

THE LAURA FLANDERS SHOW

BIPOC MEDIA COVERED THE ELECTIONS DIFFERENTLY

LAURA FLANDERS- The results of the 2020 midterm elections have confounded the pollsters, the pundits, and the politicians who told us we should be prepared for a 'red wave' of Republicans being swept into office. Of particular concern because of how many in the party have committed to 2020 election denialism and a rollback of democratic freedoms. That didn't happen, at least not at the national level. But local stories still reveal lots of threats to our democracy. Hidden beneath the headlines are the effects of gerrymandering, the extraordinary efforts many must still take to vote, and of course the election day procedures that give election deniers space to sow doubts. This month, our Meet the BIPOC Press Roundtable looks at how the media fared this election season, particularly in terms of communities of color, their priorities, and their information needs. What do the media's hits and misses this time around tell us about what journalists need to do better or differently in the next few weeks and months? For that, I am happy to be joined by Mitra Kalita, who is the publisher of Epicenter NYC, a newsletter based in Queens, New York. She's also the co-founder of URL Media, a network of Black and Brown community news outlets that partner with us here every month. We're joined by Habib Rahman, co-founder of TBN 24. A URL media network member, and the first Bangladeshi 24/7 live television channel to produce original content in the U.S. Also with us, Stephanie Williams, the executive editor of the IE Voice and Black Voice News. Solutions oriented news operations based in Riverside, California serving the Inland Empire region of the southern part of that state. I wanna welcome you all to the program. Mitra, coming to you in New York a lot of people were surprised by the outcome. Governor Hochul, the Democrat, hung on, but five Republicans won in the House. Now you and your reporter, Felipe De La Hoz at Epicenter perhaps weren't so surprised. You'd been reporting on the rise of MAGA New Yorkers for weeks, maybe months. Can you talk about that?

S. MITRA KALITA- Felipe, as you mentioned on October 13th did a story about the MAGA forces of New York. And I think for mainstream media, I hadn't yet seen that story saying in New York, including New York City, in South Brooklyn, Staten Island, but also parts of Queens, this polarization is starting to pervade our local politics in a way that we actually didn't see for the last few years. So guess what? Even without Donald Trump in the White House, we're seeing major effects of deep partisanship. October 13th. Epicenter does this story saying these are the forces. October 18th comes the Quinnipiac Poll saying Zeldin and Kathy Hochul are neck and neck. And sure enough, the reasons for that are what I'm outlining. Obviously, Governor Hochul made it through, but I do think it goes way beyond the governorship to your point, right? That the map of New York between a combination of redistricting, but also these forces has been

altered in a way that I think a lot of blue states and blue cities, while there was not a red wave in this election, I think blue states and blue cities cannot afford to be complacent at all.

LAURA FLANDERS- Well, that takes us directly to Los Angeles. And coming to you, Stephanie, you have Republican Rick Caruso against Democrat Karen Bass.

STEPHANIE WILLIAMS- Karen Bass is gonna hang on and prevail, but it should not have been a struggle. The struggle that it was. I had really assumed she would be declared victorious on election night. So that was surprising.

LAURA FLANDERS- I mean, whatever way the voters vote, we're talking about media coverage and media assumptions. And I guess my question to you, Stephanie, from your vantage point, why do you think much of the media got this so wrong?

STEPHANIE WILLIAMS- We've seen it again and again, and yet the media kind of just, oh, the polls say this and there's a tendency to just follow along. And yet, and also I think if we're kind of looking within our own communities, we should be reading the pulse of what's happening here. And if it's contrary to the polls, we should use our voices and speak up and say, that's not what we're seeing in my community, you know, regardless of what the polls say. If we can use our publications to raise awareness around that issue to educate around the issues that are important to our community on the ballot and to get local leaders in our communities to share their voices on those issues, I think that helps to drive turnout. And sometimes you can't necessarily do that in straight reporting because we should, you know, present both sides. But we can use our opinion columns to be a megaphone for some of that information

LAURA FLANDERS- As you have very well beautifully in your publication. Coming to this question of misinformation and looking at or taking the pulse, not the polls. I love that. There were all those pollsters and pundits out there predicting that 'red wave'. They said that they were surprised on election night. Were you? You wanna start, Habib? How about you?

