You Might Be Right Ep062 (S9 Ep006) - Young Voters - Preview Transcript

Daniel Cox (00:00):
This group has come of age when there's been very little trust in Congress, in the presidency, in the federal government, in our political processes. That's a really different formative experience to try to understand and think about how to get involved in politics when you think that the system's largely broken and politicians are all serving themselves.

Robert Griffin (00:20):
People are just more flexible. They're more cartilage than they are bone, is one way to think about it. And as we get older, we tend to kind of crystallize, we kind of freeze up a little bit in terms of how we think about things or our political affiliations. But this young period of people's lives, it's really an important period for forming these identities and opinions.

Marianne Wanamaker (00:42):
Welcome to You Might Be Right, a place for civil conversations about tough topics, hosted by former Tennessee governors, Phil Bredesen and Bill Haslam. I'm Marianne Wanemaker, Dean of the Baker School at the University of Tennessee, where members of our producer circle make this show possible. To learn more about our work, visit youmightberight.org.

Bill Haslam (01:07):
Welcome back to You Might Be Right. I'm here as always with my co-host and friend, Phil Bredesen. Phil, it's always fun to do these with you, particularly this one.

Phil Bredesen (01:14):
Good. Well, I appreciate that and good to be back with you as well. I'm really enjoying this season, kind of leading up to the midterms here, getting into some serious politics.

Bill Haslam (01:23):
Me too. I think this is a lot of interesting topics leading up to what's going to be an interesting as well as important midterm. I want to start with a number. Nearly 50 million young people are going to be eligible to vote in this year's midterm. So those are folks usually defined in the 18 to 29 age range. Now made up entirely of Gen Zers as the millennials have aged out of that description. But it'll be the biggest voting eligible generation we've ever had in this country.

Phil Bredesen (01:53):
And I think also the most unpredictable, which is the part that I think I really care about, you and I built, we've been doing this a long time and we've heard that these young people, this is the year the young people are finally going to show up before nearly every election I can remember.

Sometimes it happens, a lot of times it doesn't and by the next cycle everybody's forgotten about it.

Bill Haslam (02:19):
I remember when I ran for mayor back in 2003, I though, "Well, I'm going to concentrate on all these University of Tennessee students who live in Knoxville and spend a lot of time and then realize that most of them in the end actually didn't vote, but there might be something different going on here. This is a generation that's been through some unique things, a pandemic, COVID that shut their schools down right when they were in the middle of the beginning education process. There's a cost of living and a housing squeeze that is real that people are feeling. Particularly if you're in that age group, you're thinking, I'm not certain how I'm ever going to be able to afford a down payment to buy a house of my own." And maybe most importantly, they've grown up in a time when the politics have been so partisan and so divided and that's been exacerbated by the weapon of social media to where it can be felt in ways that it hasn't been felt before.

Phil Bredesen (03:12):
Yeah, I don't disagree that this generation has had kind of a strange run of it compared to some previous ones. What I want to know is whether this actually turns into something at the ballot box or whether it's just a rumble that goes on underneath it. Because the honest history here is the young voters show up sometimes big in presidential years and it falls off hugely in those off years, which in the end can be more important for the direction that things are taking than even those big elections.

Bill Haslam (03:42):
So today we're going to talk about will they vote? And again, the youth vote has always, I think a little bit been overemphasized or over talked about for what actually happens. And then if they will, what are the issues that are motivating those 18 to 29 year old voters?

Phil Bredesen (04:01):
And I guess the question in my mind is if they do show up in real numbers, it isn't a story about just one election. And I think both of our parties need to be figuring out how to earn that support going forward. This is becoming a very important voting block.

Bill Haslam (04:18):
I think it is. And more and more of those folks actually don't identify with either party. And so what will that mean? Will that 18 to 29 year old vote change everything or change nothing?

Phil Bredesen (04:33):

Let's find out. Before we get to our expert guests, we have some special guests joining us today. Two students from the University of Tennessee Butt Baker School who will give their perspective. I think it's great to have them on. They're interested, intelligent young people because of being part of the Baker School.

Bill Haslam (04:49):
Hey, welcome Madeline and Tyler. Madeline, I'll let you start. Introduce yourself, tell us a little about you, and then we'll go from there.

Madeline Rust (04:57):
Well, thank you so much for having me on today. My name is Madeline Rust. I'm originally from Van Buren County, Tennessee. Right. Go Van Buren. I love that. I am a second year here at UT. I'm in the Baker School. I'm majoring in public affairs and I'm also minoring in PR and political science. Yeah, that's pretty much about me.

Bill Haslam (05:16):
That's great. And Tyler, same question.

Tyler Raffety (05:20):
Yes, sir. Governor Bredesen, Governor Haflem, really appreciate y'all for having us on today. My name is Halibi Rafi. I'm from Vonore in Monroe County, Tennessee. I'm a sophomore at the Baker School with a concentration in economic community development. I'm also a public affairs major.

