

Democracy in Danger S2 E18: WTF, GOP?

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. Today on the show, it's our season two finale. And it's a little episode we're affectionately calling "WTF, GOP."

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:00:20] Yeah, yeah. You know, Will, when we started this project a year ago, we made it a point. This was not going to be a show about Democrats in danger. We weren't alarmed by run of the mill conservatism or the idea of, you know, Republicans winning elections. What did alarm us were the threats to self governance and the rule of law. We were worried, we are worried, about autocracy creeping in all over the world, even, and especially, in the United States.

Will Hitchcock [00:00:52] That's right, Siva. But the problem is we can't deny that one of the two major political parties in this country has come to epitomize this anti-democratic moment. I mean, let's face it, Republicans are committed to former President Trump, who still refuses to accept the loss of 2020. Few are willing to openly debunk Trump's baseless claims of election fraud. I mean, even fewer acknowledge his role in encouraging the January sixth riot in Washington.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:01:19] Right, right, right.

Will Hitchcock [00:01:20] And Republicans are busy dismantling voting rights in states across the union. And they're hoping, I guess, to cling to power by picking voters where the voters aren't picking them.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:01:30] Yeah, yeah. You know, according to the Brennan Center at New York University, this year alone, legislators in more than a dozen states have passed 22 laws restricting access to the polls.

Will Hitchcock [00:01:44] Yeah, and as our listeners know, I like to put things in historical context. And so I'm wondering, where does this all come from? You know, how did these ideas gain traction in the first place? You know, when did this shift to the conspiratorial and truth doubting Right really take place? And that was one reason that we caught up recently with our friend Nicole Hemmer, the very first guest we had on this show.

Nicole Hemmer [00:02:08] The conservative movement since World War Two, had this thread running through it of anti-democratic politics.

Will Hitchcock [00:02:15] Now, Niki's a columnist, the host and producer of her own various podcasts. She's a researcher at Columbia University and also a historian of the conservative media and the American Right. And one of the things she told us is you have to distinguish conservative extremism from the Republican Party -- they're not the same thing. Even if their paths started to get tangled up a little bit in the 20th century as Nikki said, the illiberal strain of conservatism was alive and well as far back as the days of President Eisenhower, although it remained mostly on the margins in right leaning intellectual circles.

Nicole Hemmer [00:02:52] For instance, William F. Buckley Jr. in 1957 writes a piece in National Review where he argues that in the South, the minority should rule. That democracy doesn't work there because, as he put it, white people were the superior race. And if they weren't superior in numbers, well, they should rule anyway.

William F. Buckley Jr. [00:03:14] I think actually what is wrong in Mississippi, sir, is not that not enough Negroes are voting, but the too many white people are voting.

Will Hitchcock [00:03:23] That's Buckley a few years after writing, quote, "Why the South Must Prevail." Squaring off in a famous debate with the writer James Baldwin. Buckley was answering a question about whether more black Southerners should be allowed to vote.

William F. Buckley Jr. [00:03:37] Not that they vote, but that they be prepared to vote. What are we going to do with Negroes?

Will Hitchcock [00:03:41] He made no effort to hide the elitism and the racism at the core of his beliefs.

William F. Buckley Jr. [00:03:46] It is much more complicated than simply the question of giving them the vote. If I were myself a constituent of the community of Mississippi at this moment, what I would do is vote to lift the standards of the vote so as to disqualify sixty five percent of the white people who are presently voting. Not, not simply....

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:04:07] As it happens, Buckley's own perspective on the race problem, as they said in those days, would actually come to soften over time. At the same time, those anti-democratic ideals he espoused grew in the Republican mainstream. They helped the GOP peel off Dixiecrats who were dissatisfied with their own party's support of civil rights.

Larry Sabato [00:04:33] And let's not forget about Goldwater.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:04:35] This is another good friend of ours, Larry Sabato, who joined us in that conversation with Niki. Larry is a political scientist and pollster here at the University of Virginia. And he reminded us that Barry Goldwater, the Arizona senator, took up the far-right cause and made it palatable.

