EPISODE DATE: 2/24/12

EPISODE NAME: UVM Political Science Professor Anthony Gierzynski Discusses his Book: Saving American Elections: A Diagnosis and Prescription for a Healthier Democracy

Good afternoon and thanks for joining us I am Judy Simpson. Since 1845 early November has been designated as Election Day. By this time next year we will have elected a president 33 U.S. senators and the entire House of Representatives. Despite the significance of Election Day one and three Americans will not vote. Low voter turnout is just one symptom of what many see as a broken system. My guest this afternoon offers a diagnosis and prescription for healthcare democracy in his book saving American elections. The author is University of Vermont political science Professor Anthony Gierzynski. Saving American elections is professor Gierzynski is third book. His area of study is American politics with specific interest in elections political parties in the mass media. Thanks so much for being with us. This book takes on a huge issue it's a very ambitious study with an ambitious goal. What led you to take on this big project?

Anthony.: As you pointed out with your comment about voter turnout there are a lot of symptoms with things wrong with our election system and we've known that for many years. In addition to that I've been studying elections and being involved in a number of things involved with elections such as campaign finance court case in Vermont. It really struck me that there are a lot ideas out there to fix our elections but there's nothing that can really help us figure out which are the good ones and which are the bad ones. Which reforms will help improve our systems and which ones will not do any good or actually do more harm.

Judy.: Right there's been a lot written about the problems with elections and democracy in the U.S. so what makes your book different or unique?
Anthony.: When I decided what I thought we need to in order to figure out which reforms work in which performs to work is to come up with some way of assessing what is wrong with our system in the first place. I’m thinking about it I thought about what to doctors do. What doctors do is they're not going to prescribe you any medicine or any sort of treatment until they've made a full diagnosis of what's wrong with you. In the literature and the research there has been nothing there's been no full diagnosis to the state of what really is wrong with our system big picture approach as far as was wrong with our elections why are they malfunctioning? Why are people so unhappy with them? Why do we have low voter turnout? Things along those lines. What I thought would be appropriate was to take a look at all the research to date on elections and the problems on elections and to kind of come up with a full diagnoses. In doing those full diagnoses you look at the problems and a really occurred to me that some of the things such as low voter turnout. The level of cynicism the public as about elections there's also a low level of information the public as about elections. In all sort of feeds on itself. You’re cynical about elections say don't pay attention to what's going on.

Judy.: So what is your diagnosis how healthy or unhealthy is the patient. If the grass here that you can walk as through because it is sort of busy.

Anthony.: In terms of the grass basically as I was talking about the symptoms the diagnosis lays out what the symptoms of the problems of the elections are and then tries to identify what is the illness with elections and ultimately what are the causes of the illness. The idea is if you're going to perform all elections you can't just address the symptoms you need to address the actual root causes of what's going wrong with our system. You have issues of overwhelm the voters in terms of our systems rather complex just like diagnosis. You have problems regarding inequality in terms of resources political resources. You have failure of institutions that are needed to support elections that are now operating well. If we look back and take one further step back the problems are rooted in our election laws and our administration that lead to some of the inequality. The behavior of the political party and politicians who tend to fight publicly about insignificant things when they really do disagree on very significant things. Problems with the electorate as well. One of the things it needs to change is not just the system as a point of no book the metaphor from field of dreams you can build a perfect electoral system but if the public doesn't change as well that's not going to help and there's things the public needs to change.

Judy.: So what are some of the prescriptions that you think will work?
Anthony.: I think in the area for example of political parties. Parties actually function pretty well in some areas. Right now there such a divide between the parties the choice is quite clear in terms if you want more government involved to promote equality or if you want to gov't to not promote the quality of maybe promote more a sense of social order the choices there. There hasn't been a bigger divide in the two major parties for hundreds of years. One of the things the parties are working well what we need to do is get our discourse over elections onto those sort of topics and away from walls that trivial whether Barrack Obama is wearing a lapel pin or the wardrobe of certain candidates things along those lines we get distracted an awful lot from the core difference of the parties. If we can focus on that and make our choice based on that that would send a clear message and elections would function better in terms of communicating from the voter to the gov't what they want to do. Right now that's broken down so after each election doesn't seem clear what the voters want.

Judy.: Because there's such a low voter turnout.

Anthony.: There's a low voter turnout. Voters are often misinformed on important issues and they vote on things other than what the parties plan to do an office. The vote based on personality characteristics of the candidates. That may be fine for some but if you want elections to control governments do you have to focus on what the candidates are proposing to and vote based on that as opposed to whether you think a candidate is too arrogant or boring things along those lines.

Judy.: How did we get so off track as far as focusing on those kinds of trivial issues to the real issues?

