

## Democracy in Danger S2E14 Der Noisy Fringe

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

**Siva Vaidhyanathan** [00:00:06] 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] Over the last four years, America has struggled to keep democracy from collapsing completely. Meanwhile, people in Europe had every reason to worry. After all, you know, the United States had helped reestablish democracy in Europe after World War Two. But all of a sudden it looked like Europe might have to rescue the United States of America. And we all know people who are suddenly searching their family trees to see if they're Irish or Spanish ancestry could maybe help them get an EU passport.

**Will Hitchcock** [00:00:40] Yeah, and through the political storm of the last few years, one European leader in particular stood out for her stalwart defense of democracy, German Chancellor Angela Merkel. Now, Merkel has been called the leader of the free world in recent years, which is obviously a bit of a dig at former President Trump. And last year, a Pew study found she was the most trusted leader in the world. More Germans say they have confidence in their government than just about anybody else in the West, 80 percent as compared with maybe half in the United States. Yet all good things must come to an end, and this September, Angela Merkel will step down -- after the elections there. Making way for a new generation of German leadership.

**Siva Vaidhyanathan** [00:01:21] Yeah, but there are some signs of real concern in Germany. Its pandemic response, which at first was a model for all of Europe, has faltered over the winter. And the country has seen a huge spike. As of April, their death toll was more than 80,000 people, and the forces of political extremism have been on the rise. A far right xenophobic party now leads the political opposition.

**Will Hitchcock** [00:01:47] Well, to get into all these details, we've invited two experts to join us this time to talk about the shifting terrain of German politics, the pandemic in Europe, and the overall health of European democracy. Constanze Stelzenmüller is with us from the Brookings Institution, where she is a senior fellow and the first Fritz Stern Chair on Germany and Transatlantic Relations. Constanze, welcome to Democracy in Danger.

**Constanze Stelzenmüller** [00:02:11] Thank you so much for having me. It's a pleasure to be here.

**Siva Vaidhyanathan** [00:02:14] And we have Thomas Zimmer, a historian at Georgetown University's Center for German and European Studies. His work focuses on global health. He's the author of *Welt ohne Krankheit* -- that's "World Without Disease: A History of International Health Policy from 1940 to 1970." Thomas, welcome to the show as well.

**Thomas Zimmer** [00:02:36] Thank you. Excited to be here.

**Will Hitchcock** [00:02:38] Well, thank you to both of you for joining us today. Constanze, I'd like to start with you. You've just written a very deft and thoughtful portrait of Angela Merkel and her time in office for the journal Foreign Affairs. And you know what comes out in your piece, is just what an amazing story hers is. She started out as a as a as a chemist in East Germany and gradually worked her way up in the conservative Christian Democratic Party in the 1990s after German reunification. And now when she leaves office, she'll be the second longest serving Chancellor after only Helmut Kohl. But what's a puzzle is that while Merkel is enormously respected and Forbes magazine ranked her as the world's most powerful woman, from what you've told us, Germans themselves aren't entirely sure what to make of her, her personality and her technocratic style. So put it in a nutshell for us. What do you see as her enduring legacy for for Germany, for German democracy, for Europe?

**Constanze Stelzenmüller** [00:03:35] Thank you. That's a really great question and a very complicated one. I think that the problem with Merkel's legacy is that it's ambiguous. She has liberalized her Christian Democratic Party, basically kicked it into modernity. People forget just how backwards in some ways the Christian Democratic Party leadership was in 2005 when she took power and how deeply it was mired in a just awful party financing scandal. And there she, I think, really did a great deal to push the Christian Democratic Party into Germany's political middle -- in line, I think with the preferences of much of the CDU base, it has to be said, not all of it. Certainly, there is opposition to this. But, you know, there are conservatives who want gay marriage and who want paternity leave and so on, and who were happy to see these changes being made. The second huge change that she presided over was an extraordinary expansion of German power in Europe, economic and political. Now, the groundwork for that was laid, I think, with these still contested labor market reforms of the previous Schröder government. But let's not forget that in the late 1990s, early 2000s, Germany was still called the sick man of Europe because it had spent a fortune, billions on German reunification. And not enough on economic modernization, it seemed. And finally, that has given her a stature in international leaders meetings, G-7 meetings, G20, and indeed in Europe where she has, while she's made some very controversial decisions, she's also very, very often brokered compromises that nobody else could broker and kept the continent together when it mattered, not least with the eight hundred twenty three billion dollar recovery package that the European Union agreed last summer.

