

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

JVN [00:00:00] Welcome to Getting Curious, I'm Jonathan Van Ness and every week I sit down for a 40-minute conversation—but usually, let's be honest, it takes a lot longer than that—with a brilliant expert to learn all about something that makes me curious. On today's episode, I'm joined by Sister District co-founders Lala Wu and Gaby Goldstein, where I'm asking: How can we do the damn thing this midterm election? If you're a fan of Getting Curious, which I hope you are, but maybe this is, like, the first time you've ever listened. Like, I don't know what your life is. Sister District is, like, one of my favorite organizations of all time. And I know that you maybe have heard me say before that, like, "This midterm is the most important and consequential," but bitch, just keep getting more important, okay? They just keep—, the stakes, just keep getting higher. I don't make the rules, okay? I'm just a fucking hot slut who's out here trying to do their fucking best. Okay? For Christ's sake. Ah! Ah! So, anyway, midterms are right around the corner, and we want to make sure that we're up to speed. There's a lot happening. So we're ready to take action. How are you?

GABY GOLDSTEIN [00:01:00] It's so good to be back. You're right. The stakes just keep going up.

JVN [00:01:04] Is this how pole vaulters feel? Like the records just keep getting higher and it's, like, scarier and scarier because you could just, like, hit that pole right on your tit or your privates or your side. You could miss the fucking mat. So much could go wrong. We spoke last right before the 2021 elections when you taught us that there's, like, no "off years" for elections there's just, like, odd year one because of Virginia. Obviously that didn't go totally the way we wanted it to go.

GABY GOLDSTEIN [00:01:29] Oh, for sure. You know, I was just thinking about the 2017 election recently, which was our first election at Sister District and Lala and Liz and I went to Virginia a couple of weeks before the election to be on the ground and help our candidates. We were working around the clock and it was absolutely wild. We ran out of garbage bags and just started piling trash in a corner, living on, like, frozen sausages and crackers, just trying so, so hard to help these candidates win. And, you know, I'll never forget how it felt when we started watching the returns come in and Democrats took this deep red state legislative chamber to within one seat of flipping into Democratic control. And it was, it was exhilarating. It was amazing. In 2019, we went back and flipped both the House and the Senate and delivered that beautiful blue Democratic trifecta that got to work, passing things like Medicaid expansion, increasing the minimum wage, abolishing the death penalty, legalizing marijuana, strengthening civil rights protections for LGBTQ folks. Like, it was, it was amazing to see what that majority was able to do in Virginia.

But you're right. Elections matter and those legislative majorities can be lost in a heartbeat. And in 2021, we lost that trifecta. Just 750 votes out of 3 million votes was what separated us from keeping the House. And, you know, we still have control of the Senate, which means that we've been able to block the regressive Republican legislative agenda. But both of those chambers are going to be back on the ballot next year, and we're going to have a chance to, you know, keep the Senate and flip the House back into Democratic control. So Virginia is really, I think, a source of inspiration and also a cautionary tale for us, right? I mean, democracy and progress are not static states of being. We have to constantly give them attention and care.

JVN [00:03:37] But Danica, she won again. So there is silver linings.

GABY GOLDSTEIN [00:03:40] First openly transgender legislator Danica Roem, who I call the constituent queen.

JVN [00:03:47] Because she's a three time representative now. Were there any stand out wins among Sister District candidates other than her?

GABY GOLDSTEIN [00:03:54] Oh my gosh, in Virginia. I mean, so many firsts. We helped elect the first Latinas to the legislature, Elizabeth Guzman and Hala Ayala. The first Vietnamese American—

JVN [00:04:03] Yes!

GABY GOLDSTEIN [00:04:04] Yes! Katherine Tran. And Ghazala Hashmi, who is the first Muslim-American in the Senate. She helped flip the Senate in 2019. And I just, I also think it's important to say, right, like, these are incredible firsts. But representation is not, like, just a box that we check. Right. It actually results in legislation that is needed for communities who don't historically have a voice in government. Right. And so there's so many examples in Virginia, but just as one example, last year, Danica passed legislation eliminating the gay panic defense in Virginia, which, if folks are not familiar, this is bonkers. It is a legal defense that literally says, "If you hurt or even kill a gay person, you can argue in your defense that you got 'freaked out,' you 'got panicked' because they were gay." I'm literally not kidding. It's still a legal defense in a lot of states, but not in Virginia. And that's just one, in one in, you know, a zillion examples of how representation matters.

JVN [00:05:05] Ohmigod.

GABY GOLDSTEIN [00:05:06] And how state policy can protect us. Right. And protect our civil rights and our human rights.

JVN [00:05:12] So much to unpack there, Gaby. There is so much there. And I do want to point out some things that I think about when hearing about what has happened in Virginia in the

last five years, because it's just been such a pendulum in results, even though it's such small margins that separate the results. So I do want to point out to everyone listening, if you're, like, a Democrat who is disappointed in what's happened in the House, Senate, and presidency this year, if you feel the Democrats have not gone far enough, yes, I'm with you. And at the same time, because of the rigged system that we're up against, we do need to send an even stronger mandate. And I do think, as AOC said, like, Democratic leaders need to be more clear on what are the bars, what are the stakes, where do we need to get to, to see real legislative progress.

GABY GOLDSTEIN [00:05:54] The thing that really matters at the state leg level is making sure that Democrats don't fall into a super minority. And so if Democrats are less than basically a third, it's a little bit different in some states. But if Republicans get two thirds of the seats in, in a chamber, in a legislature, they can override the governor's veto. We've seen that happen in a good way for democracy in places like Michigan and Wisconsin, where we have a Democratic governor who's been able to veto pieces of legislation around voting and the way that elections are run. And the Republicans, although they control the state chambers, they don't have enough votes to override those vetoes and get those bills into law.

