

Ten Minute T(ea) with Mr. Charlie Malcolm

*Interview conducted by Isabella Lombino
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Q) What makes this election different from other elections?

A) One of the primary differences is that some of the demographic changes that have been taking place are putting some states in play that have not been in play for a long time. Take, for instance, Arizona; there is a Latino population that all of a sudden is in play because the Republican candidate, Donald Trump's positions on immigration have left the Republicans in a precarious position in a state that isn't usually a battleground state. You also see the Latino vote providing a base of support in Nevada. That has been growing over the last few elections, but it's a bit of a firewall; it at least gets the Democrats to a certain level. The weakness of the Trump candidacy makes it even stronger.

The other thing that is fundamentally different is that the Trump campaign has not been driven by the Republican National Committee. It doesn't have the institutional support that previous Republicans, like Mitt Romney, John McCain, or Bob Dole have had. That's really problematic because the organizational structure isn't there for Trump. He has had to rely on rallies, and quite frankly, the press and free coverage, which is kind of interesting. It really helped him in the primaries but is hurting him now in the national election. So Clinton has huge margins over Trump in get-out-the-vote organizations. If you look at each one of the battleground states, just the boots on the ground, people are going door-to-door, and the sheer number of offices are identifying likely voters and then making sure they get to the polls and vote early. The Democrats have an overwhelming majority advantage in key battleground states like North Carolina, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Virginia. It's kind of a tsunami of organization that Clinton has, and she has so much more money. On the other hand, Trump has lost the Koch brothers and big-time donors, so his spigot is that the amount of money falling in is just not there. If you combine that with a lack of institutional organization and a lack of money, then his campaign becomes dependent on his showmanship. So he's been forced to solidify his base of support rather than expanding it, which is problematic. He's never been able to get out of how he ran in the primary to how he's going to run in the general election. So it's really fascinating.

If you think about it, when looking at the dynamics and demographics, Latinos, Asian Americans, African Americans, and women are creating a base of support for the Democrats, while the shrinking power of white male voters are weakening support for the Republicans. There are some interesting shifts that have been going on for a while, but each year it's going to get stronger.

Q) During this election, there's a huge divide between the two parties that has been growing and growing. What has been causing this bigger gap? Especially for students who are thinking of going into careers in politics, is there any way to avoid having that gap, that divide in the future?

A) There are a few things that exacerbate the divide. One is that over the last 20 years, since the Reagan years, people among the working class are struggling to get to the middle class, and there's a lot of anxiety related to globalization, technology, the shrinking industrial base, transformations in the economy, that leave people vulnerable. Progressives would argue that we have not invested in our people for this transformation and that anxiety, anger, and frustration are byproducts of this. And, not to be too political, over the last eight years, the Republicans' response to Obama has been obstructionist. They wanted to make him a one-term president, and, over the last eight years, the Republican Party have had to deal with this Tea Party movement, which makes it hard for Republicans to compromise. So that has caused some problems.

The second is that, since the 2010 census, there has been redistricting, also known as gerrymandering, that has made these districts, large numbers of them, incredibly uncompetitive, leading to more extreme candidates who play to the base rather than candidates who need to appeal to moderate voters. Between Republican obstructionism and gerrymandering, there are some forces out there, combined with social media, that can exacerbate, both in terms of people gravitating to whatever news sources suit them; if you're a conservative populist, you watch Fox, while if you're a liberal, you might be watching MSNBC or NPR. We tend to gravitate to information that fulfills our own narrative. That combined with districts that are now drawn to reinforce the majority views is problematic, and it makes it really hard in Washington D.C. to get something done.

Q) Do you think there's a solution for that?

A) Well, young people are the solution in many respects. If you look at issues like gay marriage and issues concerning transgender rights, there's a reason Obama waited as long as he did to support initiatives for equality for all people. He had to wait for the millennials to become a large enough force to make these changes. They got to a tipping point when more than 50 percent of the people were comfortable with gay marriage. Now you might criticize Obama for not getting ahead of history, but there's a certain reality, a political pragmatism, that he's forced to deal with.

The important question that has to be re-discussed or decided is, "Is this generation better prepared to then ask critical questions about democracy, and force changes in campaign finance, gerrymandering, the Citizens United decision, and corporations or individuals giving money as a form of free speech?" I think young people are going to be critical because there are so many issues, like climate change, that we can't kick the can down the road any further. We really need to address it. And I think there's a reality that the political system must change in order for these problems to be addressed. And I think current issues like climate change are going to pull young people into politics and demand a more responsible and more responsive system of government.

Q) What do you think about the strategy of voting for your party even though you don't like the candidate?

