

## Democracy in Danger S3E8 Some Fine States Pt4 – Florida

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

**Paul Reyes** [00:00:04] And I'm Paul Reyes sitting in for Siva Vaidhyanathan.

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

**Paul Reyes** [00:00:12] It's good to be with you, Will!

**Will Hitchcock** [00:00:14] Well, thanks for joining us, Paul. Paul, I just want to fill in our listeners here. You're the editor of VQR, the Virginia Quarterly Review. One of our favorite media affiliates. And you grew up, for the most part, in Florida, which is where we're heading today on the show.

**Paul Reyes** [00:00:28] I did. And you know, my father's Cuban and pretty much every Cuban on the planet has a connection to the Sunshine State.

**Will Hitchcock** [00:00:35] Well, no doubt, but you you've written a book about Florida. Do I have that right?

**Paul Reyes** [00:00:38] Yes, that's right. It was a ground-level chronicle of the 2008 housing crisis told from the perspective of homeowners, agents, activists. My angle was based on experiences I had working with my father, who ran a business trashing out all the belongings people left behind in foreclosed homes. It was pretty dreary stuff. The rattling of the American dream, you might say.

**Will Hitchcock** [00:01:00] I thought Florida is where you go for sunshine and swimming and optimism, but I guess maybe it's also the place where fantasies go from boom to bust.

**Paul Reyes** [00:01:09] Yes, on a regular basis, in fact. But, you know, Florida has a lot going on. People tend to describe it as a zany state, but really, it's an incredibly diverse state. It's tropical, it's multilingual. It's in the South, it's in Latin America. And for those of us who remember the 2000 election, it was once the battlefield of Bush v. Gore, the land of hanging chads. Florida politics, in particular, never disappoint.

**Will Hitchcock** [00:01:33] Oof. Hanging chads that brings back a lot of memories. Well, there are some recent upheavals and changes on Florida's political landscape. And that's what we're here to talk about. We have a guest today who describes herself as quote a Florida girl still living on her family's farm north of Tampa. She's also a prominent political scientist and an astute observer of state and local affairs.

**Paul Reyes** [00:01:57] Right. But before we get to that interview, we're going to share something just a little bit unusual for Democracy in Danger, an uplifting story of perseverance and grassroots mobilizing. It comes from our colleague Robert Armengol. Another Cubano, by the way, who also grew up in South Florida. Here it is.

**Robert Armengol** [00:02:13] Until very recently, the Sunshine State cast a lot of shade over Desmond Meade.

**Desmond Meade** [00:02:19] I could not run for office. I could not serve on the jury. I could not practice law even though I have a law degree. I found it difficult to own or even rent a home in Florida because many subdivisions would have provisions written within their bylaws that would prevent someone like me from owning or even renting a home until their civil rights have been restored.

**Robert Armengol** [00:02:43] Meade is an activist who is instrumental in the drive to get Amendment 4 passed in his state. That was the change three years ago to Florida's constitution that restored the right to vote for most convicted felons who have done their time. Meade calls such people - like himself - returning citizens. His own return has been a long, hard journey. As a young man, Meade was thrown out of the military after getting addicted to cocaine. He was caught stealing alcohol and electronics on his base to support his drug use. And when he got out of the Brig, he went home and got in the bodyguard business. But he couldn't get off coke and his life spiraled out of control.

**Desmond Meade** [00:03:22] It took me to some very dark places.

**Robert Armengol** [00:03:28] In 2001, Meade was convicted again on firearms charges and sentenced to 15 years in prison.

**Desmond Meade** [00:03:35] I remember when the judge handed his sentence down, how my knees buckled and I thought my life was over.

**Robert Armengol** [00:03:44] Still, Meade fought his conviction and on appeal, won a new trial. In 2004, he struck a plea deal with prosecutors that got him out of jail early. But as he puts it, he was still locked in a mental prison.

**Desmond Meade** [00:03:59] The minute I hit the streets, I was back to using drugs, you know, and in less than a year after being released, I found myself standing in front of railroad tracks, waiting on a train to come so I can jump in front of it. You know, I'm standing there, I'm addicted to crack cocaine. I am, I'm homeless, I don't have a job, the only thing I own were the clothes on my back. And I didn't see any light at the end of the tunnel. Fortunately, the train didn't come that day, and I end up crossing the tracks and I walked a few blocks further and I checked myself into a drug treatment facility. And while there really contemplating my death, I had a transformation, I should say, of who Desmond was. You know, wondering who would come to my funeral when, when I die? Right? What have I done on this earth, on this planet while living here, right?

