

Democracy in Danger S7 E2: “A Dream in Distress”

[THEME MUSIC]

[00:03] **Emily Burrill:** Hello, I’m Emily Burrill.

[00:05] **Siva Vaidhyanathan:** And I’m Siva Vaidhyanathan.

[00:06] **EB:** And from the 2023 Texas Tribune Festival in Austin, Texas, this is *Democracy in Danger*.

[APPLAUSE]

[00:18] **SV:** It’s so great to be back here in the Lone Star State. Emily, I lived here for 14 years back in the last century. I did both my degrees at the University of Texas. This city is as much my home as any, and I come to this festival every year. It’s the most lively and interesting gathering of thinkers and leaders in the United States.

[00:37] **EB:** Yeah, and, you know, I was reminded flying in just how big Texas is and what a model it is for this big, diverse and, you might say, unwieldy country that we live in.

[MUSIC FADING OUT]

[00:49] **SV:** Yeah, it’s certainly a land of big dreams. So, it’s appropriate that we’re dedicating this episode to a conversation about the American dream. And by many measures, the American dream is in decline, both as a story that we tell about ourselves and a reality we live.

[01:07] **EB:** So, consider this, Siva. In the United States, children born in 1940 ended up making more than their parents at a rate of 92 percent. But that picture has changed a lot in the past half-century. Incomes for middle-class and working-class Americans have flattened. Nowadays, the data say that people born in the past three decades have maybe a 50-50 chance of doing better than the previous generation.

[01:33] **SV:** And then there are all the other measures of wellbeing. American’s mental health is worse. We incarcerate more people than any other country. Racial disparities persist. Even life expectancy has taken a hit in recent years, and women’s basic rights are being crushed by courts and legislatures.

[01:52] **EB:** Well, our guest today calls this predicament “the great American stagnation.” David Leonhardt is on stage with us here at the Capital Factory. He is a reporter, editor and columnist for The New York Times. Every day, millions of Americans receive his newsletter, “The Morning.” David won a Pulitzer in 2011 for his commentary on economic issues, and he’s got a new book coming out called *Ours Was the Shining Future*. David, welcome to Democracy and Danger.

[02:22] **David Leonhardt:** Thank you so much. It’s great to be on your podcast and it’s great to be in Texas. I am not a native. I’m sure you’re all shocked, but I am a Texan by marriage, so it is good to be in Texas.

[02:36] **EB:** So, David, let’s start with the idea of the American dream itself. The term is credited to James Truslow Adams, a historian who you discuss in the book. What does this dream mean to you? Why is it worth fighting for and how do we fight for it?

[02:53] **DL:** The story of the phrase American dream is really just fascinating. It was coined — the words American dream appeared next to each other in some earlier cases — but really, this is the coining of the phrase as we know it, by James Truslow Adams, this historian. And he does it in the depth of the depression. I mean, the really the worst years of the Depression, the early 1930s. And he writes this book called *The Epic of America*, in which he talks about “a better, richer, happier life for all of our citizens of every rank.” And the book becomes a big deal.

[03:28] And that really leads to the phrase taking off. There are a couple of Broadway plays called *American Dream* or *The American Dream*. And what I find so important about that phrase are a couple things. First of all, the phrase “of every rank.” From the very beginning, it’s meant to say that this is supposed to be a broad dream. It’s supposed to be a dream that’s accessible to all of our citizens. And then I think the second thing that’s important is to look at the form of those words “better, richer, happier.” They’re all comparative words. They’re a little vague. But what he’s basically saying is, is that over time, things should get better, things should improve. And to me, that is the basic definition of the American dream — that you can expect over the course of your life, that your life will get better, perhaps even more important, that you can expect that your children’s life will be better than your life. And that when people are making progress, it really can feed on itself. It gives you an optimism about the future.

[04:26] You can still encounter terrible problems, but if you have a sense of an upward trajectory, it can lead to an optimism. And I think it’s just important to remember he didn’t come up with that idea at a time when everything looked great in this country. He came up with that idea at a time when we were facing the biggest economic challenges that our country has ever faced.

