

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 groundbreaking 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:

Kevin Morris is a second year PhD student in sociology at the Graduate Center, CUNY. He is also a quantitative researcher at the Brennan Center for Justice at NYU. The democracy program where he works focuses on voting rights and elections. His research focuses on the impact of laws and policies on access to the polls with a particular focus on rights restoration and voter list maintenance.

Tanya Domi:

Morris has published a number of journal articles in a forthcoming book chapter on voter suppression in the United States. In June this year, he testified in the US House of Representatives, hearing about voting in America, the potential for polling place, quality and restrictions on opportunities to vote, to interfere with free and fair access to the ballot.

Tanya Domi:

Voting rights in America exists in a state of existential peril posing a threat to US democracy. Before the 2020 presidential election, the former president of the United States proclaimed that the only way he could lose the election would be because it was rigged. He repeatedly said that voters who chose to vote by mail or cast absentee ballot were likely to be illegal votes. Since losing the elections in the US House, Senate and the White House, Republican controlled legislatures have passed a slew of new laws limiting access to the ballot.

Tanya Domi:

The Supreme Court also recently issued a new judgment on voting rights indicating that two provisions of an Arizona voting law that restricts how ballots can be cast do not violate the historic Voting Rights Act that bars regulations that result in racial discrimination. The ruling will limit the ability of minorities to challenge state laws in the future that they say are discriminatory.

Tanya Domi:

Just this past week women voting rights activists engaged in civil disobedience at the US Capitol calling for the adoption of the John Lewis Voting Rights Advancement Act to restore protections as well as address new aspects to state laws that also undermine the credibility of an election in addition to original protection such as pre-clearance, which have been gutted by the John Roberts led Supreme Court in the 2013, Shelby County case. Welcome to the thought project. Kevin Morris.

Kevin Morris:

Thanks. I'm excited to be here with you.

Tanya Domi:

You cannot be more centrally positioned on one of the biggest battles since the civil rights movement for racial justice in the 1960s that successfully sought and had adoption of the 1965 Voting Rights Act. How did you get interested in voting and its suppression in America?

Kevin Morris:

That's a great question. When I started at the Brennan Center, I had a background in quantitative research and statistical methodology but I actually didn't know very much about voting at all. Before I was here, I worked at the Port Authority and worked as an economic analyst in the planning department there. But my master's degree was in urban planning and I've always been really interested in space and segregation and in how our built environment and the structure of our neighborhoods bleeds over into all these different aspects of our social life.

Kevin Morris:

There's a huge amount of that when it comes to voting. Over my time at the Brennan Center had been able to draw both on what I've learned here about voting rights and in this push you just said that we're seeing in the past few years to restrict access and also understanding of as part of a larger phenomenon that colors so much of our social world and so much.

Tanya Domi:

Like the structural racism?

Kevin Morris:

Yeah and how people are divided up over space and how race is usually what we use to divide people out both politically and socially.

Tanya Domi:

How are you pursuing your research in sociology in the PhD program at the Graduate Center?

Kevin Morris:

So I just wrapped up my first year in the sociology program and I have one foot planted in sociology and another foot planted in political science. The reason that I decided to enroll in the sociology program and was more interested in pursuing sociology at the academic level is that I think that these two fields really can talk to each other a lot. There are a lot of tremendous scholars in sociology and political science that are part of this conversation.

Kevin Morris:

I wanted to develop my sociological chops, knowing that I would continue to be involved in political science while at the Brennan Center. I wanted to beef up that side of my theoretical training and statistical training as well. So yeah, I'm headed into the second year starting in a few weeks now.

Tanya Domi:

You couldn't be in a better place in the graduate center with regard to when you look at census data, demographics and economics. Two political scientists come to mind that are both sociologists and that includes John Mollenkopf, who's the director of the Center for Urban Research and Janet Gornick, who's the director of the Stone Center on Socioeconomic Inequality. So there is that look and research at the Graduate Center that you don't see a lot of places in the same institution. It's an interesting phenomenon.

Speaker 3:

The two tie between the program are great. John is actually my faculty mentor, my faculty advisor. He's opened up a lot of space for me to take the projects that I'm interested in and look at them from both a political science and a sociological perspective. And yeah, that's of course, one of the strengths of the graduate center and one of the strengths of the QB system generally is the role that it plays in the city is such that it can't be restricted to disciplinary boundaries because they're kind of the public facing rule.