Barry Goldwater [00:04:55] That extremism, in the defense of liberty, is no vice.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:05:03] He convinced the GOP to let him carry the flag in the 1964 presidential contest against Lyndon Johnson.

Barry Goldwater [00:05:10] Moderation, in the pursuit of justice, is no virtue.

Larry Sabato [00:05:17] We got a glimpse of the future in 1964, when the right wing took over the Republican Party in nominating Goldwater and then in experiencing a massive defeat. I think that was a turning point for some Republicans in losing faith in democracy and starting to look at other alternatives.

Will Hitchcock [00:05:41] Now, it would take a long time for this hostility to pluralism and democracy, to build up in the GOP. After all, as Nicky recalled, Ronald Reagan swept into office with mass appeal in the early 1980s.

Ronald Reagan [00:05:55] The heart of America is strong.

Nicole Hemmer [00:05:57] You had this moment of kind of Republican, democratic triumphalism, right? He was winning in these huge majorities, it was the height of the Cold War, and democracy was the watchword for foreign policy.

Ronald Reagan [00:06:11] People everywhere, hunger for peace and a better life. The tide of the future is a freedom tide, and our struggle for democracy cannot and will not be denied.

Nicole Hemmer [00:06:22] And yet, by the 1990s, as the Cold War ends, as Reagan's legacy begins to fade, that Democratic pessimism starts to reemerge in the party and it just grows stronger over the next 30 years.

Larry Sabato [00:06:39] But I am not going to absolve Donald Trump of having super-charged this war against democracy.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:06:50] Again, Larry Sabato.

Larry Sabato [00:06:51] He is the key factor here. I think Donald Trump opened the door to the most extreme parts of the Republican Party. He legitimized them. He encouraged them to move off the democracy track almost entirely. He gave them hope. And this occurred as early as 2016.

Donald Trump [00:07:14] And I will totally accept the result of this great and historic presidential election, if I win.

Larry Sabato [00:07:28] 2020 wasn't unique. He was attacking the election process when he won. That was the tip off to what was going to happen when he lost.

Will Hitchcock [00:07:42] Well, we now know what would happen when he lost. From last November through January, Trump and his lawyers tried to overturn Joe Biden's victory. And when those efforts failed, Donald J. Trump all but pleaded for an insurrection at the US Capitol.

Donald Trump [00:07:57] We're going to walk down to the Capitol.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:08:01] But you know, Will, one of the more disturbing things about this episode in American politics has been the almost puritanical purging of the GOP's ranks of anyone who dares to question Donald Trump's lies. I mean, we just saw how Congresswoman Liz Cheney of Wyoming, an extreme conservative, was pushed out of her leadership role in the US House after vocally criticizing the former president.

Will Hitchcock [00:08:30] Oh, yeah. The blacklist even includes elder statesman, the former presidential nominee, Mitt Romney, who voted to impeach Trump, and the late Senator John McCain. Larry Sabato told us that as many as 30 state chapters of the Republican Party have been taken over by Trumpism. And as Niki Hemmer put it, this is where the history has landed us.

Nicole Hemmer [00:08:50] One of the qualifications now for being a Republican is that you have to fully embrace Donald Trump and all of his assorted conspiracies. And that

doesn't leave any space for an embrace of democracy because Trump so thoroughly rejects it. I do think that there's something deeper there than just Donald Trump, but Donald Trump then metastasized it and made it not just space in the Republican Party to be anti-democratic, but making it necessary as a condition of membership.

Will Hitchcock [00:09:26] We're going to come back to that conversation with Larry and Nikki in just a few minutes, but first, we wanted to check in with one of those Republicans who has gone out on a limb to reject Trump's cult of personality. Barbara, are you there?

Barbara Comstock [00:09:40] I am here, good to be with you.

