

The Future of Democracy Ep. 21 - English

[00:02:37] Hello, welcome to The Future of Democracy, a show about the ideas, trends and disruptions changing the face of our democracy. I'm your host, Sam Gill. On this show we try to do is to identify and explore critical debates about the future of our democracy and take you a little bit deeper than the op-ed that maybe you read or the tweet that somebody shared with you if it's possible to get deeper than a tweet. In today's conversation really brings together two such issues. One has been the national conversation and reckoning on race that has really intensified since the murder of George Floyd earlier this year in Minneapolis. And the other is an emerging generation and a lot of contestation and discussion about who America's young adults are, what their preferences are, and how they could reshape politics to help us dig deeper into these two topics. We're going to be joined today by Cathy Cohen, professor at the University of Chicago. He's a longtime scholar of culture and community, the author of the book Democracy Remixed Black Youth and the Future of American Politics, and the founder of the Black Youth Project. Please welcome the show. Cathy, go get you. Thank you for joining us.

[00:03:46] Thank you for the invitation to join you. Thrilled to be here.

[00:03:50] Well, I'd love to just get into it. And you came bearing gifts in the form of data. And so I want to get into that data. You have. You have been studying for some time really concretely the views of young adults. And I know that part of what you've been looking at recently is how young adults have been responding to the murder of George Floyd to the moment that we're in and how that informs their views of ways to be active. And so I'd love, as you could, walk us through some of that data and we could start there.

[00:04:22] So it sounds good. Let's bring up a slight one while you're doing that. I'll just say a little bit about why we stay young people, because I think it's critical. You know, there's been the kind of flood of information through data and polls and surveys that we often see on particular cable news broadcasts. And usually they talk about the general population. And in those surveys, young adults make up a very small percentage of those that they survey. Even though we know that millennials and Gen Zimmers now are larger generations than baby boomers, when we combine generation, I mean generation C. And millennials, they're the largest share of the workforce. Largest share of eligible voters. So we really wanted to focus in on young adults 18 to 36 and do oversampling of African-American, Asian-American. Next young people. So we could, you know, desegregate by race and have something to say about how young people think similarly, but also how they differ. And this is an example of such a question. Go ahead, Sam. So just because they tell us. Yes, sir. So, you know, one of the things that we wanted to ask is what's the best way to make racial progress in the United States? Right. And we gave respondents a list of probably 13 options that included national elections and voting in state and local elections. Nonviolent protests, organizing in communities. And we gave them the option of revolution. And I suspect we put that in at, you know, at the end thinking, well, let's put it on, but no one will probably please select that option. And what we find here is, again, that the diversity of how young adults think about these things. If you look at African-Americans, the number one answer that's chosen most often and around 20 percent. So about one out of five is revolution. And we can talk about what that means because, you know, I've presented this before and people kind of scoff or laugh it off like, oh, yes. What do they know about revolution for Asian-Americans and for whites? It's voting and state and local elections as though no one answer. And for that next, young people, young adults, it's nonviolent protests and demonstrations. One of the things that we've seen over time because we've asked this question before is that a home is is that

young people rarely say voting in national elections. Right. When they think about the idea of progress. And this goes to their sense of alienation from traditional political institutions. It is not through voting. And if it's through voting, it's exactly what we see here, voting at the state level, at the local level, where they feel like they can hold politicians much more accountable.

[00:07:08] Is this. It is. This is are people going. Are young adults going south on national government or is this a intensified trend?

[00:07:17] Well, I think it's an intensifying trend. And what I mean by that is I think the general population has a sense of alienation. You don't think the parties work when we ask a question, should there be a third party majorities and usually two-thirds of respondents say yes to that question. I always say we don't have a third party because if you ask people. What the third party should look like. You know, there's no agreement there, but no one's happy with the traditional political institutions. They feel like they don't respond to the people and they're in it to kind of advance their own interests. This, I think, is a different, though, because I think what young African-Americans are telling us here is that they're not sure anything short of large systemic change will alter the ways in which their lives have been structured. Right. And there is a way, again, I think that people say, oh, that's silly. They don't know what revolution is. And in fact, they may not know what revolution is, but they do know what a.. Blackness is. White supremacy has. Right. They know what it is to live in a society where, in fact, they feel like there are opportunities for mobility or structure outward and that in. Right. They know what it is to live in a society where they don't feel like full citizens, even though they have citizenship. And I think what we're seeing here is in part an acknowledgment that major transformation has to happen in their lives. And I'll say one more thing about this, which is these are young people who have also lived through the first black president. Right. So what they and many of them have lived through, you know, black mayors or black city council members. So they've experienced what kind of demographic representation looks like. And those experiences have not drastically changed their lives. In fact, when President Obama was elected, we did focus groups with African-Americans and they were quite nuanced in their approach.