[04:46] **SV:** So, let’s cast our eyes again to the early 20th century, to Minneapolis, and, you know, during the Great Depression. You write about Carl Skoglund in Minneapolis, who helped mobilize and organize truck drivers. So why is this story important? What can we learn from that experience and maybe apply it to the first few decades of the 21st?

[05:09] **DL:** And it’s particularly relevant now because we’re living in a time of resurgence of interest, at least — we don’t yet know about success — for organized labor in this country. Right now we’ve got GM workers on strike. We’ve got Hollywood writers on strike. We’ve got a lot more interest in labor unions. According to Gallup, Americans approval of labor unions is at a multi-decade high. And, look, I’ve been in a labor union at The New York Times. I’ve been a manager at The New York Times who works with labor unions. I understand that labor unions are not perfect.

[05:40] So, I do not want to suggest that unions are flawless. They have problems, they can frustrate people. What I want to suggest is that unions are absolutely vital to a flourishing economy in which most people have decent living standards. And, no, unions aren’t perfect. But you know what else isn’t perfect? Everything, right. Corporations are not perfect. Social justice movements aren’t perfect. Nothing is perfect.

[06:07] And so, to very briefly tell you the story. In Minneapolis in the early 1930s, you really had an economy where workers had absolutely no power, no political power. We may think of Minneapolis as a liberal city today, but it was a deeply conservative city in the 1930s. It was a low wage city. And a group of truck drivers got together and they decided to organize and try to get higher wages. They were not paid for the extra time when they were sitting around and weren't getting work, they had to buy their own trucks to transport coal. Today we would call them gig workers. And a group of socialists — and I think that's an important part of the story — led by Carl Skoglund, a Swedish immigrant, decided to organize these truck drivers. And what ends up happening is a bunch of political radicals took huge risks. They also figured out how to cast this strike not as a project to build socialism in Minneapolis, which they knew they couldn't win most people over to, but to build a better life — better lives — for people. And there was this absolutely epic battle in Minneapolis during these years. There were violent fights in the streets of Minneapolis. It is ultimately solved by FDR, who comes through Minnesota on a train trip. And I think it's so important because to me, it shows three things. One, labor unions are vital to people getting decent wages. Two, you need a grassroots organization to push the political system toward different outcomes. And then three, you need elected politicians who are sympathetic to the goals of that grassroots movement.

[07:35] The strike in Minneapolis in the 1930s, which turns Minneapolis into a union town — it's not just one strike — it doesn't succeed without the activists who are willing to take huge risks with their own personal life, many of whom were more radical than most people in Minneapolis. It also doesn't succeed without a governor of Minnesota and a president of the United States who in the end were willing to say, “We are intervening on this strike on behalf of workers instead of the trucking companies, and we're making sure that people can earn a decent living in Minnesota.” And a version of that story happened again and again and again in this country in the 1930s and 1940s and into the 1950s.

[08:14] **EB:** But, David, you write that after the successes of those labor movements and ultimately of the New Deal, of FDR's New Deal, the left splintered in America beginning in the 1960s. One story told about this is racism. The civil rights movement split the Democratic Party, alienating white Southern voters in particular. But you tell another story in your book, one where progressives basically gave up fighting for the American dream and the working class. Can you flesh that out for us?

[08:47] **DL:** Yeah, absolutely. Racism is a vital part of this story. And so, the history of the fact that the Democratic Party embraces civil rights and ends up alienating a lot of Southern whites is a huge part of this story. I think the mistake that progressives make sometimes is they suggest it is the only part of the story. They suggest that the entire drift of the working class toward the right is essentially because the working class is ignorant or is bigoted. That's not a very good way to win people's votes, if you tell them that they're ignorant or that they're bigoted. And I think the 1960s is an important period because you can see both the central role that racism plays, but you can also see that there are other things going on. And starting in the 1960s, the Democratic Party starts to increasingly define itself as a party of highly educated, more affluent people: college graduates, people who, if we're being honest, tend to read The New York Times, tend to read The Texas Tribune, tend to attend the Texas Tribune Festival. And what happens is the Democratic Party basically goes pretty far left on a whole bunch of issues that the American people say, “Whoa, that's not quite as far left as we are.”

