

Political Sociology with Mindy Romero

Ologies Podcast

September 30, 2020

Oh Heey, it's that extra stamp you're gonna put on your ballot, Alie Ward. I'm back with a very important episode of *Ologies* to get us all fired up about a powerful tool in most of our possession: our votes. At first I was like, "Should I do a voter suppression episode in the middle of Spooktober because it's more scary than a poltergeist?" But you know what, no: this episode won't be about scaring you into action, so much as giving us all the juice to see our votes as precious as a Willy Wonka Golden Ticket, and to get pumped as hell about using it.

But before we dive in, this episode would not exist without all the folks supporting at Patreon.com/Ologies. Thank you to everyone wearing *Ologies* t-shirts, and totes, and warm beanies, and sweatshirts from OlogiesMerch.com, as well as everyone who passes this episode along to someone who needs the facts. And hitting subscribe and rating also keeps the show up in the charts, leaving a review helps a bunch. And to prove that I read them all, here's a fresh one, it's from ZeroBugsNotAllowed, who wrote:

I find myself looking at the world a little differently, leaning in too close to bugs, and making friendly conversation with the moth that took up residence inside my truck for days, before gently shooing her tiny tush out the window and on to greater things. I also find myself using the phrase "boy howdy" a lot. It just feels right on my Texan tongue.

ZeroBugsNotAllowed, hello to you and the spider that's probably living on your porch light. I swear go check, I bet it's there.

Okay! So, if you are an *Ologies* listener who does not like to talk politics; bye! Bye now! Have a good one. We'll just see you next week for the start of Spooktober. But if you are a human being who cares about people and justice and wants more clarity on the electoral process here in America, and how to vote, and why to vote, and why things right now feel... like underpants full of crushed glass, join me, won't you? Let's take a deep dive into the ballot box with Political Sociology.

Okay, so 'political' is widely accepted to originate with Aristotle's use of it; it means 'affairs of the state'. And 'sociology' comes from the Latin for 'associate'. So it's Government and People. More on that in a few minutes.

Now, this guest got her Bachelor's in Political Science and Sociology, and got a PhD in Sociology from the University of California, Davis, and is an Assistant Professor and the founding Director of USC's Center for Inclusive Democracy, which is a nonpartisan civic engagement research and outreach initiative, and it's headquartered at the Price School's campus in Sacramento. Her research focuses on political behavior and voting among race, ethnicity, age groups, and she has weighed in on the election process for countless news outlets and publications. And I was looking for someone who could chat with me about voter turnout. Boy howdy does she study this.

So I sent her an email, I crossed my fingers, I got one back, we were off to the races. So we're going to get right into it! Sharpen your pencils, buy some extra stamps, polish your glasses, and get ready to become so fired up about voting you're going to skip to the ballot box as we chat about voting history, the electoral process, turnout at the polls, sausages, voter suppression, the supreme court, hot apple cider, the safety of mail-in voting, MLK, and more with researcher and Political Sociologist Dr. Mindy Romero.

Alie: Let's see, if I could have you say first and last names, and how you pronounce them, and also the pronouns that you prefer?

Dr. R: Sure! She/her. Mindy Romero.

Alie: And that is *Dr.* Romero, right?

Dr. R: Yes, yes.

Alie: Now you are a political sociologist, yes?

Dr. R: Yes, which means I'm cooler than any political scientist on the planet, automatically!

Alie: *[laughs]* Yes! Well, if you were a political scientist I couldn't have you on *Ologies* because it would need to end in 'ology'! So this works! This is great.

Dr. R: There you go!

Alie: How long have you been interested in how we vote? Did it go back to your childhood or did you turn 18 and cast your first ballot? What was your path like?

Dr. R: Honestly, it did and does go back to my childhood. You could say I was a very odd child; I think I was a particularly cool child in that sense. But, you know, I looked around my community when I was a kid and I saw a lot of things that really puzzled me. I saw a lot of social ill, you know, high unemployment rates, people really struggling, the streets not being in good shape, the schools not being in good shape, or at least, really struggling.

And I wondered why that was, and I wondered why that it seemed that the folks that were, you know, making decisions for our community and our city - and I didn't even know who those people were - I just wondered why it was okay that there was such blatant differences across the city, and blatant differences in terms of the distribution of resources. I didn't know anything else other than, just from a very gut level as a kid, it didn't seem really right, or even really fair.

And I was struggling with why that was and quickly realized that the people that make those decisions are put into those places, into those positions of power, by voters. And that also then puzzled me even further and it really set me down this path that is a lifelong passion to understand patterns of underrepresentation in voting and other types of political behavior, why we see these, and try to ultimately... hopefully my research addresses some of that and helps us not only understand but actually looks to solutions.

Alie: And so now where are you based? Or where did you grow up?

Dr. R: Yeah. I'm based up here in Sacramento. USC has a building here and my headquarters of my research center are in Sacramento. I grew up not very far from here, down in the central valley, in a town called Modesto.

Alie: Mmhmm. I know Modesto!

Aside: Modesto, side note, is in central California and it's an agricultural town with a greater population of about half a million people. It does have distinctions as being the setting of the film *American Graffiti*. It's the hometown of George Lucas. But Modesto also made *Time Magazine's* 2012 list titled "Ten Cities Where Americans Are Pretty Much Terrified to Live." Which is probably not what they intended for a city whose name means 'modest'.

So the amazing Dr. Romero let her lived experiences inspire her academic work, asking questions, not only for herself, but for so many other underrepresented communities out there.

Alie: And now at what point in your schooling did you decide to take a really academic view of this?

Dr. R: Kind of from the beginning. At least certainly by the time my senior year in high school and I was looking to go off to college. The only major that I really considered.. there were, you know, a few distant second and third, but the number one major for me was actually political science. And then in my junior year, I discovered sociology, I took a political sociology class, and just... talk about lightbulb, you know fireworks. [*“Oh, wow!”*]

And I realized that for me, you know, the way that I had been looking, thinking about, and feeling about the political social structure really was more aligned with a sociological view. When I went, right away, into grad school I had a choice: political science or sociologist, and I chose to be a political sociologist. Yeah, even though my work was very in alignment with the field within political science. And it was the best decision I ever made, by the way.

Alie: Was it really?!

Dr. R: Oh yeah!

Alie: What do you think that your career would have been like if you’d stayed in political science? Because if you asked me to... Not knowing anything about the field, I’m like, “How is political science *not* political sociology?” I’m not sure! [*laughs*]

Dr. R: Yeah. Well, I’ve taken a really unusual path, period. So I can’t say that I’m a typical political sociologist either. But I think in a nutshell, looking at the political landscape through a sociological perspective is absolutely what gives my work its power. The work that I do is very grounded in policy. Speaking to policy makers with local, statewide, national, and it’s very much also designed to inform the work of advocates; community, local, statewide, and so forth.

The length to which I do my work, and the types of research questions that I ask, and how I approach my work, and how I talk about the findings, of course, to be honest, they’re very much also informed by my own lived experiences. And far too often as researchers, we’re not supposed to talk about that. It doesn’t mean that we’re biased, it just means that we’re recognizing where we are coming from. And in my case, I think that gives my work strength. It conforms the questions that I ask. I think it helps me to create often more relevant questions. Still, the research we conduct is still independent, nonpartisan, up to the standards of political sociology.

