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4 SPEAKERS

Mila Atmos

Secretary Jocelyn Benson

Carol Jenkins

The Democracy Group

START OF TRANSCRIPT

[00:00:00] Mila Atmos

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[00:00:22] Mila Atmos

Welcome to Future Hindsight, a podcast that takes big ideas about civic life and democracy and turns them into action items for you and me. I'm Mila Atmos. 2022 is an election year, and we want to bring you episodes that help you build a robust civic action toolkit. We've already spoken about democracy reform and election reform like ranked choice voting. And this week we're going to turn our attention to election integrity and protecting the freedom to vote. The 2020 election was the most watched, most audited election in history. It was also a secure election. Despite dozens of lawsuits, election audits in multiple states, and in some states, multiple audits, none of these cases found fraud or maladministration on anything like the scale that could have affected the outcome. The takeaway from all the investigations into the 2020 elections is that the system worked and we can trust the outcomes of our elections. And yet, and yet, millions of Americans do not trust the outcome of that election. And that big lie is ripping at the fabric of our democracy. So I want to shine a light on election integrity today. I feel that we should be talking more about the tremendous success of the general election. Americans have never turned out like this before and in the middle of the pandemic. And I want to shine a light on the people responsible for election integrity, Secretaries of State. Today's guest, Jocelyn Benson, Michigan's Secretary of State, has become an important voice in defense of democracy.

[00:02:09] Mila Atmos

Secretary Benson is focused on ensuring elections are secure and accessible and is the author of *State Secretaries of State: Guardians of the Democratic Process*, the first major book on the role of the Secretary of State in enforcing election and campaign finance laws. Secretary Benson, thank you for joining us.

[00:02:30] Secretary Jocelyn Benson

Thank you so much for having me. This is such an important topic and I really appreciate you highlighting it.

[00:02:35] Mila Atmos

Fantastic. Tell us about the role of Secretaries of State, which is previously a somewhat overlooked statewide office.

[00:02:43] Secretary Jocelyn Benson

Yes, every state has, or most every state has a Secretary of State. They are, in many cases, elected positions, sometimes appointed by governors or legislatures, and they are in about 36 states, also responsible for overseeing elections. They serve as the chief election officers in their state. And what that means is that they are on the front line and responsible for ensuring our elections are run in a way that balances the importance of openness and transparency and integrity and security with making sure every citizen has an equal opportunity to vote and have their voice heard. We have broad authority to oversee election administration and are duty bound to ensure elections are carried out in a nonpartisan manner. Usually, we're behind the scenes, making the trains run on time and ensure everything works. But as you mentioned in recent years, really at the behest of political actors, these positions have become more high profile because we have become responsible for, in a time where democracy is under attack, protecting democracy from subversion and ensuring that the right of every American citizen to vote and have their vote fairly counted is enforced and real for all.

[00:04:02] Mila Atmos

That's a big job. So this sounds like maybe a super softball question, but I'm hoping it'll help us understand more about what Secretaries of States do in a sense of like, you know, what is your everyday thing? So what's your favorite thing about your job?

[00:04:16] Secretary Jocelyn Benson

That I get to wake up every day thinking about how to make government work better for every citizen in our state. And that starts with the ballot box. But I also oversee the DMV, the Motor Vehicles Department, which makes me everyone's favorite person, but at the same time is a tremendous opportunity to make government work better for everyday citizens. So what I love is that it's not really a political role and I'm not really a political person, but it's one where from an operational standpoint, from an administrative standpoint, you can be a voice for every citizen and you can be an advocate for every citizen.

[00:04:50] Mila Atmos

One of the things that we've heard on this podcast before is that good governance, you know, bolsters the case for a democracy, because when good governance is in place, then people trust government and they believe that, you know, it's necessary and it works and it enhances our lives.

[00:05:05] Secretary Jocelyn Benson

Exactly. Yeah. And that's what makes this role so exciting that, unlike more political roles that you could be elected to at the state or federal level, this is just about doing good work for citizens. It's not about fighting political battles, although it's certainly become that way when the political battles are indeed about democracy itself. But for the most part, it's a nonpartisan role that is best embodied by nonpartisan officials committed to making government work better for every citizen and advancing democracy.