**Will Hitchcock** [00:05:36] You know, let's jump into some of those controversies, because if I'm recalling this right, she she has had some bumps in the road. After all, one would in a 16 year tenure. The bailout during the Greek financial crisis was something that caused a lot of difficulty in intra-European relations. And then there was the decision to move Germany away from nuclear power. Maybe tell us a little bit about how controversial that was inside Germany. It certainly generated a lot of comment. And then perhaps most controversial was her decision to accept refugees from the Syrian war in 2015. I mean, she's a courageous leader and has often, you know, turned against the tide of public opinion, isn't that right?

**Constanze Stelzenmüller** [00:06:14] I would say yes or no. I mean, Merkel is known for being extremely attuned to popular opinion and to very closely following it. And I think one of her strengths is gauging public opinion and then and then jumping ahead of it. And her decision to take Germany out of nuclear power after the Fukushima disaster in Japan in 2011 is a case in point where it was very clear that German public opinion was terrified and that she thought she had to move. The problem with that decision was that it, shall we say politely, it was imperfectly implemented. German energy policy remains, I think,

unstrategic unthought through. We've spent a fortune on renewables but are nowhere near replacing fossil fuels. And as a result, we have been scraping a lot of coal out of German ground. And of course, there is the very controversial German-Russian pipeline, the Nord Stream 2 pipeline. Russia supplies about 40 percent of Germany's gas imports. So much for the energy part of the story. On the handling of the eurozone crisis, which was the follow follow-on of the global financial crisis of 2008 and 2009, there was a huge fight within Germany over how to deal with EU member states who needed bailouts. And I think it's important to remember because Merkel gets a lot of the blame for the anger that was directed at Germany for imposing austerity policies on countries like Greece, that there were significant parts of her own party and her own political base that wanted countries like Greece thrown out of the Eurozone. And some of the Nordic and Baltic states were in total agreement on this. I remember conferences there where people would ask me and say, why don't we just throw the Greeks out? And it was Merkel who said over my dead body. That's, I think, important to keep in mind. And then finally, on the refugee crisis, again, it's important to remember that there was a huge outbreak of support for Merkel saying we can do this. I think that this was a humanitarian decision. It was also responsible statecraft because these refugees had been lining up from the Balkans throughout the EU southwest, up into Austria and the German border. And had Germany closed its borders at the time, that would have created enormous public order issues all the way down to the Balkans and I think would have been seen as irresponsible. That said, people blamed her for creating a pull factor, for wanting to later on to distribute refugees throughout Germany. And then she was blamed for orchestrating with Turkey to keep refugees in Turkey and no longer let them migrate upwards to Europe.

**Siva Vaidhyathan** [00:09:05] Well, that that leads me to a question I'd actually like both of you to address. Because, you know, from this side of the Atlantic, my entire life, looking at Germany, both before 1989 and after 1989, it seemed like this was a country that had dealt with its demons with some pretty strong education and civic engagement to the point where democracy seemed stronger there than just about anywhere in the world, at least in West Germany before 1989, throughout Germany after 1989. Then you have the figure of Merkel who grew up under oppression in East Germany now, you know, ruling the whole country in a way that seems to sort of embody rationality and deliberation and intelligence and, you know, decent governance. And yet now we see the rise of alternative for Germany, a party that seems to oppose everything, not only that Merkel stands for, but everything that postwar, post-Nazi, post 1989 Germany seems to stand for. Should the rest of us be worried? Is this as scary as it seems?

**Constanze Stelzenmüller** [00:10:16] Well, the arrival of more than a million refugees within a short period of time in 2015 gave rise to the mutation of the AFD, which had been a sort of mildly Eurosceptic little party that never made it across the parliamentary threshold of five percent, into this massive, ragingly xenophobic party that ran into the federal legislature in the 2017 elections and became the opposition leader at twelve point six percent of the electoral vote. And, you know, I think you may be overstating the the the excellence of government.

