

## **Democracy in Danger**

### **S3 E4 The New Old Dominion**

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

**Siva Vaidhyanathan** [00:00:05] And I'm Siva Vaidhyanathan

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

**Siva Vaidhyanathan** [00:00:12] This week we are staying right here in Virginia to revisit the recent upheaval and surprising rightward drift in the politics of the Old Dominion. The election of a Republican governor, Glenn Youngkin, startled Democrats here and nationally just as it heartened Republicans. They see Youngkin as a bellwether for a big GOP gain next year.

**Will Hitchcock** [00:00:34] Yes, Siva and Glenn Youngkin took office as governor here on January 15, and in a style that some thought perhaps echoed former President Trump, he released a slew of executive orders on his first day. Now these orders, unlike presidential orders, don't have a ton of legal power here in Virginia. But like many Republican politicians who are borrowing from that style, Youngkin seems happy to keep the rhetoric of the campaign going as long as he can into his new governorship.

**Siva Vaidhyanathan** [00:01:07] Yeah, we still don't know Glenn Youngkin very well, right? Has not had a record of public service – he came from the private sector. So, you know, we're still guessing what kind of governor he's going to be in, and we're trying to figure out what kind of Republican Party the Republican Party of Virginia is going to be now that it runs so many important parts of the government of Virginia. Now, his first day actions tell us a lot about what he values, right? He certainly has hostility towards mask mandates in schools, opposition to vaccine mandates in the state workforce. He has opposition to the idea of teaching the history of racial inequality or the history of slavery in public schools. Now this, of course, is torn right from the national Republican playbook.

**Will Hitchcock** [00:01:51] Yeah, I mean, Virginia has lately been a blue state. Biden won it by 10 percentage points over Trump, but the state has had many Republican governors, senators and delegates to our state legislature. And, you know, red candidates drawing from the Trump playbook have won plenty of votes here in statewide elections recently.

**Siva Vaidhyanathan** [00:02:10] Yeah. Let's be clear, though, that Youngkin won an election and is pursuing the policies he promised voters he would, does not mean in itself that democracy is in danger in Virginia. Now, if Youngkin and other Virginia Republicans push for things like voter suppression or, or try to stifle facts and debate about important issues like climate change and the pandemic, well, then he is a threat to democracy. We're fortunate to have on the line with us today someone who can speak to the state of democracy in the Commonwealth. Delegate Sally Hudson represents Charlottesville and Albemarle County in the state legislature. She's also an economist and a professor in the Baton School of Public Policy here at the University of Virginia. Sally, welcome to Democracy in Danger.

**Sally Hudson** [00:02:57] Thank you so much for having me with you.

**Siva Vaidhyanathan** [00:02:59] Well, Sally, let me start with a question that I'm sure you've given a great deal of thought to. How did Glenn Youngkin win the governorship in Virginia and what does his win portend for the health of democracy? Was it perhaps a sign that democracy is actually working?

**Sally Hudson** [00:03:16] I think the governor talked about the issues that were top of mind for voters, like keeping kids in school and the cost of living down. The Youngkin campaign also did a great job of localizing their message. He was talking about Mega-sites for business development in Southwest Virginia and governor schools in NOVA and sexual assault in Loudoun. These were really hot local topics. He was running for governor of Virginia, and I think the Democratic ticket was still running against the last president. And I think this is where Democrats find themselves in trouble because Democrats are so often transfixed by federal politics and they ignore what's going on in the state level, where we are often better suited to deliver on some of those nuts and bolts kitchen table issues. And especially as DC becomes just gridlocked for the foreseeable future. I mean, the situation with the Senate, I don't know how that gets better any time soon. I think it's important for people who identify as progressives to bring their attention back down to the state and local level because D.C. is not coming to the rescue.

**Will Hitchcock** [00:04:13] Sally, some people and it's not just Republicans, have concluded in a sense that Youngkin's win, in addition to being successful on those local issues, was a rebuke to the progressive agenda that Democrats pursued in the last two year period when they controlled the governor's office and both houses of our state legislature. What's your answer to that line of thinking?

