

Democracy in Danger

S4 E16: Past Present Future

Elie Bashkow [00:00:00] This episode was recorded live on Thursday, June 9th, 2022.

Will Hitchcock [00:00:07] Hello and welcome everyone. I'm Will Hitchcock.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:00:09] And I'm Siva Vaidhyanathan.

Will Hitchcock [00:00:11] And live from the American Political History Conference at Purdue University in West Lafayette, Indiana. This is Democracy in Danger.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:00:23] Thank you for that. Yeah, well, it's been quite a journey these past two years. You know, we got this show going in the first burst of the pandemic. It was the turbulent summer of 2020, and it was a really nervous time. That was an election coming. We had no idea how the world or the country was going to turn at that point.

Will Hitchcock [00:00:43] Well, and you remember, of course, six months into the podcast, we lived through an insurrection, and it happened for us in real time as we were teaching a class based on Democracy and Danger. It was an unforgettable moment. Well, now we're taping this live episode on the very evening that the House Democrats take their January 6 hearings directly to the American public.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:01:03] Yeah, you know, I'm sorry to say that these hearings are going to place front and center a whole lot of the ugliness that we have been unpacking for our listeners over the past few years, the deep roots of white supremacy and authoritarianism and so many unabashed efforts to undermine elections, the dark web. Right. All of this will be mixed into these hearings.

Will Hitchcock [00:01:25] Yeah. And it's been 70 plus episodes, Siva, that we've been doing this. And there's no doubt that democracy as a form of government is in decline in America, but also it's embattled around the world. And the question that we've been grappling with on the show and that we're going to continue with tonight is why? Just why is democracy in such a perilous state? Why is the death knell ringing now? And that's one we've been trying to wrap our heads around. And it's been a challenge.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:01:49] Right. So tonight we have some of the finest minds in the business of history, not just the distinguished guests on stage with us, but everyone here in the audience with us. If any group can explain why us democracy is dying before our eyes. This is the group, and we're here to try to do it today.

Will Hitchcock [00:02:08] Well, let's introduce our three guests. First, we have Thomas Zimmer. He is a visiting professor at Georgetown University and a columnist for The Guardian. Thomas, welcome back to Democracy and Danger.

Thomas Zimmer [00:02:18] I'm very excited to be here. Thank you.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:02:20] Next, we have Liette Gidlow, a professor of history at Wayne State University in Michigan. Her forthcoming book is The 19th Amendment and the Politics of Race. Liette, welcome.

Liette Gidlow [00:02:31] Great. Thank you so much for having me.

Will Hitchcock [00:02:33] And finally, we're joined by Derek Musgrove. He's an associate professor at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County, who's been researching the history of black power in Washington, D.C.. Derek, thank you so much for joining us on Democracy in Danger.

Derek Musgrove [00:02:45] Thanks for having me.

Will Hitchcock [00:02:47] Liette I want to turn to you first and get this conversation rolling with a question that reflects your work on gender and democracy. So we had American women have had access to the ballot box for just over a century. You've written a lot about this. Today, American women have more representation in our political life than they ever have had. And yet we're in the midst of an escalating assault - I think that's the right word - on women's rights. And it seems clear women are about to lose the reproductive rights that they secured 50 years ago in Roe v Wade. We also know that abortion rights are favored by a substantial majority of the American public. So what does the erosion of women's rights that we're seeing today mean about the erosion of democracy in general?

Liette Gidlow [00:03:36] Well, it says that our democracy isn't working very well. Public opinion does not necessarily translate into public policy. Right. We don't govern by polling. We don't govern by plebiscite. We govern through processes in which various inputs like public opinion and votes go through institutions. And some kind of policy comes out at the other end or doesn't come out at the other end. And it may or may not reflect the inputs that have started interest in the issue. It's not the first time this has happened with respect to issues that pertain to women. It's certainly not the first time it's happened with respect to a whole lot of issues. Recent data from the Pew Research Center shows that a very stable, roughly 60% of Americans over the past two decades support abortion rights in most or all cases. But that doesn't necessarily translate into a policy outcome determined by an unelected court that is, by design insulated from public opinion. It was also true at the time that the ERA went down to defeat. In 1982, when the deadline expired, the ERA failed by three states just short of the number needed for ratification. As it was going down to defeat it was enjoying a 77% approval rating in public opinion polls. So public opinion doesn't translate into policy outcomes. And this is a cause of enormous frustration for many Americans of all political stripes.