[crosstalk 00:07:00]

Tanya Domi:

Right. The interengagement, the interdisciplinary work that goes on at the Graduate Center. That's wonderful. But you have a full-time job and you're a qualitative researcher at the Brennan Center for Justice at NYU. You also testified before Congress about voting suppression in America in June. How many states thus far have passed laws limiting access to the ballot?

Kevin Morris:

So far this year we've seen bills passed and passed into law in 14 states. We've seen bills introduced in 48 states across the country. The legislative session isn't even over yet. We know that Texas, the governor of Texas has called them back into a special session to try and pass restrictive voting laws, 14

states around the country so far in 2021, but that's not going to be the final count unfortunately based on trends around the country.

Tanya Domi:

So these states are not just adopting laws to limit access to the ballot. In Arizona for example, laws were adopted that now give authority to political aspects of the Arizona political structure to actually ultimately certify elections now. Almost an ex post facto ability, which has been suggested by observers and analysts, these changes pose a credible threat to legitimate results. In your opinion, I know you're a quantitative analyst, but surely the Brennan Center is looking at why these laws are being adopted and this goes well beyond the 1965 Voting Rights Act and in any measure in Congress that is going to effectively address this will have to go beyond just advancing and adopting the John Lewis Voting Rights Act.

Kevin Morris:

The John Lewis Voting Rights Advancement Act is definitely, it's a major part of what needs to happen. There are other pieces as well, and you just referenced the Brennan decision that came down from the Supreme Court a few weeks ago, that undermines a part of the 1965 Voting Rights Act that would not be protected under the VRA, the John Lewis Voting Rights Acts, which is historically under the Voting Rights Act you could bring a challenge against the law if there were racially disparate outcomes to that law, but that is now the Supreme Court justice [crosstalk 00:09:44].

Tanya Domi:

Just nullified by Roberts Court.

Kevin Morris:

The VRA is a central piece of the federal fight to protect HR 1 [inaudible 00:09:54] is a central piece of this.

Tanya Domi:

So to re-establish pre-clearance and everything that was contained in the original act.

Kevin Morris:

And to update it. So the part of what we're doing is working on... We have with a whole bunch of other people around the country are working on a new formula to figure out which jurisdictions ought to be covered under that pre-clearance condition based on voting practices from the past decade or so.

Tanya Domi:

So these changes really pose a credible threat and it feels like this is an existential threat to US democracy. There's been a lot of discussion about Texas and the activities there in the state legislature and as the country now is where the democratic caucus of the Texas State House left the state of Texas, came to Washington DC during the past week and using their voices to talk to members of Congress, particularly in the US Senate to convince them of the necessity to adopt a federal law and as probably some of our listeners and you certainly know that right now, Joe mentioned a US Senator democratic caucus member from West Virginia, as well as Kristin Sinema, the US Senator from Arizona, also a Democrat oppose a cutout on filibuster reform to address a Voting Rights Act and pass one.

Tanya Domi:

So just this past week, there were a number of women from the Moral Majority, Reverend Barber, from North Carolina, they came to the Congress and they engaged in civil disobedience and there was an arrest action in Washington. So it seems like things are beginning to escalate around the organizing aspect of this, but if there's no legislation or job did in the US Senate, what could be foreseen in next year's midterm elections?

Kevin Morris:

That's an excellent question. It's hard to gauge how it will play out. A lot of it depends on COVID as well. So a lot of the restrictions that we're seeing this year are undoing things that made it a lot easier for a lot of people to vote during a pandemic in 2020. Depending on what the world looks like next year, if early voting and mail voting is as much more difficult as we expect it to be, that could be a really big problem and it could leave a lot of people on the sidelines. [crosstalk 00:12:33].

Tanya Domi:

In addition to that, we're going to be going through reapportionment because of the census and that's another dynamic that some election forecasters project that the Democrats probably have already lost seven to nine seats easily because of population movement and the loss of seats and mostly blue states.

Kevin Morris:

We're seeing there are some people that are arguing that, yeah, these restrictions are going to make it harder to vote, but if people really care about voting, they'll find a way to do it, which that on its own, when it comes to voting is not entirely true for people that have childcare duties or work.

