

Tanya Domi: Hi, this is Tanya Domi. Welcome to the Thought Project, recorded at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York. Fostering ground breaking research and scholarship in the arts, social sciences and sciences. In this space, we talk with faculty and doctoral students about the big thinking and big ideas generating cutting edge research. Informing New Yorkers and the world.

Tanya Domi: Charles Tien is a professor of political science at Hunter College and at the graduate center of the City University of New York. Tien is an Americanist, whose research interest include Congress, Quantitative Research methods and representation of minorities and women in the U.S. Congress. Welcome to the Thought Project Professor Tien.

Charles Tien: Thank you Tanya for having me.

Tanya Domi: Since your research interest include minorities and women in the Congress, it would seem that this election broke all records of diversity. What are you initial thoughts?

Charles Tien: My initial thoughts on the new Congress that will sworn in, like you said, on January 3rd, 2019, is that it's a reaction, I think, to the politics of the last two years. So the day after President Trump was sworn in, you saw millions of women taking to the streets and protesting all over the country, all over the world in fact. And I think that galvanized a lot of women to run for Congress and this election cycle, we saw more women than ever before file for candidacy. More women than ever before run in general elections and it looks like more women than ever before seated in Congress.

Charles Tien: And they'll make real differences in the short run and also in the long run. So women have been found to be more liberal on average than men. They focus on different issues than men. They focus more on education and on health care. And they also have an impact, I think, on the conversation in Congress and in the country. So the issues that they focus on will also resonate, I think, in the Congress and force the Congress to address those issues. So I think it's a positive night, in terms of descriptive representation. That means having the Congress look more like the country.

Tanya Domi: Yes, and I think what really drove the Democratic campaign seemed to be health care, number one issue, jobs and economic security and education. And in a past election cycle, you would call those soft issues. In other words, female issues. But as you say, women have stepped forward in a reaction, and I think that there's a real possibility that they're going to drive these issues throughout the Congress.

Charles Tien: I think they need to do that and I think the 2016 election, I think, was also a reaction to the two parties on those issues, meaning that education was becoming less affordable. Economic insecurity was increasing and I think a lot of voters looked to both parties and said, neither party is really working for me

right now, so let's elect somebody who's as far out as possible, and that was Donald Trump. And now in 2018, I think you see kind of a reaction to that election, but still it's those same issues, I think, that are driving electoral outcomes. And the last two years hasn't seen a lot of progress on those issues. Health care has not been expanded. Wages have-

Tanya Domi: It's contracted actually.

Charles Tien: Right. Wages have not gone up. Tax cuts were targeted towards the wealthy. So those issues that made, I think, voters angry in 2016, they're still making them angry in 2018 and it's a challenge for both of the parties to address those issues in ways that make real differences and I think the party that can do that will be more successful in 2020.

Tanya Domi: Yeah. So that's really a gap in legislative responsiveness, as you've addressed. Whereas, it seems that everything that Trump ran on in 2016 and said he was going to address, he did actually the opposite of it. Contracting health care, eliminating access to education through not forgiving loans. All these things that he said he was going to do and you get the absolute opposite and then Congress actually moved on some of these items, but it's really quite stunning to see the response when it was absolutely the opposite of what the electorate said they wanted.

Charles Tien: Right. And I think there's a growing frustration amongst the electorate with our institutions, with the inaction. And I think part of the response was to also maybe focus on state and local elections. So here in New York, as you know, the Democrats will be controlling all three branches, the governorship, the assembly and the state senate for the first time in over a decade. And action is being done more on the state level as the Congress and the federal government is at a stalemate and not delivering on the things that people are looking for, which includes, I think, gun control, to the topics that you would see-

Tanya Domi: There's another example. There's another example. Absolutely. Yeah. There was a number of ... We flipped state houses in Colorado, in Maine, in New Hampshire and also as you said, New York, in the senate. We brought the senate back into the blue column and maintained the Colorado house, the Delaware Senate, the Illinois House, Maine House, New Mexico Assembly, Washington Senate and house. So Washington State of Washington. So it seems that the Democrats really got energized down ballot.

Charles Tien: Definitely. Definitely. And I'd like to just give a shout out to a Cuny grad, who won last year, and since this is a Cuny radio, Andrew Gounardes won the State Senate race in 22nd district. And he's a graduate of Cuny. And he's part of the blue wave.

Tanya Domi: That's terrific. He's part of the blue wave. Speaking of which, was there really a blue wave? I want to hear your thoughts on that. How would you define this

election. There was a lot of debate last night, hot debate about was it a wave or not?