**Siva Vaidhyathan** [00:10:56] I hope so. I hope so.

**Constanze Stelzenmüller** [00:10:59] I think that, I'm curious to see what Thomas has to say to this, but there is a lot of infighting right now about the management of the pandemic, and we'll perhaps discuss that later. But it's also, I think, important to say that the AFD right now has sort of painted itself into a corner. It is massively radicalized and is now under observation by the domestic intelligence service because it has overt connections to

neo-Nazi organizations, identitarians, and the German version of QAnon: The Querdenker. It has, you know, in response to the threat of being surveilled by domestic intelligence, dissolved its right wing figure. But in reality, the exponents, the leaders of that figure are firmly in control and have pushed the so-called moderates who aren't moderates to the side.

**Thomas Zimmer** [00:11:46] So I think if you ask the question, should we be worried? I mean, the answer is always yes, right? But I want to offer a slightly more positive reading of the situation with regards to the AFD. Sure, the establishment of a stable, far right party is concerning. But I think it's important to understand that the support for the AFD, at least for now, seems to have leveled out at something around 10 percent, maybe slightly above 10 percent. The far right has not so far benefited from the pandemic in any way, right? And there are limits to the normalization of far right ideology or the AFD in particular. There has been no cooperation so far by any of the democratic parties with the AFD. And I think that's the question, that's the central question going forward, right? Will the conservatives hold the line? Historically speaking, that's the deciding factor for whether or not democracies fall. Whether or not the sort of the center right, the conservative parties will make common cause with the far right. Yes or no? If the answer remains no, then I think there is reason to be optimistic here.

**Will Hitchcock** [00:12:50] That's a really important point, Thomas. And I think if the United States had a parliamentary system, we would have far more than 10 percent of the very far right in parliament in the United States. But what's interesting is what's happened in the Republican Party, that we would need to go down this rabbit hole, but just what you said, they're the ones who have made common cause with the far right. They've become the far right through a process of gradual radicalization and the conservative gatekeepers gave in. So I think that comparative point is really helpful. Well, Thomas, I want to turn to you and to your expertise on on global health in the context of Germany and Europe. You know, we're thankfully, appear to be, at the tail end of this global pandemic. And regrettably, neither the United States nor Europe did very well in confronting it for different reasons. But their public health policies all revealed certain flaws and weaknesses. Now, you're a historian of of the making of the Post 1945 global public health institutions. You've done work on the World Health Organization. What conclusions have you been able to draw about the response of the West to the pandemic? What has been revealed about our our global health infrastructure? And in particular, have we learned anything about whether democratic governments are better at confronting such global problems versus authoritarian or autocratic governments? Or has everybody struggled in the same way?

**Thomas Zimmer** [00:14:06] I think COVID has revealed how woefully underprepared and most importantly, under financed, the global health infrastructure is. There has been much criticism of the World Health Organization in particular, and it's true that the WHO is badly in need of reform. That is, by the way, a statement that no one outside or inside the organization would truly disagree with. But I think we need to recognize that the WHO has only ever been as effective as its member states and crucially as its wealthiest and most powerful member states have allowed it to be. That starts with the financial resources that have always been dramatically inadequate. Keep in mind that the WHO's budget is less than what some major U.S. hospitals get to work with. And for most of the WHO's history, Western countries have ever actively sought to restrict the organization's work -- for instance, when it threatened to regulate the global production of pharmaceuticals in any way. Or they have simply not cared enough to really get involved and provide the necessary resources on a sustained basis. The West only ever cares about global health when it feels acutely threatened and such notions of acute danger tend to have a fairly

