

The Equality Arizona Podcast, Episode 3

SPEAKERS

Michael Soto, tanner menard, HLT Quan

HLT Quan 00:16

Okay, again, welcome to the Equality Arizona podcast. This is a special edition on voter fraud and voter suppression. As you know, voter fraud is, of course, a political invention. And we will speak during this podcast to the ample empirical evidence of the absence actually, of systematic voter fraud. However, voter suppression in the United States is very real. And it is a historical phenomenon. And it has been happening for a very long time. Many would argue that it has happened, essentially at the very beginning of the process where nontraditional voter or noncitizen subject, or those people who were perceived as noncitizen subject, namely, with the 15th amendment that extend the right to vote to African Americans in the 19th century, in the aftermath of the Civil War. That's when voter suppression became systemic and widespread. And so we hope that, in this conversation, we will explore these concepts because we are living in the midst of an epistemic crisis, or the crisis of knowing. And part of this podcast, as intended, is really to help our listeners navigate through the sea of misinformation, because, like voter fraud, it is consequential, and it harms people, particularly in relation to the health of our democracy. As we speak, as we speak, the impeachment trial is going on in the Senate for the January 6th failed siege, which the former president has been essentially accused of instigating an insurrection of sorts. So it's, it's very consequential. And we hope that in this conversation, we can explore the many ways in which voter fraud is not real, while voter suppression is real. And we will also turn specifically to Arizona, so that our listener can have a sense of what's going on on the ground, and how to deal with this situation. So let me begin by asking both tanner and Michael to talk a little bit about voter fraud, like how do you encounter this concept? And what does it really mean, for you and for for our listeners?

Michael Soto 02:51

That's such an important question, Dr. Quan, I mean voter fraud is something that is nearly nonexistent, right. We know that voter fraud does not happen in any election in any widescale format here in this country, right, we have really strict — the states govern how elections work in each state. States have strict laws and procedures and have bipartisan and nonpartisan commissions and poll workers and processes set up so that the people who are safeguarding the elections — county recorders, secretaries of state, right — they're doing it from a nonpartisan position where they're working very hard to maintain election integrity. And so I think that's what stood out to me this year, in 2020, was how one, long before the election even happened, how the Republican Party and the former president planted this idea that there was going to be widespread voter fraud, when there's literally no precedent for that in the country, right. And when states have worked extremely hard to create, especially because of the Voting Rights Act, right, when, especially when that was really strictly enforced, to create accessible systems. Many states have worked to, since then, right, and have since the Voting Rights Act have worked in different ways and before, to suppress voters that they don't want voting, but that's a different thing, right. So there are, so I was, I mean, this election — this idea that American elections or elections in the United States are subject to widespread fraud was one not in line with my experience. I've

worked in this field for over 20 years right, and so totally, totally an outlier. Just that idea even and doesn't, is not proven by history, or by my personal experience working in this field. But then watching them continue that narrative, right, of voter fraud with no evidence with states like Arizona, where we've had mail-in voting through the Permanent Early Voter List for over 30 years, right. We know how to do mail-in voting. We have an amazing Secretary of State right now. And we always have had very dedicated Secretaries of State, who are really focused on election integrity and making sure that Arizonans have access to voting and to, you know, to polling locations, to mail-in voting — all of that was conducted with, you know, the most transparency, the you know, the sort of the highest degree of transparency and nonpartisanship. And in fact, when they did both the manual, the hand recount and the machine recount here, they didn't find even one example of voter fraud, right — and there was this long process of verifying the ballots — like not even one. And so, for me, that's what really stood out about this election is that somehow the Republican Party and the former President have convinced a significant amount of the American electorate that these really detailed and very, very transparent processes that you can understand and be a part of, if you would like to, you know, you can sign up to be a poll worker, you can participate in this process. Everyone can. They've convinced a significant part of the American public that these processes are not, do not have integrity, right, and are not working as they should, when the real problem is when a state or a government entity of any kind tries to make voting harder for American citizens. That's actually the problem, not making voting more accessible to American voters.