Aside: So, in a nutshell, a political scientist studies the governmental systems and laws, policies, how political parties conduct themselves. But a political sociologist studies people, and how people interact with those systems. So political sociology relies on a lot of research and data about people, and their backgrounds, and behaviors to find patterns and the influence of those patterns. So yes, political science and political sociology; different things. As different as environment and ecology, if you will. Donkeys and elephants, both dealing with viruses and global warming.

Dr. R: And so yeah, it’s best decision I ever made.

Alie: What kind of questions do you get to ask with your research?

Dr. R: Hmm. Well number one, my research center... The mission of the center, every project is looking at this question of equity. Every project is looking at the question of underrepresentation. So if we're looking at an election reform, for instance, and there's been a lot of them, especially here in California: The Voters Choice Act, same-day voter registration, automatic voter registration, vote by mail expansion... list goes on. And a key fundamental question is, how are those reforms actually impacting the question of representation? And are we... if the goal was to increase turnout, we don't stop there.

Well, it increased turnout, but did it increase turnout for all groups? And did it actually increase turnout in a way that narrowed the gaps between groups when it comes to turnout? You can increase turnout for everybody but if the gap is still the same, you're actually not affecting or improving representation. So it's just a driving theme and thread through our work. I think it's deeply important.

I wouldn't consider doing a research project without a deep and thoughtful analysis that's looking at race, ethnicity, age, wherever possible. Populations with limited English proficiency, eligible voters with disabilities... We want an inclusive democracy and a truly functioning democracy, as we have all been promised, then we need to be asking these questions and holding things like election forms accountable to that.

Aside: So yes, it's not just about ensuring a deluge of votes, but does that rising tide lift all the boats in the harbor? And if not, why? And how can we make sure America's, in this case, 55% voter turnout rate swells? But let's get right into this.

In the US, our presidential election is November 3rd. In a lot of states you can already start voting early, which is exciting. Now, just talking facts, there's a guy who lost the public vote by nearly 3 million, and he's up for reelection. How do we make sure that our elective representatives actually represent the people they represent? Hmm...

Dr. R: So here's what I know. I think there's two things. First, we need to make it easier for people to vote. That's typically looked at through that, kind of, institutional lens. So what kind of institutional changes can we make? Election reforms, making it actually easier for people to register, to vote... That process of it..

Aside: Okay, so that external, circumstantial hurdles to cast ballots is number one. What's the other thing?

Dr. R: And then we need to make people *want* to vote. And that's the motivation question, and I've found that's much more difficult. In the bulk of my career I have focused on those institutional barriers. And now I realize more and more that we really need to be looking at... because each electoral reform - although necessary, many of them, if they're positive - they're biting of little pieces of... important pieces, but little pieces, often, of the low turnout situation we have in the United States and the question of underrepresentation.

Making people want to vote, potentially, can get us much farther along to greater participation and representation. But it's not that simple either. That's the really hard one. It's not about apathy, I want to be clear. We might often think that way, like, "Why won't people just vote?? It's so easy. It's such a simple thing! And why won't voters of color vote?" We often hear the adage, which I don't use in my work, but the 'sleeping giant'. "What's wrong with the Latino population? They're punching below their weight."

Or young people, "Well, they're just apathetic! What's wrong with this generation? Why won't they go vote?" That's *if* people want them to vote, which a lot of people don't necessarily want to see young people voting. It depends on who you talk to. But it's not

apathy, but what it is, is helping people not feel disconnected to the political process. People feel very disconnected for very real reasons. And this is perpetual. Throughout our society, the gaps that we see are entrenched. And the reasons for low participation or no participation are part of people's lived experiences in communities, and in generations of communities.

And they look around and they still don't see their communities being fully represented, or represented to meet the need that they have, and they often feel like, "What does it matter?" Right? Not apathy, like in the stark sense but, "If I'm going to vote, I need to know that it's really going to matter, that it's really going to make a difference." And you know, "God forbid that I'm going to vote and maybe actually make a mistake and vote for somebody who's going to hurt my community. And I never see outreach or education. I never see a candidate come to my community, or very rarely. I don't get calls..." You know all that stuff that regular voters get in the mail that we all kind of hate, the junk mail or whatever?

We know from a lot of research that because of the likely voter model, historically underrepresented groups are not considered likely voters. And they don't get that kind of outreach and mobilization from campaigns and they're much less likely to participate. It becomes a vicious cycle. We say that they're apathetic and they don't care. Well, they're not even getting asked to vote, often. There's lots of good work done from advocacy groups and others, but they're fighting an uphill battle and they can't reach everybody in the system and reasons for why people don't participate.

So, I could go on and I probably shouldn't because this podcast isn't that long. But it's about helping people to feel connected. There's a lot there that we can unpack. But it's not a question of apathy, it's a question of what can we do to bring people into our political system in real ways that make them feel like their participation actually matters?

Alie: Right.

Aside: And campaigning used to be more localized. With candidates pounding the pavement, shaking hands, kissing babies, making promises, passing out buttons. But the advent of national TV reduced those localized campaigns. Now people have fancy commercials, and these days social media, like the research gleaned from Cambridge Analytica, can deliver hyper-local messages based on user data with paid posts that discourage certain people from voting, which can have really big impacts on, say, presidential races, where people may not feel that their vote even matters because of our wacky Electoral College system.

Dr. R: So, with regard to the Electoral College, I'll take it one step further. It's not just the Electoral College, because in that we're focused on the presidential race. But beyond that, the way our electoral system is structured in the United States, we actually discourage people from participating. That connection that people need to feel, that their vote actually matter is often... the case just isn't made.

So, let me back up for a moment. We have for instance winner-take-all, single member districts. We know that the power of a incumbencies, once somebody's in a position... If we're just talking about the national level, so in a senate seat or in a congressional seat, it's very hard to move them out of that seat. If it's a safe seat, they either think, "Okay, well my candidate is good to go," or, "Why bother? I can't affect this change and get the candidate that I want in."

So, the way our electoral system, just in that sense, is structured, the fact that there is a two-party system, “What does it really matter between a Democrat and a Republican?” Of course, there are real differences. But those candidates are kind of fighting for everybody in the middle. Essentially, candidates are incentivized to fight for that middle ground and to make it hard for voters to figure out in a real way who they really are. To get information is a bit of a chore.

Aside: So, those are the mental and emotional hurdles. What about the institutional reality that your vote doesn’t feel like it counts sometimes? That the popular vote doesn’t elect the leader of the world’s largest democracy, but rather tells electors who to elect?

Alie: Do you think that we’ll ever get to a point where we’ll ditch the Electoral College?

Dr. R: *[sighs]*

Alie: Heavy sigh. *[laughs]*

Dr. R: Heavy sigh. We might. But I’ll tell you what, we’re probably going to see an ebb and flow back and forth for a while. Obviously, it’s problematic in many ways, but what I’m a little uncomfortable with is that so much of conversation is about the here and now and tied to a political candidate, where it’s hard to disentangle that from just... at least in most conversations, to disentangle it from the merits or lack of merits of the Electoral College itself.

In a Trump world, in a post-2016 world, we’ve seen a much more heightened conversation around whether we should keep the Electoral College, but so much of it is so charged that it makes me a little nervous having a real conversation that could actually lead to an outcome at this point.

