

THE LAURA FLANDERS SHOW

IDAHO'S UNITED VISION PROJECT: CONFRONTING EXTREMISM IN AMERICA'S HEARTLAND

LAURA FLANDERS: Democracies are facing rising threats, both here and globally. Today to think about this, we are gonna zoom in to Idaho. Idaho is one of the most conservative places in the US. It's a state whose legislature includes leaders of extremist movements and where progressives, the minority, are basically locked out of every branch of government. As the '24 presidential campaign heats up, Idaho is not a place that Democratic strategists will be thinking about much. But writing off places like Idaho and the people who live there is a mistake, say our guests today. Indeed, writing off entire populations and parts of this country is a mistake that has brought the dream of an American functional, pluralistic, inclusive, responsive democracy to a very dangerous brink. Adrienne Evans is the executive director for United Vision for Idaho, the state's only multi-issue progressive coalition. Not so long ago I got to visit with her in the state capital of Boise and see how she and her colleagues work on the ground to build relations across difference. We're also welcoming back to the program today Scot Nakagawa director of the 22nd Century Initiative. That's a new relationship-building network he'll tell us more about. Scot has worked for decades to deepen democracy and confront authoritarian threats starting in the 1980s confronting white militias in the US Northwest. A little later, we will get a glimpse of the Rural Democracy Summit that both Scot and I participated in in Boise in November of 2023. But first, it is my great pleasure to welcome back to the program Adrienne Evans and Scot Nakagawa. Thanks for being here, both. Welcome.

ADRIENNE EVANS: Thanks so much, Laura.

LAURA FLANDERS: When we last spoke, I guess it was probably a couple of years ago, you were about to embark on what sounded like an extraordinary project. Can you tell us about that, what you've been doing in the last couple of years or so?

ADRIENNE EVANS: Yes, so at that time, after the event of COVID, we were trying to figure out how to reach people across a state that's as vast and rural as Idaho. And so we had access to a text-based program, and we reached out with one question after the 2020 election. And from there, now it has been three years, and we've had hundreds of thousands of conversations stretching Idaho, North Carolina, Georgia, New York, Oregon, and now West Virginia. And we're learning a lot. We're learning a lot about, what are the underlying currents that are making people feel broken, that are causing them to gravitate towards authoritarianism and abandon democracy? And we are learning how to have conversations across difference and be able to really, you know, see each other as human beings and not just as an opposing political party.

LAURA FLANDERS: And how did this happen? You're starting with one question on a text message to a complete stranger?

ADRIENNE EVANS: Yeah, it's a really unique process. So, there's only one outbound question that you will get. "Our country may be more divided than it's ever been. What do you think is causing this?" From that point forward, you never have another scripted response. You are coupled with a person, often people across the country who've never had a conversation with someone living in a rural place before. And together, you'll explore the differences, the commonalities, the challenges, and figure out, what is it that we both are feeling and what maybe caused that? What's underlying that? I think one of the things that we say, text message, but this is such a unique program. We're also learning about language, what language works and what doesn't.

LAURA FLANDERS: So you don't just have people off there on their own having text messages. You have a project with some heft to it.

ADRIENNE EVANS: Absolutely, so it is a very, very robust training. There's a 62-page searchable narrative guide to help people learn, right? We all have to learn how to do these things, learn how to have nuanced conversations based on anything someone says to you. To do so with respect, but also that doesn't mean sacrificing our ideas or beliefs, right? It means understanding that we have to act with humility and grace, you know, for each other. And that's the way forward.

LAURA FLANDERS: How do they go? Give us an example.

ADRIENNE EVANS: Sometimes they start like you would imagine, very vitriolic, very suspicious. The number one thing that people say to us is, "No one from your side has ever reached out to ask what I think or feel before." The responses often get to a point of, "Thank you. Thank you for taking the time. Thank you for learning about my experience so that maybe we can deeply understand each other differently." And it's humanizing not just the people that we're talking to, but it's humanizing the people that are doing the outreach to see the struggle that often, you know, is very invisible because we haven't made rural places a priority in this country.

LAURA FLANDERS: So Scot, looking at what is happening there in Idaho and across the country, but United Vision for Idaho at the heart, what role is it playing? How significant is what they've done, given how many urgent things are out there that you can see?