HLT Quan 06:57

Okay, so So Michael, you're describing this, the voting process and ensuring that there is integrity to this voting process. But there's widespread misapprehension, misunderstanding that, for instance, that somehow the 2020 election was fraudulent. And I want to, actually want tanner to explain to us like, what specifically what we mean by voter fraud. Because we know that respectable, as you suggest, respectable, reliable research outfits, including major universities, have shown that voter fraud isn't really a thing. And this includes the respected Brennan Center for Justice at NYU, and of course closer to home, Arizona State. So what, if it isn't really a thing, what is it? And when we say voter fraud, or when, say, former President Trump, and many of his followers accuse the process of being fraudulent, what do they mean? I hear people say "dead people voting," that sort of thing. Can you talk a little bit about that tanner?

tanner menard 08:09

Well, my feeling is, is that this really relates to the crisis of knowing that we're talking about and that that crisis of knowing is actually manufactured. So when I think of voter fraud, I think of a manufactured piece of misinformation that leads people to believe that things like dead people voting or people voting twice, or trucks carrying ballots that have been filled out for a Democratic candidate, that these are like manufactured pieces of misinformation, which are being used to create a crisis of knowing in our country, so that people feel confused about whether or not they should vote. And I believe that this is a tactic that, you know, people in American politics have used for a long time. And they've used it, for instance, just by, you know, when African Americans were first allowed to vote, there were restrictions on who could vote based on whether or not they understood the law, you know, and a question that could be asked, for instance, is how many bubbles are on a bar of soap? So it's a way of sort of like gaslighting the system, and gaslighting citizens of the United States into believing that they are not allowed to vote, that there's no access for them to vote. And I think that if we look at the way the Republican Party and the Trump administration in particular, focused on the, on disallowing the census to take place, we see why there's so much fear about this and why they would need to cover up their

own tactics to suppress people from voting, is because the demographics of the United States are changing. They don't want that to be recognized. And they don't want it to be public knowledge that their white majority who votes for their party is in significant decline and will be losing power very shortly, as we see all over the United States.

HLT Quan 10:29

So, I think one of the misconceptions, and there seems to be a pattern of significant investment on the part of the Republican Party to suppress the vote, right? Because there's this idea that if more people come out of to vote because of this demographic shift, that somehow they'll vote Democratic. The elections, the 2020 General Election results are actually mixed. Right? It's true that there have been an unprecedented number of people who voted, I mean, for over 100 years, 120 years, I think. Some 107 million people voted early, either in person or by mail. And there were a lot of politics, a lot of heated discussions, a lot of lawsuits around the early votes and the accessibility to the ballot. And I want to unpack that a little bit, Michael, especially when you were talking about voting suppressions. What exactly does that involve? Is it purging the voter rolls? Is it denying access to the ballot? Because you talked about accessibility to the ballot, and there seems to be a systematic investment in suppressing that vote. So while voter fraud might be miniscule, and small, because all of the agencies came out, including Homeland Security, came out and essentially said that the 2020 election, there's no widespread, there is no evidence of widespread fraud. And I think Tanner is right, that there's specific reasons for why this was part of the larger public consciousness. Is that part of the suppressing the vote too, that voter fraud itself is part of the tactic? Can you talk a little bit about voting suppression, this different tactic and how voter fraud itself is an attempt to depress the vote?

Michael Soto 12:24

Absolutely. So we have, we do have plenty of evidence that shows that creating mistrust in our electoral system is a tactic of the extreme right, of the far right, to suppress the vote. And so we also have a lot of evidence showing that, you know, people: thought leaders and think tanks, like ALEC, right, and legislative incubators like ALEC, they understand that the fewer people that vote, the more likely conservative or extreme conservatives are to be elected. Right. And so Tea Party members, right, when the Tea Party movement was happening; right now the Qanon kind of folks, right, so these extreme right wing sort of movements, which are really sort of neofascist movements, right? These folks who represent those movements are much more likely — and authoritarian movements within, and trends within the conservative wing of political thought in this country — are much more likely to be elected if fewer people vote. And that is actually an articulated strategy of the Republican Party, as well as these much more extreme subgroups, right, that fit into the Republican Party and the conservative agenda. And so, so that is very well documented. It's articulated, we have lots of folks, you know, from the former chairman of ALEC on video saying "we win when fewer people vote", right. So we know that voter suppression is something that they are invested in as a political movement. And so this is done in lots of ways, right? We've seen this done by, in say, like, in Georgia, right. Or even in Arizona in, I think it was two presidential primaries ago, not this last primary but the presidential preference election before that, a slimming down of — when Michelle Reagan was Secretary of State, right — a slimming down of — and I think Helen Purcell was the County Recorder here in Maricopa — of polling locations, right, of cutting polling locations, of making the vote less accessible so that people had to stand in line for hours to vote, right? I think we saw, we've seen, we always see that happening typically in districts that are primarily Black voters, primarily Latino voters, right? Primarily, voters from disenfranchised and marginalized communities and poor communities, right, we see fewer ballot locations, fewer polling locations, and fewer options as far as voting go. We also see things like purging of the voter rolls, right.

