

## Democracy and Decision 2024 | The Gears of Democracy (Ep. 4)

Stephanie Perry:

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

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

Well, it's finally here -- election day in the United States. In this episode we'll be sitting down with Marc Meredith to talk about how elections are being run across the nation.

Marc is professor of Political Science and has served as an election analyst at the NBC Decision Desk since 2014. His research examines election laws, election administration, and is often cited in the media on instances of voter fraud. I'll talk with Marc about how new voter laws in 2024 may affect the outcome of the election and what he'll be looking at tonight at the NBC Decision Desk as the results come in.

Welcome to Democracy and Decision 2024, episode 4: The Gears of Democracy

Stephanie Perry:

Hi, Marc. Thank you so much for joining me today.

Marc Meredith:

Hi, Steph. Great to be here.

Stephanie Perry:

So today is decision day in the United States. For us, this moment it is not because we're taping this ahead of time and on Election Day we are going to be locked in the Decision Desk, but for millions of Americans who are going to head to the polls to cast their votes for president, for Senate, for their local offices. As an expert in election administration and election laws, we wanted to talk with you about how the gears of democracy actually operate. But maybe first, can you tell us what interested you about this particular area of political science? What first question really got you interested in your research?

Marc Meredith:

Yeah, well, I went to grad school at the Stanford Graduate School of Business thinking I was going to study maybe labor economics or maybe education economics, and just kind of by chance ended up studying voting. It was around the time when behavioral economics was really taking off in the field of economics, the idea that people maybe make decisions in ways that don't contort with the standard ways economists always assume people made decisions. And as I started thinking about behavioral economics, one of the clear applications I could think of where some of these theories could be tested was in looking at people's turnout choices, their voting choices.

And so I really approached elections through that pathway where I was first really focused more on I guess the voter behavior side. But over time, as I was thinking about the ways voters behave, it just became so clear to me that structuring the way that voters make choices and their decisions to turn out or not, were all these rules and regulations that govern the process of voting. And so over time, I've

gravitated maybe a little bit away from thinking about voters so much as sort of agents of behavioral economics and more really geared my research towards understanding the ways that these rules and regulations we put forth that govern the process of voting really shape the types of outcomes we get.

Stephanie Perry:

So why are voting laws so complicated? How are people expected to navigate the system?

Marc Meredith:

Yeah, I'm teaching Introduction to American Politics this semester and we just got through federalism week. Every question students bring to me, I go, "The answer is federalism." And that certainly applies to why are voting laws are so complicated. Just to remind people, federalism is the idea that we have two sovereign governments in the United States. We have the federal governments and the state governments, and we have this weird, strange system of overlapping and shared and distinct powers that sometimes in political science, we call it layer cake federalism, where the same or the federal and state governments, they're kind of doing the same thing and trying to check each other's power in some ways. And voting is one of the clear examples of why this can lead to so much complication. We have the Constitution that says that states have the ability to structure their own elections, but give Congress the power to structure the time, place, and manner. We can talk for a whole podcast about what constitutes the time, place, and manner of elections.

And so then Congress comes in and passes a bunch of federal regulation that go on top of the state laws. And all of a sudden you have this really messy system where some elements of voting are set by Congress, other parts are set by state governments. They're often implemented by then county governments or township governments. And it just makes it very complicated to know what exactly applies and what situation. And so we do have this complicated system. And so then thinking, like how do people navigate the system? It's really, really hard if you're a first-time voter who's never engaged in the process before because you have to do things like get registered to vote. We take that as a given United States that there's voter registration, but not every place in the world has voter registration.

And certainly not every place has a voter registration where the citizen themselves has to initiate the registration. And then you have to figure out, well, how am I going to vote? Am I going to vote by a mail ballot? I'm going to vote early in person. Am I going to vote on election day at a polling place? Can I pick which polling place I vote at or do I have to go to one that I'm assigned to? There aren't consistent answers to these questions. And for example, not everyone is eligible even to vote by mail ballot in every state or then there's states that conduct their entire election by mail balloting. So I think the byproduct of this really complicated federalist election structure that we operate under is it makes experience really valuable, experience voting generally. Also experience voting at the residence you're currently living in. It's just a system that really benefits those with experience to know how to navigate it.

