

Back to Basics: The Ethics of Voting

Christiane Wisehart (producer): Examining Ethics with Andy Cullison is hosted by the Janet Prindle Institute for Ethics at DePauw University.

[music begins]

Andy Cullison: Hi, I'm your host, Andy Cullison. Election day is coming up very soon so today we have a special episode for you. Our producer, Sandra Bertin is going to share some reporting she's done on the ethics of voting. She shared what she found with our producer, Christiane Wisehart.

[music fades]

Christiane: Why am I here?

Sandra Bertin: You are here because I have some juicy, juicy tape, and I really wanna get your authentic reaction to all the clips I'm gonna show you.

Christiane: I'm nervous, but go on. Okay. What are the, what are the clips about?

Sandra: Okay. We're gonna be talking about the ethics of voting. So all my clips are people chatting—that I got to chat with about the ethics of voting.

Christiane: Awesome. Okay. Interesting.

Sandra: Yeah. And so the reason I got interested in, in this topic is because in this election, it seems like people are arguing more than I've ever seen about the absolute basics of voting. And I don't mean arguing over who to vote for, although obviously that's happening because that happens all the time, but I've seen a lot, a lot of people arguing about whether they should vote at all or whether it really is some kind of obligation to vote, or if they're gonna protest a vote. Like I know a lot of people don't like either of the major candidates and they wanna show their unhappiness with those two candidates and at its, and a lot of people are arguing about what's the best way to show that protest. Have you noticed that too?

Christiane: Yeah. This election cycle, it really has people in its grips. Um, like the stakes feel really high, I think. And they feel so high that, um, even voting itself feels like it's, um, high stakes this election cycle. So I can't wait to hear the voices that you've been collecting. Um, so, okay. So you said you talked to a lot of people who all did you talk to?

Sandra: Yeah, so we talked, well, I talked to a lot of people, um, and <affirmative>, and some,

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some, we did a call out on the show. And so a couple of the, of the people you're gonna hear on here are actually our wonderful listeners who called in, um, who called in their opinions and left them on my voicemail, which I really appreciate.

Christiane: Thank you, listeners.

Sandra: Thank you so much. Um, and then also I, I went to Ferguson, Missouri, uh, because I was in St. Louis for the second presidential debate. And I decided to head up to Ferguson to just get some, just some thoughts of, from people on what they were thinking. And I actually got some amazing tape from there and that's like the majority of what you'll hear on the show. Cool. There were so many philosophical questions and ethical questions that were sort of underlying the opinions that I found of, of both our listeners who called in and, um, the people who I got to talk to in Ferguson that I thought I sort of needed some expert help in figuring out what it all meant, sort of. Um, and so when I got home, I just basically got on the phone and called every philosophy and political science professor and African American studies professor that would talk to me. <laugh>

Christiane: Well, awesome. Yeah. <laugh> um, I, oh man, I can't okay. I wanna hear from everybody, can we start with our listeners though? Like what did, what did they have to say about voting?

Sandra: Yeah. Um, so we had so many great calls, but here is a little mashup I made of, um, of three of the ones that I think brought up the most important themes.

Caller 1: My thoughts on voting, um, I think, uh, you know, your first question was, do you think everyone should vote? Um,

Caller 2: Basically what I think about voting is that everyone should vote and they're all circumstances always.

Caller 3: I don't think that people are obligated to vote. Cause I look at voting as legitimization of the state. And I don't think that people especially oppress people are obligated to legitimize the institutions that oppress them.

Caller 1: If someone doesn't care, then I don't see what good their voice adds to the discussion.

Caller 2: I think even if you're uninformed, I mean, that's still your opinion. Every time you don't vote, it's, you know, you're losing your voice. So if you don't vote to make a stand against both parties, then it's just the people who voted voices are now louder. So I think everyone should vote all the time, the end.

Christiane: So that's wow. That's a really interesting mashup because that's like basically two extremes and then one person in the middle, right? You have one person saying you're not

obligated to vote, especially if you're oppressed, because you're supporting the institution by voting, you're supporting the institution that oppresses you or on the other end of like the spectrum, you have somebody saying, you always should vote no matter what the end period. Right. And then you have that guy in the middle saying like, I'm not sure because, you know, if, if you don't care, what are you adding to the process? Right. And...

Sandra: Yeah. And so what's fascinating is that from just these three voicemails we actually got, we got the major questions that we addressed basically throughout the whole episode. And so, yeah. So the question of should oppressed people vote, um, should, should everybody vote no matter what and, um, should you vote even if you're uninformed? I think, and that last one particularly struck me, um, like should uninformed people kind of like remove themselves, which is what, um, one of those voicemails was suggesting. And it really reminded me of a conversation that Andy had with the editor of *The American Conservative* magazine, um, Daniel McCarthy. And so I wanna show you a clip from that conversation.