Will Hitchcock [00:05:23] Let me follow up on this question of public opinion versus outcome. So 2018. A major reason for the success of Democrats in that election was women's activism. This is coming in the midst of the Trump presidency and the the sense that Trump represented a threat on so many levels to democracy, but in particular to women's rights. What does that episode, that moment, tell us about the potential of women's activism in politics? Was that a one off? Is this now a coalition that's a permanent part of our small d democratic landscape? How do you read the - as a historian of of women's mobilization - how do you read that event?

Liette Gidlow [00:06:00] Well, I think there were structural factors at play as because it is most often the case that in the first off year congressional elections, after a presidential election, the party in power loses seats. And that certainly was the case in 2018. The mobilization of women, of course, was valuable, in particular the mobilization of African-American women who voted Democratic in overwhelming numbers. So mobilization helps, but there are general trends and patterns that also affect these outcomes. And if that's the case, that spells a very difficult situation for Democrats this fall. And Joe Biden's poll

numbers right now show him very much underwater, despite things like a successful vaccine rollout and the American rescue plan. So mobilization is going to be key to try to blunt those effects.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:06:56] Well, Derek, let's talk about another kind of mobilization. You've studied African-American activism in the 1980s and nineties quite deeply. And so I would love to hear you compare and contrast the goals and results of that moment of activism with what we've just been through with the Black Lives Matter protests of the last three years. And also, how does it relate to the previous era of African-American activism? What are the different strategies, tactics, goals and and what do you see coming in terms of both blowback and success?

Derek Musgrove [00:07:31] Hmm. So, you know, I look at the black power movement as kind of a generational movement. And so there's there's that high point of black power in 1966, roughly to 1976. And then, you know, there's this moment where you have the urban crisis, the conservative ascendance. Reagan, of course, brings everybody into official power. And a lot of these old civil rights and black power activists are still around. I mean, a lot of them are really quite young, like Jesse Jackson or Joseph Lowery. And they say we have to get back out into the streets. And so what you see them doing is using some of the old institutions that had lost membership in the late 1970s as African-American politics sort of shifts towards a integrationist kind of politics, and they try to fill those institutions back up. The way they do that, though, is to look at all of these folks who are out in the different states and different cities who are essentially fighting for a piece of the economic pie or to not have a toxic waste dump in their backyard. And they try to knit them together into a national coalition that they hope will reinvigorate all of these organizations. And the specific items that they use to do that are the Martin Luther King protests led by Stevie Wonder and the March on Washington 20th anniversary of 1983. If you look at the paperwork for that march, this is not an exercise in nostalgia, which is, you know, sort of something that always sticks in my mind from Barack Obama when he talks about some of these marches. It was very specifically an agenda setting event designed to bring all of these disparate groups who have been struggling from the late 1970s through the early 1980s together into a coalition that could be ready for 1984. Right. Jesse Jackson sees that it decides to seize on it. And so you have these older organizations that facilitate a very specific type of politics, and they're being run by people who have direct institutional memory of the black power movement. One of the biggest differences that we see today is that you don't have that generation and those organizations informing our contemporary politics. You know, even when you look at the old heads that are that are working with Black Lives Matter activists, these are primarily black women, queer activists who had sort of come up in the in the 1990s trying to find a place for black women activists, queer activists and even radical activists in a black political world that was largely being dominated by Farrakhan. And so you really have a different sort of landscape today.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:10:07] So let's talk about blowback, right? Because Nixon ran in '68 and '72 with an explicit appeal to the fears of white Americans about that kind of black activism. Reagan might have bottled it up and the Democrats institutionalized a lot of that in the 1980s. But then Bill Clinton clearly put a strong wall between his campaign and his agenda and any traditions of radicalism or black activism, even though there were people who were veterans of that movement were close to him. And then now the Republicans are quite explicit about invoking the apparent complete burning of Portland, Oregon. I don't know. Last time I checked, Portland was still standing. But, you know, we keep hearing these things that that things have burned to the ground in the past years and there's billions of dollars in property damage. Right. None of which is true. So what do you make

of the blowback? Is the blowback a series of echoes, or has the blowback changed as well over time?

