

Democracy in Danger

S3E5 Some Fine States Pt1 – Texas

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:00:03] Hello, I'm Siva Vaidhyanathan

Alison Wright [00:00:05] and I'm Alison Wright sitting in for Will Hitchcock.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:00:08] And from the University of Virginia's Deliberative Media Lab, this is Democracy in Danger.

Alison Wright [00:00:14] Siva, I'm really excited to be with you today, especially because we're going to talk all about the Republic of Texas, my native state.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:00:21] Yeah. Well, you know, you're a native Texan. I spent my young adult years in Austin and actually some of my middle adult years as well. And you know, I have to say Texas is its own place. It's one of the most important states, but in so many ways it's different from the rest of the country. But Alison, we didn't just invite you here to co-host this week because you speak Texan. Our listeners should know that you are the publisher and executive editor of the esteemed literary magazine V.Q.R. Of The Virginia Quarterly Review. And earlier in your career, you trained to be a schoolteacher in Texas and did some student teaching. Isn't that right?

Alison Wright [00:00:59] I did. I spent three years in public high schools in the San Antonio area as part of a five-year master's and teaching program, so I taught high school history and English.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:01:10] Well, that's one of the major reasons we thought you would be great to co-host this episode, which is the first we are doing in a mini-series about democracy at the state level in the United States. There's been a lot of controversy in Texas in the last few months, and we have so many issues to cover, but we want to start with education. There has been a huge debate over what children should learn in public schools. You want to brief our listeners on that controversy?

Alison Wright [00:01:39] Sure. So over the summer, the Republican controlled Legislature pushed through some controversial education reforms. Those reforms were aimed mostly at prescribing what social studies teachers could say and do in their classrooms, especially when it comes to race and slavery and civic engagement. So that got more than a few students and teachers worried, as you can imagine. In July, a lot of kids of all ages K through 12 testified at a special session called by the Texas governor Greg Abbott. And when it comes down to it, what most of them said was that Senate Bill three, which was designed to double down on some earlier restrictions, would hurt their learning and stifle some difficult but important conversations. Here's one of them on the Senate floor in Austin.

Isabella Rivera [00:02:28] My name is Isabella Rivera. I'm here on behalf of Texas, rising and representing myself to oppose SB three. Understanding our history. Every single bit of the good and the bad is essential. Every Texas citizen should grow up knowing about all of this and order to form solid opinions at the ballot box and empathy within their communities. Whitewashing our history is wrong.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:02:50] Wow, it's so impressive that people so young can articulate that so clearly, so boldly in such a public forum. But let's get into the measures

themselves. Can you break down what the Texas Legislature intended to have happen in the classroom?

Alison Wright [00:03:08] Absolutely. So first of all, just for some background. Texas is the latest state to go after this new sort of boogeyman of the right in America. Otherwise known as critical race theory. Idaho and Tennessee have passed similar laws. More than a dozen other red states are looking at bills like this at their core. These bills are reinforcing the idea that thinking critically about the history of racism in America, the way that it's deeply woven into the fabric of U.S. society is somehow threatening or contrary to American values.

Siva Vaidhyathan [00:03:44] Well, in a way it is threatening. You know, it's threatening to the stability and comfort of those who have been in power for centuries. It's certainly threatening to their sense of entitlement, to their sense of privilege. You know, it's understandable that they would rather not be reminded about how and why they maintain their positions of privilege, right?

Alison Wright [00:04:07] Right. These laws are meant to inhibit really examining that privilege. They're premised on fear in a lot of cases, but certainly on the idea that talking about it is like saying, "You're guilty for being white. You're intrinsically bad." Now in Texas, the new law doesn't call out critical race theory by name. Rather, it says somewhat vaguely that teachers shouldn't employ concepts that tend to make their students feel quote discomfort, guilt or anguish on account of their race. So it all sounds very neutral, but I caught up with one teacher from Dallas last week to discuss how this is really playing out. And here's what she had to say about it.

