

THE LAURA FLANDERS SHOW

FORGET EVERYTHING YOU KNOW ABOUT TEXAS

LAURA FLANDERS: Don't mess with Texas. That's what they say. But how about your ideas about Texas? Chances are they are overdue for a review. Last September, Texas lawmakers passed SB8, the most extreme abortion ban in the US criminalizing abortion after just six weeks with virtually no exceptions and deputizing individuals and groups anywhere to sue. This March, Texans voted in the first primaries of this midterm election year amid an uproar over voting restrictions, rejected ballots, attacks on migrants, and an unrelenting assault, not only on pregnant people and those who help them, but also on virtually everything having to do with trans rights. Red, Republican — Texas has certainly been a testing ground for backlash policies and politicians. And that could be what's happening now, but could it also be a bellwether of a different sort? Our guests today say that their state could also be predicting how 21st century change happens when people organize differently. What are people who don't live there have wrong about Texas? And what do Texans see as the path to reclaiming their state? Joining me today are activists from several intersecting movements in Texas. Aimee Arrambide is the director of AVOW, which focuses on abortion access, reproductive health rights and justice. Eesha Pandit is co-founder of the Center for Advancing Innovative Policy. She's also a member of the Crunk Feminist Collective, and co-founder of South Asian Youth in Houston Unite. Emmett Schelling is the director of the Transgender Education Network of Texas or TENT, an organization dedicated to gender diverse equality in Texas. And we're also gonna be hearing from Greg Casar, a labor organizer, Working Families Party member, and progressive Democrat who won the primary on March 1st and now stands to run to represent a district that runs all the way from Austin to San Antonio. A lot to talk about in what I know is gonna be too little time. We are messing with people's minds on Texas, but let's start perhaps with what they need to know about where things stand. And Aimee, I'm gonna start with you. What is front and center of your mind now in terms of the threats, the issues and people that you care about are facing there in Texas?

AIMEE ARRAMBIDE: Thank you so much for having me on the show. Essentially abortion has been pretty much banned in Texas since September. So over six months for the majority of people seeking abortion care, and that's not okay. It's also not in line with what the majority of Texans support. Texans support access to abortion care. And that's just been the truth since before Roe v. Wade. Texans are having to travel out of state to access the care they need, or they're being forced to carry their pregnancies to term. And that's absolutely not okay.

LAURA FLANDERS: And what about you, Emmett, what's front and center of your mind?

EMMETT SCHELLING: We are in the midst of a vicious attack on trans kids and their parents, their caregivers, essentially criminalizing them simply for getting care for their children with physicians who are actually educated to provide that kind of care unlike our legislators. Unfortunately, what we're dealing with is an AG who issued an opinion that was based on zero merit, zero fact, a governor who took that opinion, issued a directive to DFPS or Department of Family Protective Services, to ask CPS to investigate any trans kids that were thought to have gender-affirming care. And at the end of the day, what it did is the same vigilante sort of reporting on your neighbor, really creating a climate that just is not indicative and is not genuine to actual Texas.

LAURA FLANDERS: Eesha, I'm gonna ask you to kick off your sense of what is Texas up against and why should those of us outside the state care?

EESHA PANDIT: What Aimee and Emmett articulated beautifully is the criminalization of self-determination that's been happening in this state. Criminalization of many families of people trying to control their own families. And so when you hear Texas politicians say that they are pro-family, you will know that what they're actually up to over here is actually criminalizing safety for many families in the state. Texas is only relatively recently dominated by far-right politics. They are terrible and brazen, but they have not been in power forever. Far-right politicians, they know that Texas is a battleground state. They are approaching Texas as though there is something to be won here. And so my sort of call to reconfiguration of like how we talk about Texas is that why aren't progressives approaching Texas as a place where there is something to be won, a place that is on the cusp of sort of political and demographic shift? And that is the reason why this is such a battleground state for many conservatives.

EMMETT SCHELLING: One point of frustration for me is when people are like, well, forget Texas, right? Like who cares? And then you have the same progressives saying trans lives matter. Texas has the second-highest population of transgender people in this country. So if you say Trans Lives Matter, then that includes the trans lives in the state. We're talking about people's freedom, their bodily autonomy, their decisions over their healthcare. What impacts an individual the most is health.

LAURA FLANDERS: The question of abortion is similar in the sense that we are already on track to see, I think the Guttmacher Institute is predicting something like 26 states following the route of Texas. And just to underscore what's unique so far over the Texas — about the Texas model, Aimee, why we should be afraid?

