

THE LAURA FLANDERS SHOW

THE GEORGIA WAY: STRATEGIES THAT WORK FOR WINNING ELECTIONS

LAURA FLANDERS- What happened in 2020 in Georgia that led to a democratic majority in the US Senate and the election of President Joe Biden, the first Democrat to win Georgia since 1992? Republican charges of dirty tricks have been investigated repeatedly. They didn't happen. What did happen has been studied far less well. So today we look at what the authors of a new book are calling "The Georgia Way" and what it has to teach those who are campaigning for next month's midterms and the 2024 race. "The wins of 2020 were miraculous" they write, "but also built on years, nay, decades of work." To tell us more, I'm happy to introduce Steven Rosenfeld, the editor and chief correspondent of Voting Booth, a project of the non-profit Independent Media Institute. Steven is the co-editor with Ray McClendon of the book "The Georgia Way: How to Win Elections." He also authored a new report on how election systems actually work. Ray McClendon is the NAACP Political Action Committee chair in Atlanta, Georgia, and an organizer focused on voter turnout. Andrea Miller is an organizer based in Virginia, who is the Executive Director of the Center for Common Ground: People Demanding Action, and the founding President of the National Women's Political Caucus of Virginia. So welcome everybody, and let me start with you, Ray. Thanks for joining us. Just remind us all what actually happened in Georgia in 2020 and why it was so important.

RAY MCCLENDON- Well, thank you so much for having us today, and in 2020, we had made a conscious decision that if we were to make the difference that was required in a most consequential election, the civic engagement groups needed to come together and to coordinate their activities to be much more effective and efficient as opposed to being in silos operating on their own devices. We had a conscious plan to come together and bring all of these groups together so that we would be much better organized and much more effective. This created a statewide organization with the help of many folks like Steven, and of course Andrea, and many of the other groups that are familiar to you and others around the country. And we did this each and every week for several months leading up to the November election, and indeed, for those critical runoffs, and that is what made the difference in a turnout, and especially in the runoff for the two Senate races. We were able to get 95% of the Black voters who had voted in the November election returned to the polls on January the 5th, an unprecedented historic turnout for a runoff election.

LAURA FLANDERS- And Andrea, as people may have noticed, we made the point that you were actually based in Virginia and you work in Virginia. Why was your experience in Virginia important and how did it feed into this story?

ANDREA MILLER- I'm a digital strategist, so I have digital voter files for not only Virginia, but Virginia and also Georgia. So we took the experience that we had had in Virginia utilizing texting and phone banking on a statewide basis and brought that infrastructure or provided the underpinnings of that infrastructure in Georgia. During the runoff, we also introduced a new system "The Georgia One" that we had used in Virginia, that gave us a lot more and better phone numbers for connecting with voters. It also didn't hurt that our volunteers wrote 1.5 million postcards to voters in Georgia, either.

LAURA FLANDERS- Steven, coming to you, why did you think it was so important to capture this story of what happened in Georgia, "The Georgia Way" in the way that you have?

STEVEN ROSENFELD- Most political histories are written as nonfiction narratives and it's almost like you're always racing from the starting line to the finish line, and it really overlooks the interpersonal aspects of campaigning. In 2020, during the pandemic, people really had to make a special effort to innovate, reach out, use new technology, and help each other, you know, attend a Sunday church service over Zoom. Well, that became an organizing tool to actually do other kinds of organizing. Is your voter registration up to date? Do you have a plan to get a ballot? Have you gotten your ballot? Have you returned it? If there are any questions, will you go to an early voting site, deal with it there in person? So what the opportunity to do an oral history is so interesting to me because basically you have all of these ordinary people who are committed and some of them are just amazing and many of them are just people who value civic engagement, and it was great to hear their voices. There were tons of women, it wasn't just men giving orders, and often it was the young women who were some of the most incredibly energetic organizers. So this was a rare thing, and I had heard afterwards and I didn't give it that much thought that it's rarely done. We rarely have oral histories about the people who do actually the work.

LAURA FLANDERS- Ray McClendon coming to you. One of the things I noticed in this book was that a couple of the contributors whose stories you include make the point that this was not a democratic party operation.

RAY MCCLENDON- This was the collaboration of many civic engagement organizations in the Black community across the state of Georgia. We have, as an example, the Divine Nine, all of the Black Greek fraternities and sororities, the Masons, which is the oldest fraternal organization from the Black community, dating all the way back to prior to the Revolutionary War started by Prince Hall, the NAACP, of course, Black Voters Matter, and groups like Shirley Sherrod's group down in southwest Georgia. All of these organizations represent the leadership in local communities, across the entire 159 counties in Georgia. Those people represent leaders who are trusted messengers, and what we found is when you're doing relational organizing, you want to be able to have leaders talking to people who they already have relationships with that

they will trust and rely upon, and that was a core component of why we put together this group called Team Unity that brought all of those organizations together.

LAURA FLANDERS- And when you say relational organizing, what do you mean and what makes that different?