**Sally Hudson** [00:04:37] I know there are people who want to tell that story, but I think this election had precious little to do with policy. I think most elections don't. I think most voters want to know that candidates care about the problems they're facing, whether or not the candidate has the right policy fix. And so Governor Youngkin spent most of his days on the campaign trail talking about inflation and gasoline and grocery prices. Now, can the governor of Virginia do much to combat those big macroeconomic forces? No. And he knows that he said so himself in his State of the Commonwealth address. But he knew that he was talking about what was top of mind and at the kitchen tables of voters. And so people went out and cast a ballot for a guy that they thought knew what their lives were like. And I genuinely think that that's what most voters think about when they're going to the polls. They know that elected leaders are going to have to handle a wide range of issues, and they want somebody in the seat who at least feels connected to the problems that they're facing. I think it's also worth noting that most of the steps that Democrats took in the last two years, progress that we're genuinely proud of, we're on policies that are wildly popular with the electorate. Things like expanding Medicaid and passing common sense gun safety measures. These were not radical changes that got swept in overnight just because Democrats suddenly got elected. They were things that voters had been clamoring for for years and that the General Assembly had been unable to make progress on because we were living in a wildly gerrymandered map that kept Republicans in power in the state legislature, despite the fact that our statewide offices had long since turned blue. So I really don't think this is about a backlash to laws that were passed in Richmond. It had more to do with a candidate who was talking about what matters to voters in those moments.

**Siva Vaidhyanathan** [00:06:20] Yeah, I'm really glad you brought up gerrymandering, and we're definitely going to get to that and how this state is addressing that problem. Let's go back to the kitchen table issues, specifically the fact that for a year and a half, our kids

were at our kitchen tables with their laptops open, trying to learn. You know, teacher stepped up and worked valiantly to make it happen against tremendous, tremendous pressures. But nonetheless, Youngkin exploited parents frustration, right? Frustration about school closing, about COVID protocols. But then he added to that a sense that maybe what's actually being taught in Virginia's public schools is a problem. And he invoked the specter of critical race theory, which of course we know is not actually being taught in Virginia schools. So, you know, what do you make of this? How did public education end up being a Republican issue and how did Democrats manage to become so out of touch with the concern of parents?

**Sally Hudson** [00:07:29] Well, I think the Youngkin campaign was very savvy about message targeting. I think they know very well that in our fractured media environment, you can communicate with different segments of the electorate on different platforms. And so he got to do both. He could talk to swing voters in suburbs in major primetime news about keeping kids in school, which was, you know, talking to the kitchen table issues. And then he could still communicate with the rabid base about CRT and that both corners of that coalition could come out thinking that his core message was for them and this was something that they were willing to tolerate as part of the package. I'll tell you what, though, I was at the inauguration last month, which is, of course, an event that draws the campaign's biggest fans, and they roared to their feet for the CRT lines, and the applause was comparably quiet for the kitchen table issues. And so I believe that both parts of that big tent came together in this election, and they did a really good job of segmenting their messaging so that both parts could see themselves in the tent.

**Will Hitchcock** [00:08:34] Sally, I've got to just follow up a little bit on this because it's it's puzzling, but also fascinating. What does CRT stand for? I don't mean literally, I mean figuratively in our state, local and national politics right now? Just to take the anecdote, you just described the roar of approval.

**Glenn Youngkin** [00:08:52] Parents should have a say in what is taught in schools.

**Will Hitchcock** [00:08:59] What are they really cheering for?

**Sally Hudson** [00:09:01] Well, I think you hit the nail on the head. I think Democrats sometimes are too eager to police the micro process of wording and argue about the definition of CRT and what is or is not being taught. But what some parents do understand is that our curriculums are becoming more diverse and inclusive and that people are becoming cognizant of their race. For the very first time, lots of white people get to live out their lives as if white is the default category, and periodically they get taught black history or women's history, or they get taught about Asian-Americans and their contributions to our country. But they get to think of their whiteness as living in the in the background and people who have had the luxury of not having to think much about their own race are having to become aware of it. And that makes them uncomfortable. That's real. And arguing about what you call it, I don't think speaks to the politics of white grievance.

