

Omnia Podcast: Democracy and Decision 2024 | Episode 3: The Fight for Democracy

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Stephanie Perry:

Hello, and welcome to Omnia, the podcast on all things Penn Arts & Sciences. This season we're taking a close look at the state of U.S. democracy in the context of the 2024 election.

I'm your host, Stephanie Perry, Executive Director of the Penn Program on Opinion Research and Election Studies and a member of the NBC News Decision Desk Team.

In today's episode, we sit down with Matthew Levendusky to talk about the myths and realities of political polarization in the U.S., as well as the ways the public can work toward turning down the temperature of political tension and finding some common ground.

Matthew is professor of Political Science, as well as the Stephen and Mary Baran Chair in the Institutions of Democracy at the Annenberg Public Policy Center. Matthew has written a number of books that look at partisanship and polarization, including his latest, *Our Common Bonds: Using What Americans Share to Help Bridge the Partisan Divide*, which offers concrete strategies to reduce partisan animosity. I'll talk with Matthew about some of these strategies as well as his perspective on the presidential election as an analyst for the NBC News Decision Desk.

Welcome to Democracy and Decision 2024, episode 3: The Fight for Democracy

Stephanie Perry:

Matt, thank you so much for sitting down with me today.

Matthew Levendusky:

Thanks for having me, Stephanie.

Stephanie Perry:

So you have studied polarization and politics for a long time. Can you talk about what got you started in that field? What piqued your interest?

Matthew Levendusky:

We have to go back a long time, to the very early 2000s when I was in graduate school. And after the very closely divided 2000 election, and then especially after nearly as divided 2004 election, there became a lot of interest in polarization, whether Americans were polarized, and the, if so, what had caused that? So when I was in grad school, I started working on this question. That work eventually became my first book, the *Partisan Sort*, that was published in 2009, shortly after I arrived at Penn. And in that work I argued that what had changed was that elites had really moved to the polls and that voters had not really become much more polarized than they had been, but what had changed was their partisanship and their issue positions had become increasingly aligned. That's the process they called sorting, hence the name of the book.

And so at first I thought, oh, maybe I'll write this one book on polarization and then move on to something else. But then one thing became another, and here I am still working on it, almost a quarter of a century later.

Stephanie Perry:

So in that book, you describe a shift that partisan affiliation doesn't depend on ideology, necessarily. Today, liberals overwhelmingly identify with Democrats and conservatives with Republicans. So why do you think that happened? What changed in the 15 years since you wrote the book?

Matthew Levendusky:

So if we were to go back to say the 1960s, even the early 1970s, there were a large contingent of conservative Democrats in Congress, especially members from the South. And there were a large number of liberal Republicans, especially from the Northeast in California. And so within both parties you had a bit of ideological heterogeneity, so that you can think of the Democratic Party containing someone like Hubert Humphrey, but also John Stennis, the Republican Party containing someone like Jacob Javits, as well as Barry Goldwater. So a quite broad ideological range within them. But over time, largely due to the changes in the South, you have the parties become more homogenous. So that over time, we saw first at the elite level, and then as a consequence at that voter level, that Democrats became increasingly liberal, Republicans became increasingly conservative. So there were fewer of these liberal Republicans and conservative Democrats. So increasingly, to be a Democrat was to be someone more on the left and to be a Republican with someone more on the right.

And so voters noticed that, and it's not that they blindly follow political elites, but they look to them as people where they might take cues. So if I'm an ordinary Democrat and I encounter a new issue, I might think, I'm not sure what to think about that. But then you see that Kamala Harris and Joe Biden and Nancy Pelosi support it and you think, oh, those are people I agree with, so maybe that's a good position for me to take. And likewise, if you're a Republican, you might see Donald Trump and JD Vance and John Cornyn take the position, so maybe you feel the same and say, "Okay, I can take that position as well." So that over time, that helps voters figure out where they should stand based on their party and what party they fit into based on their ideology. And of course, those two things are still not perfectly related, but they're more related now than they used to be.

Stephanie Perry:

Have you seen any changes over time with moderates and independents in that way?

Matthew Levendusky:

Yes, there have been some important changes with moderates and independents, but let's take a step back. So with independents, we can think that there are a couple of groups.

