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Michael Weis: People that don't vote are generally the people who decide the election ...

(Music)

Rachel Park: So if you need to register to vote, we can actually do that here at the Bloomington Library ...

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Danny Rice: Hello and welcome to Shelf Awareness, the Bloomington Public Library's podcast. I'm your host, Danny Rice – children's librarian, Bookmobile driver, beard aficionado, and today, we're going to be talking about a topic that is somewhat controversial and extremely complicated. In as such, we're really only going to be scratching the surface on this. Today, we're going to be talking about non-voting, or more specifically, how non-voting effects the election process in a democratic country. It turns out that the U.S. has pretty low rates in terms of voter turnout. In fact, the U.S. only ranks 31st out of 35 similarly developed countries ... 31st out of 35, that's not so good.

In the 2012 presidential election alone, there were over 100 million people in the U.S. who were of the eligible voting age who didn't vote for one reason or another. So, what does this do to our election process? How do 100 million missing votes change things?

We decided to see if we could get to the bottom of this and maybe get our listeners thinking about it as well. Fortunately for us, we live in a college town and we have a wealth of information at our fingertips. So we decided to sit down with Professor Michael Weis who teaches political history – primarily – at Illinois Wesleyan University.

Michael: People who don't vote for whatever election, not just the presidents, but any election ... people who don't vote are generally the people who decide the election because, well, just give the last Congressional election. Only 33 percent of the people in the country voted for the House of Representatives and one-third of our Senate. That means 2/3 of the people didn't care enough to vote ... weren't able to vote for a variety of reasons, and that's a well more than both candidates in any election ever got (fades out).

Danny: So, what you may be thinking right now is, "OK. So how can we get more people to vote?" Well, there are some countries where voting isn't an option, but it's required. This is called compulsory voting, and it's a system that democratic countries like Brazil and Australia already use.

We've been looking at a few countries -- in researching for this episode -- that have compulsory voting. Brazil is a very interesting one to look at because we have similar population sizes. The one that I personally liked the most was Australia because not only do they have compulsory voting and they shut down and have kind of a national holiday, but it's also kind of turned into a kind of party where they tailgate after they vote or before they vote ... Do you think that that kind of a system would improve the climate in America, or do you think it would be detrimental? Do you think it's worth exploring?

Michael: What I think is that, and I'm not sure that I agree with compulsory voting, I can see why that would be attractive.

Danny: OK.

Michael: But I also think that if you don't want to vote, you should not be forced to. I tend to live and let live. But I can certainly see the appeal of that -- of compulsory voting and requiring it. It would, it could make for a more patriotic population. If you know that on Election Day you're going to vote, and then you're going to do other activities in the community with other, could be other supporters or whatever. Maybe it would be great if it was sort of party blind so that people would just go into public spaces and celebrate the fact that we do have the right to vote and that we do have in some ways a responsibility to vote. I think that could actually build a lot of patriotism and a lot of sense of ownership in the country.

Danny: Hi, this is Danny again. We're going to jump out of the interview once more because we're going to talk about the Electoral College and we thought it necessary to provide a little bit of background information. It might surprise you to learn that the president isn't actually chosen by people like you and me. Instead, we rely on the Electors in the Electoral College -- there are 538 -- to make the final decision for us. Generally, the Electors pledge to vote for the candidate chosen by the popular vote in their state. But, they're actually not bound to that pledge.

(back to the interview)

Danny: There are also some people who believe that their vote doesn't matter because of the Electoral College. Can you speak to that sentiment at all?

Michael: Well, they know ... I can tell you why the Electoral College was put into place, as a historian. It was put into place because the Founding Fathers didn't really trust the people.

Danny: OK.

Michael: So, it's really an anti-democratic institution that only the better in society should choose the president so the electors would be the ultimate sort of gatekeeper on the will of the people. I have certain sympathy to that, and I think there are certain ways in which we should have a majority rules system. In 2000, Al Gore got a half a million more votes than George Bush, but he lost the electoral vote. That seems a little, I don't know what the right word is, capricious. But, I don't think the Electoral College is all the determining factors to why people don't vote.

