

THE LAURA FLANDERS SHOW

DEMOCRACY: A NATIONAL TEMPERATURE CHECK

LAURA FLANDERS: Democracy. When it works well, it scares the bejesus out of anyone or a group that wants to hold power just for their own narrow self-interests. That's because democracy is supposed to be about majority rule, right? Which may be why for as long as the United States have been in existence, the idea of democracy has been intention with our reality. Which is actually a representative republic with very carefully restricted access to the vote. Those tensions came to a very obvious head for a lot of people this January 6th, when an armed insurrection sought to invade Congress to decertify a majority, one largely by newly organized voters of color. Since then, we've seen a non-stop campaign to discredit that election and democracy fairly generally. To restrict voting rights, to attack the honest teaching of history, to resist any changes to policing, let alone defunding and to roll back self-determination rights for women and trans people. And it doesn't stop there. "It is all about adapting the American electorate to authoritarianism," my friend Scot Nakagawa said kind of casually to me the other day. And that's the kind of comment that stops one in one's tracks. And it's for that reason that I invited Scot back to co host this discussion and invite some of his colleagues. Scot Nakagawa is co-founder and senior partner of ChangeLab, a national racial equity think-and-act lab. So Scot to you, democracy, it sounds like we need a kind of national temperature check.

SCOT NAKAGAWA: I think our conversation started with our asking, what time is it on the clock of the world? And on the clock of democracy, the hour does appear to be very, very late. But as it is so often darkest before the dawn, democracy watchdog groups around the country are also pointing to some new and hopeful signs, perhaps a sign of a new day, the rise of popular pro-democracy movements. With that in mind, I did, like you said, invite some of the best people I could think of, friends of mine to help take the temperature of democracy around the world and here, especially in the United States. So we have here joining us, Rachel Carmona, executive director of the Women's March, one of the largest women's organizations in the world. Adrienne Evans of a United Vision for Idaho, where she's the executive director out there in mostly rural America. And Rinku Sen, executive director of the Narrative Initiative. So welcome everybody to the show. Thanks for joining us.

LAURA FLANDERS: So before we get to the dawn and the good news, I have to just start with where we are right now. And as September began, we were reeling from what was happening in Texas. It began the season with the nation's most restrictive voting law, the nation's most restrictive abortion ban and a governor who seems to think that it is government overreach to distribute mail-in ballots or masks or force people to wear masks, but it is not an infringement of your freedom to be forced to bear an unwanted child. So Rinku, I think I heard a rumor that you were in Texas. Can you start by telling us something about the temperature there? Is this total

freeze or is this the kind of chill that fires up the kind of popular democracy movement that Scot's looking for?

RINKU SEN: I live in central Texas, about 30 minutes north of Austin. And along with the things that you mentioned, Laura, the other law that went into effect yesterday, is the law that allows Texans to carry a firearm without a license.

LAURA FLANDERS: How could I forget?

RINKU SEN: You don't even need to be licensed to carry your gun around. And that might be the most terrifying one for me. I would say that the mood here is one of getting ready, hunkering down, that has been going on for a long time here in Texas. I think people are probably familiar with the idea that this is the election that Texas is gonna go blue. No, this is the election. It didn't happen last election, it's gonna be the next election. And there are many, many obstacles to Texas going blue, but there are also many drivers toward that outcome here. There are wonderful organizations. There is money starting to flow into the state for democratic organizing of all kinds, big D little d, local regional around the state. And Rachel's here too, actually a new Texas resident. People are still moving to Texas and that's good.

SCOT NAKAGAWA: So what are you seeing Rachel? What's happening over there?

RACHEL O'LEARY CARMONA: Well I'm in a different part of the state from Rinku. So I am in the Panhandle. So the red area. I'm in Amarillo. I see a lot of different things, but I see what Rinku was talking about in terms of organizing against the kind of encroachments onto rights. But I also see people who, because of misinformation and disinformation, believe that there is a different landscape than there is. And so I think that there's a lot of opportunity to reach folks who feel like are in separate communities from us, or feel like they're ideologically opposed to us by virtue of having better communications and clearer communications and just accurate communications. Because I think that a lot of what drives the policy and legislation, or even values and feelings around these laws are actually just rooted in things that aren't true.

