Eric Boles:

Hello, and welcome to another episode of Road to Recovery: Expert Conversations. I'm your host, Eric Boles. As the election season heats up in the United States, one thing everyone can agree on is this election is like nothing we've ever seen. Beyond who the candidates are and the issues they are facing, it's the way we, as citizens will take part in the election process. It will be different this year. And some of these changes may continue beyond 2020. My guests today have behind the scenes perspectives on where we've been and where we may be going. Cris Landa is the program manager at Verified Voting, a non-partisan organization focused on the critical role technology plays in the elections. The Honorable Scott Brison is a vice chair with BMO Capital Markets and former president of the treasury board in Canada. And David Jacobson is vice-chair at BMO Financial Group and a former US ambassador to Canada. I want to thank you all for joining me today. And for those of you who are watching on LinkedIn Live, we will be taking your questions live at the end of the stream. So, please comment continuously with your questions. So, we're going to jump right into it. So, taking a quick step back, what is the process for choosing a US president, and how has campaigning evolved to work within this system? Cris, I'd like to begin with you.

Cris Landa:

Thanks so much, Eric. And thank you all for being here. So, in the US, the presidential election works a little bit differently because it's based on the electoral college, which was established in the US constitution. So, every state in the United States has a certain number of electors. It's based on the number of US senators. So, it's two per state plus congressional representatives, which is based on population. That's why you hear about certain states like Texas or California that are highly populated having more electoral college votes, and certain states like Michigan or Pennsylvania, Florida that really matter, right? Because they swing between parties for different elections.

Cris Landa:

So, a couple of things that are important to remember. So, first is that it takes 270 electoral college votes to win a presidential election. And second thing is that there's a date. December 8th, that's a safe harbor date. And that's when the electors actually cast their vote and the date by which votes are certified. And the reason I highlight this, it's not something that people typically talk about, but this year the election is different and it's going to take longer to count those votes. And there's actually legislation right now that's been introduced to extend that safe harbor date to January 1st because of the pandemic.

Eric Boles:

Thank you, Cris. David, can you speak on that as well as the campaigning side of it?

David Jacobson:

Well, first of all, Eric, I agree with Cris. We do not have national election for president of the United States. We have 50 state elections. And as Cris pointed out, some states are more important than

others. If you live in a safe state like I do in Illinois, we don't see a whole lot of TV ads or yard signs. On the other hand, if you're in Wisconsin or you're in North Carolina, or you're in Arizona, it's all you see on TV. In terms of the strategy behind this, it's all very complicated, I suppose, at some level, but at another level, it's very simple. You want 270 electoral votes. That's what you care about. And you look to see which states are in your column fairly certainly. I would be very surprised, for example, if California didn't go for Joe Biden and Alabama didn't go for Donald Trump. But then there are these battleground states. That's where all the focus is. And you have to be very careful that by picking up a vote in one of these states, you don't lose a vote in another. So, it is a challenge. There was once a book in the '70s written about a presidential campaign called "The Marathon". And I think over the years, if there's another one that's written, it will be called "Ultra Marathon." It's a long, tedious process.

Eric Boles:

Thank you so much. Scott, can you speak about that in terms of the Canadian federal elections?

Scott Brison:

Thanks Eric. We have the British parliamentary system of government, the Westminster model. So, there are 338 members of parliament in the Canadian House of Commons. The prime minister of Canada is actually a member of parliament. He is a legislator as well as a member of the executive branch as prime minister. So, you have to be a member of parliament. So, each party in Canada, and there's the major parties, the Liberal party, the Conservative party, the New Democrat party, which is a social democrat party, the Bloc Quebecois, which is unique to Quebec and is there to focus on Quebec issues, they run candidates. The Liberals, Conservatives, NDP, Green run candidates across Canada. The Bloc only in Quebec.

