



POLICY ON PURPOSE

Episode 20: Robert Jones, Ph.D., founding CEO of the Public Religion Research Institute (PRRI), on LGBT rights and public policy

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ANGELA EVANS: Hi, I'm Angela Evans. I'm the dean of the LBJ school, and this is another segment of "Policy on Purpose," a podcast where we try to bring to you people who are in the arena, and in the arena for good, public good, and good public policy. So today, I'm very, very pleased to welcome [Dr. Robert Jones](#), who wants to be called Robbie, and so I will do that on his instruction, who is the CEO and the founder of the [Public Religion Research Institute](#). I wanted to get that right, because I always think about the initials first, so welcome! And we just had a wonderful session with students and community leaders looking at [Stonewall 50 years later](#). And so I really am so pleased that you can spend some time with us this afternoon.

ROBERT JONES: Well thanks, I'm thrilled to be here.

EVANS: Good. So I want to start with something pretty general. You know, when we start thinking about the United States and the founding principle of separation of church and state, and all that you've been in, do you really believe we can actually get a separation of church and state?

JONES: Well, you know, it's always been a tricky balance, as you know. Here's one thing I think is different, though: We have always had a kind of white Protestant majority that has never really been threatened by waves of immigration. Now, we've had plenty of national freakout moments from waves of immigration, but nonetheless it wasn't the case that waves of people from Ireland or, you know, who were Catholic, or waves of Jews from Eastern Europe really

ever threatened to tip the scales in terms of the demographic majority, or even political power in the country.

And so, I think there's a way in which where we are today is different than any other generation has faced on this question. It's no longer a theoretical question, whether we want to have kind of — respect religious liberty and hold separation of church and state, it's now actually a question where the demographic majority has some skin in the game, because we've just really in the last 10 years moved from being a country that was majority white and Christian, to one who's no longer a majority white and Christian. So now, that really is the case that, you know it's not just inviting somebody to pull up a chair at a table we own, but it is trying to make room around a table that really nobody owns anymore. And that's a really different place to be.

EVANS: You know, I think about that, and that's really true. My grandparents came from Italy, and they were Catholic, and, you know, they just assimilated, and it wasn't this — I don't really, I never really sensed that there was this us and them; it was like you went to church and you did your thing, and, you know, you had your perspective. But the fact that the president of this country is set on the separation, no matter what your religion is, or no matter what your collective approach to a spiritual being, spiritual values. That's something we're always — every country has to deal with, but in our country, I think this is going to be even more interesting, because that's kind of where we've come from, that's been our roots and the way we think. And so I'd just like to get your perspectives on how do we use the power of that and at the same time not create victims in this.

JONES: Yeah. Well, I think that's right, I mean I think that, you know, one way of thinking about the story of American history is to think about us trying to make good on the principles that we say were the founding principles of the country, right? So slavery, right?

EVANS: Yes.

JONES: Something that we somehow made the Constitution work with until we had amendments that made clear that it didn't work with it. And we've always been, I think, trying to figure out how do we live these things out, and I think we're at a moment where, you know, this is something real, but kind of one thing to just kind of point back to — your grandparents, you said?

EVANS: Yes.

JONES: Yeah. So, you know, when your grandparents came to this country, when they got their immigration form, if I've got my dates right, they would not have been able to check Caucasian. They would've had a separate box to check that was probably Italian, that was separate than white on the immigration form. And so there was a way in which they got brought in as — and there was, as you know, high anti-Catholic sentiment in the country in the late 1800s through the 1920s, and so —

EVANS: You know, that's true, but I have to tell you, that never came up as something that they were concerned about. It was almost like "OK, we're here. What we're going to do is we're going to assimilate." I mean, my grandmother was illiterate. I mean, she couldn't read or write. But for her children, she wanted my mother's generation to say, "OK, we're going to work here, we're going to assimilate, we're going to speak English, and this is what we're going to do." So they never really said "Oh, we're sort of set aside because, you know, we're in ghettos or because they were — or, you know, we're labeled this. For some reason, that never really entered the picture, maybe because they didn't know it, or people weren't talking about it as such. It was — it seems to be very different now, because people have much more information, and much more able to work in groups through our social media and through the media in general than they had in the early 20th century when they came.