[09:56] The first one in the early '60s is crime. Crime really starts to rise in the early 1960s. And you go back, and you read liberal publications at the time, and they put *crime* in quotes, and they say the “crime” increase — if you read *The Nation* or *The New Republic* — as if in fact somehow it was a conspiracy theory. By *any* measure, crime was rising. And to me, one of the things to look back on as a kind of what if, is Robert F. Kennedy’s 1968 presidential campaign.

[10:24] Kennedy is the most popular white politician in black America. He does not countenance racism. Period. He talks about the ills of racism. He knows he is losing voters because of his focus on civil rights. He also organizes much of his 1968 campaign around the idea of law and order, because he knows that Americans are frustrated with rising crime, and he knows that while some of the people frustrated with rising crime are, in fact, racists who can never be won over, he knows that many others are not. In fact, he knows that many black Americans are frustrated with rising crime. And that, to me, is an example of a Democratic Party that tries to take seriously the concerns of working people rather than saying, hey, if you are somewhat moderate on an issue like crime, if you’re worried about crime, we’re just going to cast you out. And I think too much of the Democratic Party on a series of issues has basically turned itself into a party of relatively affluent college graduates. And this is why if you look now, it isn’t just working-class whites who have moved to the right. But in the last five years, we have seen working-class Asian Americans move significantly to the right, working-class Latinos move significantly to the right — including here in Texas — and working-class African Americans move somewhat to the right — it’s only a couple percentage points, but it’s still noticeable in the polls.

[11:47] **SV:** So, at the very moment that this is happening, with this transition and split within the Democratic Party, you’re also seeing the high point of public expenditure to help raise the quality of life for working-class people. You know, tremendous increases in education spending, lots of infrastructure spending, new airports built, stadia built with public money, right. And you have a vice president from the Democratic Farmer Labor Party of Minnesota who then runs for president in 1968 — and loses. So, what lesson can we take from that?

[12:21] **DL:** You know, who is it that runs off the cliff and keeps running? Is that the Roadrunner — which is the cartoon character? It is. OK.

[12:28] **SV:** Well it’s the Coyote, actually.

[12:30] **DL:** It’s the Coyote. Thank you, thank you. So, I think it’s important to remember that when politics change, it doesn’t immediately change policy in this country. Things have a very long legacy in this country. So, the great campaigns to organize American workers happened in the '30s and forties and a little bit into the '50s. But labor unions remain very strong in this country, into the '60s and '70s. So even in the '60s and '70s, as labor unions are weakening, right, you can still see labor being strong. And so, similarly, what happens in the middle decades of the 20th century is we build this political system and this economy that really works better for most working people.

[13:10] These are also decades with horrific sexism in this country, horrific racism, horrific religious bigotry, horrific bigotry against LGBT people, bigotry against disabled people. And so, these are in many ways really troubled decades. But if you look at measures of people’s wellbeing, if you look, for example, at the white-black pay gap during the 1940s and '50s, it is shrinking significantly. So, this is *before* the civil rights movement. And it’s not just pay. If you don’t like economic things, the white-black life expectancy gap is shrinking significantly

in the '40s and '50s. And so, I think it can simultaneously be true that our economy was starting — and our society was starting — to pivot away from the interests of working-class people. And to be clear, we should talk about the Republican Party's role in this because it's huge. At the same time that because of some of the legacy forces that were put in motion, the Coyote is still able to run even though the cliff has disappeared.

[14:11] **EB:** But at the same time, David, one of the things that you discuss in the book are these splinters in the labor movement that are really about the difference between maybe what you might want to call manufacturers and farm workers, right, in the '60s. So, you tell a story about farm workers who tried to unionize in California in the early sixties, led by César Chávez and Dolores Huerta, who, by the way, is here at the Texas Tribune Festival. The movement stumbled, in part, because of the Teamsters. Why did the Teamsters not support farm workers?

