

A Third Party on the Rise with Maurice Mitchell Unedited Transcript

Steve Phillips [00:00:13] Welcome to Democracy in Color with Steve Phillips Color Conscious podcast about politics. I'm your host, Steve Phillips, and I'm coming to you this week from the great state of Texas. I spent this year reflecting on and looking at the work that Susan and I did together and thinking about how to move that forward and continue on that cause and that mission. And then what we had really settled on and identified as our key contribution was identifying and supporting talented people. Most famously, probably we were early supporters of Stacey Abrams over a decade ago and supported her and helped her navigate some of the challenges of ascending to a position of influence and impact that impacted the state of Georgia and then the whole country. And so we're now looking at trying to do something similar and identify and support people in the state of Texas. And so that's what I'm doing here, is making the rounds of the state that is 61% people of color and trying to identify who are talented people who could do the similar kind of work and are doing similar kinds of work in Texas. That was done in Georgia. So that's what I'm doing in the state of Texas. But that's not necessarily the focus per se of today's podcast. But the focus today as podcast is shining a light on talented people. And so we're going to be talking to one of the talented people within this country driving critically important work all across the nation. He leads the Working Families Party. And as I've said before that the work that Working Families Party is doing, some of the most promising organizing that I've seen in this country really since the Rainbow in the 1980s is visionary. It's hopeful, sophisticated, long term and rooted in the tradition of social change that we're trying to embrace and lift up. So I'm excited to discuss this moment we're in where we need to go and talk with our guests about what he's doing to help us get there. And for that conversation, I'm joined by my co-host, Sharline Chiang. Hi, Sharline. Have you worked off the holiday food? And you want to introduce our guest?

Sharline Chiang [00:02:10] Hey, Steve, if you knew how much holiday food I had, you would know that there have not been enough days. I get off. Also, I cooked. I love pumpkin pie amid three. And that means that I'm still eating pumpkin pie. So I think there's a grace period of at least a week before you have to start really working all off because there's leftovers, right? That's what just just so you know, that's how I operate, is Thanksgiving lasts almost a week for me and I am super stoked to have our guests on today and to have him back on. Our guest today is Maurice Mitchell. Maurice is a nationally recognized social movement strategist and organizer for racial, social and Economic justice. Maurice has worked as an organizer for the Long Island Progressive Coalition and for Citizen Action of New York. He was also the director of the New York State Civic Engagement Table after the police murder of Mike Brown. Maurice, located to Ferguson, Missouri, to provide strategic support and guidance to the Movement for Black Lives activists. And in 2015, he helped organize the Movement for Black Lives Convention in Cleveland. Maurice is a graduate of Howard University and he grew up in Long Island. Shout out to the East Coast folks, and he's a child of Caribbean working class parents. Maurice has been the national director of the Working Families Party since 2018. Welcome, Maurice. Or should I say welcome back. We're so happy to have you back on and catch up with you.

Maurice Mitchell [00:03:38] It's good to be back with you all.

Steve Phillips [00:03:40] I really appreciate you making the time. So let's jump in. Right. So you've been building this movement that is bridging both the movement building work and a more traditional civil rights stance and also being involved in electoral politics. We talked a little bit before we got started about Elizabeth Warren, you guys backed Elizabeth Warren in the presidential campaign. And you've been focusing on building this new

political party, Working Families Party has its name as the word in it for a reason. So can you just share with us what does it mean to create a third force in American politics? And what does it mean to create a new party? And how does that relate to the Democratic Party?

Maurice Mitchell [00:04:18] So I think most people remember the Republican Party before MAGA, right? It actually was a different party, meaning there were different people in leadership, sort of the more traditional Republicans, Right. But maybe the coalition wasn't exactly that different. Like there were always well, not always, but certainly since the mid to late 60s, there were there were definitely elements of white nationalist and racist in and around the Republican Party. But they weren't they weren't the leading faction. Right. And so we've witnessed how parties can actually shift and change. In fact, many, many years ago, the Republican Party was actually like the left party and the radical right. So we know that that parties aren't. That's right. That they shift and change their coalitions change. They even change where they might be on the ideological spectrum. Their leadership changes. So what happens is different forces pull them. Right. And the force that I think is pulling the Republican Party into its gravitational pull is this very particular white, Christian nationalist, sort of ethno-nationalist, right wing populist force that has pulled the Republican Party into its center of gravity that can help understand how the party just, I don't know, 20 years ago under George W Bush and the party now is very, very different. Right. And I would say that there is a center left, center, right center of gravity that is at the center of the Democratic Party. And but there's a lot of different people and a lot of different factions in and around the Democratic Party. And so there definitely is like a left faction. So people like Bernie Sanders and people like the AOC are part of the Democratic Party coalition. But I don't think most people would say that their politics are at the very center or the force that is pulling the Democratic Party is a democratic socialist force or anything like that, right? It's more of like a center right, center left, maybe neoliberal consensus, maybe just a little bit of that type of force. Right. And so, we're taking several steps back and we're looking at the two main forces and the two main parties. And we're looking at the outcomes that are leading both to the very, very rigid two-party system in our country. We have a uniquely rigid two-party system. There are other there are other countries that have two party systems or even multiparty democracies where basically there are two main parties. Mm hmm. Our country's two-party system is very, very rigid. It's like baked into election law, right? State by state by state. Right. That wasn't always the case. That that's where we arrived at this sort of dual ballistic Republican Democrat sort of system. There's a on top of that system is this first past the post electoral system where it's not even about the majority is whoever gets the most votes gets the whole thing right. So you can if you get a plurality, you get the the whole prize. Right? That's the first past the post system on top of this rigid two-party system. And when we look at that and we look at the two forces, this like right wing populist, white nationalist. Center of gravity and this sort of center left, center, right center of gravity. And we look and we're kind of witnessing this, this, these structures and what we've witnessed that the Working Families Party is the fact that when you add all these things together, number one, it creates the incentive for a faction of one of the two parties in order for them to express themselves fully, to take over one of the two parties. And so, this is why the MAGA faction has invested in taking over the Republican Party instead of being their own thing. Right. And then also, it creates a natural sort of incentive for political violence because there's very limited space. And so, if you can't express yourself through the venue of one of the two parties using politics and using the traditional means of politics, then then naturally, the next solution is political violence or apartheid, actually changing the structures and overcoming that barrier through anti-democratic means. None of these things we think are helpful or good for working people. Right. And so, at the Working

