

THE LAURA FLANDERS SHOW

VOTING RIGHTS: BIPOC MEDIA SOUND THE ALARM

LAURA FLANDERS: The Brennan Center for Justice, who track such things, reported at the end of last year that in 2021, at least 19 states passed 34 laws restricting access to voting. And more than 440 such bills were introduced in 49 states. That's almost all of them. Moving into 2022, just days after the country marked the birth of the great voting rights crusader, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., the Senate voted to uphold that chamber's most recent filibuster rules, meaning that it was impossible for the majority to pass a new voting rights law. And so it was that a Freedom to Vote act, named after King's allied John Lewis, went down to defeat in the same week as the Dr. King holiday. What to make of all of this? Especially as viewed from the communities that Lewis and King represented? Today we welcome our colleagues, Sara Lomax-Reese and Mitra Kalita, co-founders of URL Media, as we do every month to host our monthly Meet the BIPOC Press media roundtables. URL is a network of Black and Brown owned and operated media outlets that is right now celebrating its one year anniversary. So a big congratulations on that. Sara, Mitra, take it from here.

SARA LOMAX-REESE: Thanks, Laura. It's so great to be back for another year. And another episode of Meet the BIPOC Press.

MITRA KALITA: It's great to be here and it does mark one year since URL Media's journey began. So this is an especially poignant episode.

SARA LOMAX-REESE: We have an amazing panel assembled today. We're going to be talking with Solomon Jones, who is the morning show host of WURD. He's also a journalist and author. And Michelle Garcia, who is a freelance writer for Palabra, which is the digital publication for the National Association of Hispanic Journalists. Both WURD and Palabra are part of the URL Media network. So many people in BIPOC communities feel like this issue of voting rights has already been resolved. It was resolved in the sixties. And yet right now we are really in the fight of our lives. Solomon, I'm going to start with you because I know you were doing a live broadcast during Martin Luther King Day that was in the center of Philadelphia and we were talking to a lot of people about this very question.

SOLOMON JONES: You know, one of the things that I heard was from a listener and I thought the question was so poignant and I think it underscored how people in the community view this whole issue. And the question was, why do we have to keep having laws passed specifically for Black people to be able to vote? Why do we have to have this reauthorized every 10 years so that Black people can vote? And what it showed me was the perception in the community that

without these laws, Black people cannot vote. That we have specific laws for us that allow us to vote. People have to understand that these laws are designed specifically to make it harder for you to vote. But they're not saying Black people can't vote. What they're doing is making it so hard that it discourages you from voting and reduces your numbers so that they can win. That's what people are saying. People are angry. People are frustrated. You know, some people are saying that they are, you know, enthusiastic about the future because in the future, we'll be able to get these people out with another election. But the reality is people understand that this is targeted toward Black people. They might not understand all of the details, but they do understand that they're targets and it makes them angry.

SARA LOMAX-REESE: I'm wondering, Michelle, cause you're in Texas and we know that Texas is one of those states that has some of the most, you know, rigorous or restrictive voting laws that are being enacted. And can you tell us a little bit about what you're seeing, as you're covering Texas for Palabra?

MICHELLE GARCÍA: Sure. I'd like to maybe also pick up from what Solomon just said. It was something I observed actually in New York that I think rings true across the country and I certainly see it here in Texas. After the 2016 election, I was on the subway and I was going to Harlem where I lived, and this young Black man, was like a teenager, starts talking with a woman who I assumed he knew, but didn't. And he just said to her, I was sitting next to him, he said, "It just feels like nobody wants Black people anymore." Like he just said it. And it was . . . I shuddered. And when people feel like they don't belong — and I wrote a story about this for Palabra, and researchers and for The World, PRX, The World, when people feel like they don't belong, it is a way to prevent them from voting. So let's start with the cycle that you put restrictions in place, you have campaigns with messaging that basically communicates who's important, who's not, and there is a cycle in which people are being told, "You don't matter, you don't actually belong." And so one of the things, so before we even get to the ballot box, there are so many obstacles that have to be overcome in order to say, to overcome that message of not belonging. What that kid felt, what people here felt, and what I've seen personally. I got turned away from the polls myself twice for one election because of the voter ID law.