[14:44] **DL:** The California Farm Workers Organization is really a tragic story because of the incredible potential that it had. So, you get into the 1960s in this country, and the country is becoming more diverse, the economy becoming more diverse. And so, for the labor movement to remain strong, it needs to diversify beyond manufacturing. It needs to organize service workers, needs to organize farm workers who are obviously were always a big part of our economy, but had been left out. And there are visionaries who understand the importance of this — Dolores Huerta, César Chávez, Walter Reuther — and basically try to have a more inclusive labor union — uh, movement: one that really includes women working in service jobs, one that includes nonwhite Americans, one that includes people from job categories that had not been as organized before. And they have some success. African Americans are really substantially organized in this country during this period. But ultimately, this attempt to diversify, organize working people, really breaks down.

[15:46] And the California Farm Workers strike is an example of that, because it had so much promise and it succeeded at first. And what essentially happens is, the Teamsters, in an example of the selfishness of much of organized labor at this point, decide that what they really care about is getting the dues of these farm workers. And so, they come in and basically undermine the movement that is in California so *they* can try to organize the farm workers, instead. The Teamsters use violence to do it, in some cases, fatal violence, to do it. And just imagine, *any* labor union organizing campaign is fantastically difficult. It is so hard to organize workers. Imagine you're fighting not only, in California, the big agricultural companies, not only the conservative governor of California in the mid 1960s — Ronald Reagan — but you're also fighting *another* union that's coming in. And so, the Teamsters goes from playing this heroic role — it's a complicated story in Minnesota — but goes from playing this heroic role in Minnesota, to playing this profoundly counterproductive role in California.

[16:51] **SV:** So, let's stick our attention still in 1968. So, Bobby Kennedy is sending all those messages that seem like he's offering some sort of unified vision that might raise and continue a left. And of course, tragically, he wasn't able to continue his campaign. He's marching with Chávez, right, he's actually holding hands with Chávez. But the other thing that's happening in 1968 is blowback from organized labor against the peace movement, right. And you have hardhat riots in New York City, right. And you have the Democratic Convention in 1968, in Chicago, when organized labor — including police and other organized labor factions — are running up against the antiwar protesters and making complete chaos out of that convention, where the Happy Warrior is trying to bring the flag

across the finish line, in the body of Hubert Humphrey. So, what happens from 1968 to 1980 that precedes this tremendous change?

[17:47] **DL:** One of the things that I feel like I learned a lot about while writing this book was — I acquire a more nuanced view of the whole politics of the Vietnam War. I mean, I don't exist without the anti-Vietnam War movement. My parents met as part of it, and I do think it was a heroic movement that basically called attention to this unwinnable, unjust war that was killing huge numbers of Vietnamese people and large numbers of Americans. But I also think the politics around Vietnam in the moment were really quite complicated. And I don't want to turn RFK into a saint. First of all, he might not have gotten the nomination in 1968, let alone won. He might have. We don't know.

[18:29] But I think it's important not just to look back and say, “Oh, my goodness, the new left, the college students who were demonstrating against the war, were right, and the hard hats and the working-class people were wrong.” Because if you think about it from the perspective of those working-class people in the 1960s, their kids were the ones fighting in Vietnam, right. Because of student deferments, college students were able to largely get out of Vietnam. And while I think that the movement to try to get this country out of Vietnam was a just — and a movement that was important and that was right, it also ended up taking on a flavor that basically treated many of the soldiers themselves as wrong and as evil and as symbols of something bad. And it was deeply alienating to these communities whose sons were off fighting in this war to be told that they were actually part of the problem, to be told — these are oftentimes immigrant families — to be told that they've organized their lives around veterans clubs in their cities where they hang the American flag, and that this is a symbol of something evil.

[19:35] And so I think part of what breaks down in the '60s is something in which both sides really came to have disdain for the other side. And I think for those of us who are part of the more elite intellectual left, it's easy to look back and say, *our* side was right about everything, and those other folks were just wrong about everything. But I actually have real empathy for both sides in this. And I think the tragedy of it is that it leads to this splitting of the left. And the effects of it were really damaging, because it opened the way for this *very* right wing movement to come into this country and impose an economic agenda that has really not worked in this country.