Families Party, we're trying to do two things. We're building a third force that is a pro-worker, pro-multiracial, pro-people force that can pull not just one party, but pull the entire political system closer to the people. So instead of just having these two poles, they'll be three poles and we're building a party around them. And by party, I don't mean one particular organization. I mean a collection of individuals, activists, voters, think tanks, donors, candidates, labor institutions, grassroots organizations that are part of one shared political commitment and are and have established a shared desire for long term governing. And so that's what we build every single day at the working.

Steve Phillips [00:09:49] So let. Well, for our listeners, just want to share a couple things about third parties. And I guess the question anymore is kind of how do you mean relevant? But it's interesting. One of the things I think I didn't even know until maybe a year or so ago, it's so fascinating to me how much. Abraham Lincoln is lifted up as the epitome of success in terms of power. I was in Cleveland the other see my father at Thanksgiving. There's a, you know, billboards of failed, failed, failed men, a picture of Lincoln linking a 39% of the vote in 1860. And so what happened was you had a third party. The racists could not agree. And so, they ran two candidates who split the vote, which is what enabled Lincoln to actually get in. So, I just think that that's fascinating. And that level historically, you're imagining this first past the Post piece. That's how Democratic presidential primaries used to work by congressional district. Whoever won the most votes, an aggressive district, got all the votes in that congressional district entirely lost. The history just for the efforts of this podcast is that Jesse Jackson fought against that to change that so that you would have proportional representation by congressional district, which then made it more democratic. So, Jesse was able to do better. And what's completely lost to history is that reform is what enabled Obama to win the primary in 2008. So that's like this thing. I want some history I want to share with folks. But at the same time, there's also been a lot of there's a lot of question around both. Is it a risk? And then how realistic or viable is it to have a third party as a something that has, you know, effectiveness and impact? So how are you kind of navigating that door?

Maurice Mitchell [00:11:32] Well, to me, it always comes back to what your strategy. Right. And so, there's a lot of different third-party strategies. What we like to say is that we're not delusional. You know what that means is that we live in the world. We live in the world that everybody else lives in, where basically most political expression is run through either the Republican or Democratic. We live in that world. We don't pretend that that world doesn't exist. We don't pretend that state by state there's all of these laws and this legal regime in order to enforce the two-party duopoly. We don't just, like, ignore the fact that that's true. And so, what we do is like, all right, so my parents are both immigrants of the Caribbean. And so, I know I know a little bit about cooking what you have in the in the kitchen. Okay. I get that. You know, you can't just use Grub Hub or whatever or like you just kind of have to open the cupboard, look what you got and figure out how to make a peace with that. Right. And so, we take that approach to third party partner. So, in places like New York where fusion voting exists and I don't want to go down the whole fusion voting rabbit hole, but basically it allows for parties to cross endorse candidates of other parties. So, in New York and in Connecticut, where fusion voting also exists, when many voters went into the polling place and voted for Joe Biden and Kamala Harris, they had the option of voting for them on the Democratic Party line or the working families. Right. You might ask, like, why is that significant? Well, it allows us and our voters to be able to come together as a community of interest and vote for a candidate and then afterwards tell that candidate, our community voted for you for these particular reasons. And therefore, in governing, we want to leverage our votes. And you could count them, one, to leverage our