Will Hitchcock [00:09:43] Barbara, could you just tell our listeners who you are?

Barbara Comstock [00:09:45] I am Barbara Comstock. I am a former congresswoman who served in Virginia's 10th District. Before that, I was in the Virginia State House for five years and I was previously on Capitol Hill for 10 years, working for my predecessor, Congressman Frank Wolf. And during the 90s, I was a chief counsel on the Government Reform Committee, where we did many Clinton investigations. So I have been a Republican for a lot longer than Donald Trump.

Will Hitchcock [00:10:13] Well, Barbara, you wrote recently a really striking op-ed, didn't pull any punches -- it appeared in The New York Times last week. And you called Donald Trump, quote, "the patron saint of sore losers." You call in that article, you call on your fellow Republicans to support a full investigation of the events of January sixth. And I just want to hear you talk a little bit about why you feel that investigation is so important. We know there are many other investigations, especially the federal criminal investigations that are going on. But you still feel that a congressional inquiry would do some good for the country and perhaps it would do some good for the Republican Party, is that right?

Barbara Comstock [00:10:54] Yes, in fact, you know, even though you certainly see many Republicans want to move on and say, let's move on from January sixth. But the problem is Donald Trump is not moving on from November 3rd. And now you have this movement, which Steve Bannon, the guy who was indicted and then pardoned by Donald Trump, calls the November 3rd movement -- where they are going to demand that Republicans have to accept the big lie, that there was enough fraud in elections, that it would have overturned numerous states and they are insisting upon that type of fealty. And so it's really a deranged dynamic created here, which is why I said, you know, he's a dangerous but also diminished man. And I do think Donald Trump is waning in his overall popularity. I pointed out that sixty six percent of the country does not want him to run again, and that includes 30 percent of Republicans. So I think it's time to turn the page and move on. But we need to have an investigation just like we needed one, whether it was Benghazi or, you know, the different investigations. The 9/11 Commission is obviously the biggest, what this was modeled on. And I worked with our Capitol Police, I worked on a committee that worked with them, and I know they are hurting. And this is something they very much want. And I think we owe it to them, but also to the country and to history.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:12:24] Well, it's clear now that the Republican leadership does not want to investigate anything about the Trump era, whether it was January 6th or the recent announcement that the Justice Department had been rifling through Democrats' phone records. And I'm wondering, does this kind of obstruction of fact-finding make you feel like there's no place left in the Republican Party for you or for a sense of accountability?

Barbara Comstock [00:12:52] No, because I think that's why I'm working with Adam Kinzinger, with Liz Cheney, with Mitt Romney, people like Ben Sasse, who I think are more of the future of the party. Bill Cassidy from Louisiana, I think is very courageous on saying this. And what he pointed out, he said, listen, there's going to be an investigation either way, why not have it be something that's trusted and bipartisan? But I don't understand why Democrats haven't already started doing this. They should just turn around and get phone records from Donald Trump, from Trump Junior, from Ivanka, from Mark Meadows, from all the people who were involved in this lead up to January 6th and get the texts and the emails organizing this event. And that will tell the story. I would have been sending out subpoenas for those on January 7th if I was in my previous role as chief counsel on the Government Reform Committee.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:13:46] So are you confident that there is enough growing strength in the Republican Party to put forth that culture of accountability?

