**[music]**

**Intro**

Welcome to the Let’s Talk Government Podcast that is provided for you by the Department of Government at Minnesota State University, Mankato located in Minnesota in the United States. I am your host Dr. Pat Nelson the chairperson of the Government Department. I want to thank you for joining us as we explore different topics about government. Some may be surprising to you and some may not, so please enjoy.

**Dr. Nelson:**

Welcome to episode seven of the Let's Talk Government podcast. Today, we are going to be discussing the 2020 election results. I'm joined by Dr. Kevin Parsneau and Dr. Josh Berkenpas who are full professors in the political science program at Minnesota state university, Mankato you both of them have been guests before. So welcome gentlemen, let's start off with what is going on. Obviously we're recording this before it's published, but the election is this week. What's going on with the presidential election. Let's start there.

**Dr. Kevin Parsneau:**

Well, I, it, it appears to me right now as it's, um, the morning of November 6th, that the counts in Pennsylvania and Georgia and North Carolina and Arizona have continued to the point and Joe Biden has passed, uh, Donald Trump and the number of votes in Georgia and the number of votes in Pennsylvania. And it doesn't look like, uh, at least by counting ballots. Donald Trump has a path to winning those States at this point, and Arizona is still up in the air because there's votes left to be counted. That might come Donald Trump's way, but all of them are looking like they're going to go for, um, Joe Biden, which should get him to, I think about 306 electoral college votes. Uh, North Carolina appears at it. He will not get enough to get to that doc that Biden will not get enough to get North Carolina, but he does not need it. And that should be enough to make him the next president of the United States. Although there are court cases, uh, at least that the Trump campaign is talking about.

**Dr. Nelson:**

So since this is still up in the air a little bit, when, when do you think one of them will declare that they're the winner? When do you make that call? Do we have to wait for all the recounting to be done? Or is there a certain point that you could say, yes, that's definitely our president elect.

**Dr. Kevin Parsneau:**

I think that, I mean, the normal way that this goes is on election night, enough, people are certain enough of enough States that the person who is behind usually calls the winner and concedes, although there's nothing formal about that process, it's just a thing. And in fact, in 2000, um, Al retracted his concession and then they have the court case in Florida. So there's nothing official. The normal thing would be for the person who loses or appears to have lost, to call the winner and concede. Um, I, I don't see that coming from Donald Trump on the one hand, because he appears to hold out hope that court cases or something will, uh, allow him to prevail. And I'm not even sure that it's in his character to call if, if he had lost under regular circumstances. Um, because he's kind of said that, right? He said, I don't like losing it's particularly hard for me. So he doesn't seem like he's going to do that. So, um, I, and I don't think Joe Biden is going to announce it either until all the votes are cast. I think because, uh, one of the mantras of the Biden campaign has been, you know, count all the votes, no matter, as long as they came in by election day, keep counting those mail ballots as long as they're legal ballots. Um, so I don't foresee, uh, the Biden campaign officially declaring themselves president until somebody else does that. It might be the States. It might not.

**Dr. Nelson:**

Well, you actually brought up a good point. So we've heard that there might be court cases or there might be rulings about whether or not to count ballots that came in after election day, even though they were postmarked before or on election day, can either you, Josh or Kevin, talk about why, why somebody might challenge that. Why don't we just count everything if it's done by election day? I know I kind of threw that weird

**Dr. Josh Berkenpas:**

And it varies. It varies by state, right. And what I've heard, uh, the Republicans are, the Trump campaign is trying to do right, is to stop the counting of ballots, particularly in States that are still being counted right now. Um, I haven't yet heard of any, um, uh, courts, uh, agreeing with them or even, uh, taking up the case. Uh, it seems to me at least to be a sort of last ditch effort, um, by the campaign to try to, um, slow down or stop the counting of, uh, particularly the mail in ballots. Um, I'd also add that it might be a somewhat misconceived strategy, um, because the, um, what did we have? Something like a hundred million that was more than that? Um, Nope, a hundred million a mail-in ballots, right out of a record sending 160 million votes cast, um, and fairly evenly split between Republicans and Democrats in years past, it might've been a fairly safe assumption that most of the mail-in ballots were coming from urban areas and therefore they support democratic candidates. Uh, but this time around, of course, we've got a pandemic going. So lots of Democrats and Republicans cast mail-in ballots. Um, last numbers I saw roughly 48% of those were democratic 42% Republican. So, um, very close. And who knows, you know, it depends where they're coming from, I suppose, right. They're coming from a more rural districts, um, that might help, uh, the president's campaign. Uh, they're coming from our urban districts likely to help, uh, the Biden campaign, um, now,

**Dr. Nelson:**

Well, and Josh, you actually brought up a really interesting idea. I mean, you've got close percentage split between Democrat or Republicans, um, absentee ballots. We have really close, really, really close races in several States. I mean, like one or two percentage point differences. What are your opinions on why is this so close? Why is it so close? Not only the presidential race, but also a lot of the elections across the United States?