votes to support you in governing in this particular way. Right. And there's a number of other things that are really useful about fusion voting. In fact, like the history of our two parties, like third party history and fusion voting is baked into that into that history of the Republican Party kind of came out of fusion. And so we do that in New York, in Connecticut, right, in Philadelphia and in the city of Hartford, Connecticut, and other cities that this thing called the minority party a seat. And basically historically, that's meant that the Republican Party has been the minority party, like in a city like Philadelphia, where it's like that, the enrollment is like 8 to 1. Right? It's a huge Democratic city. You just have to basically show up and file the paperwork as a Republican. And you would get the Republicans would get these two at large minority party seats. At a certain point, we reason, hey, we think in a very, very blue city, there's more of our voters, there's more pro worker, pro interracial, pro where pro immigrant, pro progressive change voters than there are Republican. And so, let's run our own independent Working Families Party candidates for At-Large City Council. And in 2019 we did. Kendra Brooks became the first ever since the city charter in history, non-Republican to hold that seat as a Working Families Party person. And then very recently, Pastor Nicholas O'Rourke joined her. So now we have two black, independent, progressive, pro-worker, pro queer, pro black, pro-environment at large city council. People who are WFP, people in in Philadelphia, one of the larger cities in our country now, in places where you don't have the minority party set asides or you don't have fusion voting, one of the things that we also assess is that in this country, like I talked about, how the Republican Party has been captured by MAGA, Right. And so, if you're serious about engaging in any real policy debates, you're not going to find those in the Republican. They're debating about whether or not January 6th was either like organized by the Deep State or is it organized by the globalist. Right. Like that is their conversation. Right. They're still debating how much Trump actually won. That is the debate that they're having. Right. So serious policy debates in this country happen inside of the Democratic Party. And the venue in which they happen is the Democratic primary. And so we use the Democratic primary in order to have the conversation that we want to have about whether or not our policies should be centered in the interest of workers or the interests of corporations, whether or not we should have a more progressive taxation system, you know, how we should lean into racial justice, how we should approach public safety. Those debates that normally you might maybe in a in a generation or two before they were happening between the Republican and Democratic Party, they're really only happening inside of the Democratic Party. And so, we utilize the Democratic Party primary in order to engage in those debates. And we surface our own people. We call them Working Families Democrats who run as Democrats in the Democratic primary. So, for example, Congressman Greg Casar, he's somebody who we supported in Texas. So, we supported Greg when he was on the Austin City Council, and he made his way to Congress, and he engaged. He was there was an open seat, and we supported him in that open seat primary. And he's now a sitting congressperson. And there's a number of other people, you know, somebody I'm really proud to call a friend and a comrade. The current mayor of Chicago, Brandon Johnson, who I first met him when I first got this job. And he was a teacher and union organizer. Right. And we supported him when he was running for municipal government five years ago. And now he's the mayor of one of the largest cities in our country. Right. These are independents who don't necessarily come from the traditional pathways for governance, which kind of weeds out. It's a good vetting system for independence, integrity, progressive values. Right. So, we create our own pathways so we could support people who have backgrounds like, you know, Jamaal Bowman, who is the educator or the mayor of Chicago, who was a teacher and an organizer or graphic designer, also was an organizer. You, our Summer Lee. Right. People who actually have these experiences. I mean, it's so funny, but often many of our candidates almost to the one because they're working-class people or they come from a working class experience

or they are still living in working class conditions and they have to deal with things like paying off their school loans or juggle paying off traffic tickets. Those are often used against them and like.

Steve Phillips [00:18:33] Right.

Maurice Mitchell [00:18:34] But it backfires because like, oh, I could identify with that. I've been there, you know. And so those are the types of people that we're able to support. And as you know, modern electioneering is very, very, very expensive. Yeah. Which also makes it harder for people who don't have these networks where they could just kind of touch base with all of these wealthy people that can max out to them. And so, we also provide the support through grassroots means for folks to be able to be competitive, maybe not dollar for dollar with folks who are either self-funded or have the backing of industries, but we're able to be competitive through our net, our grassroots network.

Sharline Chiang [00:19:17] This is I know we've had you on before and you've explained all this and I'm so glad to have you on again because I think that it's sinking in deeper for me and it's always just so compelling and you're making it so clear. And just to help listeners connect the dots. I know you mentioned Jamaal Bowman and Summer Lee, we've had them on before as guests. And so listeners, you're listening to this episode and you want to hear from the candidates from who Working Families, parties have supported and helped, you know, their careers. Those are two leaders, political leaders who this is the context, right, for their journey. And I think that's really fascinating. And then I loved talking to them and their personal journeys are fascinating. So, it's really good to just sort of get that have this lens and thinking about how they got to where they are. Real quick question was how what year was Working Families Party founded? I don't know if you have mentioned it already...

Maurice Mitchell [00:20:14] Yeah 25 years ago, 1998 Working Families Party was founded and it was founded in this context when, you know, it was during the Clinton years and they were experimenting with triangulation and they believed that they could basically lock Republicans out and just have, you know, cycle after cycle of Democratic governance if they stole the Republicans conservative secret sauce as it related to economic policy, that they would just undercut the Republicans with economic policy. And basically, the theory is we could retain our coalition by offering social rights concessions to our diverse coalition, but then making a deal with organized capital and Wall Street and not necessarily offering our coalition economic rights, which much to the chagrin of the labor part of the coalition. And so, some people inside of that labor part of the coalition and some grassroots organizations got together and built the Working Families Party, started in New York because New York had fusion voting. Previous to that, there was this idea called the New Party, where folks were trying to do this in every state, but the Supreme Court had had a different design, and they said, well, you shouldn't actually can't be the law of the land everywhere, but you can be the law state by state. And so that's how that's how WP came together. And it was a multiracial sort of labor community coalition that came together to build the first Working Families Party in New York. And now, yeah, now we're we have, we have a presence of some sort in 20 states.

Sharline Chiang [00:21:53] That's amazing. And in a very short amount of time.

Steve Phillips [00:21:55] Great amount of time. I literally it.

Sharline Chiang [00:21:57] Is a short amount of time.

Steve Phillips [00:21:59] When you said, said it was like 1998 wasn't 25 years ago I was like, oh well I guess it was.

Maurice Mitchell [00:22:08] Yeah. What's the bad part? Yeah, it's a trip is a trip. It's a trip. How, how, how? Like time works. How it contracts and expands like. Yeah, you know, when I do, like when I do historical readings and try to in order to understand where we are today, I'm just taken by how I was like, oh, the Civil War didn't happen that long ago.

Steve Phillips [00:22:32] Right?

Sharline Chiang [00:22:32] And we know all about that.

Maurice Mitchell [00:22:34] You know.

Sharline Chiang [00:22:35] That's actually the essence of it.

Steve Phillips [00:22:38] Yeah, yeah.

Maurice Mitchell [00:22:38] You know.

Sharline Chiang [00:22:39] Down the rabbit hole on history.

