Lizzy: Hi, Lizzy Ghedi-Ehrlich.

Lisa: And I'm Lisa Hernandez.

Lizzy: And we are your hosts for Scholars Strategy Network's No Jargon. Every other week we discuss an American policy problem with one of the nation's top researchers—without jargon.

Lisa: And I mean, every single day we wake up to news having to do with our democracy—question mark?—it's fitting that we talk about it.

Lizzy: As you said, there are fresh issues every day that demand public attention and can benefit from background explanation. And it feels that way, especially because it feels like every single thing that happens, there's a lot of different takes, and sometimes it's hard to have them all hold together. And exactly what's happening right now with the federal government writ large and the branches of government and how they're interacting given all of the different policy issues, media stories, court cases, changes to government structure, it is tough. It is hard to know where to focus your attention, and I think a little bit of a historical perspective on what the pursuit of perfecting our democracy has been like and other points in history when people have put that little question mark at the end of the word democracy like you just did, Lisa, I, I think that is something that hopefully can help a lot of people organize their thoughts.

Lisa: Yeah, absolutely. I mean, we're definitely going to have to think a lot about what it means to have balances of power or not, and all the things that come with keeping this country going through its many crises beforehand and now. So I'm glad that we're thinking about our current crisis and kind of looking backwards a little bit just to learn from what we've already experienced and see how we can apply that in this very unique time.

Lizzy: Yes. Right. Exactly. It's unprecedented and unique at the same time. And if you have been hearing all about these threats to democracy, democracy under attack, if that was something that resonated with you or didn't resonate with you

during the first Trump term, in the interim, and now, I think there's a lot to be said about what the threats that we're actually seeing today are and have a historical and empirical vision of how they have interacted in the past to show that they're real. This isn't just a talking point. These are things that actually matter, that scholars and government practitioners can agree on, and that might help us see a little bit more about what the future holds, but of course not everything.

But we're going to figure it out and we're going to talk to an expert about it. And for this episode, that expert is Suzanne Mettler, the John L. Senior Professor of American Institutions at Cornell University, and our Academic Director here at Scholars Strategy Network. Professor Mettler's research and teaching focuses on American political development, public policy and political behavior. And among her other works, including the submerged state, possibly what she's best known for. She's also the author of “Four Threats: The Recurring Crises of American Democracy,” written with Robert Lieberman at Johns Hopkins University. That's going to provide the foundation of our conversation today, and here it is.

Lizzy: Professor Mettler, thank you so much for coming on No Jargon.

Suzanne: I am delighted to be with you today, Lizzy.

Lizzy: This is a conversation that I'm looking forward to having, I suppose one could say. And also have some trepidations around talking about the current threats to democracy which are so immediate. And I love taking a historic look at other moments in U.S. history that present themselves as possible learnings that we can use for today. And also that distance has really collapsed so much, it feels kind of intense, but that's what we've been doing a little bit with No Jargon lately. It's all been very intense, so I suppose that's fine. And I wanted to start, actually, in a similarly intense place, the book that we're here to mostly talk about today, but not exclusively, begins with an opening talking about the Alien and Sedition acts.

And this was a set of laws, one of which has just been used by President Trump in the last few weeks. It was the legal basis by which they are saying that they're able to deport some hundreds of Venezuelan immigrants, send them to a private prison

in El Salvador. Can you tell me a little bit of the background of these laws? And why the story of them is the opener to the “Four Threats” book

Suzanne: Yes, I'd be happy to. So, the period of the 1790s, we did a lot of research on this when we were writing the book. It was a big eye opener to me. I mean, no sooner was the ink dry on the U.S. Constitution, the United States is in its first decade of being governed under the new Constitution, and things quickly became really polarized in our politics, both among elected officials and among ordinary citizens. And there are all sorts of conflicts and catastrophic kinds of political events that are going on throughout the whole decade. And you get to 1798. And President John Adams, who is our second president, he’s known as a Federalist, like George Washington, like Alexander Hamilton. This is the beginnings of what eventually would be known as a political party. Their opponents call themselves the Democratic Republicans, and that includes James Madison and Thomas Jefferson.

