Episode_56__Who_Votes_and_Why.mp3

Avi Green: [00:00:07] Hi, I'm Avi Green. Thanks for joining us on the Scholars Strategy Network's No Jargon. Each week we discuss important social problems and policy issues with one of America's top scholars with no jargon. Next week is election day and instead of recording and issuing a new broadcast on Tuesday before we know what the results are, we're going to come out with a new episode on Wednesday. I'm really excited about that because it will give me the opportunity to interview Theda Skocpol SSN's director and a professor at Harvard who's been studying the infrastructure of the left and right in the United States, the Republican Party and a lot of other topics that will make her a great person to talk to the day after the election to talk about what happened, why it matters, and what comes next. I'm really looking forward to that show and I hope you'll join me for it. Check your feed on Wednesday evening after Election Day. In the meantime, on with this one. The idea of democracy is that everyone gets the same government and that the people vote to elect the people who will represent us. But is that what's really happening? To talk about it my guest today is Professor Jan Leighley. Jan is a professor of government at American University in Washington D.C. and she's co-author of the book Who Votes Now: Demographics, Issues, Inequality, and Turnout in the United States. Professor Leighley, thanks for coming on No Jargon.

Jan Leighley: [00:01:30] Great to be here today.

Avi Green: [00:01:32] So let's start with the big question. Who votes in American presidential elections?

Jan Leighley: [00:01:37] Who votes in elections in the United States over the past several decades has really been quite constant and that's people with higher levels of education and income and older individuals.

Avi Green: [00:01:50] How many people participate and how many don't?

Jan Leighley: [00:01:54] Well, we have a lot of different estimates above turnout in presidential elections of course and in presidential elections we usually hit about 50 to 55 percent. But it's actually more interesting to think about that in terms of differences and who that 50 percent is. So if the 50 percent of people who vote were representative then maybe we'd be OK with 50 percent turnout.

Avi Green: [00:02:23] And by that you mean that if that 50 percent basically looked like the other 50 percent who aren't voting well, it wouldn't matter.

Jan Leighley: [00:02:31] We will probably be OK. Maybe that'd even be an efficient way to run a democracy. Right? Because we have a lot of things to do in life and not everyone would have to spend time showing up at the polls or marking up a ballot and we'd have the same outcome. But the evidence suggests that the people who show up don't look like the other 50 percent.

Avi Green: [00:02:53] How does the difference between the demographics of the people who do vote. You know you say that they are older and more educated. How do they matter?

Jan Leighley: [00:03:06] You can think about that in two different ways. One of those is in terms of needs. What individuals and different -- in these different groups actually need from government. Or it could be with respect to what they prefer in terms of other policies and those preferences vary based on whether you're talking about a high status older individual and oftentimes younger individuals.

Avi Green: [00:03:32] Well, let me get a sense of sort of how big these disparities are. To what extent are older people you know really voting? And to what extent are younger people missing out on presidential elections?

Jan Leighley: [00:03:44] Well, there's a dramatic difference in turnout. If you look at older individuals and you know, individuals above the age of 65 and 70 you get turnout levels approaching 70, 75 percent voter turnout. If in contrast if you look at individuals of 30 years and younger, you're looking at more like 30 to 35 percent turnout. So it's a dramatic gap and who's -- who shows up at the polls and in my opinion what preferences are registered.

Avi Green: [00:04:17] So is this why for example you know Social Security payments for senior citizens are considered sort of untouchable in American politics? While at the same time it's funding for public education or for public higher education seemed to be much more vulnerable politically?

Jan Leighley: [00:04:39] Absolutely. Elected officials are -- surely know who shows up at the polls and who their supporters are and who got them into office and we have very clear research that suggests that for example, members of Congress are more likely to distribute benefits to precincts in their districts that are more supportive and have higher levels of turnout so elected officials want to be responsive in many different ways, but they can't respond to everyone's preferences or everyone's needs and so they have to go with some level of responsiveness to the people who are in some senses paying attention. So voters are the group that they know they need to satisfy.

Avi Green: [00:05:28] Why aren't more people voting or what really goes on inside people's heads that determines whether they vote or not?

Jan Leighley: [00:05:36] Well, I'm not exactly sure what goes on inside people's heads but surely there is a -- oftentimes the immediate I think shoves out the important. So either paying attention to politics or taking time out of your day to vote is a demand and from a rational perspective, if any one person doesn't vote that's okay. So any one 22 year old who doesn't vote is OK if other 22 year olds show up and vote. But it then becomes a bit of a collective action problem where then a lot of people choose to spend time in different ways. But that also isn't just a time issue or an attention issue. It also reflects the political system and we know that parties and candidates tend to reach out to people based on their voting histories, based on whether they've shown up at the polls before so we don't have many institutions that really systematically and consistently reach out to all individuals to encourage their political engagement.