Maurice Mitchell [00:22:41] Yeah, yeah, yeah. You know, you see these pictures, These horrific pink pictures of lynchings. Yeah, right. Yeah. Like, yeah, some of the younger people in these pictures are still alive. Are elderly.

Sharline Chiang [00:22:54] I think about that sometimes. How not not long ago that was.

Steve Phillips [00:22:57] Yeah.

Sharline Chiang [00:22:58] They are speaking about the Working Family Party's history. You guys just had your first convention, the Working Family Party has in Philadelphia in October and freshman Rep Summer Lee, who we just mentioned before again she was a former guest, were representing for Pennsylvania as she was one of the key speakers. And as a note for our listeners, again, Representative Lee, along with other members of the squad, are facing an expected \$100 million campaign by the lobbying group AIPAC, to challenge them next year in 2024. Steve, you were at the convention last month. I know from you know, you came back and gave the team like a whole sort of overview and summary of what a what amazing convention it was. And so, I wanted you to also share with our listeners a little bit about what that experience was like for you.

Steve Phillips [00:23:51] Yeah, well, I think we talked about a little bit in our in our newsletter. And you know, I also have tried to be, you know, a student of history as well. And so, what in looking at movements and what are the elements of movements and looking at building power and what are the components of that. And so that is what was so inspiring to me was the multiple elements all together in the same place. And so, you everything from Politics Summer Lee gave this amazing speech to having partnership with key elements of the movement in terms of top labor leaders, the head of the teacher's union in Colorado and those entities coming and lending their support in solidarity. Very some of the top progressive donors in the country spending the whole weekend being there, and then all of these activists from all of the years. And so, I actually I can tell you

this Maurice met somebody we actually didn't know but we know people in common from the 80s. And so, we actually connected them while we're at the convention. And then also art and culture as a fuel for the movement and that being infused with politics and reflecting the energy and the sense of those pushing for social change. And so, Maurice mentioned the Philadelphia city Council candidates, right? So, they both came up on stage and Nic O'Rourke rather than launching into a speech. He launches into song. And so, he started singing and bringing the whole crowd in song. And then they turned to the speeches. It was just a very both impressive and inspiring combination of the elements that I feel are critical to building power and creating and creating a movement. But if you wanna talk about why, because this is your first convention ever, right? So, you want to talk about why you guys decided to do that.

Maurice Mitchell [00:25:36] We when I came in five years ago, one of the things that I felt like I had a mandate to do was to truly, truly nationalize the party, right? Because we were in a number of states, but really focus on building that sense of national community and really thinking about the party as a third force that we're all collectively built. And I mean this the short answer is like it took it took 25 years to get there, truly. And, you know, I'm you know, my organizing training tells me that there are no shortcuts in organizing. Right. And you really have to, you have to make assessments about the overall conditions, which we don't have any control over. But it's our job to, like make good assessments about what's actually happening out there. And then also the internal conditions that you do have control over that. Right. And sometimes I wish I had more control over that than I do. But we do have control over what you organize. And coming we were about to come into a presidential year of 2024, and we really wanted to cohere all of these different elements that you talked about and help to, I think, articulate what we felt internally we had achieved, which is the basic elements of us, not just as like a nice progressive organization, but us collectively as a third force. And so that's what that's why we pulled the trigger on I'm having this national convention in order to demonstrate to us as a party that our aspirations are actually grounded and also is 25 years since we started. So, it was a perfect sort of inflection point to look back at the past 25 and look forward at the next 25 and into and to challenge everybody to step out of the proximal thinking where you're only focused on the next election year and actually think what we could both build together over the next 1 to 2 decades. And so we thought it was like a great opportunity to have that particular conversation and to challenge everybody to really think about party building, which is different than institution building one institution at a time, but building a center of gravity that includes many, many institutions, many, many actors that are all committed to a particular direction, and in particular, North Star, which is like to me, like the crown jewel of organizing. Right? And I think sometimes for good reasons, and I think reasons that have to do with our lack of vision or our lack appetite or sometimes the cynicism that we get in that convinces us that we can oftentimes in our spaces, we don't aspire to that level of organizing, which is not about any one self-interested piece. It's all of the pieces together, right?

Steve Phillips [00:28:38] So I want to pick up on that and reflect a little bit more on this moment that we're in, because that was one of the things that I took. And that's what was so inspiring, is the long-term vision and thinking about the moment that we're in. And that, as I mentioned about, you know, a decade or 2 or 3 there, you have people from different states presenting their plans. Here's what we want to be in 2028. Here's what to be in 2038. Here's going to be in 2048. I was like, wow, that is a long-term thinking. But I feel this moment demands that. And so that's I think, is what is so encouraging about people and groups and leaders who are have that level of breadth of vision, both historically as well as what has to happen where we're going. And so, I wanted to get your thoughts with

looking at, you know, in terms of being a student of history in this moment that we're in. And there's been a lot more discussion just more recently around the civil rights movement. Right? So, the Obama produced documentary Rustin is out now. People are watching that. I've been reading the book, Jonathan Eig's book King, which goes in great granular detail about the building of the movement. Like, I didn't actually realize how much Brown versus Board of Education decision shaped the environment that then emboldened people in Montgomery to do the Montgomery bus boycott. But I don't know how much the, but the world is very different as well now today, just social media and technology, etc... And so, I'm just very curious, what do you think as somebody who I see is trying to carry on that tradition and that lineage around what, from that time period, civil rights women in particular, should we be? Holding two. And then what about these current conditions? Demand new thinking and strategy and tactics. I'm very curious what your assessment of that is.