Charles Tien: Yeah, that's a good question. Honest answer, is I don't really know. There's no formal definition, I guess, of a wave election. It's one of those things.

Tanya Domi: It's rhetorical?

Charles Tien: Right. You know it when you see it.

Tanya Domi: Yeah.

Charles Tien: And last night, I guess, depends on from which side of the ideological divide you're looking. So, you could see evidence of a blue wave, so I think over 300 districts were more democratic than in 2016. It didn't flip all those seats, but a lot of seats were flipped. But the percentage of votes-

Tanya Domi: 61%, is that right?

Charles Tien: I think so, yes.

Tanya Domi: 61%.

Charles Tien: Right, so Democrats won more races across the board. They take control of the house, which is significant, and now they control the legislative agenda in the house. The governorships that you talked about and the Senate, it was a more difficult field for the Democrats last night. They were defending 26-

Tanya Domi: 26. Yeah 26.

Charles Tien: 26 seats. And Republicans were only defending nine. So you could argue that losing only two or three seats, given the playing field that they had, was actually a pretty good night.

Tanya Domi: Yeah I would agree with that. And the ones that were most endangered were in red states, were Trump had won in double digits, and I fully expected at least four of those five targeted, Donnelley, Tester, Hikamp, McCaskill, and ... well there's a fifth one. But in other words, I fully expected four out of those five to go down, and right now, Tester is down, although it's too close to call.

Charles Tien: Right. And Nevada was flipped towards the Democrats.

Tanya Domi: That's right. Came back into the blue column. Right.

Charles Tien: Right. Yes, the Democrats losses I think in three out of the four states were states that went big for Trump. And so those were really difficult states, I think, for Democrats to defend.

Tanya Domi: Yeah, I agree with you, and it looks like Espy in Mississippi's going to be in the jungle run off in Mississippi.

Charles Tien: Right.

Tanya Domi: And I think there's going to be probably pretty big effort and that will help, although it won't get the Dems into the majority.

Charles Tien: Right. I think you're right. That seat will get a lot of attention. I think the third party candidate there was more on the conservative side, so probably stole votes from the Republican candidate. So I think it'll be difficult for Espy to win that seat, but certainly he'll, I think, give it a good shot.

Tanya Domi: So earlier, we were talking in my preparation to interview you, I had discovered that you were picked up by Larry Sabato's center for politics. You and your colleague Michael Lewis Beck, using your structure X model. You forecasted that the midterm elections would, in fact, result in divided government. You were right about that. The Democratic party was, you forecasted, would win 44 seats in the House. That came in a bit high, because the Democrats actually came out with, they actually picked up 220 seats. And they come in at 200 and picked up 27 seats. And you projected 239 seats. Still got control and this newly seated House of Representatives is controlled by Democrats would be balanced by a Republican senate and executive branch. You and your colleague were absolutely right about that.

Tanya Domi: Can you tell us more about your structure X formula?

Charles Tien: Sure. So sometimes you get lucky and you forecast something and it actually happens that way. And the statistical model that Michael Lewis Beck and I used to forecast last night's election results, I think on the whole, like you said, did pretty well. We forecasted that the Democrats would win the majority in the house. And winning at least 30 seats and as many as 44. So the structure X model that you talked about, uses a first a structural input model first. So we have three inputs that we use to forecast the election outcome. And those inputs are the President's approval rating, then also whether it's a midterm election or not. And then the last input is the condition of the economy. And so we measure that using disposal income, change in disposal income over the first six months of the election year.

Charles Tien: And so using those three inputs, the forecast was actually for a 30 seat loss for Republicans. And then we refined that forecast by using Nathan Gonzalez's reports, district by district reports. He comes out with a great publication inside elections and he follows all the districts at the district level. We use his seats in trouble number and average that into our structural model forecast. And so that average then gave us a 44 seat loss for the Republicans. And like you said, Democrats look like they got what, 26, 29 seats? And then there's still a dozen or so that-

Tanya Domi: That are out.

Charles Tien: That are still being counted.

Tanya Domi: Yes. Yes. You may hit it.

Charles Tien: Yeah, maybe. Maybe.

Tanya Domi: You may hit it.

Charles Tien: So in the Senate, we use a similar model and we add one additional input into the Senate model, which is how many seats are exposed for the President's party. Essentially, how many seats is the President's party defending.

Tanya Domi: Defending. They had good math on their side this time.