In 1798, Adams signs into law, this set of laws actually, that are enacted in Congress where the Federalists are in power, and the real purpose of all of these laws— I mean, they have ostensible purposes— but it seems that the underlying purpose was to try to weaken the political opposition, to weaken the Democratic Republicans and one component of these laws is to make it more difficult for immigrants to become citizens, even if they've been in the United States for a few years, and then also to mandate deportation for those who were deemed to be dangerous or from hostile nations. And of course that was pretty subjective to decide, you know, who was dangerous or from hostile nations.

And these were particularly used to deport people who were French or Irish. Both groups were disliked, but incidentally, both groups in the United States tended to support the Republicans, the Democratic Republicans. So the Federalists were interested in getting rid of as many of them as they could.

Lizzy: And you know, you say this and, not to immediately kind of move towards the million dollar question, but it seems that there is always inherent in the practice of democracy this idea that if we know that we can only enact the things that we want, pass the laws that we want, engineer society the way we want to through

government, then the pursuit of power through anti-democratic means is sort of always there beckoning to people. I think it's been pulled into such greater focus now with the way we're seeing that principle operationalized, but it's always been there throughout these multiple skirmishes that your book details, there kind of is no way to design a system where the the specter of that 'Why don't you just pass a law that makes it harder for the other guys to take your power away?' as opposed to , 'Why don't you just be so great that everybody loves you, wants more of you, and gives you that mandate you need to move forward?' And that seems so particularly hard to balance.

Suzanne: I think that political scientists, we are realists, right? And we know that if you have a big, diverse society with lots of different ideas and interests, there's always gonna be conflict. People are always gonna have different ideas about how governing should happen.

And so what you'd need is a political system that manages and channels conflict so that it's peaceful. And so that people have the freedom to organize with others who have a common view about governance and they can try to compete and to try to win elective office. That's what you hope for— is that your political system has enough channels in it to allow people to do that and checks and balances to prevent one group or the other from seizing on an inordinate amount of power and oppressing the other.

But one of the things that was fascinating to my co-author, Robert Lieberman, and I—we started this book some years ago in 2017 when we were ourselves very worried about democracy in the United States—we were asking ourselves, well, have there been earlier periods when Americans felt so worried. And so we started doing this examination of American history and we found that, in fact, democracy has been fragile more often than not. We were very fortunate to have come of age during a period in time, in the middle to the late 20th century when democracy was actually more stable than it has been in many periods of American history.

But in this book, we looked at earlier periods when a lot of people who were alive at the time were worried that democracy as they knew it, they were afraid it was going

to undergo backsliding, that it was going to go back the other way toward aristocracy, even monarchy, oligarchy or the country was gonna break into two, secession, and that violence was going be part of all this. They were worried about all of those things. And, the 1790s was one such period. And, to your question, this is really what we would call the legitimacy of the opposition, one of the features that democracy needs to have in that you allow other groups to organize and to even run for public office, and when they win, you have to allow them to govern. And there have certainly been times throughout our history where the legitimacy of the opposition has not been upheld so well and the 1790s, the Alien and Sedition Acts, were one effort at suppressing it.

Lizzy: Alright, so the title of the book that we're mostly here to talk about today is "Four Threats." We're going to go into each of those threats and talk about how they've worked together or separately at different periods and what it means to see them working together today. But the first one, and the one that has historically been of the most interest to me as a person who's grown up in a political period that has largely been characterized by it is polarization. This is political polarization, the depth of our polarization, the extremeness of our current moment of polarization. That feels like a facet of American political life to me, a younger person who does not have much experience with less polarized times. The period that we just spoke of in the 1790s, that was another such time when polarization between those two parties that you're describing that don't exist exactly in the same way anymore was really growing.