Anais Childress [00:04:58] You cannot teach history without there being discomfort in institutions that were not built to be comfortable for students of color.

Alison Wright [00:05:10] This is Anais Childress, she teaches history and African-American studies at Hillcrest High School. And as you can probably tell, she's British.

Siva Vaidhyathan [00:05:19] Yeah, and that that did not sound classically Texan to me.

Alison Wright [00:05:23] Well, Anais has been teaching in Texas for more than three years. The student body in her school is predominantly Hispanic, about 17 percent black and just six or seven percent white. She identifies as biracial, and she describes herself as, quote, politically homeless.

Anais Childress [00:05:40] And so to say that students should not experience discomfort when they are learning is offensive to me personally, because my students are experiencing the discomfort of the system that was created that is currently not serving them as well as it could. Telling me that kids shouldn't be made uncomfortable in a system that was created to make them uncomfortable seems a little strange.

Siva Vaidhyathan [00:06:16] Yeah, so it seems to me that she's getting at the notion that students of color have always felt uncomfortable, right, often because of the structures of racism and the expectations and the extra pressures that are put on them, the lack of resources, all of which is baked into American society and culture. And let's face it, baked into the structures and reward systems of education. But this law, while it's written to sound balanced and unbiased, is really signaling in effect "don't make white kids feel uncomfortable", right?

Alison Wright [00:06:51] That's right. I mean, the law explicitly bans using the New York Times magazine's 1619 project curriculum in schools. You know, the idea that we should ground the deeper story of the founding of the United States in the arrival of slavery in North America? And Anais told me she sees a clear relationship between the traction these kinds of laws are gaining and the conservative backlash against the Black Lives Matter movement. So, you know, another provision of the law says that teachers cannot be compelled to discuss current events in any required courses, but Anais, current events are critical to the learning process.

Anais Childress [00:07:30] 2020 was the hardest year to teach African-American studies. Because I was teaching my students about slavery, Jim Crow, Emmett Till, and then they were looking on their phones and seeing news articles about George Floyd or Breonna Taylor or Ammad Aubrey. Right. And so here I am as their history teacher, teaching them something that is supposed to be in the past and they are still experiencing it in our society on a daily basis. And so there were moments where I have to stop everything and say, guys, we need to take a moment to grieve. We need to take a moment to check in with ourselves because I'm teaching them traumatic history.

Siva Vaidhyathan [00:08:34] Well, Alison, from what I've read about all this, it's not even clear what the enforcement of Senate Bill three will look like if, say, a parent complains, right? It seems from what the experts are saying, that the purpose of this bill is based on just a chilling effect, right? That teachers and people who develop curricula are just likely to avoid subjects to limit the potential of a hassle. So how is this going to change the way that Anais and other teachers teach?

Alison Wright [00:09:05] This is where it gets interesting. So I asked her that and her district is fairly progressive. School officials there have said that they remain committed to making the unpleasant realities of American history and positive reinforcement of engagement and activism a part of the student experience. And as an aside, here Anais helps run a program where all year long students do their own research around a policy debate and come up with solutions that they present in a kind of competition. It's called social impact.

Siva Vaidhyathan [00:09:40] Wow, that sounds great.

Alison Wright [00:09:41] It really does. I wish that, you know, we had had this type of thing at the high school where I matriculated in Texas or even in the program where I learned pedagogy. But last year, they focused on voter suppression in Texas just to give you an example, and her district is going to keep doing that, even though Senate Bill three says that you cannot make students engage in political campaigns or lobbying. So they are going to find a way around that. And you can make such programs electives, and it will probably be fine. But what ends up happening is that every locality across the state and you and I both know Texas is a big, diverse state. Every locality will apply its own understanding of the rules in its own way, which Anais says is itself a problem.