Danny: OK

Michael: What it does do is that it privileges the vote of people in smaller states. OK. So, people's vote weighs more if you live in Delaware or Wyoming where they have so few people, and yet they get three electoral votes than say California or Illinois. Their vote counts a little less than the small states do. That's definitely one side effect of ... but the one good thing about the Electoral College, and what it is set up to do ... it's designed to make it so that you can't just win one section of the country completely and lose the rest and still win an election.

Danny: Sure

Michael: The one time that that sort of happened, in 1860 Abraham Lincoln won the election by getting virtually zero votes in the south.

Danny: Yeah.

Michael: In fact, he wasn't even on the ballot in most of the southern states. Something about no advancement of slavery just didn't fit in with the Confederacy.

Danny: Yeah

Michael: But in most of our elections, you tally up that vote, but it makes you get voters from all sections of the country in order to come up with a majority because it's state by state rather than just total votes. If it was just total votes, you would just spend all your time campaigning in California, Texas, Florida, New York, and Illinois.

Danny: Right

Michael: And you would ignore most of the, you know ... why would you go to Alaska or Wyoming? You know. Well, you probably don't do it much that anymore anyway because they only have three Electoral Votes. But those Electoral votes do mean something. So, it does strengthen and make the parties be more national. It strengthens the parties.

Danny: It levels the playing field a little.

Micheal: Yes. Well it strengthens the parties so that third parties have a much harder time getting involved, and in getting traction.

Danny: We see right now, looking at some of the statistics, that the voting rates in America for the Presidential election versus for the Congressional elections, there's a wide margin, a really big gap there. Can you speak to a little bit of why you believe that is?

Michael: Well, part of it is ignorance. I think there are people who, they would like to be good citizens but they are selective in how much they educate themselves about issues and about candidates and things. And so, because of news cycles, you know they watch CNN, or they watch whatever, FOX, or whatever news they watch, they feel that they know something about the national election. And so, every four years, they get out and vote. OK. There's a large group of people that kind of think that that is the vote that matters, when in fact we know that the lower you go down the chain, the more important the elections are to your individual life. City Council elections really matter. Mayoral elections really matter.

Danny: Yeah. Yeah.

Michael: School board elections really matter. Those are the things that really have a big impact on your life. And then State Reps. also, you know, have some importance to your life, and finally you get up to the House of Representatives and the U.S. Senate or the Governors, these things matter but they don't matter as much ...

Danny: to the individual

Micheal: to the individual. But the individual doesn't know anything about their State Rep. and so, they stay out of that election unless they're already gonna vote for president, and then, you know, they go and they generally follow whoever they voted for for president and vote for the rest of the people in that party.

Danny: How do you think the individual can empower themselves to learn more about the elections that impact their lives more specifically.

Michael: Well, everything is available. We're very good at at, basically the information is out there. OK? You can go and you can listen to a lot of different radio stations. You can buy The Pantagraph. I mean, there are definitely ways to find out what's going on. OK. You can attend meetings, which I would think, if you really want to have an impact on what happens in your life, actually attending City Council meetings in Bloomington, if you're from Bloomington, or Normal if you're from Normal, that has an even a greater impact than actually voting. OK.

You're only one voter out of how many thousands of people who are going to vote. But if you go to a council meeting and say "I have a complaint," or "I have a concern," or I want to refute what other people are saying about this," you have a much bigger impact on the democracy than people actually vote. I mean voting is important. I don't think it's sufficient. But it's certainly an important step. And it is the only step that an overwhelming majority of people ever do. I mean they, even people who do follow the issues don't want to go to a Council meeting. First of all, it's time consuming. Second, who likes to do the public speaking and all that. Third, you know, as soon as you say something somebody is going to say, "Boy, why don't you, we need you on this committee," which is going to take up a lot more of your time.

Danny: Yeah

Michael: And all those things that happen. So, I mean I do understand it, but really, attending meetings is a great way of understanding, A. what's going on and how it affects you, but B. having a much bigger impact. OK. Because I think, you know, like, our City Council members, they do listen. OK. And they do care what you think about an issue. They might not agree with you. They might not swing their vote because of something you've said to them. But, they do care about what you think and they will address your concern, but maybe not in a satisfactory matter.

Danny: Yeah.

Michael: But they will address your concern. So, we have to overcome the idea that that voting is the only thing. But we also have to overcome the idea that my vote doesn't matter.