And so this is a common tactic where there the voter rolls will be purged, supposedly, to protect the election or combat voter fraud, but what ends up happening most of the time is it's not just folks who have passed away, or people who have registered who no longer have voting rights, but there's just a purging of typically marginalized voters, right. And so that's poor people, Black folks, Latinx folks, right, people of color. So we see these tactics happening constantly. We also see an increase in sort of a new version of poll tax, right, and a new version of these laws that deeply restrict who can vote through voter ID laws, right. So we're seeing a "strict-ening," I don't know if that's a correct word, or a more strict process happening, or a movement for that in different places, where one: you have to be able to afford a specific kind of ID from your state, right, because a state identification is not free. Unfortunately, you do have to pay for an ID card or a driver's license. And in place like Arizona, that's getting more expensive now that we have to comply with Real ID, right, And so these are not \$2, \$5 ID cards, they're expensive, and not everybody has the access to that, right, depending on their socioeconomic class. We see oftentimes, you have to bring not just one form of ID but have to bring several forms of ID, prove where you live. So that restricts your voting, your right to vote, and your access to vote if you are homeless, right, or if you are experiencing any type of type of housing insecurity, and perhaps you're couchsurfing, or you don't have utilities, you know, at the place where you live, right? There's, there's a lot that goes into sort of creating these stricter identity laws where it makes it harder and harder to prove your identity. And then, for folks, like trans folks like me, that becomes even harder if your gender identity doesn't match with your legal documentation. You know, like, early on in my transition, I was actually turned away from a polling location because I hadn't been able to afford to change my legal name yet, yet had been on hormones and they would not let me vote. Luckily, it was only in a — it was a small election. But I still wanted to vote and had that right to vote, but was turned away because they didn't believe I was who I, who I am, right, and would not accept my identification. All of those, you know, these are many, many voter suppression tactics. But to your point, even creating the idea, planting that seed that voter fraud is a widespread problem, is a part of that tactic, right, that allows these folks to pass legislation that creates stricter ID laws, right, creates stricter processes that actually limit people's access to the vote. Even that now, after the 2020 election, there's discussion throughout the country of ending vote by mail, right, where that's been a critical way to make the vote accessible to the elderly, to the disabled, right, to rural voters — to lots of different voters. And so that is an articulated and clear strategy. Creating this mistrust in the system is a part of how this extreme, extremist group of people is trying to suppress the majority of American voters.

tanner menard 19:19

Thank you, Michael for sharing all that information with us. And what I would add to this is to kind of center back to our crisis of knowing, and explain from my point of view, how that manufactured crisis of knowing is working in tandem with the tangible things that happened on the ground that you mentioned. I think that one of the — I think that basically if you look at the tactic of the Trump administration, their tactic was to outsmart the algorithm, basically to out-think the algorithm and to manipulate how algorithms work so that more people would be exposed to misinformation about elections throughout the campaign. And, you know, I read the, I was just reading about, you know, some recommendations by the newamerica.org think tank, that talk about how the Internet can regulate information about voting so that the public is always informed about the source of an information, and so that algorithms can not be as easily manipulated by bad actors like the Trump administration. And so I think that if you just look at what happened in the 2016 election, where Russia used, you know, their state owned media apparatus, to spread information from different groups about the United States, that may not have been true, to manipulate people towards voting for Donald Trump, I believe that the Republican Party has picked up those tactics and used them to manipulate people's desire to vote. One way that they do that

is by posting false information about where to vote, times to vote, and that sort of thing needs to be vetted by Internet companies. And one suggestion that I read that I think is very interesting is that if a person has been exposed to misinformation online, that their Internet provider should make them aware that they've been exposed to false information, and then target them for correct information about voting locations and information about voting. And I think that part of the reason that this is happening is, is that in the past, you know, like when — at the formation of the United States only 6% of the population could vote, legally could vote. And so there was sort of brute force used to make sure that only landowners, only people with wealth, could contribute to the political ideologies and foundations of the country, and as that's grown, the tactics went from the thing that I mentioned earlier, where people were disallowed to vote by ridiculous tests, that we are not able to use such brute tactics anymore. So they've, they're using algorithms as a battlefield inside of our minds, basically