JONES: Yeah, and I think the assimilation pressure isn't what it was, right? And I think it is, again, because of this shift that, you know — I mean, we have this term White Anglo-Saxon Protestant, WASP, right, you know?

EVANS: Yes. Yes, yes.

JONES: And the reason why we have that little shorthand is because that was a very powerful group that was controlling pretty much everything in the country. And so, WASPy America, assimilation, you know, is always — always has to have a target, right? And so the question is assimilation toward what?

EVANS: Yeah.

JONES: And it was always basically toward that WASPy norm, was the thing — access to power, access to education, access to jobs — that was all sort of toward that norm. And I think that also is gone today, right? There's not this kind of sense of "Oh, I have to assimilate toward that norm." People are holding more onto their own cultural traditions, and I think it's because we have moved to where that norm is no longer really calling all the shots, so there's not a real need to assimilate toward that norm in order to find acceptance, to find paths into upward mobility.

EVANS: Mm-hmm. So in some ways, it's sort of around the verge of something very different that no other nations really experienced, where we came from these roots and now we're looking at — we were talking about e pluribus unum, you know, which is supposed to be "Out of many, one."

JONES: Yeah.

EVANS: Well how do you maintain that, you know, when there isn't the one, there's a lot of different things that people do, and we're moving toward some kind of a national value system, a national — the national principles of how much you behave as an American. And that's really pretty cloudy right now in terms of having something that everybody agrees to. I think they — I

think most people, like your surveys have shown, you know, I think the endurance of the Bill of Rights, thank God, has continued. But I think people are still questioning a lot of things that we just took for granted before.

JONES: Yeah, I think that's right. I mean I think, you know, the growing divide I think even between the two political parties are along these kinds of questions, right? It's less about do you support abortion or not, or marriage equality or not, and it's much more — really, the deeper fault lines today I think are around what vision of America do we have. Is it a kind of diverse, you know, ethnically diverse, religiously diverse country? Or is it kind of an older model of the kind of WASPy nation, and everybody else kind of just fights for whatever space they can?

And I think the two political parties, even in the last election cycle, right? The mantras, "Make America Great Again," right, is all about this kind of backward-looking, back to the '50s kind of thing when kind of WASPy America was more controlled, versus, you know, Hillary Clinton had this forward-pointing era to the future, and her slogan was "Stronger Together," right? And so it's very explicit. I think we're going to see this more and more as the two parties become demographically homogeneous, and then attached to that are two very different and in many ways, you know, incongruous images of what the country should be.

EVANS: The thing to me that was very interesting about your work — what's interesting about your work, is that Americans in general often don't align with where some of the far right is going with regard to, you know, our fundamental rights. So, you know, LGBTQ or abortion. Americans in general are more generous about this. And you've said something that was very interesting to me. It was like "It's going to take us two presidential cycles for the electoral process to catch up with where Americans are." But yup, that's a long time, and we have just seen that in just a few years, there's a lot of chaos that can be created with regard to really understanding some measure of stability in the things that Americans have supported. And I worry sometimes about whether or not what happens in that interim for us to catch up, for the political process to catch up to where the American public is, and why that isn't obvious in our political landscape right now.

JONES: I think that's right, we are at this liminal space, where we're at this tipping point. There's a lot of other ways to think about it, but where the, you know, the old are sort of like sun setting, and the new is struggling to be born, you know? And we are in that space, I think. You know, the last election cycle was won by 77,000 votes of the electoral college in three states, right? Michigan, Wisconsin, and Pennsylvania. In Michigan, it was only 10,000 votes in Michigan, that this 0.05 percent of the vote, I think, in Michigan. So it was very, very close, and that's where we're at, you know? And so we have this time where yeah, the country has moved demographically and on key issues to a certain place, but because of differential turnout rates, older, white, Christian Americans tend to turn out and vote at rates higher. So we end up with an electorate, yeah, that lags almost a decade behind where the country actually has already moved.

EVANS: I want to pick your brain about something.

JONES: Yeah.

EVANS: The thing that really baffles me is why the young people are not voting. So you think they have to get out to vote, and, you know, obviously the work in the primaries, those are really important. The primary votes are really essential. We have students here with passion and purpose, and they vote, and I think most of these are really passionate about something. I don't understand why they do not exercise the fundamental right to vote when in other countries, in other nations, they die for the fight *[inaudible]* preserved it that way, but they walk, you know, days to get to vote. From your travels and things that you've looked at, what do you see as some of the fundamental reasons why we're not getting that engagement of the younger voter?