Derek Musgrove [00:11:07] I think the blowback has migrated rightward over time. You know, look, I focused primarily on the disconnects. I didn't even talk about the international dimension where you still have revolutionaries in the Third World communicating with African-American activists here, sort of pushing their politics leftward in the eighties and the mid eighties and even through 1990, when Nelson Mandela is coming to the United States to do a tour after he gets out of jail. But, you know, when you talk about continuity, the blowback is really where you see the continuity because you have Republicans who are just saying, look, African-Americans are the problem in a lot of cases and saying it over and over from the '70s to the present. Democrats are also responding in a very similar way over time, which is to say, okay, Jesse Jackson's a problem. He's pulling the party back towards the left. That's not how we're going to win. We need to root the party in the suburbs. We need to root the party among Reagan Democrats. And so we got to pull the party back from them. Same thing is happening today. We got to pull the party back from BLM. We can't talk about defund the police. And the scary thing about now when it comes to black politics, I think, is that in the mid-eighties, you had a large number of African-Americans who were outside of the political establishment who could serve as a counterweight to the DLC Democratic Leadership Council tendencies within the Democratic Party. Today you don't. To the same degree. I mean, a lot of high profile African-Americans are in the party in leadership, which is which is really a big difference. Right. And so, you know, very famous African-Americans who are in politics today are people like Hakeem Jeffries, who I love. But, you know, as the head of the party, he simply cannot take an oppositional standpoint in the way that Jesse Jackson did.

Will Hitchcock [00:12:47] Thomas, let's get you into the picture here. So let me just ask you to talk a little bit about a phrase that you wrote in which you said, basically, the Republican Party is their idea of democracy is utterly incompatible with the idea of a fully functioning, multiracial, pluralistic democracy. You take the gloves off. You see America, I think, at a place in its history where voters are being asked to choose between two very different kinds of political organization, democracy on the one hand, and essentially a kind of authoritarianism on the other. I want to ask you this. Are you surprised that half the country is prepared to embrace authoritarianism? What is the lure that lies out there for that model of government?

Thomas Zimmer [00:13:31] Well, look, I think what's animating the the anti-democratic radicalization on the right to me is the idea that in America, a certain group of people and the party that represents those people is entitled to rule. That white, conservative Christians, white, conservative Christian men in particular are entitled to rule. And regardless of whether or not it has a majority of the electorate behind it. I'm not really surprised that that is attractive or successful because that idea has been around for a long time. It has shaped the American political project since the beginning. Really, right. I mean, that is not new in American history. It's this idea that only the Republican Party represents real America, quote unquote, real America. Only the Republican Party represents the true will of the people. And I think what is interesting is that the people who hold that view, they are at times very much willing to stay within the political system and even support a sort of restricted version of democracy, as long as that version of democracy leaves that specific order in place. But that all that has come under pressure. It has come under pressure due to political, social, cultural, but most importantly, demographic change over the past few decades. And so now the people who think America should be first and foremost a place

where white Christian conservatives get to dominate and get to decide what is and what is not and what counts and what does not count as America. Many of those people have decided that democracy, even even in this restricted version of democracy, that American democracy has traditionally been, does not work for them anymore. And so quite a few of them have decided to openly embrace of authoritarianism.

Will Hitchcock [00:15:21] Let me paint your picture by way of follow up and ask you to comment. This is a maybe a little heavy handed, but imagine, if you will, a far right group stages an attempted coup d'etat. It fails through bungling and mishaps, and the leader is placed on trial and is ultimately convicted and sent to jail. But a decade later, the same leader of the movement becomes the head of state. And it seems as if conservative elites are basically levered this this radical into power. I'm just you know, I'm conjuring up historical parallels, which, of course, since you come from Germany, you have a sense for what the echoes are. But I want you to think about the January 6 hearings through the lens of the past. What are we likely to expect as citizens and as scholars from this reckoning with the insurrection of January 6th? What can we expect to get out of it in your mind? Do you think it's going to be a revelatory experience? How might it help or how might it harm in some ways our effort to sustain and rebuild our democracy?