SCOT NAKAGAWA: I know Adrienne in Idaho is actually tapping in to the people who are the audience for all of that unreality and trying to find out, what are you really thinking? What's really happening? Why are you making the choices you're making out there in conservative America? I don't know Adrienne if you can tell us something about that.

ADRIENNE EVANS: I mean, I think that we're standing at a moment that is that question. Is it darkest before the dawn or before the storm? And a lot of that rests on what we're doing right now. So living in a rural state like Idaho, where we see this escalation of white nationalist activity and recruitment and disinformation, and disalignment toward authoritarianism and

rejection of democracy, the question really has to be what is motivating this? And so we launched a project that really sought to answer that question. What is motivating, fueling, and driving this shift in American democracy? And so the program is gathering the largest data that has ever been collected, but it is interesting because what we are doing is we are going to the source of it. And we are asking people who are either aligned with white nationalist activity or who are susceptible to recruitment and disinformation. And we go in with one question, we all agree that our nation is more divided than it has ever been, but what is it that you believe is causing this? And from there we are actually documenting, what is it? Is it racism? Is it sexism? Is it political and social identity? Is it a lack of faith in our democratic institutions? And where are those sources of information that folks are relying on to inform them?

LAURA FLANDERS: You said that you're going in. Can you talk a little bit about how you're going in? I mean, are you arriving on the doorstep? Are you phoning people up? What are you doing to take this kind of a temperature check really of people's opinions?

ADRIENNE EVANS: So what we did is build a really robust texting program. And I know that may seem very inauthentic, but we really tailored the approach to keep that authenticity. So this isn't like a text you would get on your phone and ask you to do something. It's a live human being on the other end, asking what is it that you think, believe, feel, what do you care about? And what that does is allow us an extensive reach, Laura. So we are actually reaching out to 500,000 people at minimum across the country. We have concluded Idaho's outreach. We are in North Carolina, we're moving to Georgia and we are going to discover, is it the same uniformly across the country? Or do we have nuance that we need to be aware of so that we can really reach people where they are? And what we found is that people, especially people in rural communities who are particularly susceptible, are very isolated, they're alone, there are very few opportunities to have these kinds of conversations or to know if that's a safe place. And we find that a tremendous number of people want to have these conversations. They wanna be heard.

SCOT NAKAGAWA: 42,000 Conversations, by the way. I just wanna say that. 42,000 conversations and growing. And so it is really the largest dataset of its kind, and it should teach us a great deal. I recently heard somebody use this term hidden tribes to refer to the things that informed the way we behave as people that are beyond the things that you see like that I'm Asian person or somebody else's a white person. That inside of those groupings, there are these little hidden things that we live in by, the real life that we live day to day, the stories that we tell ourselves to help us understand what's happening in the world around us. That is so important. And there seems to be some indication, we have failed to tap into those stories. Rinku you lead the Narrative Initiative, so I'm wondering if you can help us understand something about those stories. What is narrative and why is it important to us now?

RINKU SEN: Narrative, our definition of narrative is that these are the themes and ideas that are embedded in stories. So all of the cop shows that we watch on TV and all of the Sunday night hospital dramas and all of the comic books that are popular now. Through those and each of those stories, there is a moral and a set of ideas. So that set of ideas is what we called narrative. When those ideas are repeated through many collections of stories for a long time, let's say 200 or 300 years, they become deep narrative and very, very sticky, hard to dislodge. So if we look at January 6th, you hear about the violence. You hear that it's shocking, that it's unusual and the solution to it is heavily law enforcement. We have to find all of the rioters and we have to arrest them and they're gonna get punished in the criminal system. So what we need to do is I think give people clear ways to block white nationalists activity that build toward pluralistic, multiracial local democracy. But the answer is not law enforcement. Law enforcement is not going to put an end to white nationalists organizing. The answer is another kind of organizing that actually involves everybody and gives them a role.

LAURA FLANDERS: Well, let me come to you on that, Rachel, because it does seem to me that when it comes to women's organizing, one of the things that the Women's March has done is, de-centralize and multiply really our stories around women and around feminism and women's rights and women's organizing. And in a sense you've multiplied, grown bigger our picture of what organizing by, for, with and about women's freedom is. Can you talk a little bit about the role A, of narrative and culture in all of this, but also your relationship to this discussion around authoritarianism versus democracy, diversity?

