



Fall 9-3-2024

## **Greg Shaw Offered Media Literacy Tips Ahead of the November Presidential Election**

Colin Hardman

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WGLT Interview with Greg Shaw, September 3, 2024

Announcer: It's the economy. Stupid. That memorable quote from a political campaign advisor over 30 years ago has long been understood as fact when explaining the one issue that's most likely going to sway elections, but two politics and government experts in Bloomington-Normal say that's not the case anymore, even though voters still often tell pollsters the economy is a top concern. Greg Shaw from Illinois Wesleyan University and Lane Crothers from Illinois State University say many people base their votes on emotion just as much as facts and political campaigns know this. The two will have a discussion on the issue later this month at Normal First United Methodist Church. In this conversation with WGLT correspondent, Colin Hardman Shaw says cultural issues seem to carry more weight now.

Greg Shaw: Cultural issues grab people viscerally, right? And so a nice example of that is, is migration, and so there, there are a couple of narratives about migration. You know, one of them that you can say in polite company, perhaps, is that migrants come here and take our jobs, and that's why I feel, that's why I, a generic I, would resent that person would resent that or fear that. The other is that I just don't like their culture, I don't like their language, I don't like their food, I don't like their folk ways, whatever, I don't like the way they dress, their music, the cars they drive and but in polite company, it's not, it's not, you know, it's out of bounds to say that out loud, for the most part, but interestingly, when you look at public opinion data, that's able to parse these questions and match it up with how people actually think about desired volume of migration, it's the cultural things that Bob, that help explain people's overall assessment of migration levels, rather than the fear of jobs. That is, it's polite to say I'm afraid of migrants because they're going to take my job, but in your heart of hearts, what's really bothering you is that is the cultural threat, as some people see it.

Lane Crothers : And to build on that, I would just say that what I've been struck by in the last truthfully, the two, the three, now Trump campaigns have highlighted this theme, that there is a threat of people for whom this is very much the case, that the motivations for engagement are not, in fact, many of these historically declared things that particularly show up in public opinion polls, that a lot of journalists tend to focus on what economic plan, whatever else here. It's become much more motivated for many people anyway, and a meaningful percentage of people based on, I need to publicly demonstrate. I need to publicly perform, the fact that my side is moral, just true and right, and that your side is evil, vile and hateful and destructive, and so people go out of their way, and probably social media feeds into this as well to express opinions in ways that are not so much aimed at governing. They're not aimed at building an honest to god management plan for trying to deal with making sure the electric grid works properly, which is sort of, sort of important. It's about it's about me both demonstrating my point of view and then being rewarded by my network for believing what we all believe together, and that, and that's really vital. I think that's driven a lot of this in the last...

Shaw: ...that fits in really nice, in with the slide toward identity politics that we've seen in this country and others, which is a perilous road to walk, right when, when identity politics comes to characterize your politics overall, as opposed to big ideas of parties over time, about larger or smaller government involvement in the economy, identity politics can be, can be really lethal for you. So, point to places like Venezuela and Hungary and well the United States, yeah.

Crothers: And given, in the United States, the social cleavages exist, and we have historically done off and on a pretty good job dealing with those cleavages after periods, quite often of great tension and evil, but nonetheless, we have managed to keep it together, and some of these cleavages tend towards not keeping it together. Is that going to happen? I'm not that good in a predictor, but, but, but it could.

Colin Hardman: This is WGLT Sound Ideas. I'm Colin Hardman here in studio with Professor Lane Crothers of Illinois State University and Professor Greg Shaw of Illinois Wesleyan University. We're talking about the election, and I'd like to dig a little bit more into the more into the polarization point that you just brought up Lane. Would you say that technology is amplifying the kind of effects we see with people siloed into their own type of information?

