Monday, Nov. 11, 2024 / Does #Resist still exist?

[HALF SECOND OF SILENCE]

[BILLBOARD]

SEAN RAMESWARAM (host): The United States moved right on election night. My neighborhood in Blue AF DC moved right. Virginia, right across the river moved right. Even California moved right??! What’s up, California?

SCORING <A roaring fire and a chicken skin rug - BMC>

MELANIE MASON (*Politico* reporter): A deep identity crisis, perhaps. I mean, Lord knows the rest of the country sees us as kind of like the land of hippies. But I think those of us who live here know that there's always been a little bit more nuance. I mean, California is a deep blue state. It's a state that's dominated by Democrats. But that doesn't necessarily mean that it's sort of all Democratic Socialists of America all the time. I mean, there's shades of blue. And it seems like now maybe some shades of purple and even some red.

SEAN: If everyone’s moving to the right, what does that mean for #resist and the #resistance? We’re gonna ask for you on *Today, Explained*.

[THEME]

SEAN: *Today, Explained.* Sean Rameswaram, here with Melanie Mason, senior political writer with Politico based in California. Melanie, California moved 12 points closer to Trumpism this year. What was the draw of Donald Trump in California? Was it the same story we're seeing across the rest of the country, is it immigration and the economy and, and maybe a little like men just love him, can't get enough of him?

MELANIE: I would say that the economy, I think we have to put at number one, because inflation, although it was a problem all across the country, I think that because California is already a high-cost state, when prices went up even further, I think that people really, really felt the squeeze.

*<CLIP> NBC BAY AREA: LADY: On average you're playing 70 cents more today for gas in San Jose than you were last Friday.*

*MAN: There in Menlo Park above eight dollars a gallon.*

*LADY: Wow.*

MELANIE: So I think that the economic pitch, and really just sort of anti-incumbent frustration, right. Which we've seen not just in America, but across the world. I think inflation makes voters really angry. And that includes a lot of Californians.

*<CLIP> TIKTOK: We are all aware of the fact that the cost of living in California is astronomically high. We are spending on average between 300 to 350 dollars a week on groceries.*

SEAN: And this wasn't just manifesting in terms of Trumpism in California, because there are a bunch of statewide ballot measures where people also seem to sort of lurch a little rightward, right?

MELANIE: Right. The marquee ballot measure that we had in the state was called Proposition 36. And this had to do with crime. And really it was increasing penalties for certain thefts and certain drug crimes. And the reason that that was noticeable was that it is passing with a gigantic margin. I mean, this is not a squeaker by any stretch.

*<CLIP> KCRA: The vote tally so far showing 70% of voters approved it versus the 29% who would not. Despite the broad support from voters in both parties, Governor Newsom and Democratic legislative leaders were major opponents of this.*

MELANIE: In all parts of the state, not just the redder parts, but in deep blue places like San Francisco and Los Angeles, voters were really signaling that there was a frustration, a sense that public safety was, was at the top of their minds. And they weren't happy with how the ruling Democrats have handled it.

*<CLIP> ABC7, PERSON ON THE STREET: I think right now the city is just kind of having an outcry for just wanting some change.*

*OTHER PERSON: I don't know if it's going to have a major impact but I'm hoping it's going to have some impact.*

SEAN: Was it just Prop 36 or was this issue on criminal justice manifesting in other ways?

MELANIE: In my hometown of Los Angeles, there is a very well-known progressive prosecutor named George Gascón, who was elected in 2020, sort of swept in by the wave that was set off by George Floyd's murder in Minneapolis.

SCORING <Starting To Sink In>

*<CLIP> GEORGE GASCON: LA County's incoming district attorney made good on a major campaign promise last night. George Gascón held a meeting with Black Lives Matter, including families of people who have been killed by police officers.*

MELANIE: And he lost reelection, again, quite decisively.