[00:09:11] What they said was it's fantastic that he's been elected to symbolics. It's important for the nation. But I don't think it's going to change my life. It's not going to stop the police from harassing me. It's not going to make my school better. So I think that's what we're seeing in this slide.

[00:09:26] So it's like so we should your interpretation is less, you know, some sort of let ask. I've got a theory of what the agenda is and a little more. The paradigm is not working for me. And you need to understand that.

[00:09:38] I think that's absolutely right. Yeah. I don't I don't think it's an s. I don't think it's I definitely want democratic socialism or communism or something of that sort. I think what they're saying is that democracy, as it's being played out here, capitalism as it exists in its form here of racialized capitalism, isn't working for me and my community. And so when we think about making significant racial progress, what is it going to take? It's not going to take voting for Biden, even though I might vote for Biden. Right. It means something more structural, something a bigger transformation.

[00:10:13] Let's bring the sides back up. And I know there's a couple more data points on political activism we want to look at. Yeah.

[00:10:18] All right. So this is just about a question about the kind of killing of George Floyd and the movement uprisings that have been sparked by that. And we can say, you know, Spark was many things, including the killing of George Floyd or the execution of George Floyd. And we'll have an a long term impact on race relations. And what we find is across race and ethnicity in our survey that young people say, yes, it's going to have a long term impact. Now, I don't have the slide here, but if we when we break this down by party, what we find is a real split in particular among Republicans on whether it will have a long term impact or short term impact. If you look at independents, the plurality of independents say long term impact and overwhelmingly young Democrats say long term impact.

[00:11:08] But I think, again, what we're seeing in part is some movement. When we think about it and look at it based on race in terms of how young people are experiencing these protests and believe the impact will be of the protests, although when we feel to it by party I.D., young Republicans who tend to be white and often tend to be male, at least in our sample, are more reluctant to see these as having long term impact.

[00:11:37] What do you make of that? Is it a preference expression or is it that they're a different view about what long term impact is is needed?

[00:11:48] Well, I think I think that's a different view. I you know, you limited me to six slides, so I sorry for your loss. It's all your fault. But if we go back to that, we don't have to if we went back to that first slide about racial progress. What is it going to take when we ask young Republicans and we split it up by party I.D., the number one answer, and if we had this by party I.D. of young Republicans, is that racial progress is not needed. Right. So, first of all, they're starting from the preference or the the the position that actually we live in a pretty equal world. Right. And the kind of idea of racial progress. Maybe there's some need, but there's it's not a major. So when you start from that position, you have a very different view of the protests. Right. And if you understand the protests only to be limited to a cry out for racial justice. Right. Then you have a different reaction than if we frame the question, for example. Do you think these protests will have an impact on economic inequality? And that will be something, you know, to play around with in the survey.

[00:13:01] So if we go back to that second slide. So just for those who are listening later on the podcasts, you're creeping up on two-thirds majority of of African-American and Asian-American young adults who think there will be a long term impact.

[00:13:14] And then sort of simple, just over 50 percent majority for Lant Nixon white young adults. Did the level of I guess I'm calling it optimism about the potential for long term change, particularly among African-American, Asian-American, young adults, surprise you at all?

