

## Democracy in Danger

### S3E9 Some Fine States Pt5 – The Wrap

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

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

**Will Hitchcock** [00:00:06] And from the University of Virginia's Deliberative Media Lab, this is Democracy in Danger.

**Siva Vaidhyanathan** [00:00:12] As our listeners know, we just wrapped up four episodes on the state of democracy across the union, specifically in the states of Texas, Virginia, Colorado and Florida.

**Will Hitchcock** [00:00:23] And right here in Virginia last week, we witnessed and participated in a race for governor that ended with a sharp turnaround for a state that lately had been leaning blue and frankly pursuing a progressive policy agenda. The Republican nominee and once the underdog, the multi-millionaire Glenn Youngkin, defeated former governor Terry McAuliffe, the Democrat, an establishment figure in his party. And the GOP also took control of the state House of Delegates, swinging Virginia sharply to the right in a single night.

**Siva Vaidhyanathan** [00:00:56] Today on the show, it's just Will and me. We wanted to take a breather from our usual format with guests and just talk about that election and what it means to the larger state of democracy. And along the way we'll maybe draw out some of the recurring threads that have cropped up in this series.

**Will Hitchcock** [00:01:15] Yes, Siva, there's a lot to discuss. We heard stories in our series about the states about public education as a new battleground in the culture wars. We heard about the bogus narrative of election fraud, which hangs over our time and about voter suppression, alongside a story, interestingly of massive voter re-enfranchisement in Florida.

**Siva Vaidhyanathan** [00:01:36] So Will, it's been a few days since we found out that we are about to get our first Republican governor in eight years. How do you feel about this?

**Will Hitchcock** [00:01:44] Well, I'm discouraged. I'm worried. On the one hand, democracy seemed to work. We had a better than average turnout. Here in Virginia, we have off-year elections. But honestly, the lessons that I'm drawing from Virginia make me worried about the future of the Democratic Party and the future of the country. Where I'm going with this is that I think that since 2016, the stakes feel as if they're much higher. The polarization of both parties has been pretty dramatic. But I would say that the the way in which Republicans have campaigned since 2016 all across Virginia has been sharply different than a long tradition of conservative slash centrist Republicans actually working with conservatives slash centrist Democrats in this Commonwealth of Virginia. That tradition has is appears to be broken now. There is very little common ground, and I can't imagine what the next two years before we have our next round of elections in this state are going to be like.

**Siva Vaidhyanathan** [00:02:43] But look, I don't lament the breakdown in that consensus, right? I lived in Texas a long time. I moved there under the reign of the conservative/moderate Democrat with a handful of liberals like Ann Richards and Jim

Hightower thrown in. But you know, for the most part, it was these, you know, Yellow Dog Democrats who are today mostly Republicans who ran the state very close to oil and gas interests, very close to banking interests, uninterested in really empowering black and brown voters except when they could harvest their votes, right? So. So that kind of politics to me never got the job done. I'm actually kind of happy with the fact that our two major parties more honestly reflect differing agendas and ideologies that really lets voters choose a direction and know what they're getting. But man, I was surprised that this state that I thought was pretty safely blue had a whole lot more voters than I thought, who don't agree with me. So what do you think about this? Was Younkin's victory an expression of democracy working or a sign that democracy is in danger? What do you think?

**Will Hitchcock** [00:03:57] Well, if - you know, I didn't like the results, so I have to say that I've got to find something wrong with our democracy. Of course, you're right that basically democracy, if we say basically all it means is that the citizens have an opportunity to vote, is alive and well in the Commonwealth of Virginia. The Democratic trifecta, which controls the governor's office and the two legislative bodies, passed a great deal of voting rights legislation in the last year that allowed many more days of early voting, access to drop boxes, absentee ballots. I mean, we did everything we could to get more people to the polls. Ironically, of course, the result was that the voters chose to express their will and going very much against the agenda of the Democrats who've been in control of the state this past year. I will just say, though, that democracy is not just about getting, say, more than 50 percent of eligible voters to the polls, it's also about having well-informed and substantive debates about significant issues. And I don't think anybody can point to the election that just occurred in Virginia and say we had a substantive serious debate about the issues that are most likely to shape our lives in the next coming couple of years.