[00:05:35] Mila Atmos

But in some ways, it is political, right? Because you're an elected official. So how do you think about that contradiction of being an elected official who is supposed to be an impartial overseer of elections?

[00:05:48] Secretary Jocelyn Benson

I wrote a book in 2008 on this very question: what makes an effective Secretary of State? What should voters look for in the majority of states where voters elect these individuals? And I think first and foremost, regardless of what side of the aisle someone is on, you need to have people of integrity in these positions who are willing to stand up to their own political parties or political officials across the spectrum and make sure that elections work well. We are essentially the referees of democracy. And so in that regard, you want to look for people who are willing to be proactive in being an advocate for voters, making democracy work, educating voters about their rights and how to access their rights and access their vote, but also being willing to stand guard over those votes and those voters against political forces who, as we've seen in recent years, are very much mobilized to try to undermine the will of the people and even to the extent of potentially overturning election results, fair, accurate election results, to further their own political will. And what's particularly dangerous in this moment is that we have now, because of the higher profile these roles have and the spotlight that we're under, we see now the role being used as a potential political one. We see individuals seeking these roles now to further political agendas, even being willing to potentially further misinformation from these platforms or use these positions, these very powerful positions, to potentially subvert accurate election results. So in that way, now that the nation is seeing more of a spotlight on this critical role, we are also seeing voters have an important responsibility to fight back against efforts to install partisan election administrators in roles where these are previously and are best occupied by a professional.

[00:07:40] Mila Atmos

Yeah, you're already where I was heading with my next question about the changing position of Secretaries of State and how much more fraught these races have become. So from a personal point of view, you know, when you look at everything that's going on in Arizona and in Colorado, what's your take on that?

[00:07:59] Secretary Jocelyn Benson

Well, in 2020, we certainly saw how there really are a number of states, Arizona being one of them. Nevada, Georgia, as you mentioned earlier, Michigan, Pennsylvania and Wisconsin, being in the spotlight of very critical elections with just a few votes in each state, tipping the scale one way or the other for the outcome of an entire presidential election. And so as a result, there have been, you know, an increased scrutiny on the actions of election officials in those states and to a certain extent, other states as well. And what that has created is really an opportunity for voters to demand people of integrity run our elections. And people are committed to protecting the voice of every voter being similarly put and prioritize in places of election administration as opposed to partisan individuals who are very openly advocating against democracy. And so it all really roots down to, in terms of what we make of it, is the important role that citizens have in defending democracy. We as Secretaries of State or as election administrators, we can do that as well. But it really in history teaches us that it's the voters, it's our citizens' responsibility to also protect and defend democracy by participating in it, engaging it, rejecting those who would seek to manipulate elections to further their partisan goals, but ensure that our republic stands as one where the will of the people is respected above all else. And it's really only going to be when voters demand that their elected officials tell the truth and follow those principles, that we can guarantee that we'll see that from our government.

[00:09:39] Mila Atmos

That puts a lot of faith in voters. And I agree that the voters definitely have the power, although I think a lot of people misconceive how powerful they actually are. But I wanted to talk a little bit more about the tone of some of these campaigns. It's truly alarming. I'm thinking about Tina Peters, a proponent of the big lie who's running for Secretary of State in Colorado. And she was in an election conspiracy event supported by, of course, of all people, the MyPillow CEO, where the featured speakers called for the hanging of the current Colorado Secretary of State, Jena Griswold. I mean, that has to have a chilling effect on who can or will run for these positions. So do you see signs of people being bullied out of office, basically?