**Siva Vaidhyanathan** [00:10:01] Yes. Sally, you know, there are other issues that seem to cross ideological and party boundaries as well. You know where we live out here in sort of the edge of the Shenandoah Mountains. If you drive south or west from Charlottesville, you pretty much get a sense that a big power company, Dominion Energy, is not very popular. You know it. It has over the years developed a reputation for bullying landowners and overcharging its customers. And we all know what kind of power it has in Richmond as it pours money into politicians of both parties. So I was wondering if you have thoughts on

the role of Dominion in Virginia politics. You know, right now there is at least one Republican, Delegate Lee Ware of Powhatan County, who says he wants to stand up to Dominion and prohibit lawmakers from taking its money. You know, what do you see when you look at Dominion and its role in Richmond and across the state?

**Sally Hudson** [00:11:01] Boy, do I have thoughts. Dominion Power is the biggest player in Virginia politics. They're hands down the biggest donor to candidates from both parties, which is a wild conflict of interest. Because we, the state legislature, regulate the utilities and then the utilities provide power through monopolies to their customers. So if customers don't like the service that they're getting, they have nowhere to go. And I think as public servants, we have an obligation to show the people that we're serving, that we work for power customers, not for power companies, but that is not the status quo in Richmond. And so finally, I think this issue is getting the attention that it deserves because the power companies have overplayed their hand in too many parts of the state. Whether you're from Southwest Virginia and it's the Mountain Valley pipeline that's been tearing through your property or you're from northern Virginia, where you have power outages more often than you should and inconsistent communication about when your power is going to come back on, there are customers who are rightly frustrated. And they're lobbying their public servants to do something about it, and they're coming to understand the crux of the problem, which is that Dominion Energy is such a major player in our politics. So I think that the right coalition is coming together, and I'm very proud to be working with Delegate Ware to finally pass this bill, which has been introduced for many, many years, to try to finally ban contributions from public utilities to candidates. That should be table stakes for this, and there's frankly a lot more work we should do.

**Siva Vaidhyathan** [00:12:33] Right, right. So, you know, when we talk about Dominion and its power, its political power, right, we're talking about the intersection between politics and economics and when we're talking about the concentrations of power, it seems to me like we're also speaking about the very causes for, you know, wealth gaps in society and especially in Virginia. You know, as we get more unequal, especially in terms of wealth, what does that pretend for the health of democracy in a state like Virginia or in the United States?

**Sally Hudson** [00:13:09] Well, it's a great question, and I don't think you have to tell any voter that people with money have an outsized influence in our politics. So many of our laws are tilted against everyday Americans. I think that we absolutely have to reckon with how our wealth inequality threatens the very democracy in which we live because people are right to be losing faith in government. I don't think that they're wrong to wonder whether their votes really matter. And that's what scares me most. Is when, when people start to become sincerely disillusioned with democracy, then that's what threatens the bigger project. We need people to still have faith in public servants so that they keep showing up to the polls and making their voices heard. Because when too many people check out, that's when the biggest moneyed interests have really won the game.

**Will Hitchcock** [00:14:04] Sally, one of the things that I admire about you is that you got out of the classroom and went into politics, which is, you know, hard for those of us who spent our lives inside the academic bubble to imagine taking on the work, to take your ideas and your theories out of the classroom and into the real everyday life of politics, we talk on this show constantly about the crisis of democracy. And believe me, it's a really long list of things that are going wrong with our democratic system and they are happening, especially in statehouses around the country. State legislatures are the ones that are that are right now eroding voting rights and gerrymandering too. Some good

things have happened in Virginia. More needs to be done. But what role do you, your colleagues and statehouses in general play? What role can they play in trying to enhance democracy, trying to rebuild the guardrails, trying to make this system survive what is clearly a very tenuous era?