Danny: Not to put you on the spot too much, but how do you foresee the non-voting population, how do you see that effecting the 2016 election?

Michael: That's an interesting question. The last two elections, and maybe and maybe we could even go back certainly to 2004 as well, have all been, you know the country is polarized. Approximately half the country is one way. Approximately half the country is another way. The people who win the elections have been people who have been able to get their base out. OK.

Danny: Yeah.

Michael: Because both sides now know, you know, there's all kinds of research, there's all kinds of things out there. They already know on this street who is gonna vote for me, who is not gonna vote for me. And the ones who are winning elections, particularly in close states, are the ones who can get their supporters to the

polls, you know, because every vote is that close. You have a state like Ohio, or a state like North Carolina, or a state like Florida, it just matters that much who actually shows up to the polls. I think the person who wins this election, whether it be Clinton or whether it be Trump, will be the one who they can mobilize their base.

(Music)

Danny: That's the end of part one, our interview with Professor Weis. We're going to take a quick break, and when we come back, I'm going to be sitting down with Rachel Park and Rhonda Massie, two people who work at our library and also on this podcast, dissecting some of the points that Michael brought up.

Usually this is where a commercial would go, but since we don't have sponsors, we've decided instead to feature one of our library's resources each month. This month's featured library resource is a database called America's News from NewsBank. America's News provides electronic editions of local, regional, and national U.S. newspapers along with articles from reputable websites and blogs. Users can search by newspaper or topic to find current information on a variety of topics including business, health, education, and politics. This is a great resource for those interested in further exploring the topics discussed in this podcast -- America's News from NewsBank.

And now, back to Shelf Awareness.

Danny: All right Rachel, do you want to introduce yourself?

Rachel: Yeah. My name is Rachel Park. I'm one of the Adult Services librarians at the Bloomington Library and I'm also a member of the podcast committee.

Danny: All right. Rhonda, how about you?

Rhonda: I'm Rhonda Massie. I am the Marketing Manager here at the library and also a member of the podcast committee.

Danny: OK. So, we listened to Michael Weis' interview and decided that what we really needed from that point on was just to have all of us sit down and kind of talk it out, figure out exactly how we feel about everything. So, Rachel, what are your initial reactions?

Rachel: to Michael Weis?

Danny: Yeah.

Rachel: the interview he gave?

Danny: to the episode thus far

Rachel: Oh yeah, the episode. Well, I think he says a lot of really cool things. I think one of my favorite things that he says is that voting is important, but it's not sufficient.

Danny: Yeah.

Rachel: I loved that. And then that he talked a lot about local politics and how that's like even more important than the presidential part of it.

Danny: Well and, to the, I mean objectively speaking, to the individual, the local politics is a lot more, it has a bigger impact on us than really anything else. And yet, a lot of people, that's the thing that they're least involved in and the thing that they know the least about.

Rachel: Well, it's hard to know, right?

Danny: It is.

Rachel: Most of the news networks are national news networks. So, like, if you watch TV you're probably watching national news. So they can report on presidential elections, but, like, FOX News isn't going to cover Bloomington, Illinois.

Danny: Right. They've got, you know, bigger, like ...

Rachel: bigger fish to fry

Danny: Well, yeah. No kidding.
Um, Rhonda ...

Rhonda: What?

Danny: What are your reactions to everything?

Rhonda: The thing I found most interesting, I liked hearing about compulsory voting. I don't think that's really a bad idea. You know.

Rachel: Right. I wasn't convinced that it was bad. I'd like to have a day off to be able to go vote and do community service. Like that would be awesome.

Danny: So, in a lot of countries with compulsory voting, they actually will shut down the, you know, grocery stores, and the post office, and the schools, and the libraries, and things like that, and it's kind of like, what we have, you know Labor Day. It's like that. But then, it's like go vote. Today is your day where all you're supposed to do is kind of get involved in government and go out and vote. And

so that's one of the benefits of compulsory voting is that it's required but they also make it easier for people to vote.