HLT Quan 22:44

I mean, I want to tell our listeners that we will, at some point, take up artificial intelligence and algorithms, and have this conversation. But for now, I think that big data is definitely involved. And, and I want to first take a moment and kind of like, kind of go through some basic history for our listener. And really, I want to know what makes 2020 different, because voting suppression is really part of American political landscape for a very, very long time. We have had, as Tanner, and both of you have pointed out, we have a long history of reserving voting as a privilege. And the estimate, as Tanner pointed out, is between 7 to 15%, when the Constitution was written, that reserved the right to vote only to property owning white males. It took three Amendments, the 15th, extending the right to vote to African Americans, then the 19th, to women, and then the 26th, to people under 21 and over 18, spanning more than 100 years before, along with several voting rights and civil rights acts, to ensure that we actually have universal franchise. But there's still various loopholes, particularly regarding people who have a criminal record. In the aftermath of the Civil War, Black people got the right to vote with the 15th Amendment. But many states including the North, there's this misnomer that somehow these things only happen in the South. Many states in the North came up with very intricate measures to suppress the Black vote. And so you're right, from polling taxes to literacy tests to Klan rallies. And I wanted to also talk a little bit about voter intimidation, because that's also real, especially within the larger context of very violent protests and insurrections, and people are talking, there are some states that are allowing now or at least discussing the possibility of allowing drivers to pay fewer consequences when they hit a crowd of protesters, nonviolent protesters. We have to keep this in mind, right? There were so called white primaries, where Black people were banned from voting in the primary. So the 15th Amendment extended the right to vote to African Americans, the 19th Amendment extended the right to vote to women. And this is after over a century of protests and mobilization not only by white women, but also Black women and other women of color. Right. And really, not until the Voting Rights Act of 1965 when people of color, particularly women of color, indigenous people, Native Americans, Latinx and Asian American citizens, for the first time actually able to exercise that that right. So, in recent years, we've seen waves of states, 25 out of 50 states have implemented various voting restrictions, so you're talking about, and I want to get to Arizona more specifically. And these restrictions disproportionately affect Black people, it affects people of color, it affects young people. So Stacey Abrams' organization also focuses on getting young people out to vote, right, the Fair Fight, that doesn't just focus on people of color or Black people, but it also focuses on the young vote, the youth vote. So what makes 2020 different? And now that Trump is gone, although yes, there is a trial that's going on to bar him from running for office (well, first to convict him, and then possibly to bar him from running for offices). But what makes it different? And now that he's gone, are these restrictions? What are the Republicans doing in the aftermath of the 2020 election?

Michael Soto 27:05

That's a lot of questions. So let's see. I mean, I think in some ways the tactics aren't different, right. And so we're seeing, you know, the same strategies, similar tactics that we've seen throughout history to suppress the vote, to intimidate BIPOC voters, right, to intimidate people who, who sort of have a vested interest in either keeping the political status quo or making it more, leaning more towards this authoritarian, right wing status quo. We are seeing similar tactics, right, we saw the Proud Boys this time, right, at the insurrection and other groups like that, they're a domestic white supremacist terrorist group. We saw that with the Klan, right? For decades and decades, right. Like with these, this isn't new, it's just new forms of it. Right? So different people, perhaps, maybe in different places. But we've seen it's just the current iteration of many of the same tactics. I do think something that is different today is the 24 hour news cycle, right, and constant access to information in a way that perhaps we didn't have the same level of constant bombardment of media, whether that's social media, or the news media, the corporate news media. And so I think that has shifted things, the conversation a little bit and allowed 2020 to — I think what it did via social media in particular, is it's allowed this idea that voter fraud is an actual problem, that it is not, there is no proof that voter fraud is a widespread systemic problem in the United States. It allowed that idea to live and to gain strength, not based on evidence, but based on just "my friend said," basically, right, or "someone posted," or this idea is out there, though it has no credibility, right. There's no facts surrounding it. There's no one credible spreading these ideas. But they're still spreading, right? Because you, in this age of social media, you don't have to be credible, right, to put that information out there. And so, so I think there's, that's part of the difference in creating this narrative of voter fraud that is lending to and has become a strategic effort to suppress the vote.

HLT Quan 29:48

Does it matter that the architect of some of this fraudulent messaging around voting comes out of the White House? Does it make a difference?

Michael Soto 29:59

Yeah. It does, absolutely. It comes out of the White House. And I also want to be clear it comes out of the national and the state Republican parties, right? Like we have to hold parties accountable. Parties are private entities. They're not, they're not government entities, right. And they, the Republican Party right now, has a group of people, and has always, we've, you know, we've talked about this, had a vested interest in suppressing the vote, because they know that they win, right, more frequently win, at least in modern times, they win more frequently when less voters vote. But having that legitimized, right in a way that is so clear, by having the actual presidential administration saying that there's going to be widespread voter fraud months before the election actually takes place, then having state party chairs like Dr. Kelli Ward here, right, reiterating that over and over again, having all of these different official people, right, people who are holding positions of power, either in the Republican Party, or in the White House, and in now the former administration, or even members of Congress like Josh Hawley, right, or Ted Cruz, saying that, that lends a whole different level, I think of power, and it legitimates, unfortunately, these claims made without any evidence, without any support, right. And so they're just, it's sort of what I've seen is, I guess, an echo chamber, right, of people just saying the thing over and over and over, and then citing one another as proof that it's true.