Stephanie Perry:

So in 2020, which was the year of the highest turnout on a presidential election, it was also the time of Covid. And so how people voted changed, the way that they voted, what was available and not to them, all of those things I think, shifted in a lot of ways for a lot of people that year. So can you talk a little bit about how voting laws have changed since 2020 and what are some of the challenges with that?

Marc Meredith:

Yeah, I mean, thinking about us, like we were sitting in 30 Rock in early March 2020 just feeling the dread of being in this building where we all thought in a windowless room we were passing Covid back and forth, and that quickly we had to move on and do a lot of our Decision Desk operations remotely for the rest of the primary season. And that same challenge applied to a lot of our election workers because there were states that had elections scheduled to be held in late March, April, May of 2020, who quickly had to figure out how are we going to do this, among other things like our poll workers tend to be on the older side. And I remember we were covering the election on March 17th, 2020, and these states were concerned whether they have enough poll workers to even show up and manage those elections.

And so this was a time when our elections administrators just did an amazing job of keeping the system running. States put in a bunch of emergency protocols that maybe in some states expanded the use of mail balloting. And there were some states that basically ran mail only elections in spring, summer 2020 that previously had pretty limited experience with mail balloting. There were states that put in some different procedures for trying to make sure that they could have enough social distancing at polling places when possible, maybe add polling places or sometimes places were having a shortage of poll workers and having them figure out how to deal with that. And 2020 was really, in my eyes, a triumph of election administration to get us through those times. And so this then moves us into the present, in 2024 where we have a bunch of voters who normally had voted in person often on Election Day at a polling place who had a different experience in 2020 and one impact of that I think, is that some people grew to like that experience.

And so we had an expansion of mail balloting in a number of states, and that expansion has maybe taken hold a little bit, and I think there'll be a few more people voting by mail. But then we had the backlash and specifically the Donald Trump rhetoric coming out of 2020 about mail balloting and fraud and the big why that comes out of the aftermath of the 2020 election that the election was stolen. And so in the wake of that, you see a number of states, especially states that were controlled by Republican legislatures and governors who were able to make policy laterally if they could stick together as a party, that in some key states like North Carolina and Georgia, some new rules went into place after 2020 that made it a little bit more difficult to cast a mail ballot.

Maybe on the flip side of that, in Michigan, which is a state with a democratic governor and a democratic legislature, they're putting in place early in-person voting for the first time in a general election in 2024. And so there are things along the margins that are happening in some of these key battleground states that we'll be focusing on tonight. Ohio is another one that move from requesting that someone shows a voter ID to mandating that they have to show a photo ID when they go cast their ballot so we can point to these changes that are happening in some of these key states we'll be watching tonight. Ultimately, I am, let's say, hopeful that that's not going to dictate the results that we're going to see tonight. I think when we think about these types of restrictions or increased accessibility of voting, can it affect the odds that any individual voter shows up and votes? Absolutely.

If you're someone who doesn't have the right form of ID that you need to vote in Ohio, might that make it less likely that you show up to vote tonight? That certainly is possible. When we add this all together though, is this going to shape the outcome of the election in Ohio tonight? Probably not, because there probably just aren't that many people who are going to be facing those challenges. So I think these are important law changes, they're going to matter to individuals, but I don't think I can point to any law change that I remember occurring between 2020 or 2024 that I would expect to change the outcome of tonight's election unless we're in Florida 2000 territory when then every vote matters.

Stephanie Perry:

So you don't expect this to change anything with turnout for tonight?

Marc Meredith:

No. I mean, we're clearly going to be watching turnout really closely tonight. I think this is an election that could come down to which party does a better job of mobilizing its supporters to come to the polls. And here in Pennsylvania, there's going to be a big focus on certain mail ballots that won't count either because they weren't returned in a secrecy envelope or the voter forgot to fix a date next to their signature on their affidavit. And right now people are going out and trying to assist these voters and making sure they know about the problem and seeing if they could do anything to get that ballot to count before polls close. And so yeah, I think these rules and regulations matter for individual voters, but again, it would have to be, we're in razor-thin territory for the accumulation of these affected individuals to change the outcomes of the elections tonight.