Can you talk a bit about the threats of polarization and how we're seeing it today?

Suzanne: Yeah, that's right. So political polarization is one of the four major threats to democracy. And, possibly, it's even the most dangerous one I tend to think. In the 1790s it emerged very quickly that people, who had been really united during the time of the American Revolution, united against a common enemy trying to fight off the British crown. Then once that's gone and now they're trying to govern alone, they grouped into these two different sides. People who had different views about public policy, both foreign and domestic, formed into what started to seem like teams, and that's how polarization feels. It's like instead of having what we call

“cross-cutting affiliations” where you might live in a neighborhood where there's mostly people in one political party, but then you might be in a workplace where there's people in the other or both political parties, you might attend church or belong to civic organizations with people in other political parties so that you have cross-cutting affiliations and memberships. That's really healthy for democracy, political scientists have long argued. But when things stack up so that you're continually associating with people in the same political party and all of these different affiliations that you have, it can start to feel like us versus them.

And then the more polarization grows, the more that people will start to see the other side as if they're engaged in mortal combat. That you think that if our side doesn't prevail then the country is just going to totally deteriorate. And the nation as we know it will not exist anymore. And when the stakes start to seem so high in every election, for example, in every governing decision, that's when polarization is really dangerous. The bottom line about when it's a danger to democracy is when you have one side, at least, who's deciding that they have to win in elections no matter what, nevermind democracy. So winning becomes more important to them than protecting and preserving democracy.

Lizzy: So, I understand that. Here's why this has always been a bit of a struggle for me—and this also relates to the second threat we'll bring into it, political polarization. I've experienced this political polarization, and I understand the threat of feeling like every contest is existential. But sometimes, it also feels like it legitimately is existential.

And the previous period of political polarization when you were talking about people in the 1790s, you described them as having opposing viewpoints about policy. And that sounds so quaint to me. Now, the polarization that I feel most threatened by isn't about people saying, “we have a shared vision and our means of how to get there differs. I think school funding should function like this, not like that” or “I think that healthcare should function under this penumbra and not another.” The polarization that I am so frightened of feels like it does cut more to the heart of who belongs in our polity, who is a legitimate person who can have

rights, and whose rights are actually privileges, and I don't know how to get out of that.

I want to find cross-cutting affinities with people and I want to intervene on actual issues that are harming everyone in different ways, but when it feels like the schism is between one group who says “these people are people” and another group who says they're not, I don't know how to tone that down. I kind of keep coming back to that. And then this speaks to one of the other of the four threats, which is who belongs in our political community? So what does that look like? What does that combination look like? And how does this speak to some of those, this side, that side schisms that we're currently experiencing.

Suzanne: Oh, wow. You have raised several rich questions here, and I'll try to be fairly concise in answering them. Mind you, I teach a semester-long course on democracy. So, you've just raised questions that we might cover over several classes in my course.

Lizzy: Well, do it in 15 minutes. No, this should be a jumping off point to further, hopefully everyone will go back and be able to read some of your work as well, but give us a taste maybe.

Suzanne: Well, I think you made a really good distinction at the outset about when policy feels divisive, policy decisions versus things that are more fundamental than that. I would say, you were saying you, you were born in the 1980s. The 1980s was when polarization over public policies was really just, beginning, right?

And in the eighties and nineties, polarization was growing in different ways that we measure it, looking at elected officials, looking at citizens, et cetera, but it was really conflict over public policies and that is not dangerous to democracy. In fact, some would say that's healthy for democracy because it means that citizens have actual choices.

In the decades before that, political scientists were critical of our political system, that it really didn't give people meaningful choices, right? So there's a sweet spot of

polarization, which is actually healthy, but I would say that in the past, 15 years or so, we made a transition from that polarization that's over public policy toward polarization over more fundamental things. As you're saying, some of the basic pillars of democracy are threatened, such as the integrity of rights, the legitimacy of the opposition, and I would add to that the rule of law, and free and fair elections. I mean those are what we recognize as the pillars of democracy in the book.