Maurice Mitchell [00:30:15] I do think that there's something about a black led multiracial coalition. Right. And I think when we've had the most success at making significant and sustained leaps, that those elements have been in the place that the civil rights movement was always multiracial in some form and always had black leadership. And, you know, I don't want to go into too much about why I think that's true, but I do think that's true. And I think we should be curious about why that's been true and what we could learn about that in building the multiracial, broad containers that allow everybody to see themselves in the present. One of the things that so I'm one of the folks I helped to build the Movement for Black Lives from 2014 on. And one of the interventions we were attempting to make was that around how we constructed leadership. And so, what I mean is and I saw the Rustin film and it was quite good, I was actually really pleasantly surprised. You know, I don't, I don't own it like I'm in, you know, I'm involved in a lot of social justice work, but sometimes when I'm watching TV, I just want to I want to watch some, like, reality TV.

Steve Phillips [00:31:33] Oh, yeah, no. Needles me for watching these Norwegian murder mysteries I like. Sometimes I just want to see a white detective try to figure out which white person killed white Norwegian. Right.

Maurice Mitchell [00:31:45] So, yeah, yeah, yeah. So, the film director, Haile Gerima. I went to Howard, so he taught and teaches at Howard. He often says like, Yeah, sometimes when I go to the movies, I, I just try to find the whitest movie so I don't like have to activate my critical thinking so I could just enjoy myself, you know? So, but yeah, so the thing around leadership, so what the Rustin film I thought did really well is like it really showed the labor involved in organizing anything, right? And how many people it takes and how diverse the thinking has to be. Right. And it wasn't. One of these reductive civil rights stories were just focused on like a preacher in a suit, which I really appreciated. And so, you know, in the Movement for Black Lives, one of the things that we attempted to do was to demonstrate what a leader for movement look, our movements have always been leader full, but they weren't necessarily the way that we understand. Leadership wasn't constructed in that way. It was like, is a guy who's a religious leader in a suit. Like that's that's the leader, right? And so, we very intentionally elevated this idea that, you know, there's always a lot of people involved, and we're going to try to demonstrate that. And we also wanted to demonstrate that the identities of the leaders, like the bodies that that the leadership is contained in, look all different types of ways. And there's always been LGBTQ people and women. And so, the movement for Black Lives, I think very creatively and I think we demonstrated that, yeah, look, there's not just one person. There's a lot of people across a lot of different black identities. Now, the one thing that I think I've learned from that experience is that the leader full thing almost some people took from that the

idea that, oh, anybody could be a leader. And I think we need to be a little bit more precise about that. Like, I think leadership can be found anywhere, but everyone is not prepared for leadership. Is that equally prepared for leadership? Right. And in the present, it's actually really important that we say multiple things. Leadership does matter, right? The individuals that we elevate to leadership positions, it really does matter. It's not just one person or one dude. It's a variety of people. And however, it's not everyone, which means we need to be discerning about the qualities. And I think the qualities that we really need today are the skills, the social emotional skills, the strategic skills that allow for coalition build, allow for leaders that are able to operate at a span that's much greater than themselves or much greater than their organization, number one. I think number two, we need leaders that are able to see much farther than just five inches past their nose, we need visionary in this particular moment and that. So, we need to be searching for vision, the ability for people to make assessments about the present and the future two or 3 or 4 decades into the future, or even more. And. Leaders who choose the breath of their leadership can't contain many, many people, many, many identities. And there's like, I think, a alchemy where you rooted in your story and your identity and allows you to represent the interests of people far, far past your story and your identity and so I even talk a little bit about this, about identity politics and how it was initially developed and, you know, some of the work and writing of the Columbia River collective talk about identity politics as a as a venue for solidarity and how in present day identity politics has been deprived of the court, the political context in which it was developed. And so, people are using their identity and using their personal story for narrow self-interest and not for the broader interest of building a bigger We. And so, I think there's something to learn about how leadership is constructed in various moments and how the broader conditions require us to figure out what type of what quality of leadership we need. And so perhaps in the context of the civil rights movement in the late 60s, early summer of these or even in the 50s, all the way into the early 70s, there, the type of leadership that was unitary, almost singular, that type of leadership, the way that was constructed, was useful for that moment. But we saw the limitations. We often saw how if you if you could cut down one leader, you could destabilize a movement. Right. And so, we tried to learn from that. And I think we're still learning from that. And I would say that, yes, we need to actually be intentional and forthright about building leadership, that that could hold multiple people, multiple identities, but also be very, very discerning about the qualities and the skills and the social emotional skills to be able to hold a lot of people and to be able to help make meaning of conflict because conflict isn't bad. It can be generative, but it takes certain special skills in order to generate the best things out of conflict. And that could also be able to look down the path in order to help people focus on and nos.

Steve Phillips [00:37:25] Yeah, I just want to pick up quickly on this leadership point. As I mentioned, I've been reading about in a much more granular way, appreciating this, the Montgomery bus boycott. And so, yes, King, a man and a minister in a tie. And then there's been some more understanding of Rosa Parks role in all of that. But you had this combination. So, there was a black lawyer, Fred Gray, who was very instrumental in thinking through and planning out and what would the legal strategy be and being ready and maybe paired. And then Joanne Robinson. Right. A black woman professor at Alabama State University, helped create the women's organization that did the nitty gritty work of printing out 30,000 fliers to hand out across the city. So, all those different elements of leadership were required to be able to respond to that moment.