**Robert Armengol** [00:05:01] That was right around the time the civil rights icon Rosa Parks died peacefully at the age of 92. The national outpouring of sentiment and as political leaders and ordinary people alike celebrated her life, struck a chord with Meade.

**Desmond Meade** [00:05:15] And where I landed, you know, basically was since I couldn't be an actor, since I couldn't be an athlete, that I would have to be someone who could take their own experiences, the pain and the suffering, and the low self-esteem that led me to those railroad tracks and shape it in such a way that it would help other people. And that's what started me on my path to engage in activism, to engage in advocacy, to make sure that I did something that had a positive impact in people's lives so that when I die, I'll be properly mourned.

**Robert Armengol** [00:05:51] In the years that followed, Meade finished college and law school in Miami, and he got involved in a fledgling movement to restore voting and other

civil rights to ex-felons. It was a push that went against the grain of recent attempts all over the country to make voting harder and against a long and painful history of the post-Reconstruction South. Like other former Confederate states, Florida enacted the so-called black codes that severely penalized minor crimes and targeted formerly enslaved people for enforcement. And a new state constitution, in 1868, made felons second class citizens denying them the right to vote. One hundred and fifty years later, Florida was one of four remaining states with this kind of rule on the books.

**Desmond Meade** [00:06:36] You know, when we look at the Jim Crow laws, what we've seen was that felon disenfranchisement, just like literacy tests, just like poll taxes were used in such a way to diminish the political capital that was gained by the newly freed slaves. What you see is the attack against democracy. I mean, back then it was Dixie Democrats that was leading the charge. Today you see Republicans leading the charge. And I think the heart of the issue is how people are viewing democracy or what do they think democracy is supposed to be? And in our heads, we're like, listen, we are in the country where the citizens should have a say in how their communities are being governed. But there are people who are in office that believe the opposite, that citizens should not have that much say and that it should be left up to politicians to decide what's best for the community and its constituents. And those that believe that seek to limit the access that the regular citizens would have to democracy.

**Robert Armengol** [00:07:55] Well, today, Meade runs the Florida Rights Restoration Coalition, which led the charge in gathering a million signatures for Amendment 4. Got it on the ballot in November 2018, and championed its passage. And this year, the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation awarded Meade one of its Genius grants. Perhaps in a nod to just how naive his efforts once seemed. Even Meade had doubts sometimes that his proposal could meet the 60 percent threshold it needed to pass.

**Desmond Meade** [00:08:25] Everybody thought I was crazy. I tell folks if my mother was alive at the time, she would probably think I was crazy too, for taking on this task. But there was something that was deeper than just, you know, my superficial worries. There was something that was all the way in my soul that told me that I was on the right track. And I like to tell folks that, you know, Hey, I was, this movement was divinely inspired and divinely led. And at the end of the day, in spite of any doubt, I may have, I held on to the faith that we were doing the right thing, right? So when you look back to the civil rights movement, they didn't have polling and focus groups and research groups that tell them to engage in that fight,

**Robert Armengol** [00:09:18] And it's probably a good thing, too.

**Desmond Meade** [00:09:19] That's right, because they would have been discouraged. But the reality was they thought that it was the right thing to do. And I do believe that if you are convinced that what you're doing is the right thing, then you don't stop. You don't let anyone discourage you. You continue to do it. And if it is the right thing, good is going to come from that.

**Robert Armengol** [00:09:45] Eventually, almost two thirds of Florida voters from across the political spectrum approved Amendment 4. Along the way, mid befriended and brought into his organization guys like Neil Volz, a former GOP operative convicted in the Jack Abramoff lobbying scandal. Here's Volz speaking alongside Meade with a PBS reporter during the campaign for Amendment 4.

**Neil Volz** [00:10:07] While the African-American community is disproportionately impacted and there is a long history that got us to this point, the truth is this cancer that started after the Civil War has grown to a place where it impacts the entire state. Every community is impacted by this, and two thirds of those who are formally convicted - people like myself - are not African-American. They look more like me than they do Desmond.