Stephanie Perry:

Can you talk a little bit more about Pennsylvania? Thinking about in 2020, I know everyone was watching when we did not make the call in Pennsylvania in the presidency until Saturday. It took obviously days. And thinking about this year and some of the rules that are in there, some of them that you just mentioned. Can you just talk a little bit more about that and what people should or shouldn't expect for tonight?

Marc Meredith:

I mean, one thing that really affected the 2020 process that sort of builds on what we've been talking about was just this massive increase in mail balloting that happened in Pennsylvania in 2020. It wasn't until 2019 that every Pennsylvania registrant had the capacity to ask for a mail ballot without having a qualified excuse. So 2020 was really Pennsylvania's first foray into mail balloting, and it happens at the time of Covid. It frankly just had to develop a lot of skills on the fly as election administrators just to deal with this onslaught of mail balloting. Compounding that is in Pennsylvania, the election officials aren't allowed to open mail ballots and start counting them until election day itself. And so unlike in a state like Florida where they can before Election Day, if someone returns their mail ballot early, they can start the process of tallying those votes. They can't report out or even look at what those tallies are saying, but they can start the process of putting them through machines.

And that's why in Florida tonight we'll get results quite quickly. In Pennsylvania, the election administrators have to wait till today to process those ballots. And so in 2020 what that meant was they couldn't finish the task or anywhere close to finish the task on election night, they needed until Saturday to really get through all those mail ballots. From what I hear, things have changed a little bit in Pennsylvania since then. They're now more used to the mail ballots, they've had more experience in the local and midterm elections that have happened since then, a number of our larger counties have invested in some technology on the machine side that will help them process these mail ballots more quickly. And so I don't want to say that we'll have all the ballots counted tonight necessarily, but I think a lot of the counties are going to count a lot more of the ballots tonight than in 2020. And so I would be surprised if we're sitting here still waiting for mail ballots to be counted on Saturday to determine who wins here in Pennsylvania.

Stephanie Perry:

You mentioned poll workers and election officials, which got me thinking about the fact that I think from 2020 to now, so many of them are new, there's been a lot of turnover. So how do you think that will, if at all, affect the way that things are done collectively throughout the country tonight?

Marc Meredith:

Yeah, I think there's sort of two things built into that question. One is the poll workers themselves. 2020 was interesting because I think a lot of people understanding that these older individuals didn't want to be poll workers during the time of Covid really stepped up and felt like, oh, I'm young. I'm not as at risk from Covid so I can be a poll worker. And so we had a lot of people gain experience with poll working being first time poll workers back in 2020. We continue to have our turnover in poll workers, so there's going to be a good number of people who are working the polls for the first time tonight. And this is another place where experience can be really helpful just getting used to the technology. Here in Philadelphia, at least we use an e-poll book and you get some training on it, but it's probably nothing like doing it for the first time in a real election to sort of get you used to the technology and all the various problems that can come about when you can't find someone's registration or the voting machine isn't doing something right.

So I think you clearly want to have poll worker experience when possible, but this is a common problem that we face all the time. We have to get new people trained up and using the election equipment. And generally speaking, all things equal better to have experienced poll workers, but people can figure it out and get the job done.

Relatedly coming out of 2020 and all of the stresses that were applied to higher ups in election offices, the county election directors for example, we have had a lot of turnover at that level too, where for many people who will be overseeing the elections in various Pennsylvania counties and counties all over the country, this is really going to be their first presidential election. But again, this is something where we have a lot of elections in this country, so even this is people's first presidential election, most of them have had experience running an Election Day before. There's a lot of expertise. In many case, people sort of rose through the ranks and have worked in elections before and maybe weren't the director, but now are the director of their county. And I have a lot of faith in those people to do the types of things we need to get done to make elections run smoothly like they generally do here in the United States. And I'm optimistic that when all said and done, we'll have another really, really well run election tonight.

Stephanie Perry:

So one area of your research is political campaigns, and obviously President Biden's decision to drop out of the race has significantly changed the presidential race this year. So is there anything that strikes you about either campaign? Are there particular groups of voters you're looking at tonight? What specific states are you looking at? How are you thinking about this?