Rachel: And they do it in other ways too. Like in some countries, like here in America it's kind of hard to vote because a lot of restrictions placed on you, like you have to register first, and to register you have to have two forms of ID, one of which is, you know, has your address on it, and all this stuff. And it varies from state to state too, so it's sort of confusing. In other countries with compulsory voting, the government takes the initiative. So, like, once you're 18, you're automatically registered to vote. Like, you don't have to go through that hurdle of like proving that you actually want to vote before you can. They're just like, "Oh you're a citizen, so you're gonna vote." I think that makes a lot more sense than making you register. You know.

Danny: Yeah. I'm trying to think from like a Devil's advocate perspective. What are the downsides? Well, should you, should you force people to get involved? Is that, is that a dangerous path to lead people down?

Rachel: I mean, I see your point. Definitely. And I think it begs the question like, "Is it ok to be a citizen of a country and not participate? Like, is that ok?"

Danny: Right

Rachel: And I think that's maybe the question that we've been trying to answer.

Danny: Another question that kind of came up was like, "Is voting a duty? Is it a civic duty or is it a civic right?" You know, is it something that certain people are allowed to do? Or is it something that people are obligated to do?

Rachel: Well I think, right now, it's a right because of the way that we have it structured. Like if you, like I believe ...

Danny: So if it's not a civic duty, if it's something that not everyone needs to do, then what's wrong with saying, "I live in this country, but I don't want to be involved in how it's run?" like, especially if you think that it doesn't affect you that much.

Rachel: I think because of what Michael Weis is telling us, like, even if you don't vote, you're involved.

Danny: When you don't vote, you're actually casting a vote for just whoever.

Rachel: Yeah

Danny: Whoever everyone else decides. You're, you're, and there's something that's kind of appealing about saying, "I trust the electors, either the electors in the

Electoral College or I trust my fellow voters to make the right decision, but is that the way our country is supposed to go? Like, is that, is that beneficial to the system? The other thing that I'd kind of learned, I had heard people say that like America is not a democracy, it's a republic. And I'd heard people say that, and I kind of brushed it off as like, well, like, I thought they were being critical. But like, it's just the truth. Like, the popular vote is not the only thing that decides an election. We also have people who are set electors, and their votes kind of far and away are the ones that really, really decide, so, I do think that that has an impact on a lot of people in the way they choose to vote or not vote.

Rachel: Right. How they view their civic duty

Danny: Right

Rachel: Like is it a civic duty to go vote when your vote doesn't actually translate into a vote for the president, necessarily.

Danny: Right.

Rachel: There's like (inaudible) there.

Danny: What do you think Rhonda?

Rhonda: Personally, I have often wondered why we bother to vote for president when there is the Electoral College in place, but I also feel personally that it is my civic duty to go vote. So, I do it, and that's all there is to it. But, you know, I was talking recently to an adult who didn't know the Electoral ... he literally thought that every vote counted for the president. He didn't know there was an Electoral College in place. And when I said that, he was like, "What are you talking about?" And I'm like, yeah. And the more I dig into the Electoral College, it is really confusing how it works. And, you know, some, so, in most states, 48 of them, whoever the popular vote goes to, those electors are pledged to vote for that person. But then there are two states – Maine and Nebraska – where they don't do it that way, and you can split your electoral votes in those two states. So, but they are a very small number of votes.

Rachel: But that seems to make more sense to me. Right? So, like, and I'm not sure what the population of Illinois is, but for the sake of numbers, let's say it's 1 million. And if, you know, let's just say Hillary wins Illinois by 51 percent, which would be 510,000 people. Then it's like 490,000 whose opinions don't matter in terms of who the president is going to be. That just doesn't seem fair.

Danny: I guess the next place that my mind goes is saying should it be straight up popular vote? Should it be different? Or should we just get rid of the popular vote? Like, ...

Rachel: I don't want to get rid of the popular vote.

Danny: Well no.

Rachel: I care about who the president is.

Danny: But if no citizen, if no regular U.S. citizen who is not a member of the Electoral College, if nobody voted, they would still elect a president. So, like, to me, I personally feel like the only reason I vote for, in the presidential election, is for the state legislatures and the people who aren't, like, for everybody else besides the president. Those are the ones that, the votes that I care about.

Rachel: The Electoral College only elects the president. Every other vote in the country is decided by popular vote.

Danny: Right. And in Illinois, and I think the only time you can vote for a lot of those state reps is during the presidential election.