Phil Bredesen (05:41):
The one thing I sort of felt missing from both of those, and if you just talk about it a little bit, is how'd you get interested in politics? There's lots of students in college who've got a lot of other interests and things they're working on. Tyler, start with you just going backwards. How'd you get interested?

Tyler Raffety (05:59):
Well, I first got interested, honestly, when I was around, I'd say 13, 14. The 2020 presidential election was definitely a huge one for me. Just being able to be interested in that and starting to learn more about how politics works and how campaigning works and whatnot. But I kind of sought it out for myself. Never came from any kind of political background, wasn't born into it or anything like that. So it was just an interest that I had and just went with it as the years went on.

Bill Haslam (06:33):
That's good. Madeline, same question.

Madeline Rust (06:35):
Okay. So like Tyler, I'm not from a political background or anything like that. I really got involved in 2024 or 2025, sorry. When I graduated high school, I ended up getting the White County Democratic Party local scholarship, which I didn't know existed honestly, because in rural Tennessee, you don't really see a bunch of Democrats being very vocal or anything. So I ended up getting that scholarship and they invited me to their annual picnic that they had and it was a fundraiser. And so when I went the following month, I met a bunch of young Democrats there, not my now best friend I met there and we ended up connecting. But after that, it kind of went up from there.

Phil Bredesen (07:14):
We're coming up here on the midterms to talk a little bit about politics. I'd like to just kind of ask each of you, what do you think are going to be the defining issues in these elections? I mean, obviously each party is trying to focus people on what's most advantageous to them, but from your perspectives, what do you think the issues are?

Madeline Rust (07:39):
Yes.

Phil Bredesen (07:41):
And let me amend that maybe the issues of most importance to young people.

Madeline Rust (07:45):
I think the two biggest ones that I've heard around the table, number one, affordability. As a young person, I don't know how I'm going to afford a house when I want to buy one. I don't know how when I graduate college, if I don't get a paying job, what am I going to do? Am I going to stay an apartment? Am I going to have to move back in my parents' house? I really think that's going to be a defining key feature in this election because a lot of people can't afford things right now. Groceries are going up, gas is going up, things like that. And the other thing I think is really on the table for this election as well is just human rights, human rights. I feel like it's a very touchy subject for a lot of people, especially within these last year, year or two.

Bill Haslam (08:28):
Tyler, what issues do you see?

Tyler Raffety (08:32):
I will agree with Maddie. I think affordability is top of mind for everyone right now. I think too, being in rural Tennessee and whatnot, this may be with people who are not necessarily young

people, but there's still a few young people as well who agree with this. Protecting agriculture is a huge thing right now. I know we got a lot of hot button issues when it comes to data centers, when it comes to farmland, when it comes to certain decisions that people on the local level are making. I think that's kind of starting to even trickle down to young voters, young voters starting to pay attention to things like that as well.

Bill Haslam (09:08):
One of the purposes of the podcast is not that we're going to try to make everybody agree or people that all end up in the middle in the same place, but to have people learn how to disagree better by understanding the other side. I'm curious, and again, it's hard to compare a whole lot with prior generations, but do you think your friends and people you associate with, will your generation know how to disagree better than the ones that have come before you? We've taken the sharp weapon of social media and used it to beat each other to a pulp and not try to understand the other side. Will your generation improve on what's come before?

Tyler Raffety (09:50):
I think so. I think a lot of people in my generation especially are a little bit more open-minded. They'll agree with some policies of some people, they'll disagree with some of their policies and they may agree with the other side. They're willing to see the other person's perspective. I think that's something the Baker School does very well. Obviously we're kind of in this echo chamber, so to speak, because a lot of us are taught this whole thing to disagree better. But I think even outside of the Baker School, I think you see that a lot. I think you see a lot more open-mindedness.

Madeline Rust (10:20):
You know what? I'm going to have to agree with Tyler on that one. I would have to completely agree with it. There is so much aggression and there is so much hatred on social media, but when you actually have those conversations in person and face to face, door to door, it's different. It's a different type of energy. When you talk about the tolerance of how people can communicate these days, I feel like our generations, we have a pretty high tolerance on what we can say and what we can think. I feel like we're also very open-minded, of course, but tolerance is high. We're going to have those conversations because we're growing up having those conversations. I mean, right now you have two second years in college talking about it on a podcast, but I do feel like that tolerance starts to disintegrate when it comes to certain topics, the touchy subjects, the hot subjects that tick people off just in a snap.

Bill Haslam (11:17):
Perfect. Well, thank you both for joining us. This has been fun. Our episode is on about will young voters engage in this election? Will it be any different than before? And we love having two real life examples. Thank you both also for engaging in the process and doing it in a constructive thoughtful way. We hope your tribes increase.

Phil Bredesen (11:36):
Good. And want to say my own thanks to you. It's been really interesting and good luck to you. And I certainly hope that once you get that degree in your hand and move out into the real world, you continue your interest and passion because the world needs it. Appreciate that.

Madeline Rust (11:52):
Thank you. Yeah. Thank you so much.