**Robert Armengol** [00:10:29] So I asked Meade about this friendship of seemingly strange bedfellows.

**Desmond Meade** [00:10:34] It's strange bedfellows that should not be strange. Let me tell you, Neil, is an individual who today I call my brother. When Neil met me, I was actually speaking at a local community college in South Florida, and he happened to be in the area and he decided to sit in in the meeting. And he was getting ready to leave because he looked around, and what he saw was it was a bunch of Democrats or progressives in that room. Like he loves to say, he felt like a fire hydrant at an all dog show. But it just so happened he stayed long enough to hear me say a few things, and we became the best of friends. And, you know, we may not agree on everything. And, you know, here he is. He's a white Republican and I'm a black...I don't know...you know, I would say independent, but we know how to deal with each other in spite of our differences, right? Neil and I's friendship should not be something that is like a white unicorn. This should be the norm.

**Robert Armengol** [00:11:49] In all, about one and a half million returning citizens now qualify to have their voting rights restored under Amendment 4. And for Meade, that also means giving them a chance to become fully involved active members of their communities.

**Desmond Meade** [00:12:03] Lost in all of that politics is a reality that man, what we were talking about is not about votes. We're talking about real people's lives. What I believe that the 1.4 million people and beyond would do is not just shift the political landscape. But what I think it can do is actually shake up the political system, right? And force both parties to actually reevaluate how they're approaching their engagement with constituents. I look at the 1.4 million people as an emerging constituency group whose issues have to be addressed by both sides, especially when you talk about criminal justice reform. We transcended the partisan politics. We even transcended the implicit racial biases and we were able to connect with each other along the lines of humanity. And we were able to tap into what I believe is the most powerful force on this planet. Even more powerful than hate and fear. And that's the force of love.

**Robert Armengol** [00:13:15] Now, there have been efforts to push back on that love, for instance, the Republican controlled legislature quickly passed rules insisting that serving your sentence also means paying up all your court costs and fees and restitution to victims. But Meade's organization continues to fight. Last year, the coalition raised \$27 million to help felons cover their debts or to ask judges to waive those debts. And earlier this year, Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis, a Republican, approved a new, much easier clemency process for felons who have done their time bringing that process in line with Amendment 4. While the amendment restores voting rights to ex-felons, the governor's new mandates now mean that returning citizens can gain back all their civil rights in Florida, including serving on a jury or practicing law. So just a month ago, on October 9th, Desmond Meade received his clemency notice from the governor's office. Now he can finally take the bar exam and maybe do something that's been on his mind for a while. Well, so I got to ask you, are you going to run for office now?

**Desmond Meade** [00:14:27] Well, I can tell you, is that that is definitely something that I'm seriously considering because I do think that, you know, the state of Florida, I think this country need more public servants than politicians.

**Will Hitchcock** [00:15:04] Desmond Meade is the executive director of the Florida Rights Restoration Coalition based in Orlando, Meade is also a 2021 MacArthur Fellow. He spoke with our producer, Robert Armengol.

**Paul Reyes** [00:15:16] We'll be right back after this message from our supporters.

**Elie Bashkow** [00:15:21] Hi, I'm Elie Bashkow an intern here on Democracy in Danger. We wanted to let you know about a podcast we've been listening to from Foreign Policy Magazine. It's called ones and twos. Economic historian Adam Tuz is like an encyclopedia about basically everything from the COVID shutdown to climate change and pasta sauce on ones and twos. He joins FP editor Cameron Abadi. And together they unpack two numbers one from the news and the other something fascinating Find ones and twos. That's tozzi on Apple, Spotify or wherever you get your podcasts.

**Will Hitchcock** [00:15:57] Paul, what Desmond Meade and his organization have accomplished in Florida is really remarkable, and indeed it's an uplifting story for us here on Democracy in Danger. And it's especially remarkable given the troubling resurgence of voter suppression in the United States, in the South in particular, over the last decade or so.

**Paul Reyes** [00:16:15] Yeah. And I think the key takeaway here is that for him and so many others really isn't a partisan issue. It's a fairness issue. But you know, there's so much more to talk about in Florida. It's a swing state, the third most populous in the country and so much of the nation's most divisive issues lately: Covid, racial and ethnic divisions, abortion and guns on full display there.

**Will Hitchcock** [00:16:35] Well, to help us sort out the state of affairs in Florida ahead of next year's midterm elections, we have with us an expert on state politics and demographics. Susan McManus joins us from WUSF in Tampa, where she is a professor emerita at the University of South Florida. Susan, thank you so much for joining us on Democracy in Danger.

