

Transcript
BUSPH Public Health Conversation Starter
In Conversation with Virginia Sapiro

Yvette Cozier:

Hello, everyone. My name is Yvette Cozier, Associate Dean for Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Justice at Boston University School of Public Health. Thank you for joining us for our latest Public Health Conversation Starter. Today's conversation is part of our SPH Reads Series. SPH Reads is a school-wide reading program hosted by the Office of Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Justice.

It aims to encourage critical thought and discussion among all members of the BUSPH community and is centered on a carefully chosen thought-provoking book. The selection for fall 2024, spring 2025 academic year is *Strangers in Their Own Land: Anger and Mourning on the American Right* by Arlie Russell Hochschild. In conjunction with this year's book selection, I'm having discussions with leaders on the themes of political divides, class, and race.

Today I have the privilege of speaking with Dr. Virginia "Gina" Sapiro, who is a political scientist and psychologist and was Professor of Political Science Emerita and the Dean of the College of Graduate School of Arts and Sciences at Boston University prior to her retirement. Gina received her Bachelor's Degree in Political Science from Clark University and her PhD in Political Science from the University of Michigan.

Gina has held many leadership positions and has received many honors and awards throughout her career. Gina's research and specializations include elections and voting behavior, political psychology, gender politics, and feminist and democratic theory. Gina, thank you for being with us today.

Dr. Virginia "Gina" Sapiro:

It's a pleasure. Thank you.

Yvette Cozier:

So as we record today, the results of the 2024 election are known. Donald Trump has been re-elected and will take over the Office of the Presidency in January. And one of the things that I think many of us have seen with this election was exactly how divided it is just on many fronts, socially and certainly politically.

So within Dr. Hochschild's work, she really tried to understand or get to the heart of what drives a political divide. And she started from 2016, the first run from Donald Trump's or the first election with Donald Trump. What is your understanding of the relevance of this political divide that we've experienced as a country?

Dr. Virginia "Gina" Sapiro:

Sure. So thank you for asking me, and it's a pleasure to be part of events like this where people read together and think together and talk together, which is more necessary than ever, I think. Let me answer by starting with an anecdote. I'm an election official in Gilmanton, New

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Hampshire. It's a largely rural place. The closest city is Concord, New Hampshire, our capital, which is a good 20 minutes away.

So what I do on election day is I register the people who are not registered yet and I do name changes and address changes and so forth. One of the things that happened this year is that we had in a state like this where we have very high voter turnout, we had higher voter turnout than ever, and we registered a massive number of voters on election day.

Now, when I tell you we register new voters, you're probably thinking of 18, 19, 21 year olds, people like our Boston University student. And we did have young people, but a very large proportion of the new voters that I registered were older people, middle-aged and even older, who had voted in the past, sometime long in the past, but long enough ago that they were bounced off the records and had to come in and register again.

And the vast majority of those people were Republican. They registered as Republicans. The vast majority were Republican men, and many of them expressed in one way through their faces, through their demeanor, and even through their words a great deal of anger. And the fact that they were showing up at the polls where they hadn't come in a long time and they were motivated by anger.

During that day, and of course, I live in the most conservative area of New Hampshire, and as would be expected, we're about two to one Republicans versus Democrats. And of course, Trump won handily in my local area, but I thought about the fact that this conversation was upcoming and I was thinking of Arlie Hochschild's book and I saw that anger and that resentment.

Now, I couldn't stop and say, "Hey, what's this about?" But I've heard enough conversation here where I think her observations about rural people, rural men in particular, and people without college educations as we know from recent studies, feeling like other people have cut in line ahead of them and that they are not getting their due, or alternatively, that other people are getting more than their due.

And as we know from a lot of research, that began to kick in very strongly when Barack Obama was elected president. It was symbolic for a lot of people of the line cutting. So I think her book is very relevant. I think there are things we could talk about about why it happened and how that happened and what its relevance is. But I certainly saw I think examples of what she found in her interviews in a very different place.