SCOT NAKAGAWA: Well, the Northwest, Idaho and Oregon in particular, have been early adopters of this sort of white nationalist mode of organizing on the part of white supremacists in the United States. The story goes all the way back to the early '80s when Idaho and Oregon and

other Northwest states were targeted by the white supremacist movement of that time in a campaign of strategic realignment and institution-building that they launched in that period. The Northwest was considered the whitest part of the country, and therefore the most ripe to create a white homeland in. In Idaho, they established the Aryan Nations Compound. And in Oregon they moved organizers, neo-Nazi professional academics and intellectuals and money to the state in order to be able to build the base there for far-right ideas and anti-democratic organizing. So, the particular targeting of the Northwest has resulted in us being kind of a bellwether for the country. It is a harbinger of where we may be soon in many other parts of the country and therefore really important for us to learn from and intervene in.

LAURA FLANDERS: As you describe it, I feel my heart racing, and I think about the rise of white nationalism and militia organizations. And you've been part of confronting some of them. Typically what we've called for, what we've seen called for from progressive forces is legal prosecutions, arrests, detentions, incarceration, the banning of certain organizations. Do we have time for 700 text messages?

SCOT NAKAGAWA: We always have time for 700 text messages. The problem is that we often feel we have no time. We react to every emergency and don't make the kinds of investments in the future we need to make. One of the most important things that we can engage in now is foresight planning, to think ahead to what might happen at each turn. If we lose our ability to affect elections as majorities, what do we do next? If we turn to the boycott and to the general strike and that doesn't work, what else do we need to do? What kinds of alternative institutions do we need to create? What kinds of formations do we need to create in order for people to remain engaged and fight again for the right to organize and dissent against our government?

LAURA FLANDERS: And Adrienne, I mean, I'd have you answer that question too. I mean, I hear the case, but I also imagine that you have, at various times, felt the urgency. Talk about why this strategy now and what you make of the kind of calling out, calling for prosecutions, incarceration strategy that's been so often pursued.

ADRIENNE EVANS: Yes, I mean, and to be honest, what I would say is that some of the impetus for this outreach was not just to help bridge the American people in the divide that we face. It was also a wake-up call to the progressive movement who have taken the most expedient path that I would argue have led us to this moment. Scot and I are often in spaces where we talk about the effects of an unattended democracy. Not democracy like the outcome. Democracy like a verb. Like the process of being able to hold multiple truths, engage in complex conversations, and still hold each other with dignity and respect. We have lost fundamental skills, and we have come to see each other as enemy rather than in a shared, you know, collective journey with the consequences that affect all of us. And I would say the one thing, you know, coming from a rural space, Laura, that's really important, and I wanna emphasize for viewers, yes, none of the things

that we are seeing now are surprising to any of us who have been living in these areas. But it should be stunning because what what was once the reality of rural people, of Idahoans, is now the reality of every American in this country. We have lost so many of the levers of power that it takes but one, you know, piece of legislation to strip away rights and the right federal judge to make that the reality for every person in this country. What won't work is to treat people like products. Like all that they have to do is vote and will only come around and talk to you every two or four years.

LAURA FLANDERS: We have a lot of people on this show that describe what they see as happening as being a backlash that certain people, disproportionately white, male, cisgendered people are feeling insecure and experiencing a sense of threat at the rise of a multiracial America, demographically speaking, not to mention the LGBTQ rights movement, feminism, immigration rights, civil rights, you name it. Is that analysis wrong? Scot and then Adrienne.

SCOT NAKAGAWA: Well, it's both right and incomplete. So, we are facing a big backlash against the gains of the Civil Rights Movement and against the gains of the feminist movement and the LGBTQ movement, the secularization of government, and many other changes that have happened, right? These are very powerful animating forces on the far right. But we also have to recognize that the phenomenon we're seeing in the United States is not just happening here within our borders, but around the world. There are nations all over the world that are turning to autocracy. The majority of the world's people now live under autocratic governments and year after year that number is increasing. So, that can't be explained by backlash to the Civil Rights Movement in the United States, can it? So we need to really start to think about what it is that's causing us at a global level to move in this rightward direction. And I would argue that what we are really facing here at root is a kind of loss of faith in the nation-state as a satisfying way of understanding who we are and how we are safe and well in the world. And as people move away from faith in the nation-state as the primary kind of container for our identities, they reach to the ones that they were taught are valid to them after that, race, ethnicity, religion, et cetera. And so we see a rise of ethnic nationalism as people turn to these other kind of identity containers to make meaning in a world in which nation-states have lost their magnetism and ability to explain things to people. And so that's the result, then, of a long history of neoliberal policies that have basically gutted the democratic functions of governments like the United States and others around the world, while insulating markets from democratic decision making, causing our economies to become very unstable. And so that kind of precarity that people feel then is being interpreted by right-wing manipulators through the filter of fear about the other. And so we're being postured as us and them in this process.