Anthony.: How did we get so far off track? It's kind of a broad cultural trend that's happened in the U.S. Part of it is rooted in our profit driven Entertainment Media that basically gives us what we want to watch want to hear. That tends to be more entertaining things. In the business you know the easiest way to lose an audience is to get too serious and to get too in-depth and too complex. So the media has moved away from that and that has impoverished our understanding of elections and there's very little attempt to drawback conversation about elections to this what the election really means this is what your choice means so you choose this side you get this you choose that side you get the other thing. That's part of the problem culturally in terms of we seem to be more interested in entertainment these days in terms of a culture. That seem to of lost and ability to really engage in more rational discourse. There's a lot of writing about the American public becoming less
reasonable. The side seems so divided right now that people are willing to dismiss pretty concrete facts about reality. When you can't agree on the basic facts you can't have meaningful conversation about what we ought to do about the problems.

Judy.: How much is it personal responsibility? I know there's a big generational divide. I know people of my parents' generation take voting very seriously and their policy very serious in candidates. That seems to be less with younger people. They seem to be less interested in. Does it come down to just personal responsibility of educating yourself?

Anthony.: It's interesting that's one of the things my students often push when they talk about problems with the electoral system. Your life people are just lazy they just don't understand but I think when I try to get two in this book is that it's a lot more complex. We have an electoral system that is probably one of the most complex systems in the world. We ask people to vote more often for more offices then pre much any other country in the world and on top of it we deprive people of important shortcuts or ways to make it easy. For example we diminish or demean the notion of voting based on political party. A simplifying mechanism for voting that is used in a lot of other countries. It would be very meaningful here because the parties are very different the way they represent a choice but we say you don't vote for the party you vote for the person but that makes it a lot more complicated. We actually have that tool sitting there you can vote for the democrats and yet one thing or republicans the other thing and if our elections functioned along those lines once they're in office you be pretty clear who have a mandate to implement their policies. It's all kind of intertwined if you would. It's not just the voter's fault it's not just the systems fault. Our system is an accident the way it's designed. It’s rather Byzantine all the different choices we have as you go down the ballot you get down to the bottom for justice of the peas or in some areas you vote for the county coroner things along those lines should we really be voting on those? Our system likes to have more choices and more voting but there's a cost to that. The more you demand from voters the more voters are going to disenfranchise because you're making the task too complicated.

Judy.: There are some electoral reform ideas out there like instant runoff voting changes in the electoral college or even public financing but you call those snake oil why?

Anthony.: Well there are a lot of good reforms out there and in fact the great thing about our country is we have a lot of people concerned about our system and they come up with a lot of different ideas. The issue is we really need to
take a look at those ideas for reform and compare them to the diagnosis of what's wrong with the system. Do they address the problem with the system that we have right now or are they dealing with something that is not a problem right now. People pushing third parties to have a major third party because the belief is we do not have a choice. Well you actually do have a choice right now. I am trying to think of a metaphor. We have in our democracy we have a lot of tools in our toolbox that we don't actually use like the current party system. Some of the reforms are we have to devise a new tool to do something we're RT have a tool to do just not aware that we already have that that it would work that way. Some reforms will make the system more complicated. If you look at the length of our ballot and all the choices we have as I said we'd love that we love all those choices but the cost is we disenfranchise people because it's so complicated. Some of the reforms like IRV just make it more complicated. Not only do you have to choose a candidate you have to rank the candidates. Most people that's fine but we know that that's going to disenfranchise if you added to the bigger picture of the complicated nature of our elections. That's just going to make it worse.

Judy.: So how do we get to the point where actual changes are made without letting politics get in the way?

Anthony.: Exactly well right now our system is in such bad shape that and part of the problem is the polarization. It's not bad that the parties disagree. What's bad is how they disagree and the fact that the way they bear their disagreements in public and in the media it just makes it worse. They've made it so they cannot work with each other and you have groups behind them the tea party is causing problems with the Republican Party in terms of their ability to compromise or other interest groups that back the parties can push the parties even further apart and make it hard are to compromise. Part of the issue in terms of how you do a right now in terms of politics it's problematic because part of the problem is going to make it difficult to get to the solution. As things get worse and certainly right now the public is not very happy with the way our system is. I think 9% approve of the job Congress is doing the record low in terms of that attitude tour is a major institution of our gov't. As things get worse there's going to be a demand for more and more reform so there's a desire for certainly some of the movements like occupy wall street. They see the system is not being responsive they see it as favoring the money financial interests and certainly I have a chapter dealing with campaign finance and the role of money and elections and politics that that pressure may build for some reform the question is where do we go how to become through the politics to actually have some sort of reform? As a recognize in the book it's difficult. As much as we need a full reform we can just do a bit at a time. We
need to address all of these issues because they're all interrelated. You do have to start somewhere.

Judy.: Which is what your book points out the diagnosis.

Anthony.: Exactly.

Judy.: Anthony thank you so much. I've been talking to UVM political science Professor Anthony Gierzynski. His new book is entitled saving American elections. It's an issue that's important to everyone who cares about American democracy and professor Gierzynski 's book certainly shares light on the diagnosis of the problem and the prescription for the cure. Anthony thank you so much. That's our program for today I'm Judy Simpson we will see you again next time on across the fence.

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