



S3E6: Political Writer Julie Kohler

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Aimee: Welcome to Democracy in Color, the voice of the new American majority. I'm Aimee Allison, and joining me in just a moment is Julie Kohler. Julie is a senior vice president of strategy and planning at the Democracy Alliance. She wrote this fascinating article recently for The Nation about why white women vote overwhelmingly Republican, and what progressive white women can do about it and how to understand it,

Julie: And so the fact that 53 percent of white women voted for Donald Trump in 2016 actually is not an aberration, but the continuation of a long-standing pattern.

Aimee: Julie Kohler, welcome to Democracy in Color.

Julie: Thanks, Aimee. It's so nice to be here with you .

Aimee: And it's great to have you. Okay. I want to take you back to January 2017. There was this poignant photo at the Women's March where a black woman protester in the milieu of the Women's March I was holding up this sign that said, 'Don't forget white women voted for Trump.' And I remember that photo was taken being framed with three white women wearing pink hats, celebrating. What do you make of the message of that image?

Julie: Yeah, I remember that image really well too. And I think it was a really important check. The Women's March had so much to celebrate; the massive action of women turning out in opposition to, you know, all that was so offensive about the Trump candidacy and subsequently the administration, their priorities as well as his personal conduct and behavior.

But, you know, I think there was a lot of surprise amongst some white women, um, white progressive women and white feminists about the overall voting statistics in the 2016 election. And I think that's because there's been sort of a misguided narrative over many election cycles about the gender gap in electoral politics, or the so-called gender gap in electoral politics, without the proper analysis of what's really going on. The bottom line is that we do have a gender

gap of the smallest of margins in this country, but we have a race gap of enormous proportions. And so the fact that 53 percent of white women voted for Donald Trump in 2016 actually is not an aberration, but the continuation of a long-standing pattern. And so that sign at the, uh, at the Women's March, I think is the reality that a lot of white women progressives, a lot of white feminists, need to come to terms with and, and reality that we have to get our heads around so that we can figure out what the appropriate actions are going forward.

Aimee: Well, your Nation article went into a lot more detail about the gender gap and the race gap. There's a lot made of the power of gender in defining people's political motivation. Can you give us some more detail about both the race and the gender realities?

Julie: Yeah. Well, we've heard about this so called gender gap as a force in electoral politics for many, many years. And if you look on average, there are differences in how men and women vote. But the reality is is that that's largely driven by women of color and especially black women who vote overwhelmingly democratic. White women have voted Republican in presidential elections dating back to the 19 seventies. In fact, there was only a brief blip in the 19 nineties in 1992 and 1996. 1992 white women were about evenly divided in their, in their votes between the Republican and Democratic presidential candidates. And in 1996 white women favored Bill Clinton by the slimmest of margins.

So we, we really are doing a disfavor, I think, to our understanding of kind of the relative weight of race and gender if we continue just to talk in the overall. We really need to kind of desegregate this data and look more specifically at who's driving the gender gap in electoral politics. And the fact that women of color and in particular black women are indeed the true base of the Democratic Party. They are who lead social change in this country.

Aimee: You say that sentence, it's like this is the reality. Why do you think it's so difficult for some people to acknowledge and accept that plain fact?

Julie: Well, I think for many white feminists and white progressives, especially those who found Donald Trump so offensive as a candidate and who are in such opposition to the priorities of this administration, it's a tough pill to swallow, a bitter pill to swallow in some respects. And I think it points to an incredible amount of work that white progressives and white feminists need to continue to do both kind of the checking of our own privilege as well as the outreach that we really need to be doing to other white women and to better understand those realities and to try to enter into dialogue so that we can hopefully make progress in this country.

Aimee: So my question is this, what do white women need to know about themselves as political players and what does the country need to know about white women?

