Episode Book

EPISODE #5569

Measuring Democracy Beyond Voter Turnout

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SYNOPSIS

Voter turnout is the easiest thing to count, but it isn't the same as the thing we want to measure. This episode starts with the "parliament" — the informal table of friends arguing politics over coffee and beer — and uses it to pry open the measurement problem underneath a listener's question: how do we actually gauge political engagement and disengagement? The research points to volunteering, national service, early-childhood interventions, even sleep. Then comes the country comparison: high-turnout Belgium, Sweden, and Australia versus low-turnout Switzerland, Chile, and the United States, with compulsory voting scrambling the whole exercise. A study spanning 105 countries links engagement and well-being, and Kurdistan offers a natural experiment where the same voters show up for regional elections and stay home for national ones. The conclusion is uncomfortable: engagement isn't a personality trait, it's a relationship with a specific institution.

TRANSCRIPT



Corn

Daniel's been circling something for a while, and this time he's put his finger right on it. He wrote in about the Israeli institution we've kicked around before, the "parliament." Not the Knesset. The other one. The one where four friends sit around a table with coffee going cold and beers going warm and argue about the government until somebody's wife calls.



Herman

The parliament with no quorum and no speaker.



Corn

Right. And Daniel's point is a good one. He says even in a landscape as divisive as this one, most theorists of democracy would still say engagement beats disengagement. Even if, and I'm quoting him here, "you might feel a bit shaded by the rise and fall of the different parties." Which is a very polite way of describing the last few years.



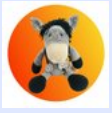
Herman

He's not wrong about the shading.



Corn

Then he asks the question underneath the question. Voting is one way to measure engagement. But stable democracies don't vote all that often. An election every three or four years is a sparse data point. So how else do we measure political engagement and disengagement? And then the big one. If you were to list the world's most engaged and most disengaged electorates today, what would come out on either side?



Herman

Two questions, really. One methodological, one empirical.



Corn

And I think they're the same question wearing different hats. Because the moment you try to answer the second one, you discover you don't have a good instrument for the first.



Herman

That's the trap, yeah. Let's start with the parliament itself, because it's the perfect illustration of the problem.



Corn

Define it for people who haven't sat at one.



Herman

It's a social ritual more than an institution. A group of friends, usually the same group, meeting regularly. Coffee, beer, cigarettes, whatever the table runs on. And they debate politics. Passionately. At length. It's got roots in the kibbutz tradition of collective argument, and it borrows the texture of café culture in Tel Aviv and Jerusalem. Somebody coined the term "parliament" ironically, because it has no formal power at all.



Corn

No votes, no minutes, no binding anything.



Herman

And yet it does real work. It's where opinions get formed, tested, sharpened. Somebody floats a take, somebody else pushes back, and by the end of the evening a position has moved. That's political socialization happening in real time. It's just invisible to every dataset we have.



Corn

Which is why it's the right hook. It's engagement that doesn't show up in turnout. And Daniel's instinct is that there's a lot more of it out there than the numbers capture.



Herman

There is. And the reason that matters is that the numbers are what we argue about. We treat turnout as the vital sign of a democracy, and it's actually one reading from one instrument.



Corn

So let's start with the big normative question. Why do democratic theorists care so much about engagement in the first place? Why is disengagement treated as a disease rather than a preference?



Herman

Because for a whole strand of theory, engagement isn't a means to democracy. It's the thing itself. Rousseau, Mill, Carole Pateman, Benjamin Barber's Strong Democracy. The claim is that citizens become democratic through participation. You don't learn to be a citizen by reading about it. You learn it by doing it, badly, in a room with other people who disagree with you.



Corn

So the parliament isn't a sideshow to democracy. It's a rehearsal space for it.



Herman

That's the participatory claim, yes. And then there's the social capital tradition, which is Putnam. Bowling Alone. Civic participation builds trust, reciprocity, the habits of cooperation. Disengagement doesn't just mean fewer votes. It erodes the fabric that makes institutions work in the first place.



