

In episode 16 of *George Washington Slept Here*, host Jason Raia sits down with Lauren Cristella, President and CEO of Committee of Seventy. We delve deep into the heart of American democracy and civic participation as we explore topics like open primaries, ranked-choice voting, and the complex art of drawing electoral maps. With Lauren's wealth of knowledge and experience, we uncover the true significance of civic engagement, responsible governance, and the transformative power of respectful dialogue.

Quotes

"Our mission is to ensure efficient and effective representation within our democracy, empowering citizens to hold their government accountable." –Lauren Cristella

"I strongly believe in the importance of a thriving opposition party. It is in the presence of such a party that the government operates at its best." – Lauren Cristella

Featured in this Episode

Lauren Cristella
President & CEO at the Committee of Seventy
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Produced by <http://www.heartcastmedia.com>

Transcript:

We the people of the United States. A House divided against itself cannot stand. Life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness..

Jason Raia:

Hello, and welcome to *George Washington Slept Here*, the civic education podcast from Freedoms Foundation at Valley Forge, where we explore American history, civics, and the idea of liberty through conversations with some of our favorite thinkers, writers, and leaders. I'm Jason Raia, Chief Operating Officer of Freedoms Foundation, and host of *George Washington Slept Here*. The format is simple, a long form conversation with a friend of Freedoms Foundation where everyone can learn something new. Before we go any further, just a little shameless self-promotion. This podcast is our way to reach a larger audience, beyond our Valley Forge campus. And if you enjoy the show, please help us spread the word by telling your friends. If you wanna support our show, you can donate by going to our website www.freedomsfoundation.org/podcast. We love hearing from listeners, so please email us at gwshpodcast@gmail.com with your comments, questions, and suggestions, and feel free to hit us up on social media.

Jason Raia:

Today's interview is with the new president of Philadelphia's Committee of Seventy, Lauren Cristella. Hello, Lauren.

Lauren Cristella:

Hi, Jason. Thanks for having me.

Jason Raia:

Great to have you. Our conversation today is going to be structured in a way to keep us on track. We wanna explore your origin story. How did you become the person sitting here before us, your current work at the Committee of Seventy, and that will segue nicely into our discussion about the state of America today. And finally, we always end with a quiz. And lucky for you, you didn't have to prepare. So, Lauren, tell us, where were you born and raised?

Lauren Cristella:

I was born in Philadelphia, but raised in South Jersey in Williamstown.

Jason Raia:

Okay. Excellent. And who are your most important early influences, would you say?

Lauren Cristella:

My goodness. My mother, for sure. And then I would say, I benefited from many, many years of Catholic education. So I would say the fierce fiercely independent and strong willed, daughters of Mercy.

Jason Raia:

Excellent. So you still had, some of the nuns who were teaching when you were?

Lauren Cristella:

Absolutely. And, they lived on the campus, and it was an all girls, private Catholic high school.

Jason Raia:

Oh, that's great. And then you went from there. I know you went to, Catholic University down in D.C.?

Lauren Cristella:

I did. I caught a political bug early. Knew I wanted to be in D.C. for college. So did that. And then when I was at Catholic University, I studied abroad in Rome. And that really set my hair on fire for traveling and studying abroad. So I decided to do my master's degree in ethics, politics, and public policy, at the University of Essex in England for 18 months.

Jason Raia:

So what tell us about those experiences? You know, you get into politics or at least you wanna study politics. You're down in D.C. in our Capitol, but then you wind up in Europe and Rome and and and in England. What did you learn? What did you experience?

Lauren Cristella:

So I had fallen in love with philosophy, but I didn't know how lucrative a philosophy major would be. So not the politics just that much better.

Jason Raia:

Just so you know, I was a philosophy major.

Lauren Cristella:

Love it. So I I did Love that course of study. So marrying politics with philosophy and finding a degree that allowed me to do both and then practically apply it to public policy was a dream. So, but in going abroad, I think I had always been pretty conservative, and I think, kind of coming of age. My 3 weeks into my freshman year at Catholic University in D.C. was 9/11.

So that totally changed my course of study. In terms of focusing on terrorism studies, I worked with another number of organizations focused on that and just trying to make sense of the world, really.

Jason Raia:

Right.

Lauren Cristella:

So then going to Europe, in undergraduate and just hearing different perspectives on America from outside of our bubble in D.C. Was very interesting to me. And then studying abroad really changed my whole life. It was really the people I met with, the conversations we had, I came back with a very different perspective. It's one thing to be kind of a, you know, a hawk on certain policies and have a very clear understanding of what I thought, public policy should be in our our approach to the world, And then to to meet in person people who live with the consequences of our policies in many real real ways, really changed my perspective And set the course for the rest of my career.

Jason Raia:

Sure. Sure. Yeah. I was very lucky to be able to travel. Fairly early in my life, you know, when I was 16, I did a school trip, and we went to Paris, by way of London. We flew into London and took the boat over to Calais and did all of that. But, and I've been able to do that many times since. And I I came away with two, basic impressions, and those were transformative experiences, but one of them was, oh my gosh, how young our country is. When you're in a castle, I was looking at some graffiti that was older than our nation.

I knew that we were sort of the new kids on the block, but also, very much how, how lucky I felt, to have been, born in this country with this system of government, with this Constitution, and and, the privileges of freedom that that come with it and, and how that is not the norm everywhere else. And so, that was really important to me.

Lauren Cristella:

Absolutely. And I think I, you know, maybe got wrapped up in a little bit of cynicism, about being an American, and there were places where I couldn't. It was better to just keep my mouth shut and work my way through a crowd. But then I came back from graduate school. I was applying everywhere. I had a job offer to do archaeology in Rome. And then I got an interview to work at the National Constitution Center.

Jason Raia:

Okay. Our good friends.