Aside: Just a fun fact, five times the US has elected someone president even though they lost the popular vote. They lost the race; they won the prize. What??

So, Andrew Jackson, Samuel Tilden, Grover Cleveland, and then Al Gore, all won the popular vote. Al Gore won by half a million over George W. Bush. Then Donald Trump lost by 2.9 million votes to Hillary Rodham Clinton. So yes, kids, you *can* be a loser and be president. For now at least. Is this always going to be the case?

Dr. R: The bottom line is that we’re not going to see a change any time soon. So, it’s a good conversation and an important conversation to have, but I don’t think we’re at a place where it’s politically viable. Although there are movements to ask states to make commitments, for instance, on their electoral votes for the candidate that gets the most votes, that sort of thing. But I don’t think that we’re anywhere close to it yet, at least not in this environment.

Aside: Oh, if you listened to the two-part Nomology episode, I got to sit down with USC Constitutional Law Professor and Vice Dean, Franita Tolson asked her, “Hey, can we get rid of this Electoral College system or what?” She said:

Unfortunately, the Electoral College is not going anywhere without a Constitutional amendment. However, some states have taken steps to neutralize its effects by joining the National Popular Vote Interstate Compact, where participants pledge their electoral votes to the candidate who wins the popular vote. So far, 16 states have joined the compact.

What?! Okay, I went and I looked it up. Those 16 states are; California, Colorado, Connecticut, DC, Delaware, Hawaii, Illinois, Massachusetts, Maryland, New Jersey, New Mexico, New York, Oregon, Rhode Island, Vermont, and Washington. Way to go y'all.

Now, there's more information on this at NationalPopularVote.com. But how else might we bring voting out of the 1800s and into the present?

Dr. R: Almost every time I give a public presentation I get asked about, "Why don't we have online voting?" There's the security aspect of it. There's the technical aspect of it. Then there's just the political liability of it. We're not anywhere... especially post-2016, anywhere near something like that.

Any type of election reform... Something as huge as eliminating the Electoral College is one thing, but any type of election reform, unfortunately, at some point or another, generates a question about politics that are often unfair. Even like automatic voter registration, which is a very positive thing across the United States to enfranchise voters, keep voter registration laws clean all that sort of stuff. We're the only established democracy in the world that puts a burden of registration on its people, its citizens. And yet, 20-30 years ago it actually wasn't something that was very political, so to speak.

It's incredibly disappointing because we look at our turnout numbers in the United States and we're also... among established democracies we have some of the lowest turnout consistently. We need to do a lot more to make sure that we do have a fully inclusive, robust democracy. And yet, we're fighting over whether vote-by-mail has a partisan impact. It doesn't. And we're muddying up the waters for political gain in one particular election. That does long-term damage to our political structure.

If a particular issue sticks, so to speak, in subsequent years, those potential voters that would have signed up, like young voters for instance... We have lots of research that shows that if you get a young person to turn out when they're 18, they're much more likely to continue to vote the rest of their life. It's a key time. Think about all the young people this year that might potentially get discouraged from voting. I think that we're going to have a lot of young people voting.

[grown male voice with a party in background: "How do you do, fellow kids?"]

But people that could be turned off because of Covid, or turned off because of political rhetoric around vote-by-mail, or just get confused or scared about the USPS and putting their ballot in the mail there; just on that generation, the potential impact that we could see is, at best, incredibly disheartening and all the way up to, just blatantly talking about this for what it is, which is a form of voter suppression.

Alie: Right. Do you ever have to turn your research to things like TikTok? "Will TikTok decide an election?" Things like that? The power of messages spreading?

Dr. R: That's a good question. So, I have to say, that I do not... I have never used TikTok, I can't talk intelligently about TikTok in any way, shape, or form. But more broadly, social media; research around the impact of social media on whether people vote. Whether people volunteer for a campaign around the election period, it's kind of evolved, really, over the last decade or so, ever since 2008. Cut to now, I think the tools available to us under the large umbrella of social media have grown substantially over the past 10 years. The ways and knowledge that campaigns have about using social media has grown significantly. I think clearly it's a very impactful tool in a lot of ways.

Aside: Now, in the US, 43% of eligible voters did not vote. But factors that can persuade non-voters include: a social circle that values voting; gratitude from the community, “Hey, thanks for voting man;” and yes, in some cases, even light shame at not voting. So, keep those “I voted” selfies coming. Even better, post about voting early. Chat with your friends about voting, make a plan.

Mindy’s research also found that messages that stress community have the most weight. In one study, she tested a message reading, “The future is ours to build by voting together. We have work to do. The first step is to vote. We must vote for our families. Vote for our communities. Vote for our future.” That messaging got potential voters most pumped to hit the polls. So, fire people up.

Now, in some countries voting is not dependent on your whims or your excitement, it’s compulsory. Like for example, in Australia.

Alie: How do you feel about sausage stands as a way to celebrate voting day? I know they do have compulsory voting in Australia, but they also have sausage stands.

I propose that in the United States, this November, we make it *Decider Day*, and everyone drinks hot cider, there are cider stands. Perhaps with the Covid it’s not the best idea. Maybe you spike it with some Fireball or some whiskey if you want. But do we need to make it more of a celebration? Is there some way we can break down the fears involved and make it more celebratory?

Dr. R: I am so glad you asked this question, because it *should* be a celebration. That is just one of the horrible side effects or consequences of the last number of years since we have become a society much more polarized, and in many ways further and further apart. Everything is so contentious and talking about the election is such a contentious thing. Now, we’re worried about fraud and accusing each other and other groups of trying to steal the election.

The election should be a celebration, especially in a strong democracy, and a peaceful transfer of power. The people simply vote, everybody gets a vote, and you get a new government and the old government steps aside. What an amazing process! How fortunate we are to have this versus many other countries around the world.

Of course, I am not talking about the fact that we don’t have a fully realized democracy. We know that and we have a long way to go. But the election in and of itself, I think especially for young people to elevate it to the level of, “This is something that we should be happy and grateful to be participating in.” There should be civil dialogue, and conversation, and free participation by all, and hopefully bringing in more people into that conversation that historically have not been part of the conversation; so inclusivity as well.

In Australia, it is a celebration. Election Day in many places is like a block party. You have the alcohol, you have the TV, you’re razzing each other, and that’s the way it should be. As I raised my kids, which are all grown now, I tried to do a little of that in my own home. But of course, the reality of it is - this is the Sociologist saying this - that we’re still within our larger society, and we don’t have a culture of voting in the United States.

So for my kids, election night was pizza night, and punch night, and ice cream and... Yeah I know, junk food, but you do whatever you got to do to make it work. *[Alie giggles]* So, they looked forward to Election night. It was a fun thing, and sometimes I would have parties and friends over too, or maybe it was just us. I think to this day some of it has stuck. But again, they’re within the larger culture and we do not have a society that... Forget about

celebrating the election or celebrating our right to vote. We don't even have a culture of voting recognizing that it's important, period.

If you doubt that... I mean, obviously we have voter suppression efforts across the country in many ways. But if you just think about young people, even in the most, kind of, what we think of as communities that are not actively, overtly engaging in voter suppression, we know that there's systemic factors at play that disenfranchise people

But in any given community we don't see young people encouraged. Actually, we often see them discouraged from voting. Sometimes it's in very subtle ways, but we're not out there giving young people an active civics education that's really robust that sets them up to be able to be confident voters when they turn 18. Instead we expect them to turn 18 and magically know how to vote, want to vote, feel motivated to vote. Then when they don't vote we blame them.

