

Policy 360 Transcript – Episode 98 – Getting out the Vote on Campus

Judith Kelley: Do you remember the first time you voted? That's certainly something I remember very clearly because I couldn't vote for a long time. I was 50 years old before I got to go to the polls and cast a ballot, and that meant that I spent decades in the United States listening to people talk about elections, feeling somewhat part of the process but not quite, because I knew that when election day came around I wasn't going to be able to go cast a ballot of my own, which was particularly ironic given that I wrote a book on election monitoring. Maybe I wrote that because I felt excluded. But it was 2016 and I finally ... the opportunity had arisen for me to become a citizen and I was able to go and cast my first ballot. So voting is something that resonates with me, and it seems that there are more and more key constituencies that we focus on in terms of thinking about bringing out the vote.

Judith Kelley: I am Judith Kelley. I am Dean of the Sanford School of Public Policy, and I'm very pleased to have with me here today Lindsay Morgenstein, who is a student, sophomore, at Duke University and a public policy major. She's just declared. Go public policy. And B.J. Rudell is the associate director of Duke Center for Political Leadership, Innovation, and Service. And they're here with me to share a little bit about some of the exciting things that happened in the 2018 election, during which the turnout for Duke, the student turnout, really grew. It doubled between 14 and 18, which was more than we saw elsewhere. I mean grew overall, but at Duke the rate was kind of higher than even we saw elsewhere, at 114%. So we're going to talk a little bit about how that came about and how POLIS, the Duke Center for Politics, was a part of making that happen.

Judith Kelley: So, welcome Lindsay.

Lindsay M: Thank you.

Judith Kelley: And welcome to you B.J.

B.J. Rudell: Thank you.

Judith Kelley: So B.J., let's start with you. So take us back in time a little bit. 2016, we've had an election that's gotten a lot of people to sit up and think about the future of politics in this country. So you started to think about getting POLIS involved in the 2018 election. When did you start thinking about that? Why did you think we should get involved with that as a university?

B.J. Rudell: Well, I started here at Duke a month before the 2016 election and so everything about that election caught me off guard, as it did a lot of people, but for my own sake, just not really even knowing the students on campus or the pulse of the campus. And then you have really an earth shattering election. Even those on the right who are students here really felt that they weren't sure they could speak up and speak their mind. It was really a pretty powerful experience for a

lot of people, and I was still new to it. And so my focus, and really POLIS' focus, and students who I talked to, their focus, was let's make sure going into 2018 that everyone understands that they have a voice, and let's figure out how we can really mobilize people on a grassroots level where everyone feels that they're a part of something bigger. They're not just voting on their own.

Judith Kelley: So what were some of the first steps you took to get students involved?

B.J. Rudell: Well, I stole an idea from Elon university. They had something called Elon Votes.

Judith Kelley: That's the best type of flattery. Right?

B.J. Rudell: I told them I'm going to take that and they said, please do, and so we made a website, Duke Votes. And then once we had a home for voting, we then started talking with student leaders all around the campus over the summer of 2018. The basic question we asked was what can POLIS do that supports you and that doesn't step on your toes, but that also demonstrates that Duke cares a great deal about amplifying your voice?

Judith Kelley: Right. So Lindsay, you were one of those targeted student leaders, I guess, or somehow you decided to get involved. Why did you decide to get involved in a midterm election, which must be a fairly obscure thing too. What were you at that time, a freshmen or-

Lindsay M: Yeah. So, it's a little obscure but also not really. I'm from North Carolina and this is a state that's always been very, I would say, electorally challenged. We're so gerrymandered and so many voters are disenfranchised every year, and so I came to Duke and I knew that voting was important because I had just voted for the first time, I guess, in the mid-terms, that midterm election. And so I was thinking about ... this matters. I really care. I saw Duke Votes. I said, Oh Duke, I like that I go here. And votes, I like that too. And so I started coming to some of the Duke Votes meetings, got plugged in a little bit. My freshman hall actually had a voter registration event, which was my first kind of taste of registering voters and engaging the campus in voting efforts. And from there I guess I've just been pretty involved with Duke Votes and especially what we're doing forward, just moving forward, going into 2020.

Judith Kelley: Had you had any kind of experience with activism like this before?

Lindsay M: Yeah. I've been pretty politically minded forever. I interned at the Alliance for Climate Education when I was a junior in high school, and we ran a campaign to try and change my school system's board of education to 100% renewable energy. It was a lofty goal and of course we failed, but that's my first sort of foray into politics. We collected 600 petitions and as a 16 year old I was pretty proud of that.

Judith Kelley: So what role did you take in this effort, and what were some of the ideas that you and the students were coming up with?

Lindsay M: Yeah. So, currently there are 10 of us on sort of the executive team of Duke Votes, and we've been doing a couple of different approaches to voting on campus. First, we've been really focusing on a new state constitutional amendment that requires everyone who wants to vote, going out from 2020, to have a photo ID that's issued by the state if they want to vote.

Judith Kelley: Are required to, right?