But one of the threats to democracy besides political polarization is what we call conflict over who belongs, who's a member of the political community. And this occurs when you have some group in society that is saying we want to preserve our way of life, our culture, the way things were or have been And these other people, who are now a part of our country, are imperiling that. And so we want to, either get rid of them, deport them, or give them some kind of second class citizenship, et cetera.

And there has certainly been plenty of this kind of conflict. Throughout American history, a nation that began with slavery as part of it, there has certainly been conflict over who belongs along lines of race in the United States over and over again and also, gender, and so on.

And the United States is not unique right now in having this kind of conflict over who belongs. There's a political scientist named Dan Slater at the University of Michigan who says that for many democracies in the world today, they're undergoing what he calls “careening” and the careening is between these two sides in political debates. One side wants to make citizenship more expansive and inclusive. Let's include more people. Let's give everybody first class citizenship, full rights as citizens, full civil rights, civil liberties, voting rights, et cetera. And then the other side is saying, no, we want to protect our way of life, we want to protect our status. And we're seeing that in the United States today. I think the saying “Let’s Make America Great Again” is saying let's protect our way of life for a time when white people had a certain kind of status, at the top of the hierarchy and in society, than men did over women and so on. And then there's others who say, let's keep making society more inclusive. We’re seeing that kind of conflict today.

Lizzy: As a white woman, I understand the calculus, I think that people do when they're trying to decide which side of that line, the more inclusive, expansive part or the preserve what I've got because more inclusion and more expansion might mean that I have less. I can judge those choices, but I rarely think that they are irrational. So I see that happening.

And I mentioned my identity specifically because I'm part of a demographic that is often discussed as potentially voting against their interests, voting for a patriarchal system that strips the rights of women, and why does that choice keep being made? Whiteness is often cited as part of that factor, and I see it very plainly sometimes as people looking at two possible worlds: one in which they understand that they may have fewer rights ultimately, and less power ultimately, but where their position within the hierarchy is at least fixed and is relatively near power. And to willingly give that up and try something else, I'm seeing people make a calculation and saying that that's too much risk for them.

Relatedly, not relatedly, I do wanna take us to the next threat, which feels a little bit easier in some ways, less thorny. And maybe that's because of the divide, there's a lot fewer people on the side that currently has more power. And this is us talking about economic inequality. It might seem immediately like this is less of a specific threat to democracy than the two previous threats that we just spoke of because of course, capitalism is not a political system, it's an economic system. They're slightly separate. But I think we're really seeing today how, when economic inequality gets really bad, which I would say, this moment is, but maybe you can put that in a bit more historical context, that very obviously skews how power works.

Suzanne: Yeah, that's well put. Yeah, so economic inequality is something that scholars who study democratic deterioration around the world recognize as a threat. And when Rob and I were studying all this, we assumed it was because of the 99% rise up against the 1%, this revolution. That's not actually what scholars find. They find that what makes economic inequality so dangerous for democracy is that the wealthiest people, when they have so much more than everyone else, what they want to do is to lock down their advantages, nevermind democracy. So they are willing to override democracy, just as we saw with the other two threats. That

there's something that becomes more important to a group than democracy, and that in this case, locking down all of the advantages they have.

I think, right now we're in a moment where we've had these tax cuts from 2017 that really advantaged the wealthiest Americans the most. And they are due to either expire or Republicans right now want to continue them. They would love to make them permanent, in fact. And I think that that is driving a lot of what we're seeing right now, as well as all sorts of wealthy people wanting deregulation in ways that will improve their bottom line and allow them to make more profits.