[00:13:31] No, I mean, no, I. Well, let's see. Did it surprise me? I think this is one of those moments where, in fact, you want to feel like this will have some impact. Right. That there's a kind of desperate need for hope. And again, if we go back to that first question, where you say how do you make racial progress, these young people are telling us the way you make racial progress is you go into the streets, right. You engage in nonviolent protests. You organize and community. And in the extreme sense, you support revolution. And so I think there's a way in which things they need and want this to have some long term impact. The other thing on that slide that I'll just note is really a small percentages of young people who say it will have no impact. Right. And you could you could imagine that people would be much more cynical about what they're seeing and that they might say in

large numbers, well, this isn't really going to matter. And that's that would be in the second slide. But in fact, they believe is going to have some impact either long term or short term. But very few people are going to say no impact. And in fact and we do it by party again. Only 13 percent of Republicans say no impact. So, again, I think people see the uprisings, the protests as as shaping a new type of discourse, a new understanding of what's going on for black people. And it's it's going to have some impact. It's not clear if it will be long or short.

[00:14:59] And just as a footnote, from a historic perspective. Does that other threshold moments like that, are there is there something about the regardless of preferences, the acknowledgment that maybe this is a watershed event that itself is critical to cultural social change? Do we have any any evidence or insight into that?

[00:15:19] That's a great question. I don't think I have a good answer for you. Right. Like, when are the moments when the country begins to believe either through events or information that something is changing and therefore is willing to support that type of change? I would say that, in fact, the framing of these protests is something that says to the general population, this is important. Right. We've talked about these as the largest protests in the history of the country. I think the narrative coming out of the media has often focused on the fact that these are not just black people going into the streets. Right. That these are young whites and Latin nag's and Asian-American and native and indigenous folks. And it is a multicultural, multiracial nature of these protests. I think there's also been the idea that, in fact, even if older Americans can't get into the streets, in part because of Colvert, there's been support for this. We've seen this in the data and a real shift in the ways in which people are beginning to think about these issues. Now, the other thing that different at this moment is that we have the affordance is of new media. We have the offenses of the video. Right. That will move people in ways that we've never seen before. Even though we can say it's it's kind of like Rodney King when people saw the video of him being beat. Right. Or when we think about the civil rights movement and Emmett Till and Mamie Till decides, in fact, to show the images of his body. And so there is something that I think social media scholars know about what images can do. And when we have a proliferation, proliferation of images of George Floyd, you know, but also of other killings or harassment of black people, it begins to tell a narrative about, one, how the country has to change. And then we see this response and outpouring into the streets. And I think people begin to believe that something is different at this moment.

[00:17:19] So we've got one more slide on the political question activism side.

[00:17:22] So why don't we bring the third side up and you can tell us around.

[00:17:31] So this is a question that we've been asking about how people think about the killing of black people by the police. Right. Are these isolated incidences or are they part of a larger pattern and part of really what we just want to show here is the change over time. Right. The creeping kind of acknowledgment or understanding that these are part of a larger pattern.

[00:17:54] And so for young whites, for example, we see an increase from 40 to 52 percent. Right. So majorities are now beginning to understand that we see a slight increase for Latin X and for Asian-American. But the change in African-Americans is really probably not statistically significant. So we can say that that's that's just we can say that's stable. But, you know, we have other data that we could point to that suggests that there is a change. Again, it goes back to our last question. And how young people at least are

young adults are thinking about these issues and how young whites in particular are thinking about these issues. Now, as always, bring in my party framework here just to bring us down. If you look at young Republicans, right, and we ask this question one time, they still largely believe, right. That the killing of black people by the police are isolated incidents. So while we are kind of moving young people or people going into the street, changing the framework and the narrative, there is still the kind of party I.D. that says I ascribe to the narrative that says these are bad apples. These are isolated events. And that's how we should approach this issue.

[00:19:10] Do you think as an as a political scientist? You know, a question that occurs to me is we're in a pretty intense. We've been in a pretty intense debate for the past five to 10 years about what the coming party realignment will be, partly in response to the polling you just cited. Right. Most people would ever a third party, they've gone south and accurate system. Is there. One thing I haven't heard people talk about is, is there the potential that one of the cleavages of party lines will just be whether you buy into the notion that structural racism is a thing because it touches a lot of core beliefs right now that are part of what distinctions, particularly for Republicans and their philosophical, make certain ideas about liberty and the market are really challenged by a certain discourse about inequality, a certain discourse about about implicit bias and structural discrimination. Do you just as a political scientist, do you see this becoming a more significant force in how we organize ourselves potentially politically?