JVN [00:06:44] So that works both ways. That's really good to think about. We have an episode coming up, it's about the before, during and after of World War Two and how, like, queer people were treated. And if you want to pre-research some of this before that episode comes out, y'all, just side little detour. It's called Paragraph 175, and the reason why this is really nerve wracking—and you'll hear more about that later—is that anti-queer policies have historically been very popular. Like, anti-gay, like sentiment, blaming stuff on being gay, this idea of, like, the gay panic defense. These sorts of ideologies have been very popular, very accepted and, like, overwhelmingly celebrated. And even these anti-trans bills, they're overwhelmingly popular. Like, these anti-gay bills are overwhelmingly popular. Which makes me think about the difference between, like, hate and love and how hate begets blame and, like, wanting to blame people and take, like, easy ways out. And just, like, scapegoating folks. Whereas love is more nuanced, but that begets compassion and, like, inclusion. And if your, if your political will ends at the exclusion of someone, it's not correct. And if it arrives at the inclusion of people, then it is correct.

GABY GOLDSTEIN [00:07:48] I totally agree. And I think that it's tied to another piece that's really important for Democrats, which is we can't just be against the bad stuff that Republicans are doing. We can't just be a party of opposition. We have to be *for* things. We have to have a beautiful, progressive vision of the future where everybody's lives are better when we're in charge. And I think that we can really see that in states. And I think states are a really great place for us to build towards that positive vision of the future that gets us away from the divisive and sort of hate-focused rhetoric and policies on the right. Yes, they're bad, they're awful, and we need to fight them. And also, we need to have our own vision of the future that centers the kind of love policy that you're talking about. We need a love politics. And I think that the states are really a place where we can see that happening in real time. And certainly

there's so much in Virginia that we can look to that would help us build that narrative around the love politics, right. I mean, raising the minimum wage. Making Election Day a holiday in the state. Right. Celebrating the environment by passing the Clean Economy Act. There's so much, I think, in Virginia and elsewhere that we can use to build that positive vision so that we're not just fighting against the hate, but we're fighting for the, you know, the love.

JVN [00:09:21] Yes! I'm just, like, writing down our platform: it's, like, for legal weed, for bodily autonomy, for a living wage, for ending mass incarceration. And by doing that, honey, we're improving, like, public safety, because what we're realizing is it's, like, we've got to teach people that, like, we don't criminalize people, honey. It's really, like, all these other things that we need to work with. And then it will be safer. Sometimes I feel like we are not chatting about really important things. It's, like, "Just don't touch it, because what if it ruffles someone wrong?" Monkeypox is a really good example of that right now, like, a lot of Democratic leaders don't want to talk about that because they're, like, "Ooh, I don't want to, like, freak out a Republican from talking about monkeypox." And it's, like, we need to be helping people.

GABY GOLDSTEIN [00:10:02] Abortion, abortion!

JVN [00:10:04] Abortion, yes. Yes.

GABY GOLDSTEIN [00:10:05] Abortion's a great example. This is the prime example, right? I mean, any Democrat who's scared of talking about abortion rights doesn't deserve to be in the Democratic Party.

JVN [00:10:13] Or also, like, using inclusive language around abortion rights, like, saying, like, "birthing people" or "pregnant people," then, like, being, like, "Oh, we *really* can't say that," because it's, like, we need to be able to explain to people, like, how that's just inclusive language and how that's just, like, the right thing to do. Because this will affect—especially when you have Republicans saying, like, "even in cases of rape." What the fuck are we talking about? A lot of people can get raped. A lot of people can be forced into birth. Like, you have to use inclusive language. So that shouldn't be, like, a controversial issue to, like, see people's humanity. You see, like, just so many TERFs and so many transphobic people that, like, jump on that. But get the fuck out of here, like, we need to be able to call bullshit on that and an effective way. And I do feel like on a federal leader level, I am very disappointed from our highest leaders in this fucking party who refuse to speak up for what is right. That is just from my gay as hell, mad as fuck perspective. So we're seeing attacks on reproductive rights, LGBTQIA+ protections, and racial justice; a wave of gun violence; and soaring COVID; and, like, tripling monkeypox rates. So how has this happened with the Democratic trifecta at the federal level?

GABY GOLDSTEIN [00:11:27] I mean, look, states are growing in power and we see that in real time. We have this Democratic trifecta at the federal level. And still we have all of these

challenges. Our organization is really premised on this idea that states are where so much of the rubber hits the road on all of these policies. And it's not just that states are important venues for, for all of the, you know, policies that we care about. It's that they're actually growing in power. That's in no small part because of long term strategic efforts on the right to narrow federal protections, particularly civil rights protections, and expand state power. And there's a lot of factors that are converging there. One I think that's really important is that our courts, our state courts, our federal courts are extremely captured by conservative judges. And, of course, the Supreme Court has now a conservative super majority, and they can really do whatever they want. And we've already started to see them doing that.

But, you know, Trump appointed between one third and one quarter of all federal judges in this entire country. And there were already a ton of conservative judges before he got there. And there's this long term goal among conservative judges and conservative jurisprudence around narrowing federal civil rights protections and returning power to states. And so we're seeing that now. Also, there's just been a really, a general decline in federal governance. Right. Like, there are these reports that come out that show that each year our federal Congress passes fewer laws than ever. Right. And so, you know, even under this federal trifecta, as we're currently seeing, states are the place where, where things actually get done. So, you know, it's definitely, it's not enough for Dems to control the federal government. The real site for change, the real fight for liberation, for, for the love politic. Right. Is, is going to be at the state level.

