

The Future of Democracy Ep. 38 - English

[00:01:42] Hi, everyone, and welcome to The Future of Democracy, a show about the trends, ideas and disruptions changing the face of our democracy. I'm Evette Alexander, the director of Learning and Impact at Knight Foundation. And today, our show focuses on unpacking the twenty twenty election turnout and what it means for the future of democratic participation. Last year, Knight Foundation launched a landmark study of over twelve thousand nonvoters. It was a one of a kind look at the views and attitudes of the politically disengaged Americans. Our guest today acted as advisers on the study.

[00:02:17] Please welcome to the show Diana Markov and Thomas. Yannick Rupnik is professor of political science at Stony Brook University. She's a political psychologist who studies the relationship between political partisanship, political communication and willingness to participate in politics to date. Her work has been published in a variety of academic journals, as well as outlets such as The New York Times, CNN, Washington Post. Her first book focuses on people who identify as political independents and often misunderstood group. And her next book focuses on differences in people's engagement with politics. Ayten Hirsch is an associate professor at the Department of Political Science at Tufts University, and the focus of his writing and teaching is American politics. He studies civic participation, voting rights and the relationship between election rules, strategies and the behavior of voters. Much of his work utilizes large databases of personal records to study political behavior, and his second book, Politics for Power, was published in January 20 20. So with that background, let's dove in to today's conversation. So I'm going to just cut to the chase right out of the gate. We had a much higher turnout and the twenty twenty election than we've seen in recent decades or even a century. And about two thirds of eligible voters cast a vote. So please impact. Whereas let's start with you, Yoanna. What exactly do political scientists think was behind such extraordinary turnout last year? And more importantly, can we expect that to continue?

[00:03:48] So I think one of the things that we see this year is that there is kind of an election that is motivated by unusual political circumstances. And I think having an election during a pandemic could have, of course, gone either way. But I think in this particular case, kind of seeing unprecedented issues in front of them, seeing kind of how politicians perhaps were not handling these issues in the most appropriate ways, motivated a lot of people to vote. And I think another key issue that we really have to focus on with 20, 20 is just the tremendous amount of mobilization that is taking place. I think the efforts in Georgia and Stacey Abrams efforts were pivotal in encouraging lots of people to vote. So kind of critical to taking lessons from 20 20 forward is just focusing on that mobilization and how kind of crucial mobilization is to getting people to turn out to the polls.

[00:04:53] What about you? What did you take away from the mobilization of twenty twenty and can we expect that level in the future?

[00:05:01] Yeah, so I mean, the first thing I would say is that politics over time has gotten much more nationalized. So people's eyeballs, attention, psychological engagement, politics is really focused on the national level. And we have at the national level in twenty twenty a kind of a celebrity provocateur candidate who drove up support for his own side, but also even more so, drove up turnout from people who dislike him. And that's a pattern we've seen in congressional elections as well. When there's kind of an extreme candidate on the ballot, it turns out voters on the other side more who are energized to oppose that. So I think a lot of this has to do with both the particulars of it being a presidential election and and President Trump being a kind of a celebrity provocateur. So those conditions are

not going to continue in the future. So in the next congressional election, the infrastructure is there. In some states that you talked about of grassroots mobilization in many states is not there. It never was there. And it continues not to be there. The kind of postcard campaign style campaigning that happened in some states only is not going to carry through to the congressional election. So, no, I don't expect to see particularly high rates of turnout as an ongoing basis, particularly at the state and local level or even a congressional level, unless there's much more investment in organizational infrastructure like there was in Georgia.

[00:06:29] So that's helpful to know and and so thinking a little bit more about what did happen in twenty twenty four, tens of millions came to the polls who typically don't. Let's discuss the impact of those additional votes. I think many Americans were surprised, perhaps, that even with such a wave of extra turnout and the young voter participation, the election result was still fairly close. And let's start with you. What did we learn that may have confirmed our challenged conventional wisdom?

