

EP 10 US ELECTION EDITED AUDIO_mixdown.mp3

Voiceover [00:00:02] This podcast is brought to you by the University of Aberdeen.

Dr Chris Croly [00:00:10] OK, ladies and gentlemen, thanks very much for joining us for the latest podcast in the University of Aberdeen Café Connect series. So Café Connect exists really to bring research and the public together, to bring the latest research which touches upon aspects of everyday life or things that we read about all the time. And today, I'm joined by my colleague, Dr Malcolm Harvey. Malcolm, as a lecturer in politics at the University of Aberdeen, I will hand over to Malcolm in a minute. But just to see that the topic for today's Café Connect is the recent series of events in American politics. Bringing about the election to post-election events leading up to the inauguration of Joe Biden and how politics is going to be moving forward and in the United States of America. There was a scene of really looking at research which impacts and things that we know, whether this has been written large in the news of late. But Malcolm, maybe you'd like to introduce yourself.

Dr Malcom Harvey [00:01:04] Yeah, thank you, Chris. I'm a lecturer in Politics and International Relations. I'm currently on a Fulbright Scholarship at Villanova University in Philadelphia. Right now, it's much sunnier, I think here. It's always sunny in Philadelphia and it's an interesting place to be right now. Obviously, post-election, the new presidency, the new administration and a lot of things still to sort out from November from the election that the incoming administration, the trifecta that the Democrats have now in terms of control in the US Congress and the presidency as well. So it's a very interesting time to be here. And I look forward to sharing some thoughts about the process with you.

Dr Chris Croly 00:01:57] Indeed. Sorry, I hadn't actually introduced myself. I am Chris Croly, I take care of the Public Engagement with Research unit in the University of Aberdeen. But anyway, that's neither here nor there, really. The fact is that you are in America is fantastic. It just adds to the gist of what we're talking about today. But, yes, we've just had the inauguration of the 46th president of the United States of America, Joe Biden. He was the winner, but there still seems to be two schools of thought. But there was a winner, but there are people who claim there wasn't. Yeah. I mean, this is still an ongoing debate.

Dr Malcolm Harvey [00:02:30] It certainly is. We had, you know, for all good and bad of the US over the last 240 years of its existence. There have been challenges about elections, there have been contested elections. There have been elections which one candidate has won the popular vote and the other candidate has won the Electoral College. And we saw that in 2016, most recently. But we've never really had an election where one candidate has contested the result right up until the point at which the new president has been inaugurated. So it has been a pretty unprecedented period in American history. And I think we've also seen with the scenes at the Capitol on the 6th of January, we've seen that sparking into violence in ways that I don't think I was going to say, I don't think anyone expected. I think that's perhaps the wrong phraseology, because I think if you've been following US politics over the last four years, I think this was always a likely outcome, given the way that the atmosphere had been charged and given the way that there's no nice way of putting this, but the president had been fanning the flames of this. And so I think the riots or the protest at the Capitol that became a riot that became a storming of the seat of the US democracy was in some ways inevitable. I think that the temperature had been ratcheted up that much that if you've been following US

politics, I mean, it was shocking. There is no question about that. But I think if you were shocked by it, you hadn't really been paying attention.

Dr Chris Croly [00:04:25] No, indeed. You are right, this is to a certain extent a reflection of how divisive things have become in American politics recently. How can find common ground anymore? You know, and the opposition were suddenly the enemy rather than just simply another party vying for power with a slightly different take on broadly the same sort of politics or probably the same range of policies. And yes, I want to be as fair as possible to Donald Trump within less and of course, he was absolutely right. If he felt that there was electoral fraud, he should have contested. And that was contested in the courts. And the courts, not universally, but probably in 99.9% rejected these cases, of course, actually does lead to the interesting point that this doesn't exist in a vacuum. So I believe that the companies behind the electoral machines have suits like Rudy Giuliani and various other people know this is a part of a wider network. Let's cut straight to the events of January 6th because you're right, that's absolutely unprecedented. Shocking images, I certainly watched it live, couldn't quite believe what I was watching. And I also watched as his speech not long before it. And it was, if you like, the straw that broke the camel's back in my mind.