JVN [00:13:32] So state power is increasing. This is a calculated, like, long term game, not game, but it's, like, well, you know, in, like, a Hunger Games sort of way, it is like that. So now we've had the census. We know on Getting Curious if you haven't listened to the episodes of why this census is so important. We did a really good one. Now redistricting is happening. Where are we the most fucked? What's going to happen? I think I was just reading something about Ohio, Gaby, that it's, like, they've really been able to, like, "Gah! Gah!" every single court order to, like, maintain their redistricting. And didn't governor fucking God fucking forsaken DeSantis? Didn't he just do something, too?

GABY GOLDSTEIN [00:14:13] Yeah. It's a mixed bag. The lines for Congress, like your congressperson, whoever they are, the district lines for their district as well as the state legislature are redrawn once every ten years after the census. And in most states, it's the state legislature that draws those lines, both for Congress and for the state leg. And when Republicans control the legislature, as they do in many states, they gerrymander, which is basically just the process of drawing the lines in a way that favors their party. So they did this big time after the 2010 census as part of a strategy called Project Red Map. And there's a really great book, if folks are interested in those shenanigans called Ratf**ked by Dave Daley, that goes into the whole thing. But as a result of that last round of redistricting, Democrats went into this round of redistricting with, you know, a disadvantage. The Republicans were at a big advantage. There are a few things that Democrats had in our favor this time. There were some court cases that had redrawn lines more fairly in some places, like Virginia, for instance.

And also there were some independent commissions that had been started, particularly in Michigan, to take the power away from the legislature and give it to this independent commission to draw the lines and stop the gerrymandering.

But the Republicans still controlled an awful lot of legislatures after the 2020 election, and they took advantage again wherever they could. So it was a mixed bag. We have some new opportunities to build power and, you know, even flip some chambers, maybe not this year, but over the next decade, especially in Michigan and Arizona, Pennsylvania House. But in some places, honestly, the maps are even worse than they were before. So Wisconsin is a place where that's true, it was already one of the worst gerrymanders in the country, and it's even worse now. So that means that we're going to be fighting off a Republican supermajority for the next decade. Right. And that supermajority would let the legislature do whatever they want, regardless of who's governor, because they could override the governor's veto. So we really have to watch for that in places like Wisconsin and North Carolina. Especially, I mean, these are places that will be absolutely critical to maintaining the integrity of the 2024 presidential election. And, you know, it's very, very important that we keep an eye on those states and not let Republicans gain that supermajority where they could really do whatever they want.

JVN [00:16:55] Oh, God. Every time I talk about Wisconsin politics, I just think about Making a Murderer. And then I'm, like, that fucking Supreme Court. Like, they are just nightmares. Like, they are really bad, that Supreme Court in Wisconsin. And Wisconsin's kind of gay! I saw my first lesbian kiss in Madison.

GABY GOLDSTEIN [00:17:12] The gerrymander does not reflect the people's will in Wisconsin. Right. Like, that's the thing in so many of these states that look so bad. Right. And that, that pass on these terrible policies. It's not that the people there are terrible or that they even want these policies. The policies are very unpopular. Very, very unpopular. It's that the Republicans have rigged the system and they've taken advantage to draw lines in a way to keep themselves in power and insulate them from what the people actually want.

JVN [00:17:44] Okay, wait. So midterms are so soon and 83% of the nation's state legislative seats will be up for grabs. And it also feels like Republicans, like, what they're doing with, like, hate, and just, like, obliterating, like, gay and trans people and, like, unions and, like, living wages and, like, gun laws and, like, the environment and everything. So they really feel like they got us by the taint at the moment and I am worried about it. Who currently holds most of the state legislative seats? Obviously Republicans. Right?

GABY GOLDSTEIN [00:18:20] They control the majority of the state legislative seats. But we've made really great progress since, you know, since we started this organization in 2017. Right. I mean, we've helped flip the, the state legislatures in Washington State, in Colorado, Maine, Virginia, although now, you know, we're, we're a little bit back. Broken Republican

supermajorities in, in Michigan and Pennsylvania. You know, there's been a lot of progress. So we're not coming out of nowhere here.

JVN [00:18:52] Yes.

GABY GOLDSTEIN [00:18:53] But, you know, we're still at a disadvantage, which means we've got to work really, really hard. And these disadvantages, it's, I think it's really important to stress they're structural. Right. It's not that this reflects the will of the people. It's that the, the Republicans have engineered and continue to try to engineer the rules so that they win regardless of how the votes come out. And that's something we're really worried about for the 2024 election.

JVN [00:19:21] How many Houses do you think could flip in this midterm and which way?

GABY GOLDSTEIN [00:19:27] So this is a tough environment for Democrats this year, and that's especially true at the bottom of the ballot. So historically in midterm years, the party who has the presidency tends to do poorly. And that's just a consequence of a few things. One of them being that the out party is really enthusiastic. They're fired up. Remember when Trump was in office in the 2018 election? Democrats were fired up. So that's how Republicans feel now. And that's usually what drives the outcomes we see in midterms, where the president's party tends to not do that well. And in Virginia, I think looking at what happened in 2021, we shouldn't overinterpret it. Right. It's just one state in a different year. But it is useful to understand what happened there in, in some ways, especially because we saw such clear Republican enthusiasm. So this is a tough year for Democrats. I don't think this is a year where we go out and we flip all the chambers and we're all about flipping.