short shelf life. They have not led to sustained efforts by the world's wealthiest nations. I mean, just compare the massive attention for the 2014 Ebola epidemic in West Africa with the fact that the second worst Ebola epidemic in recorded history started in Central Africa in twenty eighteen, and it barely caused the reaction. So for most of its existence, WHO has been desperately scratching and begging for attention and resources. If we really care about establishing a functional World Health Organization as an important piece in the global health puzzle, then it's up to the West, first and foremost, to break out of this cycle of panic and neglect and engage with global health matters in a more sustained way. Now, as to the second part of your question, what have we learned about sort of the ability of democratic governments to respond to a sort of collective action crisis like this? I mean, I think it's important to remember that most highly developed democratic governments have not been able to handle the pandemic very well. Almost no one has, right? But some have done a really good job, right? Although they are certainly the exception. Think of Japan, South Korea, New Zealand, for instance, maybe Australia. Now, of course, there are specific circumstances in each of these cases, right? New Zealand in particular is a small island-nation -- I don't want to downplay these differences. And yet, I do believe it is instructive and very much relevant to our discussion about the dangers to democracy to look at one specific aspect that has distinguished the response in New Zealand, for instance, from that in Germany or the US. In many Western countries, certainly in Germany, the response to the pandemic has often been hampered by the fear of impending backlash. The debate in Germany has basically from the start, focused on the threat of an impending reactionary right wing populist backlash against covid restrictions. We can't enact this or that measure because it will lead to a populist uprising, etc., that sort of thing. That is, of course, a political argument that we know from other areas and one that has often been deployed to delay and hamper progressive policies. Now, crucially, in the case of COVID in Germany, the idea of an impending backlash has never been backed up by empirical evidence. All the polling and survey data we have tells us that a consistent majority of 70 to 80 percent of people either support the public health measures or even think they don't go far enough. So we're looking at a weirdly undemocratic situation. The vast majority of people is on board with reasonable, sensible public health measures, but they're not coming or they're coming too late because we are focusing on a clear minority that objects. And that is where I think the example of New Zealand is instructive. The New Zealand government has portrayed the public health measures as a patriotic effort, as an act of communal solidarity, and has rejected that sort of anticipated backlash logic, instead emphasizing the majority support in the population. And that is interesting to me, not just with COVID. I believe we need to be more skeptical of the backlash politics logic, because it can lead to severely undemocratic outcomes and hamper our ability to tackle collective action problems.

**Siva Vaidhyanathan** [00:18:07] And yet in Europe, like in the United States, we see this sort of cacophony of nonsense that bubbles up occasionally when we have these public discussions about what we might do collectively, right? So anti-vaccine activists or anti-lockdown protesters, they seem to be growing in Europe as well as in North America. And while we don't want to overestimate their power, as you have just said, isn't it concerning that they could even find each other and articulate these messages that basically drive us away from any reasonable deliberation about the proper policy moves in these moments? And that might extend beyond this pandemic. It might extend to all sorts of policies about migration policies, about economic justice. Again, am I committing the exact sin that you just pointed out? Am I overestimating the power of the opposition and perhaps undermining our own ability to think clearly about how we might respond?

**Thomas Zimmer** [00:19:12] Regarding the anti-vaxers and anti-lockdown protests. I mean, first of all, I don't think we should be surprised by any of what we've seen. We've known for a long time now that in Germany, for instance, there's a pretty stable percentage of the population, around 15 percent that has clear far right leanings that is hostile to Germany's democratically elected government and therefore hostile to the state as long as it is led by these democratic forces, right? Now, it is true that the attitude towards lockdown measures or COVID restrictions doesn't match up perfectly under the left right political spectrum -- this isn't just the far right protesting against these restrictions, particularly the antivax movement in Germany has its base in something that you might call a left, leftish alternative political scene. But still as a political project, these protests have been closely associated with the far right. Now, I think two things are crucial. I'd be careful not to characterize this as the rise of right-wing populism, right? Again, we have no empirical indication that the number of people attracted by these protests or the number of people with far-right leanings is growing. It is very stable. This is not the silent majority. It is the noisy fringe. That does not mean we don't have to take the protests seriously, but they are not an expression of the will of the people, no matter how often they claim it is what they represent. Now, secondly, my bigger concern actually is that on the Democratic center is where we see an erosion of trust in the state and not because of authoritarian overreach. And I'm talking about the German case in particular here, but because of the state's inability to muster a response to the pandemic that is commensurate with the challenge. Now, since at least January, every credible expert has warned of a new wave of infections coming because of the rapid spread of virus mutations. And yet in Germany, for months, political authorities have done almost nothing, even until a few weeks ago, publicly excusing their inaction by claiming that, oh, goodness, no one could have seen this coming when absolutely everyone saw it coming. That's what erodes trust. And we see that in polling data. We see that frustration is rising, particularly among those who support restrictions and sensible public health measures, not so much on the fringes of the political spectrum, but in the center. And that actually worries me much more than these sort of 10 to 15 percent with sort of far right leanings.

**Constanze Stelzenmüller** [00:21:26] Thomas is completely right to say that the AFD is plateauing at 10 percent, but it polled much higher in the eastern states. It continually is in second or even in first place with 25 or 26 percent. That suggests political divisions that we do not know yet how they will play out in the national election. Second thing is that, there are still a hard right and German mainstream conservatism that, much like the Uyghurs in Germany in the 1920s, thinks that it can co-opt these forces and direct them and therefore wants to work with them. If you talk to conservatives in the east, there is a much different take on cooperating with the AFD on the local level. And it's a mixture, I think, of a hope of exploitation and fear, which ought to seem familiar to us.