Dr Malcolm Harvey [00:05:52] I mean, I absolutely think so. I mean, I think what we'll find in the coming weeks with the US Senate trial, only the second impeachment of Donald Trump, the evidence in that is going to come out and they're going to seek to explore the role of that the speech to the protesters before the riot on the 6th of January, they're going to explore what impact that had on it. But I think there's no question I mean, when you spend the months leading up to the election casting doubt about the integrity of those that are running the election, the poll machines, and as you said, they've started to sue various bodies for what was said about them in the aftermath. And when you start to make claims about that process and suggest that, from a perfectly legitimate position, because Democrats were largely voting by post and Republicans were largely voting in person and the in-person votes were going to be counted first. You know, this was this is a natural process that the Republicans in most cases were going to be ahead because those votes were counted first. And then it was only when the million ballots, the postal votes were counted, the Democrats were going to take the lead in a lot of these places. And that's as it happened, that's as it turned out. But if you're telling your followers that this is all a trick, that, we were ahead and then there was these massive dumps the Democrats were stealing the election. And then after the election result becomes formalised and confirmed, you're still challenging it. And you're talking through the process and saying this is damaging to the US democracy and cheated and stolen and all these kind of things. You're going to rile people up. And that that was entirely his intention. He said by his own mouth that he does not lose well and this is a really clear example of it. Now, it might be the fact that he doesn't believe that he lost and that he believes that it was stolen from him. But there is absolutely no evidence of that. You know, the Trump campaign took around 50 lawsuits to various courts in the US. They lost all, but one of those, the one that they won was on a technicality about people standing a little bit closer to view the polling results as they were coming in. So the courts found no problem with the process.

Dr Malcolm Harvey [00:08:45] And in a lot of the places that he was challenging the process, it was his party that were running the elections in those places, and particularly Georgia. He had a lot of problems in Georgia and with the Georgia returning officer who, to be incredibly fair to him, stood his ground and said, look, this is not how we do things in this country, Mr. President. And them to stand down, basically. So my impression and my understanding of that speech is, you used the phrase the straw that broke the camel's

back. My kind of metaphor, I suppose, is the shouting fire in a crowded theatre. You can't do that when people are charged up as they were and ready to riot. He just lit the spark of that revolution. And I think he understood full well what he was doing there, and I think in some ways his Vice President was the biggest fall guy in that, because for the last four years, Mike Pence has been the most loyal of his cronies, if you like.. He stood by them during the election campaign when there was the Access Hollywood tape, which would have sunk any other candidate, and we don't need to say any more about it. I mean, you know, for someone like Mike Pence, who is an Evangelical Christian, but his I think he and his wife were absolutely disgusted by that. And there was about 48 hours during which he and Donald Trump, the candidate, did not talk. And it was almost at the point where Pence was going to drop off the ticket and he decided to stick with them. And the rest, as they say, is history. And he was he was the most loyal through that, through those four years. And to see Donald Trump turned on him in that way and the way he did on the 6th of January that that must have been pretty hard for Mike Pence to take, given the loyalty that he'd show. And so I think that was almost the most shocking bit of it in a day of shocks and four years of shocking moments. I think that was that was probably up there.

Dr Chris Croly [00:11:10] I mean, it's so far to say that the Pence and others were more or less fleeing for their lives, really. Or whilst it might not have come to their lives, they would certainly have felt that moment and that's what's important.