Barbara Comstock [00:13:55] Well, I think the Democrats are going to have to get out there and do it. They're all outraged now about their own phone records. I wish they would be more outraged about the Capitol Police who were beaten. You know, we're a 50-50 country. So whichever party is in power, the best thing to do is to let's find those six things that 60 percent of Americans agree on and work together and get those things done and don't try and force things that don't have the support of a large majority of Americans, because that's what kind of causes a lot of this, you know, outrage politics. Our speaker was, he did not, he would not let the far right wing really try and push things or drag it over someplace where he knew the state wasn't at. And I think we need to get back to governing that way. And that's why I'm happy people like Susan Collins are there and Lisa Murkowski, people I work to get elected, and Mitt Romney. And now you look at the Gang of 10 who are trying to get an infrastructure bill done. That's where we need to focus our efforts. People who actually want, who don't want to just be on TV and be Kardashians and you have that on the left and the right. People are never going to pass bills.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:15:14] So, Barbara, if I may, I'd like to talk a bit about your time in the house, right? You won your House seat in Virginia's 10th Congressional District in 2014 after Representative Wolf retired and you held onto that seat until the 2018 midterms, until the so-called blue wave of that year. So what happened in America that year? What happened in your district that ultimately took you out of the house?

Barbara Comstock [00:15:42] Well, I had, as I mentioned, since I had worked with Congressman Wolf, have lived here for 30 years. I knew this area well. I mean, it was really a blue-purple area both in my state House district and in Congress. So when I ran in 2014, it was a swing seat and I won by 16 points because I got the endorsement of federal employees, I knew the district. Now in 16 when Donald Trump was on the ticket, I, I was actually co-chair for Marco Rubio. I had some choice words throughout the campaign for Donald Trump and had not endorsed him at all. And when the Access Hollywood tape came out, I said I'm out, not supporting him. And then I did win by six points that year while Donald Trump lost my district by 12 points. And then in 18, obviously, after the reality of Donald Trump came into office and was regularly attacking people in my district as the swamp and sort of all the ugliness -- I have a very diverse district, which is, I think, what the country will look like in the future. I enjoyed working in a diverse district, but it obviously reacted very strongly against Donald Trump. And when, when a leader, whether it's Obama or Trump, try and pull it far away from that, I think the country responds.

Will Hitchcock [00:17:04] Barbara, as a, as a Republican congresswoman from Northern Virginia, you were both critical of Donald Trump when he ran for president and indeed, while he was in office. On the other hand, you did vote to support his agenda pretty consistently, I think 98 percent support for the president. How much did that have to do with the way your district flipped? Do they turn against Trump or maybe did they think that you were too closely aligned with him?

Barbara Comstock [00:17:29] Well, I think those numbers were always sort of misguided in the sense that the centrist Republicans had higher numbers because it wasn't a Trump agenda, it was the Republican Congress passing bills that then Trump signed. So bills like keeping the government open that the Freedom Caucus opposed, I supported. So a lot of the Trump so-called agenda that people didn't like were the things that he said, the things that didn't pass, the things that didn't get anywhere. But it was also the, 2018 was a rejection of him personally, which I think is why you saw in the swing districts in the suburban districts, we were kind of wiped out in 2018.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:18:12] I think I think we we all agree that Donald Trump is a different kind of politician, almost an anti-ideologue. He's not a classic American conservative, yet he is his explicitly anti-democratic, small D, and, and so but now we have a situation where the Republican Party is his, right? I mean, he is the cult figure. So, so I'm wondering like what is the prospect for recovery, for making the Republican Party of Ronald Reagan's party again, or for that matter, Barbara Comstock's party again and not Donald Trump's party? You know, have the values of the party so warped under Donald Trump that it is un-saveable?

Barbara Comstock [00:18:57] No, I think, I think, you know, things can turn around fairly quickly. And I look at things like the CPAC, the conservative conference that they had back in February or March where they did a poll about who they wanted to be the nominee in 2024. Now, mind you, this was Trump's own pollster at his basically family gathering because it was a very Trump -- they had a golden Trump statues there. So it was a very Trump-friendly audience. And he only got fifty five percent of the vote. Now, if you can imagine, if you have a family gathering and say, hey, do you guys like me? And only fifty five percent say, yes, you've got a pretty big problem. So I think even those who maybe liked him or liked his policies realize he's not the future.

Will Hitchcock [00:19:43] Well, Barbara Comstock, thank you so much for joining us today.

Barbara Comstock [00:19:47] Good to be with you.