RAY MCCLENDON- When we go into communities, we want to go into the communities where people that are already there, that have relationships with the people that we want to engage with to motivate them to get out to vote and understand that we are not just there for a short cycle political cycle, but that we are interested in what it is that will allow them to pursue their best life, that will address their pain points, and that will be there in that community fighting for a better life for them year round. That is much better. We go into barbershops, into beauty salons, and other areas, and when you go in, and you are 30 days out from election, you go into a barbershop and the young brothers wanna know, "Well, yeah we see you here now because you want our vote, but you're not concerned about us back in January and February and March, when we're fighting to try to figure out how we make a difference in our lives with the daily struggles of life in our communities."

LAURA FLANDERS- Coming to you, Andrea. Hasn't it often been the case that data rolls, voter rolls, that information has sometimes been held quite tightly by consultant groups and lobby organizations and others, including party chapters? What enabled you to do it differently when it comes to data this time around?

ANDREA MILLER- What we did is we went out and we bought all of our own data. We went to a new vendor, not the one that most people think of when they think of the Democratic Party, and we bought our own data, we bought our own voter files. Most of the organizations that Ray works with generally do not have their own voter files. Voter files are complicated to deal with, and again, I'm also a digital strategist, so I could do the IT, I could do the organizing, and I also knew about competitive products. So that was what allowed us to put together superior digital infrastructure.

LAURA FLANDERS- And one of the things that's so fantastic about the oral histories that you gathered is the generational span that's represented there. Ray, I mean you wanna talk just again about who was involved and what stands out to you in terms of that picture of a united movement that we get from studying "The Georgia Way"?

RAY MCCLENDON- Absolutely. Well, what we've already talked about the different organizations, but within those organizations there are generations that are at work, and you mentioned Shirley Sherrod as one of those examples who's been involved in making a difference in the Black community in southwest Georgia and putting her integrity and responsibility on the

line for decades. And the critical thing there is, and what differentiates us from any other organization, is that we understood that it was important that if we were gonna get people to lift up their voices in power, we had to have trusted messengers from local communities. Steven alluded to the fact that we were in the middle of a pandemic and everybody was focused on Georgia and we were getting requests from all over the country that people wanted to fly in and they wanted to canvas and do other things, and we said, "Hey, that's great, we love that but what we need to do, we don't need people from California flying in and canvassing in south Georgia. It doesn't work that way. What we need for you to do is save that money and send us that airfare and help us put people on the ground in the local communities who those people know."

LAURA FLANDERS- And did they do it?

RAY MCCLENDON- They did it. And that was what made the difference. So you take people like a Shirley Sherrod, and the people who were working for her, and many others like her that are unheralded nationally but are known in their local communities, they can knock on doors, they can go into their churches and say, "Hey, I've known you from the time you were born and you better get out and vote." It's those kinds of conversations that can only be had by local people that make the difference and will be respected and responded to.

LAURA FLANDERS- I'm rolling my eyes, because as Steven knows, we used to work together. I wrote a book on exactly this, interviewing people about this exact problem back in 2006. So I am thrilled that perhaps there has been some learning and some change. Andrea, you've got actually examples of other groups learning from Georgia?

ANDREA MILLER- Yes, Virginia really took a hard look at "The Georgia Way" and sixteen counties in northern Virginia formed something called Nova Partners, where they're all going to work together, they will all be trained, and when they bring their people or as they bring their people on, we do the training. So everybody's getting the same training, we figured out and analyzed when we knock on doors what doors do we knock on and it is a team effort.

LAURA FLANDERS- Now, Andrea, you have talked a bit about technology and what you did differently. It also should be mentioned that Georgia did have some new systems in place, 16 day early voting, automatic registration no excuses, absentee ballots. You don't have to explain why you need one. To what extent do you attribute what happened there in Georgia to any of those innovations?

ANDREA MILLER- Well, Georgia's had early voting for a very, very, very long time, so early voting's not new in Georgia. We made sure that not only were people aware that there was early voting, but in our messaging we told people where it was. If they were in a rural county, we actually gave them the address. Early voting information is available to the privileged people

who have internet. People in rural counties often don't have internet, and the same is true for people who are low income, both rural and urban. So every interaction we have with a voter, we are giving them information. We're not selling candidates or who to vote for, we're making sure because there were so many changes in 2020, people knew how to vote.

LAURA FLANDERS- Steve, coming to you. While we're talking about technology and voting systems among other things, I want you to just touch on for a minute what you've written about in your most recent report which is about the big fears and suspicions that many have about some voting systems and the way that those fears have been kind of exaggerated, or at least, you know, emphasized by people trying to undermine the results of elections like Georgia's. In your research, what did you conclude about how worried we should or shouldn't be about the systems per se, meaning the technology, equipment, et cetera?