Corn

Here's where I want to push, though. Because Daniel flags the divisiveness himself. High engagement in a divided landscape doesn't necessarily build trust. It can entrench camps.



Herman

That's the counterpoint, and it's a real one. Engagement and healthy engagement are not the same thing. You can have a country where everybody argues politics constantly and nobody trusts anybody. The volume is high and the fabric is still fraying.



Corn

So the parliament can be a bridge or a trench depending on the table.



Herman

And that tension runs through the whole episode. More engagement is not automatically better. It depends on what the engagement is made of.



Corn

Which brings us to the measurement problem. Voting is sparse, and it's distorted. What else is there?



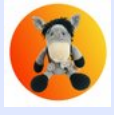
Herman

Quite a lot, and the literature keeps pointing at things people don't expect. Start with volunteering and organizational participation. There's a big European study using SHARE data, seventy-four thousand people across the continent, and it found that socio-structural resources and social capital predict formal volunteering and participation in political organizations. The paper calls civic engagement one of the cornerstones of participatory democracy.



Corn

So joining things is a measurable proxy.



Herman

Joining things, showing up, doing unpaid work for a cause. That's cross-nationally comparable in a way that "did you argue at a café" isn't.



Corn

What else?



Herman

National service. Teach For America is the cleanest case. Admitted applicants were substantially more likely to vote later, and the effect was larger than previous efforts to increase youth turnout. That's a big claim. It suggests institutional pathways build the habit of engagement.



Corn

So you put somebody in a structured role with a mission for two years and they come out a voter.



Herman

They come out a participant. Voting is downstream of it.



Corn

Here's the one that got me. Sleep.



Herman

Yes. Insufficient sleep predicts lower voter turnout. It also predicts reduced willingness to vote, to sign petitions, to donate. Same research group, published in Nature Human Behaviour.



Corn

So civic engagement has a physiological precondition. You can't be a good citizen if you're exhausted.



Herman

That's the finding, and it's a strange one. It reframes disengagement as partly a public health problem rather than a purely political one. Somebody who's working two jobs and sleeping five hours isn't apathetic. They're depleted.



Corn

That's a real reframe. The guy who doesn't vote because he's wrecked is filed in the same column as the guy who doesn't vote because he's checked out.



Herman

And they need completely different remedies.



Corn

What about the early-childhood piece?



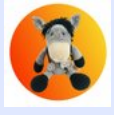
Herman

Also Holbein. Early-childhood preventive interventions had long-term positive impacts on adult voter participation. Engagement is partly formed before you can read. Which means if you want to fix turnout, you might be thirty years too late by the time you're running a get-out-the-vote campaign.



Corn

So the lever isn't where the conversation usually points.



Herman

It's much earlier, and it's much less political. It's preschool programs and sleep and service corps.



Corn

Now the global picture. There's a study I want to get to, but let's do the country comparison first, because that's what Daniel actually asked for.



Herman

Fair warning on this part. Turnout rankings need verification against current data before anybody quotes them as gospel. The shape of it is stable, the exact figures move.



Corn

Give us the shape.



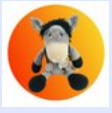
Herman

Highest turnout, typically. Belgium, Sweden, Denmark, Australia, Turkey, Malta, Iceland, Uruguay, the Philippines. Israel itself runs sixty-five to seventy percent and often higher. Lowest, typically. The United States, historically, though twenty twenty was an outlier high. Switzerland, which is fascinating because it has more direct democracy than almost anyone and still low federal turnout. Chile, Japan, South Korea, which has been declining, parts of Eastern Europe, and a lot of post-Soviet states.



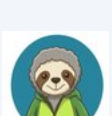
Corn

And the caveat that wrecks the whole exercise.



Herman

Compulsory voting. Australia, Belgium, Brazil. Turnout is inflated by law, not by enthusiasm. So a country can post ninety percent and have a disengaged electorate, and a country can post fifty-five and have a fiercely engaged one.



