

RICHARD: For a long time, most of us, no matter where we lived, didn't give much thought to the role of our state's leading election official, the Secretary of State. After all, until recently, the mechanics of how elections were held seemed kind of boring.

ASHLEY: Then, everything changed. Since 2020, elections have been in the spotlight along with the officials who run them. This is Let's Find Common Ground. I'm Ashley Milne-Tyte.

RICHARD: And I'm Richard Davies. Free and fair elections are right at the heart of our democracy, but with trust in such short supply, the role of the Secretary of State has become a lot more challenging. Our guests today know this firsthand.

ASHLEY: In this episode, we meet Democrat Steve Hobbs, Secretary of State for Washington, and Republican Michael Adams, Secretary of State for Kentucky.

RICHARD: Michael Adams was the first in his family to get a college degree and became an attorney specializing in election law. He became Secretary of State in 2020.

ASHLEY: Steve Hobbs began his career in the Army and spent 15 years as a state senator before being elected Secretary of State last year.

RICHARD: Our first question was for Michael. In his job as Secretary of State, exactly what does he do?

MICHAEL ADAMS: The responsibilities that our office has around the country differ by state law, but typically, we do three things. Number one, we are literally the secretary of the state. We're the chief custodian of records for our constituents. I have to attest to the acts of the governor or keep a register of those, every order that he signs, every bill that he signs. Number two, we're typically the chief business official of our states, and so businesses that do action in our states, they all register and report with our offices. And then, last but not least, typically, we're also the chief election officials of our states.

RICHARD: And that last bit, chief election officials of your states, is what has been controversial, right, Steve Hobbs?

STEVE HOBBS: Yeah. It's interesting. I have about 350 employees. Elections make up about 25 employees, but that gives me all the heartache, all the heartburn, all the tough questions from the media. It's probably why you wanted to do this podcast, but I also have a very varied profile. Like the Secretary said, it's different in each state. Not only do I have elections and also the secretaries, all the legislative matters that we have to record, but we have corporations, charities. We have Washington State Library. We have the archives. We have legacy, so we actually put out books on our state's history and displays, and it goes around to different museums. And we have community-focused programs, so very varied.

I know that previous secretaries of state in my state, and I've heard it from other secretaries of state, they call it "the junk drawer of state government." I'm not sitting by that because, obviously, I got hit on it during an election, but that's the joke that we use because the legislature, when they come up with different ideas, it's like, "Oh, where are we going to put this? Oh, we'll just put it in the Secretary of State's office."

ASHLEY: Well, you're right, though. We are going to talk a bit about elections in this interview, I will admit, because being able to hold fair elections is one of the most fundamental principles in our democracy. Can you each talk about why this is so important to you personally?

STEVE HOBBS: Yeah. On my end, it's pretty simple because my background, I served in the military. I took an oath to serve, protect and defend the United States and its democracy, and serving overseas both in Kosovo and Iraq, I saw these very fragile democracies under attack, and I was there during the elections. In fact, I was there to support the elections in both those countries, and I saw the same thing I'm seeing now: misinformation, trying to stop the elections, people threatening other people. So, unfortunately, we're kind of seeing it now, but that's why, to me, I'm very invested in this.

ASHLEY: Secretary Adams?

MICHAEL ADAMS: For myself, I'll note, in my state, my two predecessors, they were both business lawyers. Part of the course was to run for this office with a business background and talk about the business issues, and that was true through 2019. I'm really the first person to run for this job on a voting rights and election integrity platform. That's pretty unusual, actually, for our state, but I think you're going to see a lot more of that around the country as the election issues become more controversial and more high-profile.

RICHARD: I'm sure you'd answer this question yes, which is: are elections well-run in your state? And assuming you do say yes, why? I'll begin with you, Secretary of State Adams.

MICHAEL ADAMS: Well, I sure hope so. I'm on the ballot this year. I do think they are well-run, and they were run well before I got here, and they continue to be well-run because they're not run by one person. Whoever is in this office certainly can be helpful, but in Kentucky, it takes an army of 15,000 people to run an election. We rely on, of course, at the top, we have a Secretary of State, but we also have a bipartisan State Board of Elections, we have a bipartisan County Board of Elections in each of our 120 counties, and each of our voting locations, every precinct, by statute, has to have a mix of Democrat and Republican running the polls.