**Will Hitchcock** [00:22:13] Yeah.

**Constanze Stelzenmüller** [00:22:14] Then my next point is that the AFD, while it is plateauing on the national level, you know, seems divided and angry, there is another level on which I think it's actually much more successful than we'd like to think. Which is sort of not in the parliaments or in the streets, but where it is prosecuting cultural warfare through the courts with the help of some quite prominent lawyers and where it is trying to undermine the effectiveness, the legitimacy of the executive with the instrument of parliamentary inquiries. Which is a huge catalogues of questions, which ministries are obligated by law to answer and which just gum up the works. And that's part of the AFD is very deliberate, is disciplined and is organized. And my final point here is that the AFD's simple existence at 10 percent contributes to a fragmentation of the political landscape

which will in the future, I think, make coalition mathematics more complicated. It is relatively unlikely that in the September 26th elections we will have a two way coalition. It's possible that we will because Germans don't like instability and may flock in large numbers to the CDU or to the Greens and make a two way coalition possible. But recent surveys after the sort of circular firing squad leadership selection process of the city has suddenly had the Greens pulling ahead of the CDU by an astounding seven percentage points and the CDU dropping six percentage points to a historic low of twenty one. Remember that Merkel won the 2017 elections at thirty three percent, which was then a historic low for the CDU in the postwar period. So we're we're, in other words, we're in a situation where a variety of coalition variables are suddenly possible that were unimaginable a year ago, four years ago. And there is even a possibility of a coalition, a so-called traffic light coalition, green social Democrats and liberals, that would have the CDU go into opposition. So that also is a result of the existence of the AFD. And again, the the, I think Thomas is exactly right in saying that what it ought to concern us much more is the weakness of the institutions of representative democracy, the processes, and the mediating institutions like the parties. I think we have to ask ourselves, you know, what are we doing to help make these institutions more resilient so that their vulnerabilities can't be exploited by domestic actors like the AFD or external actors like purveyors of disinformation from the Kremlin or from Beijing?

**Will Hitchcock** [00:24:59] That's very interesting. And I wonder, Constanze, if you have a sense that any similar patterns that you just described in Germany with the AFD may be plateauing in terms of its vote getting, but actually nonetheless still having a dramatic influence on the functioning of government and the erosion of democratic institutions, is that pattern playing out in Europe more broadly? And I asked that because I just wanted you to put on your your continental European analyst hat, which I hope you have handy, and just to reflect for a moment on, you know, the fate of European democracies in the last, say, two decades or really the last three decades since the end of the Cold War, when we were just breathless with optimism about Europe being united and free. But it's been a pretty rough couple of decades and we've seen some fairly significant backsliding, to say the least. If, you know, from Russia to Hungary, the Balkans, to say nothing of Turkey. Are these patterns playing out elsewhere? Is democracy wobbling a little bit or is this just the price of doing business in a vibrant, you know, pluralistic society?

**Constanze Stelzenmüller** [00:26:04] Well, you know, I I again my answer to this, I'm afraid, is yes and no. On the one hand, we thought in the years between 2015 and, say, 2019, that there might be a sort of populist wave that would overwhelm European democracies. And it was clear that this populist wave was being supported by the sort of ethno-nationalist components of the Trump administration, people like Stephen Bannon and Stephen Miller, for example. And that wave seems to have broken fairly decisively. Even Matteo Salvini in Italy, who I think saw himself as a popular Tribune in the mold of sort of early, earlier Roman Tribunes, is now much more careful in what he says in public. Likewise, the Hungarians and the highly conservative Polish government have no intention of leaving the European Union. They would like to change it, but they have no intention of leaving it. On the other hand, the French go to the polls next spring and Macron will be standing for reelection, we think. It's not clear whether he will have challenges from his own rank, he might very well. But his most important challenger, Marie Le Pen, the head of the Rassemblement is polling neck-to-neck or ahead of him and has made very clear her intention of taking France out of the European Union. So I think this question is more usefully asked when you look at the systems, the domestic governance orders of Europe and Germany and France and the UK and elsewhere, and ask do they possess the necessary resilience and consent of the governed to survive in an age of openness,

deepening interdependence and a sort of social media platforms which provide for a, if you will, a daily plebiscite on how governments are doing? A huge amount of noise, as Thomas just said, which for governments can be quite threatening and makes it extremely difficult to separate out the noise from what voters actually think and want.