Charles Tien: Right. We said earlier, Democrats were defending 26 seats, Republicans only defending nine. So the more seats you're defending, the more seats you're probably going to lose. And that's happened last night. So even on a good night for Democrats, right, they probably lost to two to three seats on the Senate side.

Tanya Domi: I still think, I agree with you, I think they were lucky. They did pretty well, given the math they were facing. You were talking about the President's approval ratings. We have never seen a President hover in the 40's on approval. He did not win the popular vote. He was, in 2016, he was successful through the electoral college, and his numbers have seemed to range from, his approvals have ranged from maybe the mid to little high in the 40's down to 39. Generally not below 39 or 38. And he goes up and down according to whatever issue he's animated about. And a lot of the pundits last night were saying, well the more he talks about himself and makes it about himself, the lower his approval rating goes. And that seems to be true, and yet it didn't really hurt them in the Senate. Can you talk about that? I'd love to hear your ideas about that.

Charles Tien: So I think this President, more than any other that I've seen, appeals to his base and doesn't appeal the middle. So on issue after issue, when he has opportunities to unify and appeal to the broader electorate, he chooses not to. And so, I think that explains why his approval rating doesn't go above 50%, but it doesn't really go lower, like you said, much lower than the high 30's either. And so, I think his base is satisfied with what he's been doing and what he's been saying. And I think the other takeaway from last night is that the electorate is divided and the divide seems to be rural versus suburban and urban. And his base is more rural, so the pickups that the Republicans got in the Senate were more in rural states. And a lot of the house seats that were flipped were in suburban districts.

Tanya Domi: Correct. Yes.

Charles Tien: And so, that's all an indication, I think, of this President repeatedly mollifying his base and the base responding.

Tanya Domi: Some of the pickups last night though, were for the Democrats, were absolutely mind blowing. One of them was in Texas, that seat hasn't been held by a Democrat in over 50 years. And it was a woman ... sorry, I just can't remember the district. Another example is Oklahoma, a blue seat came in, a pickup, in the heart of the bible belt. This entire red state, there's a tiny blue dot, another pickup. And this must yield to this suburban purple mixture in the electorate. People who are educated. And I think, today at the press conference he gave, he gave a press conference earlier before we're meeting here, and he was asked about what ... he had a problem with the Republican women, and of course he didn't respond directly at all. But apparently, he's also said, well we're going to have to get nicer about how we talk to Republican women.

Tanya Domi: So I think these issues right here, these issues about the suburban educated Republican women and men perhaps, this will an issue that will confront him in 2020 I would think.

Charles Tien: Yes. Women overwhelmingly voted for Democratic candidates last night.

Tanya Domi: The gender gap was significant, wasn't it? So the largest perhaps, the-

Charles Tien: I think it was the ... I think I heard 69% of women voted for Democratic candidates. But buried inside that 69% is a breakdown I think, by race. And so, when you break the gender vote down by race, you still see, I haven't seen the numbers for last night, but in the 2016 Presidential election, you saw of white women, 52% actually voted for Trump. It goes to the changing landscape of the country. So these districts that you mentioned one in Texas, one in Oklahoma, probably also speak to how the country is changing demographically. So more Hispanics, more Asians. The urban areas and suburban areas are becoming, I think, browner in the sense that there are more minorities moving into these areas and the other part of it you mentioned is education.

Charles Tien: And so, higher educated whites I think are also moving into urban areas. And a combination, I think, of these two factors, makes the country more polarized geographically. So the urban and the suburban areas are becoming more Democratic and I think that trend will continue. And the rural areas are becoming whiter and more conservative.

Tanya Domi: Yes. Amy Walter, with the Cook Political Report, the National Editor, a former colleague of mine, has written, I think, probably one of the best articles I've seen this on who are the white voters. And she identifies his core base as being uneducated white evangelicals. That is the core, the hard core of his base. And it does include evangelical educated too. Although there's a gender gap. There's a gender gap there, which was very interesting. I haven't seen anybody else actually talk about this as articulately as Amy has written about it. But it's very

clear that it is evangelical is the defining affiliation for that voter. That is how that voter is part of his core base. And that's going to really, probably, grow or expand, which is another interesting aspect to this President's appeal.

Charles Tien: Right. So I think the fact that that segment of the population is not going to grow helps us understand tactics taken by both parties to mobilize the vote and suppress the vote. And so, rather than appealing to a broader segment of the population to win elections, what you can do is to suppress votes amongst groups that you know aren't going to support you and mobilize and make it easier for voters amongst groups that you think are more likely to support you. And so, closing of polling stations, voter I.D. laws, limiting voting hours and days, making it harder to register to vote. All of these things, I think, speak to this segment of the population that feels threatened and is not getting larger.

