later. And also, even if the leader himself doesn't come back to power, there are a host of people who worked for him or imitated him or admired him, hoping to replicate or finish the work he started.

**Siva Vaidhyanathan** [00:20:28] Well, Ruth Ben-Ghiat, thank you so much for joining us today on Democracy in Danger.

**Ruth Ben-Ghiat** [00:20:34] Thank you.

**Will Hitchcock** [00:20:39] Democracy in Danger is part of the Democracy Group podcast network. Visit [democracygroup.com](http://democracygroup.com) to find all our sister shows. We will be right back.

**Will Hitchcock** [00:20:55] Well Siva, one of the things I take away from that conversation is we have got to find a way in this country to hold Donald Trump and the many figures around him who bent and broke the norms in our democracy, we got to hold them accountable. And, of course, he's already been impeached twice. And it doesn't look as if the US Senate will convict Donald Trump of the crime of incitement. But nonetheless, the danger is that he will get away scot free. And the results of that are that he'll remain in politics. He will come back just the way Berlusconi came back in 2019 when he was elected to the European Parliament. These guys don't go away easily unless the society decides to hold them accountable. And I think that's what needs to be done.

**Siva Vaidhyanathan** [00:21:37] Yeah. You know, and even beyond criminality and corruption for which we should be willing to hold people accountable, there's another concern. It's a big concern I've had. And I think it might be my overwhelming concern for the long term, for the health of democracy, you know, in Italy, in the rest of Europe, the health of democracy in Mexico, in Brazil and certainly in the United States. And that's the corrosion rather than the corruption or in addition to the corruption. And what I mean by corrosion is the undermining of trust in institutions. But beyond that, the growing inability or unwillingness to take anyone seriously about anything serious. So when you make someone like Silvio Berlusconi your leader, when you make someone like Jair Bolsonaro your leader, when you make someone like Donald Trump your leader, you're basically saying, I don't take our current set of problems seriously. I might believe this or believe that, but not enough to make it a priority. You're basically saying, I would rather have a clown - and by the way, the Five Star movement in Italy was founded by a clown - than have someone who might look at deforestation, look at climate change, look at public health, look at global security in a serious and creative way. And I think ultimately that undermines governance at every level and reinforces a sense that nothing matters and no

party matters and no figure matters and everybody is the same. And, you know, it's really hard to come back from that.

**Will Hitchcock** [00:23:31] Well, one thing that 2021 has allowed us to do is to begin to imagine that we can repair the corrosion that you talked about, that we can use the power of the ballot box organizing activism to begin to reset. I mean, I'll say one thing. We have talked as a country, as a society more about democracy this year and maybe this month than we have in the previous decade or so. And if you look at Joe Biden's inaugural address, you'll find that he uses the word democracy more than any other president in any other inaugural address since Franklin Roosevelt. That's a tip that we are, as a society, choosing to engage the problems of democracy now in a way we haven't done maybe in the last half century. And I think that's a good sign.

**Siva Vaidhyanathan** [00:24:19] I mean, I think it's pretty clear that Joe Biden and his speechwriters listen to Democracy in Danger.

**Will Hitchcock** [00:24:24] Yes, we are saving democracy one podcast at a time.

**Siva Vaidhyanathan** [00:24:28] We're doing our best.

**Will Hitchcock** [00:24:37] That's all for today's show. Next time, we'll speak with Stanford University researcher Renee DiResta about the spread of disinformation and its implications for public health.

**Renee DiResta** [00:24:47] The platforms have chosen to try to intervene in health misinformation. And so you are allowed to be an anti vaccine organization provided that your objection to vaccines is related to this idea of government overreach and tyranny.

**Siva Vaidhyanathan** [00:25:02] In the meantime, we want to hear from you. Shoot us a tweet @DinDpodcast that's D-I-N-D podcast, or you can send us an email to UVAMediaLab@virginia.edu, or you can visit our website. It's DinDanger.org to find notes on all of our episodes and links to all of the material we've been reading.

**Will Hitchcock** [00:25:24] Hey everyone, our audience is growing. Thanks to you we've hit thirty thousand listens and counting. Please keep up the support and leave us a review on Apple podcasts or wherever you get the show.

**Siva Vaidhyanathan** [00:25:36] Democracy in Danger is produced by Robert Armegol with help from Jennifer Ludovici, our interns are Denzel Mitchell and Jane Frankel.

**Will Hitchcock** [00:25:45] 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's Deliberative Media Lab. We're distributed by the Virginia Audio Collective, the podcast Network of WTU Radio in Charlottesville, I'm Will Hitchcock.

**Siva Vaidhyanathan** [00:26:02] And I'm Siva Vaidhyanathan. Until next time.