[00:06:56] One of the things that I think is still surprising from the election is that the turnout was a lot of it was driven by opposition to Trump. And Trump lost the election handily. A lot more people came out at the same time. A lot of Democrats were expecting to see that kind of wave of election also affect Congress. And it didn't. Democrats actually lost seats, which is very unusual. Usually the president's party gained seats. And in the Senate, there were a lot of close races where that seemed close, where the Democrats tried to compete and they lost. So we just kind of a different result at the national level, at the presidential level, at the congressional level. And I think the the upshot of that is that a lot of what was happening in this election has to do with Trump and doesn't really apply beyond Trump.

[00:07:48] Well, a dismal turnout would seem to bolster the idea that perhaps an election does represent the will of the people. Unfortunately, that didn't seem to be the case for 20, 20. There's a lot of doubt about the results. This is something that came up in the one hundred million study as well, with a lot of nonvoters or infrequent voters saying they didn't quite trust the results of elections in general, that perhaps the system was rigged. Didn't understand Electoral College. Yoanna, as the political psychologist, maybe you could unpack that a bit more of this this mistrust of elections?

[00:08:21] Well, I think there are a couple of ways to think about it. One way to think about it is that there are some people who are generally going to have cynicism about the electoral process, about politics, about politicians. And that cynicism maybe kind of socialized over time. Maybe something that's built over people's experiences with government is going to persist regardless of the electoral context. I think another thing that we can think about psychologically is that people are often really responsive to the cues they get from those who are in power. And so when you have an electoral context where there are these very strong cues actually before the election even happens, telling certain groups of people that something's going to go strange with this election, that they shouldn't trust certain kinds of votes, I think those cues become really, really powerful. And what research has suggested is that once people buy into certain political cues, it becomes really difficult to give them additional information, which becomes more difficult for them to trust the results.

[00:09:25] Let's talk a little bit about those who didn't vote in twenty twenty, as you know, the name of the study of nonvoters. One hundred million project was inspired by the fact

that America had gradually been approaching the number of one hundred million non voters in presidential elections.

[00:09:40] And the number was in the 90s in twenty sixteen. And while it may have gone down a bit for twenty twenty, the data shows it's still about a third of eligible Americans did not vote. That's about 80 million citizens. So what do we know about them? What separates those who didn't vote in twenty 20 from perhaps the historically infrequent voters who actually did turn out and made of some of that added turnout?

[00:10:04] How about you look where we we still have a lot to learn about these people. We are we are going to get more and more data in the coming months about who the 20, 20 nonvoters were. But what of the really interesting things about the hundred million study was the real diversity we have in the nonvoter population. Obviously a hundred million people. It's a lot of people. And there were some people in there who didn't vote because they just don't have time. They work multiple jobs. They have young children. A lot more people are the kind you described before. They really are like, don't feel the system works for them or they don't think the system is responsive or fair. And so and we see people of obviously of all age groups, particularly young people, who who don't vote in high rates, mobile people, renters. And so I think what's going to be interesting to see as more data comes in for 20, 20, is which of these pockets of people end up voting, the kinds of people who ordinarily would be too busy, but maybe mail balloting made it easier for them? I think we're going to see some of that and then we're going to see people who I think were disengaged for a long time in elections. But President Trump made them feel more engaged and we're going to see that. So we're going to see across the political spectrum some people really staying away. They're not under a lot of social pressure to vote because their friends don't vote. No one cares about voting. And other people who were kind of roped into into voting, either through peer groups or through the mobilization efforts of campaigns.

[00:11:33] Let's hear from you. What do you imagine separated some of those who turned out from from those who didn't?

[00:11:40] I think, again, there is kind of returning to this idea of cynicism. I think that there are some people for whom voting is just not necessarily something that's part of their lives for a variety of reasons. And I think 20, 20 in some cases was an election that stood out to people because of the candidates running, because of the political context, because of the pandemic context as something that is especially important, that may have kind of gotten through some of the cynicism. And so the question that I think is going to be pivotal in the data that comes out is really tracking what exactly was it that encouraged people to turn out, because that's really the lesson that we can take past 20, 20. Was this a unique election or was this something that we can systematically track to further points?

[00:12:31] Yeah, that's really interesting and I wonder to the information environment leading up to the election was I think very different information. Engagement was very different, I think, with a lot of the added attention to daily coronavirus briefings and a lot of attention being paid to news. And I was wondering, with your work around, you know, information and political mobilization in your mind, did did any of the was there a change in twenty twenty as a result of the pandemic or other factors that you feel like change the information environment?