Will Hitchcock [00:19:53] That was Barbara Comstock, former congresswoman of Virginia and now a senior advisor at the Memphis-based lobbying firm, Baker Donelson.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:20:07] Will, you know, the former congresswoman exemplified the transition that Larry and Niki discussed when we talked to them about the the historical process, right? The radicalization of the Republican Party, right? Barbara Comstock is a classical Republican. She's also really optimistic. She seems to think that she and the handful of people in power who think like she does and stand up to Donald Trump are the future of the party. And I think, you know, we really have to face the fact that classic Republicans are few in number and almost completely out of power.

Will Hitchcock [00:20:47] We'll Siva, thinking back to that conversation we had with Nikki and Larry, I have to say they were a lot less optimistic than Barbara about the prospects for the Republican Party. So why don't we play the rest of it? And let's pick up where you are asking Larry about how Trump first managed to defeat a really big field of Republican presidential contenders.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:21:07] Larry, when you look at the process of selecting a Republican nominee in 2016, what do you see? How was 2016 so different? Why didn't we have you know, why didn't we have Marco Rubio as the standard bearer of the Republican Party in 2016?

Larry Sabato [00:21:23] Partly circumstance and accident. There were 17 Republican candidates, the highest number ever in the modern period, actually, for either party -- Democrats exceeded in 2020. And because the vote was split so many different ways, Donald Trump, during the competitive part of the primaries and caucuses, only accumulated thirty eight percent of the vote. Now, thirty eight percent is a lot of votes, and it's incredible to think he got that many votes. But, but that means sixty two percent of Republicans didn't buy in to Trump's approach, didn't like his flouting of the rules. And yet, because we didn't have a rank choice voting, for example -- ranked choice voting is not perfect, there are lots of problems with it -- but it actually probably would have prevented Donald Trump from becoming the Republican nominee. So that's why I say part of it was happenstance, that 17 Republicans decided, mainly because Obama had been in for eight years, and the recent American tradition is that we change parties every eight years. And they smelled the presidency correctly, as it turned out, but that enabled Donald Trump to get the nomination. This is really concerning because they've gotten stronger and stronger and these factions now dominate in many of our key states, even ones that lean Democratic, because of gerrymandering, they run the state legislatures.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:22:50] Right.

Will Hitchcock [00:22:52] Niki, I wonder if we're not kind of reverting back to our true selves as a country. I would hate to think of it this way, but let's remember, the country started as a slave owning republic, even after the civil war perpetuated Jim Crow for a century, we denied women the right to vote for 150 years after the founding of the country, the Constitution doesn't even mention democracy. I mean, we haven't been a democracy in our history really until the 1960s. So a relatively short period of our national history has been really fully-functioning democracy. Are we reverting to the norm with Trump and with our current crises? Do you think we have the capacity to kind of reach escape velocity and continue to perfect this democracy?

Nicole Hemmer [00:23:35] Yeah, I mean, there's a lot of reason to be pessimistic. I mean, we've lived through periods of Democratic contraction or backsliding before. It is definitely the case that America, I'm not even sure after 1965, has fully embodied the kind of liberal democracy that we imagine. And so I would say that I feel hopeful in the sense that there is a real emphasis right now on democracy. One of the things that you see in Joe Biden's speeches is that he is very committed to putting democracy and a debate about democracy at the center of his presidency. So in his inauguration speech, he used the word democracy more than any other presidential inauguration in history. He recently gave the speech on Memorial Day where he laid out what he saw as an ideal democracy in the United States. He talked about the infrastructure of democracy -- because Joe Biden loves infrastructure. So I feel hope in the sense that that kind of almost theoretical or philosophical talk about democracy coming from the president, suggests that there is

some space for us to tackle a big question like that. All that hope now released, let me say that I feel super pessimistic about us getting there any time soon. Because there is this real moment of Democratic retrenchment that we're seeing at the state-level. There's much more danger ahead, I think, than hope, but I think that we have to hold on to those places where people are willing to be imaginative when they think about what's next. And I think that gets to your question. Democracy in the United States has always been imperfectly practiced. And that means that we should allow ourselves to imagine more capaciously what it might look like. Because the older models never really functioned as a purely liberal democracy in a multiracial society dedicated to justice and equality.