Dr Malcolm Harvey [00:11:26] Absolutely. And I think we saw earlier this week, the congresswoman from New York, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, did an Instagram live video where she talked about her experiences of being trapped in the Capitol on the 6th January. And she did fear for her life, she talked about and compared it to a previous experience of being sexually abused and she said the feelings were very similar. There was a real concern for their lives at that point. And I've heard a number of representatives in the Chamber talking about their experiences on the day and it's pretty harrowing listening to that. That's a place of work, it's a place, where you're going to as representatives of the people and expecting to be safe and expecting to be able to express your views. And for that to be kind of snapped out of existence in that moment is terrifying. And I think absolutely the vice president, the entire Senate, the entire House of Representatives were in a very scary moment. There were real dangers at play on that day.

Dr Chris Croly [00:12:43] And beyond that, as well as the symbolism, it's that the Capitol is the symbol of democracy in America, it's the largest, most important, most powerful democracy in the world. I think that's not an unfair statement to me. So to see this happening there and obviously I do not want to do down the mother of parliaments in Westminster either. But, yeah, it's the symbolism of seeing this overrun so quickly.

Dr Malcolm Harvey [00:13:11] I think that's absolutely, I said you shouldn't be shocked by it, but the images were shocking and it is about that. It's about America. If this had happened anywhere else and it has happened in other places recently, we've seen that in Myanmar and the American administration has been very resolute in calling it what it is, a military coup. And yet, less than a month ago you saw these scenes at the US Capitol and it was a mob overrunning the Seat of Democracy. And, it doesn't really matter how you say they are, how many times you see it, you're never really going to get your head around just how big an event that is.

Dr Chris Croly [00:13:59] Yeah, but at the end of the day, more democracy prevailed. Congress and Senate came back in session. Electoral College votes were certified and

Joe Biden was inaugurated. But really for that to happen it took Mike Pence, Mitch McConnell, a lot of other people as well to stand up and say, no, democracy relied on one or two key people effectively.

Dr Malcolm Harvey [00:14:25] It did. And that was the interesting bit about this. And this is not to let the Republican Party off the hook here because there were people like Senator Ted Cruz, Senator Joe Foley, that still resolutely stood up and said, these results should not be certified. And they went back and they looked at Pennsylvania, they had votes on that. They looked at Arizona, they had votes on that. They challenged in Nevada. They challenged Georgia as well. So, yes, absolutely. A couple of people changing their mind or at least, you know, drawing back a little bit from the support of the president are really helping the wheels of democracy to move forward. And I think you're right. It was absolutely, hugely important that Congress came back that night and they sat until 3:00-4:00 in the morning to make sure they got through those things. But, as a symbol that was really, really important, the fact that democracy had overcome and it would not be cowed and the public would be heard in the aftermath of something really important symbolically. And also obviously officially as well, because it required to be done in order that the inauguration could go forward a couple of weeks later. So it came down to the institution and the actors as well to play a large role in basically getting back on the road, recovering from that moment and taking forward U.S. democracy the way it was supposed to be done.

Dr Chrs Croly [00:16:01] So, this is a half hour of broadcasting to try and keep it up. But there's a number of things that I think we need to talk to you about the future of the Republicans, the Grand Old Party, the GOP. I'd like to touch upon the impeachment that you mentioned there as well, but also the process, the American presidential election process. I was a long time ago an undergraduate at the University of Strathclyde and taught by John Curtis and a number of other people and I learnt about the intricacies and ins and outs of the American electoral process. However, this year, I knew it better than I ever probably have. But my goodness, there are so many stages and so many ways in which it could potentially have fallen down or been intervened with. Is it time for reform?