So there are some people who are, what political scientists and pollsters call, pure independents. So when we first ask people, "Are you a Democrat, a Republican or an Independent?" A lot of people, it's actually the plurality of people will say, "Oh, I'm an independent," but then we often follow up with a question that says, "Okay, but if you had to choose, would you say you're closer to the Democratic Party or closer to the Republican Party?" And those people who say that they're closer to the Democratic Party or closer to the Republican Party, often behave and have attitudes and vote and participate in politics in ways that look a lot like the people who just tell you initially they're a Democrat or a Republican. And it seems to be that part of why those people initially say they're an Independent is that they're turned off by the idea of political conflict and political contestation that they see as part of

politics. So they view it as a way of sort of signaling their displeasure with that. But a lot of those independents actually end up looking like partisans.

So of the folks who, what political scientists call pure independents, right? The folks who say, "No, I really don't lean towards one group or the other." There are kind of two sets of those folks. There are a set of those folks who genuinely are conflicted, but follow politics, and those are a lot of the people we maybe think of as swing voters. And then there are a set of people who basically what they're telling you is, "I don't really know a lot about politics, I don't really like it." And those are the people we can sort of, I guess we're going to use the modern parlance, would say they're just reacting to the vibes. Right? So they're looking at the kind of, how they think the country is doing, right? And it's not necessarily a strict issue based position, but really, one more about what people sometimes call the nature of the times.

Now, moderates are actually the largest group if we were to look whether they think of themselves as liberal, moderate, or conservative. But a lot of moderates in much the same way, kind of lean towards one side or the other, and that will determine which way they go. But there are still a lot of people who are conflicted on some things with their parties, so that does give an opportunity for the other party to try and convert them.

So we've seen both parties do this this year. So we see Democrats making a lot of appeals to Republicans and independent voters who are pro-choice, and maybe are not comfortable with some of the more hard-line positions that Republicans in some red states have taken on abortion, and especially issues like IVF. And we've seen Republicans do the same thing, in terms of the positioning on immigration, which is why you saw President Biden, Vice President Harris and lots of congressional democrats be willing to really move pretty far to the right this spring on the immigration proposal that was considered and then ultimately killed in Congress, and then partially enacted via the President through executive order.

Stephanie Perry:

So to what extent do you think this election is going to be an election of vibes, as you just noted, versus an issue driven election, or a personality driven election?

Matthew Levendusky:

So with Donald Trump, he definitely is a polarizing figure. Right? He's now been on the scene since 2015, and I'm sure there are some voters in America who don't have an opinion about him. But basically, if you've paid any attention to politics over that time, you've got a pretty fixed opinion of Donald Trump, right? You know who he is, what he's going to do, like him or hate him, right? You've got an opinion. Harris is a bit more of an unknown, but she's becoming better known every day as people learn more about her and the campaign goes on.

So there will be some people who's a vote will simply be, hey, Donald Trump, he's my guy. I support his policies, I support him. And other people who say, "No way, I am an anti-Trump voter. It didn't matter who Democrats nominated, I was going to be opposed to Trump. I would've voted for Biden, I would've voted for Harris, I would've voted for whoever the Democrats nominated." There are going to be some of those folks, and actually many of those folks will be the most engaged people, right? Because they tend to have these really strong partisan identities. So if you think about your friends who watch cable news and post about politics all the time on social media and always want to talk to you about politics, they probably are in that camp on one side or the other.

But for a lot of other voters, I think it will come down to the issues. So I don't necessarily just think of that as vibes, though. I think for a lot of voters, even if they say vibes, what they're really saying is, "I'm unhappy that prices have increased so much that it is only been within this year that wage gains have

caught back up to the gains in prices." And that's something that's very visible to people. Rightly or wrongly, people assume that the President is in charge of the economy, and they hold him responsible for that. There's 50 years of scholarship demonstrating that point. And so they will in part be making a retrospective judgment about saying, "Am I better off today than I was when Joe Biden took office?" And especially on inflation and immigration, those will be key issues for a lot of voters in this election.

Stephanie Perry:

So in your most recent book, which is titled, *Our Common Bonds: Using What Americans Share to Help Bridge the Partisan Divide*, you look at concrete strategies to reduce partisan animosity. I want to talk about some of these strategies, but first, have you found that political polarization in the United States is as bad as it's portrayed? Can partisan animosity be a good thing?