[00:10:25] Secretary Jocelyn Benson

Well, I've actually seen election administrators being emboldened by these threats. Now, you have Secretaries of State in a number of states who are standing guard over our democracy and partisan officials or partisan individuals in Michigan, in Arizona, in Georgia, in Nevada and many other states running and seeking these positions, almost forming a coalition, seeking these positions to further a partisan agenda, and using threats of violence and other means to advance their cause and strike fear and attempt to intimidate election administrators out of doing their jobs. But we're not going to be intimidated. I mean, when people showed up outside my home in December of 2020 demanding that I come outside and face them. My reaction was certainly trying to keep my family safe, but also recognizing that my job is to defend and protect the will of the voters. And when people protest or threaten us as election administrators with are really doing is threatening voters and the will of the voters and trying to force us to undermine or intervene with that constitutionally protected foundation of our country. This idea that the people choose their elected officials and can hold them accountable. The important thing is that every voter know that they have an opportunity right now to reject those who are spreading conspiracy theories and lies that manifest themselves in these nefarious threats that we in Michigan, the governor, the attorney general and I have been enduring for the better part of two years now and instead demand that all leaders show respect, not just for their colleagues, but for the system itself and the system of democracy. That only works when we have people of integrity on both sides of the aisle committed to ensuring that elections run smoothly, they're secure and accessible, and that citizens can, as we can right now, trust the results of the election.

[00:12:35] Mila Atmos

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[00:14:19] Mila Atmos

I also want you to know about another insightful podcast digging into political and cultural polarization, and that's the Purple Principle. They've just launched a special mini series about identity, politics, and hyper-partisanship in Texas, with episodes releasing every Tuesday in March. Check out the Texas series to hear full interviews with former congressmen Will B Hurd, Former San Antonio Mayor and Cabinet Secretary Henry Cisneros, Texas Monthly Editor in Chief. Dan Goodgame, and UT San Antonio Latino Politics expert Sharon Navarro, among others. Lots of big things from the nation-sized Lone Star State on the Purple Principle right now. Subscribe to the podcast and visit PurplePrincipal.com for more. Now let's return to our conversation with Jocelyn Benson, Michigan's Secretary of State.

[00:15:16] Mila Atmos

So talking about making sure that the election results are trustworthy. What is the most important thing that your office did in 2020 to make sure that the election was secure, despite the fact that, of course, that some people don't believe it?

[00:15:33] Secretary Jocelyn Benson

Well, we started on day one of my administration convening the election security experts from around the country and creating an advisory council, election security advisory council that included officials from both sides of the aisle and at the state and federal level, as well as local clerks who have expertise in protecting the security of our elections, to implement a number of things such as legitimate post-election audits, such as increased security protections for the infrastructure and our technology systems as well, and also increasing transparency of our operations so that citizens have access to information about just how much we're doing to protect the security of their vote and the security of the process. Working to ensure our clerks have all the resources they need in partnership with the federal government to protect every aspect, every moment of the system. It's important to also recognize that in addition to bringing these experts and really implementing a lot of their suggestions and recommendations to the way we operate in Michigan, we're also implementing many new procedures that voters themselves enacted in 2018 so that they could, for example, have a right to vote absentee in Michigan, which is in our state constitution, a right to be automatically registered to vote when they get a driver's license or a state ID.

[00:16:51] Secretary Jocelyn Benson

So we also had to make real those rights and implement these significant reforms in time for the 2020 election cycle, which we did even in the midst of a pandemic, because we took best practices from other states and we relied on experts and data to drive our decision making process as opposed to politics and partisanship. And that enabled us to ultimately have the most high turnout, secure elections in Michigan's history, where there was no major security attempt, even attempted breach. But at the same time, more citizens voted than ever before, and we were able to securely tabulate every valid vote more efficiently and more quickly than it had ever before and had even been anticipated. So all of that led to much success. And one of the real tragedies of what's unfolded since then is that instead of telling that success story, instead of talking about how to replicate that success and support the thousands of clerks and the hundreds of clerks who made that a success, we are fighting lies and misinformation furthered by a politician and his most ardent supporters that are really the exact opposite of the truth, which was, again, that the 2020 elections in Michigan and elsewhere were among the most secure and accessible in history.

[00:18:06] Mila Atmos

Right. It's impressive everything that you've pulled off. And also kudos to the voters in Michigan to demand election reforms to make the vote more accessible. And yet, like you said, there was still doubt cast upon the result and you had to go through over 250 audits, which, of course, all confirmed the accuracy and the integrity of the election results. And you've also fielded some pretty crazy lawsuits, including one that mixed up results in Michigan and Minnesota. So what was that like and what's your take? What's your takeaway for next time? Because, you know, this is another election year.