**Susan McManus** [00:16:56] My pleasure and it's a great state. Come on down.

**Will Hitchcock** [00:16:59] Susan, you spent a lot of time studying Florida's political geography, and there is just so much to discuss here. Let me just start by by diving in the deep end. How is Florida's voting population changing? And I guess, where in what groups are those changes most evident? I mean, I'll be. I'll be honest. I still think of Florida as a state full of elderly retirees and maybe baby boomers who are, you know, they're the ones who go to the polls, et cetera. But that's not at all the whole picture, is it?

**Susan McManus** [00:17:32] Not at all. In fact, the biggest shift in Florida is the generational replacement. And the fact of the matter is that right now, over half of our registered voters are from the three youngest generations and Gen Zers and millennials, the two youngest, make up over a third of our registrants. Long gone are the days where you can describe Florida as a retiree dominated state and national politics, or state politics. It's a very exciting place to be. The younger generations are extremely racially and ethnically diverse. They're politically diverse as well. Many of them choosing to cast aside

the two parties and register as no party affiliation. And they're very, very issue oriented and very active in all of the issues that you just mentioned. Sometimes they're hard to get to the polls, but in 2018, the diversity of the Democratic nominee Andrew Gillum drew a lot of particularly young minorities and young people in general to the polls. That was missing in the 2020 presidential race. Part of it was younger people weren't on campus. They like to be together. They're energized. But secondly, there was just this sort of disinterest in the fact that both of the presidential candidates were, as I heard, one of my former students say, old white guys. So politics is very complex here. If you don't do your homework and you rely upon demographics from two-year election prior and you try to win a current year election, you can be really off base in certain parts of our state. Very, very changing place, often described as an immigrant magnet state. And two thirds of our voters weren't born here.

**Paul Reyes** [00:19:21] Well, Susan, that reminds me, you know, we all know the media has a tendency to fall back on tropes and cliches and not just when it comes to Florida, but when they're trying to make sense of the American electorate as a whole. And I tend to wince when I read about the so-called Hispanic or Latino vote, as if such a thing even exists. Now, Florida defies a lot of preconceived notions people have about the United States, and it's no different on this issue either, right? So what patterns do you see that can help frame our understanding of the Hispanic population in Florida?

**Susan McManus** [00:19:51] It's the fastest growing portion of our electorate, but it's hardly monolithic. It is extremely diverse. You have virtually every country in South America, Latin America, right here in our state. And your country-of-origin roots are a big part of how you see political issues in our state. For years, it was dominated by Cubans. But of course, more recent waves of immigration just as, say, Venezuelans, Colombians, Nicaraguans, Mexicans, Puerto Ricans, you name it here. They're not all the same politically, and that's where national campaigns often go wrong is to assume that one size fits all politically for the LatinX or Latino vote. However, you wish to describe it. And certain issues can pull groups together that sometimes aren't. In 2020, the socialism issue was huge. We saw tremendous coalition - very uncommon, but very, very strong - and high turnout. Colombians Venezuela. And Nicaraguans, not Puerto Ricans, they tend to be more democratic leaning, as do Mexican-Americans, Hondurans. People whose roots were in these countries who came to Florida because they wanted to get away from the despotism that you saw there. The last thing they want is a return of any sort. And that issue alone, the anti-Socialism issue was what sort of molded together a very strong Latino coalition that voted Republican. And this is one of the uphill battles that Florida Democrats right now are still facing somewhat. How to do better at dissecting each of these groups and figuring out ways to reach them. Messaging and communication are different depending upon where these groups come from. So I think that it's causing people to recognize you have to micro-target the Latino population. One size fits all means that you may lose an election, right?

**Paul Reyes** [00:22:03] I mean, do you think it's fair to say that focusing on these groups based on ethnicity, just as a Latino monolithic Latino bloc has led to neglecting other critical groupings or perceptions of a voter characterization. For instance, the generational component?

**Susan McManus** [00:22:20] Absolutely. It has, and a lot of the candidates even ignore the younger generational composition. Even within Latino groups, you see younger people differing often on issues from their parents or grandparents. They tend to be more focused on domestic issues, whereas the older generations more on foreign policy issues, as you

might imagine. But the other problem is language issues and means of communication are something that sometimes people who are trying to engage people and get them to turn out to vote and get them interested in their candidate failed to realize. Even among younger generations, their ways of getting information about politics are totally 180 from an older person. TV doesn't work for them. They don't watch it. At the same time, you can't use the same kind of language because it's slightly different depending on where you come from. And these are things that nuances are strong in a state that is terribly and importantly and interestingly, complex like Florida. I argue it is the most complex and most difficult swing state in the country to win. And it costs a lot of money and takes a lot of time, and it takes a lot of street smarts from people who know local communities. You can't just use an aggregate percent Hispanic or a polling data and really have a lot of confidence that you're going to win different pieces of the Hispanic vote in Florida. You're not.