RACHEL O'LEARY CARMONA: Women's March was born in 2017, in the aftermath of the election. And I think that the easy story to tell there is, it was a protest to the election of Donald Trump. I think there was a much more complicated story there about patriarchy, the roles that women play inside of families, homes, communities, society. And one of the things about Women's March that has been really effective is that people can come with the issue that's closest to their heart. We have a big tent in a broad way for people to get involved. What we look for is people who are committed to shared values and a shared future. And we meet folks where they are. And so maybe for somebody who has limited mobility, that means taking action from their house, maybe that means marching, and having an opportunity and a vehicle for people to get involved in the ways that they can, I think is really crucial. I know that in some years there's been kind of push back to, oh, that's online. You know, that's just, what have you. And I actually just think it's gonna take all of us in all of the ways and that we don't have the luxury of turning our nose up at any one set of tactics. But I think it just takes everything we have and all the creativity we have and all the imagination that we have to be in this space to actually propel ourselves forward into the future that we deserve.

LAURA FLANDERS: You are all fantastic. And I love hearing what everyone is doing, but we started by saying, there is this assault on the idea of democracy being organized by authoritarians

who are not loosey goosey, organizing in any way they feel like. They have playbooks, they have talking points, they have meetings, they have trainings. Is what I'm hearing tough enough for this moment?

SCOT NAKAGAWA: Is it tough enough? Maybe not, maybe not. I mean, seriously, but we gotta get the practice right. We just have to toughen up and we're going to do that by taking action. And so we have to learn as we go. This is something completely new. This is something we haven't tried. We so easily default to polarization in the world, right? We easily say, it's your fault, it's your fault, it's your fault. And you know what we're saying here is we need to embrace the idea that maybe it's all of us, maybe we all need to move forward together to make change happen in a positive way. If we want an inclusive society, maybe we have to be inclusive. If we want a society that isn't about demonizing and denigrating each other, maybe we just need to stop that and look for the good.

LAURA FLANDERS: Maybe that's why Adrienne's leading the way. You can't just abandon most of Idaho.

ADRIENNE EVANS: Yeah, no and I would say I don't know that the question is really, is it tough enough? I think the question is, is it strategic enough? This is about real people, talking in real language in real time to understand what it is that we are facing. And yes, there are those that are very well-organized. Political Research Associates has documented that 35% of those who voted for Trump are really just die hard, we will never persuade them. But another 65% of the country are feeling lost and abandoned and like a system hasn't been working for them. And so they're very susceptible to all of these efforts to move us toward authoritarianism. And that's where we have to step into the breach. And I would say particularly in regard to Rachel and the Women's March, it is also about finding our lane. I would imagine there are many viewers here today who are thinking, I understand that this is a problem, but I don't know what to do. And this I think is also really naming and owning what white work can look like. This is the moment for white people to step up, to have hard conversations and to really combat and confront what we're seeing.

SCOT NAKAGAWA: To Laura's point, a couple of weekends ago in Portland, Oregon, a Proud Boys rally ended up in a shootout. And so those are the kinds of things that are happening for which we are not yet prepared. What is the non-law enforcement response to that kind of street violence? And the part of people who are basically doing it, was chanting whose streets? Our streets. Can our answer just be okay, they're yours because we can't face the gunfire. What's the alternative?

RINKU SEN: So we do a lot of reacting. And from a communication standpoint, one of the problems when we're reacting is that we almost always amplify the messages of the

authoritarians when we are reacting. We're like, look how horrible this is. Go listen to this person be horrible, why? We don't wanna drive people in that direction. We want to drive them in our direction, toward our content. And so there are some very fundamental, basic things we can change. Number one, don't retweet the opposition. Don't do it. Don't share it on Facebook. If you wanna say something about what is happening, then try to do it in a way that doesn't repeat their phrases and talking points.

LAURA FLANDERS: These are huge things we're talking about in what feels like a super urgent moment. Has there been an experience in your life where you felt, oh, we can do this. We've got this. We are acting in this moment that I'm feeling as if this big “we” is all of ours.