Corn

Which means the ranking Daniel asked for is real, but it's a ranking of a proxy.



Herman

It's a ranking of the easiest thing to count, which is not the same as the thing you want to measure.



Corn

So what does the deeper picture say? There's a study across a hundred and five countries, ninety-five percent of the world's population.



Herman

Perkins and colleagues, twenty twenty-one. Freedom Score was the most robust predictor of well-being. And voter turnout plus fiscal decentralization predicted both the Human Development Index and national happiness.



Corn

So engagement and quality of life move together.



Herman

They correlate. And here's where I have to be honest, because the causality is unclear to me. It could be that engagement produces better institutions and better lives. It could just as easily be that well-functioning institutions and decent lives produce engagement. Happy, secure people have the bandwidth to show up.



Corn

The sleep finding actually supports the second reading.



Herman

It does. Depleted people disengage. So a lot of what looks like civic virtue might be the visible surface of a society where people have enough margin to participate.



Corn

Which is a much less romantic story than the participatory theorists tell.



Herman

It's a less romantic story and it might be the true one. I don't think we know yet.



Corn

Let's do the Kurdistan case, because it's the sharpest natural experiment in the pile.



Herman

Northern Iraq, Kurdistan Region. A study of about a thousand people found that national identity predicted both intended and actual voting, and that it was mediated by trust in government and life satisfaction. Even amid instability.



Corn

So identity holds engagement up.



Herman

Identity holds it up. And then the split. Turnout stayed high in regional elections. It hit a historic low in the Iraqi parliamentary elections. Same people, same region, wildly different behavior.



Corn

Because the regional vote felt like it mattered and the national one didn't.



Herman

Because trust and identity pointed at one institution and not the other. Which tells you engagement isn't a trait of a person. It's a relationship between a person and a specific thing.



Corn

That's the line I'd put on the poster. Engagement isn't a personality type. It's a relationship.



Herman

And relationships can be broken by specific events, not by general apathy.



Corn

Now let's pull the thread. If engagement is partly formed in early childhood, partly physiological, partly a function of trust in a specific institution, then the whole framing of "engaged versus disengaged electorates" starts to wobble.



Herman

It does. Because you're comparing countries on a single number that's produced by completely different mechanisms. Belgium's turnout and Sweden's turnout are not the same phenomenon. One is law, one is culture.



Corn

And Israel's parliament, the café one, doesn't show up in any of it.



Herman

None of it. There's no index for it. There's no survey question that captures a table of friends arguing until midnight.



Corn

How many other forms are we missing? Online argument, community organizing, political consumerism. Somebody deciding not to buy a product because of where it's made.



Herman

Boycotts and buycotts are measurable, actually. There are survey instruments for political consumerism. But the informal talk, the group chat, the family argument at dinner, that's the dark matter of political engagement. We know it's there because we can see its gravitational effects. We can't see it directly.



Corn

So the honest answer to Daniel's second question is that we can give him a ranking, and we should, but we have to tell him what the ranking is a ranking of.



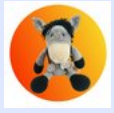
Herman

A ranking of the easiest proxy, distorted by law, and blind to the most common form of engagement there is.



Corn

And the answer to his first question is that there's a whole menu. Volunteering, service programs, early intervention, sleep, trust, identity, activism history, fiscal decentralization. Each one catches something the others miss.



Herman

And none of them catch the parliament.



Corn

Now the harder question. Is high engagement always a democratic good?



Herman

The Israeli case says no. High engagement, deeply divided landscape. The arguing is constant and the camps are dug in. You can have a society that talks politics obsessively and still can't form a coalition.



Corn

The Kurdistan case says something adjacent. Identity can sustain engagement even when trust collapses. So you can have high turnout driven by tribal loyalty rather than by any belief that the system works.



Herman

Which means engagement is a multiplier, not a good in itself. It amplifies whatever the underlying material is. If the material is trust, you get a healthy democracy. If the material is grievance, you get a more efficient grievance machine.