This is a year where we hunker down, we hold on to everything we've got. We make the gains that we can in the states where we have opportunities, especially in places like Michigan, where there's, you know, new lines that are much, much fairer because of the independent commission. And we take this long term strategy into our minds, right? We, we start planning for the long term. And it's not just about this midterm or even the '24 election. It's about the next decade. Because that's what conservatives do so well. Right. They think in terms of decades, they don't think in terms of election cycles. This year is not where we go out and flip all of the seats everywhere. We'll flip some seats. There will be seats that flip and it'll be great and glorious. But we need to protect the Mallory McMorrowes who are already legislators and make sure they don't lose their seats this year. And we need to make that a shiny object for us, too, is protecting the incredible, fierce leaders that are already in office and making sure that they come back next year to continue to do the great work that they're doing.

JVN [00:21:37] So I'd love to hear more about how Sister District is approaching these elections. What states are we targeting and why?

LALA WU [00:21:44] So this year, we are hyper-focused on democracy battlegrounds, where the state of the presidency is going to be determined in 2024, as well as all kinds of issues about whether people's votes in that state actually matter. So these are states like Arizona, Georgia, Michigan, North Carolina, Nevada, Pennsylvania and Wisconsin. These are states not only with great state legislative opportunities where we can compete for the majority, particularly in some places that, as Gaby mentioned, have actually quite fairer maps than they used to before. But these are also states where there are also important governor's races happening, as well as secretaries of state. As we know, these races are getting more and more important, as well as nested congressional and Senate races, too. We know that whenever we turn out somebody for their state legislative candidate, if they drop their mail ballot or if they go into the ballot box, they are going to vote all the way up the ticket. So every year, you know, we're looking to build a portfolio of states where we can flip a chamber, hold the chamber or make inroads into badly gerrymandered states. And we take this portfolio approach because we want to expand our power, we need to build new majorities. And so we're going to compete for that where we can. That's what a blue flip is all about.

And then blue holds are where we can't—as Gaby was mentioning about incumbents, it's kind of taken to the state level. We can't become complacent in where we already have power. We saw that in Virginia. Unfortunately, you know, this place we needed to defend. Nevada is another example of a blue trifecta that currently protects abortion, for example, but is under threat. The Republicans in that state are blood thirsty. They are hungry to flip that state red. And so we have to protect a state like Nevada as a blue hold. And then blue inroads are really this idea that we have to be building power for the long term as well. We can't just be focused on what's going to work this cycle. As Gaby said, we need to think like the Republicans, at least in this respect. We need to think in terms of decades. “Okay, so if we can't flip it this cycle, for example, like Georgia, not going to flip this cycle, maybe Wisconsin kind of the same thing. But what if we can start building some of those inroads now, if we start talking to these voters in these districts and then we come back next time and we keep talking to them and we build that power, build those kinds of relationships, we can flip it down the road.” It's exactly the kind of thing that Stacey Abrams did with her ten-year plan for Georgia. And look where it got us at the statewide level. We got two Democratic senators, right. And we can see it's such a clear example of the power of redistricting and the power of gerrymandering, because at the statewide level, we've got Democrats. But what do we have at the state legislative level where there's gerrymandered districts? Republicans.

JVN [00:24:49] Where are we working on blue inroads because is that basically, we're going to Madison, we are, like, kind of funding some, like, you know, Democratic resources or something to, like, get people, like, chatting and canvassing more? Like, how do we do inroads for the ten-year plan? I'm obsessed with that.

LALA WU [00:25:03] Yeah, absolutely. And so I would say there's two major components to it and one of them is electoral, right? We have to go and try to compete for the front line battleground districts that exist in these seats in these inroad states—like Wisconsin, like

Georgia, like North Carolina. And so what we need to be doing there is competing, because what we know is that if we actually compete, we'll make the Republicans spend their resources. Right? If we let seats go uncontested or if we just don't put up a real fight, and then the Republicans just have more money in their coffers and more wind at their backs to win even more seats than they already have. So we can't give up on them electorally. We have to look for the best opportunities, uncover all of the opportunities to hold the line, expand our gains in these in these inroad states. And then the other part of it is about organizing day in and day out, year after year.

So Sister District, we're kind of best well-known for our electoral programs, but we also have a whole suite of programs that build long-term democratic infrastructure, and one of them is called State Bridges. And this is where we partner with organizations on the ground that are led by women, people of color, young people, LGBTQ people who are really talking to voters day in and day out, year over year, and not just doing electoral stuff. They are, for example, in Texas, when nobody had heat in the middle of the winter, you know, helping with mutual aid. Right. And so that voters, by the time the election comes around, they not only trust these organizations who are then going to ask them to go out and vote. But they also understand the importance, they've connected the dots, about why what happens in government matters to their lives. And so there is an electoral and every cycle kind of approach to building inroads as well as this long-term organizing piece.

JVN [00:26:59] Fuck yes! It's totally a "both and." I mean, I didn't even know about that piece of your guys' work. I'm, like, obsessed with these programs, I can't get enough. Mommy needs to come volunteer herself. That's me. So can you tell us, because I love when I follow you guys and you do those really fun graphics about, like, who we endorse and you do those, like, fun, like, "This is who we're endorsing right now." I'm, like, obsessed, whoever's doing your, like, [social media], chef's kiss. But who have we endorsed so far, who are obsessed with, like, who are new, like, state leg-level squads. Who's our new Mallory McMorrows, even though we're also going to, like, hold our current ones and make sure that they do really good, too. But like, I am a fickle bitch who loves shiny new object. So is there any, like, who are we obsessed with who's, like, a first-time candidate? Or maybe they're not a first-time candidate, but they're, like, you know what I'm sayin'?