**Sally Hudson** [00:15:00] Well, I am inspired every day by my colleagues. In the last four years in Virginia, we've seen a sea change in the kinds of people who are stepping up to run for office. Our General Assembly is far more diverse than it was even five years ago, and it's people coming from all walks of life, not just on the demographic traits that I know we all track so closely – Women and racial minorities. But really, especially in terms of career paths, we have nurse practitioners and journalists and teachers who bring the voices of those critical community institutions into the lawmaking process so that we've got fewer politicians making laws that they don't have to live under and more people legislating for personal experience. And that's all to the good. I think that state legislatures are essential when it comes to safeguarding democracy because in this country, most of the laws that govern how elections operate are set at the state level. That's what the debate in D.C. over the renewal of the Voting Rights Act is all about. It's about standardizing voting laws across the states because state officials have been abusing that latitude to set their own election laws. They've been closing polling places and putting up more and more barriers to, to make it more difficult to vote. But here in Virginia, we've been doing the exact opposite. Under the Democratic trifecta that we had for the last two years, we have gone from the second hardest state in the country to vote to being a top 10 national leader by expanding early voting and absentee ballots and voter registration. And I think that that means that we've got more people having their voices heard than ever before. Whether or not you were happy with the outcome of the election, it had record turnout for Virginia voters, which I think is important because it shows that both Republicans and Democrats can win high turnout elections. I think for a long time there was this narrative that more voters is unambiguously good for Democrats, and I think the Youngkin campaign proved that's very much not true.

**Siva Vaidhyanathan** [00:16:55] Yeah, I mean, all of those provisions certainly help voters choose their leaders, but we still have a problem with the leaders choosing their own voters, right? And that's what that's what gerrymandering is all about. And you know, look, this Commonwealth has taken a big step toward rectifying that. And you know, that's why we created a commission – the voters actually passed a referendum to create a bipartisan commission to handle congressional redistricting in the wake of the 2020 census. Now, of course, you supported the measure and ultimately we watched it not work so well, you know, it kind of locked up. Its members got to the point where they weren't even talking to each other. You know, and I think a lot of people saw the very presence of legislators on that commission being a problem. They also had a conflict of interest. They were working for their party and to choose their own voters. Look, eventually the issue was settled by the state Supreme Court, and now we have a redistricting map that, you know, I'm sort of shrugging and as I look at it and I say it's better than what we used to have and maybe it's what we need. But the model clearly did not work. So I'm wondering, what lessons can we take from that? What can we do next? Can we do better than having our state Supreme Court draw these lines every 10 years?

**Sally Hudson** [00:18:13] Absolutely, and I think you hit both parts of that which are important, which was these are the best maps Virginia's ever had. And we can also design a better process for the future. I was one of the legislators who supported the constitutional amendment to reform our redistricting process. And I think it played out as most people expected at the State Supreme Court, which hired two qualified independent map makers

to draw those fair maps. So for the first time in Virginia history, we have maps rooted in where the people live and not the sitting politicians. And those maps, in turn, will support some of the most competitive elections I think we've ever seen for our General Assembly in 2023. I think Virginia will elect the most diverse and vibrant General Assembly it's ever had in our next cycle because we finally took the power to draw the maps away from the politicians. But like you said, the road there was really rocky and complicated because we had to pass through this Franken commission of half legislators and half citizens, which ultimately deadlocked. And I think a lot of people saw that coming, and that's not fortune telling, it's just math. There were 16 members drawn equally from two warring parties and no way to break ties, and so it seemed very likely that they would deadlock. So then the question turned on what happens when the commission fails? And since the amendment specified that if the legislators and the commission members can't get along, the process goes to the state Supreme Court. It's ultimately about do you trust the state Supreme Court to carry out the process as it did? And I was one of the people who thought the state Supreme Court with appointed special masters is better than anything Virginia's had in its 400 year history because they're not the legislators who have to run on the lines that they drew. And so I think that all in all, we got what most reformers wanted out of this process, which was a productive step forward in the right direction. But I was also very clear in voting for the amendment that it's not the system I want to live on for the long haul. And so we've got another decade now to pass a different process in time for 2030.