AIMEE ARRAMBIDE: Banning abortion at six weeks is completely unconstitutional, but the bounty hunter component of the bill where they essentially deputize anyone to sue anyone for quote, "Aiding and abetting abortion access," is just completely contrary to any sort of judicial

prudence that's established. Not only is abortion care gonna be completely banned in 26 states after June, but what if this starts happening — I mean, it's already started happening with trans kids in Texas — but it's gonna spread to any sort of human right that anyone disagrees with. And we cannot set that precedent.

LAURA FLANDERS: All right. So we are going to switch in a second to what is being done differently in Texas that we can learn from, and one of the things that's being done is you are speaking very explicitly about being pro-abortion.

AIMEE ARRAMBIDE: Well, one of the things is we changed our name to AVOW. Our tagline is "unapologetic Abortion Advocacy". And one of the reasons behind that is that the opposition uses the word abortion four times more than our side does. So in fact, they've been able to frame the narrative. They've been able to spread misinformation and lies. They've been able to enact laws based on false claims. And I think we have to change that dynamic. We have to take back the word abortion. And then second to that, like one in four people will have an abortion in their lifetime. That is so many people that you love and care about within your community. And we have to talk about how we support the choices they make and support the families they build or choose not to build. This is about love. Abortion is about love for yourself. It's about love for the family you want to create maybe later, the family that you already have and are complete with. And I think that that's one of the most important things that we can do right now to change the trajectory of abortion rights is to just unapologetically declare how pro-abortion we are.

LAURA FLANDERS: I think it's one in four people who can get pregnant, right?

AIMEE ARRAMBIDE: Correct.

LAURA FLANDERS: Emmett, to you. What's distinct in your approach if there's a comparable distinction to be drawn?

EMMETT SCHELLING: To really lead successfully, right? We need leaders that actually are reflective of the constituency that they're leading. Really understand, are tied directly to who the people are and understanding that and combining that with their own expertise, education, knowledge, whatever that looks like. And I think that's what we're doing different in Texas, is that we're unapologetically stepping out and we're saying, no, this may have been who you said we are, this may have been what you said we were about, but we're here to clear the air and let you know straight from us, this is who we are. This is what we look like, and this is what we are about.

LAURA FLANDERS: Well, Greg Casar ran on a fairly unapologetically, progressive and pro-labor platform this spring and won the democratic primary March 1st. I had a chance to catch up with him and talk with him about how he is now gonna run for Congress. Here's Greg.

GREG CASAR: When some people think of Texas, they think of the Bushes or Gregg Abbot or Dan Patrick. But I think of Barbara Jordan, I think of Anne Richards. I think of Emma Tenayuca, and the Pecan Sheller's Union that built some of the most radical and progressive unions of women of color in our nation's history that was here in Texas. While lots of folks think about Texas as the voter suppression law or our anti-abortion laws that have basically banned abortion in Texas. And that is all real and true. At the same time, Texas is the home of Roe v. Wade. This is where Roe v. Wade was won. This is also the home of, I think the most flourishing and strong immigrants' rights movement in our country. And so I think that we need to sort of lean into and build up and support that fight back because in so many ways, my race for Congress was a piece of that. It wasn't just me that won. It was that people wanted to go and vote for \$15 an hour instead of a tax on workers, right? So they wanted to vote not only against the abortion ban in our state, but for making Roe v. Wade the law of the land and repealing the Hyde Amendment. People overwhelmingly believe in that kind of change. And so that's why Texas to me, isn't a red state. It's an under-organized state. And it's time for us to invest in that kind of organizing. We're amongst the lowest states in the country for voter turnout. If we got more communities of color and working-class folks to recognize that this system that has failed them could work if we all jointly participate, that's what changes the state, because this isn't a state of overwhelmingly reactionary people. It's a state where overwhelmingly reactionary people have run the show for so long that most folks say I just don't wanna participate anymore. I think it's actually exactly in places like Texas where we have frankly, the most at stake, and where if we change things here, it changes the country.

LAURA FLANDERS: We're closing our shows this season by asking people what they think is at stake right here in this moment that fuels their decision to do the work that they do.