I think that's one of the strengths of our system in Kentucky, is that it's bipartisan. There's checks and balances. People perceive that it's going to be fair. But also, because we incorporate so many people, that, number one, gets a sense of buy-in from the public, but number two, just makes it logistically impossible to steal an election. We have very few instances of allegations of fraud, and when they occur, we, of course, investigate and prosecute them.

ASHLEY: But actually, I believe, when you were reelected this past spring, you were up against at least one person who was pretty vocal that they thought that the 2020 election was rigged, right?

MICHAEL ADAMS: Yeah, I had a couple of opponents that came from that fringe of my party, and it felt good to win. It felt good to have that as an issue, essentially, before the public and to see the public side with me, specifically registered Republican voters in a closed primary. So my hope is that other secretaries of state around the country, especially in my Republican Party, will see that outcome and say, "You know, I can handle myself. I can tell the truth. I can go out there and explain how elections are run freely and fairly, and it's going to be okay. I don't have to worry about kowtowing to fringe people."

RICHARD: And you're a Republican, but you worked with Kentucky's Democratic governor to expand voting access. Why did you do that, especially with a lot of Republicans in your state, and I'm certain other states, who may have opposed that notion.

MICHAEL ADAMS: Yeah, it's really hard to do anything on a bipartisan basis today in America. If you do, then your side doesn't really trust you. I try to take advantage, if that's the way to phrase it, of the COVID situation and try to bring some good out of it. Part of that was working across the aisle with our Democratic governor. He and I both were elected at the same time in very close races, and I thought it was appropriate to work with a Democrat, especially we had a big election 2020 like every state did, and I thought if I just went out there by myself and did stuff, people would say, "Oh, the Republicans are trying to rig the election."

I thought it was important to have the governor with me for us to do everything together across party lines and be seen doing that, and that would contribute to both sides accepting the pretty significant changes that we implemented to our process. Kentucky's only had one day to vote and virtually no absentee voting for 170 years, and then, suddenly, these new guys come to town and change everything. I thought it was important that people see a D and an R together at these press conferences and have more confidence that this was not being done in a way to try to tip the balance toward one party or the other.

ASHLEY: Secretary Hobbs, have you had to deal with election deniers, and if so, how have you handled that in your state?

STEVE HOBBS: Oh, yeah. I certainly have, and the best way of handling election deniers is with the truth, right? Well, we have done, in the Secretary of State's office here, and I just talked to my colleagues across the other states and, by the way, our local folks really do the groundwork, our counties do a lot of the groundwork on elections, but we've kind of taken it for granted. In the past, we've always said, "Hey, don't forget to vote. Put your ballot in the mail," or in my state, "or put it in the drop box," and we kind of left it at that. But now we've got to take it a step further because of the rise of election denialism and misinformation. We've got to say, "Hey, don't forget to put your ballot in the mail, but did you know that the tabulation machines are not connected to the internet? Did you know that anybody can come into a county office and witness the vote count happening with their own eyes?"

So we've got to take it a step further, something that I know about in my state, Secretary Adams knows about in his state, but maybe the general public doesn't know about, and we've just got to do a better job of communicating that because we took it for granted. Elections used to be a boring thing, right? It just happened. We just live with it and see the results, but now that has changed, obviously, in the last couple years. By the way, my hat's off on Secretary Adams, and the pendulum will swing. In 2000, Democrats were saying elections were rigged. We all remember Gore v. Bush, and now it's swung the other way, but it's these extremists on both ends that make it hard for elected officials to stand up and Secretary Adams to stand up as well as Republican secretaries in Georgia and Utah and a few others that push back on this narrative. But I tell you, it is really hard to go against your own party. It's easier to go against the party opposite from you, but it is really hard to go against your own party. So thank you very much, Secretary Adams.

RICHARD: Do you want to respond further? That's a pretty big compliment coming from a Democratic elected official.