Bill Haslam (11:55):
Phil, our first guest today is Daniel Cox, director and founder of the Survey Center on American Life and a senior fellow in polling and public opinion at the American Enterprise Institute. He spent his career studying how Americans actually live, their friendships, their faith, their relationships, and what that tells us about their politics. I personally find all this really interesting, so I'm looking forward to this conversation. Before AEI co-founded PRRI and served as its research director, he writes the newsletter American Storylines, and he has a book coming out next month called Generation Uncoupled about the gender divide among young Americans. Dan, welcome to You Might be Right. We're pleased to have you here.

Daniel Cox (12:33):
It's good to be here.

Bill Haslam (12:35):
So let me ask you maybe a question that's right down your alley, but it's one that though about a lot. When we look at the youth vote, and demographers and politicians all try to divide people up, is this a question of voting by age group? Is it voting by gender? Is it a rural urban divide? Is it a college educated versus not? How should we think about young voters today?

Daniel Cox (12:59):
Yeah. I mean, well, pollsters like myself, we love to slice and dice the electorate and look for new and emerging groups like soccer moms and security moms and all that. But there has historically been a pretty significant age divide in the electorate and patterns of voting and turnout vary pretty consistently across age groups. As you well know, young voters tend to turn out less often. They tend to be less engaged.

(13:28):
And partly this is due to not anything relating to their character, but just where they are in life. They're in a transition period. Many of them are not homeowners or not married. These are experiences that are associated with more regular political participation. And so a lot of them get

there eventually, so they become more regular voters, they become more involved in local, state and national politics. But what really defines this new group honestly is the fact that they're hitting these milestones a lot later. So they're getting married later, they're becoming homeowners later, they're settling into communities later in their life. And so they're in this period where they're more disengaged in politics, at least traditionally for a longer period of time.

Phil Bredesen (14:18):
When you think about that cohort, slicing and dicing it as you described it, of 18 to 29 year old or something like that, which is this young cohort, are the issues that they are interested in the same as the more general issues of affordability and the like that we talk about in the general electorate or are there issues that are specific to their generation? I ask that question in part because I'm from the coming of age in the Vietnam War generation when young people had some very different takes on the state of the world than an older generation. There's a lot of tension there. Is that true now?

Daniel Cox (15:00):
In one way, yes. That young people view the world very differently because of when they've come in of age, the cultural, political touchstones that inform how they see themselves and relate to the political system. But in another way, no. I mean, young people are concerned about affordability, the price of groceries. A lot of them are also concerned about the price and cost of higher education for those coming out with student loans. And then housing affordability is another huge one. And so in a lot of ways, they care just as much about economic concerns and kitchen table issues as your average voter of any age. And one of the things I think that a lot of analysts, and I think particularly left-leaning and democratic analysts have gotten wrong about the youth vote is to think that this is a group that predominantly cares about cultural concerns.

(15:53):
If you look at the millennial generation, a generation that we associated a lot of us with the issue of same-sex marriage and the drive towards legalization, it was true that millennials were among the most supportive of that issue, but it was not a priority for them. If you look at all the polling that was conducted over roughly a 10-year period when we were debating that issue before it was legalized, it tend to rank fairly low, if not the bottom, even for millennials who supported it. And so I think we tend to think that these cultural concerns, whether it's LGBT policy or abortion issues, that young people care about these things more than other voters, but when in fact it's economic concerns that far and away outweigh other issues.

Phil Bredesen (16:42):
And are there any, just to follow up for one second there, are there any other sort of slightly more hidden issues you can identify though things? I mean, given that maybe affordability is

front of mind for everybody across the spectrum, but are there any issues that really separate out this younger cohort?

Daniel Cox (17:01):
Well, I think one of the things that distinguishes them politically, quite honestly, is not really a particular issue or piece of legislation, but trust, that this group has come of age when there's been very little trust in Congress, in the presidency, in the federal government, in our political processes. So if you look at previous generations, and we've asked this question to all Americans, we asked them, "When you were growing up, did you think that elected officials could broadly be trusted to work in the best interest of the American people?" And for voters over the age of 50, most said, yeah. When I was growing up, I largely believe that elected officials, despite their differences, had the best interest of voters in the heart. And for the under 50 crowd, they said no. At no time did they feel that the system was operating correctly, that elected officials were operating in an act of public service.

(17:59):
And so that's a really different formative experience to try to understand and think about how to get involved in politics when you think that the system's largely broken and politicians are all serving themselves.

Bill Haslam (18:13):
And that's interesting. Is it significantly different? I mean, can you compare back to particularly the '60s generation that had a big skepticism about anything that felt like it was institutional?

Daniel Cox (18:27):
Yeah. So I think one of the big differences is that we've had a social and civic infrastructure collapse. If you're familiar with Robert Putnam's Bowling Alone, right?

Bill Haslam (18:37):
Yep.