Thomas Zimmer [00:16:23] I'm not sure if my being German will inform this answer. That's a fair. I get it. I get it. I'm German.

Will Hitchcock [00:16:30] I'm steeped in this period right now. I'm working on it. What can I say?

Thomas Zimmer [00:16:32] I need to talk about Weimar Germany. By the way - just quickly on Weimar Germany, it's quite interesting that it's become very fashionable on the right to make that comparison to Weimar Germany. They they love to talk about this as Americans Weimar moment - I think Tucker Carlson mentioned this on his show this week. They don't mean it as a warning, by the way. They mean it as a way to say how supposedly rotten the system is, how ripe for the taking it is, and how they will overtake it. So it's it's not meant as a warning, I don't think. Anyway, so the hearings look, I think we've already seen a lot of hand-wringing in mainstream media about, oh, will the hearings change people's minds? Will they convince Republicans, whatever? I think that just can't be the framing going into this. I don't think the hearings will convince anyone on the right. I think that is highly unlikely considering the political environment in which they take place, considering the information environment in which they take place. The right wing media machine is first going to boycott the hearings and then probably completely just lie about the findings. And even if we could get conservatives to pay attention, I mean, it seems based on a misunderstanding. It seems based on the idea that a lack of information is sort of the reason why people are still with Trump. If only they knew, right? If only they knew. I mean, look, much of what happened, much of the insurrection, much of Trump's role in this attempted coup happened out in the open, in plain sight. I don't think a lack of information is the problem here. If people are still on Team Trump in June 2022, I'm pretty sure we can assume they have found a way to give themselves permission to stay on Team Trump. So that's not, I think, what I'm looking for. To me, the most important thing is that we need to find a way to effectively communicate to people who are already in the small democratic camp how dire the situation is, how American democracy is hanging by a thread, how little time remains to halt America's accelerating slide into authoritarianism. And, you know, my hope would be that maybe the hearings can contribute to communicating effectively to people, that it is really time to raise the alarm. I'm not super hopeful, and I'm not going to sit here and say that's going to work. But if we are looking for something, I think we should

not look for, you know, Republicans being convinced or whatever we should look for maybe hopefully this contributing to mobilizing civil society against this sort of accelerating slide into opportunism.

Siva Vaidhyathan [00:19:05] So Liette, you've already frightened us about the prospects of the election coming imminently this off year election in 2022. And Derek has already mentioned the the really rather successful activism that Jesse Jackson and others put forth in the 1980s that created impressive results in 1986 - an off year election, of course, with a Republican in office following a big landslide election. So you've done work on particularly the effectiveness of African-American women as political actors, and we all reflected deeply upon that four years ago, I guess, at this point, which was the last off year election that, you know, we saw a blue wave, right? So what do you see in terms of the durability of that level of activism? As you know, it's clear that state legislatures and courts have turned up the voter suppression dial. And and there seems to be increased activism on the far right.

Liette Gidlow [00:20:10] The key is organization. The key is always organization. And, you know, some groups remain very effective at doing just that. Black Voters Matter. Fair Fight Action. They have not gone away. They have doubled down pursuing remedies through the courts. Very active work on the part of the Brennan Center. And, you know, a number of well-known lawyers who take up these cases, Democracy Docket and the rest. We need this kind of continuing effort to try to mobilize not just groups that have done this effectively for some time, like, for example, above all African-American women, but try to mobilize the middle. The problem with the middle is, you know, moderates rarely rage. Right. And so the challenge is to try to mobilize a middle, to not just prick their consciences with these hearings that will likely show us some really appalling things that took place. But to translate that into votes and ongoing participation in public policy processes. I really see the January 6th hearings as a full circle moment highlighting the necessity to fight for democracy again and again. Today is June 9th and June 9th - today - is the 59th anniversary of the date on which Fannie Lou Hamer and her snick compatriots were arrested in Winona, Mississippi and beaten within an inch of their lives. And this connects to the hearings that will start to broadcast live tonight because the chair of the January 6th Select Investigative Committee is Congressman Bennie Thompson from Mississippi. Bennie Thompson was a campaign aide to Fannie Lou Hamer when she ran for office in the late 1960s. So at the time, he was a college student at Tougaloo. But, you know, he has seen it from 50 and 60 years ago up until today. And the fight has never ceased to be important.