Marc Meredith:

Yeah, so Steph, one major thing we're doing here on election day before polls close is we're running this giant operation to try to understand what turnout's looking like. And that's probably what I'm most focused on, both from a projection standpoint, working on decision desk, but also as a political science trying to understand this election, is are we going to have turnout that looks like it did in 2020 where as you reference, this was the highest level in my lifetime in terms of the number of people who showed up to vote. Or are we going to have a little bit of a lag back maybe towards 2016 levels of turnout or go back down to where we were in say 2012? And this is something that's really hard to know before

Election Day because our polls, the types of questions that you ask people are not that well-designed to understand turnout decisions. When you ask people are you going to vote? Everyone says, yeah, I'm going to vote. And it's hard to get people to say, no, I'm not going to vote.

And as a result, I think we don't have a great understanding of what turnout's going to look like tonight until we start getting these reports from elections officials about what are the counts looking like, how many people have voted? And anyone who thinks they know with 100% certainty the way this presidential election is going to go tonight is probably full of themselves. It just feels like this is something that is unknowable, and I really do think why it's so unknowable is which side is better able to get their supporters to the polls is probably the side that's going to prevail tonight.

And so given that we don't have good polling questions that really get us at that core question of which side, if either is going to be more successful getting people to vote until we start seeing these turnout data. That's what I'm most interested in seeing, is we'll start looking at turnout reports, we'll start looking at whether we're seeing more turnout in places that tend to support Democrats, in places that tend to support Republicans, whether it's high across the board, whether it's low across the board. So I think more than anything else, what I'm thinking about tonight it's which side it seems like it's really able to get its people out there to vote.

Stephanie Perry:

So you're right, the exit poll is definitely a tool for the media to be able to talk about what the story is of the election, right, especially in those early hours before we have any real vote. And it isn't often used, at least not anymore, to make race projections. In the past, I think it could be leaned out a little bit more heavily because all the things we're talking about, the laws were different, the way that people voted was different, all of that. And now that has shifted quite a bit. And you talked about turnout and how you're going to be thinking about that on election night, well tonight. How you're going to be thinking about that tonight and what you're doing today. We have a team of PORE students who are working with us to gather some of that data. Can you just talk a little bit about how early are you here today? What are you looking at? How many data points are you looking at throughout the day? What makes you feel confident, what doesn't as you're looking at this stuff as it comes in?

Marc Meredith:

Yeah, I mean, I love the exit poll. It's great after the fact for telling us some stories about the election and why voters were voting a certain way, but by definition, exit poll, right? It's only talking to the people who are leaving their polling place. And so we're not talking to the people who didn't vote on it. We're having to fill in the gaps a little bit on the people who maybe cast an early in-person vote where,-

Stephanie Perry:

We do have a phone poll.

Marc Meredith:

We do a phone poll.

Stephanie Perry:

And we're actually at locations early in person. So we have interviewers there too, but.

Marc Meredith:

Totally. But it is an exercise in blending, right? It is like this is not 1980 where almost everyone who's going to vote is leaving a polling place on election day, which just I think would've made your life so much easier to have the data come in that form. But the long and short of it is it's a really useful tool, but it's not particularly useful for making projections in the races that are going to be close. I think we're going to use the exit poll when approaching races where we have a pretty good idea ahead of time just based on the past history of the state in terms of its partisanship and the polling that's gone down. We're going to be looking at the exit poll to just provide some confirmatory evidence that the things that we expected to be seeing are in fact true.

But that's for races where we feel like a candidate's probably going to win by 20, 30 points not for races where we have any high probability on the chance that is close. And so for those close races, which is the ones that are going to be determining who the president is, who controls the Senate, who controls the House, we're going to be looking at these turnout data. We're going to have hundreds, maybe thousands of data points collected by the time the polls close in some of these key states that are going to be on getting the most attention tonight. I expect states like Wisconsin and Pennsylvania and Michigan. We're going to have a good sense from the data that the PORES students are collecting throughout the day of what turnout's looking like there. And then once polls closed, we sort of close the book on turnout.

And at that point we're really looking at what the counted votes are showing. And one thing that's particularly valuable for us on the projection side are counties that are completely done counting their votes, that at the end of the night, a county eventually hopefully will tell us, this is it. This is all the votes that you're going to get from us until we go and count those last few provisional votes maybe that we got to count down the road. But that point we really feel like, okay, we know in this county how many people voted. We know which way they voted. We can compare that back to the past races and see how predictive, say the 2020 vote was of how places are voting in 2024.