Daniel Cox (18:37):
Even in the '60s when young people were perhaps protesting the Vietnam War in the '70s, concerns about Richard Nixon and the fallout from all that, these were people who were connected to their local communities, perhaps involved in their church or place of worship. And so the social and civic infrastructure was still quite strong. In fact, even right before I came on, I looked at the phrase public servant on Google's engram, which tracks how often a term or phrase is used in books. And it topped out in the '60s, the idea of public servant, and it has

plummeted since then. So even the term public servant is more foreign today to this generation than previous generations.

Bill Haslam (19:27):
And so that's actually really interesting. So as you look at the causes for that, what's caused, like I said, listen, the decline in respect for institutions is precipitous and it's across the board, but it sounds like you're saying it's even more stark in this generation. What's caused that?

Daniel Cox (19:47):
I think there are two things to pay attention to and I think they're related. One is technology. So it used to be that if you wanted to figure out where to go or if you needed help moving a piece of furniture in your house, you had to rely on people. You had to rely on a neighbor, you had to ask a stranger for directions. If you wanted to get to the airport, perhaps at an ungodly early hour, you'd ask a friend or a family member. And increasingly we can outsource all these things that we rely on other people for, information, services, support. You can pick up your phone and be like, okay, how do I just order my food delivery, get a TaskRabbit helper to come over and move my furniture, find out information about virtually anything. There's AI concierge now that can help you find all sorts of things.

(20:39):
And so we increasingly don't need each other in institutions that used to be really important in providing this structure of support. And so I think that is part of it. And I think the other is we have a strong culture of individualism in the US. And so I think that is the kind of other piece of it. And it's related to the rise in technology that being able to do things for yourself is great, but it means we sort of lost the comfort of asking for help, for reaching out to someone saying, "Hey, I really need your help." So now if someone asks you for directions, you'd be like, "Why aren't you just consulting your phone?" And so I think we've kind of lost that mutual need that tied us together and made institutions really important.

Phil Bredesen (21:29):
In that cohort of young voters, are there significant gender differences?

Daniel Cox (21:35):
Yeah. So this was one of the parts of the book where, and one of the things that precipitated this book was that with this increasingly this growing ideological divide between young men and women that started around 2016, and it wasn't that young men were becoming more conservative necessarily, at least not in the data that I've seen, but young women were becoming far more liberal. And so you had a 12, 13, 14, 15 point gap, and that has not dissipated at all. In fact, I just checked some recent Pew surveys and in 2026, there was a 20

point divide between young men and young women when it comes to party ID. So there's still a really significant rift when it comes to the politics of young men and young women.

Bill Haslam (22:25):
So I got to ask, what's your theory as to what's caused that? There's always been a little gap, but that's a pretty seismic gap.

Daniel Cox (22:35):
Yeah. So I mean, there are a few theories. I think one of the strongest for me is it comes to technology and the sort of curation culture that it has created. So increasingly, if you're a man or woman and you log online and you are looking at social media, the algorithm will feed you things that you're interested in or things that might agitate you or excite you. And so what you have is even if young men and women log onto the same social media site, they are fed very, very different content very quickly. And so it puts them down these really different paths. So they're learning about different types of issues.

Bill Haslam (23:14):
Can I stop you? Is it giving them the different algorithm because it knows they're male and female or because the males are just clicking on different things than the female?

Daniel Cox (23:22):
It starts with some different interests, right? So if you're interested in bodybuilding, if you're interested in supplements, if you're interested in gambling, that will send you out on one direction. And if you're interested in shopping or other kinds of things like that -

Bill Haslam (23:37):
Careful, careful.

Daniel Cox (23:37):
Yeah, you got to be careful. But in terms of the algorithm, it knows it identifies women who are doing shopping halls on Instagram, that has a huge audience, but predominantly women. And so it feeds you more of that kind of content. And so it may be that they are not starting that far apart in terms of what they're interested in, but quickly the algorithm identifies them and studies have shown this. Quickly, the algorithm identifies, oh, these are different types of people. We're going to move them quickly down different pathways. And so they're going to be exposed to very different kinds of political information.

Phil Bredesen (24:15):

So when we look at the midterms, I mean, do you see any sort of a surge coming this year from the patterns you've seen so far or is that likely to be a disappointment?

Daniel Cox (24:32):
I mean, I think if you're expecting something qualitatively different from the past, then yeah, you probably will be disappointed. I wouldn't be surprised to see a modest spike in a turnout in interest, just given how strongly people feel. There was a New York Times Sienna poll that was just out and it shows that young people in particular are just really unhappy with the sort of state of the country, are more likely to believe that we're heading off in the wrong direction. And so that might suggest that they'd be more animated and interested in voting. But when it comes to midterms, we always see that it's the more habitual voters who turn out and that those are not young voters.

Phil Bredesen (25:15):
We've talked at various times in this podcast about issues of civic education in school and in many cases talked about the decline of that as the pressure has come on STEM subjects and the like. Is there a role for better engaging young voters in population in adding things into the educational system to give them more tools or more ways to think about these things?