Daniel McCarthy: Uh, the fundamental thing you have to be informed about is simply your own life and the way in which your life is affected by politics and by the state. And this is something that, um, you know, is clearly personal knowledge of such a kind that, um, you know, anyone can have it. And in fact, the idea that the only people who should be voting would be experts who have a theoretical understanding of politics is I think corrosive to not only democracy, but to the sort of Republican ethos that in fact you have to have a plurality of voices of, of various different degrees of knowledge and various types of knowledge as well. And that the idea that, uh, voting should be ethically restricted to only the most, um, sort of textbook knowledgeable people, um, seems quite dangerous to me.

Sandra: So what he's basically saying is that it's okay to not vote. Like if you've thought about it, it's perfectly okay to not vote. But thinking that you're not informed enough to vote is never true, but basically he's saying that's never a reason to not vote. Like you have all the knowledge you need already.

Christiane: From your life experience, from just you being yourself, living in the world.

Sandra: Yeah, exactly. Cool.

Christiane: Okay. So, um, Daniel McCarthy addressed the issues that one of our listeners brought up, which is the idea of like, should you vote if you're not informed? And then the two other voicemails, um, kind of exist on opposite ends of a spectrum from each other. So, um, one of the listeners said you should always vote every time, period. The other listener said, no, you're not obligated to vote. You, you can abstain from voting. Um, especially if you're oppressed because it, um, legitimizes the institutions that oppress you. So those are kind of two ends of a spectrum. Did you find when you talked to people in Ferguson that their answers were kind of spread evenly across that spectrum?

Sandra: No. Uh, definitely not, actually. So far, far more people that I talked to believe that voting was not only a right, but, but a moral obligation. Like you have to vote every single time, no matter what.

Christiane: Wow. That, that is such a surprise to me. Yeah.

Sandra: It was really surprising to me too. I just, I really couldn't believe that people had that strong of a reaction towards voting. I didn't, I literally didn't know that existed.

Christiane: Yeah. I mean, um, you know, I've voted in every election that I could legally vote in, but that doesn't mean that I think that everybody should vote every time.

Sandra: Yeah. That's how I always felt about it too. Um, okay. So I'm just gonna get into showing you some juicy clips.

Christiane: Finally, give me a clip.

Sandra: Oh, I'll give you a clip.

Speaker 7:

Well, I exercise that, right. I think it's very important, especially, you know, this day and time and what, you know, people before us went through, as far as one, they exercise that. Right.

Sandra: But you do vote.

Speaker 7: I do.

Sandra: Yeah. What do you say to people who don't like either of the candidates this year and don't know, don't know what to do because they don't like Trump or Clinton.

Speaker 7: Well, I personally don't get into that conversation for the simple reason, you know, people get bent outta shape about it. Mm-hmm <affirmative> and versus, you know, I just tell people to vote. It doesn't really matter. It does matter who you vote for, but you still should exercise that right.

Christiane: So there, there was something so interesting that she said there, and I've heard people say this so many times before, which is that it doesn't matter who you vote for. You just should vote because exercising that right is something that you owe the people that came before you, right.

Sandra: Yeah. She's not the only one. Yeah. That was like the most common answer I found. So let me play you a couple more.

Sandra: Do you, do you plan on voting this election?

Speaker 9: Yes, I do.

Sandra: Great. Yeah. Um, do you think everybody should vote?

Speaker 9: Sure. Especially African Americans because Martin Luther king, you know, he gave his life, uh, in support of that, that we have the opportunity to go out and vote. I mean, even if you vote for yourself, you go and you vote. And which I might do, I might vote for me <laugh> but I'll be there vote

Sandra: <laugh> I heard someone once voted for their dog.

Speaker 9: <laugh>

Sandra: So you would rather people vote for, let's say somebody who definitely won't win like a third party candidate

Speaker 9: Definitely, than someone that they're not sure of.

Sandra: Like I said, so many people had this same argument where, because people died for our rights to vote. That makes it a more obligation on our part to vote in order to sort of pay them back.

Christiane: Yeah. This, I think this argument not, not, well, this type of argument, right? Like we owe people, we owe our fore bearers. Um, this is the one that emotionally motivates me the most. Um, even though I can sometimes be a little bit skeptical of that, of that feeling, but like, um, you know, when I go and vote, I literally do think about the women in, you know, pre 19, you know, pre 1920s who couldn't vote. I think of all of them and I vote and I feel a little like rush of like, um, I don't know if it's pride, but I just feel a little rush of, of gratitude that I can do that. Um, and I can do something that people, not that long ago couldn't do.

Sandra: Yeah. That's I have never thought that way, for sure. Like this is a brand new argument, to me. But I did talk to, um, a white woman outside of a grocery store in Ferguson who told me the same thing. She said, I think we deserve, um, I think we need to vote because suffragettes died for our right to vote. And so it's the same argument.