[00:13:01] And can we expect that to continue? Well, I think the information environment has been changing for a really long time. We have more news than we ever did before. We

can stay up all night following the news on social media and just continually get news sent at us. So the information environment is something that has been kind of flowing for people. And I think that if you look at surveys leading up to this election, more people reported being interested and more people reported that this was an important election, this idea that people were actively seeking out information, more people were seeking out information as a result of the coronavirus. So perhaps this made it easier for information to actually reach people, given that they were more open to it. So, again, I think what this comes down to was this an especially unique context in which people actually were much more open to deliberately searching for information, whereas otherwise they may have just depended on kind of the one friend in their network who really cares about politics.

[00:14:10] I think a lot of attention is also given to young people and this election and what would they or would they not turn out? And you both jointly wrote an article that looked at the youth voter data from the 100 million project. And what jumped out to you was the divide in the ways that college men and college women engage with politics. Men were more likely to follow political news and trends more closely, but women were more likely to take certain actions. And this relates more closely to the book on political lobbying. So what is that exactly? And is it something men are more drawn to?

[00:14:44] Yeah. So political activism is this kind of catchall term I have for people who are engaging in politics for short term psychological or intellectual benefits. They check polling numbers. They care about what Nate Silver thinks about polling averages or they tweet a lot or do a lot on Facebook, a lot of kind of amateur punditry, but not political organizing, not volunteering, not working on public policy in their communities. And what I found in the research for the book, which is also evident in the in the hundred million study, is that this is a behavior that men do a lot more than women in terms of spending more time online, looking at news and commenting on politics. But if you look at the people who are spending time engaged in real politics, that's community organizing, policy advocacy. That tends to be not just more women than men, but overwhelmingly more women than men who volunteered, for example. And some of those efforts on the Democratic side, scholars have found or something like two thirds to seventy five percent women. So we see this divide in politics where the active participation is more the domain of women and the inactive participation. The kind of a couch potato punditry is more the domain of men.

[00:16:03] Wow, that's really fascinating. Maybe you could tell us a little bit more about that, how how might this this divide and the way that genders engage or don't engage with politics, affect democratic participation in the generations to come and what might be done about it?

[00:16:21] Well, there's a long and rich literature in political science that sort of suggests that women have generally felt on the outside of politics that women have felt politics is not for them. Part of it could be the almost argumentative nature of political context. I think at once hobbyism argument suggests these sort of arguments on Twitter that women might not necessarily be participating in. But this gender gap, I think, is something that has been with us beyond 20, 20. So I think one thing to do here is as more women become part of politics, as more women are elected to office, I think more younger women will see that politics is, in fact, something that they could be part of, that it is, in fact, for them. I don't know if it means more women will become hobbyists, but I do think it will be more role models to cite Christine Albrecht's role models for women as they kind of see what they're part and parcel of politics might be.

[00:17:27] So I would just just drilling down that a little bit further beyond college students of the general population, is there a growing divide between the cognitively engaged and the cognitively disengaged?

[00:17:39] So I have just finished a book on this very topic with my coauthor, John Ryan. What we find is that there are certain people for whom politics has become extraordinarily important. And I don't necessarily mean in the sense of actually engaging and taking part in politics. I mean, as an in-depth political interest. So in some sense, there are people who follow the news, who check on politics, but there are some people who follow it on an almost hourly basis. And we think there is a growing divide between those people in terms of their expectations of government and their expectations of what it means to really be engaged with politics. And I think the question becomes, as we look toward turn out toward politicians, is who are politicians going to see as their basis or are they going to see the people who follow politics on an hourly rate as the people they need to appeal to? Or are they going to try to look beyond social media and beyond those heavily engage people as they try to craft their agendas?

[00:18:42] Yeah. So again, to this theme of moving beyond voting for president and a deeper engagement. Local election turnouts always been low. It's been less representative of many communities, including young people, people of color. It's arguably both can make a lot more difference, as well as other activities that our civic engagement, but not necessarily voting.