HLT Quan 31:36

Yeah, it seems to me that there is a crisis of legitimacy. And there's two very different crises are going on. So it's not just the crisis of knowing but the crisis of knowing is very instrumental and linked up to

one of the crises of legitimacy, which is the reality is that the Republican Party has been running on a set of policies that are dangerously unpopular, right? What's interesting is they're polling a number of policies, and however you feel about Biden, these policies are extraordinarily popular even, and it's a clear majority, even among Republican voters. It's really remarkable, right? So you have elections that are so close, we're talking about some elections are decided by several thousand, or tens of thousands of votes, not millions. And when you have a poll that shows, you know, 56%, so a clear majority, that's not polarization, that's very indicative of how popular some of these policies are. So there's a there's a crisis of legitimacy on the part of the Republican Party where they, essentially their policies have no legitimacy because they cater to a small percentage of the population.

Michael Soto 32:56

Yes, exactly. And if you look at I mean, to drive that point home even further, you can look at a wide range of issues, from like welfare reform and taxes, to abortion, to LGBTQ rights, to vote, to the ability to vote, and what you see across the board, polling Republican, Independent, and Democratic voters, that it's actually, it is not the Republican Party's position on these issues that is what the majority of Americans agree with. And if you can just, you ask the question, even when you ask the question — I, you know, was part of a briefing about reproductive rights and reproductive freedom and policy around that — even when you use the inflammatory language around that, you still get a majority of Republican, Democrat, and Independent voters saying that they believe in an individual's right to make choices about their own life, and that the Republican Party's position on reproductive rights and abortion is not the one that they support. And so, you know, there's I think because of that, because the Republican Party, and the conservative movement in this country represents such a small elite group of people and their interests, you know, that they have to create these false narratives, right? They have to create this crisis of, of knowing, this crisis of legitimacy. And they have to overtly work to suppress the majority of voters because they know that the majority of Americans actually disagree with their policy positions and how they think this country should only work for a very small elite group of conservative people.

HLT Quan 34:36

Because there's there's two pieces to the crisis of legitimacy. And the second piece is linked up to tanner, and I actually want tanner to speak to it is, is the crisis of legitimacy that is manufactured, right. So, we have data that, evidence that shows very little voter fraud. We have the process that is getting better, it has problems but it is getting better, particularly through automatic absentee voting and mail balloting. So, so it seems to me that this crisis is manufactured about voting itself, that so, so again, even after the inauguration took place, nearly, more than two thirds of the Republican — of Trump voters I should say, not Republican voters, but Trump voters — continue to believe that the election is fraudulent. That is a problem. And so earlier, I asked about how does it work, and does it matter if it's coming from the White House, that you have part of the government an executive branch of the government actually manufacture a legitimacy crisis of authority, and this authority is a democratic authority. Right. And so tanner, if I start saying something silly, how does the algorithm work? If I start saying something silly, as opposed to former President Trump saying something silly? How does it go viral? And if you have a crisis of legitimacy that is instigated on the part of those powerful, be they corporations or the White House? What do we do as just every day voters? I mean, can I just make up something? And will it go viral? Or do I have to be attached to something that makes it go viral?

tanner menard 36:33

Well, I think that the answer to that question is, is that we're living in unprecedented times, because we're interacting with an intelligence that does not function like our own. For instance, it has databases that it can access, basically, like, I mean, and I'm just, I'm just a normal person trying to understand it myself. But we're interacting with something that has access to databases, that's collecting information about people all the time, to where these artificial intelligences, you know, like, people will say, "Oh, I said something around my phone, and I think it heard me," well, maybe it didn't, but it's looking at what you like, what you look at, what you... and it's basically constructing a psychological profile about you. And so people who understand how those algorithms work are able to target messages, and in fact pay to target messages at people who are susceptible to certain types of thoughts and dispositions. And so I think that, as, you know, and this is my reason for wanting to create this podcast around this format is, I think that we need to rapidly be informing people about how to interact with the AI that they carry around in their pocket all day long, and how to become educated about how algorithms work. So that we can demand that our legislators pass laws that protect our privacy, our data, and the way that we intercept information, so that we have more control and agency over the type of information that we digest, so that politicians and other bad actors, for instance, you know, foreign countries, cannot manipulate public opinion towards misinformation campaigns. And I think that part of what's happening is, is that we've had a secure election system, but it's now interacting with a form of technology that, you know, foreign actors can intervene, and that basically any bad actor can intervene in. And when we were just reading newspapers, and watching TV for information, it was a lot less easy for people to infiltrate the means through which information is passed to the electorate.