Julie: Well, one of the things that I did want to highlight in The Nation piece too is that white women are not a monolithic voting bloc and I think that needs to be called out because I think just as we shouldn't be talking about an overall gender gap, there are truths that can be a kind of obscured if we only just talk about white women as voting one particular way or that the fact that they tend to vote Republican on average. The bottom line is that white women's voting behavior is largely determined and affected by sort of the interrelationship between three variables, education level, religion and marital status. So if you look at the 2016 election, um, and the differences between college educated and non college educated white women, non college educated white women voted for Secretary Clinton at rates of about 36 percent.

Whereas college educated White Women Favored Hillary Clinton's and, uh, Secretary Clinton net rates of about 56 percent. So there was a 20-point gap. And then even more interestingly, when you look within both of those categories, you see tremendous gaps between women who identify as evangelical Christian and those who do not and those who are married and those who are not. So evangelical Christian women in both categories. Favorite Donald Trump by about a 30-point difference and married women favorite Donald Trump by about a 10-point difference. So it's really important to look at the social structures and systems that really shape women's political ideology and their perceptions of their own self interests. And --

Aimee: Let me ask you what those numbers though, with the 30 point of the 20 point, these, these differences that are driven by things like education, didn't Donald Trump win all of those categories, just by different varying percentages?

Julie: Uh, he, Secretary Clinton won the majority of college educated white women, so about 56 percent of college educated white women voted for Hillary Clinton. So not across the board, but again, those aren't, you know, compared to the rates that women of color supported Secretary Clinton, these are dramatically lower.

Aimee: Right.

Julie: So even even among kind of the sub groups that were most supportive of Secretary Clinton, they're still far lower than women of color support for Secretary Clinton.

Aimee: Thinking about how many resources, energy, and focus that the Hillary Clinton campaign spent appealing to white women and especially evoking the image of the suffragette to unite them in history. I was there at the Democratic National

Convention when she came out and all white as an homage to that history. And I remember Election Day in 2016 women lining up to visit Susan B. Anthony's grave and upstate New York to leave. I voted stickers. Remember that?

Julie: Yeah, yeah.

Aimee: But Susan B Anthony, I experienced her very differently. I think of her very differently in history. She said long ago, quote unquote, I will cut off this right arm of mine before I will ask for the ballot for the Negro and not for the woman. And so deep in the history of the suffragette movement leading to a modern sort of conception of women's history, there is this divide between white women and people of color. And so how differently must white women identify and think about their own legacy in order to move forward in a multiracial way?

Julie: Yeah, I think that there's a lot of coming to terms with the white supremacy that has been embedded even within these social justice movements. The early suffragist and frankly feminist movements. And it's a dynamic that's still in play, right? We, it's not that anything has been overcome. We are making progress on this, but it is a process and there is indeed a very ugly underside to a lot of these movements for social justice that we have to come to terms with, acknowledge, and be frank about and work to do better going forward. So, you know, Gloria Steinem has said on many occasions that not only are women of color, and especially black women, the base of the Democratic Party, kind of the most fervently progressive communities in this country, but they're also have a history of really being more feminist than white women. Uh, in the early seventies when Gloria Steinem was launching Ms. Magazine. And uh, that second wave feminist movement was really coming to be about 60 percent of black women would talk about being in support of the feminist movement schools. Whereas the support among white women was about 30 percent. So this notion that the feminist movement has really been led by white women.

There have been, of course very prominent white feminist leaders, but in terms of who has really lead with their passions and, and, and whose ideology has been there, it's been, once again, women of color and white women have followed.

Aimee: When you tell white women about these facts, how are you received?

Julie: I think there's been a lot of interest actually and one of the pieces that I've gotten the most response and the most questions about was the call to action around white women really entering into dialogue, white progressive women, with those who may not share our political orientation, but with whom we have some points of commonality. And there's a lot of questions about kind of how to construct those dialogues effectively. I think quite frankly, we live in a very atomized society where we tend to interact most with people who are very like us, who think like us, who are similar to us and there just are fewer and fewer of

those civic and cultural spaces where we can come together and really be in authentic dialogue and develop authentic relationships.