**Siva Vaidhyanathan** [00:05:06] I take your point about what we didn't have. We don't really have good local newspapers and good local radio stations covering the issues of the day anymore. I'm not sure we ever really had a great situation, but like, yeah, it's really hard to mount a conversation. So I'm sitting here as a voter, right? I'm not a low information voter. I think of myself as a high information voter. I'm a voracious consumer of news. I couldn't tell you what Terry McAuliffe, our former governor and the Democratic nominee, wanted to do as governor over four years. I could not tell you his plan as governor. I can tell you that Glenn Youngkin, the Republican who won, had at least one agenda item and that was he wants to get rid of sales tax on groceries. And when I saw that ad and by the way, that was the only ad that said something close to 'what I want to do as governor'. You know, I said, that's a pretty good idea. Like, why do we have sales tax on groceries? Why didn't two consecutive Democratic administrations get rid of that sales tax on groceries? Why didn't the previous Republican administration get rid of the sales tax on groceries? Why do we have sales tax and groceries? It's a dumb, regressive idea.

**Will Hitchcock** [00:06:20] I mean, let me just say I completely agree that the blame needs to be placed on McAuliffe and his advisers. They ran a poor campaign. Essentially, they ran a campaign that was a year too late. It was a year stale. They ran against Donald Trump, who was not actually running for office this year and not running in Virginia.

**Siva Vaidhyanathan** [00:06:36] In this sense I felt like a low information voter in the sense that the last person I wanted to think about was Donald Trump. And every time Terry McAuliffe brought out Donald Trump, I just felt a little bit ill. And I just was like, Donald Trump's a private citizen with very little power over us. He has a lot of power in the Republican Party, but that primary was settled. It just doesn't matter. Glenn Youngkin, for

all his flaws, is not Donald Trump. We don't know who he is, but he's not Donald Trump. Now, here's the thing. I'm watching the World Series. I'm watching like Game four. I mean, I watch most of it. But like game four I noticed there were just a whole bunch of commercials for both McAuliffe and Youngkin running in there. Now, the McAuliffe commercial came on and had images of the Nazi invasion of Charlottesville in 2017 and the invasion of the Capitol in 2021. January 2021, right? And it's scary. And he's trying to associate those images with Glenn Youngkin, and I have to say that was unpersuasive. Also like, come on, do you really want to lay all of that at the feet of, you know, what is he a hedge fund millionaire or billionaire who, as far as we can tell, was not active in the QAnon movement as far as we can tell. It is not like it just didn't connect with me. But the impression was, Oh my god, Virginia is being overrun by Nazis, right? Which, yeah, that was a really bad summer in Charlottesville when we were overrun by Nazis. I'm the last person to minimize that. Virginia day to day is not overrun by Nazis. Now, flash next to the Glenn Youngkin commercial. This is "Oh my god. Our schools are overrun by black and brown kids who are beating up your white children". That was the message of Glenn Youngkin's commercial like our schools are filled with violence. And by the way, this must be the fault of the guy who's not governor. Like what?

**Will Hitchcock** [00:08:21] You know, that's interesting that both candidates, in a sense, tried to appeal to a sense of dread and fear.

**Siva Vaidhyanathan** [00:08:26] Yeah!

**Will Hitchcock** [00:08:27] But McAuliffe's felt dated. Whereas Youngkin spoke right - you know, it hit the nail on the head,

**Siva Vaidhyanathan** [00:08:33] If you're going to scare people use something that really scares people. But I get it. I get why people would vote for him.

**Will Hitchcock** [00:08:41] I think the public education issue is one we're going to see a lot of in the coming years. We're already seeing it. Certainly, it was central. It was a way of talking about race pretty explicitly while pretending to talk about education. Right? This isn't new. We've had arguments about the history wars and what narratives to teach in our textbooks for a long time.

**Siva Vaidhyanathan** [00:09:03] Goes back to reconstruction.

**Will Hitchcock** [00:09:04] Yeah, I mean, it's a it's a well over a century old, but it's surprising to see how vibrant, how effective that argument is. And the thesis that Youngkin put forward in so many words is that affluent white people have the inherent right to dictate the content of school curricula for all students, not just affluent white students - for all students, whether they're black or brown or indigenous people or immigrants. Those people need to be folded into a single narrative of white progress, which is, of course, mythical, but nonetheless a very powerful idea that many white suburban voters still adhere to. To me, and I'll just put this in historical terms to me, this is the language of colonialism that essentially central bureaucrats in London or Paris devised textbooks for Senegalese kids to talk about their ancestors the Gauls, which of course, you know it makes a mockery of the notion of public education. This is what's happening. There is a single dominant white narrative that's being written so that we will expunge our textbooks and our consciousness of the suffering that is inherent in the American experience.