LAURA FLANDERS: Although those material needs are interesting to me. And Adrienne, you know, I'm imagining people in your conversations didn't talk about the magnetism of the nation-state, but they may have talked about cutbacks in services. What did you hear?

ADRIENNE EVANS: Yeah, I mean, I think what might surprise people is a lot of people are actually, while they may not be articulating it as well as Scot does, right, that is really driving a lot of this, right? And Scot and I have talked often about, who's for you and how do you know that? And people from both sides of the political spectrum no longer are believing that government is for them, that they have access or the ability to change the things in their lives. They no longer believe that a better world is possible for them or their children or grandchildren. And when you lose the faith in institutions like that, no wonder when authoritarianism comes in and offers to break that, it sounds pretty good.

LAURA FLANDERS: And it's presumably not just a feeling. I'm sorry to sound so materialist here, but there have been actual changes to what people can expect from the state, haven't there, Adrienne?

ADRIENNE EVANS: Yes, and it's getting worse and worse.

LAURA FLANDERS: Like what?

ADRIENNE EVANS: Well, I'll say that, you know, Idaho not always, but has been a Republican trifecta for many, many years. Now, you know, moderate Republicans no longer have the ability to advance their objectives because those houses have been occupied by people who are leaders in white nationalist movements. And so we're seeing just an ushering in that are breaking down norms and values at a rate that should be alarming and startling. It's like the chaos has now become the normal, right? And once that starts to happen, the faith in that, even participation, right? We've always struggled with voting, you know, numbers, but we're now talking about people who no longer believe that there's a solution possible through the agencies of government, right? And yes, material, you know, needs are absolutely a part of it because the systems have been failing them. Now, they haven't been failing us all in the same ways or to the same degrees, but I think the thing that unites us is to understand that the work that we need to do is literally on the system itself. There are lots of things that we actually agree on that could help us save the democracy that we have and build on it going forward together. But again, that is deep work and it takes a real investment. And to Scot's point, when we treat people like transactions, we will never arrive at that point.

LAURA FLANDERS: United Vision for Idaho convened the first ever Rural Democracy Summit in Boise in November, 2023. And a highlight of the event, which attracted speakers from all across the US, was a bus trip into the countryside. In the tiny town of Notus not far from where Evans grew up, the group visited the historic Notus Garage and met its proprietor, Randy Taylor.

ADRIENNE EVANS: This is the gentleman that I met the other day. And I said, "Well, I'm here with some of my friends." He graciously has offered to unlock the store and visit with us for a bit. Guys, come on in.

SCOT NAKAGAWA: What we can learn from Idaho about the future is tremendous, right? Idaho has been basically de-industrialized. Primary resource extractive industries have left Idaho. The state that was once home to the richest farmers of America is now in a state of terrible disarray in terms of its economy. And government has not stepped in to solve these problems. Instead, far-right actors have stepped into the fray and narrated these problems in ways that have directed the attention of people who are suffering to people like me, to people like us, to those they perceive to be liberals, to those who they perceive to be outside of their identity tribes who they now view as the enemy.

LAURA FLANDERS: How do you think the Biden-Harris administration are doing on this score, Scot?

SCOT NAKAGAWA: Well, you know, the Biden-Harris administration has done some good things, but my greatest concern about the Biden-Harris administration strategy in this moment is that they're specifically trying to compete for the attentions of white voters, right? And are not investing as much in the consolidation and improvement of our support in minority communities.

LAURA FLANDERS: But aren't you calling for more support for white voters like those rural folks in Idaho, Scot?