Aimee: You know, my, my mom and I was always took half of my family is white. My mom is white, my dad's African American. And uh, my mom as a teenager left an all white town in eastern Oregon to go volunteer in South Hampton, Virginia to meet with civil rights activist, stay with families and register voters. But she said, actually it was her, it was she and the, and the young people that were transformed. She was in Virginia when the Voting Rights Act was signed. And she felt she was part of that history. She felt she had done a small part to making this democracy in this country better. So when, uh, when Trump won, she fell into a deep sustained depression about the value of the work that she'd personally done. But also her generation had done. And it's taken, you know, a year for her to come out of that and figure out what to do with that. And I'm sure that this is something that's endemic among white women about what do we do next? What do we do now? Have you experienced that yourself and been part of those conversations?

Julie: You know, I think because many white women do experience privilege based on race, I think that the real racial animus that was exposed during the campaign and since then was a bit of a shock to many. Whereas I think many communities of color were not shocked by it because there was no distancing that from everyday life. And so yeah, I think it's been hard to come back. Right? I mean we, we did have to kind of go through that mourning period and, and feel like so much of the progress that this country has been making is at risk right now and indeed has already, we've already seen tremendous rollbacks to so many other areas of progress. But I think we can't kind of be indulgent in our own sense of, of outrage that it really has to be transformed into action.

Musical interlude.

Aimee: You're listening to Democracy in Color. Before we get back into our conversation with Julie Kohler, Tim Molina, political director of the Courage Campaign is back. He's our political insider breaking down the political strategies and the numbers. You know, Tim, one of the things when I was hearing Julie is thinking, okay, her voice and her message needs to spark a national conversation because this is. This is a thing, the role of white women.

Tim: Yep. Absolutely, and I think that role of white women have a huge role deploy just in turning out the vote, but also mobilizing people, volunteering and big role to play for the progressive movement.

Aimee: Yeah, I spoke at the Swing Left meeting in San Francisco. They had a lot of progressive white women who were volunteering, and I want to just say that progressive white voters in general and white women in particular, as a majority

of those voters play a key role in the multiracial success that we need have, um, in 2018 and beyond. I think the question is how can progressive white women help support and strengthen the new American majority and our political strategies? I think what Julie's pointing to is a need to really get comfortable and be advocates for racial justice.

Tim: Yeah, absolutely. I think there's two levels of this. There's the individual where they, you know, I think white progressives need to reflect on how they show up for racial justice, perpetuate inequalities and systems of oppression. And then two, there's an institutional level, where a lot of these, like national, massive, progressive grassroots organizations like the Moveon.org, Swing Left, indivisible, et cetera. Their base or their membership is mostly white rice, white progressive, but they have immense power and resources and time to volunteer. For Courage Campaign. Our list is mostly white and it's actually mostly older white women, which is pretty common for progressive online and progressive grassroots organizations.

That's okay. Right. But that's why it's so important that we are talking about this, that we're showing up. If you see something, say something. You know, I hear a lot of white folks asking what can they do, you know, to get more people of color, their meetings or to center racial justice and I think they're, they're kind of missing the question. It's--

Aimee: What's the right question?

Tim: I think it's more about how can we support him, amplify the voices of communities of color and how can white folks create space for people of color to lead or to follow their lead. So for a lot of these meetings you just said you were at that meeting and it was a lot of white women, you know, it's one thing to diversify that space, but at the end of the day, who is a political capital in that space? How many people in that space have decision making power? How many people are running the meeting or taking up that much space? So it's about action, you know, I think, like I said, individually, we need to reflect and I'm really glad that Julie's a part of this conversation. And I think that's one step, but to I think what kind of action can we take to amplify the voices of these communities? And if I can add one other thing, a lot of these states, even like California, Florida, or some of the most diverse states, the legislature is still only 20 percent women or if you want to use minority, the minority legislature, people of color. So even if the state, the voting base or a population and a lot of women or people of color, it doesn't mean much. If the leadership of that state is, they're underrepresented there.

Musical interlude.