Maurice Mitchell [00:38:14] And one thing I want to say about printing out 30,000 fliers, because you mentioned social media. And so, I remember in the beginning of the movie for Black Lives really frustrated me. Like people kind of, I think overdid it when it came to

how the movement was like a Twitter phenomenon or a social media phenomenon and all these other things. The reality is, and it's as simple to me as this, that organizers use the most readily available technology in order to get the word out right. And the most readily available technology during the civil rights movement was this amazing ability to be able to churn out 30,000 fliers. That was like that was the Twitter of that era, that was the cutting edge technology. And we just used the tools that were available to us. But it wasn't as though the technology was the beating heart of the movement. It was the organizing which, you know, without that, we couldn't have built what we did.

Steve Phillips [00:39:11] Yes, the mimeograph machine.

Sharline Chiang [00:39:14] Ha, I remember.

Maurice Mitchell [00:39:17] Yeah, yeah, Twitter and Instagram are just like our version of the mimeograph.

Steve Phillips [00:39:23] Yeah.

Sharline Chiang [00:39:24] So, Maurice, we know we're heading into 2024 for another presidential election cycle. And I wanted to ask you what you feel is the most important thing to focus on in 2024.

Maurice Mitchell [00:39:33] Sure. Well, I think two things, I'm not a big fan of hard dichotomies and binaries. Right. And so, one of the binaries or dichotomies that bedevil me is this idea that, you know, there's some people who are focused on the proximal thing, like winning the next election. And then there's other people who are thinking about the long term big structural stuff. And those are two separate people, two separate sets of thinking. And I think that that's one of the reasons. Why people on the pro-democracy side have been so frustrated is because we put these two types of thinking in different categories. Right. I think it's really important that that with 2024, we think about the proximal stuff, and we think about the long term. And so how I how that comes together is the reality that we need to think about the proximal stakes, and we need to have a sober understanding as best as we can and kind of game out in. And unfortunately, like we talked about, it will be a binary choice between two candidates. Right?

Sharline Chiang [00:40:38] Right.

Maurice Mitchell [00:40:38] I wish the I wish we had a multiparty democracy where that wasn't the case. But that would be that would be the case. And so, we don't know who the candidates are, but it looks like Trump is doing really well. And it's likely to be Trump. But things could change. All types of things could change. And Biden is by far the leading candidate. But all types of things could change. But putting those two people aside, generic Republican governance and I already talked about who the Republican Party is today, right?

Steve Phillips [00:41:11] Right.

Sharline Chiang [00:41:12] Right.

Maurice Mitchell [00:41:12] Generic Democratic Party governance. And just think about what they've actually said they want to do. I think we should take them seriously and literally we should listen to them. They're not being coy about it. The Republicans want to

use the government as a tool to be able to settle scores, to be able to take on their political enemies, to use government as a tool to spread their cruelty. Right. The Democratic Party has also shared some of the things that they want to do. Right. And again, I'm building a third party that is that lives in and around that but is also like outside of the Democratic Party as well. And I'm listening to what they're saying. And what they're saying is that they actually recognize, and this is something new after 40 years of this neoliberal consensus that trickle-down economics and traditional neoliberalism has been discredited and they're open to an industrial policy that focuses on everyday people. That's important information if your everyday person. Right. And so, what we're talking about is a pretty stark choice between, like, textbook authoritarianism.

Sharline Chiang [00:42:32] Mm hmm.

Maurice Mitchell [00:42:33] And at least the beginning of a post neoliberal economic order that is focused on regular people. Right. And so, I think people should actually wrestle with the fact that that is what's happening proximally. Right. Now, let's take a step back and talk about the long term. For me, I think one of the problems with American politics or one of its deficits is how focused and it makes sense because American culture is like focused on individuals. And, you know, we have this current of individualism in that, you know, rugged individual, all of that. Right. And so American politics is generally like obsessed with individual personalities. Right. Like and most people engage, especially presidential politics from the standpoint of like, all right, that guy Biden or that guy Trump or whoever. Do I do I like them? Do I trust them. Right. And perhaps, perhaps do I agree with their policies? And that's basically the prism in which most people engage politicians, especially on the presidential level. And what I would argue is that focus on liking and trusting your partner or your mom or your friend, like don't spend any of that emotional energy on politicians. Right. The question the long-term question, the strategic question that you should be asking yourself is if this person becomes president, what does that do for the prospects of, of my long-term strategy? What benefits or challenges? Right. That's actually the question we're trying to resolve. And when we make endorsements, we're not endorsing a person because you don't you, don't have that relationship with them. You're endorsing a terrain of struggle in order to advance your long-term strategy. Now, if you try to answer the question, you're like, I don't have a long-term strategy. Develop one or find a organization that does have one and adopt it and then try to answer that question. But these are strategic questions. And if you're not answering the questions strategically, then the two parties are more than happy to take your vote and to advance a strategy all their own without your participation. And so, what I want to bring people into is a strategic sensibility. I believe in the American people. And I think if we call the American people into a strategic sensibility and call the American people into a shared strategic alignment, that they will take it on. This is why I do party building. It's one of the things that parties should be doing because of the very limited party competition in this country. It's one of the things that the two major parties don't spend a lot of time doing. It's become kind of like two sort of marketing schemes rather than actually helping to develop people's strategic orientation. And every day, people without fancy degrees can engage that. How do I know? I look around the world, I look at South Africa and the ANC, who like how if you are a grandmother living in Soweto, working as a domestic worker, how do you develop a deep commitment to the idea of black freedom when there's no indicator that that's ever going to happen in your lifetime?

Steve Phillips [00:45:54] Right.