Will Hitchcock [00:22:28] Dereck, let me come back to you. I'd like to ask you a question. I know you're among your many areas of of interest in the scholarship. The history of Washington, D.C. is one of them, and particularly its African-American population. What is the story or the struggle for D.C. statehood - and maybe we can throw in Puerto Rican statehood - tell us about, you know, the the structural limitations of our system and the obstacles that are that are placed in the path for wider access to the to the franchise for American citizens. What does it tell us about our system that we still are debating whether or not significant chunks of the American population can essentially have representation in our society?

Derek Musgrove [00:23:06] Yes. So I'll start with the question of the prospects. They're horrible. I mean, they're really bad. In D.C., you have very high support for statehood. We had a referendum in 2016 where 86% of voters said they wanted statehood. Right. And that wasn't always the case up until 2016, the biggest problem was Democrats. And

easiest way to figure that out is this in 1993 was the first time that Congress ever held a vote on statehood. And Republicans vote almost uniformly against it. One Republican votes for the statehood bill in 1993. And Jesse Jackson is our shadow senator. He's campaigning hard for it all around the country. Among Democrats, they're basically split, right? 150 Democrats vote for it and the rest vote against it, including everyone from the suburbs around D.C. Steny Hoyer votes against it. And the reason was because Bill Clinton basically sent his press secretary out there right before the vote and said, yeah, Bill Clinton does. You know, I know he said on the campaign trail that he supports statehood, but he's he's busy doing other stuff. So vote your conscience. Right. And House leadership said the same thing. Vote your conscience. And so everyone in the suburbs said, well, we're going to vote against D.C. statehood because we don't want a commuter tax, because if they're a state, they're going to charge people who live in these bedroom communities a commuter tax. Right. Fast forward to 2016, and we had gone through the election of 2000 Republicans winning the Electoral College and lose the popular vote. Democrats look at that and you add in the election of 2016 where Trump loses by 3 million votes and wins. Right. Democrats look at that and they say, my God, the Senate and the Electoral College are a structural impediment to our winning, even though we're a majority of the population. And so we need some small states. And all of a sudden, D.C. leapfrogged into the Democratic agenda. It became part of H.R.1. Right. First thing that the Democrats were going to do once they get into office. The problem, of course, was that you had Senema, Manchion, a couple other people who just said, we're not going to touch the filibuster. And of course, Mitch McConnell has used the filibuster as this wonderful tool. If you support him, which I don't. To be able to stop anything from happening. And so, you know, we're really here because Democrats decided that D.C. statehood was in their interest. Puerto Rico is a different case because it's never had that resounding sort of support for statehood that the D.C. has had. It's always been split, you know, roughly three different ways. And so, you know, for that very reason, I should point out, because national Democrats have swung behind it. And because it's such a Democratic city, it's 9 to 1, Democrat to Republican. Republicans have essentially said over our dead bodies, if you look at the Republican platform from 1980 until today, it uniformly states that it opposes voting representation in Congress for the District of Columbia. In fact, in the mid-nineties, it started saying we should actually get rid of home rule, we should get rid of the mayor for D.C.. And there are a lot of people on government operations today who have been very clear. When we get into office in January, the first thing we're going to do is do investigations of D.C. People said for what?! They said because it's got bad Democratic policies. Right. And we may even need to look seriously at getting rid of home rule. And so it's a very partisan matter. And it's just not going to move for those reasons. But because it's such a partisan matter, Democrats should prioritize trying to move it.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:26:30] Now, let me get back to Thomas. Now, Thomas, you have been critical of what you've called nice Republicans, Mitt Romney and Liz Cheney, for instance, as two examples of two very conservative Republicans who are traditional conservatives. Right. They are. They talk a good line about strengthening democracy and making a stand against Trump. But then when it comes right down to it, they vote with Trump almost all the time. So what's your view of what gets painted as a deep divide in the Republican Party? Right. That divide between traditional conservative Republicans like Cheney and QAnon extremists like Marjorie Taylor Greene. And what is the prospect for there being a decent Republican Party?

