

Tanya: Hi. This is Tanya Domey. 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.

Heath Brown is an associate professor of public policy at the Graduate Center in John Jay College of Criminal Justice, at the City University of New York. He obtained his PhD in public administration, and public policy at the George Washington University, and obtained a Master's Degree at the Elliot School of International Affairs, also at GW. He is author of four books. That includes, Immigrants and Electoral Politics, Non Profit Organizing in a Time of Demographic Change, Pay To Play Politics, How Money Defines American Democracy, and last, The Tea Part Divided The Hidden Diversity of a Maturing Movement.

Welcome back to the thought project professor Brown.

Heath: Yeah. Thank you so much for having me back.

Tanya: So, last night the Republicans held onto their majority in the senate. It is likely they're gonna pick up more seats because three races are still out, they're too close to call in Arizona, Florida, and Montana. How do you think the Republicans performed last night in the Congress, and in the states?

Heath: Yeah. I think the Republicans performed just about how we would have expected, if we had had this conversation 48 hours ago, and were trying to predict what was going to happen, we'd say something about like this happened. The electoral map in the senate favored the Republicans strongly. The way in which the combination of Senate seats that were held by incumbents, and those that were open, really did make it look for a long time like the Senate was gonna be held by the Republicans. And they ultimately did by about the margin we might expect. And the same for the House, that they, Republican map in the house was much less favorable, the Democrats stood of two weeks ago, three weeks ago, a good chance of winning the House. And, that's basically what happened last night. And, so I think that what transpired last night really does conform to what we would have expected, what the models predicted, what the polls predicted, and even what our anecdotes might have predicted about the mood of the country, and this heated rhetoric that was leading us into the election day.

And so I think much of what we thought was going to happen did happen last night.

Tanya: True. And the five Democratic Senators who were the most vulnerable last night were in states where Trump won in 2016 double digits, and Claire McCaskill went down in Missouri, Joe Donnelly lost in Indiana, and of course Heidi Heitkamp lost in North Dakota. Do you think Kavanaugh was a factor in those defeats?

Heath: You know it doesn't look like it based on the margins of victory. None of those races were particularly close. I think if we would to expect an effect of voting against

Kavanaugh to somehow cause a certain number of undecided voters to switch who they were gonna be supporting, I think the margin would have been much closer. And so in none of those races do I think the margin of victory for the Republican leads us to conclude that if Senator Heitkamp had chosen otherwise on her vote, she would have been re-elected. I think she knew that, I think she knew that the vote ultimately wasn't going to determine her electoral outcomes, that there were factors greatly out of her control that ultimately led her to lose. And I think a similar story could be told for the others.

And so I think those margins, pretty significant margins in each one of those races, suggests that those votes wasn't the determining factor that led to them losing last night.

Tanya: Well we'll see what happens in Arizona, Montana, and also Florida. There's three races out, they're very close. The Republicans are up by slight, very, very tight margins. What are your thoughts on those three races?

Heath: You know I think in each case what we have is states that are so close that we have an electorate that is so very close, and I think campaigns are getting better and better at turning out, and convincing members of their party to turn out and vote. And I think what we have in each one of those situations, and this is not surprising, it's not terribly surprising that Florida of all places is so close that on election night we don't know the outcome. Right? Those of us who are old enough to remember back in 2000, the same thing happened. So while it feels like the world changes very quickly, the Trump era has made it feel like things are in total disarray. There's some things that persist. And the very close race in Florida, I think is sort of evidence of that. That the electorate in Florida is very evenly split. So evenly split that at the end of election night frequently, we don't know who's the ultimate winner. And so I think in those kinds of situations it's the fundamentals of the electorate, fundamentals of the campaigns that ultimately determine the outcome.

A number of these other kinds of things that happen, a major supreme court nomination, the incredible tragedies that have been happening over the last couple of weeks, feel like they're going to ultimately determine the outcome of the election. But there are these other dominant factors that are much more important in determining who wins and who loses. Kind of in the aggregate, maybe not in specific races, but in the aggregate.

Tanya: Yeah. Florida is as you point out, going back to 2000 when Gore won with the majority, but failed to secure the Presidency. We've been seeing this replay over and over again. Some of my colleagues from overseas are really confounded by Florida. And I sort of look at it like four countries, you know. You've got the pan handle, which is south Georgia. You've got central Florida, which is really dominated by a latino vote, Orlando area. Then you get into south Florida, and it's Cuban, and it's Jewish transplants from New York City. But that Broward County has become much more conservative and so these Democrats are just not being able to generate as much votes out of there as they once did. So I wasn't surprised at all last night by Florida.