Some people say, "Well, you know, that's just fine because I don't know if I want young kids making decisions for my pocketbook." That's just an example, and what seems like less insidious ways. Then we have all the crud that we're seeing like we are seeing in this election. That actively makes it harder for voters, that makes certainly historically underrepresented groups, groups that are often historically targeted for voter suppression efforts... It just serves to reinforce the marginalization that they have felt and still feel in the electoral process.

So, we like to think of ourselves as a beacon of democracy for the rest of the world. You just look at our voting rights, the numbers don't lie. We have a horrible history of voter suppression and we clearly, in multiple ways with all kinds of factors going on all at the same time, are producing an electorate that is not fully representative of the population.

So why does this even matter? It has real consequences for policy. Back to when I was a kid, right? Looking around my community and saying, "Why is the distribution of resources this way?" And of course, it's a lot more complicated than just who's on your city council or your board of supervisors, but there are real consequences to who we elect and there's real consequences to who's doing the electing and who's voting. There's differences in policy preferences by different groups of voters. For those that are more likely to vote, and those that are less likely to vote, there are differences in policy preferences. And we see that playing out then in our lived experiences and the likelihood of a good quality of life in many communities. Period.

Aside: Okay, quick aside. And when I say quick, I am lying. But I am about to get you so pissed that you never miss another election and you vote out of rage and spite, but also enthusiasm. And you vote with the heat of a thousand suns, and your vote literally sparkles in the ballot box and illuminates it like that briefcase scene from *Pulp Fiction*. And I will do that by giving you a rundown of all the ways people have been historically fucked over with voting, and how far it's come, and why we have to keep the fight up.

Okay, 1788, The Founding Fathers are like, "How are we gonna do this?" They make up the Electoral College, which has a number of voters equal to the representatives in the House and the Senate combined. Now these numbers, each state getting two senators and then getting congressional representatives depending on their population, that was based in the Three-Fifths Compromise, which treated enslaved persons as 60% of a human being. And we're still using this system today. Yep. Are you mad yet? Okay.

Now, 1820s; each individual state decides who can vote. Shocker. They all decide white males. And some free Black males.

1840: Women say, "Hey! This sucks, jerks! Can we vote?" Dudes are like, "Make me a sandwich, bitch. PS: No." Okay.

1861-65 we have the Civil War. 1866, The 14th Amendment passes. That means men over 21 can vote. Vagina-havers? LOL no.

1869: 15th Amendment to the Constitution. All can vote regardless of race. Women? Sorry, we were kidding. You can't. But race can't play into it. That's good.

Now, in the 1880s voter disenfranchisement and suppression ramps up with things like literacy tests. They might ask a white guy, "Who's the president?" And if he knows, great. He can vote. And then they'll ask a Black guy to interpret a long passage of the Constitution and then tell him he failed. Other literacy tests, they would have a jar of beans and ask Black voters to guess the exact number in the jar - as a literacy test. Or they would hold up a cucumber and make them guess the number of bumps. Or ask how many bubbles are in a bar of soap, saying there's no right answer... and also, you can't vote.

Poll taxes were also common, and those amounted to between 2-6% of a person's earnings, which obviously many sharecroppers could not afford. But there were grandfather clauses that exempted some voters from these taxes and literacy tests. So if your grandfather could vote, so could you. You get a pass. And this very clearly favored people whose grandfathers were not kidnapped and enslaved.

So fast forward, 1920; 19th Amendment passes. Women can vote. Well, some of them. Guess who can't. Yep, women of color. They could, but the same poll taxes and literacy tests were applied to disenfranchise Black women.

Now, 1965 was a big year for voting. Following a series of marches from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama led by Martin Luther King Jr, the Voting Rights Act is signed. And this outlaws literacy tests, it outlaws intentionally complicated ballot instructions, poll taxes at this point are also outlawed. So this is a big deal.

In 1971, the 26th Amendment passes. 18-year-olds can vote. In 1975 Congress expands that Voting Rights Act to protect the voting rights of those people who don't speak or read English. Now, we'll talk later about some more recent Supreme Court decisions. But how pissed are you? Don't you want to vote so hard that it leaves a mark? But what if you're so worried about doing it wrong that you just sit it out like I do at karaoke?

Alie: What would you say to people who don't vote because they're afraid of doing it wrong or they're overwhelmed? If you're looking at a ballot and you're like, "I don't know which judge to pick. I did not necessarily have the time to research all of them thoroughly." What do you say to people who are afraid of doing it so they don't?

Dr. R: Yeah. I'm so glad you were mentioning this. There's a lot of us out there like that. And again, much more likely to be from historically underrepresented groups. So first off, help them with resources. League of Women Voters has a great voter tool that people can use to look up platforms of candidates and so forth. That being said, it's not just about being able to go look up the information. People need to feel confident that the research they're doing is enough and that they feel like they actually have it. And you think about young people, you hear this often, if they've registered they're given that ballot and not given really any mentoring around it.

And sometimes young people think it's just like a SAT or standardized test where they have to fill in every single box, every single choice, and if they don't fill it out fully, it doesn't get counted. And I've heard from young people that they get nervous. It's like they're taking a test and they're like "Oh gosh, I have to fill the whole thing out." And then they can't find out anything. You mention the judges and it's so true. It's always the judges.

Alie: [*laughs*] Yeah.

Dr. R: They can't figure out the platforms of the judges and then they end up not voting at all. And if somebody had just taken them aside and actually paid attention to bringing them into the electoral process, mentoring them through that, it would be a different scenario. So again, I think it goes back to our values in our society. Making sure that voters are fully prepared and confident: number one. And then of course the official tools that we put out there need to be easier. They need to be wherever possible. County elections materials need to be in plain language, need to be in multiple languages. Websites need to be accessible and easy.

There's still a lot that we can do in terms of the information that we put out for voters and a lot we can do in terms of reaching voters to tell them about these materials. "Did you know this?" Right now the Secretary of State is putting a pretty aggressive campaign to tell people about the changes in California, that everybody's getting - if you're registered - a vote-by-mail ballot, [*"Noice!"*] what you can do, how you can turn that in. So people feel confident and actually use it.

So you can make the change, but we have to actually tell people what they need to do, and also help them to feel comfortable with it. So it's not just about giving them tools. It's also about working through that. And I think also being understanding and empathetic. I rarely ever say that. It sounds so warm and fuzzy, but if you think about it, a big part of the justification for the inequalities and the disparities we see in turnout is we'll often hear people say... and it's a way of excusing it, to say again, that sleeping giant, or again, those kids, "Oh, it's up to them. They just don't care." Or just generally, "Why don't people vote? It's such an easy thing. I can do it. They can do it. I'm not going to hold their hand." Something like that.

And understanding that often people don't participate, number one because they're incredibly busy in their lives, and taking care of their kids, and are juggling a million things, and again, don't even know if it's worth it because of things like historical marginalization. But also, maybe they're trying, and they don't have enough information and they actually are sitting it out because they think that's the right thing to do. They don't want to make a mistake. I hear this from young people all the time that say, "I'm not quite sure who to vote for. I don't know about all the measures on my ballot," whatever it might be and, "I'm going to vote next time." And they actually care deeply. They're not an apathetic young person. They actually care deeply, but they're concerned about making a mistake.