She was mostly in Louisiana, and I'm up here in New Hampshire. Louisiana is a very diverse state. New Hampshire has become very diverse over the last two decades. It used to be 97% white and now it's 93% white. So it's not like people up here are seeing this line cutting every day in their personal lives.

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Where do we go with this polarization, so this political divide? But it's not just a division, it's really pushing to the margins very strongly. And where did it come from? You mentioned the thought of people are cutting in line, but also what are the dangers of this polarization?

Dr. Virginia "Gina" Sapiro:

Sure, sure. I think the dangers are a whole other topic that we should get to head on. But one of the things that has happened over the past 30 years, even more, is that partisanship, whether you feel like you're a Democrat or a Republican, has come to take on much more meaning than it had in the 1950s, the 1960s, and even to some degree in the 1970s.

And so what has become interesting is that it used to be, for example, that if you told me your party ID, told me you're a Democrat or Republican, I would not have been able to predict your stand on abortion. In the 1970s, I couldn't have done that. I probably couldn't have predicted your stand on guns and gun control. But through the actions of many interest groups and leaders, that changed dramatically so that a number of different identities came together and became locked together.

So the actions especially of the cultural right in the 1980s under Ronald Reagan, which really took on family issues, reproduction, ultimately sexuality, and really promoted that in a way that became issues of the Republican Party in opposition to the Democratic Party. So you began to get that polarization. Ronald Reagan was very, very good at attracting especially working class white men.

For those of us who are old enough to remember it, he really emphasized and some of the conservative unions with him, George Meany and others, emphasized the idea that the Democratic Party had promoted this cutting in line of giving affirmative action, which to them meant handing out jobs to people who didn't deserve them and that's why they had never had them before.

So began to emphasize that women, African Americans, other people of color were cutting and were being given things they didn't deserve, which was pushing the deserving people behind. The gun lobby completely changed what it did. It really it used to be about gun safety, and that really changed during that era. So all of this is to say that these different identities and different issues began to line up and be integrated much more with our sense of party ID.

So now if you tell me your party, I can make a pretty good guess about your stand on guns, on reproductive rights, on abortion, and so on and so forth. And so that means that polarization takes on all these different kinds of identity, lifestyle, life space issues. They've all glommed together, so they're personal.

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So following up on that just a little, thinking about this divide and polarization, how does gender fit in that? The US, one of the largest democracies on the planet, has yet to not elevate a woman to the role of presidency. How does that play?

Dr. Virginia "Gina" Sapiro:

Yeah, a couple of times I thought I might see a woman president in my lifetime. Being now well into my 70s, I believe I won't. Which given that I've been active in that space for a very long time, it does make me a little bit sad. So gender was all folded into this in the sense of certainly in the 1970s, affirmative action as it was discussed in terms of people of color and women and the overlap.

Reproductive policies, of course, were very important and sexuality. And research has always shown that women, even those who live lives that look fairly traditional, what you might think of as cis heterosexual women, tend to be a little bit more flexible, if you will, about sexual and gender issues than men in that same space and are less frightened. And if we end up talking about public health a little bit and what all this does to our brains and hearts, it's really interesting.

So gender becomes a part of this. Now, the thing that's very interesting is the appeals of the Democratic Party and especially in the last couple of elections have been very much, well, we're going to bring all the women into our space, by which they mean the white women, right? Because close to 90% of African American women consider themselves Democrats.

And if they go to the polls, they vote democratic. Whereas that's not true of white women, and it is less true of Latinas and Asian Americans. Unfortunately, Americans, when they talk about race, they tend to talk about white people and African Americans. We're a lot more complicated than that. And so we can extend that discussion. So in 2016, about 53% of white women voted for Trump. And this year it's probably about the same.

White men voted much more for Trump. If you break it down by education, you can see that college educated white women, it's unclear where we are, maybe half to a little more than half voted for Harris. Among white women without a college education, very strongly Trump. So the question a lot of people have asked to put it on the side of those who have been favorable toward the Democrats and Harris, what's with the white women?

And what's with the white women is what I said a few minutes ago, partisanship is an identity and we have to take that very, very seriously, and especially in a polarized world where your family, your friends, the people in your various social networks are likely to be of the same political party. What we've known for decades and decades is that partisanship is the first and foremost thing that drives our vote.