GREG CASAR: We are facing attacks on just people's ability to thrive and survive. We're in a moment, we're on the precipice of even greater war. It's a time of real tension, but it's in these very moments I think where movements need to step up and be built and be born where we show the best in us to be able to turn the page, to be able to say, you know what, we're going to have elections that count and that we are going to include more and more people in, in voting in Texas where we're saying there's so little we can do about the climate crisis. It's exactly where we need to create climate renewable green energy jobs to be able to save our economy for working people and save our future for our kids. It's right now that we can actually finally say abortion rights and voting rights and civil rights are for everyone, right when they're most under attack from a place like Texas. So I think it's kind of in that darkest moment where the light shines the most bright, and we have to own up, own that light and embrace it instead of saying, oh, no, we can't get too

close to that light because what if things get worse? And so this is really, I think the moment to do that. And I think my election shows that Texas isn't a red state. It is a place where folks are sick and tired of that. And we have to bring people in, organize folks. And I really believe that our democracy is gonna be able to work from us.

LAURA FLANDERS: Coming to you, Eesha. I mean, Greg's very clear there. He says that Texas, he's famous for saying Texas isn't a red state. It's an under-organized state. Now, I don't know if you would agree with that, but it is being organized in different ways.

EESHA PANDIT: You look around at the leadership of our movements here in Texas, ground-up organizing, it is led by communities most impacted. And that makes a lot of people uncomfortable. And that is part of the story that is not told about what's happening here. And instead we get sort of national organizers saying here's how we've done it in these other states. And back to my point, Texas is a very unique political state. The way that we think about the complicated nature of New York or California, there are so many nuances that go into national conversations about the red parts of the state, the blue parts of the state, the purple parts of the state, Texas doesn't get that gracious interpretation of being a complicated state. It is painted with one brush and then we're expected to use movement strategies that are based on that one particular lens of Texas. And they don't with the vibrant nature of organizing by impacted communities that's happening here. And I think that's the story. That's the story of what's happening in Texas, is the diverse resistance.

LAURA FLANDERS: So Aimee, what messages do you find resonating that perhaps the rest of us should pick up or learn from, or at least try out on our neighbors?

AIMEE ARRAMBIDE: I think when you're talking about abortion, you start from a place of values. You explain why it's important for anyone who wants to access the healthcare they need to be able to do so in their community, to be able to do so without any obstacles that are legislatively dictated and not medically reasonable. And you have to talk about why that's important to you. And then you can back it up with facts. The fact that one of the largest populations of people of reproductive health age are in Texas, and why banning access to one of the safest procedures is not okay. And I think you have to talk to them about what's happening in our legislature, and then you can talk to them about the facts. And generally what we've found is when we have conversations with people leading with our values and backing up with facts, people are on our side.

LAURA FLANDERS: And the trans situation, Emmett, I mean, this is personal for you, for your family. For a lot of people the assaults have come so hot and heavy, whether it's school, sports teams or bathrooms, or now reassignment surgery, the trauma is lingering over entire

communities, as far as I can see, not just in Texas. How are you dealing with that part of this? And what's your learning, your teaching for us?

EMMETT SCHELLING: To start off right, it's not a reassignment. It's an alignment, right? For me, all of the medical care that I have sought and been so fortunate to get, right, it was alignment for me. It was bringing my body, my being in line with my spirit, in line with my mind, in line of who I inherently and deeply, and only I know myself to this level. And so I think like just as Aimee said, there's some fundamental things that we're seeing, right? Eesha as well, right? That aren't necessarily trans specific or even abortion specific. But I think there's just fundamental human values. The dignity, the sort of humanity that binds us together, we want to be free. We want to be able to have decisions over our own health. We're not going to entertain that I deserve to exist or not. I think we're beyond that, right? And once we can figure that road out to get through those things that we already inherently know, and we recognize in each other, just being in this world, being in community, being in space together, sharing the state, we'll get back to where we need to be. Because at the end of the day, the reason the people in this state fight so hard and deal with our colleagues who aren't here, feeling like a mixture of, I think, sorry for us, and just frustrated, just leave, is because we know this. We see it every single day in our lives. And the people that we see if it's on the street, or if it's in our community, and we know each of these people is worth fighting for, and we know right now Texans are not getting a fair shake. They're being taken advantage of by our leadership who is peddling in lies and deceit for the sake of sick political power at this point.

LAURA FLANDERS: You alluded to it there Emmett, but I'm reminded of sort of where we began that all the mythology around don't mess with Texas, don't step on me, all of that. Eesha, you touched on what seems to me is a very potentially rich theme for Texans who believe strongly in independence and liberty and freedom. When you talked about the criminalization of self-determination, if ever there was a Texan value, it seems like self-determination is one of them.