Christiane: Do some of the professors that you talk to say about this idea that we, um, you know, that people somehow owe generations that came before us when it comes to voting?

Sandra: Well, I have a couple responses from people, but I wanna show you this one first, it's from a professor named, um, professor TM Scanlon. He's a philosopher and he has a whole book on what do we owe each other? And so he, I thought he was the perfect person to contact

about this. Um, and so I'm just gonna play you what he said.

T.M. Scanlon: So our reasons to vote and obligations to do so, have to do with our relations with our contemporaries and perhaps, uh, future, uh, citizens, not with, uh, not our relations with, uh, people in the past.

Sandra: Okay. So you do not think that we owe people if they died for our right to vote, we do not owe them our votes.

T.M. Scanlon: That's correct.

Christiane: Wow.

Sandra: Yeah.

Christiane: Honestly, that had literally never occurred to me.

Sandra: Yeah.

Christiane: <laugh>, which is terrible, but, um, that's such a good point. That's such a, I can see how that's a compelling point.

Sandra: Yeah. And actually our own Andy Cullison—

Christiane: Host of Examining Ethics?

Sandra: Host of examining ethics podcast. Have you heard of it?

Christiane [in a silly, sarcastic voice]: No, I haven't.

Sandra: Um, he had something kind of similar to say as well.

Andy: I think we should be careful about, uh, blurring rights with obligations. There's lots of cases where we clearly have a right to do something, but we're not obliged to do it, uh, take the first amendment. Right. Which people fought and died for. Uh, we have a right to free speech. We have a right to assembly, but I don't think I'm obligated to get together with people. I don't think I'm obligated to speak. It's just that I have a right to do it. It's no one can stop me from doing it. Same thing with a right to bear arms. Um, I have a right to, uh, own and carry a gun, but I certainly don't think I'm obligated to own and carry a gun. So just because you've got a right to something, even a right, that you think is sort of a fundamental important right that's central to our democracy and our freedoms as Americans. I don't think you should make the jump to just from that fact thinking that there's an obligation to exercise it.

Sandra: And one of the professors I talked to over the phone professor, Elizabeth Anderson also answered this question for me.

Elizabeth Anderson: Well, I think that I wouldn't necessarily say that we owe people in the past a duty to vote, but that that's something that we owe to our fellow citizens to keep democracy sustained. And I suppose the thought might be that, um, we ought to be grateful for, uh, the struggles of people in the past and make sure that those struggles weren't in vain, but that judgment, while true, is dependent on the prior judgment, that voting is an important right. And civic duty, uh, that we need in order to sustain democracy.

Christiane: So what's interesting is that women have only recently gained the right to vote. Right. Um, it's not even been a hundred years. Um, and for African Americans, um, you know, the Voting Rights Act was passed in 1965. So, um, you know, suffrage for most African Americans has actually been pretty recent as well. And so I'm wondering, like, does the fact that, um, you know, like groups like women and African Americans have kind of only recently, um, been enfranchised, does that correlate to like a bigger voter turnout in those communities?

Sandra: Yeah. That's really interesting that you asked that. So I, I actually got to talk to a political scientist. His name is, um, professor Daniel Hopkins and he shared with me that it actually does.

Daniel Hopkins: One thing that we have seen in recent years. And that has, I think really caught the notice and that the attention of many political observers is that today African Americans are actually as likely in, in some elections say 2012, even potentially a little bit more likely than non-Hispanic whites to, to turn out, to vote. And that obviously represents a real departure from the period, you know, 30, 40, 50, 60 years ago, when many African Americans were systematically disenfranchised and unable to vote, barred from voting. The, I think that partly when African Americans talk about the, the sacredness of voting and, and the importance of voting, that reflects the history of having been denied the vote and having, um, having many members of, of the black community make tremendous sacrifices during the civil rights movement and earlier, and, and later too, to defend and expand the franchise to defend and expand African Americans' access to voting. And I think then that there that, that in all groups, but particularly in, in African, among African Americans, there's a very, very strong norm that voting is part of being an American, but also part of, um, part of your responsibility to other to other African Americans.

Christiane: Man, that is so interesting. Right. And it, it actually makes sense. It makes sense what, um, Professor Hopkins was saying, um, because there are still so many people alive who fought for civil rights in the fifties and sixties. And so, um, so these people who are alive are telling stories to their grandchildren and there's like an emotional connection to voting an emo, an, an emotional motivation that's like really real.

Sandra: Yeah. And so while I was in Ferguson, the majority of people who I talked to were

actually older black folks.

Christiane: And, oh, um, what do you mean by older?