Are we seeing Trump running ahead or behind what he got in that county in 2020 and 2016? And those are the types of things. On the projection side, we're using real votes, we're using these completed counties. And once we get enough of those and we have enough completed counties, and we can say with a lot of statistical certainty that we feel we know where this race is going, it's only at that point what we'll be putting the check marks in for candidates.

Stephanie Perry:

So why does it take longer to call some races than others?

Marc Meredith:

I mean, part of what we talked about before, is just like these election laws matter. So Florida's going to give us a lot of vote even before we can put the check mark in because one rule we have on the Decision Desk is we don't put a check mark in until the state is done voting and Florida's one of those states that most of the state is on Eastern Time, but the panhandle, I believe they're on Central Time or they have longer voting hours there or something. But we have to wait until every precinct in the state is done voting before we can think about putting that check mark in. And so by the time we hit eight o'clock, we're going to know a lot about how Florida votes are coming in and be able to have hopefully a pretty good sense of what's happening in that state.

And the reason is because they've been processing these mail ballots, these early in-person ballots. These have been tallied already on Election Day. And so when polls close, they have a pretty quick process of turning these votes around and telling us. Contrast that with a state like Michigan, Wisconsin,

these are two of the states I'll be watching tonight and they don't run their counties or their counties aren't necessarily running their elections. These are states that have the municipalities run elections and a county could have many municipalities, and then these municipalities report their results to the county and then the county gets the results to the state or to us. And so it's just a much more lengthy process, compounding that I don't remember the specific laws of these states, but I believe at least in Wisconsin, they don't open the mail ballots until Election Day itself. And it's potentially the same in Michigan. And so as a result, it just is going to take a lot longer to know what went down in those states as compared to a state like Florida.

Stephanie Perry:

So the results we're looking at right now on the Decision Desk are not official vote returns, and it takes weeks to count and report those official tallies. So what kind of certification challenges, if any, do you expect to take place over the next few weeks?

Marc Meredith:

Well, the first thing is not, even the absent of the certification challenges. We're not going to get all the votes for any state tonight. And that's because by federal law, there are circumstances under which voters have to be offered an opportunity to cast a provisional ballot at their polling place. These are ballots that are not adjudicated at the polling place where they can count or not, but are adjudicated after Election Day back usually in the county elections office. And it's usually because some unusual circumstance arose, maybe the person moved within their county of registration but forgot to tell their county elections officials that they had moved. In many states that will cause someone to cast a provisional ballot. Or maybe the poll worker just couldn't find the voter registration record in the poll book because maybe they were under a different name than the voter was given.

Maybe they got married and were under the name before they got married and then changed their name and they couldn't find them in the poll book or something like that. And so there's quite a few ballots, and it'll vary a little bit by state depending on what their laws are that are not going to be counted tonight but will be counted in the days to come. And there are cases where those ballots end up being potentially consequential if the race is close enough. And so it is possible that there'll be a state tonight that counts all the ballots they're going to count that were cast on Election Day, and yet we do not feel statistically certain enough about the way that those provisional ballots are going to go. And we feel comfortable calling the race. And I guarantee you there's going to be some House races, especially out in California that we won't be calling tonight because California allows mail ballots, if they're postmarked by election day to come in within, I believe a week after the election and still be counted.

And so there's going to be some tight House races out there just given the number of House races in California where we don't feel certain enough about the way this race is going to go given the potential outstanding votes that we're going to not put a check mark in tonight. So there's sort of that side of things, which is the votes that remain to be counted. And then once counties count all of their votes, they will report these votes out to their state elections officials. They'll have a certification process at the county. There will almost certainly be some counties where people object to some of the ballots that were or were not counted, especially if a race maybe hinges on what those ballots say. And so there'll be some challenges that just are a normal course of elections happening where people will use the court system to help determine what votes should count or not.