EESHA PANDIT: You're looking at three people who identify as Texans. And when you close your eyes before this call, if you close your eyes and thought of who you think a Texan is, you wouldn't have pictured our faces necessarily, is my guess. And that is what makes me hopeful. The very thing that makes conservative politicians wake up in the middle of the night in terrors of demographic shift is the exact thing that gives me hope. But I do know that demographics aren't political destiny, and that we have to organize, and we have to understand that, that investment in those communities as civic actors, both as citizens and non-citizens alike, as civic actors, is the solution to kind of countering some of these stories that we hear about who Texans are.

AIMEE ARRAMBIDE: Over the summer, a 12-year-old girl reached out to me because she wanted to have her own rally against SB 8. And she got her friends to come speak. And we had 10 speakers that were under the age of 18, and they talked so passionately and so articulately about why they should have the right to abortion care and all the other human rights that were being attacked. And I just was in awe of these young people who were not only just unapologetic in their beliefs, but they were unafraid to voice them to the establishment. And they were just amazing. And so to me, that's a success story. And that gives me hope for the future.

EMMETT SCHELLING: What we keep on coming back to about the beauty of Texas is the leadership we have, why we believe in what we're doing and why we see this organizing working is because when we say how do we be inclusive, but not how do we just be inclusive? How do we be welcoming? How do we learn from one another? That's what's making things exciting for me, despite, despite right, so much.

LAURA FLANDERS: Well, Eesha, I would love you to kick off closing comments with the personal, really. I mean, what do you believe is at stake here in this moment that fuels you to do the work that you do? Why?

EESHA PANDIT: The thing that makes me feel most hopeful is the fact that when you ask younger organizers to talk to you about the issues they care about, they respond in intersectional ways. Like Aimee said, they don't see reproductive justice and trans liberation and racial justice as disconnected from each other. And that's the work of a broadly intersectional feminist movement that has in fact shaped the way these conversations are happening for young people.

LAURA FLANDERS: Aimee?

AIMEE ARRAMBIDE: Ever since I started telling my abortion story, which I didn't tell for like the first 15 years after I had my abortion, despite the fact that I work in this movement, despite the fact that my dad was an abortion provider. I didn't tell my story, but once I did, everyone would talk to me about it because they wanted to talk about it. And I feel like people will find commonality and shared values. And we just need to make room for that, because I think that's how you affect the change, when you have empathy flowing and people just connecting on a human level. But that's not . . . There's not a lot of space for that in politics or the legislature. And it's unfortunate.

LAURA FLANDERS: Emmett, final word from you. What can people do? What would you recommend people do if they want to respond in a positive way to what they've seen and heard here today?

EMMETT SCHELLING: Really just support the organizations on the ground. I think this conversation has been a great example of what that looks like to have leadership so deeply rooted and deeply invested and deeply visioned for what the landscape is, what the path ahead looks like and what those obstacles are. And most importantly, what the support of our people look like through that journey.

LAURA FLANDERS: All right, so don't give up on Texas, learn from Texas, have a more complete picture and work like crazy wherever it is that you live. That's what I'm hearing from you all today. I really appreciate you taking the time. I think this too is a reflection of your commitment to working together, that you take the time from each of your individual struggles to spend some time together myth-busting about Texas. I appreciate it. And for people that wanna see the full uncut version of this conversation, we will post it at our website for those who are subscribed to our podcast. Thank you all.

Authoritarianism. We talked about it last week in relation to Vladimir Putin in the attack on Ukraine. It's sometimes thought of as strong man rule, but it's not really that. Those strong men in authoritarian regimes are propped up by a whole network of people who are willing to snitch on their neighbors. A network of spies. I've seen it up close in East Germany, and that's really what we're talking about in Texas, and increasingly around the United States. Snitching, it doesn't seem to me is much of an American value, especially not in 'don't mess with us' Texas. So what else is going on? Well voters, when asked, a majority of them in Texas support keeping abortion safe and legal. State court judges who are elected are opposing the governor's actions investigating the parents of trans kids. Voting is a hot issue. Republicans are working hard to suppress the vote, so that I think is what it comes down to, voters versus snitches. Which country do you want to live in? You can find out more and hear my full uncut conversation with today's guests that gets into more detail about the mutual aid networks that cropped up in the last few years at our website, that's LauraFlanders.org, or if you subscribe to our free podcast. That's it for me this time. Thanks for watching. Thanks for joining me. Stay kind, stay curious. I'm Laura.

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