Avi Green: [00:06:50] It this sort of in a way about costs and benefits? I mean, it seems that for a voter who's been living in the same place for a long time maybe a senior citizen who therefore knows a lot about their community a lot about what's on the ballot, they know where they're going to vote, that the cost of voting is pretty low and the benefits are pretty high. Whereas if you're a younger person and maybe you haven't been voting for as long or maybe you've never voted before. So you're you're not registered for example or you recently moved so you're not registered. Well, the cost of voting is higher because you have to spend more time and -- and the benefits may be more more vague because you're not for example like actually getting -- you maybe getting plenty of government benefits like roads and safety, maybe you know, education but you're not getting like the actual check, for example. So is it all costs and benefits to some degree?

Jan Leighley: [00:07:56] I think that's a very useful model to use as we think about voter behavior. But I think here in your example the point that is more relevant is really about those costs. And as we talk about youth versus older individuals it is more difficult to learn about not just the election system but to learn about politics and to understand its relevance. You know we know actually that

even aside from age differences that many individuals in the states really are not aware of the kinds of government benefits they receive. Either the magnitude of those or how government spending or action or regulation both allows and constrains some of their behaviors and actions and accomplishments. So what political scientists talk about is typically a life cycle model of political participation where youth as they start out on their own and separate from their prime families -- primary families. They are establishing their own lives. There's a lot of instability and a lot of settling in in terms of job and life pursuits. And it's only when they hit 30 or 35 that many people start to have accumulated information about local politics or presidential politics and so it just takes a while for that whole mindset to be developed.

Avi Green: [00:09:33] So then it seems like sort of the campaign ground games and you know when they send someone to college campuses, like you know I guess a member of the Trump family going to a college campus or Bernie Sanders or Michelle Obama. They're sort of trying to accelerate people forward in time. You know, they were gonna become a voter you know by the time that they were 30. But the campaign is hoping that they'll become a voter by the time they're 21 and if they can make those differences on the -- on the margin that that might be useful. I guess I'd like you to comment on what are the -- what are those those campaign effects? And if you could -- you could talk about the effects of the campaign not just in terms of the work to mobilize young people but also their work on other groups that might not be coming out and how those are affected. I'm thinking about differences in race, differences in economics that is women and men -- those kinds of differences.

Jan Leighley: [00:10:37] Right. We talk a lot about the importance of candidate and party organizations where up until this election at least there has been a lot of research and practical experience for campaigns and candidates about getting out their voters. And again the emphasis is getting out there voters, not expanding turnout overall. And one of the classic and widely heralded campaigns of course was Obama's election in 2008 where the credit was really given to his mastery or the campaign's mastery of big data and social media and fine-tuning microtargeting and these kinds of things to reach supporters and which was attributed to the higher level of turnout in the 2008 campaign.

Avi Green: [00:11:29] Is that what happened?

Jan Leighley: [00:11:30] Well, that was part of the puzzle but the other story that isn't as dramatic and cool and hot in today's technology society is that he -- the Obama campaign also invested a tremendous amount of money and time and bodies to organizing on the ground to having a lot of field offices where there were people there working full time to not just go door to door asking people to vote but to be there and establishing relationships over a nine month period, a six month period and so establishing relationships and doing the face to face stuff and the research that we have suggests that well, you can't ignore that social media and big data analytics can provide some useful suggestions on what to do that the face to face even in today's society is incredibly important.

Avi Green: [00:12:29] What about the candidates? I mean, I think back at President Obama, but particularly President Bill Clinton and President Ronald Reagan were well-known for their ability to connect and electrify and the people were excited about them because they were so charismatic. Is there much evidence that the charisma or lack thereof of candidates plays a big role in terms of who votes?