Lauren Cristella:

Absolutely. And as part of preparing for my interview, I went and saw the *Freedom Rising* show there.

Jason Raia:

Yeah.

Lauren Cristella:

And It kind of married both versions of myself, the graduate school self and my, kind of patriotic, past in a way that said, America is important in the world. We have a responsibility to be the torch of freedom, and advocate for strong, vibrant democracy and to do that in a responsible and ethical way.

Jason Raia:

Right. Right. Absolutely. And the the privilege and the seriousness, of of that role, really, there there is a great opportunity to share with others what we have learned, over the course of the history of this country and and good and bad, things to that other nations ought to consider copying and things that pitfalls that they wanna, avoid. But, yeah, there's there's, once you have sort of been out, and have that ability to to visit others. You see what we have and how we can share it and what we have to do to hold on to it. And that's always one of the important things that comes up when we ever talk about civic education. So, you come back you work at the National Constitution Center. And eventually, you become very involved with the League of Women Voters in Philadelphia. Tell us a little bit about that. Because at one point, I believe you were President.

Lauren Cristella:

Yes.

Jason Raia:

Yeah.

Lauren Cristella:

Yes. So I had been at the Committee of Seventy for about a year, and a colleague of mine had been on the board and was just lamenting that the entire organization had basically fallen apart in Philadelphia, that there was no real board, only in name only, and it was 2018. And it just seemed nuts to me that Philadelphia didn't have an active thriving League of Women Voters in Philadelphia.

Jason Raia:

Right.

Lauren Cristella:

So I expressed my interest, and they said, well, how do you feel about being President? So I said, well, that's something.

Jason Raia:

that we're jumping into the deep end.

Lauren Cristella:

Get acquainted fast. So I had started working behind the scenes to build a board. And fortunately, my time at the University of Pennsylvania put me in contact with remarkable women leaders, who were looking for opportunities to lead and to affect our, our government, and voting and civic engagement. So I reached out to them and built the board. And by December of 2018, kind of stepped into that presidency role.

Jason Raia:

Okay. So you were already at the Committee of Seventy. So I want that's really what I wanna focus on because here in Philadelphia you don't have to be here very long before you hear the name, the Committee of Seventy, in the news, and elsewhere. But it's outside of Philadelphia. People don't know what it is. So tell us about what the Committee of Seventy is, when was it founded, and what was the purpose of its founding?

Lauren Cristella:

So the Committee of Seventy was founded in 1904, when Philadelphia had a reputation for being corrupt and content, there was the Republican machine at the time. And a number of civic leaders, business leaders came together and said, all this corruption is bad for business.

Jason Raia:

Mhmm.

Lauren Cristella:

We need to stand up an organization that can hold the government accountable, force it to be transparent, and engage voters informing them about their choices in every upcoming election. So that's basically what we've been doing ever since. And, fortunately, one of the founders is Samuel Fels, who also founded the Economy League, others, but also the Fells Institute of Government where I previously worked.

So I'm going for the trifecta where I work. But the purpose of the organization really has maintained that consistent focus on accountability, transparency, and informing and engaging voters. 2 other groups in the country are kind of similar and came out of the same progressive era, progressive, in the previous understanding of the word, in the Citizens Union in New York and the Better Government Association in Chicago.

Jason Raia:

Right. Which speaks to who that this is very much a big city issue. Not to say there isn't there wasn't corruption everywhere, but the machine is what we think about the Chicago machine. We think about New York and Boss Tweed, and these are things that are particular challenges to these very large cities. And New York, Chicago, Philadelphia were certainly examples of the challenges that come with big city politics. So what was their approach to dealing with this corruption, and contentment?

Lauren Cristella:

At the beginning, they did work on sourcing candidates. That's not something we do now. We don't endorse candidates. We don't prepare people to run for office, but we do encourage public service and for people to take a close look at that as an option. And then just making sure that people were informed about their choices. They weren't just voting on the slate, that their, you know, world leaders, people, in their local political kind of rings were suggesting, and that's something that we continue to do today.

Jason Raia:

Right. So an educated voter is a better voter. And, so I do wanna push back a little bit just because, mainly because I find it amusing. But, when the Committee of Seventy came to be, you had essentially one party control of the city. Almost every lever of power was held by the Republicans. Some would argue that not much has changed

except that it's the party that holds every lever of power. So how do you look at that? Because, certainly, we don't have bags of money being traded the way they probably were in 1904.

Lauren Cristella:

Alcohol, money, you name it.

Jason Raia:

Right. Right. But we do have a city that has sort of opted for 8 to 1 voter registration, in Philadelphia. And so how does that play into what you're trying to accomplish as the modern day 120 year old, Committee of Seventy?

Lauren Cristella:

Absolutely. And Committee of Seventy was instrumental in forming the city's charter and advocating for all kinds of campaign finance rules, other things that have certainly made it much more transparent, efficient, effective. We obviously still have a long ways to go. But I would say that, yes, it's 8 to 1, and that's a simple kind of fact to share, but I think there's a lot of nuance in the types of Democrats that are in Philadelphia. And you see the Working Families Party presenting a challenge from the left side, to that establishment Democrat control. And I also think it is very important for there to be a thriving opposition party. I think that's where the government operates at its best. And right now, the Philadelphia Democrat party was just or I'm sorry the Philadelphia Republican Party was just pushed out of all but one seat of city council.

Jason Raia:

Now for those who don't know, tell us about the rule because it's a very old rule that was written in that minority, parties held at least a couple of seats.

Lauren Cristella:

So it's actually just a non-majority -

Jason Raia:

Okay.