Thomas Zimmer [00:27:18] Look, there are so few Republican elected officials standing up to Trump, and most of them are shunned and ostracized in their own party that I think the liberal camp or the Democratic camp has a tendency to lionize them and consider

them heroes. Liz Cheney and Mitt Romney and Adam Kinzinger and all these people. I just think that's based on a misunderstanding of what these people are fighting for and what they're fighting against. I'm not saying it's irrelevant that they are, you know, not on board with the most extreme versions of Trumpism, but look at their record on voting rights. They all tried to block - and Mitt Romney's case successfully - helped blocking legislation that would have established much needed national standards to protect voting rights. Look at how they don't seem overly concerned with what the Republican Party has been doing on the state level voter suppression, radicalizing, gerrymandering. You know, good on them for refusing to cross over into open authoritarianism. But they are decidedly not defenders of multiracial, pluralistic democracy. I think what's really happening here is that there is a struggle on the right, within the right, and also within the Republican Party, more specifically, not simply between democracy and authoritarianism, but over the right way to uphold some traditional white Christian elite rule. I think they basically all agree. They more agree than disagree on that goal and on that vision. Where they differ is that people like Cheney and Romney would prefer to uphold that sort of traditional order from within the confines of a narrowly restricted version of democracy. You know, you can say, quote unquote, democracy. That's the kind of democracy that the US has traditionally been, while the Trumpists, I think, have decided that that doesn't work for them anymore. And so they have decided, no, let's get rid even of the sort of restricted version of democracy, and let's openly embrace authoritarianism. None of them are on board with a multiracial, pluralistic democracy. That's just something to keep in mind whenever we talk about Liz Cheney as a heroic figure or whatever. What we're seeing now is the latest iteration of a sort of a reactionary counter mobilization against social and racial progress, or even just perceived social and racial progress. What is important for me is we should really take these people seriously and not just think they have been seduced by Trump or I don't know, they are all just cowards, you know, maybe maybe they're just afraid of Trump or the Trumpian base, but they don't really mean it. I don't think that's the case. I really think they mean what they do and what they say, which is they think this country should remain dominated by white Christian conservatives. And if we do take that seriously and if that's the case, then no, I don't foresee a Republican Party, Trump or not, all of a sudden turning around and saying. All right. Now it's fine. We're on board with this. They will not be.

Will Hitchcock [00:30:13] Well we take our audience seriously here on Democracy in Danger, and we'd like to throw it open to you. If you could say your name and your institutional affiliation, that would be great.

Nicole Hemmer [00:30:22] Hi, Nicole Hemmer from Columbia University. First of all, thank you for this conversation. I wanted to get your thoughts on kind of the big picture of where democracy is in this moment. So Jamelle Bouie at The New York Times has talked about this as the second redemption, this period of retrenchment after a long period of expansion of rights. And Neil Joseph, the University of Texas, has just come out with a book called The Third Reconstruction, opening up the possibility of something marvelous and new coming out of this moment. So I would like to ask each of you, do you see this more as a period of redemption or reconstruction? And what do you think about the utility of those historical analogies for making sense of where democracy is right now?

Liette Gidlow [00:31:08] I think I would come down in the camp of second redemption, especially given the levels of political violence, literal physical violence that we are seeing. It is reminiscent of a time when, you know, the Klan roamed the south. You know, it hasn't deteriorated fully to that point. But certainly the rights that came out of the rights revolution that gained traction in the 1960s, they are all up for grabs in ways that are, you know, truly a humanitarian disaster. I mean, think about what they're doing to trans kids in Texas. You

know, there's a long list of really terrible things that are happening here and human suffering that's being brought about by this political disintegration. So I think that the second redemption should help us think about the danger of this moment and what's at stake and how much can be lost. Because it's it's all on the table. It's all on the table.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:32:07] Well, thank you. Next question, please.