[00:18:37] Secretary Jocelyn Benson

Yeah. I mean, I think a couple of things. One, we have seen, as you mentioned, a number of lawsuits, what I call basically PR campaigns masquerading as lawsuits, lawsuits filed that have no merit to them and that are quite frivolous and typically thrown out, if not rejected outright, quickly, but instead used to grab headlines and further messaging that suggests something untoward has happened when really that's not the case. It's been challenging but now has become part of the job to fight back against that misinformation and really this politically driven effort to confuse voters about the integrity of the elections. And my work continues to be to simply make sure that our elections remain secure and accessible. We've already succeeded in doing that. We want to continue doing that and then protect those elections, protect our clerks, protect the results of our elections, protect democracy against all of these ongoing efforts to try to undermine it. And that really is the path forward, recognizing that everything that we worked through and overcame in 2020 to ensure democracy would prevail. The biggest mistake we could make is assuming that we won't have to go through a battle like that again.

[00:19:54] Secretary Jocelyn Benson

Indeed, every indication is that in 2024, everything we fought through to protect the results of the election and to implement and manage good elections will be again overly scrutinized and in the spotlight and under a great deal of assault to try to make it harder for democracy to work and be attainable to all. So it's all the more reason why this year's elections are critical, because voters will choose in this fall who will be on the field protecting democracy in 2024, when everything we survived in 2020 in terms of the efforts to subvert our legitimate election will likely be back, and they will likely return in a more sophisticated, strategic and more well-funded, coordinated way. Unless there's real accountability for everything that occurred in 2020, we can only imagine and anticipate that all of those efforts will escalate. And that's why those of us who stood guard successfully in 2020, myself, Katie Hobbs in Arizona, Brad Raffensperger in Georgia, have a responsibility to hopefully be able to continue to do so again in 2024 when the anti-democracy forces return in force.

[00:21:07] Mila Atmos

So what's your biggest worry ahead of the midterms this year and ahead of 2024?

[00:21:12] Secretary Jocelyn Benson

That the vast majority of citizens in our country, on both sides of the aisle, will not see that protecting democracy is the most important issue of our time. That through complacency and disengagement, we allow those very well organized, well-funded, and well-coordinated forces seeking to install bad actors in positions of authority over elections. Voters, by being complacent, could allow that to happen. And if that does happen, then we can imagine a scenario where democracy withers on the vine in the future because you won't have people in places of authority protecting it. Now, as long as I have breath in my body, whatever position I have, I'm going to continue to protect and defend our democracy and every citizen's right to vote. But really what this fall is, is an opportunity for us to overcome the worst-case scenario possibility that I just mentioned, and instead become a reckoning for those who have tried to overturn democracy. Voters have the chance this fall to reject every conspiracy theorist, every proponent of the big lie, every person who's made threats against election officials and now wants to be one by voting in support of those of us who have stood on the front lines and defended democracy and rejecting those who've tried to intimidate us out from doing our job. Voters can take a clear stand that will be possibly the strongest position or strongest advancement we can make in protecting democracy for the long run by turning out in record numbers, making democracy the most important issue of our time, and voting in furtherance of protecting every citizen's right to vote.

[00:22:52] Mila Atmos

Talking about the big lie, the danger of it, of course, is really to really muddy the waters and erode trust in the electoral process and in democracy itself, like you said. But the bigness of the big lie can make it really hard, right, to rebut effectively, and it's accompanied by threats and harassment. And it's not just Democratic Secretaries of State who are being targeted. So how are Secretaries of State working together to fight the misinformation and to drive reform?

[00:23:21] Secretary Jocelyn Benson

Well, a number of ways. I think, first, we've always been collaborative and professionals and colleagues. I think we have to remember in all of this the law and the truth. And the vast majority of American people are squarely on the side of democracy. And so working as educators of citizens to empower them to know how to fight back against misinformation and to find trusted sources of information is a key part of what Secretaries of State all around the country are working to do.