Tanya Domi:

Or shift workers.

Kevin Morris:

Exactly. Putting all of that to one side, the redistricting, the reapportionment and out organized gerrymandering is what we say. That's going to be done in state legislatures without federal protection. There's no, get out the vote campaign that can-

Tanya Domi:

That can overcome those new lines. So let's talk about Texas. You've actually written a journal article on access to the ballot in Texas. Can you tell us why Texas is one of the most difficult places to access the ballot if you're a minority?

Kevin Morris:

Yeah. We see this in a lot of places in a number of scholars have written pretty extensively on the fact that we actually see restrictive bills going into place often in places that are more competitive. So of course, we saw this in Georgia this year after it went blue for the first time in a generation and Texas is no exception. Texas is one of the most racially diverse parts of the country.

Kevin Morris:

There are different political coalitions and that's been true for a long time, but there's been a large Latino and a large black [crosstalk 00:14:27]. So the presence of different racial and ethnic minorities have long lead a certain amount of backlash, again from the white power structure against minorities organizing. Those minorities have posed a threat to the racial order in a way that they haven't in other states that are more white and more homogenous.

Kevin Morris:

So not only do we see it in Texas and I know that there's like a Texas Voting Rights project there, Georgia also has one as well. It's interesting in both of these states are trending purple to blue and maybe Texas is a little ways out from that, but clearly it's a threat and that in the 2018 midterms, the Democrats probably lost some opportunities to pick up seats in the Houston Fort worth Dallas regions because they have become increasingly blue.

Kevin Morris:

But just as you remarked, if the gerrymandering will probably be reinforced with new lines through reapportionment that will happen at the state legislative level in the coming new year, so before we get to the November midterms, there's going to be completely new lines drawn in several states and if they're Republican dominated, it would seem that the Democrats are going to be on the losing end of those lines.

Kevin Morris:

That's right. What I will emphasize is that gerrymandering it's something that both-
Tanya Domi:

The Democrats do too.

Kevin Morris:

Right. So it is one of the things that we pushed for it at the Brennan Center is nonpartisan commissions because it comes back to a catch phrase that you hear often or at least if you hang out in the spaces that I hang out, you hear often is that, voters should choose their politicians and politicians shouldn't choose their motors and the gerrymandering allows the politicians to draw their own districts. We see it on both sides. There's a certain, some parties are-

Tanya Domi:

Are more blatant about.

Kevin Morris:

Yeah, but we've definitely seen that on both sides. And this is one of the frustrating things about a lot of election reform is that you hear people like Mitch McConnell saying that HR 1 is a democratic power ground and that's not true. It ties everyone's hands equally and takes a lot of the power around elections out of the hands of politicians and puts them in people that are going to create a more level playing field.

Tanya Domi:

As a matter of fact, the United States is one of the outliers when it comes to nonpolitical managed elections in the Western world. [inaudible 00:17:18] have worked on elections all over the world. As a person who was spouses, a non-partisan electoral commissions, and we just went through an election here in New York city run by the board of elections, which is absolutely political.

Tanya Domi:

It created a major blunder during running of the first ranked choice voting electoral system in the democratic primary and they mixed in votes. That was a test one and didn't take it out before they went with the final votes on the rank choice number one candidates and so that caused an uproar. Apparently Albany's now taking the initiative to address that calling for a civilian control nonpartisan, nonpolitical board, which I completely support.

Kevin Morris:

It's kind of an adage in the election world that it is not... Blue states aren't doing everything perfectly in red states not. Definitely, it's more complicated than that. A lot of times it doesn't fall cleanly along line. It's more of a political side of it what's politicized.

Tanya Domi:

So you testified before the house administration subcommittee on elections in June. I know that you gave an interview to the GC and we wrote a new story about it for those who maybe haven't read the story. Why don't you tell us what that was like and share with our listeners some of the questions that you are really struck by that really resonated with members of the subcommittee.