**Will Hitchcock** [00:20:23] Well, Sally, let's end on a question, an issue I know that you have spent a lot of time thinking about. I've heard you talk about it before and that's ranked choice voting, which is again, maybe not a kitchen table issue. It's a bit more of a wonky issue. But it's something that is being tried around the country a little, maybe awkwardly confusingly. For example, New York City's mayoral primaries last year used ranked choice voting. I know that you want to see it get implemented more widely. I don't know if this is still something you think could work, but just tell us a little bit. You know, as we wrap up and think about what's good for democracy, what are some tools that might be out there that we could use to empower voters? Is ranked choice voting one of them? And if so, why?

**Sally Hudson** [00:21:07] I sure think so. Two years ago, in my very first term, I carried a bill that will bring ranked choice voting to Virginia for the first time and is now being implemented in Arlington County, where they're about to adopt ranked choice voting to elect their county board. And now I'm working with one of my Republican colleagues across the aisle, Glenn Davis from Virginia Beach, to carry a bill that would permit ranked choice voting in our state primary elections. And I think it's exactly what we need in both parties, which have a lot of energy right now and need a practical way to build coalitions in what are becoming big tents. Real quick, for folks who may be new to the topic, a ranked choice ballot is designed to let you say how you feel about more than one candidate, because right now our elections aren't really built to let you vote for who you really want when more than one person runs. I think we've all had the experience of being in an election where three, four, five people are running and you feel torn between voting your conscience and picking the person who you genuinely like the most. And instead maybe backing somebody who you think is in the best position to win because you don't want to waste your vote on somebody who's not going to actually carry the day.

**Will Hitchcock** [00:22:21] Might that have happened in the Democratic primary for governor in the last year?

**Sally Hudson** [00:22:25] Absolutely. We had five candidates running, and I think a lot of people felt torn between backing somebody who they thought could get across the finish line and choosing the person they wanted most. And it's worth noting that Republicans used ranked choice voting to nominate Glenn Youngkin, who ended up being a coalition builder in their party and winning, and he got to go into the general election with a lot of momentum. So it's something that's been used in Virginia, and it's something that has been used with great success across the country. Utah has now become one of the biggest embracers of ranked choice. They've got dozens of cities that are now using it at the local level. Like you said, New York City elected its city council and its mayor with ranked choice to I think great success. I know there was a little bit of a hiccup in the early stages, but that didn't actually have anything to do with ranked choice voting. If you look at the results of those elections, New York City, which has a 51 member city council and has never had more than, I think 18 women on that body now has a majority-female city council for the first time in its history. And 26 of those 29 women are women of color. So if you want to talk about elections that will help put people who look like the voters we serve in office, I think there is now a long running track record that ranked choice voting does that because it allows people to build coalitions, which is what's so missing from our politics right now.

**Siva Vaidhyanathan** [00:23:48] Well, Delegate Sally Hudson, thank you so much for joining us on Democracy in Danger.

**Sally Hudson** [00:23:54] Thank you for having me. It's always a joy to be with you.

**Siva Vaidhyanathan** [00:24:06] Sally Hudson is an economist and assistant professor of public policy at the Frank Batten School of Leadership and Public Policy at the University of Virginia.

**Will Hitchcock** [00:24:15] Democracy in Danger is part of the Democracy Group Podcast Network. Visit [DemocracyGroup.org](https://DemocracyGroup.org) to find all our sister shows. We'll be right back after this message from our friends.

**Jane Frankel** [00:24:28] Hi, I'm Jane Frankel, an intern on the show, we wanted to let you know about a cool new project from the Democracy Group. It's a set of podcast channels with shows from across the whole network organized by topic. You can look up episodes from DinD and all of our sister shows. They're organized around themes like voting rights, racial justice, misinformation, climate change and much, much more. Just go to [DemocracyGroup.org](https://DemocracyGroup.org) and scroll down. You'll find links to each topic with audio from acclaimed guests like Ezra Klein, Madeleine Albright, Andrew Yang, Srdja Popovic and Elizabeth Warren. While you're at it, let us know about any other topics that you'd like the network to carry for its audience. Thanks for listening, and let's get back to the show.

