

Getting Curious with Jonathan Van Ness & Lala Wu and Gaby Goldstein

JVN [00:00:00] Welcome to Getting Curious. I'm Jonathan Van Ness and every week I sit down for a 40 minute conversation with a brilliant expert to learn all about something that makes me curious. On today's episode, we're joined by Lala Wu and Gaby Goldstein, who are the co-founders of Sister District, where I ask them: How can we mobilize for midterms? Welcome to Getting Curious, this is Jonathan Van Ness. I'm so excited to welcome back Sister District. We have Gaby Goldstein returning, but we also have a new person here, Lala Wu. You are both co-founders of Sister District, which we are just such big fans of here on Getting Curious. So welcome and thanks for coming today.

GABY GOLDSTEIN [00:00:37] Thank you.

LALA WU [00:00:38] Thanks.

JVN [00:00:40] So, I'm just going to start this with, like, a little, like, recap. If we were more, like, Serial or, like, other podcasts, this would be the part where, like, the news clips come in from, like, the day after the election. And it was like, "We don't know who's going to win." And then, like, two weeks later, "Biden's declared the winner." But then it's, like, "We don't know about the Senate." It has just been such a, like, this election more than any other election that I can, I think probably ever in modern history was the most, like, protracted, anxiety-ridden, like, "Are we going to make it?" Like, you know, you thought that November 3rd was the big moment, but who knew that it was actually going to be, like, three more months of just pure turmoil and, like, questioning. Like, it just. Wow.

And so, we've never really had an election cycle like that. And unlike 2018, we did get the Senate. We did, we won the presidential election, which obviously we didn't have in 2018. But what we didn't have was this watershed success in so many state houses and state races like we did in 2018. So I'm worried. And then really the guiding question is, will this off-year, state-level, and local elections determine our country's future? And how are we going to go back to flipping state houses next year? So, with that being said, welcome back, Gaby. Welcome, Lala. How are you both?

LALA WU [00:02:04] So good. So, so excited to be here. Thanks, Jonathan.

GABY GOLDSTEIN [00:02:09] It's great, it's great to be back.

JVN [00:02:11] So what, let's start, let's start with Lala. I know that we can always be looking in the rearview mirror, but in order for us to make better decisions going forward,

where do you think-, where did we go wrong? What can we do better? How can we, like, what happened?

LALA WU [00:02:28] Yeah, absolutely. Well, 2020 was a really unusual year for so, so many reasons. Of course, every single day of the Trump presidency was a new, horrible adventure and nightmare. But we also had a global pandemic that really upturned the normal course of elections and, and it made it such that the playbooks were just thrown out the door. And so one thing to think about is that, you know, this made it really hard for people to get to the polls. It made it really hard for the candidates and for volunteers and for staff members to knock on doors and talk to voters and get out the vote. It just created a tremendous amount of confusion as well with all of the changing voting rights laws and access to how people were going to get to the polls. So there was a lot going on with the pandemic itself.

And then also thinking about gerrymandering. You know, gerrymandering is the process where, it's the manipulation of the process of redrawing district lines, where Republicans, usually, Democrats do it sometimes, too. But usually Republicans manipulate the district lines to favor their own political party. And it makes it so that there's a structural disadvantage against, against the Democrats. And so these are just a few of the issues. There's many, many, many things that went into 2020. But Democrats and progressives should be so proud of the incredible work that they did do and everything that we were able to accomplish. Of course, like you said, Biden and Harris are now in the White House. And it's already, you know, from the first hundred plus days, we've seen a lot of incredible progress. But we, of course, have more work to do.

I think it is important to remember, though, that we have and are in a much better position than we were 10 years ago, when we weren't paying as much attention, when the huge wave of Republican wins at the state houses just swept across the country and Democrats were kind of caught off guard. This time we were prepared. We held back the tide and we are in a better position. For example, there's five states that in 2011, the last time we did redistricting, were under complete Republican control. That is Republican trifectas. Trifecta is when the same party holds the governorship, as well as both state houses. And now those states all have more Democratic control.

They either, for example, in Michigan, the voters passed an independent redistricting commission. In Kentucky, there is now a Democratic governor. In Maine, which is now a Democratic trifecta. Those are just a few examples, but we are in a better position than we were before. And we should take that position and leverage it for everything we've got into this redistricting and then continue to build new lessons learned and figure out what we can do better to continue to win at the state level.