STEVEN ROSENFELD- The country right now votes on a new generation of voting machines that mostly have been, they've been deployed in the past couple of years, and they're generally focused around using a paper ballot whether it's marked by hand or marked by a computer. So the records in the computer systems that can actually go upstream and trace how people voted are more accurate and more detailed than ever, but we're in an environment where some people don't want to believe that anything electronic can be trusted. The election officials are in a very defensive posture cause they've been attacked since 2020, and they're reluctant to share a lot of that information because what happens is the national media doesn't understand the complexity of running an election. You'll read in the New York Times and they'll describe it as a clerical task, which is a bit of a sexist put down and what does it mean to set up an election? It means you have to con, you have to program and synchronize hundreds and hundreds of digital devices and make sure that everybody gets the right local ballot, and then what's on that ballot is accurately analyzed and then compiled like bricks in a pyramid to subtotals and totals. So what ended up happening in 2020 was, in a handful of places around the country, I mean I'm talking about like less than half a dozen out of 8,000 jurisdictions, the local officials made mistakes with setups or their contractors did since a lot of this is outsourced, and the election deniers of those who don't wanna accept the factual results pounced and said, "Oh my god, things went wrong. We can't trust the results of this computer here, or this you know, a small county of 20,000 votes in Michigan. We have to throw out the results statewide. We can never trust these machines."

LAURA FLANDERS- Were they right?

STEVEN ROSENFELD- They were wrong. They were wrong. We're in a very strange moment where there are tens of millions of voters who have heard months and months of doubt and fears coming from, you know, right wing media channels and a lot of what was done by in these so-called post-election audits, it was political theater. It didn't really instruct anybody on the actual mechanics of how ballots are cast and counted. That brings us up to where we are today

where what I think is, you know, right now already I'm getting emails and I'm seeing things from some of these same actors. They have already decided before people have even started voting that they're not going to accept the results this November, and that's really where, and I mean they, I can, they've already identified the states where they want to, including Georgia.

LAURA FLANDERS- Clearly there are real needs that people have on the ground to have an election work smoothly, inclusively, accurately, and well, and then there are phantom fears being kind of fueled for ideological reasons. What do you think is most importantly needed right now, Ray?

RAY MCCLENDON- What I think is most importantly needed right now is for people to understand that this election is not about policy, but it's about those who believe in democracy and those who want to see us move through to a more authoritarian form of government. Because what these people who are kindly called election deniers are essentially allowing for the undermining of the entire premise of democracy, which is that every vote, valid vote, should be counted. What we're seeing now is that there's a process which says, "Heads I win, tails you cheated," and that process will not allow a democracy to stand. So what we want to do is have our people recognize that democracy is on the ballot, our freedoms are on the ballot, and therefore we must go out and vote. We also must recognize that we need to stand up and participate in democracy. We are in a participatory democracy, which means that we need volunteers to be poll workers, poll monitors, and to stand up against the authoritarianism which is trying to take over local election boards so that they, what they try to do through chicanery and trickery in 2020, they are putting in place right now people who will be able to steal the election process legally by having these folks in place. So we've got to step up against that and vote our power and participate in the democratic process.

LAURA FLANDERS- There are some people in the book "The Georgia Way" that say they saw, they glimpsed a new Georgia being born.

ANDREA MILLER- I think so, and I think we're going to see that story in Virginia where communities that are always overlooked by candidates and both parties find their voice initially talking to each other about what their pain points are and what they really need, and then finding their voice to go and work toward what they need, both from an advocacy side when there is no election, and then an electoral side. So many of our communities develop palm cards. "This is what our community wants and it doesn't matter that the community next door wants something else." That's great. We've got things in common that we want. We all want portable broadband, but we also have unique things and when we work toward them, that puts us on the pathway to get them, and I think that's what we're seeing in Georgia and in some of the other states like Virginia, where we do have these Democracy Centers and people are saying "All right, our fate is in our hands. No more waiting for somebody outside to save us. we're gonna save ourselves."

LAURA FLANDERS- A great final word. I appreciate all of you for the work you've done and Steven and Ray for gathering together so many wonderful stories in this eBook that we'll make available through a link at our website. Ray McClendon, Andrea Miller, Steven Rosenfeld, thank you so much for joining me. It's been a pleasure.

- [ALL] Thank you.

LAURA FLANDERS- Here's a phrase I'd like to get rid of. Election denier. You see it popping up in our media coverage as if we were talking about some naturally occurring demographic group like, I don't know, redheads, but we're not. Ideas spread through people, so when you read a New York Times Siena poll like the one released recently that showed that 41% of Republicans and 28% of all the registered voters they polled have little or no faith in the results of the midterm elections coming up. That's no accident. People spread that doubt with intent. Likewise, we sometimes blame technology for the spread of hateful content, but New York Attorney General Leticia James looked recently at the Buffalo Tops market massacre and called out one individual for having recorded the live stream of the shooter in the course of the massacre and spreading that recording to the web. It didn't happen by virtue of technology. It happened because a person did it. The AG in New York also calls out the owners of 4Chan who refused to take that video and lots of other similar content down and haven't taken any responsibility for that since. It's no accident, not nature nor the weather. People spread hateful ideas and corrosive content and I'm afraid it's people who are gonna have to stop it. What do we do? Well, we keep serving up ideas on our program and I hope you will continue to join us. You can find all of our election coverage and media criticism in our archives. And don't forget that subscribers to our free podcast receive the full unedited conversation from our program every week. I'm Laura Flanders. Thanks for joining me. Till the next time, stay kind, stay curious.

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