Heath: Yeah. I think one of things that, this is also not new. But geography matters a lot. The residential segregation along party lines between cities, and suburbs, and rural parts of the country seems like its something that's making a much bigger difference today, than in elections of the past. The parts of the country that seems strongly Democratic are geographically different then those parts of the country that are strongly Republican. And it's that geographic segregation that makes it hard to see how this politically polarized period that we're in is likely to write itself. When people physically live far from those with different ideological beliefs, different partisan beliefs. It's hard to see how they're going to come together and find common cause. And so geography in this election I think was illustrated as a very important variable to understand electoral outcomes.

Tanya: Yeah. Especially in a state like Florida. So you have written a book on the Tea Party. The Tea Party Divided, The Hidden Diversity of a Maturing Movement. Some pundits observed last night that the Democrats actually took back the majority in the House in a similar manner to the Tea Party wing of the Republican Party in 2010. Now do you think that's a fair comparison? What are your thoughts here?

Heath: You know it's a fair comparison, buy I think when you get much closer to the comparison it doesn't really hold up that well. You know the comparison is that there's a seeming movement of people and groups, and the formation of groups, to try to wrestle control from the party. I think that what we saw with the Tea Party was a much more extreme ideological pull of the Republican party to the right, then we see in this election. I think that we see lots of organizing, lots of mobilization, but I don't think we see the Democratic party agenda moving as far to the left as the Tea Party pulled the Republican party to the right. And there's lots of reasons for that. And some of them relate to the asymmetries that have gone on for a long time related to partisan polarization. The Democratic party has moved much less strongly to the left, than the Republican party, and I think it's because the movements that sit within the Democratic party haven't had that same goal of ideological displacement as the Tea Party did.

And so I think the comparison is very interesting, and I think it's illustrative but does hold I think as strongly as many of the pundits might have suggested.

Tanya: Yeah. You've got an element of the Democratic party, they were running on this ticket called Justice Democrats, which emanated from the Bernie presence in the party. New York fourteen, Alexandria Ocasio was actually elected last night, the youngest woman ever to have been elected to the House of Representatives. She calls herself a Socialist Democrat. But this isn't a major wing, it's really lightly represented in the caucus.

Heath: I think that what we will see is how new members of Congress, like the ones from New York are going to bring their new set of ideas to Congress. And the receptivity of committee chairs, and of the Democratic party in Washington I think will determine whether some of the agenda items that she brought to her campaign are going to end up in the agenda of the Democratic party.

It seems at least right now, that that's not going to happen in the near term. And just like the Tea Party, it took a number of years for the Tea Party to have the effect that it ultimately has had. And I think if we sort of place the beginning of the Tea Party at 2010, I think it's really only now that we see the Republican party reflecting the ideological purity that the Tea Party always sought out. And so if the conversation we're having is trying to draw a comparison we'd want to revisit this, maybe in eight years from now, to see if-

Tanya: To see where it stands.

Heath: Yeah. To see if the change that sometimes we hear about ultimately shows up in what the Democratic party is all about.

Tanya: So a data point that was shared last night about the overall vote in the mid terms was, it appears that 61% of all votes casted last night were on behalf of Democrats, and yet the Democrats were unable to retake the Senate, or win in some very hotly contested races. For example, Governor in the state of Florida, which we've already talked about. Right now we don't know who has won in the state of Georgia, for Governor. And so this has been coming up repeatedly since 2016, where you have more Democrats situated on the coast, where most of their population is located that's blue in that election. And yet more Democrats get more votes, but they have less representation. What are your thoughts on this? A number of ideas have been forthcoming about getting rid of for one, the electoral college, which wasn't a factor last night. But about two Senators representing each state. What are your thoughts on electoral reform?

Heath: Well I think that you're absolutely right. That the persistent problem that the Democratic party has had, is that they waste a lot of votes. A lot of votes are wasted in elections that they are winning by such large margins, in states like California, that the number of Democrats in the country isn't reflected in the number of representatives that are in Washington. Proposals like eliminating the electoral college, eliminating sort of the structure of the Senate, seem to me to be interesting intellectual debates, but have no real future.

Tanya: Politically.