JVN [00:05:56] Well, I definitely think that I saw that firsthand in Texas with the amount of Republican outreach that was like, "What pandemic?!" and just having rallies, having meetings, like, going into these, like, gigantic community spaces and really having that sort of traditional outreach. And I do think that between the fear-based messaging and how on the ground and in people's literal homes in the midst of a respiratory pandemic, I do think that that actually, like, did create considerable amounts of, of the positive outcome that Republicans had?

So, Gaby, I want to ask you a question. So when you came last, you were so illuminating to me, because I had no idea that we had this moment in 2010. Can you just refresh our listeners a little bit on what happened in the midterms of 2010?

GABY GOLDSTEIN [00:06:41] Yeah, yeah. Well, it's, it's, it's so awesome to be back. I was just thinking this morning, the last time that I was on the show, it was in the "before times," before the pandemic, before the insurrection, before Biden-Harris. It is all in a distant, distant memory. And I actually moved to D.C. right before the pandemic, which I do not recommend to, to your listeners, moving to a new city before, right before a pandemic. But, yeah, I mean, look, 2010 was an amazing year for Republicans at the state level. You know, Obama was president. He was really popular. And Republicans knew that they were heading into a midterm in 2010 where they could really cause some damage because Democrats were a little bit asleep at the wheel. Okay, a lot asleep at the wheel.

And so they hatched this scheme called Project Redmap. And it's just as kind of, you know, backroomy and smoky cigars as you as it sounds. And the idea was, "OK, no one's watching. Let's take over state houses. And hey, if we do it, this year, we'll be able to redistrict, control the new lines for the entire next decade." And it worked like a charm. They poured tons of money into state leg races all across the country for Republicans. And PS, it wasn't really all that much money compared to what we spend on federal elections. Right. But they poured in enough money and Democrats were sort of in enough of an "asleep at the wheel" moment. And the infrastructure on the left was weak enough that they were able to pull it off.

And they flipped dozens and dozens of state houses that night in 2010. And what it meant was when redistricting came around the next year in 2011, Republicans were able to draw maps all over the country that favored themselves, not just at the state leg level, but those are congressional maps, too, because in most states, it's the state leg that draws both the congressional and the state leg maps.

So, so that worked like a charm in 2010. And the good news for us as progressives is we did learn some lessons from that. It was tough and it sucked and it continues. We continue to feel the reverberations of that. But we did get our, get our act together in a number of respects that I think Lala alluded to, built up some really nice infrastructure on the progressive side so that going into this round of redistricting, even though we did not, we fell, we fell short of the goal post in November, and super happy to chat about other factors that may have gone into that. We fell short, but even so, we have some nice new tools in our toolbox.

We are prepared to litigate, which is something that we were not really ready to do last time around. We have a much more robust infrastructure on the ground with organizations doing accountability work and making sure that the mapmaking will be in the public and fair. And we also have organizations, including ours, that are working with legislative state legislators who want to make sure that the maps are fair so that they have the resources that they need to do a good job.

JVN [00:10:03] So I think another thing that I just want to echo back to our listeners is that because these hurdles have been placed in front of us in order for us to make our way over. We have to be even smarter. We have to work even harder. It means that our messaging has to be even better because we've had all of these things put in place systemically to keep us from voting. And we're seeing a lot of these state legislatures are passing sweeping voting bills that are really I mean, Georgia just passed one. Texas is trying to do similar things.

But I was, I was, I don't know if it's surprised, disappointed, really nervous for our future, because we, because I knew what happened in 2010 and heading into a midterm after a presidential election is historically, like, a hard time for the incumbent party. And this is a time when we really don't want to fuck up. We cannot fuck up right now. And I think this is part of why I think you guys are brilliant, because you guys have done things that are working, that are creating connections, that are helping fundamentally with messaging.

GABY GOLDSTEIN [00:11:09] Yeah, I mean the messaging piece, I'm with you. I want to talk about it. Let's talk about it. It's important, and it's, sometimes it's the elephant in the room or something. Right? Like people don't know how to talk about it. One thing I would say is I'd love to plug someone who is an absolute stone-cold genius on progressive messaging, who is Anat Shenker-Osorio, and people should look her up and learn about her and sign up for her newsletter because she's brilliant. And she breaks, she is really at the forefront, I think, of understanding this issue that you're talking about, which is that, you know, national, national conversations are sometimes different from local conversations and the national conversation is sometimes muddled. And it's sometimes, you know, on

the progressive side, we're sometimes sending a lot of messages where it seems like the Republicans, the conservatives are sending one, a few clear messages.