Corn

That's a uncomfortable conclusion for anybody who's spent their career trying to get people to vote.



Herman

It is. And I'd rather sit with it than paper over it.



Corn

Because the alternative is a get-out-the-vote campaign that just makes the polarization louder.



Herman

Right. Which is why the quality question matters more than the quantity question. Are people engaging in a way that involves listening, or in a way that involves performing?



Corn

You can't measure that with turnout at all.



Herman

You can barely measure it with anything. It's the hardest thing in the whole field.



Corn

I keep coming back to the parliament here, because it's the one form of engagement where the listening is built in. You're at a table with people you like. You can't just post and walk away.



Herman

There's a cost to being wrong at that table. You have to see the person next week.



Corn

Which is exactly what the online version strips out.



Herman

That might be the real finding. The forms of engagement that build trust are the ones with a social cost attached. The forms that erode it are the ones without.



Corn

That's a better thesis than anything in the literature.



Herman

It's a hypothesis. I'd like to see somebody test it.



Corn

Would Daniel, probably. He's the one who noticed the parliament in the first place.



Hilbert

That's right, mostly.



Corn

Go on.



Hilbert

The parliament is real engagement, you're right about that. But it isn't friendly. I worked a bar in Jerusalem for two years, Thursday nights, same group of guys at the same table. Not a nice place. Just a bar. And I'll tell you, the arguments weren't debates. I watched two men who'd known each other since the army stop speaking over where the border should be. Another one stopped coming because of something said about his son's service. So when you call it a friendly debate, that's the version people tell afterward.



Corn

The table has a body count.



Hilbert

It has a body count. And here's the part that surprised me. The loudest ones, the ones who argued until I was stacking chairs, half of them never voted. I'd ask. They'd say, what's the point, they're all thieves. So the engagement was real and it didn't go anywhere near a ballot box.



Herman

That's the exact gap the episode is about. High talk, low turnout, same person.



Hilbert

Same person. And there was one, an old fellow named Moshe. Came every week. Loudest voice in the room. Then one Thursday he wasn't there. Then he wasn't there the next week. Nobody said anything, which I thought was strange, given how much they'd all shouted at each other. Months later I saw him at a bus stop and I asked where he'd been. He said he'd given up. His words. I can't change anything, so why waste my breath.



Corn

That's the whole episode in one sentence.



Hilbert

It's not dramatic. That's what I want to say. There was no event. His wife hadn't died, he hadn't lost a job. He just ran out. And nobody at that table ever went looking for him. Which is the thing I still think about, more than the shouting.



Herman

Because disengagement isn't a statistic. It's a Thursday when somebody doesn't show up.



Hilbert

You don't notice for months. Anyway. I've got a call coming in I'm not taking in here, so.



Corn

The bus stop detail is the one that gets me. Not the argument. The quiet exit.



Herman

The fact that the loudest man in the room was the first to go.



Corn

There's something in that for the closing. The data tells you a country is disengaging. It doesn't tell you who left, or when, or whether anybody noticed.



Herman

Hilbert's Moshe is the unit of analysis nobody surveys. One person, one Thursday, one decision that never shows up in any index.



Corn

That's the honest limit of everything we've walked through. We can measure volunteering, service, sleep, trust, turnout. We can rank countries. We can't measure the moment somebody decides their breath is wasted.



Herman

Which loops back to the parliament. The thing that keeps people at the table isn't ideology. It's somebody noticing you weren't there.



Corn

If there's one thought to leave people with, it's that. Every index we have measures the aggregate. None of them measure the table. And the table is where it's actually decided.



Herman

The studies can tell you a trend. They can't tell you about Moshe.



Corn

Thanks as always to Hilbert Flumingtop, who produces this show and occasionally tells us what actually happened. This has been My Weird Prompts. If you want to argue with us about any of this, the show notes have the links, and you can find everything at my weird prompts dot com.



Herman

We'll be back soon.



Corn

See you tomorrow.