JONES: Yeah, no, it is a bit perplexing to some extent. So we did a big study with *The Atlantic* magazine last year. And we took a look at — we actually did a big over sample of people under the age of 30 to try to figure out what was going on. So a couple things are going on. First is to say that historically, people under the age of 30 have always lagged behind older Americans and their voting patterns. So, this is, in some ways, not new with this generation.

But here's a couple things we found out. When we asked people about how — the most effective ways to create change in the country, what we found is that older Americans by far, and we gave them five different choices, you could volunteer for a campaign, you can, you know, give money, you can vote. And older Americans by far said voting is the way you effect change in the country. Younger Americans were significantly less likely to say voting was the way to effect change in the country, and more likely to say getting involved with an issue campaign was the way to bring about change. And about 10 percent of them said even activism online was way to bring about change.

EVANS: Really.

JONES: So part of it is, I think, less confidence that voting is the path to change, coupled with the challenges of our voting system, right? So there are some real barriers to younger people voting.

EVANS: Yes.

JONES: So absentee voting is crazy complicated to figure out how to do well. There's deadlines, requesting forms ahead of time, and the number of people that know how to do that and then remember to do it is tough. Even if you're not in a different district, if you've moved around even locally very much, which young people tend to do, right, very often. You know, you may forget where your polling place was, you may show up to the wrong polling place. There's lots of little hiccups, and so for states that don't have same-day registration, who don't have

automatic voter registration, that's a hit. And it's mostly a hit to young people when those laws aren't in place to kind of help —

EVANS: Yeah, but these are the same young people that can get together on a dime on social media. So, you know —

JONES: *(laughing)* You're not going to let them off the hook?

EVANS: You know, part of me is like "No, we're not letting them off the hook." Exactly, now we're smiling here, but, you know they're just — it's not easy. So some things that are not easy are worthwhile, and they need to do it. So part of it to me is that I feel they don't like the choices, but at the same time, they don't want to be engaged civically. Or they do to a certain extent, and so we're caught in this trap of how you push these students out, or the young people, I call them students because they're my students, but my students are really good. But still, their generation, how you push them out to say "You're going to have to work hard at this, you're going to have to be involved, you're going to have to hit the streets, you're going to have to pick candidates that you test." And it's not a choice to say "Well, there isn't anybody I want to vote for, so I'm not voting." That to me is just anathema to who we are.

JONES: Well, you know, it would absolutely change the landscape. I mean, the other thing to remember is that the kind of millennial generation, which now goes all the way up to late 30s, is the largest cohort in the country. Right? So they would swamp the votes of seniors if they turned out in anywhere near the comparable rate. So in the midterm elections, for example, young people — in a pre-election survey, young people told us that 35 percent of people under the age of 30 said they were absolutely certain to vote. It turns out the exit polls have them at 31 percent. That's who turned out.

EVANS: That's pretty close, that's pretty close.

JONES: And that's actually up 10 points from the last midterm election in 2014, so that's actually quite a bit of increase, right? From 21 to 31. But seniors were about 60 percent turnout amongst seniors, right? And so it just — it didn't close the gap, because everybody turned out at higher rates in the midterm elections. So we still haven't seen this kind of adjustment where there's disproportional turnout so that they would actually impact the vote. But, you know, again, in places like Florida, you know — well Texas, Florida, Georgia all had very tied races, statewide races in 2018. And in every single one of them, if the under 45 crowd had turned out at anywhere comparable, we would have had different candidates win. Because they vote 3/4 Democratic when they vote.

EVANS: Yeah. That's what I think — that's our big challenge, to figure out how to make that happen, and make people, you know, understand this is their fundamental right. So there's a couple of things that you said and that I've been thinking about too. You know, when you make — when we make some sea changes in the terms of how people approach issues, not only just to get involved in them, but how they look at some very controversial issues, oftentimes it's

because it's been at the expense of suffering of others or a big event where there's been riots or killings, or people being beaten up or something. And, you know, you would think by now that we'd be able to talk about this and have a sea change that doesn't take 20 years, that doesn't require some kind of a major event or a major — whether it's not life-threatening, it may be, you know, the way you live threatening. And I'd to get your perspective on that in terms of all that you've seen.

