I Hate Politics – I Hate the News Episode 24: July 23rd, 2024

Introduction

[00:00:00] Sunil Dasgupta: I Hate the News is the weekly news bulletin from I Hate Politics podcast, a show about a human activity we love to hate, I'm Sunil Dasgupta. The week of July 23rd, 2024 President Biden's decision to withdraw from the presidential race has largely energized, but also disoriented the Democratic Party, I spoke with the Biden campaign co-chair in Maryland, Mark Feinroth. The Montgomery County Board of Education released a self-study showing that board members work full time while being paid part-time, former MCPS superintendent Josh Star weighs in. University of Maryland settled a complaint for not disclosing foreign grants, 6 former employees of DCS. The local news website that WMU shut down this year, start a new local news outlet, the 51st, and they are finding broad support for their venture and more, stay with us.

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[00:01:19] Advertisement: I Hate Politics is brought to you by UMBC's Political Science program. If your goal is to make a meaningful impact with a career in local, state, or federal government, discover what this degree can do for you. Learn more at UMBC-Shady Grove.

Introduction

[00:01:35] Sunil Dasgupta: I Hate Politics is a podcast about our neighborhoods, workplaces, schools and streets, and our local governments as they function in diverse and democratic societies. This means our politics are messy, dirty, sometimes corrupt with often self-serving politicians but no matter how much we may hate politics, we are never exempt from it even when we refuse to participate. In fact, the purpose of politics is to keep society functioning precisely when we don't agree with each other, like now. Music for this episode comes from Silver Spring, power pop band Airport 77s. Andy Sullivan on vocals and guitar, Chuck Dolan on bass, and John Kelly on drums, the songs come from their album, We Realize You Have a Choice.

Music.

Interview with Mark Feinroth

[00:03:04] Sunil Dasgupta: On this podcast, we make a big deal about bringing to you the worm's eye view of things but sometimes the bird's eye view, the big picture, wins birds do pick off worms. This week seems like national politics will pick us off, but let's see if we still have something interesting and meaningful for you. Presidential campaigns in overwhelmingly one-sided states and jurisdictions are money and campaign worker export enterprises. In Maryland,

for example, no matter Joe Biden or Kamala Harris or another Democrat, the party is going to prevail. Conversely, in Texas, Republicans will prevail no matter if Trump, now the older candidate by 20 years, drops out. There are clearly down ballot impacts that are important, particularly the race between Prince George's County Executive, Angela Alsobrooks and former Maryland Governor Larry Hogan but Biden's Maryland Campaign Committee is not even formally incorporated and is led by self-appointed volunteer co-chairs, Maryland Senator Jim Rosapepe and lawyer, lobbyist, and one-time state candidate Mark Feinroth. I asked Feinroth about Biden's withdrawal and how state Democrats were feeling.

[00:04:40] Mark Feinroth: I'm feeling very conflicted, a little sad about Joe Biden's departure, um, a little excited about, uh, turning things around and trying to take another good shot at winning the general election, uh, and a little, uh, a little disoriented. I mean this is kind of strange territory you know, I was, um, a real Joe Biden fan and uh that's not, not, that's not going away, but I, I'm disappointed that we won't be carrying his flag into the general election.

[00:05:10] Sunil Dasgupta: You said you had about 900 volunteers. What were they saying?

[00:05:15] Mark Feinroth: Uh, lots of different things Um, many of them were telling me, damn the torpedoes full speed ahead. Um, lots of others were saying, gee, uh, what's the process for finding a new, uh, standard bearer for the party? Uh, what are we gonna do? Um, you know, we had a very successful event last week uh, in Baltimore with the second gentleman Doug Emoff, we raised our goal of $100,000. So there were plenty of people that were still excited about the campaign and willing to dig deeply into their pockets to support it, but there were also plenty of people that were calling and saying, gee, what do we do now?

[00:05:55] Sunil Dasgupta: Yeah, it's interesting that he, that you had Doug Emhoff, uh, as the headliner for the fundraiser.

[00:06:01] Mark Feinroth: Yes, it was interesting he's a delightful guy. Uh, you know, we didn't really know what was gonna happen then. In fact, by then, by by last week, it seemed like it was July 11th, so it's been more than a week. But um, Uh, but at that point, we were thinking that she, we, we were starting to feel like we had, we, we've gotten over the worst of it, that we were moving ahead, that we had found our legs again.

[00:06:24] Sunil Dasgupta: What are you going to do tomorrow?