It's remarkable to me as someone who's been studying economic inequality now for about 25 years, to see that we are at a point where actual oligarchs are out in front, where you have the richest man in the world who is trying to destroy American government agencies. It almost seems unreal. I mean, for a long time, a lot of scholars studied how wealthy people in the United States engaged in what some scholars called “stealth politics.” There was the book by Ben Page and Matthew Lacombe and one by Jason Seawright, which is called “Billionaires and Stealth Politics” and that came out just a handful of years ago. Here we are in a moment where billionaires don't seem to feel that they need to be stealthy at all, but they're being quite in our faces in the way they're trying to seize power.

Lizzy: Yeah, and they can. I think it's really demonstrated how there is a level of wealth that is not simply about influence, but is about, if you really have enough to just buy the damn thing, then you own the thing. And I also think that the wealthy people that you just described, they have reviewed their interests and they've reviewed what democracy offers them, and they have decided that democracy offers them less than what they want.

It feels like, again, a series of people kind of making that decision and all these factors are sort of making those decisions converge into something that's very powerful. And that brings us actually to the final one, which feels like potentially the most, not unique, but of all the four threats that you detail, this is the one that has popped up a little bit less than some of the others and the way we're experiencing it right now is definitely more extreme than what we have precedent for. And that's

executive aggrandizement and that's essentially the office of the president gaining more and more power over time.

So we want to talk about, when else have we seen this?What does this mean in terms of that checks and balance system that you talked about and, and what's the particular threat in this moment?

Suzanne: Yeah, so with most of these periods that Rob and I studied, you know, the most dangerous ones were when you had a combination of threats. And you tended to have the first three threats, political polarization, conflict over who belongs and growing inequality that occurred in the 1850s and led to the Civil War. It occurred in the 1890s and led to the disenfranchisement of millions of African American men who had been able to vote for a few decades at that point. But it did not include this fourth threat—excessive executive power. So excessive executive power in the United States only becomes a possibility really starting with the 1930s. There were moments of it. Like we started out at the top talking about Alien and Sedition Acts. That was an act of executive aggrandizement in the 1790s. But, for the most part, presidents are not very strong with the exception of Lincoln during the Civil War, and a few others until we get to the 20th century and in the midst of the Great Depression Americans were really looking for government to be more responsive to them, and Franklin D. Roosevelt does expand the powers of the Executive branch. Congress willingly seeded to him quite a bit of authority in various ways. For the most part, that's used during the 1930s to respond to the needs of the American people.

Now there was a lot of fear during the 1930s on the part of many Americans that, you know, they're looking at places around the world where tyranny was on the rise, Nazism, fascism. They were afraid the United States could go in the same direction, but didn't. There is one thing though I do need to mention and circling back to our topic of the Alien and Sedition acts at the top.

One of the big exceptions in me characterizing the Roosevelt administration this way, was the internment of Americans of Japanese descent during World War II. When that occurred, which was an executive order by President Roosevelt, with

which many people in his administration disagreed, in fact, he was using the Alien Acts as well in order to do that. And so, you know, looking back at that period, that's one of the ways in which Roosevelt said he was doing it for national security, but it certainly took away rights from a whole group of Americans, in a way that is a source of shameI think looking back historically.

But executive power. So it comes out of the 1930s, stronger than it's ever been. And then as we go through the Cold War, for the purposes of national security, presidents of both parties keep increasing executive power. And then you get to Richard Nixon. Watergate and here is Nixon using the powers of the presidency for his own political gain and his party's political gain, and that's the great danger is that these powers of the presidency are used not for the American people generally, but for a particular party or individuals. But coming out of Watergate, both parties came together in Congress, Democrats and Republicans, and enacted lots of reforms to try to prevent that from happening again.

And so executive power is somewhat curtailed then, although again, each president of either party. has tended to leave the office more powerful than he found it. And then we fast forward to President Donald Trump, who's a president, who I would say, unlike all of these others, has not had the same respect for the Constitution and has been more willing to use executive power for his own gain and his party's gain.