Sandra: Oh, okay. So like people who I perceive to be 50 years or older, probably

Christiane: So kind of roughly midlife and up. Okay.

Sandra: Okay. So, yeah. So with all of those interviews I had in Ferguson that commitment, that emotional motivation was definitely there, um, among the older folks. And there was a huge disparity with how younger people reacted when I asked them the same questions.

Christiane: Really. Can you, um, do you have any, do you have any clips from younger people then?

Sandra: Yeah, I do have one which I'm gonna show you, but unfortunately, a majority of the young people that I got to talk to, I actually didn't get them on tape.

Christiane: Oh, okay.

Sandra: So that's a huge bummer. But even though I only have the one, he is pretty representative of how young people felt—

Christiane: In Ferguson

Sandra: Ferguson. Yeah. The ones that I talk to in Ferguson. Okay.

Sandra: Okay. So are you planning on voting?

Speaker 10: No, I'm not.

Sandra: Why not?

Speaker 10: Uh, I really don't like candidates <laugh>.

Sandra: So other people who are like you, who don't like either the candidates. So I know some people are voting for third party candidates. Are you, you don't like them either?

Speaker 10: Uh, not really. I mean, I haven't really looked into it. I mean, I just, I just, honestly, I, I don't, I don't care. <laugh> It's, I, I believe that it's our country, you know, we're the people that should shape this country. Um, as far as who we elect in the white house is something that they're gonna do whatever they want to do. You know, they're gonna, they're going, we're, we're, we're messed up either way. I think so. I mean, I don't know. <laugh>.

Christiane: That's a really interesting mix of cynicism and hope. Um, because he's, you know, he's saying like, well, it doesn't matter who I vote for when it comes to the white house, but I can still like affect change in this country. Um, I find that really interesting.

Sandra: Yeah, it is. It's super interesting. Like he, yeah, it almost sounds like he knows it's important for him to have like to participate, but he's just really, like, just doesn't believe that voting is gonna do anything.

Christiane: Okay. So we've heard, we've read a couple man-on-the-street-interviews. What do the, you talked to a lot of experts. <laugh> what do the experts say about differences between, um, like older generation and younger generation voting patterns and beliefs?

Sandra: Yeah. Okay. Here, here we go. Here is, um, professor Derrick Darby.

Derrick Darby: Well, I think it's, uh, it's, uh, not a surprise to hear that particularly, um, older people, people who have been through or very familiar with the history of the civil rights movement would view voting as an obligation, uh, because I think largely what was happening during the civil rights movement. It was a call that Martin Luther King, I think, you know, ingeniously sort of engineered to get people to take a hand in restoring dignity to African Americans. And an important part of the restoration of dignity was to participate in anticipate in changing the political, the political outcomes that African Americans were being disadvantaged by through the voting process. And so during that time, they took very seriously the, uh, obligation to March and to pursue, uh, every, you know, means that they could, you know, nonviolently of course, to get the franchise and to get unfettered access to the ballot.

Sandra: So that's sort of Professor Darby's explanation on like why elderly, African Americans would have this intense feeling of obligation towards voting. And here's what he says about youth who might not, um, who might, who might be really critical of, of voting and the state's legitimacy.

Derrick Darby: Well, that's also a, a kind of response that, um, some people say, look, why should we participate in a practice that does nothing, but to further entrench the legitimacy of a state that doesn't really have our interests at heart, uh, other people are more cynical about voting because they think that ultimately their votes are not gonna matter. And, um, they're, they're, they're not gonna get their interests represented. The people that they want to vote for are not gonna get into office. And if they do get into office, they're not gonna be able to support their interest because they're gonna be constrained because there's so few voices that would represent them in positions of political power. And, and so young people tend to have a more cynical, a more radical outlook. Um, and this, I think is an ongoing challenge when it comes to trying to find coalitions for social and political change that bring together young people, people of the, people of the so-called hip hop generation and older people from the civil rights generation to work together, right? One, one that sort of believes in the power of law to

transform society. The other is more skeptical about law often because they're on the wrong side of the law, right? And when we think about all the things in the air now with police brutality against African Americans, it generates real skepticism and even hostility. And this just gets extended, I think until the, the voting domain as well.

Christiane: Wow. That the, that is so fascinating because it seems like there's an argument about dignity on both sides, right? Like for older African American voters, the idea of being able to vote was being, was like linked to legitimacy and having dignity and gaining dignity in the eyes of the state. And now you have a situation where younger people are saying like, why would I wanna give dignity to that institution, to that institution that is brutalizing me or my neighbors.

Sandra: Right. Exactly. And remember those voicemails that I played for you in the beginning.

Christiane: Oh yeah! Well, didn't, didn't somebody say basically that whole thing about like, um, you know, you don't have to vote because you're, you're legitimizing an institution that oppresses you or something like that.