Aimee: Hi, I'm Aimee Allison, host of the podcast Democracy in Color, the voice of the new American majority. Join our conversations with today's best and brightest political leaders, strategists and thinkers. Our mission: to take our country back with the power of progressive of every race. And we invite you to join us. To learn more, visit democracyincolor.com or follow us on twitter @democracycolor.

Musical interlude.

Aimee: I don't think, and you can correct me if I'm wrong, that a white women are accustomed to talking about white women or talking about women usually in the issues in organizations. It's framed as women's movement broadly. To say white women is to say something about the nature of different groups within that are women in the diversity of the United States and how those are significantly different. I guess my question is what do you think is needed in terms of moving significant numbers of white women who consider themselves progressives, that are part of the new American majority, that want a change in this country, uh, to adopt or to look at racial justice as their own issue as well?

Julie: Yeah. It's a process, right? It's always a process of sort of unpacking privilege in our lives and the role that that plays and how we can all do better and addressing that and how we use our power to elevate those with less structural power than, than ourselves.

You know, Brittany Cooper, black feminist author, who I just think is, is really making some of the most brilliant contributions right now to the thought leadership of the feminist movement.

Aimee: She's Professor Crunk on Twitter?

Julie: Yeah, exactly. Yeah, exactly. And she teaches at rutgers university and came out with a new book recently called eloquent rage, which is really a brilliant collection of essays in that she talks about white privilege, um, and it's, as, as, as it has been manifest for white women that it elevates the value of their femininity. And I thought that was a really compelling line. It was one that really stuck with me and I think it's something that white women need to unpack more. That kind of all of the ways that our supposed femininity has been valued or given status. Even the things that we may be fighting against.

It's, there is an element of white privilege to it. And so it, this is all just a really, you know, there's just a lot of work in education and dialogue that needs to go into to all of this as well as continued social activism. But I think it's really incumbent upon so many of us that consider ourselves feminists and progressives to be as passionate about issues of racial justice as we are about

issues of gender justice in this country, and to really look at the ways that they intersect and interact to shape experiences.

Aimee: If you were guiding women, what needs to happen? How do you. How do you tell people what's next?

Julie: I think this is sort of the. The critical question for all people who have kind of structural or social privilege, dude is structural inequalities in our country is how do you take up less space, right?

How do you act in true partnership and use your privilege to elevate others whose voices are not given the same prominence in social debates, in social movements, in society at large. So that is really, really important work. And if I had the answers to that, I mean I would love to be able to share them. I don't have the answers. I think we're, all of us are really learning on this, but it is critical that we're always pushing ourselves to do more and to be, you know, kind of more aware and to really be self reflective on the space that we take up and how we can change and invert those dynamics.

Aimee: Yeah. But if you say to someone, you're taking up too much space and they have no idea what you're talking about. How do you break that down?

Julie: Well, I mean, I think this is it. It's hard because of course all of this it can create a dynamic where people become very defensive. Right? And so I think all of this has to happen in the context of authentic relationships, where we can start to bridge into this difficult territory. But I think we've also, you know, white women do, experience sexism. Um, what we're seeing right now with the Me Too Movement about, you know, the ways that white women, all women, but there've been a lot of prominent white women that have come forward obviously with their stories around sexual harassment and mistreatment and assault in the workplace. And, and more broadly.

Aimee: I suppose though in the Me Too Movement, we saw very early on in acknowledgement of the roots of the me too movement, Tarana Burke.

Julie: That's right.

Aimee: Is that a model for? I mean you can tell the full story, but basically if you're a prominent white woman that's an actress and you experienced this terrible harassment and abuse and you acknowledge the roots of the movement span back many years to a black woman who basically was an activist in obscurity, you're somehow connecting race. And I think that's made me to a more powerful and long lasting and more powerful.