HABIB RAHMAN- Good question because everywhere you looked right before the election, you know, leading up to the election from going back in September, August, September, and the pollsters were saying especially FiveThirtyEight, 270 to Win and, you know, you have Politico, New York Times predicting and showing numbers that say, hey, the House is gone. It's a foregone conclusion. Forget about that. Now the Senate is also gone. And historically it backed their numbers because that's exactly what happens in the midterms, especially the sitting president when he's not doing well. His approval is lower than 46, 44%. He is not doing well except for 1998 and 2002. 2002 is a different story because Bush had the 9/11 Iraq war. The country was in a different atmosphere than what we see today. Today we have this polarized situation. We are up in arms, whether you're left or right, this is the situation. Now from

community perspective in the the community television, black and brown, and non-white new immigrant communities perspective, it is difficult to understand and grasp that situation and numbers and question what is happening? And then you have this disinformation, misinformation, and constantly feeding the wrong information and providing and you're doing it over and over. By doing so, you are actually establishing non-facts as facts. Take Donald Trump for an example, and this actually creates doubts in voter's mind. So from our perspective, journalism perspective, we have to step in and get involved in the community and ask questions. What do you think? And then surprisingly, we had Bangladeshi Americans who are supporting Trump and saying he is one of the best presidents.

LAURA FLANDERS- Mitra, again, you and Felipe were sounding an alarm about disinformation, particularly in Spanish language media and in Spanish language social media. Again, like a huge story. Why didn't this come up?

S. MITRA KALITA- There's such a difference between I think how largely white media is consuming and kind of the the both sidesism of our press tends to have us focus on Fox News as the misinformation, versus very pervasive constant WhatsApp messages, and I use WhatsApp as it's also Facebook, of course it's Twitter, it's direct text messages among communities. I mean, it really is truly pervasive. It's also very global, and I think that the way we cover elections is probably when America gets its most parochial, right? And that is a mistake. Habib mentioned 9/11 and the period after 9/11 in terms of affecting politics. I don't think our media caught up to the global forces that actually use a lot of the same tactics to misinform and disrupt communities. So we've been doing a lot of stories around misinformation. Eyes wide open, stories about misinformation tend to perform just from a metrics perspective, who's reading them, less well than the stories perpetuating misinformation. So we received a grant from American Press Institute for the URL Media Network to better cover midterm elections. And so while we're focused on misinformation, we're also equally focused on what are we encouraging voters to vote for, right? What are the issues that they have control over at the ballots? What are the local issues? We got a lot of questions about climate change, abortion, for example. How do you, as you're combating misinformation, still provide good information? Because one of the massive disconnects is that the mainstream media is covering misinformation and they're covering the polls, right? They're not really covering abortion, climate change, your garbage pickup, your kid's PTA. I mean, these are the stories that I think all three of us have been mired in for the last few months.

LAURA FLANDERS- And especially, of course, that question of crime, and I encourage people to look at some of the reporting you all did contrasting the actual declining rates of murder for example in New York City with the increasing rates of coverage of the topic. Something that clearly affected the electorate both in the LA area and in New York and other places alongside. Habib, coming to you. Was that a big topic in your reporting?

HABIB RAHMAN- Yes, absolutely. They are no different from white folks or black folks. Once you are here, you are here. What happens on the street, it will affect you. Yes, you are at the bottom of the food chain. I understand that, but it will end up affecting you. It's just a matter of time. And the other thing you really were focusing on is that there are certain things that, you know, civic engagement that you need to really take part in. And the least part of the civic engagement is to take part in the vote. If you think you picked the wrong guy last time during the primary, pick the person who you believe reflects your ideas. You believe that they will do things that they will do that affect you and your community and vote the other person out. Voters are the boss. They get to decide who gets the primary, especially in New York.

LAURA FLANDERS- I could imagine that's a powerful message, particularly to populations that in the mainstream media are cast as having so little power. So even just sending that message of you have power in this moment and you can cast a vote seems really important. Coming back to you, Stephanie, we've talked a bit about candidates. What about the ballot initiatives that were on the ballot there in California and nationwide. Abortion, prison labor, environment, bail reform, all these things were up for votes and got some interesting results more positive generally towards reform than the media, the white dominated media would've had you expect. Anything stand out to you perhaps focusing on the reproductive justice aspect? 'Cause California made history in this election.