Crothers: You know, I'm actually a little bit skeptical of that argument, because I think what we don't have, most people don't have, is a good historical record of just how much hate there's been in this country that's crossed socio-economic, religious identity lines, right? For the whole Know Nothing Party in 1840s formed as an anti grammar, anti-immigrant, anti-Catholic party, right? Those cleavages have been part of our society for an enormously long time, and the patterns of particularly large cities where their ethnic enclaves and racial enclaves and you can't cross those borders without getting into significant tensions. There's nothing new about that. What social media has perhaps done is amplify them, provide mechanisms for expression. They've also provided a low effort way to contact people outside your community who may share your ideas, and so they build networking opportunities that didn't used to exist. This country has always had cleavages along these lines, but I do think that in recent years, the, the degree to which the performance of anger, the expression of anger, and the reward for expressing that anger, has certainly intensified.

Hardman: Great.

Shaw: Yeah, right. I think my take on that is this both and this both this and that. So. So first of all, absolutely, we have been around this block before with regard to polarization. If you look at, at measured ideological cleavages in Congress, they peaked in the 1890s in ways that we can recognize readily compared to where we are now. And so we've, we've been at that level of polarization with regard to voting blocks in Congress before, and then that ebbs and flows through time. The other part is, and I'd be interested in we can have some back and forth on this perhaps. It seems to me that post World War Two, an awful lot of the argument about, about American politics was structured around the big government, small government divide, and that defined the two parties nicely, and that they argued about, about government intervention in the economy and free markets and all that kind of business. However, somewhere along about the 1970s so in the wake of the various social movements, women's rights movement, civil rights movement, gay rights movement, we began to shift toward more of a cultural saturation to our politics. The old spatial model that says you move to the center to win an election, because that's where the median voter is, that's where the maximum number of voters are, has lost a lot of credibility. And so, at this point, the elections are mainly about turnout.

Hardman: So we've talked around it a little bit the result of those passions and polarization. I think it's hard to look at this presidential election without remembering how the last one ended.

Lane, I believe you've written on this the January 6 attack, the very conspiracy fueled incident that came out of that, and we've seen renewed violence in this election cycle. We've seen a candidate who was shot at a rally. Do you think our climate is primed for these kinds of things to continue?

Crothers: First of all, this is another one where I think we do a really bad job of remembering our history. The assassination of presidents is a thing that's happened a fair number of times in our society. We had a civil war that slaughtered a significant portion of our population and destroyed the economy. We're not on the edge of the Civil War, at least I don't think we are so, we have had these passions. One, if I could switch a switch, a switch in people's brains and get everybody to read and understand the labor history of the United States from the 1880s to the 1930s I'd do it right now, because nobody understands how violent that was, and nobody understands how much of a complete struggle that was, right. So, this level, that this fact of this kind of violence is not a new feature of our politics. That said, again, the number of external actors, the speed at which it spreads, the speed at which the misinformation and disinformation spreads, the number of people whom we've cut off from social support services, failed to assist and identify, who are therefore vulnerable to these kinds of appeals. I think that probably has expanded over the last 10 or 15 years and, and, Lord knows, in a heavily armed society, you just never know.

Hardman: Sure. Greg...

Shaw: Yeah, I, you know, I'm struck by what you asked me at the very beginning of this why, why all this matters? And it seems to me like another way to say that is, in this election, we will elect either the first woman president or the first felon president, and that plays out in a few different ways, in the way that maybe Lane and I think about American politics in higher, more abstract layers, but also for voters, it's going to mobilize a lot of people, through resentment, through, through joy, through a variety of channels, right? And so again, I come to think about, you know, what they're, they're imagining, the candidates are imagining, what can I do to mobilize my people the most effectively? And, and so for Democrats, it's going to be, you know, it's gonna be reproductive rights and getting a woman in the White, a woman of color in the White House. For the other side, it's gonna be, you know, defending their guy who they're quite sure has been, has been maligned inappropriately, and so I fear that what we're going to see over the next few months anyway, is more of the politics of identity and so forth than it is about let's have a reason. The conversation about how to approach the Middle East or how to approach the economy, or how to approach the southern border, or whatever that might be,

Announcer: That was political science professors Greg Shaw from Illinois Wesleyan University and Lane Crothers from Illinois State University, speaking with WGLT correspondent Colin Hardman, their free talk on election decision making, facts or emotions, will be on Sunday, September 15, at three o'clock at Normal First United Methodist Church.