[00:19:03] You know what in your mind is the path forward to draw people into a deeper engagement?

[00:19:09] Yeah, for sure. And in that in the ninth study, we found that even young people know they report that local election participation is the most important way they can have an impact. And yet we know that the rates of participation are just really, really low. Overall turnout rates are something like 15 percent and a lot of local elections. And it's very, very low, much lower than that among young people. So part of this is there's a chicken and egg problem that people are not seeking information about the news and there's not a lot about at the local level and there's not a lot of news to seek at the local level. So part of this is changing people's news diets and trying to to create either through corporations or for nonprofits more local news. And then the other thing is to change some election laws that are quite controversial to encourage local participation. So through the work of Sarah Anzhi at Berkeley, a number of scholars, I think, including myself, have been convinced that we really need to move toward on cycle elections, which means that local elections should be held concurrent with federal elections to encourage participation. It's a controversial position. But, you know, to what you were saying before, so long as turnout rates are really, really low at the local level and even at the state level, all the energy on Twitter and social media means nothing to politicians if it doesn't correspond to voting. And I think we still have a situation right now where those politicians are responsive to a very small sector of voters who are actually participating and know what's going on in their communities.

[00:20:46] Great, let's let's go ahead and switch gears over to Q&A, I see a lot of questions coming in.

[00:20:51] I'm scrolling through. Let's just go in order here. We have a question from Jeremy Waddle's.

[00:20:57] If Congress passed a new Voting Rights Voting Rights Act, how much could that help maintain or boost turnout even higher from the twenty, eighteen, twenty, twenty cycles?

[00:21:08] Anybody want to take that?

[00:21:09] I mean, I think the main thing that Congress can do is reinstate Section five of the Voting Rights Act, which basically increases restrictions on states that have a history of suppression activities and make sure that those states are confirmed that the policies are changing, whether it's changing polling places, changing voting methods are not going to have a negative impact on protecting minority groups. So that to me, is the number one thing that there are there is a whole bunch of other potential voting changes we could make. But that to me is absolutely number one.

[00:21:53] We have another question about the voting process changes. I'll toss this one to you. Yoanna is almost a hundred million eligible voters did not vote in twenty sixteen. Is this the right time for a major third party in American politics?

[00:22:07] And separately, with easy access to voting and implementing ranked choice voting, contribute to engage in a stronger engagement. So I am going to answer the first part of the question.

[00:22:16] I'm going to toss the ranked choice voting question to Ayten because I think he really wants to answer that on the first part of the question, is this the right time for a major third party? So as somebody who studied independence for a while, that question comes up a lot. You have a points of time, a plurality of people basically identifying as independent. And the question is, do these people have something in common? Can they form a third party? The problem for a third party is often that the people who are disengaged from the two existing parties often might not have much in common other than the fact that they don't like the two major parties. But the reasons why they don't like the two major parties might differ. So the key toward forming that third party is finding what it is that unites people who don't want to identify as Democrat or Republican.

[00:23:12] And is it just a dislike of the two parties for different reasons, or are they actually united for a common platform? So the difficult question here is actually kind of figuring out what these people who are unaffiliated are unified by. And oftentimes they are unaffiliated in part because they are actually more extreme than the two major parties. They're actually extra conservative or more liberal than the Democrats. So there's very little to unite them to form that other party.

[00:23:44] That sounds like it'd be a complicated undertaking. How about rank choice voting?

[00:23:50] Yeah, so to me, because I've written a bit about this and mostly not entirely opposed to rank choice voting. Look at the evidence is pretty clear that it's not going to generate higher turnout. It's not going to have the kind of positive changes. I think that sometimes pushing for election reform makes it seem like some reform, like rancorous voting is going to have a major change in politics. But really the problem is, is engagement that politics, especially the state and local level, is just a lot more complicated than at national level, because it's not just about slogans like green, new deals and Medicare for all. It's about how do you pay for those things and who wants to pay for them. And and when politics at that level, a lot of people disengage because it's not as fun. It's not sort of

good versus evil politics at the national level, rank choice voting is not going to change that. What's changed is people moving away from the kind of good guy, bad guy partizan fights at the national level and just engaging in their in their state local politics, more so to the theme of engaging more in state and local politics.