STEPHANIE WILLIAMS- From a reporting perspective, we started early on back in March when we began to start talking about the election, and the fact that it was a midterm election. And we did some work around civics explaining to our readers about the impact that redistricting would have on the election cycle this year, and then we also talked a lot about ballot initiatives. How they're initiated, and the power of the people to move initiatives that maybe they feel the legislature should be advocating for on their behalf to show the public that they actually have the power to take on these issues and move them forward themselves. So when it came to all of the ballot measures that we had this year, I think almost the women, the abortion issue to me as a woman was almost a no-brainer, right? And one of the things that I think got missed that shouldn't have been missed in the polls was the role of young voters in the election, and how they came out in 2020 and how they came out again this year, how there were some republican women that's swung over, how independent women swung over. And so it just made it so that the probability of that initiative succeeding seemed almost written in the stars at least to me. We don't have to wait for legislators even though we elect them to represent us. The fact that if there's something that we're passionate about as a people, as a community, we can coalesce around that issue and really bring it to reality just by doing the work on the ground and using our platforms, our media platforms to make that happen. So I think civic engagement around issues, around how propositions work, around how people can make a difference in not only educating themselves but educating people around them. And we can help do that in terms of how we

report. And I think it's not a major shift in how we report, but just making sure that we're not just focusing on the negative. Because if you focus on the negative, people hear the negative, right? But if you focus on the positive or the benefits, then that's what people will focus on.

S. MITRA KALITA- I really think this issue of ballot initiatives and the how-tos of how our network has operated has really struck me that over the last few months, you know, we do what the ballot initiative means. But here in New York, you know, Epicenter was literally telling voters to flip your ballot over. Like, the actual mechanics of voting we don't separate from the issues. And I just wanna pull Habib into the conversation on that note because I visited his studio a few weeks ago. They were set up for midterms where they had translations of each of the states, and Habib, I don't know if you remember this moment, but we looked at the map and you said here and you pointed to Michigan and you said a few thousand Bangladeshis could really change the governor's fortunes, right? For Governor Whitmer. And then you pointed to Buffalo, New York and you said in here, this could really change Kathy Hochul's fortunes and I can reach both of those communities.

HABIB RAHMAN- I remember that conversation we had. You know, a small network like us, TBN 24, or compared to even URL media compared to MSNBC or CNN, or Fox, we are really minute. But they don't understand the power of local journalism, local stations, and the influence that we have on the local people. We actually have an electoral map that we go through and we say, okay, this is where people need help. The ballot initiative. Okay, oh, flip the ballot. What does that really mean? Why should I even flip the ballot, right? Somebody needs to explain that process so we started reaching out to the voters, small pockets, and then other minorities, including Bangladeshis and explaining to them what's at risk. And you know for newcomers it's very difficult. Even people who have been living here for 30, 40 years, it's very difficult to understand the process of the electoral voting system of 538, 435, 100 senators. It's all confusing. So we had to take our time to explain to them. I knew the Michigan, you know, homes of 30 to 40,000 Bangladeshi and they're in Hamtramck and Warren, Michigan, which is Rashida Tlaib's home turf.

S. MITRA KALITA- You know, we've really tried to be rooted in our coverage, Laura. And so, you know, two headlines that the URL Media Network really didn't run that I saw a lot of mainstream outlets run with was why is the GOP losing Latinos for the most part? While there are, you know, the same MAGA forces that we're talking about, Latinos by and large did vote democratic. The second were of course, Black males. There was a narrative of, I'll use Georgia as an example to be concrete, you know, is Stacey Abrams losing the Black male vote, and we really didn't do those stories to a little bit of what Stephanie's talking about, that kind of pit communities against each other, but really tried to center the candidates and their narratives as well as communities and what they're voting again, what they're voting for.

STEPHANIE WILLIAMS- Because that did prove out to be a false narrative in both cases, right?

LAURA FLANDERS- I really appreciate what you've all had to say, and I wanna come back to the big picture here because the point that you just made, Stephanie, is that paying attention to those constituencies that your media cover in the way that you cover is not just doing a favor to those constituencies, but is helping the country as a whole understand itself better. And in each of your cases, I would love you to lift up an example of a story that had the majority white media got right, we might have seen some different outcomes or at least some different expectations, and perhaps some different work going on. But starting with you, Mitra.