*<CLIP> KCAL: Former federal prosecutor Nathan Hochman appears to have won by a landslide.*

MELANIE: And his opponent ran on this platform that said, ‘George Gascón, his policies have been too liberal. It's been too lawless. Things like eliminating cash bail and not prosecuting certain misdemeanors…’ which is what Gascón instituted as soon as he got into office. His opponent, Nathan Hochman, ran on rolling back some of those measures.

*<CLIP> NATHAN HOCHMAN: We've met with so many store owners out there. They don't want to have a situation where they can no longer even call the police department because the police department says our hands are tied. So here's what I'm hearing to tell the police department: your hands aren't tied anymore. [applause]*

MELANIE: And so I do think that this, again, the fact that you had this progressive prosecutor lose. You had another progressive prosecutor up in the Bay Area, in Alameda County, Pamela Price, she has been recalled.

SEAN: Mm.

MELANIE: Each of these individuals, you could say that there's certain circumstances, that maybe this was more about the management of their office. Or maybe it was about specific handling of a case. But if you combine both what we've seen with these district attorney elections and this ballot measure, it starts to build a narrative, which is that Californians were not happy with the direction that they were seeing on public safety.

SCORING OUT

SEAN: But this wasn't just public safety. Right? Because Californians voted against raising the minimum wage, against rent control, and against abolishing forced labor in prisons. Am I reading all this right?

MELANIE: Yeah. The last one about the… abolishing forced slavery and prison labor was the most interesting because I think a lot of us thought, ‘Wow, like what are the voters saying if there's really sort of this like unsympathetic movement towards prisoners? What does that say?’ It is also notable that I believe that a similar ballot measure actually passed in neighboring Nevada. All of which is to say is that it may have more to do, in all three of those examples, with the relative strengths or weaknesses of those campaigns. There was a lot of money that was spent against the rent control measure, for example, including ads that featured Governor Newsom very prominently as, as a ‘No’ on that particular ballot measure. On the minimum wage, there was almost no advertising, no campaign for it. And that's because the state Legislature had actually passed minimum wage in various sectors. So I don't want to over-index on trying to say that all these ballot measures have fallen and therefore progressive politics is dead in California. I mean, individual campaigns matter a lot. The strengths and weaknesses of various arguments matter a lot. But I do think that when we take a step back and when you combine that with the fact that there clearly was a red shift when it came to the top of the ticket, when it came to the presidential race, there is clearly a pendulum swing that's going on. And it's notable that it's happening in a state like California, which is run by Democrats.

SEAN: Let's talk about *the* Democrat running the state, Governor Gavin Newsom. He opposed Prop 36, harsher sentences, but he also opposed this rent control measure. He was kind of tacking back to the middle leading up to the election despite famously being an anti-Trump, anti-DeSantis, type. How’s he doing right now?

MELANIE: He's not particularly popular right now.

SEAN: Hm.

MELANIE: His approval ratings are not great. And so Democrats were not climbing all over themselves to try and get close to Governor Newsom. Now, that could change. I think these next two years are going to be crucial when we talk about what his larger ambitions are. Is he going to try to position himself as the foremost Trump antagonist while Trump is in the White House? Is he going to try to think about his own legacy as California governor if that's the thing he's going to want to potentially run on as a presidential candidate? In which case, there's a lot of work to be done in California on some pretty big issues, things like the homelessness crisis, the affordability crisis. And if he's, I think, seen at all as being distracted by national politics and not doing enough to tend to the concerns at home, I think that could be damaging for him. So he has a pretty impossible balancing act ahead of him. But, you know, he is a talented politician, so I don't want to dismiss it out of hand, but just to lay down a marker that this is not going to be easy for him.

SEAN: But it's only been like mere days since the election, since Trump won, and Newsom is already saying he wants to shore up California's policies and protect their policies against Donald Trump and whatever he might want to do once he enters into office. Do we have any idea how he plans on doing that?

MELANIE: So he has already called for a special legislative session for next month.