Lauren Cristella:

Party, or not even party. It's just non-majority seats. So right now, the majority are Democrats, so there's two seats reserved for minority candidates or outside of that majority. And in Philadelphia, that has been Republicans for over 50 years, for sure, if not more. And in the last election 4 years ago, one of those seats went to a member of the Working Families Party, and now the second seat was taken again by the Working Families Party.

Jason Raia:

Right. So, that's an interesting little quirk of Philadelphia City Council. And it does make for, some say, a difficult place to have new ideas because there is that nuance. There you know? But it's but it's all ideas sort of rooted in a particular thing, but these are elected positions. You know, citizens of Philadelphia get to choose who their mayor is, and we've got a new one, about to start, in a little over a month. And it's the first woman mayor of Philadelphia, Chelle Parker. And there seem to be a lot of people who are really interested even on the opposing side.

Lauren Cristella:

Absolutely. I think the city's at a real inflection point, and our 100th mayor, being our first woman mayor, and a black woman is exciting. And I think it's a moment to be recognized and and appreciated for the historic nature of this moment in Philadelphia.

Jason Raia:

And it does feel like not only that historic nature of the election, but the change, that there's a lot of people who are very open to this and the opportunity for something different. She seems to be aligned with the importance of the business community with, and and but also with making sure citizens have what they need, from the city. So I know I'm excited about it. I think a lot of people really are, to see what's possible.

Lauren Cristella:

Absolutely. And I think, Chelle Parker is a graduate of the Fells Institute of Government, where pragmatism and a real sense of possibility is embedded into the program. So I think that we're seeing that in a bit of her policy proposals and how she's forming her team and the kind of announcements that we've seen so far are very exciting.

Jason Raia:

Yep. Absolutely. So I wanna dig into what the Committee of Seventy does today. Certainly, you are known for better government, fair elections. That has always been what you're about, but there is a lot of voter education from the beginning. But one of the things that I want you to talk about is how you do voter education, and outreach today, but also please talk about the poll worker training that you all do because that seems like a really important element of ensuring that elections are run efficiently and fairly. And so talk about elections in Philadelphia, and what the Committee is doing.

Lauren Cristella:

Absolutely. So our voter education and engagement has gone statewide, and we're very excited to also offer the poll worker recruitment and training across the state. We're working with election directors and different groups, to help recruit good people and to also bring some people who are maybe skeptical about how our elections work. They have questions. They're hearing lots of things. There might be conspiracies that they're aware of, and they have doubts.

Jason Raia:

Mhmm.

Lauren Cristella:

So what we say is come in. Come in. Get a close, upfront look at how our elections work. Really experience all the checks and balances that are there and see for yourself. That's an absolutely great way to allay those fears. And once you see, how the system works and how many people would have to keep a very big secret to pull off any kind of serious election fraud. We're hoping that that's a good antidote to some of the skepticism we're seeing out there.

Jason Raia:

And it's always I know when I was teaching to, we would say to young people, be part of the solution, not part of the problem. And becoming a poll worker is a great way, one to understand the system, but it's also to understand our citizenship beyond the terms of, oh, I'm supposed to vote every once in a while, every year, a couple times a year with primaries, whatever that may be. But that citizenship is more than voting.

Lauren Cristella:

Absolutely. Voting is necessary, but it is not sufficient. Right? There's always one more thing each of us could be doing, and poll workers are definitely fulfilling part of that promise. Right? They give a lot of time twice a year. It's a very long day. There's trainings that are involved, but they truly understand that their democracy is essential workers. Our elections do not happen without members of our community stepping up and making sure that their neighbors' voices are heard.

Jason Raia:

Right. I remember when I first started voting, my landlord was a long time poll worker, and so I would go down. And he was, at that point, retired. And, but he knew everybody. Everybody who walked in. He knew them by sight because he'd been doing this for years, and he would chat with them. And it was this great representation of we the people.

Lauren Cristella:

Absolutely. And and certainly, you see lots of retirees, people who have no problem giving up, you know, 13 hours in a day. But we're also really proud of the work we've been doing. There's a fantastic law in Pennsylvania that allows 17 year olds

Jason Raia:

Mhmm.

Lauren Cristella:

To serve as poll workers. And about two election cycles ago in Philadelphia, we maybe had two dozen 17 year olds serving as poll workers. And in this past election, we had close to 500.

Jason Raia:

Yeah.

Lauren Cristella:

And that's just it's a great way to earn service hours towards graduation, to get a sense of how our democracy works. And then I think once that happens, I think it's gonna be hard to go back to not being a voter.

Jason Raia:

Absolutely. What a great introduction. I like that. I'm always I always love it when I see parents who bring their kids, no matter whether they're little kids or big kids, that this is part of that that it's part of that citizenship training, which is why I'm interested in what Committee of Seventy does because I have, become more and more and more convinced, since especially since leaving the classroom that civic education needs to be in the hands of all of us, not just teachers. Not because teachers don't do a great job. They do. They try their hardest, but they are one institution and one place that students are learning, but students learn from lots of different places. And having the opportunity, whether it's going to the polls with your parents or whether it is becoming part of a worker, poll worker training with a Committee of Seventy. These are all ways to reinforce the classroom lessons and add to it.

Lauren Cristella:

It's all about promoting a culture of voting and civic participation. When it's part of the culture, it happens much more seamlessly with a you know, not as heavy a lift as it would take. I would say I have probably overcorrected with my own children. And when my five year old was recently asked what she wanted to be when she grows up, she said, I'm gonna vote. I'll be a voter. I said, that's great, but that is twice a year, friend.

Jason Raia:

I love it. Those are really good. So she's got her priorities. So, you know, one of the things we hear from young people all the time is, you know, why should I bother to vote? I'm one vote. One vote doesn't matter. And I was talking with somebody recently who had won an election by 29 votes out of 51,000 cast. And it's like, yeah, I guess every one of those votes really did, matter. But, a Committee of Seventy is doing civic education k-16, elementary, middle, high school, and college. And I imagine that part of that, civic education is meant to convince young people that, a, your vote does matter, and, b, that citizenship is a lot more than just voting.