Matthew Levendusky:

Just to give a bit of background, so we can think about two different kinds of polarization. We can think about polarization based on the issues, that is, you're pro-life and pro-choice, and we disagree on abortion policy. Or, we can think about partisan animosity, which is the idea that if I'm a Democrat, I just plum don't like Republicans. I don't think they're trustworthy. I don't think they're honest. I just think they're bad people. So partisan animosity is that latter thing that's not even so much about the issues, it's really about just that you dislike and distrust people from the other side. And there's been a lot of evidence both from academic studies but then also from surveys from places like Pew that suggest that has increased over the last quarter of a century. So it is real, but it's also, we tend to exaggerate it quite a bit.

So I did a study published in 2022 with a couple of co-authors, and we found something to me that's really interesting. We asked people, "How much would you like to talk with someone from the other side of the aisle? And how much do you like people who are, if you're a Democrat, who are Republican?" And most people say, "I don't really like them very much," but then if you ask people, "Okay, well, what about someone who was a moderate from the other side of the aisle who wasn't really that interested in politics?" They're like, "Oh yeah, that person's fine."

And then we asked in a different study, we asked people where they thought the other side was, in terms of their ideology and how interested they were in politics and where they themselves were. Most people think those on the other side are very ideologically extreme, so they're either very liberal or very conservative. And they love to talk about politics, they're very engaged, politics are at the center of their lives. But when you ask them about themselves, they're like, "I'm a little bit ideological, a little bit liberal, a little bit conservative, but really, I'm probably pretty moderate. I'm okay with politics. I'll talk about it occasionally, but it's not really my thing. It's not the center of my life."

And if you ask people, "Are you okay with someone who looks more typical, is more like you?" They're like, "Yeah, that's fine." They don't like the people who are the ideological extremists. The people who are in their Facebook feeds shouting about politics all the time, or their neighbor who every time you see them as wearing their Trump flag or vote blue no matter who T-shirt, and always just wants to browbeat about politics. And so that partly, people tend to think that everyone is like that latter group of people, when in reality it's actually just a small set of the public. But why do we hear so much about those people? Well, in part, there's some psychological biases that lead us to kind of overestimate their prevalence, but partly it's also that social media and mass media really bring those people to the fore, right?

Only 10% of people according to Pew, like to talk about politics on social media. But the people who do, like to do it a lot. So it's basically most people are like, "I'd really rather not talk about politics online and

just want to share recipes or cat videos or propose to my grandkids or whatever." But the people who like to talk about politics want to talk about it all the time, and those posts tend to be very emotionally charged, and they tend to draw a lot of engagement. So the algorithm tells you, "Oh, that's what you want to see," and so it promotes it, so that something like three quarters of people say that they see a lot of politics on social media, and that's sort of the difference that we then tend to kind of misestimate because of what we're seeing. They're like, "Oh, that lots of people like to talk about politics, and yeah, lots of people like it to be this loud, angry conversation."

Stephanie Perry:

So we're recording this episode after the second assassination attempt of former President Trump, and there is a lot of rhetoric around about the extremism, about hate, the threat to democracy. Is any of that, do you think, paralyzing to the voters who are not on each side and do not house that political animosity?

Matthew Levendusky:

Yeah, so I would put it in two ways. So I think the most dangerous thing that I've found in my research is not so much ordinary voters, because most ordinary voters really despise violence, they reject it. Something like 2% of the public, when you ask the question in a reasonable way, supports political violence. And honestly, even part of that is probably just a survey artifact. It's very, very small segments of the population that do this and support it.

Now, that doesn't mean it's not a terrible problem, right? But we shouldn't be thinking this is something that's widely embraced. This is a very fringe view, often correlated as best we can tell with what things they're called the dark triad, right? It's these very disturbing personality traits about dehumanization and narcissism and deep psychological problems, typically.

Stephanie Perry:

So you were recently featured on a PBS NewsHour segment, where you talked about how the news media and even political leaders themselves have played a role in deepening our divisions. So can you talk about the incentive here for the media and for political leaders?