**Dr. Kevin Parsneau:**

I think one of the reasons that these races really close in a lot of States is that the campaigns are really good these days with, um, technology for micro, uh, micro targeting voters in the past, you would say, well, this kind of people in this kind of place, this kind of message works. But given Matt, you know, campaigns are great at gathering data. They, they know a lot about voters. And so they're able to really get, they want to get right to that number. They need to win. They don't want to burn too many resources in any given state and both of them are doing it. So the Biden campaign or the Trump campaign has specific targets, specific voters, and they're just able to really push the thing like, okay, we got to win Pennsylvania. They both are trying to do it. And they both know just what they need to do to get to 50% in a way that you just couldn't do when you didn't have, you know, computers and databases that knew so much about these voters. So they're able to really, you know, try and get, just spend the exact right amount. They need to win these States. So I think a lot of times in these battleground States, they come close because they're inherently, wouldn't be battleground States if they weren't already close, but then the campaigns, you know, okay, we got to send the candidate one more time to Wisconsin just to knock that one down. And, you know, just I'll use Wisconsin as an example. Um, both candidates went to Wisconsin late. A lot of other people were saying, well, Wisconsin looks like Biden is going to win. Um, but both of the campaigns were saying, no, I don't think so. And they clearly acted like that. And so they went, um, and it turns out that Wisconsin was very close. I guess that's why these States all get very close because they're all trying to do just enough to win 50% plus a few more people. And are these candidates through these campaigns are really good at that? I don't know if that answers your question, but, but I, I think that's what we're seeing. And also, I mean, in a, in a larger picture, um, both these candidates turned out a lot of voters. I don't know whether it was the just general popularity, um, of Joe Biden and Donald Trump or general concern about Joe Biden or Donald Trump by the other side. But so many people voted. It's just going to make elections close.

**Dr. Josh Berkenpas:**

I would add to that, to a climate of, um, populism in the country, particularly, uh, well, of course, populism exists on the left and the right. And on the left, we might've had a populous candidate, had a, you know, Bernie Sanders or Elizabeth Warren captured the nomination on the democratic side, um, Biden and of course, more, uh, moderate candidate, uh, president Trump certainly, um, you know, his, his campaign in 2016 and continuing in 2020, um, a lot of populous rhetoric, right? Anti, uh, bigness, um, some underlying, um, you know, racist, uh, underlying and explicit racist themes, uh, sexism, et cetera. I mean, what that points to I think is, um, in part, uh, the, the changing demographics in the country, right? The, um, the old white majority, um, is slowly losing its majority status. We're becoming more, uh, pluralistic, uh, and that scares a lot of folks.

**Dr. Josh Berkenpas:**

Also what appeals or fuels a populous moment or movement, uh, is, uh, economic inequality, right? Economic insecurity, and a lot of these folks that are supporting, uh, the president's campaign, um, you know, feel as though they're getting a raw deal, right. And that, um, only this, this, um, you know, populist, uh, president, um, can, can fix things. Right. Um, so, um, he's getting a lot of sport, right. Particularly from, um, you know, white men, uh, white women, a lot of them without a college education. Um, and then on the democratic side, it's basically right. People of color, um, as well as whites with education, uh, both men and women, um, supporting, uh, the Biden campaign, um, part of, uh, populous rhetoric too, is to cause division, right? That's part of the game plan is to try to cause division, uh, in order to win policy fights as well as, uh, elections. So, um, the president has been, as we've all seen quite, uh, quite divisive in his rhetoric over the past few years, um, large number of people turning out, something else we could talk about is the, uh, the huge, I might say I've seen amount of money being spent on campaigns and elections. These days, we set a new record of, uh, 14 billion, which blew away, uh, the last presidential election by I think more than doubled it from, uh, 2016.

**Dr. Nelson:**

Wow. That is a huge number. So right now the Washington post is reporting that it's projected that 66.3% of all eligible voters voted in this election. And of course, here in Minnesota, we've got a really good history of having high voter turnout and is looking at like 79.4% of eligible voters voted. So these are numbers that are on par with like 1908 in the early 19 hundreds. So would you like to talk about maybe what's the role of the money spent elections and the role of media and maybe getting that high of a voter turnout? What do you think for the presidential election for sure. And then we'll move on to some other elections.