Lauren Cristella:

Absolutely. And I think that is the key to understanding why your vote matters. It's the in-between election work that we have to do too, and that's the next big step for the future of civic education engagement for the Committee of Seventy is explaining how the government works and how you can work it for your family, your community. Because I think often, you know, there's these huge efforts certainly in even numbered years to turn out the vote, and everyone hears that their vote is so important, and people died for the right to vote. And, of course, that's true. But then everyone disappears, or there's just the little Committee of Seventy and some other groups, like the League of Women Voters, trying to explain to people, and we really need to do that on the same exact scale that we do the voter turnout work. Right? Explaining that 45% of Philadelphians didn't know who their city council person was when they were polled just a few months ago.

And if you don't know the name of your council person, you haven't asked them, you don't, you know, to fix the pothole or the asbestos in your kid's school. You've you aren't getting the services often, or you're not holding them accountable for providing the services that you expect.

Jason Raia:

And we know that the local government has a particular responsibility. I think we've many of us immediately go to education because education is a local matter first and foremost. Citizens and local governments have this special relationship, but I always worry about when we wanna advocate for good government and what government can do for people that we're very careful not to forget John Kennedy's words. What can you do? That we are always talking about personal accountability, and not just, oh, I need to get my government to do this for me. But it's that yin and yang. It's that tension between what I need to do and what my local government need to do?

Lauren Cristella:

Absolutely. Excuse me. Absolutely right. I think it's about the role that the citizens play in that government. And part of that is holding Your officials accountable, making sure that they're doing what they said they were gonna do and what they promised in their campaigns, and then making sure they're doing it.

Jason Raia:

Right.

Lauren Cristella:

Right. So that's where a really active, free and fair press comes into play. Right? How do you find out if you can't sit in every community meeting, every city council meeting. We rely on the press. We rely on groups like a Committee of Seventy to call balls and strikes. I mean, I think it's an important part of being informed, but, certainly, we have an obligation to make this information as accessible as possible. Right? I think that's where we need to meet people where they are. And if it's not being taught in the classroom, how are we reaching people?

Jason Raia:

And some of it is just, you know, the challenges of learning about the candidates who are running. You know, we just had an election, not very long ago. And I was struggling to find out information, about the judges up for retention or the Register of Wills. I'm not quite sure even what their role is, but I know they're on my ballot, and so I need to figure out what one person is saying. And then it's not easy. It really does require voters, if they truly wanna be informed, to do a lot more. So how can groups like a Committee of Seventy help that process? How can voters help themselves?

Lauren Cristella:

Well, from the Committee of Seventy perspective, we try to make it as easy as possible and as fun as possible. You make it easy. You make it fun. You can engage voters, and turnout will go up. It's kind of a guaranteed thing. So we have an interactive voter guide where any voter in Pennsylvania can just put in their address, and their specific ballot comes up. We offer information about what each office does.

You can see that in a little paragraph right there. And then you can do that research on each of the candidates. And for the judges, which is so hard to kind of suss out what they believe and, certainly, even on the retention judges, they don't even put, you know, the party that they, you know, ran in in their first election. Right? So, those endorsements by the bar associations are very important. The bar associations do fantastic work, for months and months each of the candidates so we make sure that their recommendations are very prominent in that voter guide. And then connect people with all the candidates' social media, their websites so that you can do a little digging yourself and then save your picks. And if you have friends and family who share your values but might not be interested in doing that amount of work. You can also share your picks, via email or take a screenshot, whatever works for you.

Jason Raia:

Right. That's great. It's it's and it's great that you've gone the entire Commonwealth because it really is there isn't a Committee of Seventy in your town, then what do you do? Well, the fact that you all are doing this, and we definitely wanna help get the word out because I think that is a true service to voters, to be able to to find those candidates election after election. Hear about on the local news, all the people running for the democratic primary in Philadelphia's mayoral election. That doesn't help me in Pottstown. So, but, so I I the other thing that you all do is, is some advocacy work on some civic policies. And I wanna just run through a couple of these. And, first, I'm interested in how the Committee sort settles on. This is a policy we think will make a difference, and we're going to advocate for it, because there are lots of ideas out there. So what's that process like?

Lauren Cristella:

So it starts with a very clear and well understood sense of our mission, and that is to make sure that this government of ours, this democracy runs with as much representation as possible and efficiently, effectively, and that citizens can hold their government accountable. So you're not gonna see a Committee of Seventy take positions on half as many things as the League of Women Voters does. Right? Our portfolio is limited to those rules of the game. So we start from there. The board understands that, and certainly the staff does. So then we do an environmental scan. What are the most pressing issues? Right now? Mail in ballots and some of these technicalities that disqualify so many votes every election since, certainly since 2020 when universal vote by mail really came into full effect.

That's a huge priority for us. That's thousands of votes every election getting tossed out because they used their birth date on the outside of the envelope instead of the date they signed it, or they forgot the secrecy envelope inside the mailing envelope. Things that really shouldn't invalidate their vote.

Jason Raia:

So, absolutely, I I I hear what you're saying. I think there are those who are sort of more rules oriented people who would say, if you can't follow these simple rules, then, maybe that's just the way it is. And then there are others who are saying, listen this is so important that there is a way to simplify it, especially when you're talking about something that people are doing once, maybe twice a year at the very most. And so is there a way to make it clearer and so that people can vote?

Lauren Cristella:

And I think if it goes to, does this call into question the voters' intent or whether or not they're an eligible voter? And I think if it's really not touching those two things, then this is a technicality that in any kind of normal political climate, you know, laws are written. There's unintended consequences or things that were overlooked. You go back. You do an amendment. You, you know, you correct those things, but now anything with the election code is so fraught. There's such a hesitancy.