MICHAEL ADAMS: Yeah, I can't improve on Secretary Hobbs' compliment of me, but thank you. It's pretty painful. I lost supporters over it, friends over it, donors over it. Those things add up. They create a lot of strain, but I think that we were proved right with the decisions that we made, and not because of any engineering on my part, but after we made those changes through emergency powers that I was granted, the Republicans did better. They did better when voting was easier, and I think on some level that's not surprising because the parties have shifted who their bases are.

When I was growing up, the working class were more Democratic. My family were all Democrats, union members, and now those people tend to be more mixed or even somewhat even Republican depending on the jurisdiction. So I wasn't especially shocked the Republicans did better when it was easier to vote, but I think that actually cut back on some of the backlash because some folks incorrectly presumed that if you make voting easier, then you're going to have all this fraud or it's going to help the other side. It didn't really make that much of a difference. Voting methods are not ideological. Washington state votes by mail, but so does Utah, and their politics are extremely different, right? There's nothing that's Republican or Democratic about voting in person or on Election Day or early or by mail or absentee or any of that.

RICHARD: Steve Hobbs, you're in Washington state, one of five states, I believe, that has mail-in voting. How do you reassure people who are well-intentioned and who are concerned about the safety of voting that everybody who does a mail-in ballot is who they say they are because I can imagine, for instance, your kid's off to college, and a ballot arrives, and it's got your kid's name on it, and he's 21 or 22, and you send it in for him so you have two votes rather than one.

STEVE HOBBS: Well, the great thing about this state is we've been doing vote-by-mail since 1983, and most of our counties did it in 2005, and of course now it's statewide -- officially it was in 2011 -- all the signatures are checked, right? And we have a good voter base. We're also part of ERIC, which I know that's another question later down the road, but we do catch people that try to vote for somebody else when their signatures don't match because we have a very good voter database. And the great thing about our state with vote-by-mail is you have 18 days to figure out who you want to vote for and for those overseas who are serving our country to get some more time because those ballots go out earlier. So there's a paper trail, and the fact that every signature is checked, we haven't had any instances of fraud, and like I said, if they vote for somebody, we're going to find out. We find that, and then we go back to them, say, "Hey, your signature was rejected because it doesn't match what we have here."

RICHARD: In Washington state, around Seattle and Tacoma, more heavily populated areas, they tend to go Democrat, and the eastern part of Washington, which is largely rural, is heavily Republican. I would think, Steve Hobbs, that mail-in voting actually may benefit Republicans more than Democrats because those rural voters have longer to go to get to their polling stations.

STEVE HOBBS: Yeah, I would say that benefits everyone. Before I was Secretary of State, I was a state senator. I believe 2010 was kind of a Republican year. And guess what, I went from the majority to the minority, and that was because a lot of Republicans turned out and also because people were ticked off at Democratic policies. So I don't buy into some of the myths I've heard about, "Well, you do mail-in voting, then one side's going to do better than the other." That's not the case.

The case is if your party has really bad policies, and the people are fed up, they're going to throw you out. That's basically what it is. But it does make it easier, though, right? If you're in a rural community, you don't have to drive to a polling station. You just walk across the street, drop your ballot in your

mailbox, and that's what makes it easy, and the fact that you have 18 days to kind of figure that out and the fact that your ballot, as long as it comes in that Tuesday before 8:00 p.m., it's going to get counted.

ASHLEY: You're listening to Secretaries of State Steve Hobbs and Michael Adams on Let's Find Common Ground. I'm Ashley.

RICHARD: I'm Richard.

ASHLEY: We're the podcasters here at Common Ground Committee, but there's a lot more going on than just our show.

RICHARD: Yeah. Check out our YouTube channel for all the latest videos, including recent live events on climate, the state of our democracy, and guns.

ASHLEY: Now back to our conversation with Michael Adams and Steve Hobbs.

RICHARD: Steve Hobbs, you've mentioned ERIC, which is the Electronic Registration Information Center. What is ERIC exactly, and why has it become so controversial?