**Siva Vaidhyanathan** [00:25:18] You know Will, Sally's approach to government is, is, is pretty exciting. You know, it's refreshing. You know, it seems to me like she is deeply concerned, both with what she called kitchen table issues, but also she's deeply concerned about process, about making sure that the people of Virginia have power, that this is government for the people and by the people. You know, you've been doing a lot of work on Franklin Roosevelt. You've been doing a lot of research for your next big project. And, you know, he seemed to be one of those rare politicians who understood that those are not different things. That, that we, we focus on granting power to the people to make sure that the people can responsibly participate in the process of governance, right? That these cannot be different issues. You know, later than that, I think his greatest student, Lyndon Johnson, got it as well. He understood that you had to focus on things like

Head Start and you had to focus on things like college opportunity, but you also had to make sure that voting rights were guaranteed. So have we lost that now? I mean, how do we get that spirit back?

**Will Hitchcock** [00:26:27] Yeah. I think what Sally really helped us understand was she used our specific case of Virginia to think about Democrats nationally and the challenges that they face in mobilizing the public. In a way that the Democrats gave up what is usually their strongest suit, which is to talk about those daily life issues in favor of framing a boogeyman, a sort of a Trump Part two. Sally also helped me think about the fact that voting reform is not a Partisan issue – It doesn't have to be. So we're facing this massive effort of gerrymandering and voter suppression in some Republican-controlled legislatures across the country. But the point is that ranked choice voting, which she favors, actually helps to elect Glenn Youngkin in the Republican primary here in Virginia. And voting expansion in Virginia gave an enormous benefit to all the voters of the state, and we had huge turnout in our gubernatorial election. And Republicans won big. So this is something that I think, you know, is a frustrating observation because voter suppression is not only immoral and illegal, but it's not necessary for the political parties to compete and to win.

**Siva Vaidhyanathan** [00:27:41] Yeah, I mean, look, right now, it sure sounds like the National Republican Party and the state Republican Party are not interested in helping people vote. So Will, it seems like, you know, here in Virginia, we are going to live the next four years with Republicans in charge of the executive branch and the legislative branch. You know, we're going to see whether the Republican Party of Virginia is actually committed to executing their policies in a fully democratic way, right? Small 'd' democratic way. Or we're going to see if they want to leverage their time in office to further restrict the ability for Virginians at large to control their government. You know, I'm not optimistic after just the first few weeks of the Youngkin administration, but with people like Sally in the state capital, I think at least we are going to have a clear sense of what's going on.

**Siva Vaidhyanathan** [00:28:46] That's all we have for you this time on Democracy in Danger. Next week, we'll bring you a new interview with one of our favorite past guests, historian Carol Anderson. She's an expert on voting rights, but this time we will be talking to her about guns.

**Carol Anderson** [00:28:57] We get this sense of the 2nd Amendment being about either the militia or the individual right to bear arms, and what we lose is the anti-blackness that drove the creation of the 2nd Amendment.

**Will Hitchcock** [00:28:57] Stay in touch. Tweet us your thoughts @dindpodcast. That's D-I-N-D podcast. And let us know if you have any burning questions for us.

**Siva Vaidhyanathan** [00:28:57] Be sure to share this episode on social media and check out our webpage [dindanger.org](http://dindanger.org). There you will find a lot more to see and read about all of our guests. We think it's a great resource for teachers and students alike.

**Will Hitchcock** [00:28:57] Democracy in Danger is produced by Robert Armengol with help from Jennifer Ludovici. Sydney Halleman edits the show. Our interns are Denzel Mitchell, Jane Frankel and Elie Bashkow.

**Siva Vaidhyanathan** [00:28:57] Support comes from the University of Virginia's Democracy Initiative and from the College of Arts & Sciences. This show is a project of

UVA's Deliberative Media Lab. We're distributed by the audio collective of WTJU Radio in Charlottesville. I'm Siva Vaidhyanathan.

**Will Hitchcock** [00:28:57] And I'm Will Hitchcock. See you next time!