MITRA KALITA: Was this in Texas, Michelle.

MICHELLE GARCÍA: In Texas. The next time I voted, I took my voter registration card and my name was on the rolls, but they didn't have the same number and I was allowed to vote, but I don't know if my vote was counted. I mean, this is after you like, find the place and do these things and add to that, you're listening to the media tell you, the news reports telling you, "Texas has been a red state and that's unlikely to change." And there you are on your busy day, driving along, hearing one or the other party has dominated. And so you ask yourself, what's the point again? Again, are you going to go back to the ballot box twice after you get turned away? Are

you going to take time out in those long lines that we already know Blacks and Latinos face lines that are twice as long as whites do. These are completely different realities that our American, our fellow Americans are experiencing. When I interview young people though, I will, you know, I want to, and not on a hopeful, I don't do hopeful, but a sort of more, another point of view. I am deeply moved by interviewing people in their twenties and thirties, recent college grads, first ones in their family to go to college, and they get involved politically, and they challenge these voter laws and they organize not for themselves, for their parents.

MITRA KALITA: I will pick up on one thread of hope, Michelle, and Michelle, you know, we've known each other a long time, and I feel like that is our relationship. So, and here in New York City, just days before this recent news of voting rights being further curbed, New York City decided to extend the ability to vote in municipal elections, so local, not state, not federal, to non-citizens, which is really significant. That's almost a million people. It's 800,000 to a million people. And then I think the other trend that's noteworthy is that during the pandemic, mail-in ballots became very normalized. And the other trend in New York that I think is hopeful is that voting is turning into a bit of a season. So it's days and days, as opposed to the one day, which I think because of the lines and, you know, some other factors that Michelle mentioned, also confusion on that day itself. You know, that gives me a little bit more hope in terms of people being able to invest the time to get to the ballot box.

SOLOMON JONES: What your painting is an illustration of what the Kerner Commission said back in the sixties, that America was moving towards being two countries, one Black, one white, one rich, one poor, separate and unequal. And that's kind of where we are. Not only from a material sense, but I think also from a political sense, where you have New York trying to move to include immigrants and to include people who aren't citizens. You have many other parts of the country that are moving to exclude them and to exclude Black people and to exclude Latinos and young people and anybody else who's not going to vote for what has essentially become a right-wing Republican party. We're not going to change our policies. We're going to make sure that you can't vote so that you can't vote against these policies. For me, the pandemic and those mail-in ballots kinda came together in my own experience. I was getting over COVID during the November election here in Philadelphia. And I had a mail-in ballot. Just as I was coming out of quarantine, one of the first things that I was able to do, was to take that mail-in ballot to a place where I could do a drop-off box and avoid this long line that was around the corner. And so I voted, you know, using a mail-in ballot because of the pandemic, as I'm coming off of COVID quarantine and was able to use that. That was empowering. And the same Republicans here in Pennsylvania that voted to approve those mail-in ballots are now trying to do this election review, where they want to get people's social security numbers and addresses and all of this personal information. And I think as part of an intimidation tactic to try to keep people from voting.