Lindsay M: Yeah. So a lot of Duke students are not from North Carolina and so they don't have a North Carolina driver's license, and they don't have a state issued photo ID that allowed them to vote-

Judith Kelley: So your effort is ...?

Lindsay M: Our effort is actually to make sure that everyone at Duke has a state issued voter ID card, and we actually are sending around a Qualtrics survey that everyone fills out. It's three questions, just like your net ID, maybe your unique ID in your email, and Duke will actually make one for you and pay for it. And then you'll get an email from OIT when to go pick it up. We want to make sure that everyone on campus, whether or not you're planning to vote in North Carolina, has one just in case your absentee ballot falls through or anything, you can vote in North Carolina.

Judith Kelley: Were there any things of the ideas that you were coming up with that you were just thinking, this strategy is not going to work, this is crazy?

Lindsay M: A little bit. It's been a little scary to look at the whole campus and say, we need all of you to fill out our survey and then go on your own time and pick up a card, and then don't lose it next year, and bring it with you to the polls. That's a big deal. But I mean, as we've seen, especially in the increase in voter turnout between 2014 and 2018, Duke students are very political. They care about this. And so we believe in them, and if we give them the right tools to be able to register to vote, to vote, and to have the tools necessary, they'll do it.

Judith Kelley: So for the 2018 ... then when you were working on that election , what were some of the highlights that made you say, this is worth it, this is worth it?

Lindsay M: Yeah. So, we had a very big event last October, November, called Party at the Polls, where there was a lot of different student groups who came out and tons of students. It was during early voting and luckily we had a site in the Brodhead Center, so students were able to vote and just celebrate the importance of voting and civic engagement. We're really excited to put on similar things to that in the future, just showing the campus we care about this, we're going to make the time and the space.

Judith Kelley: What did you find to be the biggest challenge?

Lindsay M: I think the biggest challenge is showing all students that we care about all of them voting. I think a lot of students on campus will look at maybe sometimes Sanford, or maybe POLIS, or maybe Duke Votes, and say, you only want a certain type of student to vote, but I think that's really far from the truth. We want every student to vote. Doesn't matter who you're going to vote for, we want your name to go on the top of that ballot and we want you to check the boxes. That's what really matters and so we're going to focus on it for sure.

Judith Kelley: And B.J., so the numbers of students that voted really increased, but what were actually the numbers that we saw before and after, do you know?

B.J. Rudell: Yeah. So, for example, early voting on campus in 2014, the previous midterm election, was something around 450 students, and early voting in 2018 was about 3100 students. So, to Lindsay's point, when we talk about trying to get students to get this North Carolina ID, if you do the math you can see that if over 3000 students voted last year, based on the percentages of Duke students who are actually North Carolina residents ... Most of those students were not North Carolina residents, but they registered here in the state because they feel a connection now to North Carolina.

Judith Kelley: Right. So explain this a little bit in case we've got students listening to this.

B.J. Rudell: Oh, sure.

Judith Kelley: So I'm a student. I'm from ... Iowa, or whatever. Well, then I'll probably want to vote in Iowa. Let's say-

B.J. Rudell: A little self-conscious there-

Judith Kelley: Yeah. Let's say that I'm from Washington state or something like this, and I'm trying to figure out where I vote. How should I think about that?

B.J. Rudell: Well, it's an important decision that, as an administrator here at Duke, I would advise a student to talk with their family. There are certain considerations like financial aid, or medical situations, where you might be getting Medicaid back in your home state and if you vote here maybe that compromises things.

Judith Kelley: So explain that a little bit more. Why do these things even come into how I vote? Is it because I have to become a resident here to vote? Or what is it?

B.J. Rudell: Yeah. I kind of wished Duke Council were here next to me right now. So my understanding is that voting is a personal issue and it's a legal issue. And so if someone can say with confidence that I go to Duke, I am declaring that I'm a North Carolina resident, I have an address here, and therefore I'll vote here, that is for that student to decide. As an administrator I advise students, if they have

questions about it, to consult with their family so that we're being very careful that Duke is not in any way advising students to do one thing or the other.

Judith Kelley: Right. And you were just trying to get students to vote, whether they were voting absentee-

B.J. Rudell: That's exactly right.

Judith Kelley: Or whether they were voting-

Lindsay M: Yeah.

Judith Kelley: Right, right.

B.J. Rudell: Now the reality is when there's an early voting place on campus it makes it a lot easier for people to vote, so we encourage students to vote if they want to, and we give them the resources to do it. But we also make sure that we're putting just as much effort in creating absentee ballot trainings, and things like that, so that students understand how they can do that. In fact, very quickly, we have a pilot program where we send customized emails throughout the year to nearly 400 first year students from different States. We tell them what their state's absentee ballot deadline is, what their state's registration deadline is, to really make sure that we're not just looking at North Carolina myopically.

Judith Kelley: Right, because if you want to vote with absentee ballot you've got to fill out some paperwork and make sure you get that, and you've got to get it in a timely manner-

B.J. Rudell: That's right.