I will say that from talking to a lot of our candidates who didn't make it over the finish line last year, and we're working with a number of them this year in a new program called Future Winners, which is a very cool partnership between us and Emily's List and Run For Something, but doing a lot of debriefs with those folks. And they felt that their races had become, that the Republicans had forced their races to become more nationalized than our candidates really wanted. Whereas our candidates and local folks, they want to feel they typically are focused on things like education. Right. Access to health care, fixing the road by the supermarket, that is, you know, where people are getting their car stuck.

JVN [00:12:39] Lala, thoughts?

LALA WU [00:12:40] Yeah, I just want to underline what Gaby said, this distinction that she drew between the national conversation and what's happening at the state level, I think that the beauty of state and local politics is that you can really get into the weeds about what people care about: the little creek restoration, the, you know, the, the, the, like, the quality of the roads, the traffic that's happening. There's all of these things that are highly local issues that people run on and that I think they can be really, really successful on. And what's challenging is in this very connected world, everything becomes nationalized really quickly. And I think that what we are trying to do is, you know, try to help people identify what are the issues that really matter most to your constituents.

I think one person who does this beautifully well is Danica Roem, she, in Virginia, just crushes it. She is always talking about traffic or, you know, the cost of school lunches or these very, very, very specific issues that are frankly, like, a little bit boring in the sense that they're not going to catch national headlines. But they are, they are going to be the kinds of issues that the voters care about. And she's been extremely successful in getting that kind of legislation passed, in making the conversation about these state and local issues. And I think that that's a great model for us to think about as we think about how can we win more of these state and local races going forward.

JVN [00:14:28] Well, one thing I've thought about so much in this year has been that so many campaigns for next year are really started this year. So to back up, what do state legislatures do, who makes up this legislative body? And it is true that the state legislature, well, all state houses are every two years. Right? And then their Senate. No. Oh, shit, Gaby. Oh, shit. That headshake was a major headshake. So, Gaby, what do state legislators do!

GABY GOLDSTEIN [00:15:00] Jonathan, state legislatures are so important! I want to tell you all about them! I grew up in California and I don't really even remember learning about my state legislature in school. I think there's, like, a big civics gap when it comes to understanding our state and local governments. But yes, every state has a state legislature. All of them, except for one, have two chambers, just like our federal legislature. A senate and a house.

JVN [00:15:28] Virginia is the one that's unicameral?! [CROSSTALK] No? Who is it?

GABY GOLDSTEIN [00:15:34] I think it's Nebraska! [CROSSTALK] And so, so they hold terms, a lot of them are two-year terms. Some of them are four-year terms. A lot, many senates hold four-year terms and state houses hold two. Some of them are staggered; some of them, all of the seats are up in the same year. Others just some of them. So there's a real mix there. Some are full time, like, where it's your job all year long. Some are part-time, which is a huge problem.

JVN [00:16:07] In Texas! [CROSSTALK] Six months for their two-year term! And it's not paid. So it's, like, you're kind of relying on corporate donors to float your campaign, like, it's-, Wendy Davis was a guest of ours and she told us a lot about it.

GABY GOLDSTEIN [00:16:23] So imagine if you're a working mom, imagine if you're not rich, imagine if you have a job that won't let you just take six weeks off at a time, or six months. Those non-full time legislatures are a huge barrier to getting folks to be able to, to, to run, right, and to serve their legislature. So that's how we end up with these legislatures full of, like, old, rich, white men. Right. Because that's who can afford, frankly, to run and hold this, like, often volunteer, part-time position that controls, oh, PS: it just controls, like, our ability to have an abortion or vote.

JVN [00:17:03] Or, or, like, if the local police get, like, grenade launchers and, like, night vision goggles and, like, crazy, heat-seeking fuckin', like, you know, predatory, like, listening twenty-seven cars over with no search warrant stuff. Anyway... Yeah, so, so that's, what else. So state legislatures control reproductive rights, funding for Planned Parenthood, the redistricting for federal elections and most likely state elections.

GABY GOLDSTEIN [00:17:35] In most states, not in all states, in most states.

JVN [00:17:37] What else do they do?