S. MITRA KALITA- I would say if I could take two, one is that the security at the polls continues to be a great concern among our communities. And so we received about 50 questions in response to our call out across the URL Media Network. We had seven partners who participated. We received 50 questions. By and large, a lot of those questions were will I be safe at the polls? How do I know that my vote is being counted? And so picking up on some of the back to basics of how voting works thread, I think that's an area that was not covered enough in the mainstream media, and we continue to do those stories. It's really informing our coverage for 2023 and 2024. The second is the Asian American vote in New York City. The last year really for the Asian community has been defined by a climate of fear. You know, stop Asian hate is not just a hashtag in our communities. There is real fear. I'll say this as, you know, the mother of two girls sending my kids out on the subway and really kind of giving them instructions on where to stand and how to behave and what to do if things go awry is very different from what that was a few years ago. And it's also a repeated message in Asian households like mine. I don't think the mainstream media have figured out how to cover this. I feel personally committed to figuring out how to cover this. In the meantime, we continue to raise these voices and kind of very transparently not separate, you know, again, our communities from the policies that our communities need to be safe.

LAURA FLANDERS- And Habib, you I mean, if there was one thing one lesson you would like the white media, for lack of a better word, to do differently next time?

HABIB RAHMAN- First on the white media. CNN, Fox, MSNBC, they are focused on what sells and that's what they focus on. They are really razor sharp. You know, pinpoint goal is to make their media dominant, how to sell their media, and that's their focus. They can care less what's gonna happen if the democracy is at stake. Maybe at some point they'll be affected, but not at the moment. If you are surprised with the New York, I'm gonna tell you if a Democrat had invested little time in high profile candidates such as Obama or Biden visited Wisconsin, Mandela Barnes would've won that seat. He got no support, no funding, no support, no funding, and he came this close.

STEPHANIE WILLIAMS- For me, my one takeaway would be focused on the primary election and I'm focusing on the primary because here in California, if a candidate gets 50% plus one then he does not have to stand for runoff in the November election. And what we have happening here is that for our district attorneys and our county sheriffs, both positions are up for election in these off-cycle years. For example in Riverside County, our district attorney is known nationally because he's led the nation for several years in death penalty sentencing. So he's kind of like the death penalty king. And although he slowed a little bit in the last year or so, that is how he's known nationally. When it comes to sheriffs, they're the ultimate authority for all police departments in the region, and we have our sheriff here in Riverside County who has come to national prominence. I call him a darling of Fox News because he is a member, was a member of the Oath Keepers. And that was he was called out for that and had to resign. He was, you know, borderline COVID denier, he was anti-vaxxer, you know, all of those things where people looked to him in a leadership role. He was doing everything opposite of what we needed in communities, particularly in communities of color that were so heavily impacted by COVID. And so the fact that they run in these off year elections, that they're elected by 12 to 13 to 14% of the population, and we talk about criminal justice, criminal justice, criminal justice, but we never really get to the root of the problem. And so I just would say if there's anything that I would like to see done differently, it would be for the white media to help us tell that story.

LAURA FLANDERS- Everything that you all have said here today just affirms my commitment to our Meet the BIPOC Press Round Tables. You know, I think it was the Haitian president Aristide in his good days who said. "That elections aren't democracy, they just take the temperature of our democracy." And your outlets are our temperature takers. We have got to listen more closely and watch more closely what you're reporting, and I deeply appreciate what you did. We're gonna have a lot of links to the reporting that we've referred to here on the episode page for this episode. But I wanna thank each one of you for being with us. Habib, Stephanie, appreciate you being here. And Mitra, let's keep it up.

S. MITRA KALITA- Thank you.

HABIB RAHMAN- Thank you.

LAURA FLANDERS- We'll be back with more next time. 'Till then, stay kind, stay curious. For the "Laura Flanders Show," I'm Laura. For more on this episode and other forward thinking content, subscribe to our free newsletter for updates, my commentaries, and our full uncut conversations. We also have a podcast. It's all at lauraflanders.org.