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AUDIENCE:

Do you think there's been any developments policy-wise that are helping the situation, that are making the situation better in any way in the recent years? Or is it all coming down, I guess?

NOAM CHOMSKY: Well, I think it goes in many directions. So actually, I think the most dramatic fact about the last election, the 2016 election, was not the election of Trump. The most striking fact was the Sanders campaign.

I mean, the fact that a billionaire was elected. OK, it's not a big break from American history. That goes on all the time.

But the Sanders campaign broke sharply with over a hundred years of American political history. I mean, if we had media that were talking about reality, that would be the headline. American elections are bought. There's plenty of substantial mainstream political science research on this.

If you look just at simple variables, like, say, campaign funding-- something as simple as that-- the predictability of electability by campaign funding is literally almost a straight line.

There's a recent study by Tom Ferguson over at UMass, one of the main scholars who works on this, who studied congressional election-- for presidential elections have been shown for a long time. But that was the first main study of congressional elections. They went from 1980 to the present all over the country simply asking, what's the relation between campaign spending and electability? And it is literally a straight line. You just don't get results like that in the social sciences.

The more campaign spending, the more you get elected. And that goes back well into the late 19th century. There's a famous campaign manager, Mark Hanna, back 1890s. He was asked once, what's the secret for running a successful election campaign? And he said, you have to have two things. The first one is money. And I can't remember the second one.

That's American politics, literally. Just with overwhelming near-certainty.

Well, all of a sudden, you get a guy who's unknown, has no support from any of the sources of wealth, no support from the wealthy, no corporate support, dismissed by the media as ridiculous, very negative media campaign. He was basically unknown. And he even used a scare word "socialist." He would have won the Democratic Party nomination if it hadn't been for the Clinton-Obama shenanigans to keep the party from reflecting its popular constituency. That's an incredible break from history.

And right now, incidentally, he is by far the most popular political figure in the country. Way above anyone else.

Well, those are signs that other things are-- especially among young people, he's way up. That's the future electorate. So these are things that are going off in the other direction.

There's plenty of opportunities, if they're grasped. And it's kind of easy to sink into sort of hopelessness.

What's the point? But it's just really a bad mistake.

First of all, the issues are extremely important. There's an awful lot can be done. Even in the kind of thing that Arlie Hochschild was doing, reaching people who were deeply embedded in the ultra-red constituency, the deeply religious, conservative, traditional, anti-government for the reasons that they see, which you can understand, can be changed.

Incidentally, if you look back in the past, the same sectors of the population were the most carried forward, the most extreme radical democratic programs in American history. The term "populism" is thrown around now, but it used to mean something.

And the populist movement in the United States, which began with farmers in Texas and spread through the Midwest, to Kansas and place like that, was a really powerful, radical democratic movement. Linked up with the Knights of Labor, the main labor movement, whose slogan was the working people ought to own and run the factories.

And it was smashed by force finally, but this is by far the most real democratic movement in American history. And maybe the world, that comes out of Texas and Kansas farmers. It's the same people.