[20:15] **EB:** Mm hmm. So, David, let's talk a little bit about how you discuss the left in your book. You write that affluent progressives have, and this is a quote from the book, “have decided that their views are the only acceptable ones,” on topics like gun control, affirmative action, abortion, immigration, so on. But for many people, these are non-negotiable livelihood, life and death issues, particularly for women, particularly for people of color of all genders. And a lot of people would say that what you're calling and framing as social issues in the book that are embraced and sort of held close to the heart by the left that need to maybe go on the table and be unpacked, be negotiated, are actually, in fact, deeply fundamentally *material* concerns with economic —

[20:11] **SV:** And — and popular.

[20:12] **EB:** That's right, and popular. So, what is your response to this?

[21:16] **DL:** There is no clear divide between social issues and economic issues, right? Economic issues are also social. Social issues are also economic. I think it's useful sometimes

to divide them because voters divide them in their minds. Voters in America are substantially left of center on economic issues like Medicare. You could call them moderate. We can debate over whether they're — it's kind of center, center-left, center-right on social issues. But they're clearly to the right on a bunch of these social issues to where they are in economic issues.

[21:45] Here's what I would say. It is absolutely the case that these are important to people's livelihoods. I would argue that nearly everything — or the vast majority of issues in politics — have to be negotiable. That's the way a democracy works. If you set up and you say here are 10 issues that are non-negotiable, you're going to end up alienating a lot of people. And this is my concern. If you look at polling data in this country, Pew has done this really nicely, where they asked people their views and they asked them on a whole range of issues. They define the progressive left in this country as being something like 7 percent of the population. The progressive left is disproportionately white. The progressive left is disproportionately affluent. The progressive left has fewer numbers of Latino and African-American people. And so, my concern is that large parts of the left have said the only acceptable views on, for example, abortion are views that are well to the left of what many Americans have.

[22:45] Now, the Republican Party has gone so far to the right of the views that many Americans have. Right. But basically, if you look at polling, many Americans believe that abortion should be widely available in the first trimester and significantly restricted after that. You can decide that is, like, too restrictive a view, but that is sort of the view. If you look at immigration, why is it that the states of Florida and Texas have moved to the right in recent years? It is in part because of immigration. It is in part because meaningful numbers of Latino voters in Texas and in Florida are well to the right of the Democratic Party on immigration. Now we can debate what is the right immigration policy and what is the wrong immigration policy. But to tell voters who are in favor of less immigration than the Democratic Party is, that it is hateful to be in favor of less immigration, I think is really counterproductive. And I think actually Joe Biden's victory in the Democratic primary in 2020 is a great example of this, right. Many more elite left people in this country disdained Biden. Right? And who rescues his campaign? Predominantly working class African-American voters in South Carolina. Which is a reminder, I think, that on all kinds of issues, the view that the progressive left, which obviously I come from, has defined as “the right view” on behalf of various groups, is not necessarily the view that those groups themselves hold.

[24:11] **SV:** Well, we're in a state that no longer has any available abortion clinics for basically anybody south of San Antonio, and only a handful of abortion clinics in the entire state. So the people who are actually suffering are not the affluent white people of I-95 or Acela. The people who are suffering are the women of Harlingen who have no options and no way to fly anywhere else, right. So, is it really — are we supposed to frame this issue about what appeals or about what actually matters in people's lives?

[24:45] **DL:** Well, I don't think you can separate the two. So how do we change the fact that lower-income women in Texas don't have access to reproductive rights today? There's only one way to do it. Win elections. Right. That's the way to do it. Win elections and change policy and make it possible for women here to have the same rights that women in other places do. And I think the only way it can do that is to treat working-class people of all races with respect and try to figure out why they haven't been able to win them over recently.

[25:15] **EB:** So maybe it's not an issue, though — I mean, I am unapologetically pro-choice, for me, this is non-negotiable, I see abortion in particular as a core economic livelihood

question — but perhaps, David, what you’re suggesting, it’s not about negotiating on the core platform issues, but it’s an issue of communicating and strategizing in a different way?