STEVE HOBBS: Think of it as a system that talks to different databases, and there are several states that are part of it. So let's say one of my constituents moves to Secretary Adams' state, and they register there, we're going to know about it. And if somebody dies, we're going to know about it. So it really cleans up the voter rolls. Also, it puts out notices to people who are eligible to vote and asks them, "Hey, do you want to be a registered voter." And I'll tell you, I'm very glad that we're on ERIC. It is a good system to prevent fraud and, again, I commend Secretary Adams for standing up because right now, there's a misinformation campaign pressuring secretaries to remove themselves. Secretary Adams, you must put on a bulletproof vest when you go to some of your party meetings because I know when I head into a party meeting to talk about things, I'd get blasted.

MICHAEL ADAMS: I'll put in my two cents and reiterate what Secretary Hobbs said. This is a great device. It's not something that was set up by a private individual or shady group. This is us. It's the secretaries of state that compose ERIC. It's Secretary Hobbs and me and our colleagues of both parties. It's simply an information-sharing partnership, and it gets us information that we don't have on our own. Let me give you an example. Here in Kentucky, in my three years in office, we've taken about 330,000 voters off the rolls, and we have 3.4 million registered. So that's almost 10% that we've removed, and these are people that piled up for a long time, that we are under a federal court decree to get the rolls cleaned up, that's been there for several years. It's a long slog of a process.

A lot of those people, they lived in Kentucky, and they passed away, and we've taken those folks off. But a lot of Kentuckians move away. They especially move to our neighboring states or to Florida, and then they reregister to vote sometimes. Sometimes they pass away, and I don't have a mechanism to get that information. Unless I have a way to communicate with another state and trade that information, then we can't crosscheck our rolls and make sure that they're accurate. If you've got rolls that are not legitimate, that don't have accurate information, you do create an avenue for fraud. You don't see a ton of it. There had been some states where there had been criminal cases brought against people who voted in the name of a dead person. It's a real thing. It's not frequent, but it happens occasionally. But also, it creates longer lines when people go in person to vote if the rolls are cluttered with people that aren't there anymore.

STEVE HOBBS: Yeah. In fact, in our state, just last year, 175,000 voters were updated because of ERIC.

ASHLEY: I was just going to ask you, Steve Hobbs, you alluded to this a little bit earlier, but you said in the past that that has been something of a misinformation campaign launched at ERIC by some Republicans. Can you just elaborate a little bit on that, tell us more about what you mean?

STEVE HOBBS: Yeah. It's the extreme, right? It's not all Republicans. Let's make that clear. But it's on the far, far extreme, and we have our far-extreme folks, as well. But basically, this misinformation campaign says that ERIC is tied to George Soros that somehow leans a certain way and helps out Democrats only, and that is just not the case. Unfortunately, some secretaries have succumbed to this and removed their states from ERIC, and that's unfortunate because it weakens it, right? We're trying to protect ourselves against fraud, so more states that come on board, it's better for all of us. It's actually a little cheaper if all of the states would get on board, and quite frankly, I can't think of any other system that the state can go to to maintain their voter rolls and have accurate data.

RICHARD: Have both of you had instances where the people who work for you and the local and the county election officials faced threats or behavior that's really worrying by some voters? Secretary Adams?

MICHAEL ADAMS: Yeah, I've gotten death threats for years. My staff have gotten, sporadically. I'm not aware of any local official that has got a threat, but I will tell you this. In 2020, when we had 2020, the stress, of course, was just through the roof on all of our election officials, state and local, and I had two of our 120 county clerks quit. They just couldn't take the stress anymore. In 2022, I had about 23 quit, and 2022 was election year where they could retire. Their term ended. So about 16 of them, I think it was, retired, but another nine just walked off the job before their term even ended that year. They just couldn't take it anymore.

To go from two in 2020 to nine in 2022 tells you something. And Secretary Hobbs may agree with this, what I saw in 2020 was a Georgia and a Michigan and a Wisconsin problem, Pennsylvania problem. By 2022, it was a 50-state problem in terms of all of us in all 50 states, us and our local folks, as well, being abused and harassed. This made it harder to get people to run for county clerk in Kentucky. This made it harder to get people to be poll workers in Kentucky. These abuses, even if they're not full-fledged threats of violence, it adds up, and it begins to really lay some strain on our election process.

STEVE HOBBS: Yeah. We had a situation where an election director got doxxed. Secretary Wyman got threatened with her life. We have our county auditors that administer elections here in our state, and they were threatened with their lives. Volunteers were sometimes hard to get because they feel like they might be threatened. It's a serious matter.