MICHELLE GARCÍA: Yeah, that's right. And I would add to that. I mean, you look at a place like Texas that is, quote unquote, majority minority. And I wrote a piece a couple of years ago where I asked the question, what will it take in order for Latinos and Blacks, Native Americans and Asians in the state of Texas, who now represent the majority, to see themselves as a center? To see the, you know, when does the conversation change to voters and voters of color, to voters of color because we're it, right? When do the institutions and the coverage and the candidates and the messaging and the funding shift to reflect the reality that we're the voters, we're the American voters. Not like a parenthetical. And one of the things that, you know, we saw in Texas, for example, is Lina Hidalgo, the Harris County Judge, the top administrator, right? Born in Columbia, immigrated to the United States, and won this powerful seat. And in the last election, she and the county clerk and others made it possible to have 24-hour drive-thru voting. You could vote anywhere. They opened up so many more places, voting locations. I mean, it was revolutionary for Texas. And there was such a backlash by Republicans and the governor to shut that down. And the voter voting restriction laws targeted what Harris County had done specifically. Now, what I think gets missed in this, when we focus on that kind of dog fight political part, which is important, is that what did and what Lina Hidalgo did, and what the electeds in Harris County did and what, how this connects to what's happening to New York is they make us see what is possible. It sort of opens the windows to say, you know, questions, why do we restrict? Why do we think that it must be done this way? And I think what comes down to, and I interviewed Lina Hidalgo shortly after she was elected, was power versus the power in community. I mean, her approach to her office was based in, I'm here to serve the entirety of the community. And I think, you know, as overused as that word is, it is a very powerful one because you either have electeds who operate from a sense of inclusiveness, all of us, or those who operate from a sense of some of us.

SARA LOMAX-REESE: I think that until these political machines recognize the power of our communities, BIPOC, Black and Brown communities, that they need to be centered and prioritized, then you know, they're going to continue to fall short in terms of these elections. But I also think that in addition to these laws that are being enacted, there's a very real issue of voter apathy. And Solomon, you know, in Philadelphia, we've had elections where only like 17% of people have actually come out to vote. How do we make sure people do what they can do to vote? To get out, to vote and not sit it out? And so Solomon, I'll punt that to you.

SOLOMON JONES: I believe that in order for people to do everything that they can to vote, they need to see a win. I think that especially among young people, there is a cynicism that's born of what they've seen. They've seen that things have not changed as quickly as they would like to see them change. They come from a generation where things, technology and everything else moves quickly, politics does not. I heard what Michelle said earlier about young people, you know, working for their parents in the Latino community. In the Black community, a lot of our young people are feeling like, why should I vote? They're feeling disillusioned.

MICHELLE GARCÍA: I would like to just maybe suggest reconsidering the word apathy to neglected. When you look at the fact that before the elections, in for example, the state of Texas, 40% of Latinos have not been contacted by a campaign or a party. When you look at how the lens through which news media covers the elections. When you look at the fact that so many people feel that the party and the candidates only come around when it is time to vote and they don't see what, you know, what Solomon was talking about, what are the wins along the way? What are you doing for me? Then you're neglected. So the question is, if we want people to vote, and we want to reframe the idea of who's an American, right? Then what are we asking people to vote for? What is this democracy? What is the unifying progressive, or not even progressive, even non-ideological, what is this Americanness that we have seen in this country before, which is a multi-racial democracy based on equality. Okay. We haven't seen that. We haven't seen it for very long, so we need to give it a contour. We need to give it a name. And we need to say, you who are willing to go out on the streets and protest, or you who feel neglected, this is what you're fighting for when you overcome this. And this unifying message, of which we all occupy the center and not the orbit, is what's missing. See Republicans have that. Conservatives have that. They base it on the original premise of this country, and it's original ideas of exclusion. And I would just add to what Solomon said earlier, when he was mentioning the Kerner Commission. The other point in the Kerner Commission is, for so long, the news media has reported this country through the lens of white eyes, for white people.

SARA LOMAX-REESE: What are we going to do to energize, to reframe, to mobilize our communities in this really pivotal time?

SOLOMON JONES: We cannot change legislation if we do not vote and if we do not get in representation that actually represents the people. And so I would encourage people to formulate what it is that you want, even before you get out in the streets to protest. Because if you don't, they'll take down a statue. They'll change the name of the building. They'll do stuff that really doesn't matter, and doesn't change your reality. And so for us to get these demands, for us to get the change that we need, we must vote.

MITRA KALITA: Within the news media, BIPOC media know this story best. And so I would implore mainstream media to pick up the Haitian Times or pick up Epicenter, listen to WURD, and those listeners tell you how they're going to vote and how they're feeling. I worry that there's such a disconnect, especially in this moment of the crisis in the pandemic between what we're seeing on TV and the reality on the ground. And I think BIPOC media is just so uniquely positioned to have those conversations, because we're not just interviewing, we're really listening and responding.