To the extent that in every election, roughly 90 to 95% of people who think of themselves as Democrats vote democratic, roughly 90 to 95% of people who think of themselves as a

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Republican vote Republican. So when we're thinking about who can be captured for one side or another, we're talking about the minority who are independents.

And so that's the thing is white women, like white men, are majority Republican, although not as much as men are, and they've probably lost college-educated white women, and that's likely to continue. So that's the story. What has to happen is some shift in partisanship. We sure didn't see that happening this time.

Yvette Cozier:

Thank you for that. Now, switching a little bit to mental health and well-being certainly in these last couple of years of campaigning, because it does really take multiple years of campaigning, has had a huge impact on individual mental health and well-being. What do you think the impact will be for certain populations now that the election is over, the impact in their mental health and with the new administration coming in January?

Dr. Virginia "Gina" Sapiro:

Thank you. Yes. Let's start from the broadest, which is a lot of people are pointing out that this really is our second post-COVID election. And if you look worldwide, in the post-COVID elections, the governing party has lost the majority of times. In the past year, in every country where there's been elections, the governing party lost. So that actually happened when we elected Biden, and it happened this year when we elected Trump.

So I think if we back up, first of all, to the vulnerabilities that were created by all of our experiences during those years of the height of the pandemic, as a population, we were left quite vulnerable. And during that period, of course, we were isolated. And children, this is something I've not seen research on, but children spent critical times of their childhood isolated in their families or with their caregivers. And what is the impact now? It doesn't just stop.

They don't just go out and say, "Okay, let's play ball. We're healthy now." So we begin with that vulnerability. And in a time of growing polarization, that creates anger, a generalized anger, and a lack of trust that's obviously not healthy. And then if we move to the motivations and the not just partisan differences, but hatreds of the past year, the moving into personal camps, words and actions that are just horrific, I think that affects all of us.

But then if you take the most vulnerable populations, if you take the people for whom this means possible deportation or who recognize that they or a loved one who was a woman in their family may suffer pretty disastrous consequences in their health because of the lack of healthcare, the impact on African Americans, women especially, but the impact on African Americans with the kind of policies and racism that has been raised, I think there's something that's unusual for this era in that, of course, racism is not new.

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It's become more polite in the last 10 or 20 years. I think a lot of us don't think that it went away quite as much as some people seem to think, but it's become very, very polite. All this stuff about anti-DEI, which has basically meant don't talk about race and don't mention African Americans and don't mention slavery and don't do any of that. So the conscious erasure, which is not benign, is going to be very important in, I think, really stoking up anxiety and fear.

And likewise for women, the amount of misogyny. And then if you combine those and talk about the misogynoir of the people who fall into all of these different categories and experience that very, it's not additive, as we know, experience this very particular kind of violent racial abuse, how do we protect each other?

What kind of public health measures are there when, for example, in your curricula, there are people who would not want you to even mention any of this, not give books to children? I fear greatly for those people living in states that are trying to erase because, of course, you're not erasing the fact, just the discussion.

Yvette Cozier:

Thank you for that. And yes, January will be a very interesting time to see what will happen. We have some sense of what could happen certainly, but I don't think anyone is willing to go there to see exactly what will happen just yet. So there's so much anxiety. So pivoting back to the young people and what you were saying at the top of this conversation during your registration efforts in New Hampshire, you were registering a number of older middle-aged voters.

And we know that historically, young people don't vote at the same levels as older people. So to students at BU in general, the School of Public Health, what advice would you give for them, for young people, thinking about whether to vote and who to vote for? I just want to say that there was a lot of back and forth over, "Well, I don't like either candidate, so I'm either not going to vote or I'm going to vote for someone who has no chance at all of winning," and the ramifications of that type of vote. What advice would you give?

Dr. Virginia "Gina" Sapiro:

Well, we see the result. This election came about not because of large number of people shifting toward Trump, but a softness in the turnout and energizing of people who might otherwise have voted for the Democrats. And that's in some cases people who say, "Well, I don't love either one." In some cases it was pockets where Gaza was a particular concern, and there was a view that not voting for the Democrats would teach them a lesson or something.