Kevin Morris:

So it was part of a push in support of the John Lewis Voting Rights Advancement Act, which I know we touched on earlier that would restore the pre-clearance conditions in section five of the Voting Rights Act that we're hearing will probably come up for a vote this fall. Part of how this legislation gets passed, how lots of other station gets passed is there's a period of congressional record building. So that if a bill gets challenged in court, there is ample evidence of Congress's intent in passing it, what problems they were trying to so that the justices can-

Tanya Domi:

What they were addressing, what was their intent [crosstalk 00:19:44].

Kevin Morris:

So part of my testimony was focused on some of the research that I've done over the past few years, especially in the wake of the 2013 Supreme Court decision that nullified-

Tanya Domi:

The Shelby, yes.

Kevin Morris:

The Shelby County decision. It was tremendously exciting as someone who considers himself a scholar who is doing public facing, publicly engaged research to have the opportunity to be part of that legislative process, it was very, very exciting to see my research used for that goal. And yeah, as a first-year graduate student, it's hard to imagine a greater honor than getting to do that.

Kevin Morris:

It was an interesting experience going into it. I was told I was there to get things on the record, not necessarily trying to change anyone's mind, not trying anyone to vote for it, but rather to get these facts about racial disparities and racially disparate turnout effects that I've documented and the number of different studies that I've done.

Kevin Morris:

There was one question came out from a Congress member who said turnout was higher than ever before in 2020, what are we complaining about? Shouldn't we just be celebrating this. And it's something that we're seeing bubbling up a little bit more over the summer is turnout was so high, why do we care? These bills must not matter at all. But we actually know that the racial turnout gap is just as large in 2020 as it was in 2016. So we saw turnout go up among black voters, among Latino voters, but it also went up among white voters. So the relative turnout of black voters or Latino voters didn't increase very much at all.

Tanya Domi:

Yes. I can relate to you on testifying having, I used to be a civil rights, human rights advocate inside the belt line have testified many times, but it is an exciting experience and it's not surprising given the stature of the Brennan Center and on this topic specifically, voter oppression in the United States. So it's a nod to your research and a nod to the Brennan Center. What are your thoughts about... Let's just share with listeners, how racial minorities are deprived in the electoral process, there's less money appropriated to minority districts. Is that correct with regard to election process? There's fewer polling stations. Could you share the characteristics of what happens actually?

Kevin Morris:

Yeah. So some of it is differential resources. We've done research a couple of years ago. It would publish last year, I guess that showed that actually voters of color live in counties where there aren't fewer resources, but other researchers have shown that the resources are worse. That's polling places and machines are more like-

Tanya Domi:

More mediocre, less. I got it.

Kevin Morris:

But then also when it comes to linguistic issues, if you don't speak English particularly well, but you don't live in a city with a large population that speaks your language, you're likely to show up on election day and have to fill out your ballot in English and you're not required to speak English perfectly the to be a citizen of the United States. And so there's often not adequate-

Tanya Domi:

There's language barrier.

Kevin Morris:

And then part of what we're seeing this year is especially targeted responses, targeted disenfranchising legislation that's going into place and that wasn't part of the Georgia bill that was eventually passed and as of right now dropped out of the Texas bill, but we saw legislators trying to end Sunday voting. No, the black voters in particular, there's a long history of political organizing in the black church. Get out the vote campaign. On Sunday people go to [crosstalk 00:23:43]

Tanya Domi:

Souls to the polls.

Kevin Morris:

Exactly, souls to the polls. So we also see there are very particular ways that the minority vote is undermined in a federal court case in North Carolina from a few years back, the judge said that black voters were targeted with what he called surgical precision and that had to do with gerrymandering and voter ID laws as well. So politicians know exactly who votes for them and they know the ways that they like to vote and how to... I would make it just a little bit harder, you don't have to totally disenfranchised a whole population. All you need to do is shave off a few votes here and a few votes there and suddenly non-weight representation is undermined.

Tanya Domi:

Another example like in Georgia, they're prohibiting anybody bringing water food to a voter standing in line to vote. I saw some really interesting biblical interpretations of that saying, well, what would Christ have to say about that? These politicians really weren't thinking about any generosity Christian or elsewhere it's just absolutely brazen. I must say, as someone who is a child, I was a child during this early 60s during the civil rights movement and to see this happen in the way it's happened is stunning on one hand. But also knowing that it's been a part of the American political and social compact for a long time and unfortunately our former president really lit, he lit a fuse for sure.