[00:25:04] Another question came in that reference, the joint op ed in the Hill and the gender gap and civic engagement.

[00:25:10] So how can colleges, schools and communities work to address the gender gap? How perhaps could we pull more men into action and find ways for women to feel and be informed?

[00:25:23] Yeah, so, I mean, I think that we have a problem on college campuses and among young people that extends beyond politics. I think we also see like in community service work, there is there's another domain that I think is is dominated by women in church, volunteerism also. And so and sometimes colleges have been to blame for, I think, the political lobbying we see. We host guest speakers and have debate parties where politics is a topic. But learning about how to do politics is not really the goal, learning how to be engaged in your community. So, look, I think we have to change the norms around behavior, and that means getting students and young people to understand more about what politics is, why it's interesting. Why sort of the shallow political hobby is is sort of a pathetic version of it.

[00:26:12] So in other words, I really making the value proposition clear for why why they should engage. So I have a question here. I'm going to see which every one of you want to jump in on it.

[00:26:24] There's a quote, maybe this is the honest quote. Once people become convinced that an election is rigged, it takes more work to convince them otherwise. The question is then, how many resources should be spent on myth busting or what types of resources to defend a myth busting?

[00:26:38] And when should those efforts be instituted or should they be a year round instead of just in the lead up to elections?

[00:26:44] This is this is incredibly challenging question that I think a lot of political scientists are currently grappling with. So one thing that emerges from research in political psychology, especially, is that people are really good at what's known as motivated reasoning, which they're really good at dismissing information that goes against their worldviews, which in that sense makes it hard for us to correct people's misperceptions. It's not impossible. It's just immensely difficult. So I think a critical factor here which makes this hard is essentially Buy-In from a variety of media platforms. If there are media platforms that you can go to that are basically going to reinforce your world views that are never really going to challenge them. It doesn't necessarily matter that a lot of groups are engaged in by it. You have to have a systematic process where people just aren't getting those cues. There's research to suggest that sometimes corrections do help. So instituting processes on social media, for example, where false claims are corrected. There's early research suggests that could be helpful. But really, it's kind of a pernicious problem sometimes that once misinformation and these kind of cues make it into people's networks, it becomes more difficult to to correct them that we would actually assume.

[00:28:12] Well, thank you, Megan Smith, for that. Excellent question. I have another one, maybe a last question on the rural urban differences. Do we see differences in engagement across rural and urban groups, as anyone want to take that?

[00:28:31] I would have to I would have to look at the data on that, actually. I have not necessarily seen clear it exists. I have not just yet had a chance to look at myself on clear patterns of for 20 20. There is certainly a lot of really great political science research. Kathy Kramer's work, for example, that has specifically been looking at patterns in rural areas and how especially social networks work there and conversation people have and how that kind of contributes to their voting behaviors. But rather than kind of speculating, I'll say that I would need more data to fully answer that question.

[00:29:16] For any last words for you on what would be important to focus on moving forward.

[00:29:24] And I think as a last word, I would say that one thing that I think has guided our work together and also I think is my own research, I think, John, as well, is that a lot of what's ailing American politics is not going to be fixed with rule changes or reforms. And I think a lot of people have this instinct to look towards the primary process or the voting process. And not that that stuff's unimportant, but I think the the main issues in American democracy today have more to do with leadership and with voter engagement and and less to do with rules.

[00:30:00] Well, I wanted to just mention because social networks came up and the influence of social networks that night has other funded research by the American Enterprise Institute as to the impact of our social networks and how diverse they are or whether or not diverse.

[00:30:13] And that is all we have time for today. I want to thank you so much, Fergana and a ton, for joining us and for providing this insight into what we can learn from twenty 20 and what we need to pay attention to as we move forward as a country together. As a reminder to everyone, this episode will be up on the website later. You can see this episode and any episode on kf.org/knight-live at the show and you can also subscribe to the Future Democracy podcast on Apple, Google, Spotify or wherever you get your podcasts. Be sure to join us next Thursday at 1:00 pm for our Coast to Coast episode. And have a wonderful day.