**Will Hitchcock** [00:23:52] That's really interesting what you said about socialism echoing in this community because so many Hispanic voters may have had personal or some family story to tell about fleeing what they perceive to be socialist, quote unquote governments, most of them are merely, you know, authoritarian of one kind or another. But are there some other issues that seem to always surface as sort of particularly divisive in that community? I mean, I wonder about abortion, for example? Or are there other issues, whether it's employment or it's climate change or it's guns issues that maybe also have a national resonance? Or what are the local issues that are particularly complex within the Hispanic community?

**Susan McManus** [00:24:36] Well, abortion and of course, faith are very strongly related, as you know. And so the Catholicism, the strong dominance of that faith mean that abortion is probably more of an issue sometimes among those communities than it would be, let's say in a you know, sort of middle aged Anglo community. But most of all, the most consistent seems to be education. It's extremely high of importance issue that comes up regardless of what kind of inquiry is made within that, because people see in that opportunity. Getting ahead. And, you know, language is sometimes a big part of these people's concerns, depending upon how well they speak English. Some are better at it than others have been here longer. But increasingly also, I'd have to add another issue that's surfacing and that's affordable housing. Of getting employ in a place that you can afford to live. And I'm seeing that issue really bubbling up to the forefront ahead of the 2022 elections in our state

**Will Hitchcock** [00:25:53] And the issues that you just mentioned don't predict which party you're going to support. They could cut either way.

**Susan McManus** [00:25:59] Yeah, so let's just take it as an example you know, employment issues. There was a high hopes among Florida Democrats in 2020 that they would do just really, really well among the Puerto Rican vote, which is another burgeoning vote. Much of it centered in the Orlando area. But as it turns out, one fourth of the Puerto Rican voters did not vote Democratic. They voted Republican. And in dissecting it, as many have it turned out to be an employment issue because many of the younger Puerto Ricans who have been attracted to that area from employment in the tourism sector, the attractions. The last thing they wanted was another lockdown after the first one, and so they voted on the basis of that side of employment of don't lock us out. You know, we need this, you know, we came here for this. Whereas in other places it was the socialism issue for, as we've seen, people from other places. So this is just an example. You can't even take for granted that typically Democratic, heavily Democratic leaning Hispanic

groups, Puerto Ricans and Mexicans being first and foremost are going to remain that way. And we're also seeing among the younger Hispanics, they are registering like everyone else, as no party affiliation. But very interestingly, in 2020, the younger Hispanics turned out at a much greater rate than did younger African-American voters. That's the first time that's happened in Florida.

**Paul Reyes** [00:27:40] So we heard Desmond Meade earlier strike a pretty upbeat note about the future of participatory democracy in the Sunshine State. But from what we read, you know, all doesn't seem to be well in Florida. This past spring the Republican controlled legislature passed a controversial new voting measure known as Senate Bill 90 that restricts voting in many ways, making it harder to vote by mail and cast ballots in drop boxes. The NAACP says that the law unfairly targets black voters. Can you walk us through the likely impact of this particular piece of legislation on voting in Florida?

**Susan McManus** [00:28:13] We're not sure yet, but we will have a very good indication of how some of these new laws that were implemented last year are actually playing out because we just had a special election, including in one district where there was a large minority population. But we're going to be able to see the effects of some of these changes. And I think that the good news for Florida is that our primary elections next year are not until August. Our Legislature goes into session in January, January through March. If there are really huge issues besides lawsuits, that's another avenue to go down to challenge some of these things. But if there are really big problems that surface, there's still time to fix it before a lot of people are, you know, disenfranchised. But compared to other places, it's important to note that Florida's changes to our election law weren't nearly as draconian as elsewhere. Yes, it's true that the drop box was changed. Now, supervisors of elections have to notify people 30 days ahead of where their drop boxes are going to be, and they must be an early voting site. Some look at that as good because it allows people to be informed about where they can do this. The hours have been changed in some places, but that's not really the same as just totally getting rid of drop boxes. Now that other downside of it, which the legislature may address, is the fact that counties now have to have an employee of the Supervisor of Elections Office monitoring the drop boxes all the hours that it's open. And that, of course, adds extra expense to the election and many of the election costs are at the local level. So that's just kind of one of those things that we're watching to see what's happening. There are some other aspects to it about while some say it's harder now to vote by mail. Yes, they did change it so that now you have to notify your supervisor's office every year that you want to vote by mail ballot. However, people who have already registered last election are grandfathered in through 2022, giving election officials a lot of time to inform people about some of these changes. So I think that Mr. Meade, who's an icon and revered here by people of both parties for his efforts and his optimism, and the way that he goes about talking and encouraging everyday people and informing them as opposed to becoming polemical. He's just been masterful at it, and I applaud him tremendously.