Lizzy: I mean, not just more willing. You can be as willing as you want to be. But as you noted in the example of Watergate, which again sounds quaint, unfortunately, relatively to me, there was a strong response to that move towards executive aggrandizement. There was a strong bipartisan response and a public response. Not to say that it was Nixon alone, and everyone around him condemned it. But Congress refused to allow power to be usurped and for power to be concentrated in the executive office.

And right now it feels like one of the main differences is it's not just that this is something that this particular president feels and believes and does, which is certainly building off recent history where we've seen the increased use of things

like executive orders from both parties, which I think they would largely attribute not to this idea that they, “they” meaning the presidents, wanted to be more powerful, but more to the idea that Congress, one of the other three pillars of government, was not able to govern sufficiently because they might say of polarization, one of the other threats. And so we moved to a slightly different style of governing to try to get something done. Now we're in a situation where we've got that recent tradition of governing through the executive office, we've got a particular executive who certainly seems to like self-aggrandizement on a number of levels, and we have other branches of government that, in a departure from the Watergate example, seem to like it, I guess, is maybe what appears to be happening.

Now that we've gone through the four threats and we've moved more into this current era, tell me a little bit about what you're seeing, the interplay between these things that is happening now.

Suzanne: Yeah. It's quite striking to compare the first Trump administration with what we're already seeing in the second one. During Trump's first term in office, he was creating a lot of controversy all the time. But Rob and I, we were writing this book during that time period. I had some undergrad research assistants working with me, and what I asked them to do was to scour news articles all about damage to any of the four pillars of democracy.

And what was interesting was there wasn't much actual damage to the four pillars, up through when we sent the book to the press, which was the spring of 2020, so there was a lot of talk that sounded dangerous and it seemed like it could be harmful to the norms that underlie our political system. But in terms of actual damage, not much was happening. It was more like a barrage of threats. But then, we sent the book off to press and then things got much more intense. And with the culmination of course of once, Biden won the presidency of Trump and his campaign denying the outcome, challenging it, trying to get people to switch votes in order to go along with them. And then ultimately the insurrection on the capitol on January 6th, 2021. So that was a fundamental attack on free and fair elections and respecting their outcome and on the rule of law.

Fast forward to where we are now, another four years later. And this time around, President Trump has gone about things very differently in terms of the appointments of who's in his administration. And he's made it a top priority that these are people who are first and foremost gonna be loyal to him rather than loyal to the Constitution. And I think this is why we're really in trouble. This is really a dangerous place to be, particularly when you have agencies like the Department of Justice, the FBI, the CIA, and the Department of Defense, all of these kind of power agencies being run by people who are somewhat dismissive of the Constitution and who are really trying to be loyal to Trump first and foremost.

We're now seeing executive power being used at a rate that we've never seen before in the United States and in a whole set of areas. So many different areas are under attack, where President Trump and his administration are ignoring what Congress has done to appropriate money for all sorts of purposes, serving the will of the American people by creating laws that have set up agencies and those agencies are funded. So what DOGE has been doing of slashing and burning the federal workforce in so many agencies, directly goes against the separation of powers, and authority of Congress in setting up all of those agencies and so on. So that's very problematic.

There's destroying the administrative state, which is a political achievement in the United States. It took about a hundred years to build it, and it didn't happen easily. And what it does quietly on a day-to-day basis has been carrying out the will of the American people in all sorts of areas of governance.

And then meanwhile, there are the attacks on the courts and, with President Trump saying that a judge should be impeached, for example. So many things are being challenged in the courts now. And so the question is, to what extent is the Trump administration going to respect the decisions of judges? The jury is still out on that whole question.

Lizzy: So we're taping this episode I think a day before there is supposed to be another finding in one of the cases that's closest to that question that people are

citing as the possible provocation of a constitutional crisis. That moment when you're like, we've run out of instructions here, we really know what happens next.