And then there's also this possibility of what we saw in a few select cases in 2020 where there were Republican people on these canvassing boards, and these canvassing boards are almost always bipartisan, who in Michigan for example, objected to the count. They weren't objecting necessarily to



some specific ballots that were counted, but were sort of objecting more broadly to the process. This was sort of part of the big why that comes out of 2020, this incorrect story that the election was stolen from Trump, and it remains to be seen what will happen this time around if the election is as close as it was in 2021. Way or another you can imagine that now the precedent has been set, that in close elections we start fighting out after every close election the certification process. And how that plays out, I think depends a lot on how close the election is and also how much is this election hinge on the way one single state went?

Because if we're in that world, you can imagine the microscope is just going to turn as deep as it can go onto the practices of that state. And so that's one of the things I most hope for tonight, is we leave tonight where we have a clear winner and it's not a winner that hinges just on how one state voted because I think that really puts the electoral administration system under a lot of stress and can lead to a lot of false accusations and innuendo about how the election was conducted. And we've just seen what's played out in 2022 in Arizona and some of the certification challenges in Michigan in 2020, the false electors that were attempted to be submitted after 2020. There's lots of recent cases that give me cause for concern when thinking about what happens if we have a really close election again this time.

Stephanie Perry:

Yeah. Can you give our listeners a little insight into what the Decision Desk process is at for tonight? Do you sleep? In the following days as we're getting provisionals and the vote is still trickling in, what does that look like for you and for the team overall?

Marc Meredith:

We have a pretty substantial team at this point who will be in the Decision Desk, and there will always be at least half of the team there until we've called.

Stephanie Perry:

And no, we don't sleep.

Marc Meredith:

We don't sleep. I mean, the funny thing was in 2020, we break the country into different states and different people are sort of tasked with watching those states. And my time to go get a little short nap happened at like 4, or 4:30 in the morning. And that was, for people who remember the 2020 election Wisconsin was a big state right then, and there's this armored car traveling from the Milwaukee city to the Milwaukee County to report the absentee ballots and my phone is buzzing, like get the TV on, the car is coming, get up from your nap. And so I didn't get a nap needless to say, but we'll get some sleep. Eventually we'll break into shifts. There'll always be someone there. And I'm pretty optimistic, actually. It's not going to be Saturday. I say that, I'm probably just jinx myself. It's not going to [inaudible 00:32:30].

Stephanie Perry:

You heard that here first. Okay. So, what do you think might change with election law and voter decision-making in the future then?

Marc Meredith:

I think it's so dependent on what the outcome of tonight's election is and whether there is a party that has sufficient control of the presidency and Congress that they can unilaterally try to push for election law changes or whether it has to be a bipartisan act. Coming out of 2020 where the Democrats had the presidency in very narrow control of the House and the Senate, there were pushes for a couple of sweeping changes to election regulation. One, the John Lewis Act would have been sort of a replacement, I guess for parts of the Voting Rights Act that had been overturned in the Shelby v. Holder Supreme Court case. There was also a second bill that was, I think called For the People Act that was thinking about trying to put in place some federal laws that would institutionalize a number of the practices that democratic state governments tend to be putting into place these days.

And the issue that the Democrats ran into was there was two senators, Kyrsten Sinema and Joe Manchin, who were not willing to let the filibuster go, the filibuster being the rule that you need 60 votes in the Senate to stop debate. They were not willing to let the filibuster go to let these bills have a vote. And so while the Democrats had support, majority support in the House and the Senate and had the presidency, they were unable to get these changes through. Joe Manchin and Kyrsten Sinema will not be senators in the next Senate no matter what because they're both retiring. It's possible that you could have a majority of democratic senators of a democratic House in a Harris presidency that would maybe be pushing laws like this forward. Equally, perhaps even more possible you would have Trump plus a Republican Senate and a Republican House, and maybe they don't feel as encumbered by the filibuster and they want to put forward a bunch of the policies and standardize them in a way that Republican state governments have been doing.

And so it's really hard to know what the future looks like for voting laws until you know what the next federal government looks like. And more likely than not, you'll have a federal government in place that will not be able to put much together in terms of federal legislation on voting rights. And so what that probably means is actually the real consequential elections tonight are the ones that you're paying less attention to. But it's these state legislative races that are happening that are going to determine what state legislatures look like because it's ultimately going back to our federalist system of elections, it's really what's happening in the state legislatures that has generally the most to say about what election laws look like moving forward. And so it probably won't be the first thing you're looking at when you look tonight or tomorrow morning at what the election results are, but do pay attention to these, to whose controlling the state legislatures because ultimately that's going to have a lot to say about what rules and regulations of elections look like moving forward.