Scott Brison:

Out of the 338 to form a majority government, you need 169 members of parliament. What that means is that if you have the plurality of the seats, the numbers for your party, but not the majority, you will probably have the opportunity to rule in a minority parliament situation. So, you don't have the absolute majority of seats, but on an issue-by-issue, a legislation-by-legislation perspective, you can govern for quite some time in that capacity. That's what we have now. We have the Liberal government under the leadership of Prime Minister Trudeau as a minority government with the ad hoc support on individual pieces of legislation to maintain government and advance legislation.

Scott Brison:

And the leadership selection process for each party enables each party to choose a leader. That leader is not only a member of parliament in his or her own riding but is actually seeking the support of people across the country for his or her party. So, you're voting for both your local representative as a member of parliament, but you're also voting for prime minister and the political party under which your country Canada will be governed.

Eric Boles:

Gotcha. Gotcha. Thank you for that, Scott. Even before we go to our next question, I want to remind the audience who are watching on LinkedIn Live to please continue to comment and engage with us with your questions. So, now we're going to keep moving. And this is going to get a really good. And so question number two asks, how has the digitization of elections changed the campaigning process? And David, I'm going to start with you.

David Jacobson:

Well, I think there are two areas. And I've kind of been involved in this process for a long time, so I've seen the transition. One is on fundraising and the other is on messaging. With respect to fundraising in what old guys like me used to think of as the good old days, a very high percentage of the money that was raised by a candidate was in high-dollar contributions. These days, the limit is $2,800 for the primary, $2,800 for the general. But with the proliferation of the Internet, social media, and others, a disproportionate amount of the fundraising now comes in low-dollar contributions. It's better to get somebody to give $5 than it is to get $2,800 because the person who gave five can give five more and five more. Person who's given 2,800 is done. I think the best evidence of this shift is an announcement a couple of days ago, where Joe Biden in August raised $365 million. That's a lot of money. And that would never have happened before the age of the Internet.

David Jacobson:

With respect to messaging, and this is something that I think everybody, not only the four of us, but everybody on this LinkedIn Live understands, is that the media has become very balkanized. In the old days, again, I'm an old guy, there used to be three television networks in the United States, and all of them kind of played it pretty much down the middle. Now we have a media and certainly a television media that is very differentiated. If you watch for a while on Fox news, and then you turn to MSNBC, you kind of think they're reporting on two different universes. It's really quite different. And social media and other parts of the Internet can be even more extreme. So, it's changed it a lot. People tend to get their news from places that reinforce their preexisting [inaudible 00:09:49] conditions and beliefs.

Eric Boles:

Gotcha. Gotcha. Thank you for that. Scott, can you speak to that as well?

Scott Brison:

Well, in the old days, one of the reasons why we did so much door knocking was to actually understand on an individual and collective basis the people who were voting, and you ask questions to understand what issues were important to them. And a good campaign would actually track that and just to understand both at a macro and micro level what positions could resonate, what are the concerns of citizens leading up to their decision on election day? Today with digital, all of that is happening at warp speed.

Scott Brison:

And David is quite right. It has contributed to and reinforced a balkanization and polarization of views. People who are of a certain political perspective listen to the same news outlets today. They will read the same blogs. They will follow the same websites and get the same sources. Political parties can narrow cast on very specific issues to get the support of people who used to be referred to as single issue voters. Today, you can pull together a coalition digitally of people who don't have much in common with each other, except for their own specific narrow perspectives on individual issues. That's a challenge for political parties and representatives who are actually interested in nation building as opposed to exploiting differences.

Eric Boles:

Wow. Great insights, Scott. Cris, this is the world you live in. So, Cris, share us your thoughts on this.

Cris Landa:

Yeah. I mean, something I'll add is that there's also a lot more room for misinformation, right? And with the proliferation of social media and things like that, we saw that in 2016, especially. And there wasn't as much awareness I think of how that misinformation really impacts elections. I think there's more of that. You're starting to see tech companies do more to try to flag those things that should be investigated that which is fact versus fiction. But I think there's a lot more room to improve there in terms of just the massive disinformation campaigns that are out there and how hard it is to control in the digital era.