Will Hitchcock [00:25:44] Larry and Niki, both of you, let me just follow up with a quick question. Do you think there is an agenda of the Republican Party now, a policy agenda that is bigger than Donald Trump? I mean, let's say they take the house again in 2022, as many people predict. What is it that Republicans want? What would they like to accomplish? Or is that now just a naive question?

Nicole Hemmer [00:26:03] I don't think it's a naive question, but I do think it's a difficult one to answer. Remember that in the 2020 election, when the Republican Party had a chance to outline its platform, it passed a platform that was basically like: "Whatever Donald Trump says." And that's the way that it's holding its coalition together right now. There certainly are things like continuing to try to lower taxes where they can come together as a party, but as a sort of vision for the country that an agenda or a platform represents, that was upended by the Trump presidency and they haven't figured out a way to knit it back together. So now it is a party that is held together as much by Donald Trump and by affective claims than it is by public policy.

Will Hitchcock [00:26:53] Larry, you saw that Paul Ryan speech recently in which he kind of tried to say: "Hey, Reagan Republicanism, that's where we should be going." Is there still an appetite in the Republican Party for that or does that feel like kind of lukewarm oatmeal to to the Trump Republicans?

Larry Sabato [00:27:09] There is absolutely an appetite for that -- among 25 to 30 percent of the Republican rank and file. Now the other 70 to 75 percent, good luck trying to convince them. They have been weaned away from, I wouldn't even call, I can't say moderate conservative Reaganism because it wasn't moderate conservatives, but they've been weaned away from that and they have had rich red meat, bloody red meat since Donald Trump came down those escalator stairs and started talking about immigration and the other issues that he based his 2016 campaign on. They're not moving and the Republican Party has been shrinking -- the base of it. The moderate, I would call the moderate, I say moderate conservative to mainstream conservative Republicans have been moving away from the Republican Party entirely. So it's easier for a Trump-like character or Trump himself to win the presidential nomination the next time.

Will Hitchcock [00:28:11] Larry, I got a shout out to your Crystal Ball moniker. You are known for forecasting, but based on data, let me just throw this out there and see what you think. If Donald Trump just suddenly, you know, disappeared, vanished in a puff of smoke, what would the Republican Party do? Where would it fall back to? Is Trumpism -- kind of you know, as you said, this red meat of nativism and immigration and so on -- is Trumpism now hardwired into the GOP? Can it, can it replicate itself? Can it sustain itself? I know there are many people in the party who would like to be the second coming of Donald Trump, or do you think his charisma, his characteristics were just unique and no one could

really copy that? Like without Trump, the Republican Party might just kind of collapse. How do you see a post Trump Republican Party?

Larry Sabato [00:29:02] I think that Republican Party will never return to the Republican Party that we knew under Reagan or certainly the Bushes. Trump may be gone, but his DNA has fundamentally changed the nature of the Republican Party. There's now a checklist of the issues and you can nominate someone who at least appears to be more moderate, like the man chosen by the Republicans to be the gubernatorial nominee in this year's election in Virginia. But he checked all the boxes. He said all the right things. He loves Donald Trump, or so he professed. And Donald Trump rewarded him with an immediate and enthusiastic endorsement. So he's stuck. He's, he's running in a state that voted against Trump by ten full percentage points. And he's adopted the Trump persona, even though in some ways he's not Trump at all.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:29:58] So, Niki, for years we've heard in the post Reagan years, Republicans bowed to the memory of Ronald Reagan, so long after Reagan faded from power and even faded from popularity. To be a visible Republican, one had to pay homage to the memory and agenda of Ronald Reagan. Do you see a Republican Party going forward where Donald Trump plays that same role?