Julie: Far more powerful. And I think that the effort now with the time's up initiative to really create the legal supports for women who may not have the same level of access and power. So really being able to focus on women in low wage service industries, many of whom are disproportionately women of color and are actually more vulnerable to sexual harassment and assault. Then you know, women with power in relative power, middle class, upper middle class women. So I think the fact that they have, you know, really prioritized, supporting the most vulnerable women and helping them come forward and end, abuse assault, harassment in the workplace, that is another way to really show and kind of invert how resources are allocated and to show that we are serious about building an intersectional movement.

Aimee: So the Me Too and and Time's Up Movement, which I try to explain to 18 year old when I go. I spoke at Ignite which is a organization that encourages political participation by high school and college age, young women and girls and I tried to explain we're in the midst of this cultural transformation. We, we're experiencing it. Whereas when Anita Hill, when she testified in front of the Senate hearing, she was not believed and me too and time's up. We're about believing when someone says that they were abused. So that's what being a good sort of ally could look like. Can you point to some other examples in kind of modern day? You know, the, the optimistic examples of how we can change the dynamic with white women and the new American majority.

Julie: Yeah. I'm encouraged, frankly by the young people that have led the march to save lives. They, I think have really adopted in intersectional stance in their advocacy on gun violence. So obviously the Parkland shooting occurred in a relatively privileged community and there have been, especially in black communities and communities of color, but especially in black communities, you know, activists in Chicago and Oakland all over the country that have been, you know, working to bring awareness of gun violence, the devastating effects of gun violence in their communities for years and years and years and haven't received anywhere the same level of publicity or social recognition. And so I think the young people in Parkland really joining forces, you know, going to Chicago, as Emma Gonzalez, did and really working in partnership with the young activists there and elevating their leadership in the march this past weekend. And, and using the platform that they've been given to elevate all activists and, and unite these issues. That it's not just an issue around kind of these mass school shootings and in certain communities. But it's an issue around gun violence writ large in communities all over the United States.

I think that has been another encouraging sign and something that we can learn from and I'm encouraged about specifically is that I think it, it seems like it's coming more naturally to millennials than it has perhaps in prior generations. And I think that's a good sign for what is yet to come. I think young activists have

sort of a more innate sense of intersectionality and how they're living their lives than perhaps prior generations did and I think that will bode us well for the future. So I'm encouraged by that.

Aimee: If you look out at either candidates or elected representatives who are white women who know how to do intersectionality, right, who's name could you lift up?

Julie: Well, the one example that pops to mind immediately is the minority leader in the Minnesota House, Melissa Hortman, um, who really took to the, the, the floor of the House at one point and called out her white male colleagues for not being on the floor during a public safety debate in the Minnesota House. And I think that that kind of, um, stance, public stance, is exactly what we need to see writ large and

Aimee: Well, she was doing that because they weren't listening and weren't present for her a black Muslim colleague who was speaking.

Julie: Exactly, exactly. And for and for not being present on the, on and, and, and listening to, to the women of Color in, in the house on this important issue. And so I think that there are, you know, kind of that kind of leadership and behavior needs to happen writ large and um, we need to see, you know, kind of continued examples of that. And I know that there are people that share those, that orientation and want to use the power that they have for those purposes,

Aimee: Including you, Julie Cooler. I want to thank you so much for sparking and, and, and opening up this such a critical conversation. Thanks for joining us on democracy in color.

Julie: Thanks Aimee. It was great to be here with you.

Aimee: That's it for this episode of Democracy in Color. Big thanks to Tim Molina and Courage Campaign. Our editor is Chiquita Paschall. Our producer is Paula Mardo, with additional field production by Molly Nugent and administrative support by Lyvonne Briggs. Our theme song is "Truckee, CA" by Otis McDonald. Democracy in Color is produced by Lantigua Williams & Co. If you appreciate this show, as much as we appreciate you, please subscribe wherever you get your podcasts and rate us on Apple Podcasts. You can learn more about us at Democracyincolor.com. We're also on Facebook and on Twitter. Tell your friends, your colleagues and your neighbors to tune in for their dose of political intelligence. So until next time, thanks for listening.

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