[00:20:04] That's a great question. I think it will be an important question in terms of party structure. And what I mean by that is someone asked me this question that they've asked before about is this the end basically of the Republican Party moving forward if, in fact, increasing numbers of young people say that, of course, are structural racism? Of course, this is a pattern. Of course, you know, racism is a major problem. And the party, the Republican Party at this moment is unable to kind of acknowledge any of those. What I think many young people would call facts of their existence. I think it could be a restructuring in the sense it could be a kind of important cleavage if, in fact, the party doesn't move. I think it's a cleavage. It's actually more in the Republican Party. I think I think there is a split. And we will see it after Trump, whether it's in twenty, twenty or twenty twenty-four, where the party has to reckon with how it's going to position itself on these issues. Right. How is it going to position itself on structural racism as you race. How is it going to position itself on the question of capitalism. Right. And it's not just the 99 versus one percent, but there is a kind of discussion about capitalism and racial capitalism at this point that I think doesn't break and the same way that we've seen in previous generations. We have a question where we ask about favor, ability towards capitalism and socialism. And for young African-Americans, they are just as favorable, if not more towards socialism as they are toward capitalism. This is a generation that didn't grow up the Cold War. So there's their kind of commitment to kind of capitalism. And the ways in which it's been structured in the past doesn't work for them. I always say this is a generation that grew up with the recession of 2008 and now the pandemic recession with the gig economy that doesn't really provide them the benefits and opportunities that they desire. We know generationally, fewer of them have access, for example, to housing, to owning homes, and they have greater student debt. And so the kind of promise of capitalism of a middle class existence isn't playing for them. And so I think all of these factors are going to be cleavages and how people align themselves. Now, part of this lesson. Part of the alignment that we know is that increasing numbers of young people are just saying, I'm not with either party. Right. And so that that is going to be the point. So I think those will be questions for the Republican Party. And then I think for the Democratic Party, the

cleavages will be around kind of how progressive, how left, what type of parties, in fact, they are willing to align themselves with.

[00:22:53] And Eli Larra, the president of our street center, right libertarian think tank, he actually came on the show and talked about that, you know, the way in which he's through these internecine elements that they really see themselves. They're committed libertarians, but they're trying to be much more integrative about sort of ideas of inequity and inequality of history and often cast. The Republican scholar made waves last week with this sort of recommitment to labor that I think Marco Rubio signed on to and so on. So it's I I definitely don't want to be glib. You're good. You're good. They're kind of correct that. So let's get into policing, because you've got some fascinating data about young adults in policing. What? We bring up the slides. Right.

[00:23:32] Slides, more slides. All right. So what we're trying to do is tell a complicated story about how young people are thinking about this question of policing. And the question of policing has come to the forefront. And we think about the uprisings and the protests. Right. The media has kind of focused on this demand to defund the police. Actually, that's an incomplete narrative. What young activists, in particular black activists and the Movement for Black Lives have demanded is divestment in the police and investment community. And I think when we hold to that framework, we see something very different. So on this light, we just ask the question, do you believe that police are necessary for safe communities? And overwhelmingly right by race, young people say yes to that and to that question. Now, I will note, we've asked that twice. We asked you in twenty nineteen and we asked most recently last month. And you can see slight decreases, very slight, sometimes specifically insignificant, but very slight decreases in the number of African-Americans and the number of whites in particular who say yes to that question. Now what do I mean by decreased from young whites? It goes from 88 to 82. So, you know, you could say, who cares? It's still overwhelming for young African-Americans. Seventy two percent in July 20, 19 said, yes, police are necessary. Sixty six percent in August 20. Twenty. So there's no getting around that. And again, if you look at something like party, overwhelming, 76 percent of Democrats, 93 percent of Republicans say yes to that question. And about 68 percent of independents. So I think overwhelmingly the way if we ask that straightforward question, are police necessary? Young people say, yes, maybe go to the next line.

[00:25:27] Here, we want to ask the question using the language of the movement. Right. Defund and abolish. And again, you can see that a significant majority, significant, significant numbers of young people in some cases say yes to defund.