[00:06:27] Mark Feinroth: I'm gonna go to the office I've got work to do tomorrow, um, and, um, you know, there are a series of organizing Zoom calls. I mean, my calendar is filling up already, there's a call, uh, after you and I agreed to schedule this this evening Uh, there was another call that was scheduled with an organization called. Um, when, when with black women, Yvette Lewis was kind of promoting this call and and by the time I signed on, there were already 1000 people on the call, and I was, was blocked out, and then they sent another link and I tried to join at 8:30, and by the time I received the new link, there were 3000 people participating and I was yet again blocked out from participating in the Zoom call.

[00:07:11] Sunil Dasgupta: Yeah, but it seems like there's energy then.

[00:07:13] Mark Feinroth: Oh yeah, it does, I agree.

[00:07:15] Sunil Dasgupta: What is the role? Of a campaign or a political party in a jurisdiction or state where it is overwhelming like Democrats are in Maryland.

[00:07:28] Mark Feinroth: So, uh, it's, we're, we're an export state, so we export dollars and volunteers and energy to uh nearby battleground states. So in this cycle, that would be Pennsylvania, perhaps uh Georgia, North Carolina, Virginia, Virginia is turning purple again, yeah.

[00:07:48] Sunil Dasgupta: Mark Feinroth, good luck navigating the uncertainty now.

[00:07:53] Mark Feinroth: Thank you very much, Sunil it was great talking to you.

[00:07:58] Sunil Dasgupta: That's Mark Feinroth, co-chair of Biden's campaign committee in Maryland. A national call of black women on July 21st, the day Biden announced his withdrawal, saw 40,000 people join the call and the National Democratic Party has raised $66 million in half a day but it is unclear still who might challenge Kamala Harris and what legal challenges Democrats may face in passing the baton cleanly, especially in Republican controlled states. Republican leaders have threatened legal action.

Interview with Josh Starr

[00:08:40] Sunil Dasgupta: OK back to our usual Uber. Montgomery County Board of Education, which governs the county schools, released a self-study last week where it found that board members spend time equivalent to a full-time job that is at least 40 hours a week in their roles, supervising the school district but they are paid as part-time employees. $25,000 a year for regular members and $35,000 for the board president, board members averaged 455 calendar items in the year 2023, 24, the range being 352 to 560. The school year is 180 days, the board meets throughout the year, but a ratio of the average calendar items to school days works out to 2.53. That is, board members have on an average 2.53 calendar items for every day school is open. Unclear what calendar items include but still, this is not insignificant, how much school board members are paid is a long running debate. School board pay is a state matter, and the board cannot, like other legislative bodies, give itself a raise. In 2018, the state legislature authorized a commission to look into school board compensation and the commission recommended raising the school board's pay to 60,000, which is what part-time state legislators in Maryland make for three months of work. The state legislature increased the compensation but did not support pay parity between school board and legislators. What really is the role of the board? Josh Starr, who used to be MCPS superintendent from 2011 to 2014, has said that the board tries to do too much and in fact, a full-time board may be a greater hindrance to the superintendent's leadership. Since Star now leads an education consulting firm, still lives in the county, and has had kids in MCPS I asked him about the report.

[00:11:19] Josh Starr: I think we got a whole two ideas in our head at the same time, right? On, on one hand, The question is, what's the right work of a board member? And, and this is in any school district in the country, there's this question, the term we use in the business is what's above the line, what's below the line, right? What, what should you be doing as a board

member to support the superintendent, to focus on your three jobs, which is, or maybe 4 jobs, policy, budget, and hire and fire the superintendent, and community engagement would be the other one. The way the job is constructed, however, by many board members and certainly many Montgomery County board members have fallen into this trap, they believe that their job is much more than what it is supposed to be. So, yes, they are working very, very hard at something that they think they're supposed to be doing and they're not compensated for it, but that's not the job they should be doing in the first

[00:12:23] Sunil Dasgupta: place. With the Beidleman um harassment scandal in MCPS, the board has been accused of failing at the job. Where is the line in that respect?

[00:12:38] Josh Starr: So, the bottom of situation is one where, like it lends itself to this, oh my gosh, there's so much to be done and it's true when things like that happen, yeah, it takes a lot of time. But if you, but let's just talk about the day to day work of the system and, and that again goes this idea of what's the work of a school board. And yeah, when things like the bottom of situation happen and everyone rolls up their sleeves and it takes an enormous amount of time and energy, that's the job, right? But in the day to day work of the school system, that's where board members and not just in Montgomery County, everywhere. Um, I talked to superintendents every single day, and they tell me, particularly the new ones like, I had no idea how much care and feeding of the board members I would have to do in this job. They spent 50% of their time, if not more, dealing with the individual whims of board members because they do not understand that they, um, that they should not be managing the system. They should be governing it, not managing it.