Maurice Mitchell [00:45:54] Right. Because the ANC had a real presence in her life and trusted her to understand the strategy.

Steve Phillips [00:46:03] Yeah.

Maurice Mitchell [00:46:03] And so, you know, we actually need to do that strategic work to help make meaning of what 2024 is. This is one of the reasons why the far right has attacked labor organization. Right. Labor organizations were one of the places where every day working people in the double digits were able to make meaning, make political meaning. And their union, their union stamp of approval meant something.

Steve Phillips [00:46:30] Right.

Maurice Mitchell [00:46:30] And help them understand what direction they want. This is why organizing is so important. And this is why political decisions should not be made individual by individual. This is why political decisions have to be made collectively so that collectives of people could wrestle with debate, share ideas, and come to a political consensus together. That's how you're able to actually advance a particular agenda. And this is why the right wing wants us to believe that we're just atomized individuals, that there's no society.

Steve Phillips [00:47:05] Right.

Maurice Mitchell [00:47:06] That it's a waste of time to organize. Right. Because they know when people come together and are able to have it out and wrestle with ideas together and debate and then come to a consensus and then move towards that consensus and then have that strategic sensibility, that's when the good stuff starts to happen. And so, and one of the reasons why I like elections is that it gives us practice every cycle, every two years, every one year. If you're focusing on every single election, including the municipal elections, which we are, it creates opportunities for us to practice once again getting everyday people, not just to vote for Candidate A or Candidate B, but to be part of a closer and closer political agreement with one another. This is what organizing is. This is the promise of party building. And when parties are actually working the way, they should be working and people have a party identity and their party isn't just voting for this one person at this one time, but the party might be the bar that they go to. The party might be the people that they hang out with. The party is a social and political and almost a spiritual environment. That's one of the ways that that everyday people feel a sense of hope and togetherness. Like one of the I'm not surprised that the surgeon general, for example, recently said that we have an epidemic of loneliness. Makes sense. Makes sense because we're so disconnected. Yeah. And loneliness. Despair on top of economic insecurity and physical insecurity and a lack. Lack of physical safety. This. This is the perfect petri dish for right wing authoritarians to come and sweep room, which is why it's so important for us to do the solidarity organizing to repel the right-wing authoritarians. And one of the reasons why organizing isn't just a nice thing now it's a mandate because they're more than willing to engage with some level of curiosity and their faux care. But it feels real to working people who are like, I'm afraid I can't make ends meet. Things aren't working out for me. And they say, yes, yes, I see you. Mm hmm. I can't believe your eyes and ears. I hear you. Yeah. And work with me. Work with me so I could help you restore your dignity.

Steve Phillips [00:49:26] Right?

Maurice Mitchell [00:49:26] So I could help you protect your family.

Steve Phillips [00:49:28] Yeah.

Maurice Mitchell [00:49:28] Right. And so, when I think about when I think about 2024 and I think about the proximal thing, it's a very as a very stark and I know every election is the most important election of our lifetime. Right? This couldn't be more stark, right? Because many of those people in the MAGA wing of the Republican Party who currently run the Republican Party, they have practice now. Right. And so, we do have a stark proximal choice. And we have this long-term opportunity, I think, to actually do the deep organizing of working people so that we're not every election re debating whether or not we're going to be a democracy that can only happen through the sustainable.

Steve Phillips [00:50:05] Right.

Sharline Chiang [00:50:06] That's a that's. That's just both. It's both. Both And.

Steve Phillips [00:50:10] Right. So, we're up against the end of the time. But I know Sharline had a quick question, and I do think it's important to wrap with this in terms of leadership, the duration, the multi dimensionality of us as individuals. Sharline, you want to ask your cultural related question and we can wrap.

Sharline Chiang [00:50:25] I want to ask my cultural related question, which is we are not going to let our listeners forget those who may have listened to the first conversation when we talked, but I never forgot and am still excited about the fact that you are an Afropunk musician and that you come you know, you're an artist and I see you like, you know, like we even when you talk, you're animated. It's like he's on stage and now he's in the zone and he's rocking out. And so, I did get to check out some of your band's videos lately, and I got to tell you, I loved it. I love it. That's my jam. You may not know this. Don't let the nice Chinese lady, middle aged Chinese lady demeanor appearance fool you. But I was fine until, you know, I may or may not have been that mom lately on a tough day, close the bathroom door and just cranked Rage against the Machine is so I was really enjoying getting to see you play and listen to your music. So, my question is, I know you're so busy and you are a dad and you are, you know, political leader and movement leader. Curious these days if you are still finding time to make music. And if not, you know what? What is it that you how do you still incorporate art and music into your life?

Maurice Mitchell [00:51:39] Oh, great question. So, the answer is yes. I still if I panned, you would see a piano and a guitar, like right on the wall, right in between my zoom call, and I will play a little bit. And I find ways of like making sure that music is still present in my life. That band that I started when I was a teenager, we're all still close friends and occasionally every now and then when the when the right promoter ask us to come together, it's the opportunity for us as longtime friends to get together and play. So that does happen maybe once every two years. And I think we're actually going to be playing in New York and Long Island in February.

Sharline Chiang [00:52:19] Yeah.