**Paul Reyes** [00:30:56] Well, on one of the things I've read about is how election administrators have actually teamed together to defend the election and ask politicians to tone down the rhetoric of distrust in Florida's voting systems. Are you seeing that?

**Susan McManus** [00:31:08] Absolutely. And they have made a big point of saying that our democracy demands it and is contingent upon the toning down of the rhetoric. People are in general, and this has nothing to do with the law, just increasingly distrustful of any information or anything they get from government officials and the press and media. That's posing a huge burden on Florida supervisor of elections, to the point of which, for the first



time in their association's history, they've actually sent letters to elected officials begging them to calm down and to be less polemical. And it's hurting us and our ability, meaning the supervisors, our ability to inform people because people have become increasingly distrustful of anything that's coming out of politicians mouths. And I know personally, one of my former students is a supervisor, and he said he'd been threatened repeatedly and constantly gets these kind of off the wall emails. And I know that the supervisors everywhere feel like this is unfair because they did - by even the governor's account - run a very stellar election in 2020.

**Will Hitchcock** [00:32:23] Well, I can't imagine why people distrust government and distrust election outcomes. I mean, what could possibly be the source of this distrust? Look, I mean, Donald Trump won Florida pretty comfortably right by three and a half percent in the 2020 presidential election. But according to Tampa Bay Times, they've reported last month that Trump supporters are going around the state hunting for election fraud. They're knocking on doors. They're looking for addresses that don't match the voter rolls. They're calling for an audit of results. Now, interestingly, Governor Ron DeSantis, of course, is very close to former President Trump is defending the integrity of the election. I'm just I just got to ask you as a close observer of these parties and of the day-to-day life, political life in Florida. Tell us in Florida, what is this commitment to the, you know, the fraud story, the Big Lie story about the 2020 election? What is it supposed to accomplish? What is it tactically trying to do?

**Susan McManus** [00:33:23] In fairness, again, it's not universal among conservatives by any stretch or by Republicans. Yes, there are those who still think that overall there was some sort of problem. Recently, we've had a couple counties and legislator call for a forensic audit in Florida, like was done in Arizona. But it's not really taking hold. People are really not paying a lot of attention to it, and it will be really curious because the legislature goes into session, as I said in January, and it's an election year, so we will see how much this carries. But it is true you have very conservative and then you have more moderate conservative Republicans, so you really kind of have within the Republican Party of Florida splits and people who are very concerned that too much talk about the audits and, you know, the election results being fraudulent will tamp down turnout here, which Republicans have benefited from from the last three or four election cycles. They've won very close races by the fact that they turn out their voters at a higher rate.

**Will Hitchcock** [00:34:33] I'm looking at the history of presidential outcomes in Florida since 1980, and Republicans have won the state with three exceptions. Bill Clinton once and Barack Obama twice. Is it safe to say that Florida has really become not so much of a swing state anymore?

**Susan McManus** [00:34:50] A lot of people are wondering that, but my answer is that's not entirely accurate. The gap in 2020 was in large part because of the low turnout of younger voters - lower than usual. It was an election where the Latino vote mattered more than it had in the past, which is a pattern that was relatively new and you had a new coalition. But it reflects the changing demographics. What we kind of don't know, looking ahead to 2022 is what about all the people that moved down here during the pandemic, from the Northeast, from the Midwest, even from California and some from Texas? That includes businesses and people. We don't have any idea about how they're registering or how active they're going to be or even what their big issues are. We suspect that for anybody in Florida, that climate will increasingly be an important issue because people move here or live here, often because of our state's tremendous environmental assets. But also very worried about threats to that pristine environment that they came here for.