SCOT NAKAGAWA: Well, you know, we should be competing for their attention, but we should not also forget that a key constituent of any pro-democracy movement in the United States is communities of color, and in particular the African American community. We need those folks on our side. Those numbers matter and will matter greatly in this coming election. And the participation of people of color in these movements clarifies what democracy really is to us. So, you know, those constituents have not had their stories told so much. They have not been directly reached out to by the administration in a way that is as if to compete for them for their loyalty with more far-right forces. And what we're seeing is a kind of erosion in the support for liberal candidates and liberal ideas among some of the people in those communities, and that's dangerous

LAURA FLANDERS: In those conversations 'cause you've learned so much, how do you speak about, "Look, we care about you. We care about your healthcare, your education, your opportunities for jobs, but we also care about affirmative action and we have to focus on civil rights and voting rights for people of color who haven't had them." How do you do both of those things, sort of square that circle, if you will?

ADRIENNE EVANS: This is really one of the calls to progressive people, to people who, you know, have been part of my camp for many, many years. I too often sit in rooms and have to ask the question, "Are we saying that we no longer believe that people are capable of transformation?" Are we sitting in these rooms and saying that we no longer believe that people can make a bad decision and change their minds? And I would say, too often we are, and we're not being real honest about that. I would also say, yes, Laura, for all of the points that you bring up, those have to be addressed. And it's about holding the complexities, but that's not the first place to go. The first place to go is by really listening to people and asking them, "How do you square the rights and the things and the values that you've shared with me with these policies?" Not to tell them what to think, but to really engage in conversations. And that's where we find that people are moving, and it's not just moving them, right? It's moving us, moving us closer to each other to figure out how we can do this. And actually, as Scot aptly says, how are we living our democracy?

LAURA FLANDERS: So I want to ask you, Scot, as somebody who works at the national level, how do we make these interventions real, but also how do we bring them to scale? How do we avoid the kind of, oh, isn't it nice what they're doing in Idaho syndrome? And actually, if this is working in Idaho, bring it to a national level.

SCOT NAKAGAWA: Well, I think that we need to document what's happening in Idaho and start to try to figure out how to create a toolkit for people who are working nationally in order for them to be able to duplicate some of the successes. But we need a delivery system. And the delivery system that the 22nd Century Initiative is creating are networks. We are creating networks of organizations through which people can meet one another, build relationships, and learn a shared language, shared tools, shared practices so that we can develop a strong field of resistance to authoritarianism and the basis for pro-democracy advocacy. So those relationships really matter. In all of this as well, I just wanna remind people the importance of what Adrienne is saying, that as conditions grow more repressive, which they are likely to do, at least for some time, the quality of our relationships will become more important to us relative to the quantity of them. And in-person organizing, having conversations, real deep dialogue is the way we build those quality relationships. In the end, we must rely on our neighbors as times get tough and they will get tough. Whether anti-democratic forces continue to advance their agendas, times will get tough. Climate change will bring us disasters for which we are unprepared and things will get tougher. And you know, we see patterns in the United States now in terms of people's choices about where they live, where more and more people are moving to only 15 states and to metropolitan areas in those states. That leaves 35 states to older, whiter, more male, more conservative voters who are then positioned to be able to control who gets to be the president and who gets to serve in the Senate, which then also means who gets to serve on the Supreme Court. And so that reality that's looming ahead of us, all of those things are things that we need to go

about trying to build the muscle to be able to fight in that context now, and that's what they're doing in Idaho.

LAURA FLANDERS: Well, I want to thank you both so much for the work you do and the way you talk about it and for the invitation to come to Boise. Thank you.

ADRIENNE EVANS: Thank you, thank you.

LAURA FLANDERS: Why is it so easy for a minority to wield power in these United States? Well, history contains more than clues. We're taught a lot about the constitutional debates between farmers and merchants and the power of the slave states, but we think less about the fear those lawmakers had of the unruly urban mob. But who was it who fueled the riots and rebellions that led up to the Boston Tea Party? It was that urban lot, those disgruntled waged workers, former felons, sailors, indentured servants, escaped slaves, journalists, and queer urban folk of all kinds who had managed to throw off global corporate power and the consolidated money of the crown. It was that power that the Constitution sought to dilute. And ever since, the country's more or less been divvied up between its urban and its rural parts, with two parties bouncing power between them until today's global corporate elites and moneyed lot figured out how to put a lock on both. In parts of this country like Idaho today, small rural farmers have no voice either. Could they make common cause with that urban mob? Well, you can write to me and tell me what you think at laura@LauraFlanders.org. I'd be interested to hear. In the meantime, stay kind, stay curious, and if you want to hear my full uncut conversation from today's show, subscribe to our free podcast. All the information's at our website. Till the next time, I'm Laura for "The Laura Flanders Show." Thanks for joining me.

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.