**Siva Vaidhyanathan** [00:10:10] You know people hate feeling guilty. They people hate feeling that their position in life might not be a result of their hard work or their parents hard work or their grandparents hard work. That there might have been something else playing into their position in life. And people feel terrified at any sign that in a zero-sum world, their position in life might not be the same in 20 years as it is now, or that you might actually just get called out on stuff right? That in fact, their position in life was a result of the roll of the dice. Certainly, that's part of it. But let's be straight about this. The economic crash of 2008 still hurts. It set people back in a serious way, and a lot of people have not recovered. Their faith in the future and in democracy and in America was shaken deeply. And clearly, the Obama response to it was inadequate. The Trump response to it was purely symbolic and gestural. And Biden seems to want to finally fix some of the injuries done by the policies that led up to the crash of 2007 and 2008. But his own party with Joe Manchin specifically won't let him. And so no matter what he says or wants to do, it looks like he's still not solving the problem. So of course, people are frustrated and fed up with Democrats. This is the second Democratic president who has not taken care of business.

**Will Hitchcock** [00:11:36] I wonder if I could just step back a minute and put on my historian hat and just say a few words about a kind of big picture theory that that I have. That, unfortunately, is really depressing. But hey, this is Democracy in Danger. So yeah, we bring it down before we lift you up. I think that our series on states was wonderful and revealing about how states matter, and each one is different in its own way and each one has pathologies of its own. But I think we should also remind ourselves of what's the longer historical view here. Since arguably the middle of the 19th century, the United States has gone through periods of dramatic social progress in a brief period, followed by long periods of reaction. And you can think about the Civil War as a moment of dramatic breakthrough - the abolition of slavery - followed by basically 70 years of reaction. Of Jim Crow segregation of institutionalized racism. Arguably the New Deal of 1933, in the midst of a huge global economic crisis, as well as the rise of fascism, offers another moment - a short, sharp break in the traditions of America. Namely progressive legislation that focused on jobs, on industry, on infrastructure, on progress, on unemployment relief, on conservation that lasted, historically speaking, a very short time. Arguably throughout the 1940s and 50s, there was a period of chipping away at some of that progress. But nonetheless, through the middle of the 1960s, we saw, you know, the civil rights movement emerging in a sense, in conversation with the New Deal, the New Deal and the Great Society became the bookends of a moment of extraordinary American progress from the thirties to the 60s. I hate to say it, but I feel like I've been living throughout my entire life - having been born in 1965 - in the age of reaction. The intense period of reaction, I think, came with Ronald Reagan's election. But nonetheless, it began to be plausible and possible to argue against the legacies of progress of the New Deal and of the Great Society. As early as the 1970s, Reagan implemented this and deregulation, and it's been carried on by a series of ideological successors. And at every moment- I'm not saying there haven't been signs of progress...look, we've got, you know, gay marriage was suddenly approved by a relatively conservative Supreme Court to give you an example. But these moments of progress - electing a black president - have masked us to the fact that basically the long the long story here is that we are living in an age of reaction that is about 40 years old right now. Right? Probably will last another generation until the pain of revoking the rights that had been secured in the 19th century and in the middle of the 20th century becomes too great for the country to bear. Only then are we ever going to find the anger, the passion and the vocabulary to push back against what has been a regrettable and maybe two generations long period of counter-revolution.

**Siva Vaidhyanathan** [00:14:23] And what we see now is Joe Biden, who I think is more LBJ than Barack Obama. Right? I think he's got a sense that having another reconstruction is a good idea, even if he's not so blunt about it. I mean, he's still a white guy from Pennsylvania in his heart, and that's in many ways, his great strength. But, you know, we are seeing so first of all, when you and I talk to our students, these are different Americans. These are Americans who see a different future, who see the dissatisfaction with democracy and not just the direct threats to democracy, but deep dissatisfaction with democracy. And we're talking - I know I'm talking about students who don't all vote the same way and don't all see things the same way, but they have a sense that there are things to be fixed and they don't have a glossy view of American progress.

**Will Hitchcock** [00:15:17] No, no. And they're very worried about things that adults just can't get their heads around, like climate change.

**Siva Vaidhyanathan** [00:15:22] That's right. And I think that that means that we at least have rhetorical space that we never had at any other time in our lifetimes. So I think that that says something, the work that has to be done to make that real is astounding.