**Dr. Kevin Parsneau:**

The, I mean obviously when the, when the, uh, television, when you're watching television and it's one political ad after another, um, now a lot of times these will make people mad. You do wish there would be just, just tell me about, you know, tell me about Miller Budweiser, not this one more time, but it reminds people that there's an election, right? And a lot of the job of these ads is to have an emotional appeal because of emotional appeals, open up your thought, your mind to thinking about it. And so I think all this money being spent just got a lot of people thinking about the election and you decide to go vote. Right. Um, I th I think the, I, and I, I wanted to add, I mean, so the, the coverage, the, um, money spent on ads, but I also think to some degree, we're still kind of stuck in our houses a lot with the pandemic, and it's harder to feel like normal life. So maybe if there was normal, ordinary life was more happening, you know, go bowling or something. Um, we could think about something besides politics. And I mean, as a political scientist, I think about politics all the time, but I think a lot of people were, were stuck thinking a lot about politics. You like these guys, do you not like these guys? Do you want to vote? Do you not want to? And then it was just, I think that drove a lot of turnout. I think people just couldn't ignore politics as easily as you can when there's not a pandemic.

**Dr. Kevin Parsneau:**

Good. I guess

**Dr. Nelson:**

That's true if that's true. So let's talk about polling. You know, polling is kind of a topic that maybe the normal person has heard the term. They don't know quite exactly what goes into it. Do we trust it? Do we don't trust it? What about polling during this election?

**Dr. Kevin Parsneau:**

Well, um, the one, the one thing a lot of people are saying, well, the polls got it wrong. And I think there's going to be some examples. For example, I talked about Wisconsin, which supposedly was going heavily for Biden and winds up being really close. Um, don't know exactly how close that's going to be. But, um, a lot of like Wisconsin and Michigan were both a lot closer than the polls suggested Pennsylvania was a lot closer than the polls suggested. Um, I do, I do think though, that people kind of confuse public opinion polling, because it's used to project election outcomes with the actual election outcomes. Right? So if everybody behaves the same way, um, then it's easy. But the problem with using polling to project outcomes isn't that the polls are necessarily bad. It's that you're trying to do two things. You're trying to figure out who they're going to vote for, but then are they going to vote? And you can get a really good measure of who they would vote for if they were going to vote. But it's really hard to figure out whether a person is going to vote because you asked them in a poll, if they're going to vote. And everybody says yes, but then they don't go. Right? So pollsters have to build in some prediction of whether the person they're talking to is actually going to go vote, even though they say they're going to go vote. So they'll ask them questions. Like, did you vote in the last election? Or maybe they know, okay, this person is a college graduate. So they're more likely to vote than a non-college graduate, or they're, let's say 50 years old. So they're more likely to vote than a 25 year old. But if your guesses on those things are wrong, it looks like your pool was off. Right? Because what if all of a sudden, a whole bunch of people who are 25 turn out and vote in larger numbers, Oh, then the poll was wrong. No, the pool got their opinion. It just couldn't predict whether they were going to go vote. And I think some of that's being picked up in the fact that Donald Trump outperformed what the pollsters were predicting, not so much that they didn't measure the opinions well, but his appeal, um, to, uh, people who are less likely to have gone to college. Those are generally people that pollsters think are less likely to vote. And if he gets them to go vote, it's going to make the, it's going to make the poll seem off. Um, and yeah, the projection was off, but gosh, that's really tough to predict two things instead of just one, I, I don't know if that answers it for you. I also think that people are predicting the end of polling, uh, or the, the death of pulling a little bit premature because the polls were right on in a lot of places, right. George is razor thin and that's what the pollster said. It was. And people were thinking, Oh, George is not going to go for the Democrat George and never goes for the Democrats. So they got that one. Right. Right. And I think when we look at all the numbers, it's probably going to be a bit like 2016 when, um, yes, the polls are off a bit in some places, but overall they kind of got, got it. Right. Um, and again, you're trying to do two things and that's really hard to do.