LALA WU [00:17:39] Every issue under the sun that you can think of, I mean, states have a really important role to play in climate change, both mitigation and adaptation. When it

comes to LGBTQ rights. This year, the Human Rights Campaign said that 2021 has, so far, been the worst year in recent history for anti-LGBTQ legislation, with over 250 bills introduced. A hundred and twenty of these are anti-trans and you know, 66 of them specifically try to ban transgender girls from participating in girls' sports. I mean, it's totally shameful. And I think one thing to really highlight here is that state legislatures have tremendous power and so they can do so much good and they can also do so much harm.

And what we are seeing right now is that Republicans are launching these coordinated attacks, whether it's on voting rights or on LGBTQ rights, et cetera, et cetera. I mean, even just take a look at the Supreme Court recently taking up the Mississippi case that they could use to overturn *Roe v. Wade*. This is just one case out of many, one situation where the states were throwing everything at the wall, trying to violate the Constitution to get the Supreme Court to take up this case. So there's so much power in the state legislatures.

JVN [00:19:11] So how does the turnout differ, typically, like, on a presidential year to, like, a midterm or even, like, an off-year election?

GABY GOLDSTEIN [00:19:19] Yeah, so, I mean, just to go back, like, it's a really good segue way to talk about Virginia, to talk about policy that state leg can do, because Virginia is a shining example of how state leg can be a force for good in this world. It is not all bad news. There's a lot of good news, and a lot of it is coming from Virginia in just the last couple of years because that's when they gained that beautiful blue trifecta that we have to defend this year.

JVN [00:19:44] Right.

GABY GOLDSTEIN [00:19:45] And so, I mean, Virginia, when, when Virginia passed the Virginia Values Act, it became the first state in the South to enact comprehensive protections for the LGBTQ community. And that's just one of, like, 10 new bills that puts Virginia as the first in the South on a variety of issues. So it's a really good opportunity to talk about why Virginia is so important. There are no off-year elections. There are *odd-year* elections. And so this year is an odd-year election, but it's not an off-year, because there's elections every year. So super important. Only a small handful of states hold state elections in odd years. This year the marquee elections are in Virginia where all one hundred of the lower chamber, the House, is up for election.

JVN [00:20:33] How scared are we to defend this one? Are we nervous? It this, what do the polls say? Are we scared? Is it going to be ok, is it not OK? What's going on?

GABY GOLDSTEIN [00:20:41] So you're right, the turnout tends to be lower in these odd year elections. And that's on purpose, right? I mean, it's not a-, it's not an accident that these southern states like, like, Virginia and Mississippi and Louisiana have these odd year elections where participation is lower because guess what? That means that, you know, fewer people vote. You can get your people out. And this is a way that Republicans have been able to control the process. So it's lower.

But I think we expect a lot of enthusiasm for these Virginia races on both sides of the aisle. Right. And that's, you know, going back to something you said earlier, Jonathan, about, like, what happened in 2020 and what can we learn? I think one thing we, we have to learn real fast is that early voting and expanded voting does not just benefit Democrats. Everybody voted early. Everybody likes to vote early. And so, you know, there's, there was huge voter enthusiasm, last year was sky high on both sides. And I think we're going to see that in Virginia this year.

JVN [00:21:43] Is Virginia's in November?

GABY GOLDSTEIN [00:21:45] Yeah, it is in November. And it's a bellwether for the country. It's always, these odd-year elections are always considered a bellwether for next year. So whether it's, you know, the year before a presidential or the year before a midterm, what happens in Virginia is a sign of what's to come for the country next year. So it's super, duper critical that we-, that progressives show up and hold on to this trifecta, to set the tone, right. Like, it's not game over, mission accomplished just because Trump is out of office. This is, like, a constant forever battle that we're in to, like, build progressive power. And we got to do it this year in Virginia so that we show, like, you were saying, yes, midterms are often pretty tough for the presidential party. But we can make a real case when we show up this year and hold onto these Virginia seats, that "next year is going to be OK, because look at Virginia, look at how well Democrats did in Virginia this year." That's part of the narrative that we want to build.

JVN [00:22:48] And didn't Virginia in 2017, didn't they lose from, like, a, like, a hat, a straw hat thing, like, and then we, like, lost by one. But then we came back and won in 2019.

LALA WU [00:23:01] Yeah, I mean, we literally fell one vote short of ending Republican dominance in the House of Delegates.

JVN [00:23:10] And then how many did we win by, in 2019? How big is our buffer in the House of Delegates in Virginia, now?

GABY GOLDSTEIN [00:23:17] It's not big, it's just a handful of seats. I think it's five.