**Will Hitchcock** [00:15:38] Yeah, I agree. I think that I really believe that until Democrats and the left generally find better arguments, more persuasive arguments to take advantage of, of our democratic institutions - to go to the people with a sense of urgency. I think fundamentally centrism is basically not...centrism, competence and a sort of sense that there's a adults in the room. This kind of language might have worked in a different era. I don't think it works in in the era of Trump and post Donald Trump. I think what is happening is the Democratic Party is headed to become like the Labor Party in the UK, basically a permanent opposition where specific pieces of its political platform are popular. But they have no way of actualizing or mobilizing the people around that agenda, in part because it's widely, you know, divided between factions, but also because they've they've lost the language of urgency, the language of immediacy, of the language that suggests that there's a crisis going on in our lives at the moment that needs immediate - and immediate - restoration.

**Siva Vaidhyanathan** [00:16:44] So let me give you a place where those issues were tested. Buffalo, New York. There was a mayoral election this week in Buffalo, New York, where I grew up, by the way, so I follow very closely. So Buffalo is a white flight city. It was one of the wealthiest cities in America. It had -when I was born in 1966, I arrived in a city that had just won two AFL championships in pro football, and the American Football League was really the only football league that mattered at the time. So Buffalo was the future where it didn't turn out so well, right? White flight starts a lot of just overt racism, both in policy and in police work and in daily life and created tremendous misery. The deindustrialization started in the 1970s, really kicked up under Reagan, devastated all kinds of people in Buffalo, you know? So by the time I graduated from high school in 1984, it was time to get out. There was no future for me or for most people my age in Buffalo. So Buffalo is now majority black. The city itself or the metropolitan area is certainly not, but the city itself is majority black. For the last I think, 12 years, it's had a black mayor who is a mainstream Democrat. A guy named Byron Brown, who has been elected with the support of the police unions, the support of the big developers. And he has overseen a economic renaissance in downtown Buffalo that has created gentrification and has driven people out of their homes in East Buffalo, the traditionally black area. So all of a sudden this year, a pretty radical, a democratic socialist community activist from East Buffalo decided to run in the Democratic primary against Byron Brown, and she won. She, like, totally wiped him out in the Democratic primary. And this is going to be a pretty amazing story. On Tuesday,

Byron Brown got 59 percent of the vote. He totally wiped out the Democratic nominee, and he did this as a write-in candidate. Why? Because black voters voted for him, not for the African-American community activist from their own neighborhood. They voted for the mainstream, fairly conservative machine Democrat who has the support of the police unions, who said I will increase the police budget, not defund the police, and black voters voted overwhelmingly for him. You know, there's a lesson in there. I don't know exactly what it is, but I see the only thing we can conclude is everything is unsettled. Everything is up in the air. Voters themselves aren't sure what they want, but nobody sounds very appealing right now. That's a problem for democracy too, right? If you can't find your people when it's time to vote, that can create a deep sense of unsettledness and make people susceptible to all sorts of swings.

**Will Hitchcock** [00:19:32] Well, that's a fascinating story and a window into how city politics can sometimes help us kind of figure out larger state and national patterns. I'll just say that my own gut feeling is that in a period of confusion that allows people with short, angry, you know, inflammatory talking points to shape the dialog, that's what Glenn Youngkin did. So I think you're absolutely right. The the degree of confusion is actually really worrisome for, you know, how a demagog can manipulate reality, that's the that's the situation we're still in, even though Donald Trump is no longer president.

**Siva Vaidhyanathan** [00:20:08] Yeah, yeah. But I'll say this, I have some concerns about the future of Virginia, and they track with a lot of the concerns that we have explored in the last few episodes of Democracy in Danger as we've walked around various states. So, for instance, there's a good chance that in the next couple of weeks, the U.S. Supreme Court is going to overturn Roe versus Wade and the Casey decision as well, and throw it to the states and say, Hey, states, you figure out abortion. And then we know what's going to happen in Texas, right? It's the Texas law that is one of the big indicators of just how anti-abortion this court is. But it's also, you know, maybe a roadmap for other states and how they structure their anti-abortion laws to make it Roe proof if the next Supreme Court changes it again. But what happens in Virginia? What happens in most of these states, right? Virginia is, let's face it, mostly a blue state, mostly a pro-choice state. But we don't know what happens the day after Roe is overturned. Is abortion going to be legal or illegal in Virginia? And if the legislature decides to pass a law to clarify that, is this new Republican governor going to sign it right now? I think abortion is about to become a state issue in 50 separate states, and it's going to be really frightening for women all over America.

**Will Hitchcock** [00:21:36] But in Virginia, I think you would agree there is a pro-choice majority. Yeah. So if Glenn Youngkin, as one of his first acts as the first Republican to be elected governor in a decade, goes to war with women's right to control their body? I think he's probably a smart enough politician to know that could significantly derail his other legislative agenda. It's more likely that he will nibble around the edges, looking for tax breaks, looking for a new education bill that will ban various kinds of history teaching, and that he could get through at least one arm of the legislature and maybe eventually both, and probably leave the abortion rights in Virginia for the time being, to the High Court and to the fallout that will happen in other states.