[25:35] **SV:** And emphasis.

[25:36] **EB:** That’s right.

[25:37] **DL:** I would put it a little differently. I really do think it’s an issue of respect. I really do think it’s an issue of trying to understand why people have different views. And I would just encourage progressives to be reflective about questions like, why is it they can’t win elections in 20 different states? How might it be that by listening more respectfully to people’s views rather than just telling them you’re voting against your own interests, they might be able to win over more of them?

[26:05] **SV:** Yeah, politics has to be about persuasion as much as pandering as well. So, look, let’s talk about the key premises of your work, right. You make a really strong argument about this, like, frustration or suspension or erosion of the American dream. And you’re measuring things like income and wealth and wealth distribution, all very important. But I wonder if all of these are really the best ways to measure human flourishing and wellbeing. I mean, the economist Amartya Sen has pointed out other measures like literacy, a focus on capabilities, right, the ability to actually exact change in one’s own life — not necessarily an aggregate scorecard of a broad stratified economy. So, what is the best way to measure the good life and a decent society?

[26:52] **DL:** Yeah, I love that question. Thank you for ending there. So first of all, money’s really important, right? And you have to be pretty rich to not think money’s important. There are many people in this country who can’t comfortably pay their rent the next month, who can’t comfortably afford food the next week. Money matters to them. And so, I don’t think we should apologize for focusing on money. It’s a real privilege to be able to wonder how important money is. But money’s not the most important thing in the world. It really isn’t. And there’s a reason why the very first chapter in my book, which is a history of the United States’ economy over the last hundred years, isn’t about money. It shows life expectancy. And in 1980, the United States had a typical life expectancy for a rich country. By 2005, we had the worst life expectancy of any rich country in the world. *The worst life expectancy of any rich country in the world* — between 1980 and 2005.

[27:42] I think that is the single biggest repudiation of basically the neoliberal economic project that we have had for the last 25 years. It has failed. The promises of the Reagan revolution, the promises of this different world where the government would withdraw and the market would make everything great for everyone. You can find it all over the economic statistics, but you can also find it in the life expectancy statistics. The white-black life expectancy gap — remember I told you it had shrunk a lot — that hasn’t happened recently, right. And you look at things like how good a job do we do relative to other rich countries of making it possible for women to enter the labor force after having kids. We do the worst job of any country in the world. And so, it isn’t just about money. It is about human flourishing, to use your phrase.

[28:30] And there are many reasons to be deeply worried about the United States today. But I actually emerged hopeful from this book, because if you look at over the last century and you think about the grassroots movements we’ve had in this country — when they have managed to win over public opinion, they have changed this country often for the better. Think about

the remarkable successes of the LGBT movement. Think about the remarkable successes of the disability rights movement, of the women’s movement, of the civil rights movement. These are all grassroots movements. They depend on winning elections. They don’t always depend on winning the national popular vote. But they depend on looking at the American system as it is and not giving up on that system as hopelessly rigged, but figuring out ways to change that system, to make this country again, a country, to come back to James Truslow Adams, that produces a “better, richer, happier life for all of our citizens of every rank.”

[29:26] **EB:** On that note, we would like, David, to take some questions from the audience.

[29:30] **DL:** I’d love to.

[29:31] **EB:** So, it looks like we have a queue forming. When you step up to the mic, please tell us your first name and where you’re from.

[29:38] **Amy:** Hello, I’m Amy from Dallas. Welcome home, Siva! David, I’ll go you one better: The Democratic Party is toxic in the state of Texas, outside of Dallas, Austin, Houston. But one of the things that I think that the Republicans have on their side is a right-wing media ecosystem that is not on the left. I mean, things like, you know, if you go into the valley, you’re going — there’s like community centers that the GOP have opened and there’s Vietnamese-language advertisements in Houston that are very right wing, and the left just doesn’t have anything to match that. And so I know we need to do, you know, blocking and tackling and personal persuasion. But how do we combat that — the big ecosystem that we just don’t have?