And that is about the Venezuelan deportation flights to El Salvador. That's a moment where the judicial branch, if you could frame it as the entire part of government, has said, you shouldn't have done that, you can't do that, you need to reverse it. The executive branch is saying, what if we don't? What if we don't reverse it? And we're supposed to see the resolution of that soon. And I think it's difficult for us to think toward that future. We don't know what is going to happen a couple days after we have wrapped this podcast, but as we await that moment and see what happens next, I do wanna take some comfort in the fact that, your look at the history of all of these different moments of backsliding, potential backsliding, skirmishes, and elevation of these four threats, either individually or in combination, we have survived those moments. Yes, this moment is different, but the history of democracies, refinement and survival and progress is the history of our government.

And I want to lean into that a little bit, not falsely, not to give false hope. But if you could tell us a little bit about how some of those other moments when threats were high resolved so that we might begin to see potential paths towards some type of resolution in this current moment.

Suzanne: Yes. Well, that's a good question and I wish I could say that there's kind of a sunny overview I could give, but it's not so much like that. One thing that Rob and I found that was really deeply disturbing is that often, these threats would resolve with some sort of a compromise in which there is a group of people whose rights are sacrificed and time, and again, it was African Americans.

In the 1790s, when we get to the election of 1800, it almost seems like the Constitution isn't going to endure at all. There's this whole controversy over that election. The country gets through it okay, but one of the things that's striking is that while the Federalists and the Democratic Republicans had so many disagreements, what they both agreed upon was keeping slavery intact. Federalists didn't like slavery, but they were willing to leave it intact.

Another period that we haven't talked about is the 1890s. To me this was a very striking period because there are some real similarities to our own period. There was a high in rising economic inequality, there was political polarization, and there was real conflict over who belongs. What they did not have was the executive aggrandizement. In the late 19th century, African Americans in the South who had gained voting rights since the Civil War, and in most states they were still able to use those right up into the 1890s. And many African Americans were running for office at all different levels. And so it was actually a period when democracy was becoming more robust. It's also a period when the populist party was formed by farmers, in particular in the South and the West in the United States. That was another party that was trying to act on behalf of people's economic rights in this time of high and rising economic inequality.

In the South, the Democratic party at the time was the party run by white elites. And they did not want to lose their political power. They're very afraid that they were losing political power in this time period. In North Carolina, we zoom in on the book to Wilmington, North Carolina, which was a coastal city with a Black middle class that was really growing in the 1890s and where people were gaining political positions of leadership in the city government. And most of these, these are, Black Americans who were part of the Republican party at the time, and they began to realize that if they worked together with the populace on what they called the “fusion ticket”, running candidates on a shared ticket, that they could actually beat the Democrats, this white elite-led party, they could beat them in elections. So they do that and they actually won a lot of seats in 1894 and again at 1896. And at that point, the Democrats in the state said, enough, we need to take control back. We're losing power. And they plotted for a couple of years. And what they did in 1898 amount to a coup d'etat. It's the one known coup d'etat on American soil.

On November 10th, 1898, there were all these paramilitary groups that had been organized by the Democrats that gathered the red shirts and the white government union. Some of them were on horseback and they were all armed. It's all these white men. And they go to, first of all, to the offices of this Black-owned newspaper, the *Daily Record*, which was one of the only ones of its kind in the country at that

point in that it was a daily Black-owned newspaper. It was published daily. They burned it down.

It was very striking that that's the first thing they did was undermining the legitimacy of the opposition and particularly for African-Americans having freedom of the press, freedom of speech, et cetera. They burned it down. Then they go on to a Black neighborhood and they're terrorizing people there. They're taking many of the city leaders and taking them to the train station, forcing them to leave town. Hundreds of people were killed that day. Very significantly, by the end of the day, they gathered in the City Hall, all of these elected officials, both the populace, some of whom are white and the Republicans, these African Americans who were in elected office, and they forced them at gunpoint to resign.