JVN [00:23:21] Fuck, shit! It's fine. That's way more than negative one. That's way more than negative one.

LALA WU [00:23:28] We have to continue to pay attention to Virginia and to make sure that we maintain this trifecta, because the thing with elections that Gaby alluded to earlier is that you can win them, but then they happen again next year, and then you could lose them the next year. And also elections have consequences. And if we were to lose this amazing Democratic trifecta we have in Virginia, then the Republicans could come and try to undo so much of the incredible legislation that the people of Virginia want, that the Democrats in Virginia have managed to pass, from police reform to, you know, the voting rights passages, the incredible expansion of Medicaid to over 400,000 people.

There's so much that has been happening in Virginia that we need to keep in place. And so the stakes are incredibly high. We have to go back and defend the trifecta as well as continue to build on it. So that's what we're really focused on in Virginia this year. And as we look to 2022, we've already got our map of which states we've got our eyes on for the midterms. But we can talk about this a little bit as well. But we are going to have to, really, we're watching redistricting very, very closely because at Sister District we look for these close competitive races. And of course, we talk to the candidates. We talk to people on the ground. We really try to get a holistic sense of which districts have the best opportunities. But one critical piece of information is the, you know, the numbers of these districts. And we are going to have to see what the districts look like after redistricting.

JVN [00:25:09] And when, and Gaby, when will the results of redistricting be, like, announced? Does it all come out at once? I mean, I think some of the numbers I think New York was contesting the loss of the one because it was like 80-something votes or, like, 80-something, like, census counts that made them not get that one seat. So where are we at on that yet?

GABY GOLDSTEIN [00:25:28] So, quick primer just for folks who haven't been following along, every 10 years, on the tens, the federal government goes out and figures out in a census, right, takes, takes the census, figures out: How many people live in this country? Where do they live? So we've got and that data drives a few things. It drives how much money states get for that from the federal government for tons and tons of programs. And then it also drives redistricting. So we've got the number of congressional districts that we've got, like, that set, right: 435.

But they can move around and they do move around based on where people live. And so, for instance, based on the census data this year, just as you mentioned, some states are

losing seats, some states are gaining a seat. So it's that process of, at the congressional level it's called apportionment or reapportionment, figuring out where those 435 seats are. But this process and the data from the census also affects redistricting for four state legislative districts, which also move around based on population shifts. And so in most states, as we, as we've talked about, in most states, it's the state leg that draws both congressional and state legislative districts.

So this process of redistricting is really a big deal. OK, so typically the census gets that data to states by now, like, this should have already happened and states would be hard at work or already finished drawing their new maps. OK, that didn't happen this year because there were delays. And so the apportionment data has been delivered. That's what you were talking about, Jonathan, right, where New York is losing a seat. That's the reapportionment: "Where are all the congressional districts." But the granular data that's needed to make the new maps of where those districts where the lines are, that hasn't been delivered yet.

And what that means is for Virginia, they should have been running on these new maps. They didn't draw them yet, they don't got the data. So we're running on old maps in Virginia this year, which means we may run again in Virginia on new maps next year and then the year after. It's, it's a little bit of a mess. But what that also means is that the timeline for map-making is going to be really compressed, right, because states usually have, like, a long period of time to, like, fiddle with the maps and hopefully do a bunch of public, get a bunch of public input and a lot of expert advice and all this kind of stuff. It's all going to be, like, smashed together in a really short timeline because that data is coming out in September and, and then they're going to have to go super fast on these new maps.

So that has some real, that, that can be scary in Republican-controlled states that are going to try to do it in the dark as much as possible and as quick as possible, without the kind of fairness and transparency that we would want, right, because that would be to their advantage. So that's, that's a, that's a risk from a redistricting perspective. The good news, I think Lala mentioned, you know, we've been talking about: we've got some tools to fight this, right. It's not coming out of nowhere. It's not going to hit us out of nowhere. We have amazing organizations on the ground that are working to hold legislators accountable, where we're working with a number of those helping raise money for them in our State Bridges program, we've got that robust litigation infrastructure.

Lala and I are both lawyers. So we are, we are excited to-, we are prepared to litigate and the National Democratic Redistricting Committee is really taking the lead on that litigation work. And then, like I said, we've got organizations like Sister District, like State Innovation

Exchange, the DLCC, the NDRC, that are working with legislators who want to do the right thing, who want to draw good maps, working with them so that they have what they need in terms of resources and strategy to fight back against potential gerrymandering and to make sure the process is as fair as possible.