Daniel Cox (25:47):
I would say absolutely. In fact, I go a step further in the book where I talk about the importance of formative institutions, family, churches and places of worship and education that at one time these were institutions that were expected to form us. We would change in response to them. We would learn things. We would see behavior model that we would then adopt. And increasingly you have across all three of them, a different tack where it's more about service, right? It's about serving the needs of young people and adapting to their unique interests and requirements. And so you have the formative potential now shifting in a way. And I talk about in families now with the fact that families have fewer kids, they're investing more money and attention in them, but what they're doing is focusing on sort of individual skill development or individual experiences. So like travel sports and scholakic activities, arts.

(26:50):
So there's all these sort of private and enrichment activities that kids are experiencing. And the same is true in school as well, where there's all these different kinds of activities for kids, but less of an emphasis on character and civic learning.

Bill Haslam (27:06):
Studies also show an increasing number of young people who say, "I'm not with either side. I'm an independent. Up to 40% of young voters now say they're independent." What's driving that? Is that a good thing or a bad thing?

Daniel Cox (27:19):
Well, you always see among young voters more independent than Democratic, Republican, that they adopt those labels and affinities after a few election cycles and they say, "Oh, this is the party that I'm most aligned with." And so it takes a little while to develop those allegiances. What is unique among this cohort, especially among young men, is the degree to which they dislike both of their political options. So I think close to four in 10 young men have a negative view of both the Republican and the Democratic Party. So it's not that they haven't made a choice in which party they're going to vote for or where they see their interest most closely lie. It's that they distrust and dislike the two political options in front of them. And that may remain and may not change as they get older.

Phil Bredesen (28:16):
If you take a young cohort, one of the common experiences that they have at some point in their growing up is COVID and the couple years that it took that was involved with more isolation and stuff. Do you see that as being a particularly important or defining aspect of the experience of young people that's affecting their political views and inclinations?

Daniel Cox (28:45):
Yeah. I mean, I think you can draw a straight line between COVID and their social lives. I mean, we have not recovered in terms of how often we are conversing, how often we're communicating and hanging out with people since 2020. We've recovered a little bit, but we're far more likely to be staying at home than we used to before COVID. We have fewer close friends. We spend less time and shared social spaces and it hit this generation the hardest. It's happening during their teen years and early 20s. And so I think they've never quite recovered from that experience. I'm not saying they won't ever, but it's still very much sort of a lingering weight that they're carrying. When it comes to politics, the most direct line I can see is in terms of how they're relying on getting their political information. So they're less likely to get from real people, from a pastor, from a trusted teacher, from a parent, someone that they know, say, "Oh, I'm learning about politics and what it means to be a citizen from people I know and trust." And they're getting it more online or they're getting it from social media more than half of...

(30:00):
Of young voters say that social media is where they get news and information about politics. And during the pandemic, it just became much more natural that this is where you go for everything because you're locked out of all these other social alternatives.

Phil Bredesen (30:15):
But of course, there being significant events like that, it's not limited to COVID. I mean, are there other things that have occurred over the past couple of decades that you think in society that

are a little different from what went on before that you think have dramatically impacted the attitudes of young voters?

Daniel Cox (30:40):
I mean, there's not really one that comes to mind. I mean, there's nine eleven. We recently had the anniversary recognizing the horrific attacks of nine eleven, but that was actually an experience that brought a lot of Americans together that increased political trust, albeit for a short period of time and sort of a sense of civic pride. I don't think we've seen anything like the pandemic. I mean, the other thing is that it really altered how a significant number of people thought about science and trust in scientific institutions and medical professionals, particularly on the right. And that is something that we are now seeing sort of long standing in effect from as well. So I don't think for young people, unless you want to go back to the '60s or '70s, something as recent has had that same kind of effect.

Bill Haslam (31:38):
Dan, we always ask all of our guests the same question to wrap up, taken from Howard Baker, this idea that always remember the other side, the other person might be right. Can you give us an example of something that you've discovered you weren't right on, that as you though about it or had a different perspective or different experience like, okay, I didn't exactly have that right?

Daniel Cox (31:59):
Yeah, I love this question. And as a pollster, I tend to not shoot from the hip as much because I'm like, well, do we have data for that before I go off pontificating? But I think when it comes to the longer term trends in American politics and we've sort of seen a long shift towards more liberal identity in the US, more acceptance of LGBT people. And my assumption was that with every generation being somewhat less religious, more educated, sort of more culturally open-minded, that you would see a continuation of this pattern where every generation would be a little bit more liberal than the previous one, but Gen Z is blowing that apart. We're not seeing the same kind of pattern we saw with millennials who were more liberal than Gen X, who was more liberal than baby boomers. Gen Z has lots of liberal folks in it, but there's also a number of moderate folks and conservative folks in that generation too, a rekindled interest in religion that we're seeing as well.

(33:05):
And Gen Z men in particular have sort of decoupled from the politics of Gen Z women. And so you're seeing a generation kind of split in half. So half generation is following that pattern and half is not. And so I don't know where that's going to end or where that's going to take us, but it's going to be new.