GABY GOLDSTEIN [00:27:45] I'm obsessed with all of them. You know, we were just talking about Wisconsin. And so I want to give a shout out to Lee Snodgrass, who is the chair of the Legislative LGBTQ caucus, and she's running in a tough reelection this year. She's such a fierce advocate and she's so awesome. And, you know, Wisconsin is a tough place. It's a tough place for Dems. And we need to, you know, make sure that Lee gets back into the, into the assembly next year. You know, we've been talking a little bit about Michigan. There's a really, really good opportunity to flip the Senate in Michigan, which has been under Republican control for it since 1983, which was before a lot of us were born. Right. So we really these new maps really give us a good shot to flip or at least get super close to flipping, you know, this year. And so we are working with Darren Camilleri, his seat, is, you know, potentially the one

that would flip this legislature. But it's absolutely necessary to flip this, this seat to get control of the Senate. And he's a school teacher. He's one of the hardest working candidates, literally of all time and a real, a real volunteer favorite.

And then I want to give a shout out in Nevada. I think, you know, Lala mentioned a little bit about what's at stake in Nevada. Nevada is the first state in this country to ever have had a majority of its legislature be women, which is so, so cool. And, and two of the most fragile incumbents in the assembly are Brittney Miller and Danielle Monroe Marino. And Brittney is the secretary of the Black Legislative Caucus. And then Danielle is chair of the Black Legislative Caucus. They've been instrumental in passing so much incredible legislation in Nevada. And as we mentioned, Nevada could be this year's Virginia if we don't watch out. And I also just want to say, like, going back to diversity in government and the point that diversity is not just a box that we check, that it really results in governments that are more reflective of the people that it is governing and policies that are more aligned and responsive to what people need. When women took control of the Nevada state legislature, they passed legislation boosting minimum wage, mandating paid sick leave. They put a state equal rights amendment on the ballot. And we were able to do that in Nevada because women led this legislature that's on the line this year, totally up for grabs. And, you know, as Lala mentioned, the Republicans really see Nevada as a huge opportunity to flip red. And so we're super stoked about these incredible candidates and, and the need to protect them this year.

LALA WU [00:30:33] I just want to underline everything that Gaby said. They're so amazing. Our candidates, all of them, check them out on our website. They're so great. Just one more shout out. I love Senator Michelle Au, running for the Georgia house. She was actually gerrymandered out of her Senate district. And that's the power of gerrymandering, right, and when you have Republican-held legislatures. She was in the Senate, and she was gerrymandered out of her district. And so now because she wants to continue to serve her community. She's running for the House. And she's a doctor. She's an outspoken, very powerful voice on abortion access. And Georgia is one of these states where abortion is effectively banned. There is a six-week ban, the same timeframe as the Texas one that's in effect now after Roe. And so we need more voices like hers, like so many of the candidates who are outspoken, you know, advocates of abortion and all of the things that we really need to get the world we want to see.

JVN [00:31:30] Absolutely. And definitely check out the website. Everyone needs support, especially this year. How is everyone's campaigns going?

GABY GOLDSTEIN [00:31:38] We are so inspired by these candidates, and they give our, they give our organization life. They give our volunteers so much energy. But like I said, it's tough. It's, there's a lot in the national environment that's really challenging for Democrats. And I'm with you, and I'm with Mallory McMorrow. Right. We, we need to be bold and proud of the policies that we support and all the rest. And I think our candidates are doing a really great job of, of leading with that sort of message. But, look, it's going to be an all hands on deck

situation this year, for, for Dems at the bottom of the ballot. And so, you know, our campaigns need volunteers, right? They need money. Our candidates are often outspent by Republicans. And so, you know, it's a really, really important year for all of us to not just be focused on national politics, but also just make a little room for state legislative candidates. Huge return on investment for your time, for your dollar. And, and as we've been talking about, they're absolutely critical to the future of our civil rights and our democracy.

JVN [00:32:47] Actually, one of my favorite state legislatures is back on the ballot in Iowa now that I think about it. Heather Mattson, who I donated to in 2018 and 2020, but then she lost in 2020 by, like, 11 votes. But she's going back this year so, get in there for Heather Mattson, too. Iowa is doing all these anti-trans laws and stuff, ah! Anyway, so obviously I love that you guys focus on state legislatures, they're so important but obviously these elections don't happen in a vacuum. So how does Trump continue to shape the election landscape? I mean, I know he just called, like, a Wisconsin assembly member, like, last week in light of the Supreme Court ruling saying that the drop boxes were unconstitutional for—or no, they are unconstitutional moving forward, but they have no effect on 2020. So now there's no mail drop boxes in Wisconsin moving forward based off of that ruling?

LALA WU [00:33:37] I think that we're going to look back and realize that 2020 and everything that happened through January 6 and after was just a dress rehearsal for the Republicans. The far right Republicans are peddling "The Big Lie" to justify all manner of election subversion that is taking root in the States. We're talking introductions of legislation to try to encourage sham audits like what we saw in Arizona, trying to criminalize even unintended consequences by election administrators, trying to make nonpartisan election administrative positions partisan, and trying to criminalize voter fraud, which we know is vanishingly rare. Trump catalyzed this kind of election denialism, this big lie, all of these fantasies about the elections not being fair.

And unfortunately, it's really taking root, and it's taking root at the state and local level. I mean, the election deniers are taking this on the road. I just saw an NPR article that said there were something like over 300 events in 45 states where folks, "election denier influencers," for lack of a better term, took their show on the road. There are also organizations that are canvassing. One organization has already knocked 10,000 doors in Colorado. I mean, they are making this a grassroots movement and we have to fight this. And the way to do it is with one-on-one conversations. We have to talk to voters again. It's both candidates and their volunteers and their staffers talking to voters, as well as organizers who are in the communities every single day. We need to be having these conversations and combating this dis- and misinformation because Trump's influence has continued. He may no longer be on Twitter, he may no longer be in the White House. But Trumpism is alive and well.