Kevin Morris:

Absolutely. It is not new. It is not a new fight. Part of president Trump's bid to stay in power and his bid to undermine voting rights last year was pretty explicitly predicated on attacking vote by mail, on attacking urban areas. So we saw them launch challenges in places like Detroit [crosstalk 00:25:51].

Tanya Domi:

They lost every challenge to every election except one and it was the US Supreme Court that said, "Oh, it's fine. You guys want to monitor?" I think that was in Pennsylvania. That's fine. Go back and monitor. So it was really a non-decision.

Kevin Morris:

The court system actually worked pretty well when it came to making sure that things went well last year and they didn't want the Trump administration getaway with too much in terms of restricting the right to vote last year. But of course, we're seeing like we've been talking about this whole time, this backlash doesn't happen 2020 [inaudible 00:26:29] .

Tanya Domi:

Which was forecasted by the former president himself saying the only way I can lose is if it's rigged and if you're mailing in votes the near, then those are rigged too. So just de-legitimized all these different aspects of elections that were actually not true at all. So now we're in this moment, we don't have a lot of runway left. There's not that much time on the congressional calendar. There's a legislative calendar. They're going to be going out for summer recess.

Tanya Domi:

In the first two weeks in August, at some point they will leave and it would seem that right now, though, a lot of focuses on this bi-partisan, reconciliation, infrastructure package and then the democratic

infrastructure project, which is mostly human infrastructure. A lot of attention on that soaking up a lot of time, which is appropriate. It takes time to move these bills, but there's not a lot of runway left and some analysts are saying that the voting rights legislation, packages got to be adopted. By the end of September what are you hearing from your perch at the Brennan Center? Are you hearing anything about efforts to address this? We know some of the public efforts, but perhaps behind the scenes?

Kevin Morris:

Well, I'm somewhat bound in what I can talk about publicly. What I can say is this is still very much an ongoing conversation. Senate staffers are still very engaged with making sure that that progress has made on this in the coming months. Things need to move quickly, but there's still engagement around it. Last week, president Biden gave a major speech in Philadelphia on the need for voting rights. Over the last week, we've seen that that has helped. We'll put it that way. There's certainly a renewed focus on it as well. I would be remiss if I didn't talk about my boss or my former boss, she had her Senate confirmation hearing last week. She was just nominated for second circuit court of appeals judgeship.

Tanya Domi:

What was her name?

Kevin Morris:

Her name is Myrna Perez. [crosstalk 00:28:56]

Tanya Domi:

Very highly regarded, I understand.

Kevin Morris:

So Myrna had heard her hearing last week. So there is still a fair amount of focus on voting rates. You open up the New York Times and you're right this week, we're all reading about infrastructure, but in DC, there's still movement on all of the fight to make sure that voters are protected.

Tanya Domi:

I'm sure that the leadership conference on civil rights is doing work on this and of course the need a group to its former president is now like associate attorney general. So there are some good friends in the department of justice on these matters. What's next for you Kevin Morris? What are you doing?

Kevin Morris:

I'm trying to rest a tiny bit where I again, catching fits and snatches here and there as I get ready for my second year in the sociology program. I'm so lucky to get to do between working at Brennan and being in the graduate center is I have space right now to think about what sorts of academic projects do I need to be doing in the classroom that can help our advocacy and how can I make sure that my scholarly work is also very much in conversation with kind of the national mood and pushes for [inaudible 00:30:12] on the country. So I'm sketching out next year's paper at this point.

Tanya Domi:

Understood. Very exciting. Well, we reserve the right to have you back.

Kevin Morris:

Yeah, I'm happy too.

Tanya Domi:

Let's see what happens after this Congress and see what happens on the voting rights front and when that time comes about, we will be calling you. Thank you so much.

Kevin Morris:

Thank you.

Tanya Domi:

This transcript was exported on Jul 28, 2021 - view latest version [here](#).

Thanks for tuning into the Thought Project and thanks to our guest PhD student, Kevin Morris, who is beginning his second year this fall in sociology at the Graduate Center, CUNY.

Tanya Domi:

The Thought Project is brought to you with production engineering and technical assistance by Kevin Wolf of CUNY TV. I'm Tanya Domi. Tune in next week.