So instead of rushing to judgment, and in a sense further marginalizing people, we need to have a value structure in our society that, we say it's our right to vote, give people what they really need to be able to exercise that right, fully support them.

Aside: So yes, the most badass thing you can do is show up in life and be counted in a democracy. Now, if it seems confusing to vote, you're not stupid. It's confusing on purpose. So just ask friends, google, prepare in advance. Don't let anyone feel like you can't do it. That is horseshit.

We're about to get to your Patreon questions, but before we do, a few words from sponsors of the show who allow us to donate to a charity of the Ologist's choice. And this week Mindy had two that she couldn't decide between, so we're going to donate to both!

First is the Marshall Project, which is a nonpartisan, nonprofit news organization that seeks to sustain a sense of national urgency about the US criminal justice system. And that is achieved through their award-winning journalism and partnerships with other news outlets and public forums. And the Marshall Project educates and enlarges the audience of people who care about the state of criminal justice.

We also donated to Common Cause, which is a nonpartisan grassroots organization dedicated to upholding the core values of American democracy. And they promote equal rights, opportunity, representation for all, and they empower all people to make their voices heard in the political process. Links to both organizations are in the show notes so you can check them out. Donations were made possible by sponsors.

[*Ad Break*]

Now, questions from listeners who wrote in.

Alie: We got a ton of questions about voter suppression. Jade Tollis, Chuong Nguyen, Maria Jouravleva, Bailey Sperling, Marcie T, Meagan Walker, and Michelle Dempsey, as well as Erin Unson who asked: What are some recent examples of voter suppression, and how have they been overcome, and how can we guarantee our own liberties if we can't vote to guarantee them? So what exactly is voter suppression?

Dr. R: Oh. Well, I chuckled there for a moment only because recent examples are in our face every night on the news.

[*clip from YouTube video. Trump responding to a reporter at a White House press conference: "The ballots are out of control, you know it."*]

And that's meant no disrespect for the individual question. I think everybody that's listening probably knows that we have a really ugly history in the United States of voter suppression. Groups that have had to fight every step of the way to gain the right to vote. African Americans, women, young people, and so on. But still to this day. Voter suppression is overt in terms of creating a political structure and a set of laws around voting that deliberately make it harder for some groups. And by the way, it's not just race or ethnicity. It can be also by party. As the Supreme Court was just recently looking at the issue of gerrymandering by party.

Aside: Just a quick heads up. In the summer of 2019, the Supreme Court issued a 5 to 4 *shrug* toward gerrymandering. See, state legislatures get to decide voting districts, and most have been Republican held. And according to the New York Times, using some sophisticated software, they're able to draw up all kinds of district creatures on maps. But if Democrats had the power, they might be doing the same thing. But for now, the hopes were that the Supreme Court would issue a federal, "Hey, enough already, y'all." Which it did not.

Dr. R: It also can be much more subtle. It can be things like setting up reforms that seem to be reforms, but actually end up making it harder for people to access the political process. So like out here in California or in the West, I will hear people talk about 'election reforms', use that phrase. And typically, we're talking about changes in the election system that are about increasing access and ultimately, hopefully, greater participation from historically underrepresented groups.

Other parts of the country, election reform means the concern is about voter fraud, and you have debates about IDs, and whether young people at the University of Texas, whether their student ID should be able to be used that to be able to vote. In those kinds of conversations nobody's uttering the word suppression. What they're talking is, "Oh, we actually want to make sure that we..." If you're talking about voter fraud, it's about, "securing everybody's right to vote. Making sure that your vote counts, making sure that somebody else isn't supplanting your vote or going to take your vote away from you." If it's about things like automatic voter registration or increasing vote by mail, and that's about access, that also is about making sure that everybody has the right to vote and that you don't lose your rights.

Aside: In LA, where I live, we had a new system this year. You didn't have to report at a specific polling place anymore. You could go wherever. The freedom! The convenience! Oh also, PS, they closed a shitload of locations. Literally thousands. And so you could go anywhere, but the lines were longer than any I have ever seen in any election I've ever voted in. Hours long at times. Both Democrats and Republicans thought these changes sucked, to be fair. So what can sometimes look like election reform can be a step backward. Intentionally or unintentionally.

Dr. R: And then we have, of course, what's happening every night on our TVs or wherever you get your news. The President of the United States, whatever your politics are, clearly is engaging in voter suppression.

[clip from YouTube video. Trump responding on ballots at a White House press conference: "... get rid of the ballots and you'll have a great transf- we'll have a very peaceful... there won't be a transfer frankly, there'll be a continuation."]

The goal is about the bottom line, his reelection. It's about confusing the voter at the very least. It's about discouraging people from voting, it's about casting doubt on the election, all of that. The fear is that, of course, it's going to just suppress the vote or the outcome in some way is going to be challenged from people who legitimately voted. Voter suppression is around us in very overt ways. We just saw the President of the United States talk about sending law enforcement or the National Guard, I think it was. Forgive me, but sending some sort of law enforcement to polling places to ensure that there wasn't fraudulent voting.

So when we think about the Civil Rights Movement and we think about the push back against all of those voter suppression tactics, there was also an ideology, a set of explanations for why local sheriffs would deny African Americans access to a polling place. They didn't say... Well, sometimes it was overt. But oftentimes the excuse that was given, it was much more subtle, but clearly the intention, everybody knew what it was. So we have to look beyond the way something is packaged and really understand that the bottom line is the research.

Aside: So what one party may say is 'guarding against fraud', might be surreptitious voter suppression. Now, per the Voting Rights Act of 1965 and the National Voter Registration Act of 1993, voter intimidation or coercion, sidenote, is technically illegal. It is punishable by fine and/or imprisonment. So does voter suppression even work though? Oh, it does. After the 15th Amendment allowed Black men to vote in 1870, their turnout was equal to or greater than turnout for white voters. That voter suppression and disenfranchisement in the late 1880s, like those impossible literacy tests, lead to a 99% decrease in Black voter turnout in Louisiana. So yes, voter suppression is nefariously effective. Now, what do democracies and research have in common? Numbers really matter.

Dr. R: So let's take it back to research, right? I'm a researcher. What did this change mean? What can other research tell us? If this change is actually going to happen, what is its likely impact on people's right to vote? Likely impact on turnout and representation? Sometimes all that we have is data to be able to tell us and to be able to push back against those excuses, that framing around, "Well, we're just doing this because we want to make sure that we don't see voter fraud." Well, there is no voter fraud. Study after study after study have shown us this.

Getting back to your initial question, why do I do this work? And I talked about being a kid and looking around my community. I think, to this day... I grew up, I went to college, got my PhD. When I was a kid and I wondered why not everybody participated, because I could see that it mattered, that the communities that needed the most help were the communities that didn't have as much participation, and that puzzled me. And as I studied it, I learned why, all the reasons, all the barriers that are in place for full participation. But still, at a gut level, it's not okay.

There's lots of different ways that you can change that and hopefully effect positive change when it comes to having a stronger democracy. And for me, data was kind of my route, being a researcher. Everybody can place different parts of the puzzle, and mine was, and is to this day with my research center, to be able to supply the research that's out there, that's nonpartisan, that can hopefully reach across into different kinds of conversations, whether the conversations are open or not open. But what do the numbers tell us? What are the facts telling us? And that power and data can make change and push back against what we still see today, the voter suppression efforts across the country, blatant or otherwise.