Eric Boles:

Gotcha. Gotcha. I was once told that our actions and decisions are only as wise as the information it's based upon, right? And so the source of that information I think matters a whole lot. Scott or David, do you have any other thoughts before we go to this next question?

David Jacobson:

I think we've covered that one.

Scott Brison:

Yeah. And those of us who were involved in politics for a long time always complained about the traditional media. I think most of us would like to have them back at this point. An intelligent, informed, centrist people, yes with biases. But compared to today, I kind of welcome traditional media sources more so than I've perhaps used to.

Eric Boles:

No, I got that. Gotcha.

David Jacobson:

I think the only thing, Eric, that I have to add is a rather famous quote by Daniel Patrick Moynihan, who was a Senator who once told someone that they have the right to their own opinions but not their own facts. We get far too much of people's own facts on TV and in social media.

Eric Boles:

Gotcha. Gotcha.

Scott Brison:

It used to be said that he who owns the press has the power. Well, today, anybody who has digital connectivity has access to effectively the power of the press to a certain extent. And they can go to quite a significant following among a narrow cast who agree with them.

Eric Boles:

Yeah. Yeah.

Cris Landa:

Yeah. I think that [crosstalk 00:14:07]. Sorry. Go ahead.

Eric Boles:

Oh, no. I-

Cris Landa:

It gives some tools to first-time candidates though that didn't have it before, right? So, I think certain things are more accessible than they used to be in the digital era as well.

Eric Boles:

Yeah. One of the things I was just going to say, Cris, on the one end, you can see the positive and you can see also the challenge of it, right? The ceiling's gotten harder, but in some cases, the floor has gotten lower. And so it's the balance of those two. I do want to say these are some great thoughts on this interesting topic. So, we'd love to hear from the audience. If you have some questions or comments, please chime in. This next question I have, and I'm going to begin it with Scott and David, but the question asks, how have virtual conventions and rallies changed the way that people engage? And Scott and David, you've been very involved with that environment. So, Scott, we begin that with you.

Scott Brison:

Well, look. People like David and I, as people who were involved in the political process, we loved the conventions. We loved the funny hats, the bands, the hoopla, the hospitality-

David Jacobson:

The buffets.

Scott Brison:

All the smattering of vices to which we were exposed at these conventions. But we were the insiders. Of course, we liked it. It was great. But on the positive side, digital opens this up so that more people, not just the people who can afford to go to these conventions who are typically quite an elite group but actually more broadly. People actually get to put their stamp on political parties, on political movements and choose political leaders digitally, particularly for young people, particularly for minorities. This does represent, I think, in general, progress. David and I may not have quite as much fun as we used to at conventions, but that's a small price to pay for a more inclusive political process.

David Jacobson:

I very much agree with what Scott had to say. And I, too, miss it. COVID has taught me that there are two things that I no longer need: neckties and political conventions. There was great trepidation with the democratic and republican conventions. What was it going to be like? And I think that they were both more effective than what we labored through in the past. There were mercifully shorter speeches. Those speeches were more persuasive. And I think in particular, we had an opportunity to see average just voters giving their side of the story about something. On the democratic side, there were a couple that stuck out for me. There was a young man who was a stutterer, and Vice President Biden, who also had that affliction and still does, talking to him about how to overcome it. And there was another piece about a train conductor and the vice president took the train from Wilmington to Washington for many, many years. On the Republican side, there was a woman who had been pardoned for some criminal behavior by President Trump who had championed criminal justice reform. There was a police officer who had adopted a baby of a drug addict. These were very persuasive because they were very human. And I think we're going to see, even after the COVID problem goes away, hopefully sooner rather than later, we're going to see that.