Jason Raia:

Right. Because there are those who are out there. And I think many of them are legitimately concerned that, is there an opportunity for fraud? And question, I think, at its first and foremost needs to be, does this prevent that in any meaningful way?

Lauren Cristella:

Right.

Jason Raia:

Or not? And because there ought to be ways to protect against fraud. I think everybody agrees on that. The question is, what are those ways, and are they so oppressive that they prevent people from voting, or are they so lax that they can be overcome and fraud can take place?

Lauren Cristella:

Absolutely right.

Jason Raia:

So a couple of the policies I wanna get at because I I I find them fascinating. They are part of at least a political zeitgeist at the moment that you hear them all over the place if you're a political junkie. I'm sure there are lots of people who are like, I have never heard of these four, and that's perfectly okay. But tell me about open primaries because this is a big deal in Pennsylvania. We are a closed primary system where all you have to be a registered Democrat to vote in the Democratic primary. You have to be a registered Republican. And are we a majority, unaligned in Pennsylvania or nearly so?

Lauren Cristella:

No. We have 1.1 million unaffiliated voters registered either third party or independent.

Jason Raia:

But so tell us about open primaries. How would that work, and how is it a solution to what problem?

Lauren Cristella:

So right now, what we're seeing is that, one, independent voters are paying for primaries that they can't vote in. Right? Even though these are party elections, technically, the primaries, our tax dollars, everyone's tax dollars go to support them. So one, there's a taxation without representation case to be made. Two, I think what you're also seeing is that the most extreme voters come out in primaries. Right? You're talking to the core of your base, right, the most fired up. So candidates do what they can to appeal to those extremes. And what you're seeing is it takes extreme ideologies to get out of the primaries.

And then that doesn't necessarily appeal to the core of voters that are able to vote in the general election. So this would also be an attempt to moderate the kind of policies that we're seeing and the candidates that we're seeing that have a broader appeal to where probably the core of purple Pennsylvania really is. Right? It's probably a more moderate state than our candidates coming out of the primary seem to suggest.

Jason Raia:

So, that makes a lot of sense. Particularly, I had not thought about it in terms of taxpayers funding these primaries, and many, many cannot participate. So then the question becomes, I get the desire for moderating influence, but how does this not just become an opportunity for a party that has selected their candidate to overly influence the other party and the candidates they're allowed. Let's be honest. If you wanna have fun and games, you go vote for the most radical candidate in the other party so that your team can beat them come November.

Lauren Cristella:

That is a risk that we've heard, and we just don't see that playing out across the country. Other places vote like this, right, where you pick the slate of candidates you wanna vote on. It's not race by race. It's not like I wanna vote in the Republican primary for president, and the Democrat for treasurer. And, right, you're picking a slate.

Jason Raia:

So you say this this primary season, I wanna vote in the Democratic. And so you get all of those candidates, and then you get to choose, but you don't then get to choose some Republicans. And-

Lauren Cristella:

And, basically, you could do that 15 days before. If you wanted to be that kind of, you know, voting in the other party's primary to throw off who they're picking.

Jason Raia:

I lived in Massachusetts. I knew plenty of people who became Democrats just to vote against the Kennedy's and then went back to being Republicans.

Lauren Cristella:

Right. So I mean,-

Jason Raia:

But they did it within the bond within the bounds of registration.

Lauren Cristella:

Right. And in Pennsylvania, that's 15 days before. Right? Up until 15 days before the election. So this would be basically just picking the slate of candidates you wanna vote on when you arrive at your polling place.

Jason Raia:

Right. So instead of doing it two weeks before, you're doing it day of. Okay. Ranked choice voting. This is one we hear a lot about. I think the younger you are, the more

interesting this sounds. I think lots of folks like me don't understand it at all. But so tell us about ranked choice voting.

Lauren Cristella:

There's a few different ways it works. But, basically, for instance, in the crowded primary field that we had in Philadelphia for this mayoral race, there were several top candidates and no clear front runner. I think I'll and, you know, their positions in a lot of ways were similar. It was really just a question of approach and constituency, right, who they were gonna be able to rally to the polls. So in ranked choice voting, You would get the list of candidates, and then you pick your preference. Right? You rank them 1, 2, 3, 4, 5. You can choose to just vote for 1, basically, bullet voting. But then there's instant runoffs that happen after that.

So it's not like in other other states. Some of them have where then the top two go And and have a runoff election, so you have to bring everyone back to the polls. This would basically happen so that if your candidate was eliminated, didn't get the most votes, their votes the the bottom person in that list, their votes would be reallocated and your second choice. Right? And then that keeps going until someone gets over 50% of the vote. And what that does is gives you a candidate that actually has a mandate, right, that's elected with, the majority of support and finds you a consensus candidate, the person that, you know, most people can be okay with. I think In races like the one we just saw, there was a strong anybody but candidate x. Right? And then everyone else was left to jockey and try to suss out who other people were voting for because you didn't wanna split that antivote among three different candidates. Right? So ranked choice voting would allow you to vote for your actual preference, your top choices, without having to vote for the person you think other people are voting for to be the person you don't want. That's very complicated.

Jason Raia:

It is. No. No. No. It is. But I'm so here's the thing that always bothers me about ranked choice voting. I think it makes sense for the political junkies out there who know everything about lots of candidates. I wonder how it works when it is really just name recognition that might be driving the 2nd, 3rd, 4th, 5th vote on on your because this it seems to require more knowledge even than going, this is my guy or or or this is this is the person I wanna support because I believe in what I have heard them say.