**Paul Reyes** [00:36:02] Susan, I want to pivot back to something you mentioned earlier. And it has to do with the research you've been doing on the characteristics of different voting blocs, and you mentioned the effect in the impact of generational changes, non party affiliation. And in migration and in particular, I wonder if you could speak to the what you think the impact will be of non party affiliation voters as well as in migration voters on future election cycles.

**Susan McManus** [00:36:31] It's certainly something we're watching. Both parties. If you are to look at the trend line of registration by party, let's say even 10 years ago, Democrats have been on a steady decline and Republicans for the last few cycles have been sort of flat. But the upward the sharp upward swing has been towards people registering as no party affiliation. A lot of it is coming from younger voters. But just last night, I was at a political event, a memorial to a deceased state legislator, and some people I know who have been party activists on both sides for years have changed a no party affiliation because they're simply disgusted with the polarization and the lack of civility and so forth. But the bottom line is, if you're one of those two main parties, you've got to appeal to NPAs. You've got to build some sort of coalition or you're not going to win Florida because right now the two parties are virtually at parity. By last count, there was only 24000 more Democrats and Republicans in Florida, and some projections are that that may be reversed for the first time. It may be that Republicans outnumber Democrats, even though it would be narrowly for next year. So they're both parties are sort of realizing they're not doing real well and grabbing these younger voters who are increasingly a larger and larger share and who have gone through different life experiences and use different media. So both parties are really scrambling. But the difficulty is the NPAs themselves are very diverse, even though in general, the larger share are the younger generations.

**Will Hitchcock** [00:38:14] Susan, I do feel that we'd be remiss if we didn't bring up an important global public health issue in a Florida context, which is the COVID pandemic. So Governor DeSantis is calling for a special session this month to basically try to beat back federal vaccine mandates. Meanwhile, Florida has been very up and down, and during the pandemic now it ranks seventh in the nation in COVID cases are ninth in deaths relative to its population. About 60000 Floridians have died of COVID so far. Do you have a sense as you look at the political landscape, how the response to the COVID pandemic in Florida will shape politics statewide?

**Susan McManus** [00:38:55] It's definitely a highly, highly partisan issue, and it is an issue that from the get go has been the driving issue for Democratic candidates for governor thus far. Specifically, Nikki Friede, who's the current agricultural commissioner and U.S. Representative Charlie Crist, former mayor. They have from the get go said that that's the way that they've been largely attacking the governor. And now we have a third party candidate coming in, Annette Taddeo, who isn't focused quite as much on that as the other two have been, but she just got into the race. There are two sides to that approach. There are Democrats who are worried that too much focus on attacking the governor and linking him to Trump on COVID may not be the wisest strategy, if that turns out not to be the situation where that's such a huge, dominant issue by the time people go vote next year. There are others who say, well, this is the governor's most vulnerable decision that he's made so far, and they see the struggles and turmoil from people and constituents in their own districts and in different parts of the state. And they say, no, this is really hit them hard where we've got the best data. But even there, the data that's used, for example, right now, I think Florida has the second lowest hospitalization rate or whatever per capita of any of the 50 states. But yet we have higher numbers. As you've already mentioned, the

numbers game is a difficult one to play because the numbers can change as well. It's also extremely and strongly interfaced with school politics. I don't need to say much about that. It's in the national news everywhere, but it's those parents with kids, particularly suburban women with children in our state, have traditionally been the swing vote. So we're really closely watching how that issue is playing out. School board activism across Florida and as vary depending on what part of the state you're in.

**Will Hitchcock** [00:41:13] Well, Susan McManus, you've shown us that the Sunshine State, you know, lives up to its reputation as one of the most complex but, of course, significant states in the country politically. Thank you so much for joining us on Democracy in Danger.

**Susan McManus** [00:41:26] Thank you so much for having me. It's really an honor.

**Will Hitchcock** [00:41:43] Susan McManus is a distinguished professor emerita at the University of South Florida in Tampa. She's the author with Thomas Ar dai of the textbook on local government politics in states and communities, and she's been called the most quoted political analyst in Florida.

**Paul Reyes** [00:41:59] Democracy in Danger is part of the Democracy Group podcast network. Visit Democracy Group dot org to find all our sister shows. We'll be right back.