[00:23:49] Mila Atmos

This is a slight side question. If you could wave a magic wand for electoral reform, it's a very specific wand. What would you wish for?

[00:24:00] Secretary Jocelyn Benson

I would wish for every voter to recognize that democracy and saving democracy is the most important issue of our time and to really embrace the opportunity and the choice they'll have this fall to reject those conspiracy theorists and individuals and leaders, politicians who are using lies to overturn democracy and undermine citizens faith in it, and instead support those of us on both sides of the aisle who are fighting every day to make democracy real for every citizen and protect it for generations to come.

[00:24:29] Mila Atmos

I want to circle back to something you said here about protecting against potential election subversion in the states. What do you mean by that? And what could protection look like in real, concrete terms?

[00:24:43] Secretary Jocelyn Benson

A number of things. First, we have the Electoral Count Act in Congress that Congress can work to strengthen, to ensure efforts that we're seeing that manifest themselves in the tragedy at our US Capitol on January 6th, that there is both accountability for what happened and also changes to the Electoral Count Act to make clear that legislators and members of Congress don't really have authority to overturn a legitimate, accurate election without any type of evidence of wrongdoing. And then I think the work also starts even before that, making sure officials have a number of protections in place in the event of efforts in the states to block certification of legitimate election results. Every state's law is a little bit different, and every position has different authority in each state. The bottom line is democracy prevailed in 2020 because good people in positions of authority, whether they be Secretaries of State, county canvassers, members of Congress, the vice president did the right thing and follow the law and protected the will of the people. And we ultimately need to make sure those people of integrity are in place. Again, that's the best protection against election subversion. How do we do that? Well, by voters making protecting democracy the most important issue of this 2022 election cycle, electing individuals and putting people in positions of authority who will be there in 2024 to protect their voice and their vote.

[00:26:07] Mila Atmos

I think as a concept that's totally logical. But, you know, as we've seen, there are so many people who actually either don't turn out or they believe the big lie and then will vote the other way. So if you could speak one on one to a voter, what would you say to persuade this person? Listen, here's really what's at stake and, you know, come out and vote for this kind of person. And how can you identify the person with integrity? Because sometimes I think we don't know who they really are.

[00:26:34] Secretary Jocelyn Benson

Well, I disagree because I think what we've seen in Michigan actually, one, voters, when they understand and know what's at stake, they have been energized, as they were in 2018 and in 2020 to turn out in record numbers and vote and vote in support of individuals who are very clearly on the side of democracy. And in terms of evaluating a candidate and whether they're telling truth versus lies, I think there's a couple of things. One, look at the data. I think we all can be critical thinkers and looking at data and information as opposed to responding to hyperbole and tweets. We've made the data, for example, about the 2020 election very accessible through our audit report, which is available on our website, as well as a fact check portion of our website that encourages and engages citizens in identifying trusted sources of information and looking critically into the messages they're hearing from elected officials. So in response to your question of "what do you say to a citizen who is seeking out trusted sources of information, who is trying to figure out whether their vote or their voice matters in a time like this?" What history teaches us is undoubtedly the only thing that saves democracy in a time like this is by citizens, good citizens, standing up and demanding that their democracy and our government work for them. Indeed, the only thing that can stop a bad politician with a vote is a good citizen with a vote. And that's the only thing that has ever worked more than anything else in our country's history, in our democracy. And then in addition to that, making sure you're an informed, not just engaged, but an informed voter by seeking out those trusted sources of information, seeking out your own sources of data and multiple sources of data to identify a particular issue or evaluate a particular individual and then pay attention to people's actions. What's their track record? What have they done in the past when they weren't on the ballot and using that to also evaluate what we can expect and whether they can be trusted in important positions of authority moving forward.

[00:28:38] Mila Atmos

You've given us a lot of good advice here on how we could advance democracy in the United States and in our states individually and making sure we vote in these state elections for the people with integrity. Sort of like philosophically, what are two things everyday people could be doing to advance democracy and secure elections wherever they may live?