[00:13:41] Sunil Dasgupta: Do you hold the board members here in Montgomery County responsible for neglect in the Beidleman case?

[00:13:50] Josh Starr: If in the bottom of the situation, they moved immediately on the former superintendent and said, no, hey, we got a problem here and off of your head, would we be talking about it in the same way? Cause they would have been that, that would have been their job, right? So the uh the, the lack of doing that. For the absence of that, and again, I understand how difficult it is to actually make the case to remove the superintendent of schools, the politics of it reigns supreme. Um, there's, there's, it's never black and white, no pun intended, right? But it's, it's never like, unless it's, unless it's really clear cut, it's never clear cut, right? Um, you know, and by clearcut meaning like a DUI or caught in the act of a financial impropriety or something like that, it's really hard to remove a suit. Again, I, I still think, and I understand that the bottom of the situation is like the most egregious, but if you look at like the day to day running of the school system, because that's really what it comes down to, um, board, boards that are, when, when systems have a board that is too involved in the day to day running, it never works out well for anybody.

[00:14:54] Sunil Dasgupta: You recall Mike Durso, the former school board president?

[00:14:59] Josh Starr: Oh, I do, of course.

[00:15:00] Sunil Dasgupta: He has said. That if you did the work of the board efficiently, it shouldn't take more than 10-15 hours a week.

[00:15:08] Josh Starr: Uh, and that is one of the very rare, uh, uh, uh, examples of where I would agree with Mike Durso on anything just, uh.

[00:15:18] Sunil Dasgupta: Thank you.

[00:15:20] Josh Starr: My pleasure.

UMD pays $500K to settle that it did not disclose foreign grants from Chinese telecom firm Huawei

[00:15:22] Sunil Dasgupta: That's former MCPS Superintendent Josh Starr, who is now an education consultant, more education news, this time, higher ed. The University of Maryland has settled a complaint by the Maryland US Attorney's Office, agreeing to pay $500,000 for not disclosing foreign research grants for faculty, which included money from the Chinese telecom company, Huawei Technologies, and the Chinese online shopping platform, Taobao. The National Science Foundation and the US Department of the Army have said that the University of Maryland failed to properly disclose foreign funding in 5 cases, and nondisclosure had material impact on their NSF and Army grants. The US government has banned the import and sale of telecom equipment from Huawei, citing national security concerns, Huawei is the world's largest maker of telecom equipment.

Baltimore sues progressive group over a ballot question to give parents $1,000 for every newborn/adoption

[00:16:29] Sunil Dasgupta: A Baltimore-based advocacy group called Maryland Child Alliance, which is led by a handful of city public school teachers, have gotten enough signatures to put on the November ballot a question that will require the city of Baltimore to give parents of newborns and adopted kids $1,000 each to support the child. But Mayor Brandon Scott and the city council have filed a lawsuit to keep the referendum off the ballot, arguing that the measure, if passed, would violate the state constitution. City leaders say that the group is trying to make an end run around the budget process and represents an overreach into the city council's legislative powers.

Laid off DCist employees start a new local news website, The 51st

[00:11:16] Sunil Dasgupta: WAMU, the Washington D.C. public radio station, shut down a popular local news. Website DCist in February 2024, now, six former employees have come together to launch a worker-led nonprofit newsroom called the 51st after Washington D.C.'s longtime claim to full statehood. They set an initial fundraising goal of $250,000 which they appeared to be getting close to over the weekend and then Joe Biden decided to step aside and the energy is now shifted to national politics. The bird eats the worms, as I said.

Credits

[00:18:10] Sunil Dasgupta: That's all for this episode be sure to check out our feature interview series that comes out Friday mornings. I Hate Politics is produced by me, Sunil Dasgupta, and assistant producer Adama Gay, with support from the University of Maryland, Baltimore County. I direct UMBC's political science program at the universities at Shady Grove in Montgomery County, where among other things, we explore and learn about politics, government, and society close to home. Music for this episode comes from Silver Spring Power pop band Airport 77's. Andy Sullivan on vocals and guitar, Chuck Dolan on bass, and John Kelly on drums, the songs come from their album, We Realize You Have a Choice. If you want to share your music on the show or know someone else who might want to, please email us at producer@IHPpod.org, see you next time.

Music.