HLT Quan 39:07

Okay, so I want to make sure, two things. One is we are going to have a conversation on AI, so I don't want this conversation to be about AI. But I also I want to caution us, because I'm listening to you tanner, and quite frankly, that is, that is a fine line between this "it" thing, this thing that is sitting in our pockets, collecting information, and the accusation that voting machines, in fact, can be manipulated. Now, it's true that there is no evidence to suggest that the voting machines were manipulated in the last election in the 2020 election, but still, this somehow it's, it's, it's believable. It sounds reasonable. And what I'm suggesting is that foreign intervention in elections is not new. It isn't a 21st century phenomenon. The United States have meddled in elections all over the world, okay. So, so foreign interest in possibly determining the outcome is, it's always there. But what I want to get to is, what makes this crisis of legitimacy different insofar as all else being equal, that there's always foreign interest, that there are voting machines that we use. But there's also mechanisms that we deal with that, there are hard ballots that can be checked against electronic ballots, where — what I'm talking about is the manufacturing of misinformation on voting itself and the election outcome. Michael, can you talk a little bit about what's happening in Arizona, especially since the election? And how that may help us unpack this conundrum or this confusion that I'm in?

Michael Soto 41:08

Absolutely. So in Arizona, like every, or many states, and especially battleground states, right, and swing states, we saw after the election, sort of unprecedented challenges to the to the vote. And so it is absolutely a part of our electoral process and within the rights of any candidate to request, according to whatever the statutes are in the state right, to request recounts, if it falls, basically, if the count falls within a specific margin of error, right. And so contesting an election once is not an abnormal thing, right. And that's something that is a part of the election process, and a part of conducting a fair election. What was abnormal this time was that once, twice, three times it wasn't enough, right? We saw that it didn't matter how many times the vote in Arizona, in other places was recounted and verified and

certified. The GOP and the former president were still questioning the vote and still calling it fraudulent, right. And so we saw this in the most extreme case in the call with Georgia, where literally former President Trump says to the Georgia Secretary of State, all I need are eleven thousand and whatever votes, right, I just need you to find those. And so he's literally instructing a Secretary of State to either dismiss that number of votes for Joe Biden or to manufacture votes for himself, right. And so, in Arizona, we saw, we have seen the Republican Party here continue to question the validity of the votes. We have seen that in many forms, culminating sort of yesterday in perhaps one of the more dramatic and extreme moments where the legislature here and the Republican caucus in the legislature attempted to, to actually, essentially arrest, to censure and arrest the, the county officials in Maricopa County, the commissioners, and so they wanted to, basically the Republican Party had demanded that the county turn over the, the votes, the actual votes, turn over the voting machines and turn over the votes. Not so that an independent group or a bipartisan group or a group with any real oversight and transparency could verify and look at the ballots. But so the GOP here in Arizona, on its own, behind closed doors could do that. And so, that's not how elections work, right? We don't, there is no group, no political party that is given the votes and then allowed to close their doors and privately verify, because we know that that's not how you conduct a fair election. Luckily, that vote failed. And the commissioners were not arrested, which would have been unprecedented because those, the county commissioners refused to comply with the Republican Party, as they should have, to protect the integrity of our election. But we've, so we've seen that, we saw that yesterday. That was an extreme moment. We were on national news all over. I mean, likely international news I'm sure as well, showing what our Republican Party was trying to do to, one, create doubt in the election and to potentially cheat, right, after the fact, which, the election has been certified, the new president as well as themselves, right, they have been installed into office. And that's a part of something that's also fascinating, is that while they are continuing to contest the presidential election, they're not questioning that they got elected. They're not questioning the down ballot races that were decided by a few hundred, or a few dozen votes that, you know, allow them to sit in elected office now, which is also a fascinating thing. But we're also seeing this session (so, we're in the legislative session in Arizona, it starts in January, we always hope that it ends sooner than later here in Arizona, because the less time that the legislature is in session, the less harm that they can do to Arizonans) right, we've seen a number of bills introduced to limit access to voting, some of the most egregious are actually attacking our Permanent Early Voter List. Like I said, before, Arizona has had this Permanent Early Voter List, which is our vote by mail list for more than 30 years. We know how to do it, right? Like you can go and watch interviews of Secretary of State Katie Hobbs, or probably any former Secretary of State in the last 30 years, speaking confidently about this system, because we've worked really hard to create a very good vote by mail system here. And there are a number of bills that are, one is seeking to purge different kinds of folks from the permanent early voter list, that's SB1069. HB2632, this one would require that permanent early list voters don't just, you know, vote and then sign the ballot, you have to sign the ballot, your signature is then verified through a very rigorous process, right? You, there's all sorts of things that happen to make sure that it is you who has cast that ballot. But this would add another layer, this bill would add another layer that you would not only have to sign your ballot, you'd have to get it notarized, which many of us know is not a free process, right? Very, very few people have access to free notary. In fact, we saw this in Oklahoma this year in the 2020. election to do the mail-in voting, they had to, you had to have your ballot notarized, which just adds an extra step, and during a pandemic, right, or during any crisis, that means that you're even less likely or less able to vote, if you have to add extra steps to that process. And then HB2370, this would just eliminate the Permanent Early Voter List entirely. And so, so we've got a number of attacks specifically on the mail-in voting system in order to to make the vote less accessible to people. And to I think also create doubt in this well-established system here in