Matthew Levendusky:

So for the media, the incentive is to frame stories in front in terms of conflict, because conflict is gripping, it's newsworthy. And if you think about, in many ways, politics is a question of conflict. If I'm going to cover Congress, a lot of the coverage will be over, what can Schumer and McConnell agree to bring to the floor? What can Hakeem Jeffries and Mike Johnson do to prevent the government from shutting down? So that's a natural frame for political media, but the problem is then when that becomes the only frame for politics, it then reifies and reaffirms those divisions, and again, reinforces this message that there isn't common ground, that people are deeply divided. And so it begins to become a bit of a self-perpetuating cycle.

For political elites, there's also the same strategy that there were some early studies done, maybe these authors now regret doing them, 25 years ago, showing that these sort of appeals to threat and saying the other side is a danger and you're going to lose your rights if they're elected, was a very mobilizing message, because that is. That sounds terrible, right? But it also then becomes self-perpetuating because then that becomes the message of everything. It kind of leads to this view that, oh, if the other side wins, it's going to all be a disaster. And I understand that for a lot of people, they might feel that the other party will advance policies that they don't like, but it is also important to remember that there are

important checks and balances within the system and things that we can all do to help keep it from veering too far off.

Stephanie Perry:

So, what are some effective methods or strategies for fostering productive conversations, especially between individuals with deeply opposing views?

Matthew Levendusky:

So when I talk to folks in the public about this, I always like to say, "This is about two things. Right? First, this is about an effort to understand, not to persuade." So because a lot of the people who come to these sessions, if I talk to folks in the ordinary public who are in academics, they're like, "Oh, yes, I want to convince my Republican neighbor that they're wrong or that I want to convince my Democratic babysitter that she's just so misguided." Right? And so what I tell people is that, "You have to understand someone before you can persuade them." And so that part of this is about a goal being that you're not going to change someone's mind until you really deeply understand where they're coming from.

So there's a literature in what's called deep canvassing, about how people have these deep, very meaningful conversations, and that leads to opinion change. But part of the work that's happening there is a process that gets called perspective taking, or really I like to call it, as some other scholars do, perspective getting, because what's happening is I'm learning why Stephanie thinks the way that she does and why does she support that position? And it might be that, oh, I never thought about it that way and it hadn't occurred to me that you might have a reasonable point of view for why you're feeling that way. And so I think a key part of that is really listening well, right? And so listening in a thoughtful way to find commonality, to find shared values, emphasizing those things in the conversation, and also asking good, probing questions. So instead of doing something that's going to close off conversation, do something that's going to open up conversation.

So a question that would close off conversation is if I were a Democrat and I went to a Republican and I said, "Why won't you just admit that Donald Trump lost 2020 and that the election wasn't rigged? And he's just a liar?" Right? Because all that's going to do is kind of lean up everyone's partisan priors and they're going to kind of just retreat within themselves. A more effective strategy might be to say, "I'm really interested to hear a time when your candidate of choice, whether it's Joe Biden, Kamala Harris, Donald Trump, did something that really disappointed you and why did that disappoint you?" Or, "What's something where you really think the other side might have a good argument?" And use that to maybe open up a space for a productive discussion.

But at the start, I said there were two things. So one, I think was about understanding, and two is to say that this isn't always going to work. There's no magic kind of silver bullet. Right? These are things you can try to do to cool the temperature a little bit. But sometimes there are just differences, and that's okay because there are important divisions and important issues. I think what we want to do is understand the nature of those divisions and those conflicts and be able to talk about them in a respectful way without just reverting to kind of shouting and talking past each other.

Stephanie Perry:

So you emphasize the importance of listening, and I wonder what kind of in-person component that needs to take. I'm thinking about a lot of young voters today are participating in politics in non-traditional ways. So they're not going to go to a meeting or put up a yard sign, but they are boycotting brands and companies on social media or unfollowing celebrities, things like that. So how do you

encourage dialogue in a space that is so technology driven? And do you think social media is detrimental to that?

Matthew Levendusky:

So I think the social media can be a great tool for connecting us and allowing us to see parts of each other's lives. But there's a great book by Chris Bale. He's a researcher at Duke, and he talks about social media as a prism because it allows us to kind of hide parts of our lives and really bring certain parts of our lives to the fore. So when you see what people are doing on social media, I like to think of that as a facade, right? For very few people, is that the real person? It's often the person they want to present themselves as, right? It's this sort of idealized version of themselves, whether that's someone doing lots of political things, whether that's someone who's always taking a fabulous vacation and looking great. Right? No one really looks like that every day. So I think it's important to remember that.