JVN [00:35:37] Let's take, like, John Fetterman, for instance. Does a high profile Democratic candidate like him help bring attention to down ballot races in Pennsylvania where he's running for Senate?

LALA WU [00:35:46] It definitely can. You know, I think that there are coattails, you know, from the top of a ticket to the bottom of the ticket. But it's not always super effective and it can't be taken for granted. It's not necessarily going to happen naturally. And I would implore Fetterman or anybody else out there who's a high profile Democratic candidate who might be listening to this to please show some love, bring up your state and local candidates who are doing incredible work and who you will need once you're in the federal government, once you're in these statewide positions, to actually advance your agenda. You know, I had the privilege of seeing Governor Gretchen Whitmer, Michigan's governor, speak, and she talked about how her veto pen is what's actually blocking so much horrific legislation, anti-abortion, anti-trans, anti-whatever, that's coming out of the Michigan Republican legislature. That's great. But, you know, I asked her a question. I said, well, "Well, what would you do if you had a Democratic majority? What if you had the Democratic majorities to back you up in Michigan? What could you accomplish?" And the list was so long. There's so much we can do when it comes to not just protecting, expanding access to abortion, you know, expanding LGBTQ rights, which are really near and dear to her heart, around education, around climate, around guns, everything. All of these issues, they're really actually decided at the state level, particularly when the federal government is in stalemate. And so I would empower these high level Democratic politicians and candidates to really show some love to their down ballot candidates because they're the ones who are going to help get it done.

JVN [00:37:29] And we also know that strong candidates only succeed if voters turn out to vote for them. And then obviously, if they don't vote for you, you don't win there. You can obviously still be really impactful. You can still have a voice. You can still be if there's other things you can do, like just because you lose an election, like, it's not over for you, but what's the vibe that you're getting from voters this year? Like, I feel like I've read about an enthusiasm gap. I don't understand where the enthusiasm gap is. Like there's it's, you know, really feel like it's going down in the club where you want to not go to the club when it's going down, you know, we got to be there. You know? You might suck someone's dick in the alley. Could be fun. Why? You want to go home right now? You know, stay another few hours like you're not going to go to the club, you know what I mean? It's like everybody loves the club, you know? But, you know, actually, people are more obsessed with literally going to the club than they are voting. And so, you know, for Christ's sake, I've had it with these people! [Mock clearing throat] Anyway, so what's the deal with the enthusiasm gap?

GABY GOLDSTEIN [00:38:29] Just briefly on the enthusiasm gap, I mean, this is something that we've done a lot of research about, and we've looked at the data going back several cycles now, and we see the same thing every single year, even years, odd years, whatever it is, Democrats at the bottom of the ballot get fewer votes than Democrats at the top of the ballot. Okay. But this part is nuts. The opposite is true for Republicans. They often get more votes at the bottom of the ballot than they do at the top. So here's just one example from last year in Virginia. Sixty thousand more people voted for our Democratic gubernatorial candidate, Terry McAuliffe. Sixty thousand more voted at the top than for Democrats running

for state leg. We lost the chamber by 750 votes. So if just 750 of those sixty thousand people had not rolled off the ballot, we would still control the chamber. But wait, but wait! 5000 more people voted for Republicans running for state leg than voted for the winning Republican gubernatorial candidate. Right, Glenn Youngkin. So Glenn Youngkin got fewer votes than his party mates at the bottom of the ballot. And we got 60,000 more people who voted for our gubernatorial candidate than for our state leg.

LALA WU [00:39:56] I think another really great example is Michigan. In the Michigan house, for example, all we would have needed was about 8000 more votes across the state. Of course, they needed to be in the right districts. But still, 8000 votes across the state of Michigan is not a lot of votes. 8000 more votes and we would have gotten a majority in the Michigan House. Okay. That's already, like, kind of painful enough because it just shows, like, how close we were, but we didn't achieve that. But then you learn that—and our analysis shows—that in the same year in Michigan, there were 137,000 people who voted for Biden, but then who didn't vote for the Democratic State House candidate. And okay, some of those people, they voted for Biden, then they voted for the Republicans. So they were ticket splitters. But in an age of increasing polarization, it's less and less likely that a lot of people did that. And so a lot of those people, 137,000 people who are Democratically inclined, who voted for Biden, if just some of them had voted all the way down the ticket for their Democratic State House candidate. Then just as Gaby was giving that example in Virginia, we could have a majority in the Michigan State House as well. And this is true. Our analysis shows that this is true in states and key chambers all across the country. And so, you know, the story about 2020 when it comes to state leg has been told that, "Oh, Democrats, you know, didn't flip a single state legislature. We didn't make any gains." I mean, I think the untold story here is actually how close we really were and how close we can be if we really adequately invest the resources and focus our attention and embrace states and all of their potential with the enthusiasm that they deserve. We can make a lot of gains.

JVN [00:41:43] How do you ever go there and then not just go to the—I always go to how do you, how are we going to not go to the end of the thing? How are we not using our—

GABY GOLDSTEIN [00:41:50] We see it every year and every year that we've looked at the data, we've seen this as a chronic problem. But just for Democrats, just for Democrats.

JVN [00:41:58] Why? Do we forget? What the fuck?