Dr Malcolm Harvey [00:16:54] Well, I think it is long overdue for reform. I think we're in a situation where the style of politics and the size of the country now, it doesn't fit with an 18th century idea of how to elect a president and how to elect Congress, for that matter as well. But we'll park that for the moment. But I don't think that there is any chance that it happens and the reason for it is because of the polarisation that we've spoken about. When the parties are so far apart as they are at the moment, it's a sense of we give no quarter to the other side. So towards the end of the Trump administration, the Republicans rush to get another Supreme Court justice appointed to the bench. And in the 11 months at the end of Barack Obama's term, the Republican Senate held off on appointing another Supreme Court justice so that the next Republican president, that's what they were hoping for and that's what they got would be able to appoint them. And so that's the Republican tactic on the Democratic side, they want to get statehood for Washington, D.C. and potentially for Puerto Rico as well. They're talking about expanding the Supreme Court, which I don't think is going to happen. So, they've both got their kind of pet projects, if you like, to either end of the political spectrum. And there's no middle ground there. It's a kind of quid pro quo, if you're going to do this, then we're going to retaliate with this. And the electoral process is something that is it's very difficult to change anyway because it requires 2/3 majorities in both the House of Representatives and the Senate. And it also needs 3/4 of the US states to ratify. And now that's an almost impossible barrier to achieve because there's so many of the states that would be disadvantaged by this because the

small states are the ones that really benefit from the Electoral College. And taking that away would mean that they were much more limited what they could influence in the election. So I don't think it's likely. But I think there are a number of ways in which it could be changed without being formally changed, constitutionally changed. And one thing that has become vaguely popular in recent years is the idea, and I can't remember the order of the words here, but the popular vote, interstate compact or something like that. So basically what happens is that there's a number of states that have signed up to this and they've pledged to give their Electoral College votes to the winner of the popular vote nationwide, irrespective of whether they win that state or not. Now, it's not formalised yet because they haven't got to 270 votes. They haven't got enough states signed up to make up to 270. So it's not in play at the moment. And there potentially would be legal challenges to it, were it applied. But it's certainly an idea that's been kicking around for a few years. And it seems like it would be the kind of thing that would solve the popular vote winner not winning the Electoral College, as we saw in 2016. But it wouldn't solve a lot of the other problems with the Electoral College, not least that the candidates can campaign in about six or seven different states and win the election without actually visiting a lot of the US. So I'm sceptical about any real chances of reform, I think.

Dr Chris Croly [00:21:06] OK, and everything is so politicised and highly-charged right now, that any reform would be controversial or not quite anything that they may be wanting. And of course, Americans are so wedded to the Constitution, the people, it is part and parcel of America. So, yes, for the Grand Old Party, is it civil war? Is this what we're seeing here? We're certainly seeing a fracture in the party.

Dr Malcolm Harvey [00:21:38] Yes. And we have for a number of years, Tim Alberta, who writes for the website Politico, I think, has a fantastic book about the Republican Party. It's called American Carnage. It's about a good two and a half, three inches thick. And it goes back and talks about the challenges and the changes within the party from just before Barack Obama was elected in 2008. So just after the George Bush presidency, right through to the emergence of Donald Trump as their standard bearer. And even at that point when Barack Obama takes over as president, as Democratic president in 2008, you're looking at the Republican Party and they're not the Republican Party of Ronald Reagan in the 1980s and the Moral Majority, because George Bush had planned to do that, then 9/11 got in the way and it became a war president and became foreign policy focused. And he had to spend a lot more money than he had intended to do, so taxes went up a little bit and the party became a higher spending party. And so from that point on, they lost the characteristics of what had made them a conservative party, the Republican Party. And so they were kind of floundering a little bit in terms of ideology. And that continued right through the Obama presidency, we saw the emergence of the Tea Party as a reaction to the global financial crisis and Obama's bailing out banks and mortgage lenders and these kinds of things. And so that was the kind of right wing shift that the party took. And there were a number of leaders, Ted Cruz was one of them, I think at that point, who was really pushing this direction, Marco Rubio and the Florida senator another. And so they moved in that direction through the early 2010s. And it's only really with Trumpism that the party really departed from some kind of centrist position to take up a much more right wing position. And I suppose the problem for the Republicans at the moment, and it's quite a big problem, is that 74 million people voted for Donald Trump. But you don't know if they were voting for Donald Trump and Trumpism or if they were voting for traditional Republican values. And imagine some voting for each of those things. And so the difficulty for them is whether they make a break with Trumpism, find that centrist position and try to attract some more centrist moderate Democrats back across to support