And what I would say is I think the same lessons apply on social media, in terms of listening for engagement, but I sometimes think it can be better to say like, "Hey, let's take this conversation offline," because I think it becomes easier to escalate things quickly on social media, and it's easier to misinterpret one another over, whether through social media comments, or email, or text, in a way that's just harder when you're talking face-to-face to someone. So I think there really is a lot of value in that kind of in-person connection.

Stephanie Perry:

I agree, and I'm very glad we're in person right now talking.

Matthew Levendusky:

Exactly.

Stephanie Perry:

So a disclaimer to our listeners, Matt and I have worked together on the NBC News Decision Desk for a decade, which I cannot believe, but.

Matthew Levendusky:

It's a very frightening thought.

Stephanie Perry:

Can you talk about what the first-hand view of the political system in the Decision Desk has revealed to you?

Matthew Levendusky:

Sure. So for those of you who don't know, Penn has a lot of connections through my colleague, John Lipinski, to the NBC Decision Desk, because John is both the professor here and the Director of Elections at NBC News. So that on election nights, there are a group of Penn faculty, Penn students, and Penn staff who are in the Decision Desk in the proverbial room where it happens.

So I think part of what it's taught me is just how much goes into doing this and how careful everyone is. And we do so many rehearsals and we kind of rehearse for every scenario, so that we always know there's going to be some surprise on election night, we just don't know what it's going to be. So 2016, it's the obvious one about where there's a surprise, but every election there are things with the polling

misses, or maybe there just wasn't much polling in the state. So I think it's taught me the real importance of being prepared for the unexpected, expect the unexpected.

And I think the other thing that it's really taught me is, and I think the students as well, the value of data analysis tools that you can use in real time. So we do lots of stuff with students and our classes, and we involve them in our research. And that's great, but those projects stretch on over months and months and many times, years. But there, a lot of the stuff we're doing has to be done in the moment. So it's I think fun for us and fun for the students to see how you can apply those tools in real time.

Stephanie Perry:

I do always say that not everyone can do that job. It definitely takes a certain-

Matthew Levendusky:

No.

Stephanie Perry:

... kind of person, even student, to be able to work under that sort of intense pressure. So can you talk about, what kind of prior assumptions do you go in with on the night? What sort of things out in the world are you thinking about and paying attention to in the lead up to an election night before you're actually in the room making race projections?

Matthew Levendusky:

Yeah, so I think what we would say is we are looking at the polls and the polling averages. We conduct our own polls, we do analyses of voter files. So voter files are the records of ballots. So in states that have early voting, we're going to look at how many ballots have been returned, where they've been returned, what the partisanship of those areas is in states that record voters' partisanship or party registration, in the voter file, we're looking at that.

So we're taking advantage of all the analytic tools we have, but we're also reacting to the data as it comes in because again, the polling, sometimes as we've seen the last couple of cycles, there can be misses. So it's important that we not get too attached to those priors. So we use them as priors, but we're always trying to look at that data, look at our assumptions, and be checking what's happening in the key counties in every state. And so that's one of the things that we do in the lead up as we try to think about where the key areas are going to be, where we're going to need to be watching in each state, to know that we can confidently project the race when it's time to do so.

Stephanie Perry:

So who's going to win?

Matthew Levendusky:

I mean, I wish I knew. I think it really is one of those elections where it's going to be down to the wire. It will be, again, very close in the same handful of states. And so I think it will be much like in 2020, too close to call until we're going to be right there in the thick of it.

Stephanie Perry:

I hope not Saturday.

Matthew Levendusky:

Yes, hopefully a little bit faster. But I think one thing that a lot of states did after 2020, was they did do some stuff to speed up their ballot counting processes, which will be good. And have also put in place processes to help voters feel secure, because all the evidence suggests that mail voting is very secure and a very safe way of doing things. But it's also great to have states put in place systems so that voters can trust but verify those sorts of systems as well.

Stephanie Perry:

So now that we are at sort of the pinnacle of election season, there's a lot of attention to horse race polling and to the Harris and Biden numbers, both nationally and battleground states. But they all show basically a tie within the margin of error.

Matthew Levendusky:

Yes.

Stephanie Perry:

So can you tell our listeners what else they should be gleaming from the polling that's out there? What else should they be taking a look at under the hood that is not just the horse race number?