SARA LOMAX-REESE: Michelle.

MICHELLE GARCÍA: You just talk to people about what they want, what they're doing. They, especially Latinas get activated, cause like we move in groups. And so to see that happen makes you realize you are constantly part of this ecosystem and the conversations you're having, the questions you're asking, the history that you're uncovering, and the reports, and also the reminders that, as Mitra said, centering it on voters, that the power is with the voters.

SARA LOMAX-REESE: I want to thank all of you, Solomon Jones from WURD and Michelle Garcia from Palabra, and my co-pilot, Mitra Kalita from Epicenter and URL Media. This has been a wonderful conversation. And I think that the ultimate thing is to strengthen BIPOC media so that we can keep telling these stories, keep advancing and centering our narratives at the forefront. So thank you all so much for your time. And we look forward to a very vigorous, vigorous 2022.

MICHELLE GARCÍA: Thank you all.

SOLOMON JONES: Thank you.

LAURA FLANDERS: Sara and Mitra, that was such a sobering conversation. The question of timing, of two Americas, probably more than two, of apathy being a wrong word for the neglect, so much there that I want to see picked up in our media. Just on the timing front, there were two sort of horrendous parts of the timing of the Senate defeat of the filibuster change that would have permitted a vote on the John Lewis Voting Rights Act. The timing on that coming just days after the Dr. King holiday. Do you think that was intentional?

SARA LOMAX-REESE: I don't know if it's intentional, but I think that it's prescient. It makes incredible sense in this country because we are living in such, I guess, hypocritical times. And there's so much, I mean, we didn't really talk about the January 6th, you know, all of the information that's coming out about the January 6th insurrection. So all of this is coming together at the same time, around the King holiday, around the launch into the 2022 midterm elections, and all of the questions that are surrounding how are the midterm elections going to be impacted by COVID-19 and any kind of evolution of the pandemic? So, I mean, I think that we're living just in a very complicated and you know, a very difficult time when so much is intersecting with the realities of where we are in America right now.

MITRA KALITA: That we've turned voting rates into a democratic Party issue is appalling to me because you're absolutely right, in the same breath, we can talk about democracy and how it's supposed to work. And it's literally crumbling beneath our feet. Right? So I think that's absolutely right. And the other element, I think the backdrop of the pandemic, I know I sound like a broken record, but Martin Luther King's unifying cause was actually the elimination of

poverty, right? And so I do think there's some intentionality of the timing here, where Democrats can kind of just throw their hands up and say, "We can't do anything, you see?" They're not letting us do anything. And you know, if not this crisis, when on earth can there be action?

LAURA FLANDERS: And the action needs to be local. I mean, the point about the laws that are getting passed in the states, is they're getting passed in the states. Up to and including the laws that will enable partisan entities to interfere in the results of presidential elections and others besides. And yet our media, most of it the white money media, focuses on Washington. As you know, that's not where the power is. That's not what the stories are even. So I thank you. And everybody in URL Media, Sara, do you want to take us out? It's been a wonderful way to kick off the year and congratulations on your first at URL.

SARA LOMAX-REESE: You just wanted to add, you know, you can't, when you think about what Dr. King and John Lewis, and, you know, all of the people who were at the forefront of the civil rights movement, we can't assume that what we're facing right now is any worse or more difficult, and they were able to overcome, they were able to manifest legislation that began to level the playing field, began to create more of a true democracy. So I think that we also have to be heartened by the organizing and the efforts that laid the groundwork for what we need to do right here, right now. Do we have the will, do we have the motivation to pick up that mantle and do the work right now? Because it was done before, it can be done again.

LAURA FLANDERS: I detect the two of you switching places on the question of optimism, hope, and uplift. And I look forward to that continuing, at least for you to keep changing places on these questions as the year goes forward. Thank you so much once again for bringing such a great roundtable to the Laura Flanders Show. You've been watching Meet the BIPOC Press with our colleagues at URL Media. There's more information at our website. Thanks for joining us.

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