**Siva Vaidhyanathan** [00:28:09] Well, Thomas, what do you think about this notion? Is Germany an outlier among all of these European countries that are seeing the real surge of anti-democratic, far-right authoritarian movements like Hungary? And how would you place Germany's current state and recent history in this larger context of the fate of the European Union? You know, is there more to this story?

**Thomas Zimmer** [00:28:34] I mean, my flip answer to this is Europe is a very diverse country. You know, I'm not sure that Europe is the right lens through which to approach many of these questions, right? It seems to me that the situation of democracy in Germany or in northern Europe is very different from parts of Eastern Europe, very different from the situation in France. And I fully agree with everything Constanze just laid out. I think in Germany specifically, right now, there's not any indication of democracy being on the brink of immediate collapse. But I also don't think that's necessarily indicative of the situation elsewhere in Europe. I think if I can add a more of a big picture contextualizing thought, maybe, I think we should, we should maybe generally be more skeptical about this well-established story of democracy's triumph in the aftermath of the Cold War and then its subsequent plunge into crisis, because that's, I think, that's that's how we're looking at these things right now, right?

**Will Hitchcock** [00:29:28] I wrote a whole book on that topic, and you're telling me, you're telling me I'm totally wrong.

[00:29:31] No, no, no, but I.

[00:29:33] I probably am, by the way.

**Thomas Zimmer** [00:29:34] No, but I mean, look, maybe the reality in the 90s and early 2000s was never quite as triumphant as contemporary observers, certainly in the EU wanted to believe and wanted us to believe, right? And maybe the idea of an unqualified triumph shouldn't be the benchmark by which we measure everything that's happened since. And on the flip side, maybe there is also a glass half full reading of our current situation, right? In many ways, what we're describing as a crisis of democracy is sparked by a reactionary backlash against the fact that our societies have, in fact, or many of our societies have in fact become more liberal, more pluralistic, more multiracial. That doesn't mean that we're on an undeniable path towards ever more democracy. Not at all. This is an acutely dangerous situation, but I think it does change the perspective a little bit if we're acknowledging that anti-democratic reactionary forces are radicalizing because they feel their backs against the wall, because the danger they perceive is actually liberal democracy succeeding, not failing.

**Will Hitchcock** [00:30:33] Let me let me end with one question for both of you. I just, I am quite curious about how you guys think comparatively as transatlantic scholars of the parallel American democratic experience and the German Democratic experience. And I ask this because, of course, the first place that most nonacademic commentators went when Trump got into office was, are we poised on the edge of the abyss like the Weimar Republic? Is Trump, Mussolini or somebody worse? Are these kinds of comparisons

obscuring really what's going on? Or do you find it helpful to think and to talk to Americans about Germany's experience in struggling with democracy?

**Thomas Zimmer** [00:31:11] If I can maybe jump in there. I mean, the most pointed version of these comparisons to Europe's past to, especially to Europe's interwar period, is the question, is Donald Trump a fascist? Now, I'm generally ambivalent about the fascism question, although I do believe there are many good reasons to see Trumpism as a specifically American twenty first century version of fascism. However, I think the comparison to Europe's interwar period are sometimes invoked for problematic reasons. Sometimes people use the term fascism to mark Donald Trump as an aberration in American history. Something un-American, something so foreign that you have to use terms and concepts from Europe's past to describe it. I see never-Trumpers do that. I see people do that who favor a sort of centrist realignment in American politics. But using these comparisons and these terms in this way, I think is highly misleading. Trumpism is not an aberration. As a matter of fact, it is deeply rooted in longstanding American traditions and continuities of racism, of white nationalism, white nationalist Christianity, of nativism. It is fueled by the same energies and anxieties that have shaped the American project from the beginning. His support from conservatives is based on long standing, anti-democratic impulses on the American right. And I mean a white reactionary backlash against the first black president is in a way much closer to the historical norm in this country than it is an aberration. So we should make sure that comparisons to Europe, comparisons to Europe's past, don't obscure that fundamental fact. Now, finally, all that does not mean that I'm opposed to a comparative transnational perspective on the current crisis or on the dangers to democracy. As a matter of fact, I believe that what we are witnessing is a very similar struggle in all Western democracies. The struggle over whether or not it is possible to establish a stable, truly multiracial, truly pluralistic democracy, such a truly multiracial, pluralistic democracy has never been achieved anywhere. It would be a world historic first. There have been and there are and have been several stable liberal democracies. But no matter where you look, either have these stable liberal democracies been culturally and ethnically homogeneous to begin with, think Sweden, or there has always been a pretty clearly defined ruling group, or *Herrenvolk*, if you if you want to call it that. A multiracial, pluralistic democracy in which an individual's status was not determined to a significant degree by race, gender or religion; I don't think that's ever been achieved anywhere in this perspective. The U.S. example becomes the most advanced, most acute test case. Will it become a stable, multiracial, pluralistic democracy or remain a white Christian nation defined by white Christianity in which white Christians dominate socially, politically and culturally? I think it's an open question. It is one of enormous significance for all of us, for all democracies around the world, which is why I think the stakes right now are enormously high.