GABY GOLDSTEIN [00:42:01] So, I mean, there's two things, right? I think in the short term, to turn this around, we need to all collectively wake up and volunteer this year. Right. And start to pay attention this year and realize that it's not an all or nothing volunteering situation. Right. You can still volunteer for your Senate races and all the rest. Just make some time, right? Just make a little bit of time. Join a Sister District phone, bank, whatever it is, make some time. But in the longer term, we really need to shift the narrative. And, you know, the thing is that progressives and Democrats don't really like the idea of state power. We, we think

it's somehow unsavory. Right? We think it's inferior to federal power. We don't have any emotional connection to the idea of state power.

JVN [00:42:46] That only sounds like Democrats who have never lived in a Republican place.

GABY GOLDSTEIN [00:42:49] Totally. But we collectively don't have that—

JVN [00:42:53] But what about all the gays down there? We got to, we got to lean in all these. There's all these poor guys down there. I mean, [COUNTRY ACCENT] weren't we talking about that last time when we were saying how, you know, they just get written off because of the small queer contingencies in red states and they get left to just wither? Not anymore, honey! No!

GABY GOLDSTEIN [00:43:09] I mean, so that's the thing, right? Like, we have to update our thinking about states. We have to imagine them as these important bastions for progressive policy. And we can't just cede power to Republicans at the state level, like, we can't do that. We have to redistribute our energy downwards, down ballot. And that's what will help us in the long term be in a situation where people don't roll off the ballot for Democrats. Right. And so collectively, we have way overinvested in federal solutions, federal candidates. You know, I love looking at the FEC filings just to see how overinvested we are. And they just came out the other day for Q2. So at the end of Q2, Democrats running in noncompetitive federal Senate races, non-competitive, already raised \$130 million this year. The entire annual budget for, like, the Arizona legislature this cycle is, like, \$5 million. Right. And so we vastly overinvest in federal stuff. So those are longer term things, right. To turn this roll-off problem around, we have to focus in the short term and get out the vote this year and do all the things. But in the longer term. It's like Lala was saying, we need to invest in those year-round power building organizations. We need to shift the narrative to include states in our conception of power and good power. We need to do all of those things and think in, in a timeline of decades, not just election cycles.

JVN [00:44:38] Yes. Okay. So I've been reading, like, a lot how, like, you know, some Democratic strategists thought that, like, if Roe got reversed, it would, like, really galvanize voters. But then, like, these polls are coming out and people are, like, "We don't really care." And then I'm, like, "Are those polls right? Cause that feels so weird." What is going to galvanize people, like, what's going to get us—, is it legal weed, honey? Is it protecting gay marriage? What is it?

LALA WU [00:45:03] Yeah. I mean, people are super fired up about abortion. I think it was so shocking to people of all generations, you know, whether you grew up just taking access to abortion for granted or whether you marched and you thought that this bridge had already been crossed, this battle had already been won permanently. I mean, I think the emotional power of abortion is really huge. I'll tell a quick personal story, which is that I have a ten-month-old daughter and I took her to her first march after the Dobbs leak happened. And I

was of course, I had some mixed emotions. I mean, it was, like, very cool to be, like, "Oh, this is her first protest," but obviously not happy about why we were there. And it was really great. We started in, like, kind of Civic Center, San Francisco. We marched towards the ferry building and it was a beautiful day, like, could see the bay glittering in the background. And right towards the end, I saw this sign that said, "I marched with my mother. I never imagined I'd have to march with my daughter." Right. And that hit me so hard because these fights are generational. Whether we want them to be or not, they're cross-generational. They are going to have to be fought generation after generation.

And we do so poorly, we do such a disservice to ourselves and our future generations to not realize that. Right, because we can't just stop whenever we think that we've won. We can stop when the Republicans stop but that's not going to happen any time soon. So I think that there's such an opportunity. People are so fired up about abortion, but we need to maintain it. Right. Because, like, as shocking, as devastating as it is, as many human impacts as there are going to be, between now and the election, the news cycle is so short, we need to maintain this energy and we have to fight against getting complacent. And that means not only talking about abortion, but like you said, talking about guns, talking about climate, talking about education, talking about LGBTQ rights and gay marriage and monkey pox, all of these things. Right. We need to be talking about all of the issues that really matter to people because as Gaby said, we know Republicans right now, they're not in power in the federal government. So they feel super motivated and they are very, very excited to vote. So what we need to do as Democrats, as progressives, is we need to be bold. We need to tell the stories of our candidates. We need to focus on especially the issues that are happening at the local level and at the state level. And if we do that, then we can make gains.

JVN [00:47:46] And then when you mix in, like, family separation from mass incarceration, poverty, lack of opportunity, lack of even a possibility of upward economic mobility, people don't have opportunities we have stifling, never seen before inadequacies between, like, the haves and the have nots, people that are living in poverty. The homeless crisis is worse than it has ever, ever been. And the solution is not to criminalize people and to throw people in jail, but we are not adequately showing people that if we invest in people, if we invest in a living wage, if we invest in housing as a human right, if we get rid away from this mass incarceration, that will make publics safer. And it is so frustrating that our leaders seem to be unable to have what is the antidote to this rage and this knee-jerk reaction to, like, vilify and blame and, like, criminalize people. Because that's really what Republicans do. It's always scapegoating, like, one person. So that just was coming up for me.

But the other thing that I love that you said, Lala, is that, like, with Sister District, if you've listened to me and you're, like, "Fuck, I feel so depressed. This podcast is supposed to be fun!" Bitch! Sister District. It needs your help, honey. You want to be part of the solution and get into it. I heard mutual aid. I heard that there are so many different ways that you can get in the solution when you work with Sister District or whether that's through volunteering, donating money. You really can be part of the solution here, even if the solution for you is, like,

less about like, you know, whipping votes and more about, like, showing up for your communities. But looking ahead, what factors could shape upcoming election cycles? Impending doom, apocalypse? No, I'm just kidding. What's the Moore v. Harper case headed to the Supreme Court? What's the deal with that?