But oftentimes, that's where voters are like, okay. Good. I'm done. And now it's like, oh, well, now what's my set like, our our I guess my question is, and maybe I'm just cynical,

are voters gonna put in the extra work to make sure they know enough about their 2nd, 3rd, and 4th choice, as they do about their 1st choice?

Lauren Cristella:

I think in the field I mean, just using this most recent, primary race in Philadelphia, you couldn't help but learn about all of them. There were 55 different, you know, mayoral forums and opportunities to hear them all at one time. So I think doing that homework is obviously always important, but, what we have now is almost even less than that where they hear, oh, I like what this person said, but I really hate what that other person said, so I'm gonna go with the person I think most people are voting for. And right. Like, that's the name recognition of who you're hearing from.

Jason Raia:

So would it have changed this, the, Cherelle Parker's victory? I'm curious if you've looked at anything-

Lauren Cristella:

Well, so the Committee of Seventy did a poll back in April. There was no public polling happening. And so we got together with our partners at the Urban Affairs Coalition and the Greater Philadelphia Chamber of Commerce to do a straight horse race poll where you pick your top choice, and then which was a statistical four way tie. And then, do the ranked choice voting.

Jason Raia:

Mhmm.

Lauren Cristella:

And that's where, Cherelle Parker and Rebecca Rhyhart were very, very close, but Rebecca ended up taking the lead. But, again, just fractions of a point, really.

Jason Raia:

Mhmm.

Lauren Cristella:

And it was and I think it really did speak to how nobody really had a consensus going, and that there was a candidate, Helen Gym, that a lot of people, certainly in the business community, other places, just wanted anybody but that candidate. Right? And this allowed that consensus to show itself a little bit.

Jason Raia:

Mhmm.

Lauren Cristella:

I mean, I think that's what we saw there. In Philadelphia, it looks like it might be possible to do approval voting, which is similar to ranked choice voting, but you don't rank them. you just choose all of the people you're okay with.

Jason Raia:

Mhmm.

Lauren Cristella:

And then the person with the most votes wins, Right. Just like any other election. And the way our charter's written, there's a legal possibility that we could do that maybe for the mayor's race, so we're currently investigating that. As far as ranked choice voting at the state level, that seems like a 10 year plan, a wish list plan.

Jason Raia:

Yeah. And, Yeah. And I guess there are things that make more sense at a local level than maybe they do at a state or a or a federal election level. And, one of the great things about our system is we allow states and we allow cities to work with these experiments. And then we can look at the results and say, is that something that's interesting? Is that something we wanna pursue? Or no, we really don't like how that worked, and we're not gonna make that because we aren't a single system of elections.

Lauren Cristella:

Absolutely. And that's part of the strength of our system too. Right? It makes it that much more difficult to hack or to influence, fraud or anything else that might come out.

So our diversity is also a strength. And then we can look at places like New York City who just, You know, had their 1st experiment with ranked choice voting, and Chicago has runoffs. And we can look around and see if somebody's doing it better, and we wanna model that here.

Jason Raia:

Right. And I know, you know, the early voting. Utah has been doing early voting for over a decade, and they've worked out all the bugs. And it's one of those things that it's like, oh, well, why don't we look at those who have been doing this if this is something our state wants to do. And what lessons can we learn, and how can we implement it sort of further along the curve, the learning curve, than if we just, you know, sort of started from scratch and tried to make it up.

Lauren Cristella:

Even looking at Florida and the improvements they made after the 2000 election to their vote by mail and other systems. I would kill for some of those improvements here.

Jason Raia:

So one more, and, and that has to do with, and maybe this is more of an educational program, and less of a, it's a bit of a policy choice, but is, gerrymandering and drawing the lines. Tell us about drawing the lines because of this question of gerrymandering, having lived in a district, when I was in Boston that started in Cape Cod and made its way all the way north of the city of Boston somehow. This is an interesting question, and it has gotten just more heated in the last 5 or so years with a number of court decisions that have come down. And, tell us about what you all have been doing with gerrymandering.

Lauren Cristella:

So since about 2017, we started a program to educate students as well as adults on the process of drawing electoral maps and all the different ways that that can be rigged in favor of one party or the other, whoever's basically in control of that pen, that map making. So that could be consolidating voters, splitting them up so their representation is really limited. Basically, where the elected representatives pick their voters for their next election. It's a way that protects incumbency

Jason Raia:

Mhmm.

Lauren Cristella:

And can certainly be drawn to give one party a disproportionate amount of power, that's not really representative of the whole will of the people. So we've been doing a ton of educational work. We actually took The software that mapmakers use to do this, and we made it accessible to every person in Pennsylvania. Anyone could sit down and draw a map. It did take a couple hours to do it. You could choose to just do your region. Of course, that would affect the rest of the state, but it really gave students and adults a sense of how this process works and what are the values that go into the map. That's the conversation that we really wanted to start. Every line being drawn is a statement of values. Right?

Jason Raia:

And if you and if you do it in a way that is purely geographic and doesn't pay attention to any other factors. I'm not sure you get to a better place than this very sort of ridiculous, I used to always laugh when I first moved here that if you drove Lancaster Ave, Route 30 from Philadelphia out to Lancaster, it was like a zipper. You went from is it ffour and six? Is it the, the districts that were there at the time, I remember it was, like, Jim Gerlach and and the admiral.

Lauren Cristella:

Sestak.

Jason Raia:

Sestak. And you would literally you know, almost at stoplights, you would change districts as you drove up the same road. And it was just very odd, all those mainline communities that we're sort of eked out into these two different districts. But, it's one of those things where there is no simple solutions. There are majority minority districts that some would argue give better representation to those communities there. Whereas if you split them geographically, you might be splitting those and diluting their electoral power. And so it's there there are real challenges there.