JONES: Yeah.

EVANS: All the big things that have happened, from the civil rights era to now, that it's causing people harm in order for us to turn things around. You know, what is behind that?

JONES: You know, I think it is — comes down to human nature. Really that — one of the things — so we interviewed north of 100,000 people a year at PPRI. And we asked about a whole range of things, and one of the things I'm always reminded of is that, you know, I live in DC — it's kind of a political bubble, everything is something people pay attention to. We're reading Twitter all the time, and it's a good reminder that the rest of the country does not live in that kind of political bubble. And the extent to which politics intrudes into their consciousness is not that deep or that often. And so I think that's part of the challenge, right? It's a big country, people are, you know, struggling to make ends meet and get their kids to school and put food on the table, and that's the priority I think. And so it is, I think, often a surprise, even to me after looking at these numbers so long, how big an event it takes to kind of impact the public consciousness. And I still — you know, I think a lot of scholars are pretty agreed that is we didn't have those images of fire hoses and German shepherds attacking teenagers and kids and women in Birmingham —

EVANS: Yes.

JONES: We might not have had, you know, the kind of uprising around that. Yeah.

EVANS: Exactly. But it's putting your fellow person in extremis, and then you get it because we don't want anybody being extremis like that.

JONES: Right.

EVANS: Most of us don't. But then how do we get that feeling of being — taking care of each other, or making sure that we have a society where that's — where you're safe? Where it wouldn't take that. So sometimes I think about how we can do this, and how we can help the students think about their roles as future leaders in getting this done without us having a major catastrophe or, you know, a major — you know, suffering of people. I think that's not the way we should be doing this.

JONES: Well you know, I do think — I think things like, and that's going to sound nerdy now, but we are at a university, so I'll be nerdy.

EVANS: *(laughs)*

JONES: I mean, I do think that opening people's perspectives up with research, reading, literature, it does expand one's sensibility of what else is happening in the world. And I do think that education, you know, plays a deep role in that. We did a survey last year in California of — focused on Californians who were working and struggling with poverty. You know, one of the things we were trying to do is just really use data to paint a portrait of what someone's life is like when they're working two jobs —

EVANS: Yes.

JONES: They've got four kids, and, you know, they're struggling to figure out how to take care of the kids. And one of the things that stood out of me is, you know, we found that a third of Californians, for example, were in the workforce and still struggling with poverty.

EVANS: Yes.

JONES: And that things like a \$400 emergency expense would send them over the edge. And so, you know, when you hear that, right, and especially if you've grown up a little more privileged than that, I think it is a way that even in a small way, it kind of opens your perspective a little bit. And if you continue to feed that, I think it does broaden one's, you know, mind in a way that — and broadens your field of concern, I think. So I think that education is part of the puzzle, yeah.

EVANS: No I agree with you, and I think that it is general education. So it's not just the students who come to a university or a college, or in our public school system to open this up to, but generally, how do you keep up with these pieces of information and knowledge when you're out — like you say, you're working two jobs, you have four kids, you're a washing machine breakdown away from really not being able to — you don't have a lot of time to think through these things. And so how do we make it easy for them?

For me, I think with the students, it's our job — on many fronts, one is what's the evidence? You've got to have, you know — especially now with so many things flying around that are not true, so what is the real evidence on this? Number two, what are different perspectives on this? So it's not just your perspective, because people really, in major policy arenas, don't really care about your opinion, they want to know what your learned conclusion is. And breaking them away from that is really important. But the other thing is how we teach them to have these discourses with people that are very different than they are. Or having discourses with people that they think that they're actually helping. And they've decided what those people need rather than consulting with them. We're trying to break through all of this that's been built up to when they come to us. And I find that to be something that's surprising and challenging.

JONES: Yeah. And I think that's right. We — to just bring some more data in, because another survey we did with *The Atlantic* was on pluralism and how often people encounter people

different from them is what it's making me think about. And it's still the case today that we asked about how often you encounter people who have a different religion from you, a different race from you, different political orientation from you. And across a number of measures, it's still the case that about a quarter of the country tells us they seldom or never cross those lines. And so, I don't know, you can think about that as maybe glass half full, half empty. It feels like a lot of people —

EVANS: It does.