Sandra: Yes, exactly. So his name is Emmanuel and I actually got to snag him for a longer interview after he left me that voicemail. Um, and he has pretty strong feelings about this difference between the older generation, the younger generation. And I'm gonna play you a clip about that.

Emmanuel: Um, yeah, certainly, um, especially as a black person, um, we have sort of elders talking about Martin Luther King and all the civil rights activists died for your rights to vote. Well, in actuality, Martin Luther king didn't die for, he was killed. Um, but even if he, you know, was sort of a, a welfare Mar willful martyr, um, his sort of project was not to vote as an end, but his project was, um, a socialist essentially. Um, he was a very, he was very anti-capitalist. So, uh, I guess that's my response that Martin Luther King didn't die so that I can vote as an end, but whether Martin Luther King wanted me to be able to vote in order for me to have a tool to bring about a, uh, a structural change in the United States.

Christiane: Okay. So I didn't hear the last line. Can you repeat that for me?

Sandra: I would love to he, Martin Luther King didn't die so that I can vote as an end, but rather Martin Luther King wanted me to be able to vote in order for me to have a tool to bring about structural change in the United States. And as soon as I heard that, like I just had an emotional connection to what he was saying, you know, like when, you know, when someone just tells you something and you just feel that something could definitely be true. So I kind of assumed that when I went around asking experts what they thought about this idea that it would have more support <laugh> and it did not. Spoiler alert!

Christiane: You, you didn't hear a lot of agreement with, with the kinds of things that Emmanuel

was saying?

Sandra: No. The short answer to that is no, really, um, I heard some vague statements of understanding of where Manuel was coming from, but very few people actually agreed with him. So I wanna play you some of the phone calls I had with some experts. So here is Professor Jennifer Hochschild, Professor Tommie Shelby, and Professor Elizabeth Anderson.

Sandra: Um, so I talked to one person who said that they, um, don't believe that oppressed people should have to vote because, um, it, it legitimizes the state that oppresses them.

Jennifer Hochschild: Yeah, that feels a little, I dunno, it feels a little pretentious or a little self-righteous or a little, you know, the world isn't a perfect place and God knows it isn't a perfect place, but yeah, I mean, I, I don't know. I don't find that very convincing. I mean, um, uh, it's absolving people of a pretty straightforward and not <affirmative> and actually not all that terribly onerous commitment to their society. I, I dunno, it feels like a rhetorical ploy to me rather than a really deeply profound ethical argument.

Sandra: Okay. That's all. Thank you so much. I really appreciate it.

Jennifer Hochschild: Sure. Okay. Bye. Take care. <affirmative>

Tommie Shelby: Well, I mean, uh, myself, I mean, I'm inclined to see, I mean, while I probably would agree with all young people that there are serious injustices in, in, in the US and something dramatic needs to change. Um, I, I don't think that it's, uh, wrong, um, to vote. I mean, there's an old view. I think that, uh, William Lloyd Garrison, Garrisonians and the abolitionist movement had a, a similar view, uh, they thought that the constitutional legitimated slavery and, uh, they refused to participate in, in voting other kinds of electoral politics because they thought that they were participating in evil or they were, um, complicit in it by, by going along as if it's all legitimate. And I can see an argument, analogous argument, this feeling that you are by participating in electoral politics in the us and just voting and going along. This is, everything is legitimate. When you feel like you don't really have a functioning democracy, um, you might feel like you're being complicit in it and participating in something that's, that's that's wrong and wanting to keep give as it would keep your hands clean. Um, I don't personally think that, uh, uh, voting, I guess I saw with, um, federal Douglas against, as he did against the Garrisonians that it's, um, not, uh, incompatible with wanting to refrain from being complicit in, in evil and wrongdoing to participate in electoral politics provided one, sees it as something that's strategic and tactical was an attempt to kind of bring about changes in a society using the mechanisms that are in place, um, one need, and sort of think that those mechanisms as currently structured are, are fair to everybody or, and one need and think that that the society as a whole is, is, is just, or, or, or entirely legitimate to use the, the levers of change that, that are made available by, by, by that, by those structures.

Sandra: What, what do you think about that? Like do, do a oppressed and marginalized people

in our country...

Elizabeth Anderson: If they don't vote, then they will only get more oppressed. I think it's important for people to see the vote as not just the object, a major object of the struggle for people of color, to have a voice and a seat at the table, but absolutely essential to exercise if their interests are going to be heard. Politicians have no incentive to pay attention to the interests of people who don't show up at the polls. So I think they have a vital collective self-interest in showing up and voting for the most preferred or the least bad candidate, because if they don't exercise their power, then they will be even more oppressed. I also think that staying home and not voting as a kind of protest will not register in any way on the American public. It will not function successfully to delegitimize American elections. There are some cases where an election where a state puts up, uh, an electoral process that's obviously rigged and then staying home can sometimes delegitimize the vote by making it obvious that the system is rigged. Um, but although there are certain injustices in the structure of contemporary American electoral politics, they are not so extreme as to, uh, cancel out the possibility that, uh, mass voting by people of color can make a positive difference.