**Will Hitchcock** [00:34:07] Constanze, would you like to to wrap up with any follow on thoughts?

**Constanze Stelzenmüller** [00:34:12] I thought that Thomas put that extremely well. I will add for you and perhaps for readers, there is a very interesting piece by Ross Douthat in The New York Times a couple of weeks ago called "'Babylon Berlin,' Babylon, America?," where he compared the Weimar Republic to current America and suggested that the future of the American hard-right was, as he said, radicalization seems more likely to be a suicide weapon. A way for a weakened movement to instigate a period of crisis, maybe, but one that would probably only hastened its marginalization and defeat. To which I would say your word and God's ear, Ross. I think the jury is still out on this one. But I completely agree with Thomas that the stakes here are enormous and they concern us all because, of

course, European societies, including our own German society, are all also becoming multiethnic, multiracial, multireligious. And so we have an interest in you getting this right and we will be cheering you on if you do.

**Will Hitchcock** [00:35:17] Well, Constanze, Thomas, thank you so much for joining us today on Democracy in Danger.

**Thomas Zimmer** [00:35:22] Thank you.

**Constanze Stelzenmüller** [00:35:23] You're very welcome, it was a great pleasure.

**Will Hitchcock** [00:35:31] That was Constanze Stelzenmüller, a senior fellow in foreign policy at the Brookings Institution, where she holds the Fritze Stern Chair on Germany and Transatlantic Relations.

**Siva Vaidhyanathan** [00:35:41] We were also joined by Thomas Zimmer, a visiting professor of history at Georgetown University, where he teaches on transatlantic and international history in the 20th century.

**Will Hitchcock** [00:35:51] Democracy in Danger is part of the Democracy Group Podcast Network. Visit [DemocracyGroup.org](http://DemocracyGroup.org) to find all our sister shows. We'll be right back after this message from our friends.

**Advertisement** [00:36:06] Why does democracy matter? It's the question host Abe Goldberg and Carah Ong Whaley of the James Madison Center for Civic Engagement have been educating listeners like you with a Democracy Matters podcast. Going beyond the headlines, each episode features an in-depth conversation with guests like John Dickerson, Julia Azari, and Ethan Zuckerman to address public issues and cultivate a just and inclusive democracy. To hear the expertise of those working to strengthen our democracy, search Democracy Matters in your podcast app and subscribe.

**Siva Vaidhyanathan** [00:36:45] Will, the last time I was in Berlin was spring of 2017. I had, I had rented a bike, you know, and I was having a lovely day zooming around Berlin. And I rode through Brandenburg Gate, and I encountered about a dozen rather large men dressed in black bearing Holocaust denial signs and waving flags that were black and red, not quite bearing swastikas because, of course, swastikas are not allowed in Germany anymore. Most Berliners were walking by not paying any attention to these men. They had probably seen demonstrations like this in the past and thought little about them. But as an American who had always assumed that Germany had confronted its past effectively and bottled up its far right inclinations with some stark honesty, I remember being shocked. I couldn't help but think this was a warning sign. Now, by the summer of 2017, we saw worse demonstrations and actual violence right here in Charlottesville, in our own town. So 2017 haunts me. And I approached these issues about the fate of democracy, whether it's in Germany or the United States or Brazil with this in my mind. Now, am I overemphasizing the effect of that experience? Well, our guests helped us today. They they helped us understand that at least in Germany, the far right had limited support, limited popularity, and it's not really growing.