Arizona, that has increased access to the vote to so many voters for so many decades, right. And so we just, you know, we're seeing just this, this widespread attack, and this is happening everywhere, right? This is not just happening in Arizona, although, you know, we are typically one of the first to deal with most of the most extreme things. And so, you know, we're seeing that, that hasn't let up at all. That hasn't stopped. There are so many groups, there's so many bipartisan groups working against these bills, because you know, these are very clear and very extreme attacks on an established voting system. So we're hopeful that we'll be able to beat these bills, but we are seeing them nonetheless.

tanner menard 48:52

Michael, I think that that, the way that you lead us there, leads us into an interesting point that I think that our listenership you know is affected by, which is that voter suppression in the United States has always been linked to racial equity, and to equity between genders as they were understood in that time period, you know, women were not allowed to vote. And I feel like those things have always been linked and that the level of intimidation has only really changed shape. But that in the past, you know, people in Southern states could lynch someone in their neighborhood, for instance, and use very direct violence to scare people away from voting. And now in a state like Arizona, where the demographics are changing drastically, and where populations are much more likely to vote for Democrats because they support their rights, you know, as LGBTQ people, as Black people, as Latinx people, as Indigenous people, that the, you know, the Democratic Party has a better reputation and, you know, passes the laws that help our communities. So they're having to, they're having to revert to bullying tactics like trying to overturn an election, but that it's really, it's, it's really the same level of violence and bullying, it's an established tactic. But what's different, in my opinion, is that it's really undermining the fabric of democracy itself. Whereas democracy at one time was limited to a very small group of people, but now that it's been extended to the majority of Americans, the fabric of democracy itself is being destabilized by these tactics. And we, you know, we need to vigorously combat this if we want to maintain our democracy. And in my opinion, that has a lot to do with LGBTQ people, people of color, Indigenous people making their way into the fabric of power, financially and politically, in the United States. And that terrifies people who are White Supremacists basically.

HLT Quan 51:28

Yeah.

Michael Soto 51:29

Yeah, I couldn't agree more.

HLT Quan 51:30

That's, that's right. I mean, I think part of this is really about the threat to the existing power arrangement. Carol Anderson, who is an amazing historian, wrote this incredible book about white rage, the violence, racial violence in this country. Also, her most recent book, of course, is *One Person, No Vote: How Voter Suppression Is Destroying Our Democracy*. And she, one of the most important observations in that book that she makes, is that, as tanner suggests, voting is no longer perceived as a right, but a privilege that needs to be preserved for a few. And we mentioned it took the Voting Rights Act of 1965. to essentially operationalize this universal franchise to, you know, women of color, LGBTQ people, Indigenous people, Asian Americans, Latinx and others who have been historically, you know, whose votes have been suppressed. She ends the book in the most remarkable way. And I want to, because she, of course, is calling for a new voting rights act, because one of the things that we haven't really spent a lot of time on, is also to point out how the Supreme Court itself has not, has abdicated its