Christiane: Oh man. Okay. I have so many thoughts about all three of those clips, but, um, I think I wanna talk about, um, Professor Shelby's, um, comments, because they really resonate with me because, you know, he's saying like, he's talking about looking back to history and looking back to the things that people were thinking about when they were voting in, you know, the Civil War era. And I actually just think in general, that's such a useful tool when you're thinking about the ethics of voting, looking back to history helps put you at an emotional remove from this situation, which I actually find really helpful because a lot of times my, a lot of my anger kind of gets in the way of me thinking clearly about voting or thinking clearly about why I wanna vote in the way that I wanna vote.

Sandra: Yeah. That's such a good point. Yeah. And, and I think from Professor Hochschild's thing, like my, I took issue with the word like "straightforward," cuz like in practice, like voting is possibly, if you include the thought process of the person before they go to vote is possibly like one of the least straightforward actions. Um, at least that's how I feel about it. So something I wanted to point out about what Professor Anderson said, um, is I really like that she made a point, she wasn't trying to say that what Emmanuel was saying is not true that by voting you're legitimizing the state that oppresses you, she's not saying that he's wrong about that. What she's saying is that if someone's response is to then not vote in order to not legitimize a state, that's actually just like on its face an ineffective method of protest, usually. Sometimes she said in mass, if, if people in mass do not vote, that could send a very important message. But um, the way our political system is just set up is it's set up to listen to people who vote pretty much exclusively. Um, unless you make your voice heard in, in some other kind of really drastic way.

Christiane: Well, that, that reminds me of an argument that people use a lot of the time. It's kind of a flip side of what you're saying, which is that, um, or another side of the coin of what you're saying, which is that like, um, if you don't vote, you can't complain. I feel like I've heard that

argument over and over and over again. Um, did you hear that when you were out, um, collecting voices?

Sandra: Yeah. That's actually crazy that you bring it up because that's the second, most common thing that I heard right after we owe something to our, to our ancestors.

Christiane: Can't can't complain if you don't vote.

Sandra: Yeah. So I'm gonna show you some of those clips...

Christiane: Which by the way, I don't believe <laugh>.

Sandra: Um, are you planning on voting in this upcoming election?

Speaker 11: Yeah.

Sandra: Um, do you know people who aren't planning on voting?

Speaker 11: Yeah.

Sandra: Why do you think that they are not voting?

Speaker 11: First of all, the two candidates that they picked to vote this year is just not even worth, really voting for real, but you know, you can't vote and then you, can't not vote and complain at the same time. And I'm one of those complainants, but—

Sandra: Will you be voting in this upcoming election?

Speaker 12: Yes, I will.

Sandra: Do you think it's important that everybody votes?

Speaker 12: Yes, I do.

Sandra: What do you say to people who don't wanna vote?

Speaker 12: Don't talk to me the next day. <laugh> You cannot have an argument. If you don't vote about my, uh, candidate didn't win and I knew he wasn't gonna win. You never know. He might have, if you had voted.

Sandra: And what was super interesting was that, whereas in all of the other questions, I asked the experts that I talked to, like they had a wide range of opinions, but for this question, there was just unanimous agreement that complaining has nothing to do with voting

Christiane: Really? So this is where we start to get some differences between what the experts are saying and what the people that you interviewed said.

Sandra: Exactly. Exactly. So here is Professor Elizabeth Anderson, Professor Derrick Darby and Professor Tommie Shelby.

Elizabeth Anderson: Well, I, I <laugh>, I think that is true. You can still, if your rights are being violated, if your interests are being systematically, uh, uh, neglected, I think you have a right to protest whether you voted or not.

Derrick Darby: I mean, I think that people are always entitled to complain if they're being treated unjustly unfairly, if their dignity is not being respected. I don't think that being able to complain is, uh, is, is a, is a prerequisite. I'm sorry. I don't think being able to having, going through the voting process is a prerequisite for complaining. I think that being disrespected being violated, as I said, having one's one's dignity, not affirmed gives you adequate grounds for complaint.