**Dr. Josh Berkenpas:**

I'd add, to add to that. I'm looking back at 2016 when there was lots of complaints about, um, misleading polls. I think, um, the, the pollsters, if you will have learned a lot from that. So, um, they recovered from some of their mistakes, a couple, um, readings and political science when it comes to mind by, uh, Xeno and Todd, uh, titled the great revolt, uh, they went out, um, and access to a survey of folks right after the 2016 election. Um, and ask, you know, the big question everyone was asking back then, you know, why did so many people vote for Donald Trump, right. How could the polls have been so wrong? Um, and what they, they characterize it as being these folks were, uh, uh, quote unquote hiding in plain sight. Right. In other words, um, the posters didn't talk to them, right. They didn't consider them to be important enough. Um, and sort of folks in, I guess, in middle America, rural America, um, particularly in the so-called rust belt States about our ground States, uh, to be important enough to include, uh, in their models. Right. So that's sort of part of what their argument was. Uh, some of that may have, uh, continued today. Um, you know, another one, uh, Kevin mentioned, I think the youth vote as well. Um, typically traditionally, or I'd expected to be, uh, lower than, um, I guess we might expect. Um, but this time around, right. It seems as though a youth turn out is quite high in, uh, in a number of States. Right. So did they figure that into, uh, their projections? And then it's kind of hard to, as we say, predict the future and at best it's a, uh, an estimate, right? Of course the public's not going to, um, appreciate that difference, I suppose.

**Dr. Nelson:**

All right. So we focused on the president so far, there's lots of other races going on. Uh, do one of you want to tell me what's going on in the us Senate, in the U S house with races? Are there changes? Um, have we had any majority of flips? We have anything in parallel what's going on there

**Dr. Josh Berkenpas:**

It's, uh, it's more or less what we had before. Um, one surprising, uh, outcome that looks like so far is that the Democrats are actually going to lose seats, uh, part of their majority in the house of representatives. Um, I've even seen some early talk about perhaps, um, ousting, uh, Nancy Pelosi as speaker, um, given this, uh, poor performance by, uh, Democrats and house races across the country. You know, she has, uh, she has a lot of seniority in clouds, so I don't anticipate that being the case, but some rumblings amongst, uh, um, the democratic ranks that perhaps somebody else could do a better job. Um, Mitch McConnell in the Senate, and of course in the majority leader, um, has retained his seat. Um, and last I saw where we're split in the Senate. So, um, I think projections that I've been seeing, it appears that the, um, Republicans will retain control of the Senate. The Democrats will retain control of the house, right. So, uh, divided government continues.

**Dr. Nelson:**

So I am going to ask my political scientists for an opinion here. I was listening to a show this morning that said that by not getting a second COVID relief package through the house may have really hurt the Democrats here at the end. So I'm going to ask your opinions. Do you guys agree or not? Do you think it was a lot more other factors than that? What do you think?

**Dr. Josh Berkenpas:**

Yeah, I bet my best guess is that the American public would probably give more credit to the president for that and members of Congress, but it could, might've been something they used right in their campaigns. Um, you know, I worked hard to bring you this second stimulus package, you know, reelect me or vote for me or something like that. But my sense is most Americans would probably credit the president for that rather than, uh, Congress as a whole certainly, or, um, their member of Congress.

**Dr. Kevin Parsneau:**

Yeah. It might've that might've that sort of thing. Might've helped some incumbents, but, um, I mean, Democrats saw opportunities for their challengers to beat incumbent, uh, Republican senators. And that almost certainly wouldn't have helped, uh, challengers trying to beat incumbent senators. They wound up not winning anyway, except for so far Mark Kelly, beat McSally. Um, but they were looking for big wins and they didn't get it. It, it w who knows you can, you can always throw some big change into things and, and think that it might've changed it, but I don't know that that systematically would have helped the Democrats that much. Um, I, I th I think the Democrats were hoping for more, um, for Republicans to be more demoralized than it turned out that they were, I think that, uh, Donald Trump, I mean, I think there was a lot of, there's probably a lot of democratic candidates who were running that when they did their math, they said we got to get the, this number in order to win. And they probably got to those numbers, but Republicans turned out to vote for Donald Trump and they went down the ticket and voted for the Republican incumbents or the Republican challengers, and the Republicans exceeded what the Democrats expected them to get. Um, so that might explain a lot of it. I don't, I don't, I mean, I haven't seen enough polling on the, the relief package from COVID, uh, to say for sure, but I think Josh is probably right.

**Dr. Nelson:**

Well, thanks for letting me put you on the spot there. So, okay. So let's come down from the federal level to the state level. Obviously, Minnesota, we've had some really close races here. Um, we've been watching the Hagadorn few hand, the, and race down here by the Mankato area what's going on in Minnesota, any surprises, anything that you didn't expect?