And then they installed their own, the Democrats in their place. So it was a coup d'etat. The next several months, they went further and they instated literacy tests and other provisions that would make it possible to prohibit African Americans from voting and some poor whites as well.

And so they solidified the power of this one party government of the Democrats. And what happened there in North Carolina, I tell this story because it brought out into the open what happened more quietly, all over the South during that time. Once the political rights of African Americans were taken away, then their civil rights and civil liberties were taken away as well. Jim Crow gets firmly established and it lasted for 60 years.

The significance of this is that real backsliding not only can happen in the United States, it has happened. It's happened before and it had very longing, enduring consequences. And today, for the first time in our history, we have all four threats that are combined today. So this is a time where it is crucially important for all of us to be trying to protect democracy, so that we can continue to have it and to pass it on to future generations going forward.

Lizzy: And what have you seen? We'll leave this to be sort of our last question. I know that we can't prescribe actions that people should take. I try not to ask

scholars to do that, but a person who has observed all of these moments and brings that wisdom into our current one, you've illuminated all these things that we're seeing that are very threatening, that have huge consequences, and we've discussed those and sort of laid them out. What are you also seeing that might reflect your writing in the book that says democracy also contains the seeds of its own regrowth and renewal. Because we know that there are counter forces already acting against some of these threats as they rise.

Can you maybe name some of them and say what you've seen? Not to give anyone hope incorrectly, but to make sure that we're showing how these counter forces have also risen up alongside the threats at each of these points and currently as well.

Suzanne: Well I think that a lot of Americans have felt incredibly frustrated and voiceless during this time, and they've been looking for leaders to rise up and point the way forward and, feeling like that's not happening. Although, we did just see this historic filibuster by Senator Cory Booker that I think gave a lot of people a lot of hope, a sense of courage.

But what I keep thinking about is, remembering in the 1980s when I was part of, various marches and protests, and there would be a slogan that people would chant: “if the people will lead, the leaders will follow.” And I think it's an important mantra for our times because I think what actually really has to happen now, and it is beginning to happen, is people taking action in a million different ways and all over the country in all the different localities where people live.

Not some big, you know, just March on Washington, but rather attending town meetings in one's congressional district, even if the member of Congress doesn't show up. Going there to make your voices heard with other citizens about the issues that concern you or, you know, attending events, whether it be protests or marches, contacting elected officials, doing all of those things and speaking to whatever issues concern people which, you know, there are so many. I mean, there's concerns to be had right now about Social Security with the DOGE threats to be shutting down so many offices. There's concerns for Medicaid, with the budget

going through Congress that is proposing all of these cuts. We've been talking a little bit about immigrants. There's government jobs, all of the services that the government provides that are being attacked by DOGE, and higher education, and science and, and on and on. All of these things. And basically, the rule of law itself is under attack. Whichever of these things speaks to a person, it's great to be speaking out about that and for all of us, o be thinking of ourselves as being in one big coalition to protect democracy.

And this is a coalition that transcends party in all sorts of ways, and it transcends any single issue. It's about government of the people, by the people, and for the people. And I think that by both revealing the impact of all of these policy changes and trying to make that clear, and this is something that SSN members are really good at doing. And by being in part of visible events, the impact of that will be to strengthen the backbone of members of Congress, both Democrats and Republicans, and to strengthen the backbone of judges, to make it clear the American people will not stand for the dismantling of what has been such a struggle to attain.

Lizzy: Well, we will see what happens next by the time this is produced, but I truly hope that our listeners and our members who you mentioned there, take that with them. Take that watch word with them. And thank you so much for your insights today on No Jargon.

Suzanne: Well, it's been a pleasure to talk with you. Thank you so much, Lizzy.

Lizzy: And thanks for listening. For more on Professor Mettler's work, check out our show notes at scholars.org/nojargon.

No Jargon is the podcast of the Scholars Strategy Network, a nationwide organization that connects journalists, policymakers, and civic leaders with America's top researchers to improve policy and strengthen democracy.

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