Tommie Shelby: Well, I mean, I don't accept that principle. Um, it seems to me that, you know, I mean there are non, there are, um, non-citizen resident residents in this country, many of them. Um, and it seems to me if the, if the government is structured in ways that mistreat citizens or those non, or there was those, um, non-citizen residents, they certainly have a right to complain, even if they don't have the right to vote. I mean, I can see why people say that. I mean, I think they feel like if you're not participating in trying to make things better, if you're not participating in trying to determine the shape of government and the representatives of, uh, uh, officials and representatives of, of, of the state, whether municipal, uh, state or federal, um, then you kind of lose your standing to complain. But I think some of the people who are, who are refusing to vote, assuming it's a principle thing and not just kind of out of a kind of indifference, some of the people who are refusing to vote, I think are taking political action. They are that they're moving, they're being moved by considerations of justice and, um, fairness to try to bring about more lasting and meaningful change that they don't think will be delivered through their civil participation in electoral politics. And I think there's something to be, to be said for that position.

Christiane: Yeah. I think, I think those are all like just really good points and, and it all kind of like reaffirms my own suspicion of that, um, maximum that you can't complain if you don't vote. Um, just because it seems like voting is just one way of participating in the political process. And then also a lot of people can't vote for a lot of reasons. So, um, I don't know that like voting is the only like pathway to being able to complain about things in this country,

Sandra: But <laugh> yeah. I just think it says a lot that all of these, all of the experts I talked to said the same thing that it's just like, it doesn't make sense that voting is a prerequisite for complaining. It just doesn't link logically. Um, but yeah, something that you just said struck me, which is that it's just one way to participate and I think what's happening in the mindset of

people. When they say, say, you're not allowed to complain if you don't vote is because they perceive voting as sort of like what, um, Professor Hochschild said earlier as the least onerous, most straightforward way to participate. And so a lot of people think, well, if you're not voting, you're not doing anything to participate. And yeah, maybe that's something that we can all kind of address as a nation, like understanding that that's not the only way to participate in our political process. So I just wanted to show you one more response, um, about this question of, is it, can you complain if you don't vote? Uh, and this one is from Emmanuel.

Christiane: Um, sorry. I've heard so many voices, um, during this clip show, can you remind me who Emmanuel is?

Sandra: Oh yeah. Sorry. So Emmanuel initially left us one of those voicemails that we heard in the beginning. Right. Okay. Um, he said that you don't, uh, necessarily have to vote if you're oppressed because it legitimizes the state and then we got him for an interview.

Christiane: Okay. Yeah. Great. Thank you.

Sandra: Is, uh, people said all the time, you can't complain if you don't vote. So I guess, yeah. That's um, do you wanna elaborate on that?

Emmanuel Yeah, that's, that's that's **[cuss word bleeped]** because, because it's like, that's like saying, because I didn't participate in this ritual, my feelings aren't important that like, it doesn't, that doesn't make sense. It, it just, I don't, I don't, I guess I call it bullshit simply because I don't see the connection between not voting in one's, um, negation of a right to complaint. I don't see how they're connected.

Christiane: That's a, that's a really powerful point. And I hadn't quite thought about it that way, that just because you don't vote doesn't mean your feelings don't matter. Um, and it doesn't mean that you can't express, um, what you're feeling about a situation, just because you haven't participated in this one part.

Sandra: Yeah. Um, and I think like what all of these little pieces keep coming back to is that there's a million ways to look at every single aspect of voting, you know, like, um, whether you think everyone should vote or whether you think nobody should vote. There's not a side of this argument that I have trouble comprehending at this point. Yeah. You know, like it's rare for me to find an issue where I genuinely think that as, as long as you're thoughtful about your choices and you know, why you're doing what you're doing, I, you know?

Christiane: Yeah. It, it kind of even, I feel like I'm getting, like, I feel like I'm getting convinced with every new clip of like, whatever that person is saying. Um, and maybe that's just cuz I'm a wishy washy person. Um, but I think it, it kind of reinforces the idea of like looking back to history for some perspective, because it does kind of give you that emotional remove a little bit and can kind of help you rationalize it a little bit. But I don't know if that's the only thing you can do

because as a, you know, as Emmanuel said, like I, I do think feelings are legitimate too. And I feel like that should play a part in your, your thinking about voting.

Sandra: Yeah. Something that's sticking with me still is what Professor Anderson said, um, that our government is not set up to hear you, if you don't vote and I've been thinking about it. And maybe that idea is even more related to political participation in general, because, um, like if you communicate with your representative or if you send a letter to your Congressman or anything like that, or you attend your like town hall meetings. So I think her point is true. Our system is not set up to hear you if you don't participate at all. But I don't think that voting is the only way for our system to hear you.

Christiane: Yeah, I agree. There are a bunch of different ways to participate politically. Um, so this episode has made me, has helped me clarify some of the ways that I think about the ethics of voting for myself. Um, but we've heard from a lot of different people and we've heard a lot of different opinions about how to think through the ethics of voting or how they feel about the ethics of voting. Um, and I worry that for some listeners, um, you know, they might come away a little bit confused or scared, um, because of all the different options you have in terms of thinking through voting and, and how to think about voting.