JONES: — to me, as diverse as the country is, that there's still a quarter that kind of say "Yeah, no, mostly I'm kind of in this bubble." And again, you know, I think certainly at a big university, right, is a place where many people for the first time are going to be in a dorm room or in a classroom, and hear perspectives that they had never thought about before.

EVANS: Yeah, we have to — we were talking about this, we've been talking about this for several months, and one of the things we talked about was how do you expose people to different ideas? And how do you have those ideas sit side by side without a judgement about which is a better idea or the other? Well, it happens in educational institutions, public educational institutions in libraries, where you can go and look at the books, or go through — if it's going to be an electronic file, say "Oh, I'd like to try that." But getting more of that in to sort of the mainstream of who we are, I think, would be really important. I see 25 percent as high, given, you know, the interconnectedness of this country, and in terms of our highways and our internet highways, etc. I find that still a big high.

JONES: And the question was kind of a low bar too, it was really just about how often do you encounter, it didn't even mean you had to have a deep relationship, just contact.

EVANS: Yeah, yeah. I want to switch something, because I don't want to get this finished without talking about you.

JONES: Sure.

EVANS: Robbie, tell us how you came to do this, and how you decided that you wanted to, you know, really start something like the PRRI? What got you going?

JONES: So, we are celebrating our 10th anniversary this year.

EVANS: Can you believe that?

JONES: I know, no, it's great. And so it really — I'm an AWOL academic, so I have a Ph.D. in religion from Emory University, and —

EVANS: And you have been on academies, and you're well-versed, and you have great publications. That's what I'm interested in.

JONES: Yeah.

EVANS: OK, you made the switch.

JONES: So, you know, what it really came down to is I wanted to make the switch to the think tank world, because I really want to put my work on the ground in a way that I was having a little trouble doing in the academic setting. But when I did that, what I realized is that I was always looking for data that didn't exist. And so after a couple years of kind of banging my head on the wall, and kind of in the space of kind of religion, culture, and politics is the space I was really I was really doing work in, a little lightbulb finally went off. And I thought, "Oh, that means there's a need, right, here. And in business terms, a market for this." And so we — I gathered a board, and gathered some initial employees, and we launched at the end of 2009, and have sort of just grown it out. But our mission really is to have journalists have the best data that they can have.

EVANS: Yes.

JONES: I mean, that was kind of our first clientele, but also policymakers and the general public really understand kind of where religion and culture and worldview, how those things connect to policy issues.

EVANS: So what do you see your challenges in the next five years as to where you want to be and where you want to take this? I mean, what would be an ideal, in your mind, image of PRRI and your role in the next five years?

JONES: Oh! Great [*inaudible*], here's my [*inaudible*] elevator speech.

EVANS: There you go.

JONES: (*laughs*) No, in all seriousness. So I think the — we're kind of in a transition point, you know? And so we started as a national organization doing national survey work, and increasingly in the last couple years, we've been moving. We're here in Austin, Texas, you know, just released some new data here that we're increasingly doing work in states. And so I think that is the next thing, because increasingly I think many of these battles are being fought out in local — in state legislatures, more than they are in Congress and DC. And so —

EVANS: We've heard that today for sure.

JONES: Yeah, and so I think North Carolina, Georgia — and it's particularly places where there have been a lot of demographic changes, the states are moving from maybe red to purple in the political map. But the demographics are shifting as well, and dynamics like the urban/rural divides in states, the generational divides in states, and around issues — I mean, our big issues that we'll be kind of digging in are these kind of cultural fault lines, so LGBT issues, immigration, reproductive health rights, criminal justice reform, access to voting, and kind of just in general

people's reactions to the demographic change, and kind of how people are doing well, or not, and adjusting to all this change of the on the graph.

EVANS: Well, I congratulate you. I wish you the best, and we certainly need more people like you and your organizations to help us find some very good information, and we can help decision-makers make decisions that are based on fact and are authoritative. So thank you so much, Robbie, for joining today.

JONES: Oh, thank you, that's very kind.

EVANS: It's been a pleasure. This time has just flown by.

JONES: Yeah, likewise.

EVANS: So thank you, thank you.

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