Jan Leighley: [00:13:00] Well, I think there's certainly an important role for that because for most individuals they don't experience the campaign as a one-on-one experience and so the whole political world is through what they see on screens. So if you stumble over words, if you fall down the steps, if you can't complete a sentence you know, in a reasonable way or a colorful way at least,

if you can't complete it then that certainly view -- citizens who aren't especially interested in policy let's say or are especially politicized, they are still going to gain an impression of the person, right? And this is where I think political scientists and campaign strategists sometimes disagree about the relative importance of these things. Typically successful candidates yes they have to be able to deal with the media image and the outreach in terms of communication. And you know they have to have you know a core message that strikes home and deliver it at some level of capability, right? But that's what news media cover. That's what strategists talk about. That's the narrative by which campaigns get framed. We don't talk that much about whether or how much individual's views of candidates is really influenced by specific policy proposals or the fact that they are Democrats or Republicans and that that means -- is something meaningful. So while the emphasis is on the strategy and the framing and the media communications in terms of what's going on in voters head, that's a very difficult thing to sort out whether it's all of that. Do you really just vote for the candidate you like because you like them? Or do you like them because they say they identify certain policies or they have certain visions for our political community? And so that I think is sometimes misattributed and in discussions about the campaigns.

Avi Green: [00:15:17] What about people's free choice? I mean, I find it really fascinating that the one of the really good predictors of what kind of voter you're going to be is who your parents voted for.

Jan Leighley: [00:15:30] Well, you can still have free choice but have kind of systematic ways that decisions are made or your life is structured and that's what we really see across generations is that we don't have an especially high level of intergenerational change in the United States that the values that children are raised with are deeply ingrained. Parents can, just through how they live let alone how they talk or discussions explicitly about politics you know, help to frame for children and young adults what's important, what's valued, what's appropriate and that's a good starting point for young adults.

Avi Green: [00:16:16] You know, it's funny because as a parent who thinks of myself as having good political judgment I feel good about that but I feel like, well my daughter's likely to grow up and have similar values and through the prism of those values end up with similar political principles that I have. On the other hand, as kind of a citizen, I feel like well, not all of the parents are right obviously -- including possibly myself. And it feels like it's a little bit worrisome that young people are likely to end up with political views that are like their parents just sort of based on the lottery of you know, who your parents were.

Jan Leighley: [00:17:01] Well, certainly are -- not all citizens are well versed in politics or have a highly developed sense of what is there in their own self-interest or have the same level of skills of evaluating policies or candidates. But political scientists often argue that there are a number of shortcuts people can take to sort out the choices that are offered to individuals and generally people tend to get those things right. And the hope is those people who are highly engaged and motivated both you know are able to reflect their own self-interest but also to carry on a political conversation more broadly with neighbors and co-workers and that ideally we would all show up at the polls with whatever our sense of self interest and political preference might be. And so I don't think -- you paint a picture of that children blindly accept what their parents say or imbue in them. But I think in the end we have so many information sources relevant to our lives whether that's our jobs or daily life or streetcorner observations or you know, webcasts or newspapers or TV. We have a lot of ways to get information both directly and indirectly about politics and candidates are trying to break through in all those different ways to get you know to get their supporters out.

Avi Green: [00:18:45] Well to shift gears a little bit, I want to ask you about what else is going on other than what the candidates are doing. Particularly, I want to ask you about the landscape in the

states. So a bunch of states have various ballot initiatives that are happening this fall including Nevada which is voting on whether or not to legalize marijuana. I think, several other states -- California, Massachusetts -- are voting on that as well. Colorado and Maine are voting on minimum wage increases. Will those things turn out low-income voters voting for a higher minimum wage? Are young voters voting to legalize marijuana?

Jan Leighley: [00:19:27] Initiatives are really difficult to assess in terms of likely outcomes. The one factor we know kind of predicts outcomes the best on the actual -- whether something passes or not is where the most money is spent. So I'm a little -- that raises a concern about whether it's voters who make a difference or whether it's campaign -- initiative spending that makes a difference.

Avi Green: [00:19:56] There are so many shortcuts that you were just mentioning that help people decide, you know, how to vote between the parties and how to judge candidates. But a lot of those shortcuts don't really exist. You know when it comes to a ballot initiative whether to vote yes or no and therefore it seems like that's why money makes a really big difference on those ballot initiatives.

Jan Leighley: [00:20:15] It's huge and it's huge from every step of the way of how an initiative -- the wording is phrased and particular outreach and advertising campaigns. And I guess I'm not the biggest fan of a lot of legislative moves being made through the initiative because of that lack of information and the role of money in those games. So the good thing about it I guess is it does raise for some issues the possibility that citizens can directly engage with a particular issue you raise about youth and legalization of marijuana. So if we want people voting on the basis of issue positions that might be a hook to convince a young person who hasn't voted before to show up and cast a vote on an issue of particular interest then the hope is that since you got your hook in them you can then, develop that pattern of voting that they'd been there once and you can work that person to get them to become a more regular voter in other types of elections and on other issues.

Avi Green: [00:21:26] Well we're recording this interview on October 25th, 2016 and the election is just two weeks away. Early voting is already going on in a number of states. From the early voting and the polling of the things you see. What do you think turnout is likely to be like in this election.