[00:28:58] Secretary Jocelyn Benson

Well, there's a couple of things. I think, one, they could serve as an election worker. And one of the most important ways you can be active in protecting our democracy is to be a part of administering it. We have thousands of individuals serving as an election worker in Michigan, and there are plenty of ways to find out how to be a poll worker, how to be an election worker. But that's certainly one of the most important things you can do to engage in being a part of protecting democracy. Or you can also arm yourself with facts about elections and then use those facts to counter the lies and misinformation. And then also, of course, vote and advocate to ensure your vote is counted. Attend public hearings and meetings, whether they be school board meetings or elsewhere. And when you see people spreading misinformation, hold them accountable for what they say and speak back with the truth. And all of those things, as participants in our democracy, are ways in which we can counter those who are essentially banking on people being disengaged and misinformed in order to further their political agenda. If we show up by being engaged and informed and urgently so on both fronts, we can effectively counter once and for all those efforts to really try to take away people's voices and impose the will of a few over the many, and instead ensure that the many, many of us who do stand for truth, for democracy, for equal access to our government, for a government that works well for everyone, we can rule the day, but only if we stay engaged and informed.

[00:30:29] Mila Atmos

All good advice. We definitely, here at Future Hindsight, a civic engagement podcast, we believe that we all need to be engaged. So in closing, looking into the future, what makes you hopeful?

[00:30:41] Secretary Jocelyn Benson

What makes me hopeful is that the truth is on our side; that the law and the Constitution are on the side of democracy; that history is on the side of democracy, that indeed the moral arc of the universe is long, but it bends toward justice. We've seen that time and time and again, and that the vast majority of American people are on the side of truth and the law and democracy. If we can harness all of those things, as we did successfully in 2020, to overcome an unprecedented attack on democracy successfully. If we can harness all those things again, we will continue to prevail. Democracy will continue to prevail. But we must all work together, build a national, non-partisan coalition in this country with people in every industry and every walk of life standing up to say, Even if I'm not a political person, I'm going to stand up for our democracy now. For our future, for our children's future. Then we can actually overcome any merge out of this moment with a more robust democracy than ever before. That, to me is the path forward, and I have a great deal of hope that we'll get there.

[00:31:50] Mila Atmos

Is there anything else you'd like to share here that you haven't had an opportunity to say?

[00:31:56] Secretary Jocelyn Benson

Well, I just can't say enough that it's not only that time and time again throughout history that it's been when people demand a thriving democracy, that democracy prevails. But also the only thing throughout history that has protected democracy and ensured it prevailed, both in our country and elsewhere, is when people demand that it be so. And so we cannot shirk that responsibility. We can meet this challenging moment. We can preserve and protect our democracy. We can overcome the lies and the threats with truth and with faith and who we are as a people. But we all have to choose in this moment: are we going to be part of that movement? Are we going to be part of protecting our country, our democracy, the foundation of everything that we believe in? Or are we going to disengage? If we disengage, I guarantee you the other side, those anti democracy forces, will win. But if we engage and mobilize and become informed and allow truth in the law and history to guide us, then we can prevail and again emerge stronger than ever. But it's up to us all to make that choice right now. And if we all choose to move forward together, good things can come for our country and for all of us.

[00:33:06] Mila Atmos

Thank you very much for joining us on Future Hindsight. Our guest was Secretary Benson of the State of Michigan.

[00:33:19] Mila Atmos

Next time on Future Hindsight: Carol Jenkins, president and CEO of the ERA Coalition and the Fund for Women's Equality, sister organizations dedicated to the adoption of the Equal Rights Amendment.

[00:33:32] Carol Jenkins

You know, we've been looking for the source of sexism and racism that has bedeviled us the entire life of our country. The source of that is the Constitution. And until it is fixed and until it is recognized that we are all equal and all citizens of this country, and not just citizens, people living in this country are affected by the Equal Rights Amendment and that we're all equal under that law.

[00:34:00] Mila Atmos

In our last episode of Women's History Month, the Constitution's missing piece. That's next time on Future Hindsight.

[00:34:09] Mila Atmos

This episode was produced by Zack Travis and Sara Burningham. Until next time, stay engaged.

[00:34:24] The Democracy Group

This podcast is part of the Democracy Group.

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