Anais Childress [00:10:31] You know, we are perpetuating the issue that exists in our democracy, and that is depending on where you live, you will get an opportunity or lack thereof. You can get a rich education, you can get diverse curriculum. You know, you can get so many different opportunities, so long as you happen to be in the right place at the right moment. And I think that's a problem. That's why we we don't have equity. A student who lives in rural Texas deserves to learn about Afro-Latinos as much as the students who

are privileged to welcome every single day into my classroom. However, because of where that student lives, they don't have the opportunity to learn and I don't understand how that could be OK.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:11:40] Wow. Well, Alison, thank you so much for bringing Anais's story and really grounding this debate in the experience of one particular teacher.

Alison Wright [00:11:50] Thank you for the opportunity. You know, if I could just offer a postscript, yeah, please. Before we move on the day I spoke with and I just happened to be the same day that there was a shooting at a high school just outside of Dallas. Police say that an 18 year old opened fire after a fight and injured four people, three of whom were hospitalized. So talking to her just sort of rekindled my appreciation for everything teachers do in this country while they put their lives on the line, whether it's the pandemic or the possibility of physical violence and Anais, you know, she just cares so much about her students. I mean, the day that I spoke with her, she left our interview in order to get a meal for one of her students, who's currently unhoused. She spends her entire day every day thinking about how she can make her students lives better, and that includes trying to see the upside of things whenever she can. So one provision of these reforms, you might say almost by accident, could protect students of color in some settings, she said. And that's part of the law that says educators cannot impose their own political views in their classrooms.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:13:00] Yeah, that's really interesting.

Alison Wright [00:13:02] So beyond that, I just wanted to share maybe one last thing, she said as we were hanging up and just a note for our listeners, this may sound a little different because her recorder was turned off at that point. So you will hear our backup audio.

Anais Childress [00:13:16] I am very tired emotionally, physically, spiritually, mentally, and so is everyone else. It's a weird time, my wood burning with a lot at one time. And so it's funny, because this bill is not on anyone's radar to be 100 percent candid. I think a lot of teachers are ignoring it because the Legislature is passing down more bills that are impacting our day-to-day life of teachers. But being that I'm the African-American studies teacher, I don't have a choice.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:14:00] You're listening to Democracy in Danger. We'll be right back. Alison, you know, and Anais Childress made a point that really highlights why we're focusing on the state of democracy in Texas. It's that over this past year, under Governor Abbott and the Republicans, Texans have seen a flurry of new laws that are inflaming social divisions, driving all sorts of wedge issues into the political landscape.

Alison Wright [00:14:33] She did. I mean, the biggest news right now is the abortion law, which is the most restrictive in the country that went into effect last month. And on the same day as those education reforms. But there have also been efforts to restrict voting rights and target transgender athletes in schools. And, of course, loosened gun laws. Plus, there was an executive order that makes it harder to help migrants at the border with basic humanitarian assistance.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:14:59] Yeah. So I mean, in some ways, it's Texas like it's always been. But in other ways, it seems bolder or louder, meaner than it's ever been.

Alison Wright [00:15:08] It really does. And to help us dig deeper on all of that, we've got two colleagues on the line with us from Texas. And full disclosure, these are both friends of ours from grad school who are historians and encyclopedias on Texas politics.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:15:25] Yeah, absolutely. We have Dwonna Goldstone with us from Texas State University in San Marcos. Dwonna, who teaches courses on race and gender, on the Black Power movement and on film. And we also have Bryan Edward Stone from Del Mar College in Corpus Christi, Texas, where he was recently named Teacher of the Year. Dwonna. Brian, it's so good to talk to you again after all these years. Welcome to Democracy in Danger.

Dwonna Goldstone [00:15:51] Thank you for inviting me. Thank you.

Bryan Edward Stone [00:15:53] It's good to be here.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:15:54] So, Dwonna, let's start with you. You've written a book, the book about the long, painful process of integrating the University of Texas at Austin, which is, as we know, the premier research university in the state. What should Texans and Americans understand about that process that we might not understand? I mean, what do we miss when we celebrate what appeared in the 1950s to be a leap toward social justice?