Matthew Levendusky:

Yeah, so I think the other thing that I like to do with a poll is look at the party, break down and look at what the party cross tab is. Because a lot of times when there's movement, what it is, is just that there was movement to the underlying party ID, so that... And sometimes it can happen just because of idiosyncratic factors. And sometimes what past research has found is that when the news is better for Democrats, Democrats are more excited to take polls, and when the news is better for Republicans, Republicans are more likely to take polls. So you get a bit of that balance, and pollsters can try to adjust for that, and they're waiting, but it's really hard to know exactly how much to do that. So I like to kind of look at that cross tab as well because I think that tells you something.

But I think you should understand polling as a guide, but it's a compass, it's not a GPS, right? It's giving you an idea of where things are going, but this is all still fluid because there are assumptions that have to be made, in terms of the likely voter model and the polling weights that pollsters are using. So if I were going to say, if you were wanting to be involved, I think a good way of doing that is working for whichever campaign that you feel most passionate about, to help talk to your neighbors, learn about their issues, learn about the things that they care about, and help persuade them to go to the polls, and be involved that way.

Stephanie Perry:

So given the evolving nature of political communication and behavior, what new areas of research do you think will be crucial for understanding and addressing polarization in the future?

Matthew Levendusky:

Yeah, I mean, I think there will be a lot of continuity, but I think one of the emerging areas has been research in things about social media and the online space, and especially with younger people who just consume political information very differently. Younger people, there was just a new report released from SSRS, who's a big pollster, showing that for younger people, they think of sources like Instagram

and TikTok as being really where they turn to to get political news. And I am old-fashioned and academic enough to still like to read a newspaper. I just finally gave up the print, but I read it on my iPad. And my parents still watch TV news, and it's a big difference between younger and older people. And I think that, it's been evolving for a long time and I think that's something that will continue to evolve into the future.

Stephanie Perry:

So I think that in some ways, a lot of people are not sure which side winning is better after November, and so I'm thinking about this in the context of polarization. And so I guess the question for you is, what do you think the outcome of this election one way or the other, is going to do to political polarization as a whole in the country?

Matthew Levendusky:

So I think one of the... So earlier I said that I think what elites do is more important in some ways than what voters do. And I think no matter who wins, it's important that the loser kind of recognized that they lost, concede to the winner, and for people to understand that the election was legitimate. Right? So in 2020, this was obviously a very controversial thing, and that, we have some work that shows that that sort of damages on both sides, perceptions of democracy. And so I think that thinking about how to come together to accept the legitimacy of the contest outcome is really a key thing. And so I think no matter who wins, that's an important point.

And then in terms of thinking about what the ramifications are in the longer term. I think that it's important to think about the differences that we have, but we also still share a lot in common, and we have those common values. And we want to see the president and the country succeed, and so it's important to remember that ultimately, the goal of politics isn't just a contest, it's to produce outcomes that make people's lives better. And so our goal should be helping to move the political system in that direction.

Stephanie Perry:

How do you talk to this generation of students about polarization, about how to reach across the aisle when they are on Instagram and TikTok and getting their news from sources that are not the traditional means of getting news?

Matthew Levendusky:

So I've done a couple of these sessions with students, and I think one of the things that they say is, "I'm very afraid of saying the wrong thing and offending people." And what I tell them is that, "Look, you have to do your best to be respectful of other people, respect their opinions." But one thing you learn, so Stephanie isn't old as I am, but as you enter into middle age, that you need to extend other people grace so that they can extend you grace in return. And so I say to students is that, "You have to understand that everyone, including you, will mess up. And so you need to own it when you've messed up and acknowledge that and ask people for forgiveness. But in return, you need to extend that same grace to them."

Now, obviously there are some lines that people can't cross and not everything is forgivable, but for most things, I think learning to cultivate that skill of dialogue is a really important skill. And so that's something I tried to work on with students to have these conversations in maybe a more low stakes way to kind of practice those skills, and be able to build them up over time.

Stephanie Perry:

So you mentioned before that the media thrives on conflict and pushes conflict. That that is the splashy headline, that is the thing that's going to get the attention. But what would your advice be, I guess, and as you know, two people who do work for a media organization, if not all the time during election night, what would your advice be broadly for us to kind of take a step back and turn the temperature down a bit?