Lauren Cristella:

Absolutely. So the Voting Rights Act allows for that right, for those districts to be a little wonky in their shape if it means that minority representation is going to be protected or enhanced.

Jason Raia:

But at the same time, you can use that to say, we're gonna create one minority majority district in order to protect these other districts over here.

Lauren Cristella:

Absolutely right. And that's where this is a human process.

Jason Raia:

Yeah.

Lauren Cristella:

Right? And we need checks and balances on that. Right? So that's why we thought a bipartisan commission with a nonpartisan leader would be a good way to go about drawing those maps.

Jason Raia:

Is there such a thing?

Lauren Cristella:

We do not have that, but we tried so hard.

Jason Raia:

Does it exist? Like, if you know, I think, Yeah. Is it because California has done it?

Lauren Cristella:

Oh, California is one where anyone can apply to be on it.

Jason Raia:

Yeah. Yeah.

Lauren Cristella:

And then there's other ones where, You know?

Jason Raia:

They're appointed.

Lauren Cristella:

They're appointed, and it's a mix of minority and majority parties, and then somebody oversees it. So the level of heat our attention provided along with, groups like Fair Districts and Common Cause, others, basically got the legislature to behave more fairly, right, in drawing those maps. And we were happy with the maps that came out of this process, though the process is not fixed. Right? We would have to keep up that level of heat.

Jason Raia:

Right.

Lauren Cristella:

Because there is no guarantee that that's how it's gonna shake out in 2030.

Jason Raia:

So and for those who are listening, every census, they redistribute. We will never have, well, it would take a major act of Congress, to change the number of representatives. So that that 435 number is not changing, and thus they get reallocated. When I first moved here, we used to have nineteen. We are now at 18.

Lauren Cristella:

Can we just -

Jason Raia:

17. I think we just went down to 17 because there's been two. So, you know, that we've lost one, and then we lost another one in the next census. And so that means the maps have to be redrawn. But somebody picked up those, and I'm not sure if it was Florida or Texas or somebody picked up an extra. And so that's the reason that we have to constantly because our population shifts, and that's privileges and freedoms that we have in this country is we can move. We can go where the jobs are.

We can go where our family is. And with us comes the possibility that if enough of them make that choice, then, they're gonna get another representative in Congress. And that means redrawing all those maps. And it is not, it's not an easy process, but it is one that people need to be aware of. And, again, this is one of those places where the ability I can imagine that draw the lines in your work with the Committee of Seventy teaching people about gerrymandering and about how these maps are being drawn, made them more inclined to reach out to their representatives and say, here's what I believe you should do. And that's another one of those responsibilities of citizens is to communicate to their representatives what it is they believe.

Lauren Cristella:

Absolutely right. And governor Wolf chose our former CEO, David Thornburgh, to chair a commission going to every single county in Pennsylvania to hear from constituents, about what they thought the map making process should be and could be. And that's one of the things where that issue gets a lot of attention as you approach, the, you know, the end of a decade. But That education work continues, and the relationships we were able to form with high school and college teachers across the commonwealth really was the seed For the kind of thriving statewide civic education programming we're doing now.

Jason Raia:

Right. But it's one of those topics like the electoral college that is important in certain years. And and and then the rest of the time, I imagine there's a certain amount of struggle of trying to say, hey. No. Pay attention to this because it's gonna matter in a few more years.

Lauren Cristella:

Yes. Absolutely. But some teachers will certainly tell you they're teaching it every year regardless of what's going on.

Jason Raia:

Excellent. So we tend to talk about America today as one of these questions about how do we find common ground. And I know certainly that it is some of the work that the Committee of Seventy has done. Tell me about those efforts because Philadelphia is a huge city. It is plagued with issues that it has been facing for literally decades now, and there are lots of people who disagree about what ought to be done. How do you help that? How do we do that? How do we find common ground? How do we recognize the things that we share even though we might disagree on lots of things like policy solutions?

Lauren Cristella:

Well, I think it starts from emphasizing how important it is to be able to have those conversations. We're not going to get out of any of these problems that we are facing without talking to people who don't think like we think.

Jason Raia:

Right.

Lauren Cristella:

Right? And I'm not interested. I mean, sometimes I think the civility, you know, civil dialogue and increasing civility gets wrapped up in, you know, kind of politeness, and and, it's hard to be polite about issues that go to the core of someone's humanity. Right? So that's not how we talk about it at the Committee of Seventy. We are interested in productive dialogue.

Jason Raia:

Mhmm.

Lauren Cristella:

Because if you're not willing to talk to people who don't agree with you, you're basically saying you're okay with the status quo.

Jason Raia:

Yeah. Okay.

Lauren Cristella:

Or what could possibly be worse coming out of it. Right? So I think teaching but those are skills.

Jason Raia:

Right.

Lauren Cristella:

Those are skills. And I don't know that teachers feel equipped sometimes to have those heated discussions in their classroom or bring up controversial topics. So we provide the resources to do that kind of work. And just personally going back to what I mentioned about my kind of formative experiences. There were factors that allowed me in graduate school to be comfortable enough to have those conversations And to bring my opinions and to be open minded and and truly listen to what other people were telling me about their experience and their perspective. And creating those conditions for open mindedness, active listening, thoughtful engagement, and problem solving is really at the core of a lot of the programming that we're doing. The "Can We Talk" program is a fantastic example of this. Our team at the Pennsylvania Project for Civic Engagement, which is a part of the Committee of Seventy, has been doing it at the college level, and we just received some funding to adapt that program to high schools.

Jason Raia:

Nice. Nice. Yeah. That's a real skill, you know, because you do know, I think we do want people to try and be civil, but recognize that people get passionate and fiery about something they believe in, and it doesn't mean they're personally attacking you. They might be attacking your ideas, but we need to teach people how to separate those, that I am not my ideas and that my ideas can do battle with your ideas, but we can still be friends. Like, that's, that but that's complex, and that's sometimes asking a lot.