**Will Hitchcock** [00:42:16] Paul, that was a terrific conversation with Susan McManus. What did you make of her take on the quote unquote Hispanic community, the Latino vote? She told us that there is no such thing. Basically, there is so much diversity in Florida of communities that have any number of different national origins that to speak of a Latino voter or Hispanic vote is misleading. But then even within these communities, there are hot-button issues that divide them. I mean, reflect a little bit about, you know, you're growing up. I mean, did you did you see this? Is this is this consistent with your kind of sense for just how unpredictable Florida is?

**Paul Reyes** [00:42:52] Well, it's unpredictable. If you approach it with a particular kind of gaze, right? And if you're looking at it with the tendency to try and consolidate groups of people according to their otherness. Growing up in Florida, growing up as a Hispanic, it seemed to go without saying that people align themselves with values and issues that matter to them, aside from their ethnic identity, racial identity, etc.. So it always surprises me the degree to which the narrative is one of surprise that you know, that they're not. We're not behaving like a monolithic bloc and that this consolidation into a particular group, you know, seems to be falling apart. You know, you look at various parts of the country you're going to have for lack of a better way of categorizing it, massive Hispanic voting blocs that are going to vote in radically different ways, depending on what part of the country you're in, because they're from different countries. And this is a different set of values, a different set of experiences. And so it just comes down to what matters individually.

**Will Hitchcock** [00:43:56] Yeah, I mean, I think 2020 was a wakeup call to the demographers and the political analysts because the Hispanic vote just didn't line up with the narrative that they'd been peddling for years and years, which is rising, you know, numbers of black and brown people. We're going to skew the electorate democratic. And guess what? It didn't happen. The electorate is unpredictable and the electorate is subdivided bill by dozens of different issues that they care about. So in a way, I don't know that we've yet wrapped our head around what this means for the political analysts. We

almost can't speak of ethnicity as a defining or determinative category in politics anymore. Or at least if we do, we run the risk of having egg on our face.

**Paul Reyes** [00:44:41] And when it speaks to as well, is that the modes of capturing that information to think predictably about how particular groups of people are going to vote are outdated and something needs to change. And we already heard about the demise of polling as we know it at the end of the last election. You know, one thing that occurs to me and hearing her is the disparity between registration and actual voting. At some point, it seems possible that there could be a tremendous amount of enthusiasm on the front end. But again, when it comes to voting actual voting, especially when personality cult of personality come into the picture and effect way, the ways in which voters vote, that there might be a difference between what they anticipate and what actually ends up happening at the polls. It goes without saying that politics is an emotional sport. And when you have these, you know, large personalities or compelling personalities exacerbated or enhanced by television, by media, et cetera, it plays a huge part of it, and I have a feeling that it runs a little deeper than than we've been acknowledging.

**Will Hitchcock** [00:45:43] Or maybe we're looking for the answers in the data which are actually staring us in the face, which is Trump. As a Floridian, he's a gigantic personality in that state. His story is one of, you know, enormous business success. Love him or hate him, in Florida he's been present in that state for decades. And so in that sense, he had a home field advantage in 2020.

**Paul Reyes** [00:46:09] Sure. That wraps it up for this episode and for this series on Some Fine States.

**Will Hitchcock** [00:46:13] Well, not exactly. Siva will be back with me next week with a short wrap up conversation on this miniseries and a look at the results of the statewide election we just witnessed here in Virginia.

**Glenn Younkin** [00:46:25] All right, who's ready for a new governor?

**Terry McAuliffe** [00:46:28] Let's get those vote out! Let's make history here!

**Will Hitchcock** [00:46:32] And soon after that, we'll start dropping a new set of shows on perilous hotspots all over the world. Tell us what you think we should cover. Tweet at us @dindpodcast. That's DIND Podcast.

**Paul Reyes** [00:46:45] Don't forget to stop by our web page [DinDanger.org](http://DinDanger.org). There you'll find lots to read and a full version of Robert's interview with Desmond Meade. And please do these guys a solid - subscribe to the show and leave a review. There's no better way to help them reach new listeners.

**Will Hitchcock** [00:46:59] Democracy in Danger is produced by Robert Armengol with help from Jennifer Ludovici. Sidney Halleman edits the show. Our interns are Denzel Mitchell, Jane Frankel and Elie Bashkow. Special thanks, of course, to Paul Reyes for guest hosting this episode.

**Paul Reyes** [00:47:14] My pleasure, Will. 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. It's distributed by the Virginia Audio Collective, the podcast hub of WTJU Radio in Charlottesville. I'm Paul Reyes.

**Will Hitchcock** [00:47:31] And I'm Will Hitchcock. We'll see you here next time.