RACHEL O'LEARY CARMONA: When you asked the question, what I thought about was not election day, but that Saturday after when the election was finally called and the country kind of erupted into the streets. And that seems like, I mean, for me growing up, I'll be honest like I was not one of those little girls that used to grow up and play like bride or kitchen. I used to play Princess Leia. So I've been leading the resistance in my mind since I was five. And I feel like this moment felt like this, like return to the Jedi, like Endor scene of like everybody across the galaxy, celebrating. But I think two things about that resonates with me. Number one, it was the sense of joy. And so I think that that pouring out of joy that was so organic, just seemed for me to move the needle in terms of what was possible for our movements. We did not have a small win in November, that was a huge win. And it was huge in many different ways in the actual, tangible, win itself in the organizing capacity that we built in order to get there. In the mobilizing capacity that we didn't need to use, but was in the wings and has been documented in the media. So I think that part of what we need to do is really think about what is our relationship with power and how is power actually not mutually exclusive with the future that we wanna bring forward. And then how do we root that in the actual desired lived experience of people, which is not wanting to be sad and angry and outraged all the time, at least for me, and maybe I'm speaking for myself there, but to experience joy and abundance and rest so that we can just live good lives. I think that's really the goal.

RINKU SEN: I'm definitely hopeful. Everywhere I go, I see people who are trying. But I don't have false hope, I don't think we have a bigger movement than we do. Most of the country is unorganized. That is the truth of it. So we need to like get into suburbs and smaller towns and even smaller cities where the organizing is not robust yet. And we just need way more scale.

SCOT NAKAGAWA: So, back in 1988, an Ethiopian immigrant in Portland, Oregon, where I lived at the time was murdered by neo-Nazis skinheads, which was one of many, many violent acts, that were going down at a time when neo-Nazi skinhead youth were surging. We looked at where are these groups actually recruiting from? What is a subculture that they're building their movement out of? And we made that subculture as complex to us as possible. We got to know

the people and we went there. It was the alternative music scene in Portland and we started showing up at shows and even stage diving off the stage at shows, after making big anti-racist proclamations. And it drew people to us who felt victimized and marginalized in the scene. And they formed two groups, Anti-Racist Action and Skinheads Against Racial Prejudice. And they turned out to be brilliant organizers because they knew exactly the context in which they needed to be organizing, the symbols they needed to wield and the things they needed to do and say in order to win the day. And those young people broke the back of neo-Nazi, skinhead organizing in the city of Portland. And so I think there are heroes everywhere potentially, but we first have to be able to draw back the lens through which we generally see things, the blunt instruments with which we organize people and categorize them and start to look for the complexity because it is everywhere and it's beautiful.

LAURA FLANDERS: Coming back to you, Adrienne, I have to say, when you talk about 42,000 conversations on text messaging, and when you tell me how much people want to engage with one another, meaning with somebody they don't necessarily know and probably don't agree with, that gives me actually a taste. Oh my gosh, maybe we can avoid authoritarianism. So thank you. I think you gave me my palpable moment of the day.

ADRIENNE EVANS: We can't build it if we can't dream it. And this is about the dream of democracy and it is very much at risk, but I am always encouraged and particularly divorced from political party. When people find a sense of their own power, when they come together to recognize that this is all in our self-interests, no one benefits except for those in power, with white nationalism and white supremacy. And if we can get to that moment where we understand that we are collectively in this fight together, and everything is at stake, be it climate, women's rights, voting rights, that's the promise. But it's one that we all hold collectively and will require each and every one of us.

LAURA FLANDERS: I think it comes down exactly to that. And I wanna thank you for participating in this conversation, everybody. I mean, along with our attention to civics, we need media that pulls back and looks at these stories and ideally helps us collectively dream up some alternatives that work for everyone. We will have this conversation again, I'm sure, but I've appreciated this one.

Maybe it's because our conversation this time coincided with the run-up to the 20th anniversary of 9/11, but I thought a lot about our democratic system through the lens of what happened on that day. Look at the pictures of the attacks of 9/11, and you'd think it was one big national event that we all experienced in exactly the same way. But of course it wasn't. It was actually millions of different events experienced as individually, as each of us is individual one from the next. So too, with our democracy, it's not just election day and the result that emerges, we tend to think of it as a run-up, an event and a result. But it's not, it's a process. While our electoral system needs

to be made as broad as possible, so that everybody's vote counts and everybody feels inclined to participate, what I found so cheering about today's discussion was the pro-democracy activists are grappling with how to deepen the process too. Yes, we need to make it wider, but we also need to go deep and we need to invest not just in the results, but in the process and getting to know one another better, because we are all in this same boat. Thanks for watching I'm Laura Flanders, till the next time, stay kind, stay curious and thanks for joining us.

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