Matthew Levendusky:

Yeah, I think that part of it is thinking about the ways in which politics is sometimes about kind of conflict and consensus, but sometimes also about cooperation and deliberation and dialogue and fostering a space for those things as well. Because I think if you look at data from places like Pew and you ask people, "What is your overriding emotion about politics?" Most people just say, "Frustration, anger, resentment." Right? And it's not even so much at the other side, it's more that things don't work, this system is broken. I think because there is so much about this and this becomes so much the center of the feature about the coverage of politics.

So I think doing more to cover what works in politics and think about, how can do things to address the real concerns that people have. Because to me, one of the things that has resonated with me kind of listening to people react to the debate and these sorts of things is, for them thinking about the ways in which the debate didn't speak to many of the key concerns that they have in their lives. And we can understand the political strategy reasons why Harrison and Trump gave the answers that they did, but I think it's also a missed opportunity for our political system because they think it feeds into a cynicism from voters that like, "Oh yeah, politics isn't about people like me. It's not about solving the kinds of problems that I have," when in reality it actually is and that's sort of the goal of politics.

Stephanie Perry:

So let's end this on a hopeful note, if we can. Can you talk about some of the polling that you've done, some of the data that you've analyzed? What are some themes that you see there is agreement across party lines, where partisans do not have these extreme views across something?

Matthew Levendusky:

Yeah. So look, there are real divisions between the public. We should start there. But they're again, often smaller than people think.

So for example, a classic issue of this is abortion. So if we were to look at survey data over time, or even here in 2024, most people are yes but, in [inaudible 00:33:49] famous place. Yes, they support a right to an abortion, but they want there to be some restrictions. Right? So it's something like 10% of the public says abortion under no circumstances, a little bit less than 10% of the public says abortion in any circumstance, no limits, no restrictions. Right? Most people sort of say, "Okay, I want it to be broadly available for one to have the right to choose, but I want some restrictions on when it can happen and the conditions under which it can happen." Right? It's really kind of political elites who are much more divided.

Immigration is another example, that even though that's become much more politically contentious over time, most people actually support, including even a plurality of Republicans, support something like a pathway to citizenship for undocumented immigrants who are already here. But most Democrats on the counter hand also think we need to be doing more to secure the border. So there is in these things, the public is often more willing to compromise than political elites are. So I think on a lot of political issues, that's true.

More broadly, we can think that the kinds of things that people tend to agree on are going to be the kind of broad, overarching values that American identity in some ways has become very politicized under in the era of Donald Trump. And we can all think about the ways in which that's happened, but it's interesting to me, when you look at a lot of those surveys, it still shows a lot of support for the idea of America as a land of opportunity, centered on constitutional democracy, promoting freedom and equality. Right? Those kind of core values, right? That, yes, there's a lot of debate over the role that natality should play and the role of English, but a lot of those core values actually are sort of still there. A lot of kind of overarching values about what people want in their lives and their families.

I think for most people, the goal of politics is to make their lives and their families' lives, and especially their children and grandchildren's lives better. So I think to the extent that we can think about politics along those lines, rather than just being about scoring points and disparaging the other side, then we're moving politics in a productive direction.

So the last thing that I'll close on is that national politics for most of us is little more than a hobby. I can't do very much to change national political outcomes, but you actually can change things at the state and local level. So rather than just being discouraged about politics, I often encourage people to find issues that they care about in their community, whether it's in their town, in their county, in their school district, and get involved there because chances are you really can make a meaningful impact there and move things in a positive direction.

Stephanie Perry:

And still go vote.

Matthew Levendusky:

And still go vote.

Stephanie Perry:

Thank you very much, Matt. It's been great talking to you today.

Matthew Levendusky:

Thanks for having me, Steph.

Stephanie Perry:

That's it for episode 3: The Fight for Democracy. I hope you learned that we have more in common than divides us.

Join us next week on November 5th for our election day episode: The Gears of Democracy, where I'll sit down with Marc Meredith, Professor of Political Science. We'll talk about the nuts and bolts of how elections are administered in the U.S. and learn more about how new voting laws in 2024 may or may not affect the election result.

The Omnia Podcast: Democracy and Decision 2024 is a production of Penn Arts and Sciences in collaboration with the Penn Program on Opinion Research and Election Studies. Many thanks to today's guest Matthew Levendusky from the Department of Political Science.

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