Lauren Cristella:

And where we've tied up, I think, is either ideological purity or strict adherence to a set of values and principles and policies that don't leave any room for compromises.

Jason Raia:

Right.

Lauren Cristella:

Right? We have to be able to make everything negotiable, to be honest. And then, you know, we'll talk it out. We'll see what the best ideas wins and where the consensus can be found.

Jason Raia:

Right. And that's one of those things that is really ironic in that our country is founded on the back of all these compromises. And many of them that we look at and go, oh, I can't believe they did that. And yet when you really stop, you go, well, they they prioritize some things over other things, and sometimes that's just, you know, what has to be done in order to get to something, but it laid the groundwork for, you know, other compromises to be made later or or for things to be done differently in a different generation that could manage to do it.

Lauren Cristella:

Right. Living to fight another day. Right? There's other times. We, you know, tackle what you can tackle, find the areas. You don't have to convince everyone on every single issue or or already be in agreement before you even decide to talk about a problem that is real.

Jason Raia:

And it's really important to remember that it's not necessarily about changing somebody's mind. Their principles may make it impossible for them to change their mind. And so then what do you do? And being able to offer the grace that says, okay. We're we're we we're not gonna come to agreement on this, and that is okay. You know, everything is not a solution waiting to be found.

Lauren Cristella:

Absolutely agree. Absolutely agree. And that's hard for a lot of people to hear. I do think continuing to look to find those areas where you can be find agreement, and then also just keep in mind everyone's humanity.

Jason Raia:

Yes.

Lauren Cristella:

I think when we start othering and, using extreme language or dehumanizing language, things just break apart from there. So starting with those skills and keeping people aware of those concepts as they're engaging in sometimes very passionate discussion, is also a value. Right? We might not solve the problem, but if we can keep it to the point where we're lowering the temperature on some of this discourse, I think that's a service too.

Jason Raia:

Right. And I think about some of them, some of my favorite people, my friends that I I love fighting with. I think the reason it has worked for all these many years is because there are those moments where we can say, you know, you're right. You're right. And that is important to these kinds of conversations to be able to admit when somebody else has a good idea or, you know, thought of something in a way that you and and go, yeah. Yeah. That makes sense.

Lauren Cristella:

And I think that there is something important to remember too when I think about the conditions that enabled that kind of conversation when I was in graduate school. I felt safe. I didn't think anything about my personal safety or people I represent and their safety would ever be compromised by having those open dialogues. I went in thinking that I could learn something, and I was eager to share what I know or what I thought I knew. And creating those conditions is really important because I think when people don't feel safe, right, that's a huge problem, and we have to create those conditions, but also recognize the vulnerability people are coming with is so important too.

Jason Raia:

Absolutely. And and, and knowing that just because you disagree with somebody doesn't make them your enemy. It just means it's somebody you disagree with. Okay. This has been terrific. We have a quiz. We're gonna wrap things up. Excluding Washington and Lincoln, who's your favorite president?

Lauren Cristella:

Theodore Roosevelt and my son, Theo.

Jason Raia:

I love it. That's great. And, you know, I don't know what might have been president when your organization was founded? What's one thing you would want every American to learn more about?

Lauren Cristella:

The civic bargain.

Jason Raia:

Tell us.

Lauren Cristella:

The sense of responsibility we each have to each other and how that manifests in public life.

Jason Raia:

Absolutely. If you had not chosen a career in this sorta, politics and policy. What do you think you would have done?

Lauren Cristella:

I probably would have taken that archaeology job in Rome.

Jason Raia:

There you go. I love it. Okay. I always ask this question. What pet peeve annoys you the most? I have 1000000 of them. They're often then related to driving or or or grammar. But anything-?

Lauren Cristella:

I would say oh, it's gonna be teeth grinding.

Jason Raia:

It's okay.

Lauren Cristella:

That sound of teeth grinding makes me absolutely nuts.

Jason Raia:

Yeah. Let's see. Favorite movie?

Lauren Cristella:

A League of their Own.

Jason Raia:

I like it. What one thing would people be most surprised to learn?

Lauren Cristella:

That my kids, well, one of my children came to me through foster care.

Jason Raia:

Oh, wow. Good for you. What one lesson from your life would you like to share most with young people?

Lauren Cristella:

Oh, I think that total changing my mind at some point. Right? My political allegiances and everything else that that's a thing that that happened and that I was open to and I think I'm better for.

Jason Raia:

Great. If you could meet just one historical person, who would it be?

Lauren Cristella:

I feel like it would be Lincoln. I really do think it would be Lincoln. I know that that's such a Talk answer. But

Jason Raia:

It's Hard not to.

Lauren Cristella:

I know. He's just so good.

Jason Raia:

Yeah. Yeah. You're good. Okay. And this is our final question always and forever, bourbon or scotch?

Lauren Cristella:

Oh, bourbon.

Jason Raia:

Oh, I love it. You're in the winning team.

Lauren Cristella:

Manhattan's forever.

Jason Raia:

Oh, I love it. Well, Thank you to our guest, Lauren Cristella. I can't wait to have you back. I also wanna thank our producers, Lara Kennedy and Sarah Rasmussen. A special shout out to friends of the pod, Bill Franz and Bob Gleason, wherever you listen to your podcasts. And if you are so inclined, give us a 5 star review, which helps others discover the podcast. And don't forget to tell your friends. To learn more about Freedoms Foundation at Valley Forge, go to www.freedomsfoundation.org Check out our social media @FFVF on, I guess, X, once known as Twitter, on Facebook at Freedoms Foundation, or email us at gwshpodcast@gmail.com with comments, questions, or suggestions. Talk to you next