I find it difficult to believe that it was on the basis that the guy who did the Muslim ban was going to be really, really good, but that could just be me. Does voting make a difference? It does. Look around. Look at the court. Look at the appointments. Look at who's being appointed now. A number of people have said something that I think is very important.

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When you pick a candidate, you're not picking a partner, you're not picking the person you're going to live with, you are picking a broad-based group of people. We hope in a democracy, although that's very tenuous now, but we hope in a democracy where you can have debate and argument and someone else can win next time. And one of the issues we have this time is we do have an incoming group of people who do not believe in that as much and really do believe in more personalistic government.

They want to politicize the administration. They want to politicize the military. They want to use the military domestically. They admire people like Orban and Putin and all of those people. So all one can say is what we always say that it makes a difference. And one of the reasons young people... I'm of the first generation where they lowered the voting age to 18. And we all thought in the early '70s, this is going to be amazing. The young people are going to turn out. And I don't know, we're going to have the Age of Aquarius or some damn thing. And of course, young people turned out much less. Well, those young people are now old people. And over the course of our lifetimes, we vote more and more. And that has happened in each generation. And it's for a number of reasons. Young people are less tied to political parties, and so they're not part of a team as much, and they look for the person and they don't find a perfect person.

Of course, they don't find a perfect person. There isn't one. And also as you age out of being a student and so forth, you might start a family. You might buy a house. You might start paying local taxes. You might care more about the roads in your local community. Public policy makes a more notable individual impact on you, and that's why you vote more in your 30s than your 20s and more in your 40s and so on and so forth.

It's not because young people are stupid these days, or young people have changed. Every once in a while somebody can bump up young people voting. Obama did that. But by and large, we're going to see this pattern again and again. So those of us who work with students, for example, no point in yelling at anybody. No point in trying to teach people a lesson other than, here's how the political system works, here's what you might think about, and I actually know your future is going to be different from your present.

Yvette Cozier:

So again, that's a very broad, long-term perspective with that. And just tapping on that, is this current election unique? How does this compare to previous elections?

Dr. Virginia "Gina" Sapiro:

In terms of the dynamics of voting, it's not particularly unique. And as the last votes are settled in, remember, California isn't fully counted yet, Pennsylvania is just getting counted, and so forth. What's interesting, as usual, Americans don't understand their own political system. So they think it was a big, huge wipe out and the Democrats just totally got blasted out.

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Well, we have this funky electoral system which no other democracy on earth has chosen or will choose, and it exaggerates the impact of states that don't have many people and so on and so forth. If you look at the popular vote, it looks like in the end, Trump won with less than two percentage points margin, possibly less than Hillary Clinton actually won in 2016.

Because remember, Clinton won the popular vote in 2016. So he won with a very slim margin. And there are three states where the margin was so tiny that if turnout had been different, the election would've been different. And where were those states? Wisconsin, Minnesota, Pennsylvania, and a fourth, which is pretty close in, Georgia. So the dynamics weren't very different.

Now, the impact is huge. The impact is very different. Because if you look back in years when the parties differed in their policy quite radically, the Reagan years, the Bush years and so forth, in all of those years, both parties believed in the Constitution as it existed. They were living in roughly the same universe, although had different takes on it, on very important issues, but nevertheless, roughly the same.

That is not true now. And so issues like tearing apart the federal government, politicizing the military, putting in all people whose loyalty is more personal than political, putting in so many people in the cabinet who have no experience in the area that they're supposed to run, that is really, really different.

Yvette Cozier:

And just on that last point, some view that that's what it takes to really shake things up. What are the real practical ramifications of inexperienced individuals leading major federal agencies?

Dr. Virginia "Gina" Sapiro:

Sorry about the dog. Everybody listening should decide whether they'd be really happy shaking things up by going to a doctor who has no experience as a doctor, an auto mechanic who loves cars but has never taken auto mechanics, or want your computer fixed by somebody who has no computer science. Sure, it shakes things up like throwing out a bowl of jelly beans. But government is so complex, and you're talking about one of the most complex countries on earth with our deep federal system, which is very different.