Judith Kelley: You have to return in time and-

B.J. Rudell: It's a four step process when it comes right down to it. We're trying to make it a little easier for students to understand.

Judith Kelley: So how did you go about getting students involved in this whole effort? How did you sort of wrangle students and what did students respond to most?

B.J. Rudell: Well, 20 years ago exactly, I was working in New Hampshire on a presidential campaign and I learned about grassroots organizing. And Lindsay doesn't realize that a lot of what I'm doing with students I learned on that campaign experience, which is very honest engagement with people about why you're there, what you want to achieve, find that common ground with what they want to achieve, and then maintain communication throughout the process.

Judith Kelley: So it's not just about free pizza?

B.J. Rudell: It's not just about free ... even though you know I like free pizza. But it's really about making sure that students understand that POLIS, Sanford, Duke, are supporters of what they're doing and that we will step in when there is a gap, because we want to see them succeed. And at the same time it's not our place to tell them what to do, or to do it for them when they can do it themselves. So it's really trying to be the in the shadows entity to make sure that students feel empowered to do a lot of these things. That means my job as I see it is really engage with as many students as possible, and then start to loop them into this organization that Lindsay is a part of, this Duke Votes coordinating community, which is this ... growing into an institutional, student-centered, facing, Duke Votes operation.

Judith Kelley: So why did you decide to focus on early voting so much and getting an early voting station? Why was that important B.J.?

B.J. Rudell: It's important to me because it gives students about 20 chances to vote, and that's really what it comes down to. I think that if someone's having a bad day and it's election day maybe voting is not the most important thing. But if you're having a bad three weeks hopefully there's one of those days where you-

Judith Kelley: Not that students technically have a lot of bad days.

B.J. Rudell: That's right, there's a lot of good days, but it really gives students ... and actually the proof is in the numbers. I believe, and I have to go back and check, that the first day and last day of early voting were the largest turnouts overall at that early voting site, because it really motivates people to realize, this is my first chance. Or it really motivates people to say, this is my last chance. But in between about 8000 people voted, about 2000 of whom were Duke students. So it matters to have those 20 chances.

Judith Kelley: Got it. So, now we're looking ahead, 2020 elections. So, what are your plans? What are you trying to do? Are you trying to do anything new? What's going on?

Lindsay M: Yeah. Well, we have big plans. So, the first is, to anyone who's listening, if you go to this link, [tinyURL.com/voterIDDuke](https://tinyurl.com/voterIDDuke), you can fill out a Qualtrics survey to request a voter ID. You do it. Your friends do it. We want everyone to do it. And then register to vote. We're putting on all sorts of events all the time. Come to them, find us, go on the Duke Vote's website. You can request a ballot there. You can learn about absentee voting there, get plugged in, email B.J., email myself. We're around. We're all over campus. That's the point. So we want you to do those things. We're putting on a lot of fun events. Dogs and Democracy will come soon with details. Really excited for that. In the spring there'll probably be a Party at the Polls for primaries and early voting, so we can bring everyone out for that. You know, stay engaged. We're here for you.

Judith Kelley: So what about other campus leaders who want to drum up drama more student voters? What's a piece of advice you could give them B.J.?

B.J. Rudell: The advice I would give is that, as leaders on campus, they have responsibilities to the mission of their organization and to themselves, and that hopefully voting joins those two, that that deep down in one's individual self and also in the organization that they represent, they realize there's some service component. And voting is the cross section to me of service and democracy. So their responsibility ideally would be how do they move the needle on getting those members of their organization to feel that they are making a difference in their community in some way. And most organizations are community focused, or community tangential at the very least.

B.J. Rudell: I mean I see the world through a political lens. Everything is political. And I think one of the challenges for any leader on campus who agrees that the world is political, and that they can make a difference, is how do they get people who feel that politics has nothing to do with them to understand that it actually does, and that we're all walking political beings, whether we believe it in ourselves or whether others perceive it in us, based on identity, based on race, gender, based on privilege. Everything is political. And so acting on that is really the basic that we can hope for, and we hope that student leaders feel that responsibility.

Judith Kelley: Lindsay, do you have any advice?

Lindsay M: I guess my advice for student leaders on campus is to use the community that you have, because you have people there. You're who we're looking for. We're so impressed with the work that you're doing and we want to be part of it. Bring us in. We're happy to join with you. That's it.

B.J. Rudell: If young people we're the largest voting block demographically, then more elected officials would listen to them and young people's issues would actually matter a great deal more in the public space. At the end of the day that's what this is about to me. If it's a 20% turnout, politicians see that. If it's a 70% turnout, you better believe politicians see that.

Judith Kelley: B.J. Rudell is the associate director of Duke Center for Political Leadership, Innovation, and Service, that we've been calling POLIS throughout this conversation. Thank you to both of you for joining me and we'll be back soon with another conversation, and we'll put your little tinyURL link on our Policies 360 website. Or if anybody was wanting to figure that out come visit us on our website. I'm Judith Kelley. Have a great day.