**Will Hitchcock** [00:38:28] Yeah, Thomas and Constanze both invoked the Weimar Republic, that ill fated, unloved democracy that existed in Germany from 1918 until 1933. And the thesis basically is, look, Weimar was a troubled but functioning, highly functioning multiparty democracy. But the problem was there were a number of small parties on the

far right and a few large ones on the nationalist ethnic right that were lingering, that were waiting, that were there. Should democracy suddenly prove that it couldn't work anymore. And boom, 1930 comes along. The global economic crisis hits. And for the first time ever, the Nazi party starts winning huge numbers of votes in a democratic system. Now, in the United States and around the world, we've also just gone through a global economic meltdown of epic proportions. We also had a global pandemic that democracies and authoritarian countries didn't do a very good job of responding to. And yet we have not seen a corresponding surge of far right attitudes. We had a lot of far right politics in this country before the global economic meltdown. But in 2020, the pendulum swung the other direction in the United States. So I think the sense of doom that is conjured up by thinking about our problems through the lens of Germany's history might actually serve to sort of obscure the distinctiveness of our own time. What we're facing now is traditional conservative parties being taken over by right wing ideas that once would have been thought completely unpalatable and very alarming. You know, France is a good example where President Macron is trying to take the thunder away from the far right, the national. But in the process, he's opening up his party to some unpalatable ideas. And the result could be calamitous for Europe if the European Union starts to fall apart under the pressure of these parties that are trying to trim their sails to adopt right wing ideas.

**Siva Vaidhyathan** [00:40:27] I mean, it's remarkable how much we depend on conservatives and conservative political parties to hold the wall against far right extreme nationalist, nativist movements. And in a multiparty state like Germany, there's a visible resistance, right? Where the Christian Democrats are explicitly unwilling to enter into coalitions or even to go along with the AfD on just about anything. We see the same thing in France. And, you know, getting back to France, this notion that Macron can tack right rather comfortably, can adopt nativist policies, anti-Muslim policies, knowing that he will face no pushback from the left because the left barely exists. This is, this is one reason I worry much more about the future of France than I do the future of Germany. But let's remember, we've seen things change rather quickly and rather radically in Hungary and in Poland as well. And they could switch at any moment again in Italy,

**Will Hitchcock** [00:41:32] You know, we talk a lot about the threat of the far right to democratic institutions in Latin America, the United States, Europe, and we should focus on those threats and challenges. But we also have to ask ourselves, what are the parties that favor democracy doing and saying? What is the center left doing? Are they mobilizing a large and powerful political coalition? What ideas and values have they put out into the public sphere that are inspiring young people, people of color, minorities? And is that bid to bring the political dialog away from a sense of doom and towards a sense of possibility and a vision of the future that is democratic and and tolerant? Is that language working? Is it succeeding? And I think we have to hold the left accountable. If it cannot mobilize a big coalition to sustain democracy, then we've really got a problem.

**Siva Vaidhyathan** [00:42:35] That's all we have for you this time on Democracy in Danger. Over the next couple of weeks, we'll look farther east and consider the social movements and unrest in Russia and in Ukraine.

**Serhii Plokhii** [00:42:47] And in 2004, there was attempt actually to reverse the democratic course of the development of Ukraine, to steal the elections, to impose elements of authoritarian regime. And the Ukrainians said no.

**Will Hitchcock** [00:43:01] In the meantime, let us know what you think of this episode. Have you spent any time in Germany? Are you going to miss Angela Merkel's dry wit? We want to hear from you. Shoot us a tweet, @dindpodcast. That's dind-podcast.

**Will Hitchcock** [00:43:14] And you can visit our Web page, DinDanger.org. Please also subscribe to this show on your favorite audio player and do your part to save democracy. Tell your friends about this show. Share it on social media.

**Will Hitchcock** [00:43:29] Democracy in Danger is produced by Robert Armengol with help from Jennifer Ludovici. Our interns are Denzel Mitchell and Jane Frankel.

**Will Hitchcock** [00:43:37] 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 of WTJU Radio in Charlottesville. I'm Siva Vaidhyanathan

**Will Hitchcock** [00:43:56] And I'm Will Hitchcock, until next time.