Tanya Domi: Yes. So as you say, the demographics are changing, the Republican party has made, clearly, a decision under Trump not to really expand their base. And so, since you can't win on the issues, you'll suppress the vote. And there's a lot of concern right now about what's going on in Georgia. There's been some illusions to maybe something happening in Florida, although I've not seen any evidence of it. You saw what helped, perhaps, the remedies that were addressed in North Carolina. So you had a really, pretty blue night last night in North Carolina. And the same thing applies to Pennsylvania, where the court ordered the districts to be redrawn and four out of the five new districts went blue last night in Pennsylvania.

Tanya Domi: So is this going to continue to be a dog fight? People are going to seek relief in courts? How do you see this playing out?

Charles Tien: I don't think that any parties going to hold back. So will it get worse before it gets better? I think probably it will. The essential repeal of voting rights act has meant that we're going to see these tactics from not just Southern states, but states all over the country.

Tanya Domi: North Dakota.

Charles Tien: Right. For the foreseeable future I believe. Until Congress can amend the voting rights act, which with a Republican controlled Senate, probably won't happen. One solution might be to apply the voting right acts to the entire country, rather than just to the-

Tanya Domi: Targeted states.

Charles Tien: Right.

Tanya Domi: For pre-clearance, right?

Charles Tien: Yes.

Tanya Domi: So today is probably the first day a discreet group of people in politics are thinking about running for President. So I have to ask you. Today's the beginning of 2020. I would suspect in the Democratic side you're going to start seeing a continuation happen during the primaries, where a number of people, Camilla Harris, Cory Booker, lots of people went out on the campaign trail. They were all over the country. The rise of Beto O'Rourke, even though he lost in Texas last night, lots of speculation he's going to run for President. What are your thoughts about these potential candidates going into 2020?

Charles Tien: I think we'll see a very crowded field on the Democratic side in 2020, much like we saw a very crowded and vibrant field on the Republican side in 2016. I think one of the takeaways from last night is that the Democratic party hasn't really decided whether the progressive wing or the more moderate establishment wing is going to control the party. And with losses by the more progressive candidates in Texas and in Florida, most likely, I think you probably see the more moderate wing emboldened from last night and that just, I think, means that the race in 2020 on the Democratic primary's going to be very competitive.

Tanya Domi: Interesting. So do you think Joe Biden runs?

Charles Tien: He did campaign a lot it seemed like.

Tanya Domi: Yes he did.

Charles Tien: And that would seem to indicate that he's still thinking about it and I think he'll look at his situation and make an informed decision. So I don't think he's ... who knows what he's thinking, but I don't think he's ruled that out yet.

Tanya Domi: Sure. Bernie Sanders?

Charles Tien: Oh definitely, I think Bernie's running.

Tanya Domi: You think he's definitely ...

Charles Tien: Yeah.

Tanya Domi: So that divide, that divide within the party, is likely to exacerbate relations, I think. I think the primary could actually cause a lot of bad feelings again. That's what I think.

Charles Tien: Yeah. I think so.

Tanya Domi: Right. You agree, huh?

Charles Tien: I mean Elizabeth Warren will be running or she'll probably be running and Bernie Sanders will be running, right. So you have the progressive wing of the



party there. With Cory Booker, probably also is thinking about running. And then you have the more establishment side of the party, like Joe Biden.

Tanya Domi: Uh huh.

Charles Tien: And I think it would be good for the party to appeal to a broader electorate. And to win, I think the general, they're going to have to do that as well. So rather than ... Look at the Trump voters and ignore them or belittle them, I think a successful candidate in 2020 has to campaign to understand their concerns. The ones that we were talking about earlier on.

Tanya Domi: Sure.

Charles Tien: And realize that those are real issues that need to be addressed, and I think the candidate that addresses those issues will win the 2020 election.

Tanya Domi: Well I'll just say one thing about those rural voters. Hillary Clinton was the only candidate for President who had a rural policy on paper. It was really well thought out. This is a good place to stop and Professor Tien, I'd love to have you back as we go into 2020 to talk about these issues.

Charles Tien: Thank you very much for having me, I'd be delighted to come back and talk with you again.

Tanya Domi: Terrific. Thanks for tuning into the Thought Project and thanks to today's guest, Professor Charles Tien of the City University of New York.

Tanya Domi: The Thought Project is brought to you with production, engineering and technical assistance by Sarah Fishman. I'm Tanya Domi, tune in next week.