responsibility to uphold the right, the universal franchise for every group. So she said, "without the protection of the Voting Rights Act, American democracy remain in peril. It is clear that far too many policy makers believe that the right to vote is something to be earned, after perhaps paying a modern day poll tax or walking miles to the nearest polling station, or standing in line for hours to cast a ballot. It is also clear with the gutting of the Voting Rights Act, a major legal and political paradigm shift has taken place. The responsibility for upholding the right to vote has moved off the broad shoulders of the state and been placed squarely on the backs of the individual citizens. States apparently don't have the time to find accessible polling sites, yet Native Americans were given just a few weeks to establish a physical street address if they wanted to vote. Georgia can use a racially discriminatory registration system to put citizens in electoral limbo, but it's the Americans who must drag a treasure trove of documents to the polling station, hoping one will prove their right to cast a ballot." Again, that's from Carol Anderson's *One Person, No Vote: How Voter Suppression Is Destroying Our Democracy*. And in many ways, as you said Michael, Arizona knows what, it has demonstrated how to work with absentee ballots, with mail-in ballots. Colorado, observers and political scientists have pointed out that Colorado, where all registered voters received ballots since 2013. Colorado shows that vote by mail works. So the conclusion that we'll leave with is, why aren't the rest of the country emulating the things that are working, be it in Washington or Colorado or Arizona, but instead, in the aftermath of the 2020 election, and, you know, we have a concerted effort sounds like you are characterizing, that is actually legitimizing what is a fraudulent statement to begin with, weaponizing fraud as a way to suppress the vote even further. Now, Michael, do you have a sense that this is unique to Arizona? Or is this a broad nationwide attack?

Michael Soto 55:28

I think it's a broad attempt. And it's a broad attempt: we're seeing, you know, this, these kinds of bills, we're seeing this concerted effort to discredit, mail-in voting and voting in general, because in a representative democracy, voting is power, right? And unfortunately, you know, if we, if both parties, if every elected official, if everyone from any political ideology, whatever that is on the spectrum of political ideology, was truly invested in the idea of representative democracy, we would want universal enfranchisement and we would want to make that as easy and accessible as possible for the American people. Right? So instead of having to opt into voting, you would have to opt out of voting, right? You would get your mail, you'd get, everyone would get a mail-in ballot, everyone would get, right, everyone would have lots of options for being able to successfully and rightfully vote, as a part of our rights as members of you know, this country, as citizens of this country. And so, but what we see, and what we know is that, you know, there are different political wings of political thought and political parties that believe in representative democracy to different degrees, because it either serves or does not serve their own political interests of the group of people that they are trying to represent. Today, that's, we've talked over and over how the Republican Party is truly only representative of a very small minority of elite people. And universal enfranchisement and having widespread voting power does not serve their interests. At other times, that's been different parties, right, in the past, because political parties change and move. But that's the reality today. And so we are seeing that continue, that today the current Republican Party is not interested in universal enfranchisement, is not interested in truly protecting and preserving representative democracy, which is a deeply scary thing. Right? That is, that is how we work in this country. And that is how we are supposed to exercise power in this country, and make political choices together, right? That's how the Union works, is through the electoral process. And so it's, it's a true threat. It's a true threat to our representative democracy and to the future of our country.

HLT Quan 58:04

Tanner, do you have a closing comment on that note?

tanner menard 58:08

I do, Michael, I really appreciate your vision for Equality Arizona, and what what it leads me to say is, is that what we're doing here is political education for our community. And, as the Republican Party has become the party of misinformation, as an organization, as a community, we need to become people of information, people of education. We want people to become educated about all these topics to learn as much as you possibly can, to learn about how to interact with the world around you, so that you make informed decisions that have agency and that benefit your community and benefit the communities that intersect with your communities. And, you know, I appreciate your vision for creating that. Thank you, Dr. Quan for contributing to this. I personally am learning so much, and I'm sure that all of our listeners are learning, you know, just from, you know, hearing different ideas and from ideas that come from facts, from ideas that come from inquiry. So I really appreciate having this opportunity to speak in this format. Thank you so much.

HLT Quan 59:34

Thank you. So I want to, I want to thank Michael also, for pointing this threat out. And just in closing, I want to say that voting of course is a basic requirement of any democratic political system. And for democracy to be substantive and meaningful, all voting restrictions must cease, and everyone who is eligible to vote should vote. We know that elections have consequences. And despite the fact that big money underwrites elections in the United States, the simple act of voting remains one of the most, not the only, but one of the most potent forms of political participation. And voting is only one among a series of very intentional acts that have to be done for democracy to be meaningful. Unpopular parties, rather than restricting the right to vote, they should try to run on policies that are popular, that resonate with the public. And I know sometimes the people will get it wrong. And sometimes the machine gets it wrong. But without voting, we will have lost one of the few human elements left in this body politics that's dominated by money, by cooperations, by malice, and also by algorithm. So I want to make sure that we get that right. And I want to make sure that we, it's never too early to register to vote. If you are eligible to vote, please, please register to vote, wherever you are.

Michael Soto 1:01:11

Thank you, Dr. Quan, and thank you tanner.

HLT Quan 1:01:13

You bet, thank you.

tanner menard 1:01:14

Thank you so much. Both of you.