*<CLIP> ABC10: Governor Newsom says the extraordinary session will be essentially focused on enabling California to challenge and defend itself from actions taken by the Trump administration.*

MELANIE: And what he wants lawmakers to address is more funding for the state attorney general's office to fund California's legal battle against the Trump administration. California really took the lead in Trump 1.0 in launching dozens of lawsuits against the administration. And I think that they are absolutely going to be following suit again. He also has been Trump-proofing a lot of policies that could be under threat from a hostile presidential administration. Things like our climate change policies in California, which are far more aggressive when it comes to trying to reduce emissions than what we're seeing nationally, and certainly anything that we would see from this administration in the White House. So those breadcrumbs have actually already been laid down. And I think it's only going to increase as we get closer to Trump making his appointments, making it very clear what the shape of his administration is going to look like. I think that that energy is only going to ratchet up.

SEAN: And do we think this state that just lurched 12 points towards Donald Trump will follow Gavin Newsom in that effort?

MELANIE: I think that's the biggest question. It's notable to me that on election night I was in Los Angeles. I was with the California Democratic Watch party. It was not a particularly happy crowd.

SEAN: <sniff>

MELANIE: And I talked to a lot of prominent Democrats with this question: “What does Resistance 2.0 look like?” Because I was in Sacramento for the first one and two different gubernatorial candidates for 2026 because, yes, the governor's race of 2026 is already happening in California. Both of them struck the same tone with me. I spoke to Antonio Villaraigosa, who's the former mayor of Los Angeles. And when I asked him “what does the resistance look like?” He said, “I think the resistance looks like reducing our poverty rate…”

SEAN: Hm.

MELANIE: …“I think the resistance looks like improving our public schools.” Betty Yee, who is another Democrat who's running for governor, said, “We're going to have to fend off a hostile federal government, but we cannot take our eye off the ball dealing with the economic issues that drove people to Trump in the first place.”

SCORING <Shadow Man>

MELANIE: To me, that's a huge signal that Resistance 2.0 might be slightly different than Resistance 1.0, because I think there was maybe a sense, even among Democratic legislators who really embraced being a Trump antagonist the first time around, that maybe they let some of the internal issues that are so important to California, maybe they kind of neglected that a little bit. And I think that that actually has come back to bite them in this voter discontent that you're seeing now.

SCORING BUMP

SEAN: Melanie Mason. Politico dot com. She was wearing a Dodgers hat when we spoke. Go Dodgers.

When we’re back on *Today, Explained*, it’s not just Newsom who’s trying to #resist. But does that movement really even still exist?

[BREAK]

[BUMPER]

SEAN: Christian Paz. *Today, Explained.* Vox, senior political reporter. I mixed it all up this time. Shake it up. Gavin Newsom is trying to resist, Christian. Are other governors also trying to resist?

CHRISTIAN PAZ (Vox senior political reporter): Yeah, there's been a few. Mostly, obviously in blue states. I think the one that jumps out over the last week was J.B. Pritzker saying…

*<CLIP> ILLINOIS GOVERNOR JB PRITZKER: You come for my people, you come through me.*

CHRISTIAN: Which inspired a whole lot of nice memes. There's New York. Governor Kathy Hochul has been saying that she's going to convene the state's resources, executive departments to try to see what they can Trump-proof essentially, how they can protect people.

*<CLIP> NY GOVERNOR KATHY HOCHUL: First, I created the Empire State Freedom Initiative, focused on key areas that are most likely to face threats from the Trump Administration: again, reproductive rights, civil rights, immigration… <fade>*

SEAN: And maybe revive congestion pricing while she's at it?

CHRISTIAN: Right. I don't know why it took this long, but that's going to get us on a different tangent.

SEAN: And this isn't just governors, because I also read that Biden's trying to get in on this action.

CHRISTIAN: So there's been a little bit more muddledness. There's no formal plan right out or outlines of what the Biden administration can do or is doing to try to Trump proof the executive–

SEAN: Classic Biden.

CHRISTIAN: Classic, yeah. And a certain part of this like preceded the election. On immigration, some of the stricter executive actions that the White House took. They're trying to essentially make it as bureaucratic as possible to make it difficult to undo some of those steps.