Nicole Hemmer [00:30:24] Oh, that's a great question, because, you know, even in Reagan's case, the thing that was being paid homage to was almost mythical, right? Reagan became very malleable and would be whoever the person needed him to be in order to fit their campaign. In the case of Donald Trump, I think it's somewhat different because it's not just about like Reagan and his personality and attaching yourself to his popularity. There is a kind of personal loyalty that Donald Trump demands that just creates a different dynamic. So, yes, he might continue to be a totem in the party, although you could imagine once Donald Trump has shuffled off this mortal coil that, you know, he's not there to beat you up anymore -- maybe you don't need to tip your hat to him every time that you speak -- but he has, I think, as Larry was saying, fundamentally change the DNA of the party. So even if 20 years from now, Republicans don't find themselves having to bow before Donald Trump or Donald Trump's legacy, the ways that he has changed the party, I think, will continue on. I think it will look different, though, from Reagan because they play a different role in relationship to the party. Reagan represented in some ways in ideology and Donald Trump represents an identity. And those are two very different things.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:31:45] Well, Reagan also had like major chords playing in the background of his theme music. He was a winner. He was triumphant. He made you think wonderful, positive things about America, its past and its future. Donald Trump has never really won. He's a he's a multiple failure. And he's not led the Republican Party to glory or power the way Reagan did in two consecutive elections and much more and much longer - - actually, three consecutive elections, right? So there is a different story and memory there in terms of what the party gets out of each of these two leaders. Reagan was about winning, right?

Larry Sabato [00:32:26] Hey Siva, you've just brought up a very important point. I hadn't thought of it this way. The Republicans love what Donald Trump stands for. They love what he said and how he said it. And yet he lost by three million votes in 2016 and seven million votes in 2020. And instead of concluding that we need to change our message and do better to start winning more Americans again, Republicans have concluded that in order to keep what they like about Donald Trump, we need to change the electorate. And what do they mean by changing the electorate? Disenfranchising millions of people, that's

what they mean by changing the electorate. That's how they see their future. That's how they see maintaining power. And we're watching it play out all over the country. And it is frightening.

Will Hitchcock [00:33:21] You know, you do a lot of polling at the Center for Politics. And I just wondered if you could poll both Americans, generally, and then separate poll for Republicans, on the simple question of is democracy good for America? What kind of results do you think you'd get?

Larry Sabato [00:33:36] Well, fortunately, Pew Charitable Trusts and others have asked questions like that. And the parties couldn't be further apart. It's not just polarization, it's the fact that their whole value systems have changed. Democrats are pretty consistently in favor of not just current democracy, but more democracy. Republicans, exactly the opposite because they see the results of democracy and they're not winning.

Will Hitchcock [00:34:05] Well, Larry Sabato, Nicole Hemmer, you have shown us that democracy is still somewhat, maybe even gravely, in danger. And for that, I want to thank you very much for coming on the show

Nicole Hemmer [00:34:17] Glad we could lift you up.

Larry Sabato [00:34:19] I'm glad I took my anti-depressant.

Will Hitchcock [00:34:22] It means we're going to have to have another season.

Larry Sabato [00:34:24] Good.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:34:31] That was Larry Sabato, a political scientist, pollster and beloved teacher. He's the director of the Center for Politics right here at the University of Virginia.

Will Hitchcock [00:34:42] We also spoke with Nicole Hemmer, associate research scholar with the Obama Presidency Oral History Project at Columbia University. She's a political historian who specializes in the media and the far right. And she's the author of "Messengers of the Right: Conservative Media and the Transformation of American Politics." You can listen to Nikki on our very first episode published in July of 2020. It's called "Illiberal Media."

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:35:06] Democracy in Danger is part of the Democracy Group Podcast Network. Visit DemocracyGroup.org to find all of our sister shows. We'll be right back after this message from our friends.