[00:25:44] Right. Very few say yes to abolish. So for African-Americans, 38 percent say yes, defund. Twenty one percent say yes, abolish. For Asian-Americans, 44 percent, yes, defund. 10 percent, yes. Abolish Latt next. Twenty six percent. Defund nine percent abolished. Young whites, 32 percent. Defund. 13 percent say abolish. Again, if we go back to party, as you can imagine, more Democrats are willing to defund. Only about 17 percent abolish for Democrat. I mean, for Republicans, it's 14 percent defund and eleven percent abolish.

[00:26:23] So we could take from those first two slides that, look, young people believe, in fact, the police are necessary and they're not willing to defund or abolish the police. I think that is an incomplete analysis because it's only focused on the defund part and not the invest part. So the next slide will give us a better sense of this. OK. A lot of words on this slide. So if you're listening, you're you should be glad you don't have to read this. But it's

basically a question about would you support creating a new agency, we say, of first responders that specialize in de-escalation, providing mental health support and other social services. That would take over these responsibilities from the police. And basically, what I want you to know is majorities of African-American, Asian-American black necks and young whites support this idea either strongly or somewhat support. And in fact, when we looked at the CW, same question by party.

[00:27:27] Sixty seven percent of Republicans say yes to that question. 88 percent of Democrats say yes. And 67 percent of independents. And the point here is to say that if we just say, should we abolish the police when people don't have a more expansive understanding of what public safety could look like, not just policing, then they say hold onto the police. But when we begin to offer them other ideas and I think this is what activists are pushing us to do. Right. Other ways of providing for services that aren't just about policing. Right. That aren't just about violence. Then we see strong support actually from young adults to say, let's reimagine what public safety looks like. And again, because I only had six slides when we asked questions about would you support, you know, diverting part of the budget of the police to these other types of social services, we see significant support for that.

[00:28:28] Right. So I think people are willing to to shift and to think differently about the scope of institutions that provide for public safety. The question is, do we have the space to provide for that discussion? Right. And in our media ecology right now, we tend to kind of focus on one phrase, and that drives the narrative versus a more expansive understanding of what policing might look like. I mean, why they might look like.

[00:28:57] I want to want to push on that a little, though. So I I agree. And I've certainly said on this show, too, I think the defund the police green new deal, these are their paradigm shifts as it goes to the revolution that they're intended to open up the space to explore, you know, alternative alternative modes of providing the service. And that pattern that you show is really common. Once you give people the positive alternative, you're not only do you see greater unanimity, what what people will see and we can send the sides around is there's also less variability by race people. There's more sort of much more in sync. I guess the way I'd push on it, though, is that if it was noticeable that like one in five black young adults do say abolish, you know, when offered define versus abolish. Should I take that again as a measure of I'm not saying there's no public safety function. I'm saying I don't. I don't believe in this one as it's currently constituted that sort of had it with this paradigm. And I guess the question I would ask is, is, is one of the challenges that when white young adults are affirming that positive vision of investing in de-escalation, investing in rap brown, they may not be thinking about also all of the other kind of work that may need to be a part of that that goes along with dismantling, you know, structures of bias that with dismantling the ways in which even when which sort of racialized violence happens, even when there's not animus. You know, all all of these things that we put under the mantle of sort of structural or a systemic problem, like are they just imagining something less revolutionary than what the black young adults are imagining?

[00:30:32] It's it's not clear. But again, if we go back to an earlier slide where we said, you know, the killing of black people is an isolated event or is a part of a problem, what we've seen is growth and an understanding that it's part of a problem. Right. So I think there is a more complicated understanding of what what this would entail in terms of rethinking. I keep saying public safety. Right. As a part of rethinking policing, I think, you know, we have questions. Next time you'll let me bring all of my slides. Right, with a question that says, you know, do you think that police treat black people worse than whites?

Overwhelming young people across race and across party say yes to that. Right. So there is an understanding that police that there is inherent structural racism that is a part of policing or at least inherent bias that, you know, these are not isolated incidents and that there has to be some type of structural change. And I think the question is, what are the institutions that will provide for the kind of political education or the spaces, whereas a community we get to discuss what might. Public safety look like right, as opposed to. Do you support this or don't you support that? And that is a question to me about kind of civil society, protests, societies and how, you know, how we build an infrastructure for thinking about radical change.