*<CLIP> CNN: They’re trying to disperse about $7B in aid to Ukraine by January 20th that would otherwise be liable to be clawed back. They’re also trying to look at what spending under President Biden’s semiconductor, infrastructure, and climate laws can be spent this year… <fade>*

CHRISTIAN: It feels a little bit vague for sure. I think part of it is that for some reason this all came as a bit of a shock to all levels of democratic and liberal organizing and politics. It's just been kind of strange how we had spent an election talking about the existential threat that, you know, a Trump win might pose. And yet there's a little bit of this kind of flat-footed response right now.

SEAN: Okay. So the response from government so far: a little flat footed, in your estimation. What about the OG #resisters? Are they #resisting?

CHRISTIAN: My first response is that the hashtag original resistance is also in that bit of kind of reflection period in both like processing what happened, processing how a second when was possible, how it happened, and then trying to create, like, a deeper kind of proper strategy in response. After 2016, it definitely felt like it was much more spontaneous and much more quickly organized. It was a surprise. It was a shock, but there was a lot of anger, right? And this time around, it just feels like it's a little bit slower. I know some groups are just organizing now and are planning on releasing like their #Resistance ‘playbook’ essentially later this month. But even just thinking about quick protests, I was at one of those protests this weekend down in Capitol Hill. There were like, maybe, 200 people there. And the energy… energy was very muted.

*<CLIP> CHRISTIAN’S TAPE FROM DC PROTEST*

CHRISTIAN: There was loud music and there were speakers and stuff. But just talking to folks, they're tired. And it just feels rather different.

SEAN: Remind us when this group peaked? Was it back in 2016? Maybe early 2017?

CHRISTIAN: Yeah, I would say peak moment was 2017 going into 2018. So it's been a huge shift, obviously. This was a movement that was born out of Trump's first election. You can remember some of the big groups that organized from there were the Women's March.

*<CLIP> CNN: We can’t count, but organizers anticipate 250,000 plus women with 600 sister marches happening across the country…*

CHRISTIAN: It was kind of a hodgepodge of some of the groups that made up the Obama and unsuccessful Clinton coalition, and that would end up becoming the coalition that pushed Biden into office. So these are college educated Americans, in many cases, lots of women, lots of young people, folks from the suburbs, LGBTQ people. And some of those folks were bound together by some of the early policies that the Trump administration took. So a very classic example: Being here in D.C., I remember how quickly the protests against the first Muslim men came together.

*<CLIP> TODAY: Demonstrators at San Francisco’s airport met by riot police, capping off a weekend of demonstrations <chants> <fade>*

CHRISTIAN: Obviously, after we had gun violence spiking in the US, those big moments of school shootings. Another one of those organizations, March for Our Lives, sprung up in response to that.

*<CLIP> MARCH FOR OUR LIVES ORGANIZER EMMA GONZALEZ: In a little over 6 minutes, 17 of our friends were taken from us and 15 were injured. And everyone – absolutely everyone – in the Douglas community was forever altered…*

CHRISTIAN: The whole point of this was to. Elect Democrats eventually in 2018, during the midterms. And that energy was successful, that mobilizing was successful. And this culminated, right, with Speaker Pelosi becoming the main governmental, essentially voice of the resistance. And that leading to the impeachment of Donald Trump.

SEAN: So this #Resist movement wasn't just the protest that we all remember so vividly, but actual political action that arguably accomplished tangible things. When exactly did it recede?

