

Thank you for joining us today on The Lerner Podcast I am pleased to welcome Jeff Fleischer, author of Votes of Confidence, 2nd Edition, A Young Person's Guide to American Elections. Welcome to the program, Jeff.

Thank you very much for having me.

What was your inspiration for both the original 2016 edition of this book and the second edition?

Well, the 2016 edition had grown out of an idea I'd had for a while. So I've always been interested in government and politics since the time I was a very young child. So I remember like being seven years old, first following a primary and having favorites in both parties I wanted to win the primary, and neither one did, but I didn't pay attention to elections and government a long time. In college I majored in both journalism and history. I took coursework like I did an entire class on the history of the Democratic Party, an entire class in the Republican Party. It was always an interest of mine. And then covering politics, I wound up seeing a lot of things that seemed second nature to me, as someone who always studied this material, that was surprising to people I knew. So things like the Electoral College in the year 2000, during the Bush/Gore race, a lot of people were learning about that for the first time, or hadn't really thought about the impact of it. And campaigns obviously had because they plan their strategy based on which states will win. But it feels like a lot of polling generally talks about the national race, without looking at the specific states that will actually decide the election. Or I would be part of a lot of political discussions with people who talk about, "oh, I think the President should do this thing," without an understanding of whether or not that's even the President's role. Well, that's something the state handles, that's something Congress handles. And so between that and just knowing about the reduction of civic education in schools and start thinking about coming up with a way to write a guide that would cover both politics and government that can make it accessible and easy to understand to a young audience. As the original 2016 edition, the first edition sold out its first run. And the publisher and I discussed instead of reprinting it, why don't we do an updated edition that will include the results of 2016 and eventually the results of 2018. And to keep us up to date as possible and address new trends.

Because of the way publishing schedules work, you had no way of knowing when beginning work on the original edition what that election year would turn out to look like true. Now both editions have come out in election years featuring Donald Trump. What have you seen change over the last four years with regards to civic participation, not just voting

For civic participation there, we've seen a lot more activism. So we've seen a lot of big mass protests, whether that's the Women's March right after the 2016 election, or the March For Our Lives, the Parkland survivors for a march against gun violence, the climate strikes we saw last year, and then more recently, the Black Lives Matter marches, we've seen it for the murder of George Floyd. There's been a lot of civic activism. And now the goal is to then translate that into voting. I would say in 2018, we saw a very high turnout for a midterm election, and then included really high turnout among young voters, which was really encouraging. Young voters usually will turn out in better numbers during the presidential election. But during midterms, midterm turnout is lower in general, but especially among younger voters. And 2018 changed that trend. We also saw a lot more women and a lot more diverse

candidates running for office. So 2018 has elected the most women to the house representatives in history in the United States, and it's still only 102. So that number obviously has to go up. But that's still an improvement where things were previously. We've also seen some movements to get more scientists and teachers and experts run for office as well. We usually have a lot of lawyers, but to get more people with knowledge bases on to run for office as well. On the negative side, there's the normalization of a lot of misinformation and disinformation. And so that's been troubling. A lot more people are using as primary new sources, social media, or partisan news, instead of going back to really good reporting. Newspapers, really good local news. And so that leads to some cynicism; that leads to a lot of people believing things that are true. And then because we've recently adopted this kind of team sport approach to politics, people are a lot more willing to normalize things like corruption, like scandals. And it's really important to not normalize that, especially for young voters, because a lot of them were born during the Bush administration. They haven't seen many, many administrations over time to know what is normal. And so it's important to stress to them that what we're seeing right now is not a normal administration. This is not normally how government works.

This is a great primer for high school students, as well as first time voters, college students, and adults of all ages in need of a civics refresher. What do you most hope readers will take away from reading?

I think the biggest thing, and I say this in the book a lot, is that we often focus on the presidential election, but really focus on elections in general. So things like house races, Senate races, the state level, the local level, things like ballot initiatives, and also to really look at primaries. Even in our discussions about the most recent election, we talk a lot about the Trump/Clinton 2016 election in international discourse. But we don't talk as much about the primaries, which are both really interesting and really telling. So really, once someone becomes either the Republican or Democratic nominee, they have a pretty good chance of winning. But the way both of them got there, it was very interesting. We don't talk about that as much in the primary process. So I would say in general, just getting people to think about voting and all those kinds of elections. But think about all those issues, rather than just focus every four years on the presidential race.

How do you encourage teens especially who may not be able to vote yet to get involved with politics at any level, not just federal?

The ones who are able to vote, especially if they look at the local level and their state level, those things are usually gonna have a bigger impact on their life day to day than the presidential election? Really find out what your local school board is doing, what your city council is doing, what a local zoning board is doing. You also have the bigger impact as a voter there, because you might be one of like 5000 voters in your town and be one of the few million voters in your state. So now you are a bigger percentage of the vote, but if you can persuade a few people, get educated talk to some of your friends and family, you can have a much bigger impact at the local level. For those who are too young to vote, it's never too early to get educated about issues, to start paying attention to politics or paying attention to government, seeing what these different offices are doing that impacts your life. And finding out what good news sources are, learning history, that sort of thing. But also, you can also write to representatives at any age, because you're still a constituent, they still represent you, and you are a

future voter. So there's something that your local alderman, your local city council member, your school board can do to help you when you're 15, 16. They're still going to pay attention to that because you will, in the not too distant future, be one of their voters. Taking care of local issues is their job.