them or whether they go the other way, continue with Trumpism, have a candidate that is going to be more on the right of the party and then appeal to those people that have supported Trump over the last four years to stay with the party. And that's really what we're seeing in the GOP at the moment, it's this fight over the soul of the party. You've got the kind of more moderates who are trying to shift them back to a more centrist position, trying to kind of normalise their politics again. And then you've got the kind of Senator Cruz's senator Hawley and even Kevin McCarthy the House minority leader who went to Florida to speak with the former president almost still with those sympathies on the right. And I think McCarthy's support for Marjorie Taylor Greene in recent instances emphasises that that's where the leadership of the party still is. The interesting character here, I think, is Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell, because he's had a little bit of a transition away from being a loyal Trump supporter and to more of a sceptic and more of a centrist. And I think and what he does next and whether he can carry some of the Senate with them as Senate Republicans with them, is going to be quite interesting, especially on the vote to convict on impeachment in the Senate, which is upcoming.

Dr Chris Croly [00:26:18] OK, I mean, there's the final question as we come towards final. So if it happens, a second impeachment is not unprecedented.

Dr Malcolm Harvey [00:26:31] A second impeachment is. Yes. Donald Trump is the first US president to be impeached twice. So he is winning at something. And the impeachment has already happened the House of Representatives, voted to impeach him before he left office. But then they moved the articles of impeachment to the Senate for the trial, which will begin in the second week of February. And it requires a two-thirds majority in the Senate to support it, to vote for conviction. So basically, it requires 17 Republicans to break with the party. All the Democrats will vote for it, but I think it's unlikely that the 17 Republicans will support it to convict. So I think it's unlikely that the president is convicted. And if, however, those 17 Republicans do support it, the Senate would then have to have a second vote to disbar Donald Trump from standing in an election again, and that only requires a majority. So if the president is convicted in the Senate, then I think it's very likely they will call for that further punishment and they will disbar him from standing again for re-election. And I think actually that's almost the teaser for some Republicans, because some of them for a number of different reasons, some of them ideologically don't want Donald Trump anywhere near the party anymore. But others, they don't want him to be able to stand the 2024, but they want to take on the mantle of Donald Trump in 2024. So Senator Ted Cruz, Senator Josh Hawley particular, maybe it's too early for Hawley, but certainly Cruz is thinking this, that if they don't disbar Donald Trump from 2024, then he can stand again and may well do or may well get one of his kids to stand for president in 2024. But if he's out of the way, the road is clear for another Trumpist candidate. So Senator Cruz, he can't vote for impeachment, for conviction and he can't vote for disbarring. But he won't be too displeased if it happens because it opens up an opportunity for him. And these are the kind of Machiavellian moves that are happening even right now in the run up to 2024. I mean, the elections just happened, inauguration just happened. But we've already started the run for president in 2024. And that's just how U.S. politics works on election cycle. You know, one just finishes and the next one begins almost straight away.

Dr Chris Croly [00:29:24] So, Malcolm, thank you for what has been an introduction to the complexities of what's been going on in recent months. And it's a shame to call it quits at half an hour because we could carry on talking for a long time about this. But I think maybe let's revisit this one maybe in a month or two time we are we can maybe pick up another podcast to carry the conversation on. But in the meantime, it's been fascinating. And thank you very much for giving up your time to talk to us today. And I should say as

well, normally in our Cafés, when they happen face-to-face, we encourage question and answer. And just because this is online, that shouldn't be any different. So if people would like to email and question, they can email it to peru@abdn.ac.uk and I will happily forward to questions on to you. But in the meantime, thank you very much.

Dr Malcolm Harvey [00:30:19] Thanks, Chris.

Voiceover [00:30:23] This podcast is brought to you by the University of Aberdeen.