Aside: All right, this next question is suuuuper, super, super important. If you take away one thing from this episode, it's this. Pass it on. And it was asked by Patrons Kaydee Coast, Maria Jouravleva, Zwelf Juniper, Emily Arnold, Logan Bridge, Josh Frye, Hannah Lowe, and Jasmine Moseley.

Alie: And you know, a lot of listeners had questions. Logan K wanted to know: How likely is it that my mail-in vote will be discounted? I see conflicting information. I feel very misinformed. And Shea Murphy said: mail-in voting. Are the chances of corruption really as high as certain individuals say it is, or is it safe? Hope asks: Why is it bad (or are we just told it's bad?) to mail-in vote?

Dr. R: Oh my gosh.

Alie: So there has been a lot of talk that mail-in voting isn't reliable. Is that a form of voter suppression because mail-in voting is great?

Dr. R: Yes. Yes. So, the fact that you got that many questions shows me that the tactics that are out there right now by the President of the United States, and others, unfortunately are working. This has been made a partisan issue overtly, by many people, not just the president. And the bottom-line impact is that it's making people like many of your listeners doubt whether their vote's even going to be cast. It could affect whether they actually vote. And that's just incredibly disheartening, and it is a form of voter suppression.

So let me answer the questions. No, they don't have to worry about voter fraud. Voter fraud is incredibly rare. It is also incredibly rare when we're talking specifically about vote by mail. There are securities and procedures that are in place, quite substantial, particularly in a state like California. The ballot has to be checked. It has to be verified that the person who sent it really is the person. Your signature is going to be verified. There's a process every year. There's thousands of ballots in our state alone that get rejected.

The concern, actually, going into this election is that we may see a much, much higher - certainly we will see a much higher number, but maybe even a much higher percentage - of ballots rejected in the November election across the United States as use goes up. But you also have a lot of people who are unfamiliar with it. Plus, there's concern about if the methods that are in place to evaluate whether a ballot is actually that voter's ballot and is legitimate could be manipulated.

But putting aside manipulation, which by the way is not fraud. It would be manipulation maybe on the side of policymakers or election officials, in terms of the procedures that they put in place. Let's hope that that doesn't happen. But for an individual voter, if you cast your ballot, it's going to get counted. It's going to be verified. And what you probably have to worry about the most is just how you're going to get it in. So we do know there are delays with the USPS. Plan ahead. Mail it with at least a week. I say longer. I think the USPS still says a week. Or better yet, drop it off. You can drop it off at a polling place if you're using a vote-by-mail ballot. You can drop it off, some counties in our state, for instance, have drop boxes, some counties across the United States do. Drop it off at your elections office.

Use it, though. If that makes you more comfortable to vote, for what multitude of reasons why you might use that vote-by-mail ballot, absolutely use it. Don't be scared off from casting your ballot. I'm nervous that people who would normally vote by mail might not do it this year and say, "Okay, I'm going to vote on Election Day." And then Election Day comes and something goes wrong or they forget, because they're not in the habit. They end up not voting. Don't let your vote be taken from you, period.

Aside: It should be noted that the director of the American Postal Workers Union, Judy Beard, recently made the statement: "We definitely know that the president is absolutely wrong concerning vote-by-mail." Now, I will say - check and see if you need an extra stamp or two on there. If it's over an ounce, you may need an extra stamp. I'm gonna unload a whole damn book on mine if I have to. And Pennsylvania: you have a weird extra Privacy Envelope that says 'Official Ballot Envelope' on it, and your ballot has to be put in that and *then* in the outer envelope. So take a second, everyone. Read your instructions. And pass that on, Pennsylvania. You're a swing state, so good luck. We're all counting on you.

Also, did you know that in some states and counties, you can drop your ballot off at a local library? And you could also, while you're there, check out a book on growing orchids or dragon folklore. One-stop shop.

Also, if you need info on your state and polling places, Vote.org has you covered. The *New York Times* also has a great tool to make sure that you have all the info you need. The election is November 3rd in America but it has already started. You can vote early. Let it be counted. And help others in your life get their vote in. Have a socially-distanced study hall with like-minded friends if need be.

Now, a lot of listeners had the same question about if their vote makes a difference, especially if they vote independent or in a state that's typically red or typically blue and they are not. I'm looking at you, Emily A, Abby Cox, Jeff Fitzmyers, Leah, Rayden Marcum, Morgan Fowler, Lisa Love, Kerri-Leigh, Cat Lindsay, Hilary Larson, first-time question-askers Joshua Tauzin, PixieMuffin, Catie Noble, and Chell Margulis.

Alie: And a lot of people had questions about why their vote would matter if they live in, say, a blue state and they vote blue. So should they even bother voting if they know that the electoral college is going to go one way or another? And also people who vote independent

feel like their vote doesn't matter at all because it's such a polarized two-party system. Any thoughts on that?

Dr. R: So, every vote matters. And we're not just talking about the presidential race, which sucks up all the air in any conversation like this. But you have a state-level races, you have local races. And talking about affecting people's life chances and the quality of their lives, most of those really obvious kinds of effects on your life happen at the local level, with your local candidates. City council and so forth, school board for your kids.

Aside: So think of your mayors and how they've handled the pandemic, or the traffic through your neighborhood, or city regulations to help address climate change. Or locally, prosecutors are responsible for so much in the criminal justice system. And do you know that they're predominantly male and white? And do you know where I learned this? I learned this on the website for Ben & Jerry's. And I have never wanted to be more loyal to a dessert brand in my life.

Also, local elections kick ass because just think, when else can you vote for someone, or hate someone, and then later see them in Trader Joe's? And maybe you think you're a loser - and you're not, by the way - but then getting all up in the hot gossip of local elections, you might say, "Who are these bozos running things? I could do better than this!" And then boom, the next thing you know, you got elected to something, and you're helping shit run better. That's how it happens, people!

Dr. R: Every vote matters. Every level of voting matters. I think that's clear. And even in a blue state, you're voting on everything else on your ticket, local ballot measures. Period. So it goes back to people feeling like if they vote, they actually can affect the election. Even in a landslide election, even if all you care about is the presidential race, you should want your vote to be counted as part of that, no matter whether you think your candidate is going to win or not win, to affect the bottom line.

And I would argue in this election, even, in particular, because there has been so much conversation, and so many fear tactics used around what the outcome is going to look like, and suggestions that the outcome of the presidential race could even be challenged if it's really, really close. If it's not so close, in either direction, that helps avoid, potentially, even a constitutional crisis. I don't think we're going to get there, but a close race could be something, we've already seen, that's challenged at least verbally. So rack up those votes, whatever direction. Make a statement with your vote. Help make that ballot box overflow and keep our democracy from a crisis, in whatever direction you're going to vote.

That's another element I would never think that I'd ever have to be citing as a reason to vote. OMG. I hate to say it: we're at that point. We really are. And so many of us, Ologists and others, are honestly deeply concerned about the impacts, the outcomes, the aftermath of this election, and how our democracy can be further weakened. I think we're at a really vulnerable point right now. And the norms that keep our democracy as strong as it is - again, it's certainly far from perfect - are being challenged left and right. And we're in danger.