David Jacobson:

The one other thing though that I will say about these conventions, anyway, doesn't seem to have moved the needle very much. The kind of polling average, before the conventions Biden was ahead seven or eight points. And the polling average today Biden's ahead seven or eight points. He may have kind of cemented some of the vote to make even fewer people persuadable in the middle, but it really hasn't seemed to have moved the needle very much. I don't know if others see it differently.

Eric Boles:

Gotcha. Gotcha. Before we go to this next question, I want to say again to our audience, please send in your questions or your thoughts, so we'll be able to reference some of those at the conclusion. One thing I do want to point out, we were talking about how the digitization of these conventions actually created a greater level of engagement. I think many organizations are finding the same thing from a

corporate standpoint as well. Those very select individuals in an organization going to these off-sites or going to these company meetings and because of resources. Now, all of a sudden the whole company is part of these engagements. And they're also seeing engagement actually going up in that one area, which is synonymous with what we're talking about here, more people are being able to be involved. Cris, I'm going to begin with you. And the question asks, there has been a considerable amount of controversy surrounding voting by mail, so how does it work and why can't we just switch to online voting?

Cris Landa:

Yeah. So, I feel like it's first important to say that voting by mail has been happening since the Civil War. This is a tried and tested way to vote. A lot of people vote by mail. So, the controversy, I think, is something to just note in terms of the times, whereas that the actual process is very secure. Again, every state has this process. It's really about scaling up the process versus creating a new one. Online voting would be a new system to create, and it is not secure. Cybersecurity experts, computer scientists are nearly unanimous in saying that we are not there yet in terms of security. It's just way too risky, right? It's not just about keeping our votes secure. It's also about keeping them anonymous. A lot of people will say, "Well, I can bank online. Why can't I vote online?" Well, you can check the transaction, the store can check the transaction, the bank can check the transaction. There's a lot of checks and balances there that are not possible in an anonymous voting system. And that's not done securely. And frankly, there's a lot of fraud, right? I've had fraudulent charges on my credit card, and then the bank can return that money to me. That just can't happen with an election. We cannot put our democracy at risk.

Eric Boles:

Cris, That's good. As we're going through this process, David, give me some of your thoughts about that as well.

David Jacobson:

Well, I mean, I very much agree with Cris's view. Voting by mail is very secure, but there's one big problem that it may pose. And I think it's very fundamental to our system and that is that it will require great restraint by the media on the evening of November 3rd and 4th and 5th and 6th. And the reason for that is that mail-in ballots in most States, not all States, get counted last. First day, tabulate the people who showed up and the early voting. And based on a lot of projections, the sense is that the parties will not vote by mail in equal numbers. And it is quite possible based on 30 or 40% of the votes being tabulated on election night, that one side will be ahead. Then, as the votes continue to be tabulated over the next few days and maybe the next week, that the lead may shift. And everybody has to be very, very careful not to start picking winners until we know that all the votes have been counted because the worst thing that can happen is that people lose confidence in our system. People lose confidence in the outcome. People lose confidence in the democracy. And that's something we should all be worried about.

Cris Landa:

I think the mantra should be accuracy over speed, right? We want the most accurate results, not the fastest results. We want to make sure that every vote has been counted. There are people who wait in long lines to vote. The process this year is complicated. We have to respect the effort that has been made, right? And make sure that every single vote is counted and that we can trust those results.

Eric Boles:

Scott, how about your thoughts?

Scott Brison:

Yeah. I would add to that. Obviously accuracy is critical and the integrity of the system is critical, but also people having access to the system and increasing the level of participation. I do believe that in time, digital participation in elections including digital voting is the future. I agree with Cris in terms of the challenges technologically, in terms of security and anonymity, but I think countries ought to be in it. And election organizations that run elections in countries ought to be really focused on how to develop the integrity, the security, the safe cards, including anonymity of voting systems, because for young people today, they are doing everything digitally. And we want them to participate in elections, yet they're part of a Netflix nation and we're asking them to participate in Blockbuster elections in terms of the technology. And it seems to a lot of them to be a bit anachronistic.