Dwonna Goldstone [00:16:22] That's a really good question. I think one of the first things I would say is that integration never really happened at the University of Texas at Austin, and it still has not really happened at the University of Texas at Austin. One of the things that Texas administrators did was they did integrate the school without having to go to court. However, they made sure that those who came to U.T. Were few and far between. In fact, there was a letter that I think the president wrote where he said, let's implement tests so that they could restrict the number of black male students so that they would not be in class with young white women.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:17:05] Wow. So how do you see that period, right? The 1950s, the 1960s and 1970s? All of that story of integration, which was supposed to make us feel really good about ourselves? How do you see that connecting to everything that's going on in Texas right now?

Dwonna Goldstone [00:17:20] I think it mirrors what's going on in Texas right now, right? I think what happened in the 50s and 60s and 70s? In some ways, at least there seemed to be progress. At least people were talking about it. People were more upfront about what they were doing. And then we went into this period where, Oh, Austin is liberal. Austin is not like the rest of the state. Texas is so great. Then we get Ann Richards right, who really embodies progress, and then we get George Bush. And then eventually we get Governor Abbott, who seems to want to make sure the only people running the state are white and male.

Alison Wright [00:18:02] Well, I'm wondering actually, Bryan, do you have any thoughts on whether or not college professors like yourself are worried about the pressures of Senate Bill three in the way that public school teachers are? Is there a concern that we might see a higher ed version of the bill in the next legislative session?

Bryan Edward Stone [00:18:22] Yes. Capital letters Yes. There's a concern. In fact, I'd be very surprised if there wasn't a follow up bill in the next Legislature. But given that this one

assuming it stands, you know, assuming that this current one remains in effect, I would assume there'd be one for higher ed. And certainly there's concern among my colleagues. Of course, there are differences. I mean, we don't work for the state the way that public school teachers do. We're not under the direct authority of the governor the way that they are. Whether we could block it, I don't know. Whether we could defy it, I don't know. But absolutely, I would expect that we'll start getting some restrictions or some regulations. I would add to that, though. It's not just the Legislature, because the college is, of course, in the state. Colleges and universities are governed by boards of regents who have a much more direct impact on what could occur in their curricula, and so some of those boards, some are appointed by the governor. Some, like mine, are elected by the public, but they could be much more susceptible to that sort of influence in those sorts of changes. And I'm a little more worried, honestly, about pressure that might come from boards than from the Legislature.

Siva Vaidhyathan [00:19:34] Yeah. I mean, unlike high school where no one actually teaches critical race theory, there are plenty of classrooms at the undergraduate and graduate level and law level in Texas and elsewhere, where critical race theory is an important part of, you know, examining power structures in America. So I want to ask both of you a question about recent Texas history by reason. I mean, ever since I left. So basically all of the 21st century. When I lived there in the late 20th century and I left in 1999, Texas had just recently shaken off its tradition of being controlled by conservative white Democrats, and it had become a true two-party state. And while there was plenty of covert racism, kind of polite racism, in state politics, both parties seemed committed to inclusion and to trying to convince Texans of all backgrounds to support their policies and their parties and to vote. Both parties ran huge voter registration drives. Both parties tried to get people to vote and to vote for them. Right. So it seemed democratic, right? Even if my side lost, which they often did. I knew it was like how democracy was supposed to work. Now I left Texas, and then the whole thing turned upside down. So what the heck happened over the last 20 years? Or am I just romanticizing my time there?

Dwonna Goldstone [00:20:59] I think you're romanticizing your time,

Siva Vaidhyathan [00:21:02] Probably, quite frankly. I had a great time Dwonna. You know that I did.

Dwonna Goldstone [00:21:05] I know you did. You know, I think as a woman of color, I don't remember politics in Austin being the way I think other people remembered it being. My experience in Austin and at the University of Texas was much different than most other white students. I think you were romanticizing it a little bit, but I also think you're right that there was this push to get everybody to vote and you could vote on campus. You didn't even have to go anywhere and you could register. They made it very easy to register and to vote. And I think Governor Abbott and his ilk understand that if everyone voted, they would not be in office.