Alie: Yeah. And Pandora II and first-time question-asker Alia Myers want to know: Why is gerrymandering a thing? How is it legal and how do we stop it?

Dr. R: Ooh. Well, it's still an open question of how legal it really is. The Supreme Court has been taking up this issue a lot lately, over the last few years. It goes back to power. So who draws those electoral districts, at a state and local level? We elect the officials that do that. Those officials, without a lot of oversight or accountability - it can differ across states, but - what

they produce is often just up to their own set of justifications and not a lot of scrutiny around that, unless there is legal action. So who we vote matters. And we have seen, post-2010, a significant uptick in gerrymandering across the United States. And of course the Shelby decision with the Supreme Court, gutting the Voting Rights Act, you know, lit a fire under it. What was maybe a campfire became a wildfire after the Shelby decision.

Aside: Okay, don't worry, I googled this for us, and it was the 2013 Shelby County vs. Holder decision, and I'm gonna break it down quickly. The 1965 VRA, or Voting Rights Act, had provisions against certain states changing voting protocol without preclearance, which is a federal oversight, because these particular jurisdictions had shitty histories of voter suppression tactics. But in 2013, it was decided essentially that some of those provisions could be eliminated because [*lightly sarcastically*] times had changed since 1965 and they must no longer be needed, right?

So, dissenting justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg is quoted as saying:

Throwing out preclearance when it has worked and is continuing to work to stop discriminatory changes is like throwing away your umbrella in a rainstorm because you are not getting wet.

[*clip from Saturday Night Live, Kate McKinnon as Ruth Bader Ginsburg: "What is... Smells like smoke. What is that? It's a Ginsburn."*]

But, hey. 2013: Post-racial America right? Who needs pre-clearances? Well... America. The Shelby vs. Holder ruling has led to over 1,000 polling places being shut down, voter rolls purged, and according to the American Civil Liberties Union, the ACLU, 70% of Georgia voters purged in 2018 were Black. They also say that across the country, 1 in 13 Black Americans cannot vote due to disenfranchisement laws. Over one-third of voters with a disability report difficulty voting. And counties with larger minority populations have fewer polling sites and poll workers per voter. Also, a lot of voters who have had a felony on their record have no idea that they may still be able to vote.

Now, some other effective ways to suppress the vote: cut early voting and have super strict requirements for voter IDs. According to the ACLU, voter ID laws have been estimated by the US Government Accountability Office to reduce voter turnout by 2-3 percentage points. So that translates to tens of thousands of votes lost in a single state just because of strict voter ID laws. North Dakota enacted a voter ID law in 2017 which disproportionately affects Indigenous voters, 19% of whom don't have a qualifying ID, as opposed to just 12% of the rest of North Dakotans.

And in Texas - ooh, Texas, your voter ID laws, wow. They permit gun licenses as IDs, but not student IDs. So if you're in Texas, make sure you have the ID needed. You can also bring something like a bank statement as a supplemental ID. But yes, keeping things murky or seemingly impossible is one way to deter voters.

Who is enacting these newer election restrictions? Well, I'm sorry Republicans. Research shows it's been y'all.

Dr. R: The legality of it is in question, but the fact that we have people in power that have pretty overtly... and by the way, throughout history, both Democrats and Republicans can engage in this. As of late, it's been a lot of Republican-led state Houses, as Republicans have taken over state Houses, post-2010. There have been, kind of, overt strategies within the Republican Party. Again, it goes back to voting. Voting matters. And then also, holding these elected representatives accountable. Fortunately, we have a number of very strong nationwide and

international organizations that are watchdogs around gerrymandering. So, Common Cause, MALDEF, PRLDEF, the Brennan Center, and other groups that are always in some form or another challenging what they see as gerrymandering, whether based on race, ethnicity, flat-out overt partisan gerrymandering, whatever it might be.

Aside: Quick history aside. I know we mentioned gerrymandering earlier, but it's a term that first cropped up in Boston in 1812 after the governor drew up some districts that were just so fugly and such a stretch, one looked like a weird salamander heinous bird-creature, and the governor was Elbridge Gerry. But unlike gigawatts and gifs, you don't see anyone screaming at each other on Reddit that it should be 'gary-mander'. I, personally, am staying out of this one.

Alie: The last listener question. Lorena Hernandez, first-time question-asker, had a great question: Does the evidence actually show that we are increasingly polarized? This is what it feels like, but they also feel like they've heard academics argue that the far left and far right are just getting louder as opposed to larger. What do the polls say? What do the ballot boxes say?

Dr. R: Yeah, I think it depends on how you define it. So, if we look at, like, public opinion research and polls asking people how much they trust government, how much they trust people in power, how they view the other party, that sort of thing, I think we definitely are widening in some pretty significant ways. There's less trust in government, less trust amongst ourselves.

I think with modern media and the proliferation of all different kinds of channels, there's this ability for people to be seen in ways that they couldn't be seen before when we just had three networks and that was about it. And so people become stars of the internet, stars of all kinds of different avenues. It incentivizes candidates to be even more inflammatory, and I think we've seen this on the left and the right post-2010 with the Tea Party Movement.

We've seen a lot of candidates, certainly on the right, that you never would hear from in small states and small districts that would maybe toe the party line, but now, all of the sudden, they can get media attention. It's about sound bites, it's about having a national audience that just incentivizes them to just be louder, if you want to call it that.

[clip of from InfoWars, Alex Jones: "... have the Pepsi taste-testing systems be based on fetal tissue! All demonic systems! Genetically engineer all the crops! Overthrow creation! More blood! [prolonged growling monster sound] That's Hillary.]

And they get attention for it, right? And they can use it to come back to their home districts in ways that they couldn't before. Where, maybe things that they would say before wouldn't get play on the local news, or they would be shunned for it on the local news, but really they're just taking advantage of a different kind of communication structure that we have now.

And I think that's on the left as well. So the rise of AOC, she's had challenges within the Democratic Party and amongst its leadership, but she has her own pathways to be able to be seen, and to have a following, and to be able to have an influence, and to push the Democratic Party in some way in terms of its platform. I would argue she's not pushing it as much as many people think she is. That's also part of the concern on a lot of people's parts.

And certainly I think in the more polarized environment that we've had since 2016, and this kind of positioning against a lot of it, not all of it, but this positioning against Donald Trump, and what he puts on Twitter. It's also led to this overt, contentious, you know, "The

California governor and Trump,” “AOC and Trump,” “Marco Rubio supporting something Trump said, or not supporting something Trump said,” or whatever it might be. The media has kind of created this set of narratives that I think have come out of just the way Trump functions, so it’s hard to disentangle that.

Aside: Okay, full disclosure; for this episode I read a lot of his past tweets and confession – it gives me great anxiety, which might be their intention. I hate it. Now, on that topic:

Alie: What is one thing about your job as a political sociologist that you hate? And it can be as big or as little as you want.

Dr. R: Oh my god. Oh, you’re trying to get me in trouble, aren’t you?

Alie: No, I mean, it can be anything from your commute to, you know, e-mails, to injustice. Anything.

Dr. R: So, aside from the reason why I got into this line of work, which is great concern over things like voter suppression and underrepresentation and the strength of our democracy, the actual job... to be honest, I think I’m very public in my job and I think it’s some of the nastiness that’s out there.