Anna Law [00:32:11] Hi. Thank you, everyone. I'm Anna Law from CUNY Brooklyn College. I heard several of you allude to those structural constraints on our politics. I'm wondering if you think the U.S. Constitution leaves us vulnerable to us. I don't know, a soft slide into authoritarianism and it prevents, I guess, full democracy. So I guess what I'm asking is, is the U.S. Constitution, in fact, a suicide pact?

Will Hitchcock [00:32:40] That sounds like Thomas's bailiwick.

Thomas Zimmer [00:32:44] I'm not sure what that means. Oh, well, I certainly think that the key problem today in America is a democracy problem at its core, because, you know, at some point I think this is going to be not sustainable. The tension between the majority of the electorate going one way and the reactionary minority being awarded too much power, going the other way, that will have to be resolved and it can be resolved one way or the other. I think that is the problem. Right. I think. You know, anyone who thinks, oh, you know, we got the numbers, this is just we'll just wait and, you know, just let time work for us. And then at some point we'll just overwhelm them with voting or whatever. I think that's a complete misunderstanding. I mean, that's not how it's going to work, I think. To me, clearly, the priority has to be to democratize the system, like to truly, structurally, systematically democratize the system. That has to be the priority.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:33:40] Can we go to another question, please?

Kimberly Hamlin [00:33:43] Kimberly Hamlin, Miami University in Oxford, Ohio. Because this podcast is often aired in classrooms. I want to ask you all a question that my students sometimes bring to me, which is many of them seem to feel like this most recent era since 2016 is like the last gasp - the old white guys are having one last go and then demographic change is going to save us. As a historian, I say, Gosh, I wish that were true. Like, that would be awesome. I don't think it's true, but I want to know what would you say to them? And if demographic change is not going to save us, what should the students listening to your podcast know and or do.

Will Hitchcock [00:34:23] Derek, if you haven't had a chance to weigh in?

Derek Musgrove [00:34:26] Well, I mean, first thing I'd say is just look at the breakdown of the different demographic groups that we're kind of depending on to create this this sort of multiracial, liberal side of the equation. Right. And it it doesn't look like you're going to get overwhelming majorities on the level, say, of African-American voters or even Jewish voters, among Asian-Americans, Latino Americans, who are going to guarantee these kind of Democratic landslides. And the other thing I'd say is that you can't equate the Democratic Party with this support for a multiracial democracy because we have such, you know, conservative elements within the party that in just the elections the other night, you know, are essentially trying to pull back the progressive wing of the party. And then the other side of it is, is an argument that many progressives made in a lot of these elections, which is it's our policies and it's our way of organizing that is geared towards driving up Democratic turnout. Right. If you shut us down, you're going to end up pulling back

Democratic turnout. And, you know, that's Jesse Jackson's argument that, you know, that that's that's the sort of black power electoral politics that you see in cities like Baltimore, when people like Clarence Mitchell III running for mayor back in the seventies with Stevie Wonder on sound trucks going through the city, trying to get people who've never registered before to actually come out and vote. And I think all of that together, you know, kind of speaks to the fragility of the idea that you can have this sort of large group of people who are just sort of predisposed to a certain set of policies and they'll just slot themselves in. You can't guarantee that they'll be there ideologically, that they'll see the Democratic Party as the vehicle for their hopes and their needs, or that they'll even decide to come out and vote if they're capable of doing that. All right. We should always put that on the end as well, because it's, you know, today one of the more important aspects of all this.

Siva Vaidhyathan [00:36:23] We have time for one more question from the audience.