Heath: That these are not things that are going to happen in our lifetimes, I think. I don't see where the momentum would come to support those. Those would have to be pursued in some sort of bipartisan way. And it seems very unlikely that the Republican party that we currently have, and will have for a long time, would have any interest in entertaining those possibilities. It seems to me that other kinds of reforms that you would be looking at are probably going to be embedded in the campaign finance system. I think that's probably where you'll be much more likely to find some bipartisan support for changes in the ways elections are funded. But even in those areas proposals have been floating around for decades that haven't really gone anywhere. But on the actually changing to the Constitution, to eliminate the electoral college, and to fundamentally change the Senate, seem like very, very unlikely propositions right now.

Tanya: Yeah. I don't disagree with that. There is a term though in political science about responsiveness. Legislative responsiveness, and so I think there is frustration about the lack of representation when you dominate in casting more votes. So I think that's going to be an ongoing problem in the United States.

Heath: And responsiveness is a problem for Democrats and Republicans, there's a really interesting new research paper that was summarized in the New York Times about a week ago that suggested most staff members on Capital Hill, that is members of Congress, staff members, have a very weak understanding of the preferences of their constituents on a variety of issues. When asked the staff member of the member of Congress, assumes very different things than what the constituents actually prefer. And this holds more so Republican members of the Congress, but it also holds for Democrats. So there is gap, and it is somewhat partisan, but it exists in both parties to some extent. And so structural reforms and the way in which people are able to express their voice, particularly through money, is one of the ways in which that might be altered in some ways.

Tanya: Sure. And the discussion about Citizen's United and what the decision that's been made by the Supreme Court has really, people have struggled with this issue. What do you think about the likelihood of this new court, of readdressing that issue?

Heath: I think there is almost no chance at all that the court would revisit that in any kind of way. I think what most campaign finance reformers are looking for is a new way in. That is a new lens, a new legal strategy, a new constitutional approach, because the approach that they had been taking with the old court had very little receptivity. And I think the current court is going to be even less interested in even taking up those cases. And so I think the action we're going to see is within very local reforms. Reforms on campaign finance like we see in New York City, and also Seattle. And those at some point might percolate up and be challenged in the courts. But I think at the local level, we're likely to see the most interesting campaign finance work, democracy vouchers, more generous matching funds, better designed programmed to support a wider array of candidates entering races. I think those are the things that are most promising, and face the weakest constitutional challenges from opponents of campaign finance reform.

Tanya: It seems that the Republicans have pulled out their old play book on voter suppression tactics. What we've seen in Georgia, it appears that Stacey Abrams is not going to concede, she's going to persist an account. And may even take legal action, we'll see how this plays out. It's been eluded to that maybe even in Florida there was some meddling. I don't have any substantiated evidence of this, it's just been discussed in the press. And of course North Carolina got slapped with lawsuits and actually lost in the courts. It seems really more than obvious, it's pretty brazen in the case of Georgia. This also follows four years of adopting voter ID laws between 2012 and 2016, the Supreme Court of the United States essentially took out the heart of voter rights, the voter, law. What are your thoughts on voter suppression?

Heath: Well I think that if the now Democrat controlled House is going to take up one issue, addressing the voting rights act would be one of the most important, most significant

things that they can do. The changes that were made after the Shelby County decision from the Supreme Court just a couple of years ago, that have facilitated the kinds of things that happened, allegedly in Georgia and Florida, and elsewhere, could be addressed with a re-writing, and amending of the voter rights act in a way that made applicable the targeted coverage of the old act to all counties. And so that all changes in electoral policy at the state and local level have to go through pre-clearance within the Justice Department. That seems like a perfectly reasonable way in which voting rights could be protected in the future. That's something that I think would be a real priority for Democrats, and whether they take it up is, I think, a real question. But it would be an area that they could greatly enhance the democracy in the future.

Tanya: Yes. And you can see how it worked in the state of Pennsylvania last night, because all the districts were court ordered redrawn. And four out of five went Democratic last night. Four out of five districts so that certainly added to the pick up in the House.

Heath Brown, thank you so much for coming in today.

Heath: Yeah, Tonya. Thank you.

Tanya: Thanks for tuning into The Thought Project. And thanks to our guest today Professor Heath Brown.

The Thought Project is brought to you with production, engineering, and technical assistance by Sarah Fishmen. I'm Tonya Domey. Tune in next week.