Rachel: Well, it's just the way election law is set up, and I didn't know this until very recently, but local elections happen on odd-numbered years, and all other kinds of elections happen on even-numbered years.

Rhonda: I have been wondering recently with Trump making claims that the election is rigged, if he really thinks the election is flat out rigged, or if he's really expressing displeasure with the process, with the Electoral College.

Rachel: Yeah. And I think a lot of people would agree with him.

Rhonda: Yeah. Because if you look at how polling is going right now, the popular vote is much closer than the Electoral College looks. I think the last time I looked it was 42 percent to 49 percent. But then with the Electoral College, it was more like 87 percent to 13 percent.

Rachel: Yeah

Danny: Donald Trump has a, he, he made a comment where he said something along the lines of "I do think the system is rigged, but I don't care anymore." And this was when he was, it was being decided whether or not he was going to be the nominee for the Republican Party. He said, like, "I do think the system's rigged, but I don't care because I'm the one who's winning." And that is very, I think that sums up a lot of the way citizens, individuals feel that politicians feel about the way the system is. Like, it's only rigged if they don't get the outcome.

Rachel: Exactly

Danny: They're only displeased with it if their side doesn't win. But if the system truly is not working, if it truly isn't set up in the way to best nominate a president, then we shouldn't be pleased with it no matter what happens.

Well, Rachel, did you want to plug some of our political resources?

Rachel: Yeah. Actually, I just want to let everybody know that we have some programs coming up at the library that are directly related to topics we covered in this podcast.

Danny: Great

Rachel: Yeah. This first one, actually, Michael Weis, the guy we interviewed for this podcast, he's going to be at the library on Tuesday, October 25, at 7pm. His program is going to cover the topic of America's most important presidential elections. So, he's going to provide like a historical background on the issues we talked about today. So it should be really interesting. We have another one actually coming up too. Robert Bradley, who's a retired political science professor at Illinois State University, he's going to be doing a program called "Assessing the 2016 Election Results." And that's going to be Wednesday, November 9, at 7pm, so, really close after the presidential election. So he's just going to be talking about whatever those results will be, and how that affects the country. So, it should be great, and people should stop by for it.

Danny: Great. Are there other kinds of resources that we can provide people just like any time when they're in the library?

Rachel: Yeah. We do. Funny you should ask. A lot of staff at the library are what are called deputy registrars, which unfortunately doesn't mean that we get like a sheriff's badge or anything. But it does mean that we can register people to vote up to 30 days before an upcoming election. What we'll need for that is for people to bring in a photo ID, or two forms of ID actually, one of which has their address on them. And we can, again, do that up to 30 days before the upcoming election. So, as a caveat, that date has passed for the presidential election.

Danny: OK.

Rachel: We can do it for the upcoming local election though. And if you need to register to vote for the presidential election and you haven't already, you can do what's called grace-period registration at the County Clerk's Office or the Bloomington Board of Elections Office in downtown, but you do have to be prepared to vote at the same time. So, you need the same thing, two forms of ID, and one of which has your address on it. But then they'll require you to vote also at that same time.

Danny: OK. Great. Anything else?

Rachel: Yeah. I guess one more thing I just want to say is that the library provides reference services for people, and with a topic like this that's just so sprawling and often colored by biases, you know like one side will have experts that say one thing and the other side will have experts that say another, it can be really invaluable to have expert advice on information that's truly unbiased, and like that's our job here at the library. So, like, if you want to learn more, give us a call, come in, and we will do our best to like guide you through the resources that are really going to be useful for you to figure things out.

Danny: All right. Thanks Rachel.

Rachel: Yeah. Thanks Danny.

Danny: Well, like we said at the beginning of the episode, this is a very complicated topic. Fortunately, at the Bloomington Public Library, or really any public library, we can help you access all of the information you need to come to your own conclusion on this, or really any other topic. That's it for this month. Thanks for listening. We hope you enjoyed it. If you did, you can subscribe and tell your friends.

Music for today's episode was *Fugue No. 18 from 36 Fugues for Piano* from the Daniel Estrem album *Reicha Fugues on Guitar*, *Pour 4 Personnes* from the Toni Castells' album *Slaves of Time* and *Do It for Me* from the Chiwawa album *Bus Stop Chinese Buffet*, acquired from Magnatune.com