I don’t mind challenging questions at all. I give a lot of public presentations and people ask me questions about my research or my methods, or ask me if I’m doing a study on young people, for instance, [*snobby voice*] “Why should we have young people to vote?” I welcome the dialogue, even though I just said it with a tone, because that’s my job. And if people are questioning it, hopefully the data helps change their mind, or opens their minds, at least to a larger conversation. But they are... especially over the last two years, there’s just more out there. I’ll write an op-ed about something that’s completely not controversial and I’ll get e-mails that are just not nice. I think I have a pretty thick skin and I think I’m actually overall pretty lucky and I certainly don’t want to encourage anything by saying this in public.

Aside: So Dr. Romero says that occasionally her published studies about voter suppression of certain groups will land her an email or two from angry folks who believe dogma over data, but she shrugs it off and keeps working.

Dr. R: It’s an attempt to silence us overtly and sometimes not overtly, but it’s still an attempt to silence us. It’s an attempt to keep us in our boxes, it’s an attempt to intimidate anybody that’s trying to do research that does enlighten and gives data that is helpful to these conversations. The one good thing to talk about this is; since you said this is a show about ologists - is I suspect that a lot us are getting this, and we just don’t talk to each other about it, because we keep doing our jobs. But I think it’s an attempt to suppress, in a sense, our work, and since you asked, that’s the thing that I think is most, I guess, disappointing. I won’t say I hate it. It is what it is, but it’s just disappointing.

Doesn’t stop me. Doesn’t make me cry at night. If anything, it spurs you on to continue to do your work because you don’t want even some pathetic attempt or otherwise to intimidate you. That means, that’s all the more reason why you should be doing the work that you’re doing, and on the whole, overwhelmingly, I’m really lucky my research is perceived very positively. I’m so grateful that it’s used by election officials, it’s used by advocacy groups, it’s used by the different political parties, it’s used by everybody. I’m very confident in terms of the impact of my work, but that’s just a yuckiness that’s out there, and that’s how we are all feeling, in different ways, in our society. Right?

Again, nothing compared to what we're seeing out in the street, the attacks that people have received over social media for taking a stand on issues that are important, their lives being threatened. What I'm disappointed about in my work is, you know, it pales, it's nothing! It's just absolutely nothing compared to... coming from the same pot, but the vitriol that so many people get for the different kinds of actions they are taking to make social change. So, I just want to make sure that's clear too.

Alie: What about your favorite thing about your job? Your favorite thing about political sociology?

Dr. R: Favorite? I think, favorite is to see the impact of my work. To see policy makers and groups tell me that it is something that is useful for them, that it informs the work that they're doing, that it has real impact on the ground is deeply, deeply gratifying. To see that it gets used and it informs real action to improve turnout, right? To evaluate whether an election form really is working in the ways that it was intended, those sorts of things, I'm incredibly grateful to get to do this work.

And then as a researcher, I have a job that's deeply meaningful, that I have a lot of autonomy, I have a research center that I founded, that I set the mission for, that I have wonderful support from USC and my public policy school. And I am free to be able to pursue a research that I think is, and that I've, again with our relationships with our policy makers and others, that I know in some form will be impactful. To be able to do that, to have that intellectual freedom, is deeply important to me.

And of course, you know, I'm also just freaking lucky that I get to work at home. I'm safe and sound as an academic, and I get to, just on a practical basis, make a living in a safe environment with a lot of autonomy. That's not what the other members of my family were able to do, and I'm really, really lucky that I'm in that position. I have a strong sense of responsibility that the work that I *do* do under that structure is meaningful and impactful.

Alie: You're making such a difference. I'm so glad that you do what you. This has been so fascinating and, Everyone; vote, vote, vote, vote, vote, vote, vote!

Dr. R: Everyone vote!

So, ask smart people stupid, important questions because policy makers sometimes make these things confusing on purpose and it's punk rock to ask for explanations.

So, to check out Dr. Romero's work, head to CID.USC.edu and there's going to be a link in the show notes. You can follow the Center for Inclusive Democracy on Twitter [@CID_USC](https://twitter.com/CID_USC). Dr. Romero tweets at [@MindySRomero](https://twitter.com/MindySRomero). We are @Ologies on [Twitter](https://twitter.com/Ologies) and [Instagram](https://www.instagram.com/Ologies). I'm [@AlieWard](https://twitter.com/AlieWard) on [both](https://twitter.com/Ologies). Do say hello. And if you'd like to flaunt your Ologi-ness, merch is up at OlogiesMerch.com. We have all the usual merch, plus some cozy *Ologies* blankets, and surprise! We just got face masks. Heck yeah.

Thank you Boni Dutch and Shannon Feltus who manage merch and host the comedy podcast *You Are That*. This week, the *You Are That* guest is Dr. Mike Natter from the Diabetology and Covid episodes, so subscribe to *You Are That* for those.

Thank you to Erin Talbert for adminning the [Ologies Podcast Facebook group](https://www.facebook.com/OlogiesPodcast). Thank you to Emily White and her team of Ologite transcribers who make episode transcripts free and available on my website at AlieWard.com/Ologies-Extras. There are bleeped episodes for your grandma, or your kids, or my mom on that page for free. There's a link to all that in the show notes. Thank you Caleb Patton for bleeping those.

Thank you Noel Dilworth for helping me shuffle my schedule around amid shoots and stuff. I am recording this from a Hampton Inn in Alabama right now. Thank you to assistant editor, Jarrett Sleeper of MindJam Media, who is also very adept with a sledgehammer, and to his Highness, lead editor Steven Ray Morris, for piecing all these parts together each week. He hosts the *Purrrcast* and the dino-themed podcast, *See Jurassic Right*, both very worthy of subscribing.

Now if you listen to the end of the episode you know I tell you a secret, and this week's secret is that, yeah, I am recording these asides in a Hampton Inn in Alabama, and I'm having to do it on my phone because I'm shooting for *Innovation Nation*, and it wasn't until I went through TSA at LAX that I realized I left my entire recording bag at home and, hey, problem, solution. You got a problem on a film set, no one has time to sit around wallowing, you just gotta find the fastest solution, and you gotta keep going. So here we go. Recording it on my phone. Okay, vote, talk to your friends about voting, again, make a plan, vote early, we got this. All right. Vote. Berbye.

Transcribed by:

Ruby-Leigh Tonks

Scott Metzinger

Samantha Blackwood, a dual (US and Canadian) citizen voting in the 2020 US general election via absentee mail-in ballot all the way from Toronto, ON, Canada

Hannah Dent

That Canadian who's always asking, "what's that temperature in Celsius," Elena Horne

More links you may find useful:

Resources for voting: [Vote.org](https://www.vote.org)

[New York Times state-by-state info on voting](#)

Donations went to [themarshallproject.org](https://www.themarshallproject.org) & [commoncause.org](https://www.commoncause.org)

[Political sociology vs. Political Science](#)

[Huell Howser's California's Gold \["Wooooow"\]](#)

[Voting Rights Act](#)

[Trump blocks USPS funding to stop mail-in votes](#)

[Felony disenfranchisement laws by state](#)

[1993's Voter Registration Act](#)

[Electoral College's Racist Origins](#)

[Voter intimidation Laws](#)

[The Gerrymander](#)

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[Voting timeline of the US](#)

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