[30:20] **DL:** Yeah, that’s a really good question. I mean, I think — you tell me if I’m wrong — I think there are two slightly different parts of that. One is the media ecosystem, right, one is the left doesn’t have a Fox News — and I don’t have an answer about that. Right. But I think it’s worth people thinking about that. Right. And I would simply say if the left is asking itself, how do we counter the power of Fox News, just remember that your answer can’t be a product aimed at people who have master’s degrees. Right. It needs to be aimed at the same population that’s watching Fox News. We are still a country with less than 40 percent of adults have a four-year college degree. That is where the bulk of Americans are. That’s where the focus should be in terms of winning hearts and minds.

[31:04] The other part of your question was, on the ground making people’s lives better in kind of a grassroots way. You know, one of the ways in which César Chávez and Dolores Huerta built up the farm workers, they didn’t go in and say, “Join a union,” they went in and said, “What are your problems?” They started co-ops for farm workers to buy fuel more cheaply than they could then do it. They helped farm workers deal with interactions with the police, because of police violence, because of racist police violence against Latinos. They helped farmworkers deal with a really unjust increase in their rent. They helped farmworkers get more toilets in the communities where they lived. And César Chávez actually said, “We’re still not ready to go on strike and turn this into a union. We need to spend more time in this community helping people with their everyday problems.” Another local union went on strike, and he said, “Look, if they’re going on strike, we have to honor their strike.” So, they moved more quickly than they originally would. But I think that model of going in, listening more than talking, not telling people what they need but asking people what they need, and then later connecting it to larger political change, is a real bit of wisdom that today’s progressives would benefit from — from looking back at that history.

[32:19] **SV:** Let’s go to the next question.

[32:21] **Melissa:** Hi, Melissa García, and I’m from Brownsville, Texas. I hear you say that we are talking about respect. I think that there are efforts already — grassroots organizations — that are doing that work. So, with that in mind, around building trust, right, what are some efforts that you have seen, and how are we creating those systems that are sustainable, to not only go in and listen, but support the people who are doing the work there?

[32:47] **DL:** So, my book is a book mostly of history, right? And so, I really think that it’s worth looking back on some of the previous movements that were so successful in this country and winning people over. So, I just talked a little bit about the model of César Chávez, of focusing on people’s daily problems. I think the A. Philip Randolph model, in building up the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, is arguably the single best example. When he takes over the sleeping car porters, Philip Randolph is a street preacher in Harlem during the Renaissance — he’s a great public speaker — so, this union of black workers who work on trains say, “Hey, can you try to organize us?” — it was the underdog labor union of all underdog labor unions. He’s trying to organize *black workers in America* in the 1930s, and he’s taking on a company that has Vanderbilts and Whitney’s on their board.

[33:38] And I do think it very much involves trust, as you’re talking about. I also think there’s an undeniable connection between respect and trust. And so, I don’t — I do not pretend to have a kind of an agenda of the issues that people should take in these communities. I tend to have a basic confidence that people are very good judges of what they need in their lives. And for any political organizers, listening to them and then trying to help them solve those problems is almost always the most promising approach.

[34:08] **SV:** I think we have to ask you one more.

[34:09] **EB:** Yeah, one more question.

[34:11] **Brian:** Hey, my name is Brian Zabcik. I’m from down here. In my observation and personal experience, some movements succeed because they can frame their issues in positive terms that people like, and some movements struggle because their issue, no matter how they try, is going to be seen by many people in negative terms. So, where I’m coming from: As Siva knows, I’ve been part of the LGBTQ movement since 1988 as an activist, going back to Act Up in New York City. The LGBT movement struggled during the ’70s and ’80s because it was so tied to sex. And it was tied to not only sex but to sexual acts that made people uncomfortable, specifically gay male sex. And then in the ’90s and the aughts, the primary issue switched, as you know, to gays in the military and to gay marriage. And those are two conservative mainstream institutions that have a lot of support in this country. And I think that that combined with the fact that more and more Americans said that they knew someone who was LGBTQ were the two things that really drove that.