**Siva Vaidhyanathan** [00:22:24] But he doesn't have to take any action, right? He could just not sign something. Now, look, you know, it almost doesn't matter that abortion is popular because, you know, we don't have that sense of democratic responsiveness built into our system. And one of the reasons we don't is that our legislatures around the country do not map to the will of the voters because of gerrymandering. Now, here in

Virginia, as we learned in our episode, we have this bipartisan commission trying to write and draw fair boundaries so that we don't have this crazy gerrymandering. We don't know if that's going to work out. You know, I think that that's a big thing to worry about. All this work that we've done to make a move toward reconnecting the voters to the power and getting it so voters choose our leaders and leaders, choose their voters seem to be on the verge of being undone.

**Will Hitchcock** [00:23:15] Well, I think this is a way to come back to your opening question: Is the election we just had in Virginia good for democracy or not? If you want to take the view that, hey, people went to the polls and they voted, so democracy is fine. OK, fine. But let's look at the outcomes. Various policies are popular. Access to abortion is one of them, but they are not reflected in our legislatures. Why not? Because there is a fundamental problem in the translation from the will of the voters into the will of the people to the behavior of right-wing majorities in these legislatures. That is not good for democracy. Democracy is not delivering. It is not listening to the will of the people. So I mean, maybe that's just liberal tears. And I'm not crying because I didn't get the outcome that I wanted at the at the polls. But there is something fundamentally broken or wrong, or at least very frustrating when you know that certain policies that are popular in the states and in the country as a whole are not reflected in the legislative bodies because of things like redistricting, which year in and year out get worse and worse and worse, along with voter suppression. So it's not a time to celebrate. Hey, you know, the great turnout at the polls because the end result is going to be a worsening of life for many Americans.

**Siva Vaidhyanathan** [00:24:27] We still have one political party that is at its root declared itself against democracy. And we have a big problem, and we don't know that Glenn Youngkin is going to be one of those people who changes the Republican Party back into a party that actually supports democracy. But look, I've said this time and time again on this show. Democracy is not about my side winning. Democracy is about my side losing and all of us walking away or waking up the next day and saying, Well, that was a fair fight. The rules worked. People abide by the rules, and at least we agree on the basic operational principles. And we're really nowhere near that right now. So we can't take this one result and say, well, in Virginia, things worked pretty well. Things will be fine because they could just change the rules on us. They could turn around and undo all the voting rights that Virginia has passed in the last few years. They could do worse, and they can crack down on what teachers can say in classrooms. And what you and I can say as professors, right there could be a Ron DeSantis style Florida style attack on what professors say in classrooms and beyond classrooms. We might not have this podcast in five years if the Republicans get too much power and get too angry at us.

**Will Hitchcock** [00:25:39] If you're not sad, angry and pissed off, you're not paying attention.

**Siva Vaidhyanathan** [00:25:43] Wow. OK, well, you know, I think that pretty much wraps up this episode of Democracy in Danger. We are the Mike and the Mad Dog of American democracy. Please stay with us over the next few episodes because we're going to step back again and look at some hot spots in different places.

**Will Hitchcock** [00:26:03] Our first stop isn't taking us too far.

**Aniko Bodroghkozy** [00:26:06] There is a reason that this trial is happening. It's because of the counterprotesters. It's because of the movement that was built here in Charlottesville.

**Siva Vaidhyanathan** [00:26:19] In the meantime, please stay in touch. You can tweet at us at DinD podcast. That's DIND podcast. Tell your friends, neighbors and your cranky uncles about the show.

**Will Hitchcock** [00:26:32] And be sure to check out our excellent web page [DinDanger.org](http://DinDanger.org). We have tons of material there on every show and a lot worth using in the classroom if you happen to be a teacher,

**Siva Vaidhyanathan** [00:26:44] ...while you can still say what you want as a teacher. Democracy in Danger is produced by Robert Armengol with help from Jennifer Ludovici. Sidney Halleman edits the show and our fabulous interns are Denzel Mitchell, Jane Frankel and Elie Bashkow.

**Will Hitchcock** [00:27:00] Support for the meantime 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, where distributed by the Virginia Audio Collective of WTJU Radio in Charlottesville. I'm Will Hitchcock

**Siva Vaidhyanathan** [00:27:17] and I'm Siva "mad dog" Vaidyanathan. Until next time.