Alison Wright [00:21:45] That's right. So the new voter restriction measures, which the Republicans of course, don't refer to as restrictions, but they are pretty bold faced in their partisan character, right? And this new law that goes into effect next year expands voting hours in smaller, mostly Republican counties. But then it also bans overnight and drive through voting, which are popular in more diverse counties that lean blue. And then there are a bunch of other rules that criminalize helping voters and clamped down on voting by mail. What in particular, do you think are sort of the most egregious of those?

Bryan Edward Stone [00:22:27] When I look at that list that you just named and there's a few other things in that bill as well. Mostly what they're doing is restricting relatively new methods of voting things that sort of came up during the pandemic. What worries me more is an element that you didn't mention, which are protections for poll watchers, meaning it is now easier for parties to, and I think we can guess which party will be more involved in this, to have their people show up at the polls, hover over the voters really sort of shockingly close, bring guns if they want and sort of, you know, supposedly stand guard over the polling process. And I think that is far more frightening in terms of not only the potential for violence, you know, which is clear, but the real potential that voters will be genuinely intimidated and frightened to appear. This doesn't create an environment that feels particularly democratic or free. And I think as a as a symbol of sort of deteriorating faith in the process itself, that's really frightening. And the fact that the Legislature went to the trouble to make sure that it can happen is, to me, the most upsetting element of this.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:23:32] Well, let's turn to some other nasty stuff, right? We were having so much fun talking about troublesome laws. Of course, one of the more troublesome laws to recently come out of Texas concerns abortion. This was a very radical law that essentially skirts the kind of judicial review that has historically rendered abortion restrictions unconstitutional. The instruments of the state right? The agents of the state are not involved in enforcing bans on abortion. It's up to citizens, right? It's like creating a posse to try to prevent people from having abortions and punishing them if they do as well as punishing clinics and doctors and nurses and anyone who helped someone get an abortion. It means that the courts have been able to say, "Hey, this isn't really about Roe versus Wade at all." And it seems like this amazing trick. Now when we look at that from outside of Texas, it frightens us. You know, we wonder if this is a pattern where Texas is sort of a place where the right is trying out some pretty aggressive tactics to see if they fly constitutionally and politically. Is that your sense, too? Is Texas a laboratory in anti-democratic movements right now?

Dwonna Goldstone [00:24:47] You know, in some ways, I think Texas is a laboratory. I also think all of it is about making sure white men like Abbott and people like Abbott stay in power. So if you can make these people have these children that they do not want, then you create a structure whereby people are poor. The churches continue to be tied. It's all. I'm convinced it's all part of the system in order to keep people poor, impoverished and dependent on the state. It is not obviously about making sure fetuses are brought to term because, as I said to one of my students, if life really did begin at conception, then so should child support.

Bryan Edward Stone [00:25:30] I agree entirely with everything that Dwonna just said, but to add a dimension, particularly to the notion of hypocrisy and how hypocritical this is. Of course, a lot of the opposition to abortion at least sort of pretends to be faith based that it's a violation of religious views. But there are faiths, including the one I'm a member of, where abortion is often is not only permitted, but sometimes sort of required for the sake of the health of the mother, which is the primary goal. And so, in fact, restricting abortion, this completely, in fact, violates the religious freedom of other people in the name of protecting. Supposedly, although I'm not sure how sincere it is the religious freedom of some. And so it's clearly that the restrictions on abortion as Dwonna is saying is the most important aspect of this. But I think there are other factors that make it a pretty unacceptable policy.

Alison Wright [00:26:20] Brian, Dwonna, we'd like to end on a question for both of you. Which is really one of hope. So what are the sources of hope for democracy in Texas, not

Democrats in Texas? Are there signs of hope that Texans can or will try to reinvigorate democracy and to speak Texan? Do either of y'all see any light?