Phil Bredesen (33:26):

Thank you very much. This has been very interesting.

Bill Haslam (33:28):
And as two people that love data, and when you said, tell me what the data is behind that, you're speaking our love language. So we appreciate all the insight you brought to this.

Daniel Cox (33:38):
Came to the right place.

Bill Haslam (33:40):
Yeah. Hey, thanks so much, Dan.

Daniel Cox (33:42):
Thank you.

Phil Bredesen (33:43):
Bill, our next guest is Rob Griffin, who's a senior director in the democracy practice at Third Plateau. Before that, he ran the voter study group at Democracy Fund and he held research director roles at PRRI and the Center for American Progress. He's also one of the authors of the States of Change Project, which has spent the better part of a decade projecting how generational shifts will reshape our elections.

(34:08):
Rob, welcome to Yo Might You Right. Thanks for being here.

Robert Griffin (34:11):
Yeah, thanks for having me.

Phil Bredesen (34:13):
I want to just start out, we've talked about young voters and talk about them as a block. Is that framing already misleading? Are 18 year olds in very different places on these things than 28 or 29 year olds?

Robert Griffin (34:28):
Yeah. And the starting place that I always have for people around this is, you can start with this being political, but just start in terms of people's lives. Where are you at when you're 18 versus when you're 29, right? So it's just a different period of your life. You're a lot more stabilized often

as you get older. It's usually worth kind of breaking these things down because the behavior really does change as you get into your late 20s, like you're turning out to vote at a lot higher rate. Your political opinions are more stable. And this is true of any generation. Forget just today's 18 to 29 year olds.

Bill Haslam (35:02):
And so we tend to think of, you might think of young voters as a block, but you could argue that voters are segregated as much by the geography where they live, whether it's rural, urban or which state they live in by education level obviously is a big issue today. Is it fair even to think of voters this age as a block?

Robert Griffin (35:29):
I think it's fine as another... By all means, let's have a complex understanding of the American public,

Bill Haslam (35:36):
Right?

Robert Griffin (35:37):
There's no reason that we got to think of them as a monolith. Is this quite as important as whether they live in an urban area versus a rural area? Probably not. You know what I mean? Is this as important as racial differences? Probably not, but it is still a feature and we have to think about these incoming generations, what it tells us about where politics may go in the future, whether they have leans or not. This is also a generation, just to name it, that's often not just a generation, but a time period in people's lives where they're really sensitive to political events. They're starting to shape their long-term political opinions about who they are and who they think, who they associate with. So they're important to hone in on, even if at the end of the day, I can't tell you that age is necessarily always the biggest factor.

(36:20):
It's still an important factor.

Bill Haslam (36:21):
I think one of the things in the 24 election that people commented on was that President Trump did better among young men than maybe was expected or had previously happened. Is that block holding for Trump and Republicans or is some of that dissipated?

Robert Griffin (36:41):

One thing to think about here, and I've kind of referenced it before, is this sensitive period in your life. So who is president during these formative years? How is the economy doing? So a lot of these people were coming of age, Biden was president. We had the worst inflation in 40 years. And not shockingly, what did we see in that very next election was a swing among this more sensitive group.

(37:03):
And now again, we have President Trump. It is not the worst inflation of 40 years, but it's still not good. And people are experiencing that and not shockingly, they are swinging back. Again, that time period, people are just more flexible, right? They're more cartilage than they are bone is one way to think about it. As we get older, we tend to kind of crystallize, we kind of freeze up a little bit in terms of how we think about things or our political affiliations. But this young period of people's lives, it's really an important period for forming these identities and opinions. And again, this is what we are seeing in this upcoming midterm election is, I may have the numbers slightly wrong, but I think I was seeing something like 18% approval among these younger generations for Trump. It's pretty bad numbers.

Phil Bredesen (37:48):
One of the, I think things that both Bill and I, as we've talked about, have experienced is you run for office, you do spend a lot of time on this particular age group because you think they'll be open to change and the like. And while there often is a lot of engagement in discussion of politics, it's hard to turn that into showing up at the polls. I mean, it has always, during my time in running in elections, been kind of a disappointment to me as to how few young people ended up voting, whatever the degree of interest seemed to be. Is it going to be different this time? Do you think people are motivated to actually go to the polls or is this another year of just same old, same old?

Robert Griffin (38:35):
Yeah, I definitely take a long-term view on this, that really what you are looking at with young people and them not participating much is a life cycle thing. What does it mean to become a person who votes all the time is, well, you live in a place and you're stable there and you learn how to vote and you know where your polling places. So what ends up happening every cycle is I think people, Charlie Brown with the football, can get very excited about mobilizing young voters and then their turnout rate plus or minus with some exceptions kind of sort of looks like what it did in the past relative to these older groups. If there's a high turnout, which we are in a high turnout period by the way, everybody kind of moves up and everybody kind of moves down together. So I am not expecting some explosive youth turnout this election or frankly any election in the near future.