JVN [00:29:22] Just in case you don't know, because maybe you didn't listen to the last podcast, what Sister District does, and correct me if I'm wrong, but basically, Sister District is an organization that takes progressive in, like coastal, more, like, bigger cities, more, like, urban areas, and connects them with progressives in smaller, more rural locations to help try to flip red, red counties, red states, red offices blue. Correct?

LALA WU [00:29:49] The basic idea, you're exactly right, is that we, we help to organize people all across the country, which are-, many of them, many of our folks are in these, you know, bigger cities. But we've got a lot of folks all over the country, including in these battleground states, in smaller towns, etc. So really, it's a national movement of people that we organize into local teams and then we pair them up with these candidates that are in these key districts, in these key states. And then the local teams will raise money, make phone calls, write postcards, send texts when we're able to again travel to go knock on doors to support these candidates.

So, for example, I live in San Francisco and my team last year--shout out to the home team--was paired with two races in Arizona and in Texas. And they did a phenomenal job raising tons of money for these candidates, as well as making all of these phone calls, writing all of these postcards and what Sister District does as we help to provide the liaising between the candidates and the volunteers to make this a really smooth process that can be as effective and as efficient as possible. And it really, basically, just creates this super concentrated conduit of energy that is-, provides the most effective support that the candidates want the most and that they need the most on the ground. So we've been just super, super proud of what we've been able to do there. And I think what we're really pleased with is to see the outsized impact that we've been able to have.

Like last year, we raised an average of 10 percent of our candidate's total cash contributions and we made an average of 34 percent of their total phone calls. And in a pandemic year, you can't knock on doors, which is the best way to talk to voters. Phone banking is the next best thing and is really, just, I'm so proud of our community for making such a huge contribution to our candidates' field programs and to going out there, talking to voters, making sure that no stone was left unturned, you know, as we headed into the election. So we've got a lot going on as we, as we move forward as well. And there are some new programs that we're doing. So this volunteer piece I just talked about is always going to be our cornerstone, but we're always innovating here. Sister District, always

figuring out what we can do better to help plug the gaps in the infrastructure that we see and Gaby, you mentioned earlier, we've got an amazing partnership with Run for Something and Emily's List, a new program called Future Winners. And we also have a number of other things that we're brewing up as well.

JVN [00:32:37] Love that program actually. Just wrote down Future Winners before you even said that because I want to ask more about it. But first, Gaby, in light of just one more bumper question before we get to the good ones.

GABY GOLDSTEIN [00:32:47] Give me all the bumper questions, I'm goth, I can take it!

JVN [00:32:50] No, no! So, well, maybe I should give Lala a bumper question if I've been accidentally giving you all the bumpers. But basically, it was in light of the census information that we have gotten, is that going to change the way that Sister District was planning on focusing on certain districts? Was there any, like, big surprises for like, "Oh, fuck, like, that's going to be too far gone?" Or did anyone come more towards like, "Oh, maybe we could do something with that?"

LALA WU [00:33:15] I've got to let Gaby answer this question, because she is our political, she's a-, she's the race-targeting goddess. So I've gotta let her answer this one.

GABY GOLDSTEIN [00:33:24] Nonsense, nonsense. The Karl Rove of Democratic politics. [CROSSTALK] I wish. Yeah. Gothic Karl Rove of Democratic politics.

JVN [00:33:33] Got to tear down the misogyny as fast as his dumb ass trying to build it, honey!

GABY GOLDSTEIN [00:33:37] That's right. Yeah. He's just a strategic, you know, monster. But regardless, regardless. I mean, I think one thing, so, we're still waiting on the exact data. Right. But what we do know is that we're we we can I think that what we do know is that redistricting is going to result in a mixed bag of opportunities for Democrats down ballot. There will be some places where we can go on offense, like, Lala mentioned Michigan, which will have an independent commission drawing those new lines should be fairer. Right. That could provide, that should provide, progressives with good opportunities, go on defense and flip a bunch of seats. But we've got to be prepared for playing some real defense next year.