Natlia Petrzela [00:36:27] Thank you for this great show. I'm Natalia Patrzela from the New School, and I am interested in your thoughts about discourse, about threats of authoritarianism that come from the right, about the left. Because we started this conversation talking about the attack on reproductive rights, on voting rights. On the January 6 riots, of course, and all that makes sense is illustrating a slide into authoritarianism. But you go listen to Glenn Beck or read a lot of different sorts of media from a very different political perspective and you hear, you know, these longstanding claims that government schools are on your dime, brainwashing your children. And more recently, of course, with COVID, the government is locking down your businesses and making you cover your face. And then there's the kind of, I think, third layer of sort of a new investment or a new enthusiasm around, you know, they're not going to let you the government is not going to let you talk this way or think this way. And we're in a new, I think, anti-trans chapter of that, which is especially intense. So this is all very depressing. But what I'm curious to hear from all of you is, is it just depressing or is there some sort of like shared passion for liberty and democracy that might come out of what maybe is a shared concern about authoritarianism and decline of democratic norms? Or am I just being pollyannaish in thinking that might come?

Liette Gidlow [00:37:51] I don't see a meeting of the minds on definitions of what constitutes liberty between the left and the right. I see what's coming out of these very far corners of the right is really kind of a purile, an infantilized kind of libertarianism where, you know, it's every person for themselves and keep your hands off my government Medicare and that kind of thing. Right. I mean, they're perfectly happy to spend American rescue plan dollars, even though they vote against those plans. So I don't I don't see a community of interest there. I think we need to do a much better job of making the affirmative case for government, what government does and why it's good. We need to have an effective counter argument to Ronald Reagan's old saw that, you know, I'm I'm from the government. I'm here to help. There has never been an effective enough affirmative case made for governance. And yet we've seen what happens when governance fails in, for example, the COVID pandemic, right, where the federal government basically punted in the early stages of the pandemic. So we need to do a much better job of making this affirmative case for why government is good and preserves liberty.

Will Hitchcock [00:39:12] Well, that's all the time we have for your questions. I want to thank our guests one more time for being here. Liette Gidlow, Derek Musgrove and Thomas Zimmer. Thank you so much for sharing your thoughts and your expertise on Democracy in Danger. Liette Gidlow is a professor of history at Wayne State University in

Detroit and a fellow at Harvard's Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study. She's the author of *The Big Vote* about the history of voting campaigns and of *Obama, Clinton, Palin: On gender and race in the 2008 election*.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:39:47] G. Derek Musgrove is an associate professor of history and Africana studies at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County. His most recent book is *Chocolate City A History of Race and Democracy in the Nation's Capital*.

Will Hitchcock [00:40:01] And Thomas Zimmer is a historian and visiting professor at Georgetown University's School of Foreign Service. You can catch his incisive column in the *US Guardian* all about the past, present and possible futures of American democracy. Well, that's all we have for this episode and season four of *Democracy in Danger*. Please stay with us as we drop new shows in the coming season.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:40:25] Because democracy is fragile friends. And as we heard today, we need to do all we can do to protect it.

Will Hitchcock [00:40:32] In the meantime, stay in touch. Listen to all our past shows. Find much more on our Web page, DinDanger.org, and tag us on Twitter @DinDpodcast that's D-I-N-D podcast and give us some love. Leave us a review some stars on your favorite podcast app.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:40:47] *Democracy in Danger* is produced by Robert Armengol, and Jennifer Ludovici. With this episode, we are bidding a warm goodbye to Jennifer, who has been so crucial and essential. So thank you, Jennifer. We could not have done any of this without you. We also have some more talented colleagues who are moving on. We must give a big shout out to our editor, Sidney Halleman, and to our graduating interns, Denzel Mitchell and Jane Frankel. Elie Bashkow is still going to be with us and he is an extraordinary engineer.

Will Hitchcock [00:41:20] Special thanks to everyone who helped make this live recording possible, especially Katherine Kramer Brownell, Nicole Hemmer and Leah Wright Riguer.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:41:27] Support 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.

Will Hitchcock [00:41:45] And I'm Will Hitchcock, and we'll see you next season.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:41:53] Our work here is done.

Elie Bashkow [00:42:01] *Democracy in Danger* is part of the Democracy Group Podcast Network. Visit DemocracyGroup.org to find all our sister shows.