Our population is more diverse than most in the world, and we're divided into interesting pockets. Our role in the world is substantial, although right now our allies are beginning to say, "Well, if they're going to do this regularly, we're going to have to work without them because we might be able to trust them one year but not another year." So it depends on what you mean by shaking up.

Shaking up can be a well-thought-out theory and plan to make things work differently. But playing 52 Pick-Up isn't a reformulation of government, it's chaos. The economy, what happens to our economy is crucial. And we have a leader who thinks that a tariff is a tax on a foreign

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country and it won't have an impact here. Well, that's not what a tariff is. A tariff will raise our prices and will not only raise our prices, it will cause a trade war around the world.

Deporting people who do much of our farm work and service work. If people think prices are high now, if their plans to deport people, leave aside the humanity and the justice of that, if the substantial group of people who are our farm workers and our service workers and hotel workers and restaurant workers are deported, exactly what is going to happen to the price of food, it's going to skyrocket.

Yvette Cozier:

So again, just going back to the top of our conversation around the anger, the palpable anger, that you sensed from the mostly men who were coming in to register and to vote, how do we square these two things? How do we either as individuals or as groups square this so that we can somehow move forward as a country? Any thoughts?

Dr. Virginia "Gina" Sapiro:

That's the toughest question because the people we're talking about, by and large, don't trust what they call the mainstream media. Don't read it. Don't pay attention. And also remember, if you're talking about largely people who have not been to college, the reading levels and technical knowledge of being able to listen to, for example, economic news or health news or crime statistics or any of that, it's not that people aren't smart.

It's those of us who are more educated learned how to understand those things and kind of be fluent in... You're in public health, but you can listen to crime statistics or you could listen to economic statistics and have a sense of what that means because you're not an expert in that, but you've learned something about how to understand these things. Likewise, me with health data, I can read it.

So we have people who aren't following what we'd think of as real news, would not be going out of their way to reading NBER reports on the economy, get most of their news from talking to neighbors and social media, which is, by the way, how most young people get their news. And so you get these bubbles. That's a shaggy dog way of saying, "I don't know." Nobody really knows how you reach people because screaming doesn't help and having reports on the news doesn't help. And we're talking about people who will never watch something like this.

Yvette Cozier:

So as we come to wrap up, what advice would you have for current students, current school of public health students as they begin to embark on their public health careers?

Dr. Virginia "Gina" Sapiro:

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Okay, I'm going to make some guesses about the social and political leanings of students who enroll in public health schools, and I'm going to say, give yourself time to grieve if you're still doing it. And then stand up, dust yourself off, and figure out what your domain of action is. You're not going to take care of it all. And you can't take care of the things that are far away, but there's plenty to do in every community, in every domain of life, in every job.

And what I've always reminded my students is what would've happened if the people in the abolition movement the first time somebody said no said, "Oh, we're dead. We can't do this anymore," or the women's suffrage movement or the union movement or the civil rights movement or go on and on and on. It's not all over yet. Justice takes a long time. It may bend in the right direction, but it's really a curlicue.

And it's really important for people not to give in to long-term grief in this and choose where you can do something and make a difference to some people. And it seems to me that shouldn't be terribly hard for people who are studying public health.

Yvette Cozier:

I like that advice very much, and I hope that students will listen to that. I certainly believe, yes, and be in our feelings for now, but we have to be ready to move forward in a real positive and constructive way.

Dr. Virginia "Gina" Sapiro:

Some days it's harder for me to take my own advice than other days.

Yvette Cozier:

Well, I agree with that as well. I do the same. But I really, really appreciate your taking the time to impart your wisdom on us and help us as we are in this very interesting time in our country and just as our students are in their lives. Your insights are quite invaluable, so I thank you so much.

Dr. Virginia "Gina" Sapiro:

Well, thank you. These conversations are very important to share perspectives and hear what other people are thinking.

Yvette Cozier:

Thank you.

Dr. Virginia "Gina" Sapiro:

Thank you.