And I think that it's a good tie back to Virginia, which is really, I think, a good opportunity for all of us to get real comfortable and excited about incumbent protection, which is the process of protecting folks who are in really fragile seats. Most of our candidates in

Virginia, who we've endorsed in Virginia this year, are incumbents, are fragile incumbents. And I think that that's a good opportunity for our community. And in general, something that we're messaging quite a bit is we-, you know, it's not all just flipping, flipping seats and popping the champagne for that. We have to buckle down and be prepared to play some real defense next year because the midterms are going to be tough and that's going to have consequences up and down the ballot. And we can't, we can't lose the folks we've got. Right. We've got to hold on to the folks that we have. And so that's an important political strategy for Sister District this year and next year is, of course, we're going to go after every last flip that we can, but we're also going to spend a lot of time and energy holding on to those fragile Democratic incumbents who are going to be in danger.

JVN [00:35:31] OK, so I hear what you're saying. What, and I know you focus on state house, or state races. But I would be remiss if I didn't mention that hideous Rand Paul, honey, he's up for election next year. I was writing down Kentucky, and yes, they got because isn't that Governor Bashir who is, like, the Democrat governor there, but hasn't their, like, state Senate and state House, like, gone to extraordinary lengths, like, the governor of, like, historical powers that he would have normally had. Plus, they need to like we really need to get his ass out. Like, what's, like, your insider, your Sister District knowledge about that. Like we love Charles Booker. We're obsessed. Like, can we beat that fucking Rand Paul? Gaby Goldstein!

GABY GOLDSTEIN [00:36:20] Oh, my God. I, look, I mean, here's what I'll say about Kentucky, right, is that and this is not going to be a surprise. We can't just focus on these federal races. The Kentucky legislature, state legislature needs our support, needs our collective eyeballs and dollars and all the rest, and something that we've always done at Sister District is we take a portfolio approach to the races that we support. They're not all winners. They're not all in states that we can flip. We always have an inroads category of races where we're trying to build power over time. And in a state like Kentucky, we've, we've got to take a long strategy, right?

Like, we've got a long view, which is not our strong suit as progressives, right? Like, we're real good at focusing on this year and this election. We got to take a long view. We have to invest more money in unfriendly turf, more money in unfriendly turf, places where we don't have a chance to flip the entire legislature. We have to keep, keep a presence. Right. It's like, it's like, anything, you know, you have to see the same ad seven times before you'll think about buying a thing. You have to hear the progressive message over and over and over before you might think about voting for a candidate that has those views. We have to do that in places like Kentucky. And it's not just Kentucky. I mean, we've worked in Mississippi, we've worked in Louisiana. We've worked in red, really red states where we have to put a marker down. And it can't always just be about the federal races.

JVN [00:37:50] Yes, that's so true. And Charles Booker was in the state, I think it was the state House. So, yes, we need more state Senate, state House focus.

LALA WU [00:37:57] We do, also, when we look to select these races, we look for opportunities where the turning out the vote at the state legislative level is going to boost the vote up and down the ticket, all the way up to congressional seats, Senate seats, etc. We look for these what we call nested opportunities, and so we can force-multiply the efforts that we put into turning out a voter in a state legislative district for that state legislator. You know, that person is very likely going to vote all the way up the ticket for all of the other Democrats.

JVN [00:38:34] Right, yes, yes, yes, exactly. So I want to go back to one thing that we were talking about before that I really do think, like, ends up being the crux. It's, like, the bane of our existence, which is local and state elections turning into, like, nationalized issues. But when we think about things like abortion and Planned Parenthood, that is both, because it is, it is all of our friends. It's our families. It's, like, reproductive autonomy. That's a huge local issue. But it is driven by these, like, Fox News kind of scare-tactic, like, moral, like, you know, moral questioning and also just, like, I'm always struck by thinking about how much religion and people's faiths have made its way into the Constitution. and how much people have to, like, live their lives based off of what is actually someone else's religious views.

It just is more nuanced when you think about some of these issues. And, but, we have not been able to figure out a way to say, like, "Do you realize they paid for all these anti-trans bills when, like, you know, sixty percent of your state's living in poverty?" So what is the key? You know, one thing that came up for me was, like, People's Action, which is, like, George Goehl and, you know, deep canvassing and reaching out from bigger places to smaller places. Is it kind of just bearing down and doing, like, the good old fashioned AOC, where you just have to, like, connect with your literal constituents and try to, like, drown out the national noise? Like...

LALA WU [00:39:59] I think we have to be visionary, right? Like, we have to think big and have to imagine a world or not constrained and terrified and scared of what the other side is saying and doing it to rile up their base because their base is different from our base. And again, shout out to Anat Shenker-Osorio, who Gaby mentioned earlier. She's amazing. Look her up. She puts it beautifully that the Republican base is not the same as the Democratic base. The Democratic base will respond to ideas and thoughts of abundance, of expansion, of these greater good for everyone, expanding the pie. And I think that we really can and we must succeed on a message like that. And that's not to say we shouldn't be strategic. You know, we can't just ignore what's going on the other side or pretend it's

not happening, but we can express a positive message and build a more ambitious view of what we want this party to be and not just be reactive to what the other side is doing.