(39:25):

It doesn't mean you can't think about engaging young voters. I think that's part of a responsibility as a society to shepherd people into adulthood and shepherd people into citizenship. So the effort and the money is not wasted per se, but I think we have to be realistic about what it looks like to do that process.

Bill Haslam (39:44):
Staying on that theme, it's estimated that about 40% of young voters don't identify with either party. And what will the impact of that be in your opinion?

Robert Griffin (40:00):
Yeah, it's a twofer again. I'm going to do a little bit of yes and of two things that are happening here. One, that's just what being young is sometimes. Well, I don't know what I think yet, but we are also in a period where even among people who are much older, that first hit of I would identify as an independent or I am resistant to saying I'm a Democrat or Republican, those rates have gone up significantly in the population.

(40:24):
Now it doesn't mean people don't have affiliations or associations, because as I'm sure you both know, you asked that follow-up question like, well, do you lean towards the Democratic party? Do you lean towards the Republican party? That sorts a lot of people out at the end of the day where it turns out even if you say you're independent, but you lean towards the Democratic Party, you're voting for the Democratic candidate 90% of the time or something like that. But I still hold that it is actually an important and interesting thing to know that these folks don't even want to associate with this anymore, that there is something to the nature of our politics and the two political parties that they would prefer to back away, even if behaviorally what they are doing is consistently voting one party over another, they kind of don't want to identify with this.

(41:08):
And again, this is true of young people. It's also true a little bit of everybody at this point. We're just seeing higher rates of that kind of behavior among everyone.

Phil Bredesen (41:16):
When you talk about young voters, and we talked about affordability as an issue and probably the primary issue driving it, but are there other issues out there that may not be so obvious as that, that are of particular interest?

Robert Griffin (41:34):
Yeah. And I'll name actually one thing, which is just an intuition to give people, which is so often some of the discourse around where are young people at, what do they care about? It gets

filtered through the lens of college educated young people or young people are going to college. So we're suddenly like, "Ah, what's it mean to talk about young people?" Well, we'll talk about student loans. It's just like, well, again, the majority of people do not get a college degree.

(41:57):
So it is worth keeping in mind that it's a fine segment to talk about. It's okay, but also it's not all young people. I would really put prices up there. I would put sort of like job and career aspirational stuff kind of front and center. Increasingly, I am of the mind that AI as a general purpose topic is going to be a thing that people are going to have opinions about in these younger age cohorts. If this is as disruptive to the job market as people kind of start to assume it is, it's probably going to hit them first. So for me, maybe not today, maybe not tomorrow, but if that's a thing that starts happening, I expect it to kind of shape the politics of this incoming generation.

Bill Haslam (42:36):
If you are advising a candidate who is trying to run in a different spirit, who is saying, "Listen, I understand that politics today are politics of grievance and anger, but I want to call out our better angels, if you will." Is there room for a politician of either party to run a campaign that calls out the better angels instead of just grievance against the world?

Robert Griffin (43:05):
Yeah. I think an underrated aspect when it comes to the political scientists and the analysts and everything else, I think an underrated characteristic is charisma. And I think you can sell a lot of things under the hood of charisma. You can sell anger, you can sell fear, and you can sell hope. I just would not discount the possibility and the probability of somebody finding that formula out there. I think people get a little too locked in on it's got to be this one kind of version of this. And I think there's just a lot of charismatic talent under the hood that can translate these feelings into different things for people. And again, I think you actually do see this on the national stage sometimes, not the national stage, but Mamdani at the end of the day runs things as a pretty hopeful guy, you know what I mean?

(43:51):
And people lap it up.

Phil Bredesen (43:54):
I'd like to just finish up with you here with a question. This podcast is named after Senator Howard Baker's famous statement that just remembered the other fellow might be right. He was a person who obviously had partisan views, but understood the need to be open-minded, that he might not always be right and the need to find ways to move forward. As a personal question, can you think of an example in your own sort of intellectual development and history

where you had a point of view and by being willing to be open and listen to someone with a very different point of view actually changed your opinion about it?

Robert Griffin (44:36):
Oh boy, I could give so many examples probably. One, I'll just note that I also think it's a great quote from a Billy Joel song. So I think it's got a lot of strong lineage for the title, let me say it. But two, I will actually probably say, what's the thing I could give you that's probably the most interesting about me? I think things related probably to housing policy in the United States is where I've shifted the most over time and very much in a technocratic direction over a, let's call it emotionally infused version of this, which I think you see a lot.

Phil Bredesen (45:12):
From what to what?

Robert Griffin (45:15):
I think I probably had an earlier point in my life kind of like a good guy, bad guy story about housing developers or you know what I mean, that kind of thing in the story towards something that was a lot closer to actually this is a distributed problem that comes from a more generalized cross partisan distaste with the idea of building in a local area. And that's a much trickier and less morally straightforward story to grapple with. But as I've gotten older, I think a lot, just as a flavor of a thing that I've gotten more used to, is a lot more stories of complexity and a lot more stories of dealing with basic human nature and sometimes very distributed instincts that nevertheless cause problems.