**Dr. Kevin Parsneau:**

I, uh, um, I mean, the, the, the, I expected the fee Han Hagadorn raised to be closer. Um, it was very close, but, um, it was not as close as, um, I thought it would be. And, um, Hagadorn apparently pulled it off and apparently yesterday, uh, fi hand conceded in that race, but that was one that I think Democrats were really hoping to pick up because Fianna had done so well in an off year election that they expected it to carry on to a presidential year, and it didn't happen for them. Um, at the, at the, I think at the state level, uh, Democrats thought that, um, after they had done fairly well in 2018, I think they were hoping to pick up the state Senate and that didn't happen for them either. So it was a lot of, I guess, for, for Democrats, um, missed opportunities, um, for Republicans, they, they held what they were looking for. They even appear to have picked up some, some seats in the state house.

**Dr. Josh Berkenpas:**

Yeah. And if you look at the electoral map, right, we tend to look at blue States and red States. Right. Of course, Minnesota, once again, a blue state from that perspective. But if you zoom in right, and look at the County level of results, um, you know, the, most of the state, uh, is red right now, the only, um, counties really that voted, um, well, I'm looking at the house selections, right. That sent democratic members back to the house or in and around the cities. Uh, we have, uh, eight members, right. Our delegation consists of eight members. And, uh, it looks like it is split right. For, for, uh, another surprise or maybe not a surprise. Um, I suppose, a surprise from the perspective of, uh, incumbency or anything that incumbents, uh, naturally have an advantage as the, uh, the race in the seventh district. Um, Collin Peterson, long time, um, member of Congress, chair of the agriculture committee, uh, in Congress, uh, was handily defeated 53 to 40%, um, by, uh, the Republican, um, and, um, you know, long time politician in the state, Michelle, um, Oh boy, it's too small for me to read. Well, The challenger.

**Dr. Nelson:**

So, all right, we're coming to the end here. So let's, I want to ask you a full philosophical question to end our podcast. Do you think we actually need an election day in the United States? Why don't we have a different mechanism for voting? I mean, we saw a lot of episodes of fee balance, a lot of early voting. Do we still need an election day in the United States? What are your thoughts on that?

**Dr. Kevin Parsneau:**

Um, well, I, I mean, I think we still need an election day. I think election day might become less of a thing, I think with this pandemic. And so many people voting early, um, or voting by mail or drop boxes. Um, I think a lot of people like that, I mean, obviously turnout was huge and then I credited that to the pandemic, but in the course of that, I think a lot of people might've decided, yeah, let me just do this some day of the week when it's most convenient to me, rather than, you know, on Tuesday having to be at the polls. I still think that a lot of people, I, I think that a lot of people still liked the idea of going to the polls on Monday. So they'll still have that, but I think a lot more people having voted by mail or voted early with drop boxes, um, will prefer, and maybe that'll just make election day easier.

**Dr. Josh Berkenpas:**

I mean, we're sort of going through a big experiment right now, close to, um, I'm going to say two thirds of the votes cast were by mail-in ballot, uh, in United States. So that's, uh, a large number of Americans that have now had this experience. And I, I suppose time will tell, right. Um, there are of course vested interests that, um, would prefer that the, the old model, um, um, stay the same. Um, but now we've had this experience and if, you know, a couple months from now, or in the, in the coming weeks, um, we find out that, you know, everything went just fine. There was no corruption, right. Um, um, it took a little bit longer, but, you know, we finally eventually got the results, um, and everything is sort of, um, you know, run smoothly perhaps in the future. Um, we'll see more of this, um, course that'll happen, um, most likely at the state level. So depend a lot on, uh, state legislatures, the balance of power there, um, vested interests, uh, and things like that as well. Um, there's probably a reason some politicians would rather have just an election day rather than mail-in ballots.

**Dr. Nelson:**

Well, thank you, gentlemen. You know, when we were scheduling a list, we were, we were trying to contemplate how far out we could go. Cause we didn't know if there would be a call on the presidential election yet. And, you know, we had to kind of go to the limit here. So it'll be fun to see what the actual results are, but thank you for your expertise and taking time to come talk to us. I appreciate that. Thank you. Maybe some future point, we'll have more opportunity to say when it's all clear.

**[music]**

Thank you for listening to this episode of Let's Talk Government. If you have suggestions for future episode topics or other areas, you'd like us to cover, please visit our website at link.msu.edu\let'stalkgov to submit your ideas. Join us every Tuesday for a new episode and thank you for listening.