Sandra: Yeah. I'm really glad you brought that up because I have one more clip from Daniel McCarthy that calms me every time I listen to it.

Christiane: And Daniel McCarthy is the editor of *The American Conservative*, right?

Sandra: Yes.

Daniel McCarthy: There are, uh, times when you have to, uh, make, uh, adjustments to reality. So for example, if you were choosing between, and, you know, I hate to use this example, but it's, uh, such a clear example that it seems very, uh, helpful if you were choosing, you know, in a free election between someone like Adolf Hitler and Heinrich Himmler clearly, um, you would not wanna choose either one. You would not want to, uh, you know, try to find a lesser evil out of those two. Um, on the other hand, if you were choosing between an Adolf Hitler and a Francisco Franco or something, uh, you can see that there would be a very painful, but a very, uh, powerful argument to be made that, uh, someone like Franco is clearly a lesser evil. Um, so that's putting it, you know, in a kind of, uh, uh, a broad historical frame simply saying there are times when, uh, absenting yourself from the, uh, electoral process and, you know, simply making a protest if you're gonna do anything is, uh, by far the most appropriate thing to do.

There are times when you do have to choose the lesser evil, even if that lesser evil is still quite markedly, uh, you know, an authoritarian figure. Now, luckily we're not in that position in the United States. And I think that, um, for all that this election has brought out very intense passions about Hillary Clinton and, uh, Donald Trump and that, you know, for all that, both of them, uh, are very frightening figures to the people who are opposed to them that in fact, um,

you know, we are not in a crisis situation in part because we still have the rule of law, uh, as it applies in all of our other institutions, we have an independent judiciary. We have, uh, an independent Congress, we have local government and we have a, uh, very strong, uh, civil society. So it seems to me that, uh, whether Hillary Clinton or Donald Trump, uh, becomes president, if there are policies they undertake, which are radically unpopular with the people, or which are extremely controversial, they will find opposition just as we've seen under the, uh, Obama administration, uh, conservatives were very strong in opposing him at the grassroots level.

You saw things like the tea party, uh, just as we saw during the George W. Bush administration, there was very effective opposition, uh, from the people, uh, in the form of protests and other things against, uh, his, uh, foreign policy. Um, so it seems to me that, uh, the idea that you should, uh, be compelled morally speaking to vote for either, uh, Trump or Clinton simply because the other choice is, uh, something that you find, uh, very objectionable. Um, doesn't have a lot of weight. And then in fact, in an election like ours and in a country where we have as much freedom as we do, um, you should feel totally confident in considering, uh, third party candidates and also writing candidates, perhaps not voting, but all these options should be on the table.

Christiane: What I like about this is that, um, it's very comforting to know that like, if I think through voting in one election cycle and then reassess my position in another election cycle, that's good. Right? The, the thinking through how I vote is the important thing, not the rule itself. Right?

Sandra: Exactly. So it's not like after listening to this episode, you, the listener has to decide, okay. I think it's important to vote every single time. And that's what I'm gonna do. You, that's not necessary to thinking through the ethics of voting doesn't mean that you decide your hard and fast position for the rest of your life. So like Daniel McCarthy says sometimes ethically you've thought, thought it through and it makes the most sense to not vote or, and the next time you've thought really hard about it, and you've decide you're gonna do a protest vote, um, for a third party candidate or something like that. Um, your position absolutely can change and you're, you don't need to decide right now for every election ever.

Christiane: Right. And I like that. I like that idea because it acknowledges context and it, it acknowledges complexity. Um, and it's also just a great idea in general, right? In life, just to keep thinking things through all the time.

Sandra: Yeah. And not only that, but no matter what happens in this election who wins this election because of the balance of power that we have, the US will be just fine. Probably.

Christiane: I don't, I don't know about that. I'm still suspicious of that part, but I like the thinking through thing <laugh>

[music plays]

Christiane: So, um, we just wanted to make a little note here at the end of the show. Um, since this is a clip show, we didn't really have time to fully introduce each of the experts that we spoke to. But if you take a look at our show notes page at, um, examiningethics.org, you can find links to all of the professor's, um, uh, websites and then also links to their relevant works.

Sandra: And just an update. The next time you'll hear from us will be at the end of December. See you then.

Christiane: And please, don't forget to tell a friend about us. You are the best ads we have.

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Tonya Welker: This is Tonya Welker and I am reading the credits outside the Prindle Institute. Examining Ethics with Andy Cullison is hosted by The Janet Prindle Institute for Ethics at DePauw University produced the show. Our logo was created by Evie Brosius. Our music is by COry Gray and Blue Dot Sessions, and can be found online [@freemusicarchive.org](http://freemusicarchive.org). Examining Ethics is made possible by the generous support of DePauw alumni, friends of the Prindle Institute, and you, the listeners. Thank you for your support.