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Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:35:45] Will, our conversation with Barbara Comstock, with Niki Hammer, with Larry Sabato, really brings me back to so much of what inspired us to do this podcast in the first place. You know, you and I had been talking for some time about all of these different strains of illiberalism, these direct overt threats to the practice of

democracy, to democratic norms and values. And, and, of course, you know, we saw it so directly here in the United States during the reign of Donald Trump. But as we've explored throughout this last season, it's pretty powerful around the world as well.

Will Hitchcock [00:36:24] Yeah, democracy is really difficult. It's hard to make it work right. And there are a lot of people who, frankly, oppose democracy. They may not tell you that, but one of the things that we've learned by looking globally, is that democracy is really hard to take root, it's hard to sustain it, and there are many kinds of interests that oppose democracy and we are experiencing that here at home. You know, listening to Barbara Comstock, on the one hand, it's a refreshing voice to remind us that there are people in the Republican Party who want the Republican Party to repair itself after Donald Trump. I was reminded, you know, about Ronald Reagan, who, you know, he used to be a Democrat, and he said he didn't leave the Democratic Party, the Democratic Party left him, you know, it became too liberal. And I was thinking a little bit about Barbara in the same way, I think she was trying to tell us: "I didn't leave the Republican Party, the Republican Party is leaving me."

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:37:12] Right, right.

Will Hitchcock [00:37:13] It's becoming too right-wing.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:37:14] But she also hasn't even left the Republican Party yet, right? So, she seems pretty convinced that the values she grew up with are still there, somewhere deep inside. You know that, but there's a bigger problem here. And I think it's one that we've confronted throughout our, our time doing this podcast. And that is the extent to which white supremacy sets the tone, maybe motivates so much of the anti-democratic energy in this country. And, you know, while white supremacy has been at work in the Republican Party since 1964 and certainly the Democratic Party for a lot longer than that, it seems now to be proud and loud part of the Republican Party. You know, we saw it on full display in Charlottesville in August of 2017. We saw it on full display in Washington, D.C. on January 6th 2021. We heard it come from the mouth of Donald Trump time and time again. You know, I just wonder whether the Republican Party and its leaders have the will or even the desire to confront white supremacy at its core.

Will Hitchcock [00:38:29] Well, I think we have an answer to that question in the most recent efforts by a number of state legislative houses to effectively ban the teaching of racism in the public schools and public universities.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:38:39] Yeah.

Will Hitchcock [00:38:39] This seems like an extraordinary step to take. Because now they're saying the quiet part out loud as the saying goes, which is: "We don't want to hear your history of racism, we don't want to hear your histories of Jim Crow segregation, none of the Klan, none of lynching, and of white supremacy. No, none of that fits into our desired history, our ideal history of the past, which is just about the founders and about the Constitution and about equality and the land of opportunity." Well, unfortunately, history doesn't care if you want to hear it or not, it's going to be there.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:39:11] Right.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:39:17] Well, everybody that does it for this episode and for Season two of Democracy in Danger, we are going to take a break over the summer, but please be on the lookout for new shows and some new narrative series coming in the fall.

Will Hitchcock [00:39:32] In the meantime, we'll be rebroadcasting some of our best episodes from the past year. So please catch up on any shows you missed.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:39:40] And don't be a stranger. Shoot us a tweet @dindpodcast, that's D-I-N-D podcast. And visit our web page, you can find show notes, background readings, and updates on our upcoming shows.

Will Hitchcock [00:39:54] Democracy in Danger is produced by Robert Armengol, with help from Jennifer Ludovici. Our interns are Denzel Mitchell, Jane Frankel and Ellie Bashkow.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:40:02] 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 hub of WTJU Radio in Charlottesville. I'm Siva Vaidhyanathan

Will Hitchcock [00:40:22] And I'm Will Hitchcock, have a great summer.