Stephanie Perry:

Okay, Marc, so I know that when you guys are looking at election results, you're looking at specific counties and thinking about the ways that they might be helping you tell the story about other counties in that state or just nationally, counties that are similar to those. So, can you talk a little bit about what you're looking at there and how that impacts the projections?

Marc Meredith:

Sure. There's several counties that, battleground counties, they go by different names, that have at least historically been very predictive of who's going to win states. I'm originally from Wisconsin, so is my wife. She comes from this county Door county, which has been in the news a lot because it just has an uncanny track record for predicting the winners of Wisconsin elections. And we go there for vacation every summer. And this is like a social scientist take where we feel like this difference between correlation and causation. When we were there over the summer, the county was just blasted with yard

signs. There were yard signs everywhere. And I think the political campaigns have now internalized this as we need to win Door County if we're going to win Wisconsin. And it's like, well, no, it was a predictive thing when you just let it be. And once you're trying to manipulate the vote in Door County, is that really going to keep it,-

Stephanie Perry:

After you told us this story, I actually looked to see how big Door County was because I was so curious myself, and it is not very,-

Marc Meredith:

It's not that big, right? Yeah, it's a good number of people, but it's not going to determine Wisconsin elections. And so I think we can be pointing to a few counties Door is one in Wisconsin, in Pennsylvania, Erie and Northampton tend to be on the side of the winner, Kent in Michigan people where Grand Rapids is. That's one of the people have pointed to. So there's these counties out there, but I think they take on this mystique, is like they're going to determine the winner. And the fact is a vote coming from any county counts the exact same. So we'll be looking at these counties tonight and we'll be seeing them as barometers, but it's not like, okay, Door County's vote is in, we can call Wisconsin now. No, it's a predictive exercise. And these counties shift around over time. And I think more than anything in states like Wisconsin, Michigan, these are states that are largely white states in terms of mostly white residents, but there's a few select counties that are more represented by African-American voters.

That's one of the things we'll be watching tonight is in Wisconsin, Milwaukee County, in Detroit, Wayne County, Philadelphia County here in Pennsylvania. We'll be watching those counties, again, going back to just as much of the turnout side as what share of the voter they're giving. Because ultimately, I think seeing whether these counties are producing a high turnout consistent with what happened when Obama was on the top of the Democratic ticket where Black turnout really surged in these counties in 2008, 2012, and then fell off a little bit in 2016, 2020. I think one of the things we're going to be looking for is in these more heavily African-American counties, or at least have more African-Americans in them, do we see turnout levels in those counties that are on par with the Obama elections?

Stephanie Perry:

And one thing that we're doing at NBC this year that we haven't done before is the Decision Desk has created a group called County Captains where we're going to have people in 28 counties in the battleground states. So that way not only are they informing the story editorially, but they're reporting back to us with things like turnout and just what are they seeing on the ground, what kind of inconsistencies there are, and real numbers so that we can fold that into the projections too, which will be kind of interesting.

Marc Meredith:

Yeah, that's great. It's great to have people who can get that type of information because I think people have this sense that Decision Desk have a magic wand and they know all. And oftentimes we're trying to get a reporter on the phone because we're as in the dark as the public. Is Milwaukee County done counting its votes? These things are hard for us to know in this sequestered room, and that's where having some reporters who can get first hand,-

Stephanie Perry:

On the ground. Yeah.

Marc Meredith:

So helpful.

Stephanie Perry:

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

Marc Meredith:

Yeah, thanks Steph for having me.

Stephanie Perry:

That's it for episode 4: The Gears of Democracy. I hope you as much as I did about how elections are run and what it's like behind the scenes on election day.

Join us next week for our post-election episode, where I'll sit down with John Lapinski, the Robert A. Fox Leadership Professor of Political Science, Director of PORES, and Director of Elections at NBC News. I'll talk with John about what happened on election night and get some insights from inside the NBC Decision Desk.

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