A) If you go to New Hampshire you have Kelly Ayotte, a Republican senator running for re-election, who started off saying “I’m not going to endorse Trump but I’m going to vote for him.” Then she made the mistake during a debate saying that Trump was a role model, and now she’s to the point where she says she’s not going to vote for Trump or Clinton, after all of Trump’s allegations of sexual assault and some other issues.

These kinds of waffling, changing positions have really hurt the Republicans in the Senate races, particularly in these battlegrounds. It’s not clear whether the Republicans are going to pay a price down ballot, at the state level and the House of Representative elections. Although there aren’t many races that are close because of the gerrymandering, the ones that are close are often decided by a few hundred votes. It’s going to be fascinating because you usually can’t tell how those races are going to break until very late in the election process. So the prognosticators of those polls have a really hard time measuring what’s going on.

But if the Senate is any indication of these statewide races, Hassan has pulled ahead of Ayotte; there’s a close race in Pennsylvania, North Carolina, Indiana, by, okay, he’s from a traditional family that has ruled for a long time in Indiana, he’s pulling away. And so the Democrats are now in a commanding, or a decent, position, with a 68 or 70 percent chance of retaking the Senate. Trump is a drag on the candidacies of these Republican senators who are forced to alter their original positions. There are a number of traditional Republicans who got ahead from day one. With the Bush family, for example, a lot of the primary advisors to both father and son to George Bush have come out against Trump, but they don’t have to get elected. It was easy for them to make that call. It’s really fascinating. I think Paul Ryan, the speaker of the House, is a classic example of somebody who has been really hurt by trying to balance the needs of his party with a candidate that is so unpredictable and spending so much time on explaining and justifying some of Trump’s irrational statements. The most recent of which is his unwillingness to accept the outcome of the election, potentially, depending on how it goes, as he says.

Q) Do you think [Trump’s stated failure to recognize the winner of the election] poses a legitimate threat to the nation or democracy, and if so, what is that threat?

A) It’s really hard to say. It’s not so much how Trump responds to the election, it’s how Trump’s supporters respond. I think a number of Trump statements have forced us to think. For example, his statements about women have forced men to really think about what it means to be a man and how to treat women. In the case of democracy, Trump’s backhanded intimidation—he points his fingers at minorities in urban areas -- has been going on for years. I worry sometimes when Donald Trump makes remarks about second amendment gun owners. It doesn’t have to go far. It only takes one person who’s not mentally there to take those words as a catalyst for something horrific—God forbid. That’s why it’s so irresponsible. And the whole issue of voter fraud? There are 30 known cases out of a billion votes where they’ve actually found voter fraud. So, even though it’s thrown out there, at least the media is pushing back and debunking some of these things that have been used to repress voting. It’s almost like going back to Jim Crow South. It’s an attempt to suppress minority voting in urban areas by throwing out unfounded allegations.

In some respects, it's a gift that we're really having these discussions; it's not his intention, but a gift nonetheless. It's so important that we can have a national dialogue and that our universities have done outstanding studies on it.

I guess in the end it's a really important civic/political/civility discussion, and I think both sides—Democrats and Republicans—have a lot at stake. Take, for example: if a Republican narrowly wins a state, and Trump narrowly loses it, then he calls it into contention. That doesn't serve the down ticket Republican. Elections go either way. And it's not just Trump—you have senate races, you have House races, you have state races, you have governor races—so when you question the legitimacy of an election, you're throwing all people on the ballot, and that creates a lot of problems. (Though it might excite some lawyers who want to go battle it and make some cash!)

Q) If the presidential candidates were superheroes and they each had a power, what would their powers be and how would they use them?

A) I think Clinton would have some power that would affect families and children. If you go back to where she started, ever since she was done with college, she's always been focused on children's education, poverty issues, and access to healthcare for families. So if she had to choose one power, she'd go back to what is in her core, in terms of what she's focused her career on. So I don't know exactly what that power would be, but it would probably involve education and health care, and somehow lifting women/children/families forward. (That's not a sexy answer!)

Now if we go to Donald Trump's core, his core power would involve something to do with power itself. And the ability to use that power to make things grow big: bigger! So his power involves something ramping up the U.S. economy in the biggest possible way. And those who were the champions of that would benefit the most. It would focus on something grandiose, large, powerful, and driving wealth.

NMH teacher, coach, parent, and mentor, Charlie Malcolm is a presence on campus. He can be found in the classroom, engaging students in thoughtful discussions in his Foreign Policy class; on the field, leading his soccer team to NEPSAC championships; and around campus, supporting students in their many endeavors. Students remark on his engaging teaching style and effective coaching. Incredibly knowledgeable and informed when it comes to politics, Charlie Malcolm shared his views on this upcoming election with us.