It does seem like teens and young adults do have a particular fire for politics, compared to folks of many other ages. But what would you say to young people who say that they aren't interested in politics?

Whether you're interested or not, these decisions are going to impact your life. So if you're planning to go to college soon, the amount that your bank will charge you for your student loans is going to be determined in part by elected officials. If you care about something like police violence, the police officers being hired and the policies under which they work are decided by elected officials, depending on the office of the state or local level. All these things are going to impact your life in some way. The amount you pay in sales tax, how fast you can drive on the road. I mean, all these things have an impact. So even if you don't think about, you know, these decisions be made in Washington may not impact you directly. A lot of things do. And so if you want to have a say in those things, the easiest way to do that is to vote.

Those are great points. This has been a particularly peculiar election year. How do you imagine voting changing in the future?

I think one thing we're going to see is more absentee ballots without requiring a reason. And because of the coronavirus obviously everybody right now has a very good reason to do so. But we've had five states that have already done most of their ballots by mail, even before this epidemic. So Colorado, Hawaii, Oregon, Utah, Washington, and Oregon's been doing it for a long time. Oregon's done all by mail for decades. I think more states are going to go that direction. There's this lie going around that somehow it makes it easier for fraud. That's not true, you still have to register, your registration still has to be verified. So they send to your address, you still have to fill it out, sign it. And there's still penalties if you do commit a fraud or fraudulent ballot. So I think that's important point to stress too. But I think more states are also going to move toward automatic registration: if you registered once, you're automatically registered for future elections, things like that. And I think more states are also going to make Election Day a state holiday. Illinois and Virginia have done that recently. And I think that makes sense. Giving people an opportunity to participate is always a good idea. There's been so much voter suppression the last few election cycles, I think we need have a push to not only get rid of that, but also to make voting access easier.

Your point about, you know, not realizing what is the President's job or what is the city council person's job--How do you figure out whose job it is to maintain that? I mean, that stuff was not covered in history classes or social studies classes in school.

There are a lot of ways in which right now things are being done by executive order. A lot of times the president is kind of making a rule that rule only exists as long as the president's the president. That's

pretty easy for future presidents rescind that rule. Because what is a rule is not a law in the same way. Another thing I think, when evaluating presidential candidates and also Senate candidates and house candidates is a lot of what you're looking for is the kind of people you think they're going to hire. Because a lot of the jobs of the federal government aren't done by elected officials. They're done by cabinet members, or staffers who cabinet members hire and cabinet members have to go through Senate approval, but lower level people don't necessarily. So looking at their judgment and the kind of people you think they're going to put in those offices, because things like enforcement of the Clean Water Act at the Environmental Protection Agency, most of the people involved in that aren't people we vote on, but one of the one of the undercover stories the last four years has been the almost wholesale replacement of the State Department. So usually there are people who work at the State Department and diplomacy who stayed about who the president is. They're not partisan. They're experts on different countries, they're experts on different issues. And the past four years, we've seen almost all of them replaced. And so we've lost that institutional expertise, and we're seeing that play out a lot in foreign policy right now. And that's a big story that I don't think we talk a lot about because those people aren't elected those people, who were appointed once by a president gained expertise in a particular area. It's lasted for future presidents. And that tends to be true in the Defense Department too.

I think when we think about voting for people who will hire or appoint, we mostly think about Supreme Court justices, but you make a really good point about it being much, much broader than that. And those are the people who are actually implementing policies forever.

Absolutely. And even with justices, not only Supreme Court justices, but also the federal judges in general. One thing we've seen very recently is the very large percentage of the federal judiciary that's now been appointed by the current president. And so those are people who will have the job for potentially decades to come. So it's not only at the Supreme Court that matters. So obviously, they get the most attention for obvious reasons.

What do you think that students can do in high school with student council and that sort of thing? Are there is this a good way for them to gain experience in political career in the future?

Yeah, potentially, especially if they if they can find ways to get things done at a student council level, they'll gain the political skills they would use in a future job. I think a lot of times you're talking about running for office, but also being able to perform the office once you have it. And so the student council is not just getting elected to the student council, but what are you able to do in that role? If you're able to effect change in your school, the skills you're going to learn to do that working with others working with people who may or may not agree with you having to persuade them being able to compromise to get something done versus holding to one position, like those are all skills that you would use in a future job too.

And we're seeing a lot of teen activists making a big difference, Greta Thornburg and the Parkland students that you mentioned, I mean, there there's a lot of inspiration out there for teens to go out and make that difference now.

Absolutely.

Thank you, Jeff, for joining us here on The Lerner Podcast. I hope everyone has learned something from our conversation. And if you have students in your life who are interested in politics history, or making a difference in the world, check out Votes of Confidence, 2nd Edition, available now wherever books are sold.

Thank you for joining us here on The Lerner Podcast. Tune in again next time for more author interviews and the stories behind the books.