Scott Brison:

So, I would only say that I agree with Cris in terms of the concern she quite rightly lays out about security and anonymity, but I think countries ought to work on things like government digital identification that is double authenticated and secured. We should be looking at what countries, little countries, like Estonia and what they have done in terms of digital is very impressive.

Scott Brison:

But I think ultimately we can see actually better elections that include more people in much of the same way that digital has helped make conventions more accessible if less fun for David and me in some ways. In some ways, the digital has that capacity broadly in terms of electoral participation. But we have to get the security and anonymity right. But I don't think we should just sit back and wait for that to happen. That should be a part of a focus effort by countries in a multilateral sense because all democratic countries would benefit from advancement in this area.

Eric Boles:

There's two questions I have. And we got about four minutes left, and what you just spoke to, Scott, is a perfect lead into this question I have and I have a separate question for David. The first question is, do you think, Cris, based on where we're at, do you think that young people will stay engaged in the digital election process when they can't vote that way?

Cris Landa:

Yeah, I'm a young person, right? I think I'm the youngest person maybe on this panel. And I engage digitally.

David Jacobson:

That's saying much.

Cris Landa:

I follow all of the people who represent me down from the city council level all the way up on social media, because to me that's a good way to find out what they're doing and a good way to connect with them. But I also want to make sure that my vote is counted. And right now I just don't trust the online system to trust that my vote is counted securely and accurately. So, I think young people can engage while still wanting it to be secure. I think we can look to states that have high young voter turnout and find out what they're doing and see if we can expand it to other states. Things like online voter registration. There's a lot that can be learned from states that have higher turnout than others and to kind of take those learnings elsewhere.

Eric Boles:

Perfect. So, this last question I have for you, David, because of time. This question comes from Nelson. And the question asks, how traditional media could impact the changing democratic process. So, how can traditional media impact the changing democratic process.

David Jacobson:

Well, it already has in the sense of this balkanization, in the sense that a number of whether it's newspapers or television networks or radio networks, many of them, not all, but many of them are not perceived as playing this thing down the middle. They have an ax to grind. They have a side to take. And I think that that is part of... It's really the product. It's the end product. It's not what caused it, but it has certainly cemented the political divisions, the political camps that people are locked into in the United States. And my own thing was that's not good. And what I would hope is that we get back... Well, we'll probably never get back to, nor should we, to three television networks, but we get back to a broader swath of the media. It's referred to sometimes as the mainstream media, who play it more down the middle. I think it would be better for the democratic process, would be better for the country. I'm pretty sure it'd be better for me.

Eric Boles:

No, I appreciate that. We got about a minute left. Scott, do you have anything you would like to add, especially with that question that was just asked or any thought you want to leave with the folks watching?

Scott Brison:

Oh, just that we have an opportunity to engage more citizens in a genuine way in terms of shaping the policies that govern our countries, in terms of the representatives that represent us. I think Cris is quite inspiring, I think, to young people that you can combine an analog... You have a passion for your country and for politics and government because politics matters and government matters, and you actually can craft both a digital and analog approach that can actually shape the future of the country. That is still a good news story. And citizens both in the United States and Canada and any democratically governed country ought never take that for granted. But the system, it only works if individual citizens get involved, ask questions, and participate earnestly and actively. Without that, bad leaders get elected by people who don't vote.

Eric Boles:

Yeah. Yeah. I want to thank every single one of you. This has been insightful. Thank you, Cris. Thank you, Scott. Thank you, David. And thanks to everyone watching on LinkedIn Live. Hope you really enjoyed today's presentation. Don't forget to join us on September 23rd at 12:00 Eastern time, 11:00 Central for our next conversation where we will discuss how 2020 has reshaped how businesses look at talent. Until next time, thank you for joining us on Expert Conversations, focused on the road to recovery. Thank you.