Maurice Mitchell [00:52:20] Yeah. I still find these little opportunities. And then and then lastly, I'm able to get maybe a little bit of that feeling that I used to get on stage when I was crisscrossing the country. By the way, like it's interesting when I look back on my life and I think of all the experiences I, I had crisscrossing the country as a young person and like,

you know, playing in some of these very, very remote towns in the Bible Belt. And like a lot of that has prepared me to be able to organize across race, across region. Like I, I remember feeling really awkward and playing this town. I was the only black person. And, and then afterwards the promoter invited me to their parents' house and me, me waking up after the parents were like preachers or something and they made this great breakfast and I was like, "Oh, wow." I just I didn't know what white people in the South would be like or whether or not this would be cool or, you know. But the way that I feel like I'm able to weave in the creative has a lot to do with how I'm approaching organizing. So those elements of culture that, that Steve that you saw at the WFP National Convention, they weren't by chance. Every element of the convention was vetted and thought out. And part of it was, how are we? And, you know, I write about this like, how are we ensuring that our work is human and humane, and people trade in culture, right? It's like and it's one of the things that frustrates me about the how professionalized the culture of some organizing has become is that when you think about the civil rights movement and you think about a lot of our mass movements, they were grounded in a particular culture, thinking about movements in general, not just in this country or the ground in a particular culture. They had their artists, they had their songs, they had their dances, they had their. And we for some reason I feel like we've put that to the background. And so, a lot of what we're doing at WFP is foregrounding culture, right? And it's like, yeah, the agenda, the media is important, but the food that you eat is important as well as almost, almost as important. And the music that you hear and the it's our job to make our movements irresistible. That's our job. It's not our job to get every point in an agenda. It's our job to make our movement irresistible. And so, when I'm like, I get to the creative, part of my job is like the writing that I do. And I'm on more stages now because people are both inviting me to speak and I'm putting myself in places where I'm speaking publicly, and I get to do some of the lyrics. Stuff I get to, you know, like I got to speak at the convention, and it was a real pleasure to work on that speech and figure out how do I weave in something that might sound dry, like political education with story and with spirit. And so that becomes my artistic sort of challenge. How do I do that with language, right? And so those are some of the ways that we that I get to continue to keep my artist self-alive in this work, like ultimately, ultimately humans. One way to think about this, right, is like humans across the board enjoy a good time. You know, like, yeah, you know, and like, you know, children play as we grow. We never lose that desire to lean into play. And I think if we like so much of our politics becomes about like metrics and these weird algorithms that we focus on in order to try to be as efficient as possible. And it's just like I think that that is, that totally misses the point of politics. Politics are about people. People are emotional and trying to make our politics efficient. It's just like that. Like, you know, there's no there's no campaign manager who after a losing election was like, let me tell you how efficient that was. I bet that never happens, right? So, it's like, let me tell you, the efficiency is that we figured out how to for out of that campaign is like, did you win? Right. And so, I actually like I think that if you're serious about power you need to be serious about fun and you need to be serious about where people are at and need to be serious about culture. You need and you need to not skip any steps as it relates to that that can be manufactured. That has to there's a way that like Thanksgiving just passed, right? And there's a way that that that sweet potato pie that your mom or your grandma or you make it taste different than the thing that you buy in the store, you know, and we need to, we need to get back to that root because that is contagious. That is irresistible. That will, that is what movements are made of. It's just like, I want to be there and it's like, you know, so much of the instructions, the step-by-step instructions that we try to imbue on people, they don't that that doesn't work from the top, from the top down, like this is how you need to be and that's how you need to be. And these are our standards. You know, the first time you go to a wedding of a culture you've never been to, you don't, you don't it doesn't take you too long to just figure out how to get

along. Right? First time you go to Indian Wedding, it's like you're not like, okay, I need Indian wedding practice. You just go and you adopt the culture of the people around because you want to fit in and have fun. And there's so much in terms of the mores and values of a movement that could be imparted through making sure that the party is right. That I think we miss is like people are not star, although we need to have great information. People are not stop starved of information. People are starved of connection. If you bring the connection, then the connection could be a delivery system for all types of events. And so, as an artist, that's the thing that I'm sitting with. It's like, how are we weaving connection and how are we taking the best of our culture in order to make that happen?

Maurice Mitchell [00:58:37] Yeah, yeah, you may. Oh, I'm. I'm a writer. You make me think about Vincent Harding wrote this book called There Is a River Black Struggle for Freedom. And I remember the intro to it. And he talks about the rise of the civil rights movement and then the sit in movement. And he says part of it, people say that the criticism was that it was in fashion. And he says, but what a fashion it was to be in, right. In terms of wanting to be part of something like that.

Maurice Mitchell [00:59:01] That's right.

Steve Phillips [00:59:02] Okay. So, we could go on forever, but then our producers would not be happy. And so, we need to wrap this up. Really appreciate the time with you, Maurice. Appreciate your work. And, you know, keep on keeping on. And I really appreciate you being with us today.

Maurice Mitchell [00:59:18] Appreciate you all. Thank you for the opportunity.

Maurice Mitchell [00:59:20] All right. That's all the time we have for today. Thank you for listening to democracy and color with Steve Phillips. Please help us get the word out about this podcast by subscribing wherever you get your podcasts, sharing with your friends, tweeting at Democracy Color and at Steve P tweets in findings at Democracy in Color on Facebook or Instagram. You can also keep up with all things Demco by subscribing to our newsletter at Democracy in color.com. If you listen to our podcast on iTunes, please leave us a rating and a comment. It helps others to find our show. This podcast is a democracy in color production. Our producer is Olivia Parker. Fola Onifade is our staff writer and associate producer, Sharline Chiang is our editor and co-host. Special thanks to April Elkjer for quality check recorded virtually with the assistance of the Podcast Studio, San Francisco. Until next time. And as we head into the holidays, if you're serious about power, you have to be serious about fun. Till next time, keep safe.