[00:32:04] And yeah, and that's helpful. So that it's partly that what if we're if we're going to take a hopeful view? Part of the hopeful view is that it's not that the solution on its face necessarily means the same thing to everybody. But we can see signs that the scope of public debate is widening, that the premises that are now legitimate to put on the table as we talk about what de-escalation should look like, as we talk about what it's addressing, as we talk about why we don't have it. That's why we get the results that we get today. So that's I think that that's I think that's exciting. I mean, I think that's exciting if those conditions are altered.

[00:32:38] Well, here's a I think it's exciting if we have the infrastructure right to carry through. So we can all agree this isn't working right. We see it in front of our faces on video. This is not working. And in fact, it's killing black people. And then the question becomes, well, how do we figure out what might work? How do we begin to engage people and move people? And then we go back to that first slide. Right. Which is about how do you create change? It's about organizing. It's about nonviolent, violent protests. So what's the infrastructure that facilitates that? Also, I think it's part of what we have to be, you know, thinking about and planning for.

[00:33:15] So why don't we get you out on that question? What what do you think are what's the top priority in your view when it comes to building the infrastructure of change?

[00:33:24] Right. I, I, I've written this as you know, and I'll say it again. I think that the ability for people to have a kind of civic structure that allows for political education, that allows for protests, that allows for mobilization is the key here. And what do I mean by that? There is an increasingly larger literature that is beginning to think about we're not just beginning is writing about kind of what we need to further the future of our democracy. And some people, you know, are worried about the norms that have been broken under this presidency and others. Others worry about the ability to kind of vote and have each vote counted. All of these things, I think, are critical. But when we think about kind of where real change or systemic change has happened, I would argue it's through protests and social movements, right. From the civil rights movement on the idea that we can talk about kind of economic inequality and the kind of problematic nature of capitalism in part goes back to Occupy, where, in fact, people talked about the 99 percent. It is not just Bernie's candidacy, but Bernie's candidacy built on Occupy. And at this moment, when in fact, we really are starting to see people not only kind of change their attitudes, but open their minds to think about what is systemic racism look like, what is anti blackness, what is white supremacy, you know, what does this mean for the ways in which we structure policing? I would argue that was facilitated by a young people going into the streets, but also building up since 2013, a protest. I would say a movement structure.

[00:35:11] And so what do I think is the most important thing is that we have to invest both foundations and individuals and scholars and thinking about how do we build infrastructure

so people can be engaged in political education, can think about radical futures. Right. And can again, to kind of articulate and mobilize sometimes into the streets and sometimes against and with elected officials to kind of enact the future that they believe as possible.

[00:35:40] Well, you can follow Cathy on Twitter at Cathy J. Cohen, and you can visit the Black Youth Project at Black Youth Project dot com. As always, we'll send this to you after the show. Cathy, thank you so much for joining us.

[00:35:50] Can I say she also got a gen forward survey? Dot com. That's where all the data will be.

[00:35:54] You can see all the slides that we denied to you and Jen to our survey dot com. We will get that out to everybody who tuned in for the show or who listens to the podcast. But, Cathy, thanks again.

[00:36:05] Thank you. All right, folks, we've got some great shows coming up on September 24th. We'll have Alondra Nelson, president of the Social Science Research Council, on October 1st. But first, Nick Pickles, who leads Twitter's work around misinformation. And October 8th, Rashad Robinson from Color of Change, the lead architect of the Facebook ad ban that took place over the summer and is now continued as a celebrity driven movement. As a reminder, this episode will be up on the website later. You can see this episode in any episode on demand at KFC Words. After you show, you can also subscribe to the Future of Democracy podcast on Apple, Google, Spotify, or wherever you get your podcasts, e-mail us at F.T. Show at Camfed at all. If you have questions or just some, you know. Twitter at the Sam Guille, as always, please stay for 30 seconds to take a two questions survey and we will end of the show as ever, to the sounds of Miami songwriter Nick County. You can check out his music and follow him on Spotify until next week. Thanks for joining. And please stay safe.