GABY GOLDSTEIN [00:49:30] Yeah, so I think the Supreme Court in general is going to be a big factor in shaping upcoming elections, in addition to whoever is in our state legislatures. And they're connected. So, you know, as we talked about earlier, there's a really long project in conservative jurisprudence around narrowing federal civil rights and returning power to states. You know, it's connected to what we were talking about before, where states are growing in power. We saw this this term with the Dobbs decision. Right. Of course. And, you know, reverting power, the authority to decide whether abortion is—legal abortion—will be available in a state, goes back to the states. We also saw in the EPA case, which a lot of folks may not be familiar with, which was a Supreme Court case this term that essentially limited the EPA's ability to fight climate change and pushes climate change back on to states in a big way. So those are just two examples of this trend where the Supreme Court is returning power to states. And, you know, as we said before, this is really the culmination of 100 years of hard work on the part of the right to train and place judges.

And, you know, in the areas of voting rights, we've already seen, the Supreme Court is not a friend to voting rights. Right. The Shelby v. Holder decision really eviscerated the Federal Voting Rights Act, and now the Supreme Court is going to hear a case in the fall that, frankly, not to be hyperbolic, could really undo democracy. And this is the Moore v. Harper case that's coming out of North Carolina. Republicans in North Carolina argue in this case that state legislatures should have unfettered control over elections. I'm simplifying a little bit, but not too much. This is the independent state legislature theory. It's been roundly rejected and pilloried by, by legal scholars, but they don't have any of the votes that count, on the court. Right. And, and this is something that I've been writing about for almost a year. And the crazy thing about this is that the court, the Supreme Court, may actually have the votes to endorse this theory, which would hand state legislatures complete control over election administration, which could really be a checkmate on the 2024 election, given the fact that, as we've been talking about, Republicans control the legislatures in places like Wisconsin, Georgia, Pennsylvania, Arizona.

JVN [00:552:06] How could that be allowed for a state legislature to administer its own election?

GABY GOLDSTEIN [00:52:11] The way that this theory goes is, it is the state legislature that has the authority to set the rules around federal elections. And the crazy thing is that A, several members of this Supreme Court have indicated their approval of that reading of the federal Constitution. And so, you know, we know that Republicans are looking for ways to engineer the '24 election, and we know that that's their goal. And if the court, in this Moore v. Harper case says that state legislatures have that authority, it could really be a checkmate on

the 2024 election because those legislatures could simply, you know, decide to send electors for the other party. Right. Or who—for, for the Republicans, regardless of who actually gets the most votes in the state.

JVN [00:53:04] Well, that sounds like a pretty galvanizing issue for 2022. So come on, guys! So. Yes. Yay for us. Gaby. Lala! Rounding us out.

LALA WU [00:53:16] Thank you.

JVN [00:53:17] How can people support your work? How can people get on board with Sister District? How can we get involved?

LALA WU [00:53:21] Yes. So please come check us out. Sister District dot com. We're also on IG, on Twitter, come check us out. We're designed to provide a really easy onramp for people who have never been involved before or who just don't know where to start. We get you matched up with your team of local volunteers so that you can take action together. We've got awesome online events, as well as now we're doing more in-person events as well. They're super fun and all the money that you raise it goes to support these amazing candidates and swing districts and battleground states. You can feel good about making a difference. You can do it with some old friends, with some new friends. It's lots and lots of fun. And then I'd also encourage you, if you're intrigued by what we've talked about here. We've got a lot of resources on our website about all different of these topics, as well as programs about the long term infrastructure that we're building too. Because it's like I said, it's not just about elections year after year each cycle, but we also work hard with partners. We're building long-term infrastructure. We've got candidate pipeline programs. Legislators support partnering with movement organizations on the ground. Amazing research. And so we have to go big as we look towards 2024 and even 2030 and beyond. We have to think in decades and I know that we can do it and I'm really excited to have the opportunity to bring you all in, too.

JVN [00:54:50] I'm so appreciative of y'all's work, and I also just want to say, as I was saying that through the podcast, like, what's the antidote to that he and I was thinking: it's community. Because that's really why those people hate so much. It's because it gives them a community because then it's, like, this "us versus them" thing and they get this like thing out of that. But really, like, that's how you can get your hope. That's how you get the will to keep going because you get in community. So whether that's virtual, whether that's in person, if you're someone who's, like, a coastal person, you're already in an urban place, you can still get involved because you're going to get paired with your Sister District. If you're in a more rural place, honey, you can get involved. There's always a place to get involved. So I just am so appreciative of your work and your time. Thank you so much, Gaby. Thank you so much, Lala. I appreciate you both so much.

LALA WU [00:55:31] We appreciate you. Thank you so much.

JVN [00:55:33] Ah! You've been listening to Getting Curious with me, Jonathan Van Ness. My guests this week were Sister District co-founders Lala Wu and Gaby Goldstein. You'll find links to their work in the episode description of whatever you're listening to the show on. Our theme music is Freak by QUIÑ, thank you so much to her for letting us use it. If you enjoyed our show, honey, introduce a friend and show them how to subscribe. You can follow us on Instagram and Twitter @CuriousWithJVN. Our editor is Andrew Carson. Getting Curious is produced by me, Erica Getto, and Zahra Crim. [SINGING] Thank you so much for listening to Getting Curious. You're a real big pal and we're doing lots of stuff together! Yeah, Getting Curious! I love you all so much, yeah yeah yeah. Ohh wow! Bup bup. [SINGING STOPS] Bye!