Jan Leighley: [00:21:46] Predicting turnout in any election is a tough question. This year is so unique on so many fronts that it is equally as challenging. I think we have to be careful of using early voting as an indicator. Early voting is up this year and I suspect that's because candidates and parties are pushing early voting more. It might also reflect a greater level of interest in the campaign and its outcome. So that might be a leading indicator of whether people will actually vote on election day on that basis. Maybe we'll see turnout a little bit higher.

Avi Green: [00:22:29] A little higher than 2012, possibly.

Jan Leighley: [00:22:31] A little higher than 2012. I'm a little reluctant to put too much money on that bet though, in part because we have one candidate who clearly does not have a strong field organization and doesn't seem to be putting any resources into trying to turn out a vote. And the other reason is because we have such an incredibly negative political environment and specifically the candidate evaluations are so negative. I don't know if an individual who thinks that neither candidate is acceptable or appropriate to serve as president. I don't know if you -- if at the last minute or last day that person decides to choose which is the least disliked and vote for them or whether they just decide to stay at home.

Avi Green: [00:23:27] And what about the wave of voting restrictions? Things like voter ID laws,

smaller number of days for early voting and that kind of thing. Do you think that has a large impact on voting or how will that affect things?

Jan Leighley: [00:23:46] Well, on that and I should go back and return to talking about early voting a bit. There have been restrictions on early voting this year. What our research has shown is that the availability of early voting does not actually associated with increased turnout. What it does is it allows people who would otherwise vote on Election Day to vote at a more convenient time. So it's a substitution effect if you will. So I don't know that those restrictions will reduce turnout to the extent that there is a counter mobilization. We've heard stories about this and I know I have in Ohio and North Carolina where there is strong counter-mobilization effects that say they've taken the hours away because they don't want you to vote. And that has been -- we have some pretty good evidence on that that that is an effective way or strategy to get people to decide. Yeah there is. You know if someone's trying to push me away I'm going to push back harder and show up even if it is harder. So that will depend on how well organized those groups are who feel threatened by the changes in those laws. The broader consequence though is all of new legal adoptions. Most states do not have the resources or do not simply choose to spend resources on educating citizens about what the registration and voting requirements are. So new laws typically take a while to be effective. And my sense is a variety of changes that have happened this year means that there is a relatively high level of confusion out there about who is eligible to vote, what the rules governing their participation is. And I suspect that especially those who vote on Election Day that they will I'm sure be more than a few stories in the media about problems with that process.

Avi Green: [00:25:45] Right. If you're implementing a new voter ID law or some other change of the law on election day and you haven't run it in a big election before as an election administrator then you may be confused about it. You end up with having to go slower with the voters and then you have big lines. Some people can't stay. That kind of thing.

Jan Leighley: [00:26:07] It gets stressful that those are tough decisions to make. Procedures could be unclear. Voters are standing in line wanting to cast their ballot and it's a very -- it can be a very unhappy place to be.

Avi Green: [00:26:23] Do you feel like voter registration laws are and voter -- voting access laws generally are kind of where they need to be or do you think that more of the states should move towards having something like Election Day registration or something like that.

Jan Leighley: [00:26:39] I'm a strong supporter of Election Day registration. I think it makes sense in terms of how systems are administered, clarity of information to citizens and also the logic that when candidates compete for election. You know, most citizens don't registered or not -- don't tune in until the last couple of weeks. Now maybe there's been a higher level of tune-in because this year because of Trump's reality shows and his high level of name recognition outside of politics. But most citizens don't really start focusing until certainly after Labor Day and or likely in October. So if you have a 30 day registration requirement after the first week of October your game is over. And it's the case that oftentimes important things happen in the last few weeks of a campaign. There is more information out there. There is a greater social diffusion of the importance of the election to various communities or individuals of shared interests and so that's the time that individuals should be making that decision about whether it's worth their effort to cast a ballot or not. Not 30 days before the election.

Avi Green: [00:28:04] Professor Jan Leighley. Thank you so much for joining us on No Jargon.

Jan Leighley: [00:28:08] Great to be here.

Avi Green: [00:28:10] And thank you all for listening. No Jargon is the podcast of the Scholars Strategy Network, a nationwide non-partisan association of over 700 researchers at nearly 200 universities nationwide. The producer of our show is Shira Rascoe. Please send us feedback on Twitter @nojargonpodcast or give us a rating on iTunes. Those ratings really make a difference and we sure appreciate them. Thanks for listening.