CHRISTIAN: Yeah, I think there's a few key markers here. I think the overarching theme of this right, is an anti-Trump energy. These were a coalition, the coalition of a lot of various groups, you know, various constituencies, types of voters, not all necessarily having the same agenda other than to resist Trump. So once you get past 2018, there's kind of a moment of of infighting, right, about how to provide the best resistance formally to Trump in the 2020 election. We have the 2020 Democratic primaries being kind of a clash of various ideas. Obviously, once Biden is the nominee, that's where that energy goes to. And I would say around the time that Biden gets inaugurated, it's when you can probably say the resistance begins to recede and fade. Right. Because they accomplish the goal of ousting Trump. They don't necessarily all agree with every policy that Biden has. But the goal was to beat Trump and the divisions kind of grow from there, right? The truce ends after ousting Trump. And then there's kind of a free for all later on in the Biden administration over just how progressive, just how moderate, just how ambitious the administration should be. And we have a lot of that kind of in the debate over Build Back Better, that agenda that President Biden was trying to get through Congress, just how big to go with some of the progressive goals there. You eventually have the collapse of those negotiations. You have inflation beginning to rise. You have earlier debates over student loan cancellation, for example, being a great example of how progressives kind of there was a lot of infighting there. And eventually toward the end of 2023, I would say that the resistance has fully fallen apart. By then, there's a sign that there's not going to be a primary process and there's no way to kind of push Biden out that it's going to be Biden as the nominee. And you got a lot more stories about how resisters are tired, And you just don't necessarily have somebody as inspiring to rally around to beat Trump another time.

SEAN: Does Kamala entering the race revive some of that resist energy?

CHRISTIAN: I think for sure. I think I wrote about this because it was interesting to see some of the original kind of energy and themes of the resistance coming back to life. You see fundraising increasing. You see the memes coming back And a lot of the organizing in that period to try to get people tuned back in, to get people inspired about Kamala Harris's new candidacy were the same kind of groups that were leading the early forms of resist politics. But obviously that didn't last forever. Even around the time that we were noticing this increase in enthusiasm, there was an expectation that it would eventually come back to Earth in some way, shape or form, and eventually it did as the campaign came to a close in October. That energy suddenly it was kind of… it's sustained, but it wasn't enough.

SEAN: And this weekend you're out at the Capitol and there was a protest of 200 people who felt exhausted.

CHRISTIAN: Yeah, I feel like whatever kind of energy managed to make it through to Election Day and after Election Day, it was just like a full, like, sputtering out. I mean, one of the other things that kind of kind of makes it difficult for folks to feel optimistic or feel like they should come back and protest and organize is just like: When you lose the popular vote, you kind of lose that illusion that there is some greater silent majority out there that agrees with you, like at least after 2016. Part of the reason that groups were organizing and protesting so fervently and so fiercely was because Democrats had lost despite winning the popular vote. And so there was a sense that on top of it being Trump, it's also this institution of the Electoral College. The difference this time around is Democrats lost the popular vote. There's obviously not a sense of – as ballots are still being counted – just how big that loss was. But it's a symbolic defeat, too.

SEAN: That being said, Christian, is the resistance latent? Or is it just straight deceased? Do we think we could see this movement re-emerge in 2025, -6, -7, -8?

CHRISTIAN: Yeah, I have to imagine that it'll it'll maybe not roar back to life, but will for sure leap into action. I mean, part of that is why there is a little bit of a pause and a break being taken right now by some of the big groups that helped to mobilize a lot of this grassroots work because they're trying to figure out just exactly how bad is it going to get? And if so, what should we be doing in the next few weeks to months to prepare for that? Right, I imagine, if mass deportations start happening, for example, we'll see some version of a mass movement or mass protest in response. Maybe in a similar way to the response in 2018 over our family separation policies. Obviously, those got a lot of attention. And part of the hope with that is to just make it to try to take back public opinion and that will further lend energy to this movement

SCORING <Harpo>  
CHRISTIAN’S PROTEST AMBI

SEAN: Christian Paz. Vox.

Today’s show was produced by Avishay Artsy. Avi-BYE Artsy. Amanda Lewellyn. Laura Bullard and Hady Mawajdeh fact-checked. Matthew Collette edited. Patrick Boyd and Andrea Kristinsdottir mixed and mastered and I’m Sean Rameswaram. Our program is *Today, Explained*.

[10 SECONDS OF SILENCE]