Dwonna Goldstone [00:26:48] I do. The one thing that gives me hope are my students. They are much more engaged than I remember them being. They are angry and they are registered to vote. They understand what's happening. They're not standing idly by. I think this class that I'm teaching, that's mostly white people on black women and black protest shows that they want to learn. And that kind of thing gives me hope that there are students black, white, Latinx who want to change the power structure, which is why Abbott and his ilk have restricted who can vote because they are well aware that if everyone who wants to vote does vote, they will never be in power again. But black churches have been doing this for a lot longer than Abbott has been, and they will get the souls to the polls and they will figure out how to vote these people out.

Bryan Edward Stone [00:27:51] I also feel that my students are a sign of hope for me, not only from their engagement and their enthusiasm, but I have noticed I really have noticed since. I mean, I would say since 2016 a deeper level of civic knowledge, a deeper level of not necessarily historical knowledge, but awareness of issues, awareness of their place in those issues of why they affect them. It gives me a lot of hope. If the goal is to get more people involved and more people energized to participate in a process, I do think that that things are on the mend. And I'd add one more thing to that, even as sort of terrible is the Legislature is, as we've been describing, they are the majority of Texans. Every poll shows, don't approve of most of what they're doing. And even though they are gerrymandering themselves into a hold on power, I have some hope that that can't last forever. You can't defy gravity forever, and they can't keep doing unpopular and increasingly extremist things without some consequence. And so I don't know when that will happen. I don't know. You know, if I'm going to live to see that happen, but I certainly hope that I expect that it will happen. This is going to moderate at some point.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:29:09] Well, that certainly does give us some hope. Dwonna Goldstone, Brian Stone, thank you so much for joining us on Democracy in Danger. Thank you.

Dwonna Goldstone [00:29:18] Thank you.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:29:28] Dwonna Naomi Goldstone is an associate professor of history and African-American studies at Texas State University in San Marcos. She's the author of "Integrating the 40 Acres, The 50-year Struggle for Racial Equality at the University of Texas".

Alison Wright [00:29:46] Bryan Edward Stone is a historian at Delmar College in Corpus Christi, Texas. He's the author of *The Chosen Folks Jews on the Frontiers of Texas*

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:29:57] Democracy in Danger is part of the Democracy Group Podcast Network. Visit [Democracy Group dot org](http://DemocracyGroup.org) to find all our sister shows. Here's a quick message from our friends.

Mark Simon [00:30:11] Hi, I'm Mark Simon and my podcast, *The Journalism Salute*, we spotlight important and interesting journalism organizations and people. The goal of our show is to introduce you to different perspectives and different careers in the field. We talk to reporters, editors, publishers and professors. There are so many great groups to learn

about. We're also here to show you that journalists are not the enemy of the people. That's The Journalism Salute available wherever you get your podcasts.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:30:49] That's it for today's show. Next time, on part two of our series on state politics, we'll come back to our home turf and look at the Commonwealth of Virginia.

David Toscano [00:30:59] I'm David Toscano and I'm just a small town country lawyer from Charlottesville, who spent 14 years in the Virginia General Assembly, including seven and a half as the Democratic leader in the House, and just published a new book called Fighting Political Gridlock, How States Control the Country and Affect Our Lives.

Alison Wright [00:31:19] In the meantime, help us round up new listeners share this episode on social media and when you subscribe to Democracy in Danger. Bless your heart. Leave us a kind review and a lot of stars.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:31:31] After all, the stars at night are big and bright, deep in the heart of Texas. So is our web page is DinDanger.org. There you will find a better version of that song and lots more about our guests and of course, what we are reading and all of our past shows.

Alison Wright [00:31:54] Democracy in Danger is produced by Robert Armengol with help from Jennifer Ludovici. Sydney Halaman edits the show. Our interns are Denzel Mitchell, Jane Frankel and Elie Bashkow. Special thanks this time to KEDT and South Texas Public Broadcasting in Corpus Christi.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:32:12] And special thanks to Allison Wright, our special guest host, this week. Now, support for Democracy in Danger comes from the University of Virginia's Democracy Initiative and from the College of Arts and Sciences. This 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,

Alison Wright [00:32:35] and I'm Alison Wright. Thanks for letting me be part of this episode, y'all.