Bill Haslam (46:04):
All right. Hey, thanks. A lot of wisdom in there today. We really appreciate it.

Robert Griffin (46:08):
Lovely seeing you both and thanks for having me on.

Bill Haslam (46:11):
So Phil, what'd you learn today about younger voters or propensity to vote and most particularly any effect on this year's midterms?

Phil Bredesen (46:21):
Well, one of the things I really learned that I had not focused on at all before was this huge gender difference that exists in that population, which I guess it feels right now that I think about it, but I think that potentially has far reaching effects.

Bill Haslam (46:40):
Yeah. I think the other thing that our guests brought up was the impact of COVID on this generation of kind of a period of interruption in the middle of their childhood, which I sort of vibe, but I think you made at one point in time compared to Vietnam and Nixon resigning and nine eleven.

Phil Bredesen (46:59):
There's a lot of things.

Bill Haslam (47:00):
There are a lot of things. So I think the biggest difference though is what social media enabled people to do differently in their lives that I do think is unprecedented that now, again, as I think Dan talked about, listen, if you want to stay home and just consult an expert online, you can do that. And in the past it's like, well, you can stay home, but you can talk to your family or you can watch the fire or read a book maybe. Now the options are endless. I do think that has totally transformed the experience that these people have grown up with compared to what folks closer to our age and younger have done.

Phil Bredesen (47:41):
I think it's also, I mean, in listening to our guests, it also comes across very strongly to me that maybe this idea of a young cohort of voters is not quite addressing what the differences are, but people talked about how the difference between a 22-year-old and a 32-year-old is a 32-year-old is more likely to be married and have kids and thinking about the future and own a house and those kinds of things. And that kind of transitioning through the 20s and settling down into a life with family and so on may be the thing that's really happening, not just an age being reached.

Bill Haslam (48:22):
And it's happening later.

Phil Bredesen (48:23):
And it's happening later, exactly.

Bill Haslam (48:24):
Which is much different. I mean, Chrissy and I got married, I was 22. Hardly anybody gets married at 22 anymore. So life is happening at later sequences than in the past.

Phil Bredesen (48:37):

Right. But it's interesting. I've always thought it's dangerous to start getting too aggressive about looping people into groups that not all Hispanics think the same about everything or all African Americans or all farmers or whatever. And I also took out of today that it's really important to not go too far down the road of this is a cohort that there's some uniformity to. There's obviously huge gender differences. I suspect there's also huge differences in just where you live in city youth and more rural youth and so on. But I mean, for me, it's a really important subject because I think the 20s are that period of time when you're kind of figuring out who you are and part of that means what you think about the world and how the world ought to work. And it's incumbent on all of us who sort of practice the political life, I think to be reaching out and really helping these young people to understand that our role is not only to try to get votes for something, it's also to help people see these issues and think about them in sensible ways.

(49:51):
It's one of the things I hope our podcast can do.

Bill Haslam (49:52):
Right. And I'll end up with this with understand how much that matters. A lot of people see and say, oh, 40% of young people are independent, that'd be good. Maybe we won't be so partisan. I tend to look at it the other way. I'm afraid it means more people maybe just disengaged or people who are waiting to say, "I don't really like either of the parties. I'll wait and I'll vote in the general election." But as we know, the cake is baked by then. So I'm not certain this trend toward more independence, while some people might see that as good, I'm not certain that's a good thing.

Phil Bredesen (50:24):
Yeah, I think a lot of it just reflects that you may not be ready to make that call at that point. But it's been an interesting discussion. It's an important group of people. And I know it's one we both care very much about helping in any way you can do to ease them into being participants in the political life of their home and their state and their country.

Bill Haslam (50:49):
Right. Everybody always talks about this election's going to be very important and very interesting. And I think this midterm is going to be. I think we live in times where the sands shift faster than ever. And I think we're going to learn a lot once we're able to see what happens, not just the overall vote, but once you disaggregate that and look at the data, what we learn.

Phil Bredesen (51:12):
Well, we'll see on that. I mean, I don't think I've ever run for an office where I didn't express that this is the most important election of your lifetime.

Bill Haslam (51:20):
I bet you've gotten a few email requests for funds along those same lines.

Phil Bredesen (51:24):
Exactly.

Bill Haslam (51:25):
Thanks again, Phil.

Phil Bredesen (51:26):
Good. Good being with you.

Bill Haslam (51:28):
Thanks.

Marianne Wanamaker (51:31):
Thanks for listening to You Might Be Right. Be sure to follow on Apple Podcasts, Spotify, YouTube, or wherever you listen to your favorite shows. And please help spread the word by sharing, rating, and reviewing the show. Thank you Governors Bredesen & Haslam for hosting these conversations. You Might Be Right is brought to you by the Baker School at the University of Tennessee with support from the Boyd Fund for leadership and civil discourse. To learn more about the show and our work, go to youmightberight.org and follow the show on social media at YMBR Podcast. This episode was produced in partnership with Relationary Marketing and Stones River Group.