[35:20] **DL:** Contrast that with the abortion movement, which has not had — you know, I’m going to say this as someone who has actually gotten arrested in abortion rights actions before, and so I believe strongly in that — but abortion, it’s not something that people are going to respond to in a warm and fuzzy way that they respond to, say, like, a gay wedding or pictures of a gay wedding. And the one last example that I would toss out is the labor movement, which I think was very successful for a long time because a lot of people knew family and friends who were in unions.

[35:53] So, I think that’s a real— I think that your point about the LGBT movement is a really important and wise point. I won’t try to cover all the other movements ’cause I know you guys want to wrap up. But the military and marriage are great examples of opinions in which many Americans have small-C conservative opinions. They respect the military. They tend to think marriage is a good thing. Right? Whereas you think about — there are many more parts of the left, if you go to a college campus, they see the military as bad, for — many times ROTC was banned — they say, “Well, what’s the point of marriage,” right, “it’s an outdated institution”. The LGBT movement was incredibly strategic about coming up with issues that they knew would persuade most Americans. “Military and marriage” — that puts you on the side of public opinion in some really fundamental ways. It was really smart, it was strategic. And I do think in that there are lessons for other movements, right?

[36:45] So, you see there are about 10 states where it is possible to put abortion rights on the ballot where abortion is now substantially restricted. In some of those states, reproductive rights advocates have done a really good job of getting the issue on the ballot and been really strategic about, hey, let’s not necessarily get it on the ballot for complete access, but access at this number of weeks, which will protect 95 percent of abortions, and will help women *today*. Right. “We get this passed.” There are other states where, despite the fact that they could get an initiative on the ballot, they haven’t done, because they’re fighting over what the language in the amendment should be, should it include the word *women* or not include the word *women*? I would argue if you want to win, it would be good to include the word *women*. There are arguments about exactly kind of how many weeks it should be.

[THEME MUSIC FADING IN]

[37:34] And I really do think there are ways in which the LGBT movement in all of these issues should be a model of, “Hey, let’s take public opinion as it is, let’s respect it, and let’s try to go out and *win*, rather than losing and feeling virtuous about it later.”

[37:52] **SV:** Well, David Leonhardt, thank you so much for joining us on *Democracy in Danger*.

[37:56] **DL:** Thank you.

[APPLAUSE; THEME MUSIC CONTINUING]

[38:06] **EB:** David Leonhardt is an award-winning reporter and columnist for The New York Times. He writes “The Morning” newsletter and formerly co-hosted a podcast called *The Argument*. He is the author of the forthcoming book *Ours Was the Shining Future*.

[THEME MUSIC CONTINUING]

[38:25] **SV:** Well that’s all for our live show here at the Texas Tribune Festival in Austin, Texas. You can catch us live again in a few weeks when we’re back in Charlottesville, Virginia, for a conversation about feminism, film and the history of Ms. magazine.

[38:41] **EB:** We’d love to hear your thoughts on the American dream. You can shoot us a tweet [@dindpodcast](https://twitter.com/dindpodcast) or leave a comment on our website dindanger.org.

[38:53] **SV:** And please, while you’re there, take a moment to subscribe to *our* little newsletter. And check out our past episodes. We have almost 100 show pages with links to sources, images and more about our guests.

[39:06] **EB:** *Democracy in Danger* is produced by Robert Armengol, Nicholas Scott and Steven Betts. Ariana Arenson edits our social media. Adin Yager engineers the show. Our interns are Charlie Burns, Leena Fraihat, Katie Pile, Makhdum Mourad Shah and Caroline Yu. We have help from Ellie Salvatierra.

[39:26] **SV:** Support comes from the University of Virginia’s College of Arts and Sciences. The show is a project of UVa’s Karsh Institute of Democracy. We’re distributed by the Virginia Audio Collective of WTJU Radio in Charlottesville. And this time, we must thank the staff of The Texas Tribune and the Texas Tribune Festival for making this event possible and wonderful. Hook ’em, horns!

I’m Siva Vaidhyanathan.

[39:51] **EB:** And I’m Emily Burrill. See you soon.

[39:53] **DL:** Thank you all!

[THEME MUSIC OUT]