And I think, you know, one mistake of the Obama years was that they thought their actions would speak for themselves. You know, they passed Obamacare, the ACA, and they thought that people would just see, "Oh, OK, my situation is better now, and I will attribute that to the administration." That's not what happened. Right. And I think one lesson that we've learned is that we have to tell a story about our policy successes. And so you're seeing this at the federal level. You know, Biden's out on road shows touting, you know, the benefits of the huge relief, historic relief package that was passed. And at the state and local level, this is what we are seeing as well.

And telling the story again of Virginia is a shining example of where we can do so much with progressive, with democratic values being reflected in our legislatures. And we've talked a lot about Virginia, but it's not just Virginia. I mean, look, Colorado, Washington state, there's all of these places. Don't forget that Colorado was purple before. You know, it is blue now, which we kind of take for granted, but it's on our watch list for 2022 because it is a state that, that was very mixed and that has made so much progress in expanding teacher pay and expanding access to pre-K education, etc., etc. There's so much that we can do that we are already doing substantively. And I think a lot of the key to how we message successfully is: "How can we tell the story of all the good that we're doing and how we're changing people's lives?"

JVN [00:42:47] Yes! What I hear you saying is: don't run away from our base, run towards your base, run towards your base, which is a historic mistake that we've often made, we run away from our base to try to assuage the other side when in reality we need to run towards our own people, which will drive our own turnout, which is major. Gaby, final thoughts? Same question.

GABY GOLDSTEIN [00:43:08] I mean, what, can I be a bummer? No, I'm just kidding. [CROSSTALK] This is this is actually a message of power for us. But it comes in a bummer package, which is that a central goal of and this goes back to the Mississippi abortion case the Supreme Court's going to hear, and everything else. A central goal of conservative courts jurisprudence and the conservative project is the narrowing down of federal protections. That is a central goal of the idea of states' rights. Right. It is the idea of small government. And it is a, it is a large machine that is moving with a lot of inertia through the courts and through all type-, all matters of civic and, and public life.

Okay, what it means is that states are increasing in power, and that means that we have to harness the power of states. We progressives ceded, we ceded the idea of states' rights

and states' power a long, long time ago. And in many respects, of course, federal protections are amazing. We want them. They're great. However, there are these other forces pushing against that, and it's not mutually exclusive for us to fight for both, to fight for both federal protections as well as harness the power, the incredible power of states as protective venues for us, for civil rights. And so that, I think, is a message that I think I, we, we all need to focus on is that it's not an either or. It's not just focusing on federal or state, but it's an acknowledgment that this state stuff is going to be important regardless of whether we pay attention or not. So, hey, let's pay attention to it.

JVN [00:45:04] And we've seen what happens when we don't. I can't echo that enough. How can people get involved? How can people work with you? How can people volunteer with you? How can people donate to the cause? What, what, how can people get involved?

LALA WU [00:45:15] Jonathan, I am so glad you asked. People can go to SisterDistrict.com and sign up to volunteer, to hear from us, get updates. We send not too many emails, I promise, and they are really fun, educational, and you'll learn a lot. Also, you'll have an opportunity to connect with your local team if there is one in that area. And this means that you don't have to get involved alone, but you can also just donate. You can read about states and why they're so important. You can read about our amazing candidates this year, most of whom are people of color. We're super, super excited to be supporting these incredible folks who are leaders already. We want to help them continue to grow and lead in Virginia. And then we've got a lot in store for 2022. So come check us out on SisterDistrict.com. We're also on Insta and Twitter and Facebook and all those things. You can find us there and we would absolutely love to connect. And we've got lots of local volunteers in your, in your areas as well that are really excited to welcome you in.

JVN [00:46:23] And if there is not a local chapter where you are, you could start one, which, we need that, we need that. We need that. Gaby Lala, thank you so much. Thank you so much for your work, your time. Thank you. Sister District. We're so grateful. And we will see you next time on Getting Curious.

You've been listening to Getting Curious with me, Jonathan Van Ness. My guest this week was Sister District co-founders Lala Wu and Gaby Goldstein.

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