In fact, the state, we are trying to push a bill to increase the penalty on threatening an election worker, and hopefully we can get that through. And hopefully, at the federal level, I know that there's been talks about doing that, and they should do that because -- and maybe Secretary Adams could agree to this, but most of your election workers during election time at the county level, they're senior citizens, right? And they're just trying to do their part to get democracy running, protect democracy, run the election effort, be part of their community, and for them to be threatened with their lives because some group are believing some of these lies, it's not right. It's not good for our democracy.

ASHLEY: You must be rather dreading the 2024 election.

STEVE HOBBS: Well, we're trying to prepare. We've got a lot of stuff in place to prepare for that.

MICHAEL ADAMS: I may or may not still be here, so we'll see.

RICHARD: You're running for reelection.

MICHAEL ADAMS: Yeah, what was I thinking?

RICHARD: Yeah.

MICHAEL ADAMS: Well, to your point, a presidential election is a different animal completely. The emotions are much higher. The turnout's higher, too, so that's good, I guess, but the emotions are much higher. Also, the suspicions that people have against other people, I think, are inflated, as well.

RICHARD: Seriously, what do you think the outlook is for next year, for 2024.

MICHAEL ADAMS: I'd say the biggest challenge that we have is not this stuff. That's certainly always present. The biggest challenge we have is very practical, which is: how do I find enough locations for voters? We have mostly in-person voting in Kentucky. How do I have enough locations for voters, and how do I have enough volunteers to run those locations? We've seen a decline in both of those offerings, some of it tied to COVID, some of it tied to the environment out there.

But also, this has been going on since before I was elected in 2019. There's been a decline in civic engagement, in volunteering in every form. That's why it's almost entirely senior citizens that are working the polls. They come from a generation when you volunteered, you played a role in your community, you helped, and younger generations, Gen X, like me, my generation really hasn't done that, my daughter's generation either. So that's a big problem, just having enough personnel to run this thing because it's almost all volunteers. Also, locations are getting harder to get.

STEVE HOBBS: For my state, because we're mail-in, we don't have to rely so much on polling places at all, actually, so very little location finding and also very low amount of volunteers or election workers. We don't need as many. But my concern, going into the next year with the presidential election, is the amount of misinformation that comes out, so trying to counter it with the truth with what happens with your ballot. Also, the cyber threat that happens, we had to double the size of our cybersecurity team. I'm concerned about overseas actors like Russia and China and other actors out there that want to disrupt our elections. They basically want Americans tearing each other apart.

That's why we are trying to be vigilant. We're trying to lean forward by ensuring that our cybersecurity is strong, by letting the public know what goes on with their elections so that people aren't tempted to be radicalized by this misinformation that's out there. In fact, we even passed a bill recently that went after deepfakes because I think deepfakes are something that we could see not just by campaigns but by overseas actors and by other political groups that could really cause more chaos that we simply don't want in our election.

ASHLEY: Secretary Adams, you don't have mail-in voting in Kentucky. How do you feel about it?

MICHAEL ADAMS: Well, I think every state needs to find the right voting process that appeals to its electorate. In 2020, we made mail-in voting available to anyone because of COVID. We wanted to avoid lines at the polls, and even though everyone was eligible, most chose not to use it. They wanted to go vote in person.

STEVE HOBBS: It's really interesting. It's mail-in here, but a majority of people drop their ballot in the drop box.

RICHARD: On Election Day?

STEVE HOBBS: Yeah, on Election Day. In fact, it was like 70% in 2020 and then 62% in 2022. I was thinking about that myself, maybe because I've been involved with politics for a long time in my life, but I could just walk across the street and put it in my mailbox, but instead, I take the time, drive downtown, get a cup of coffee, see my friends, all that, and drop it in the drop box. It's kind of like a polling place.

RICHARD: So, before we end this interview, Steve Hobbs, I've got to ask you about something I'm seeing in our video feed from your office. I think it's a target behind you. What is it?

STEVE HOBBS: Target?

RICHARD: Is that a frisbee or what? What is that?

STEVE HOBBS: Well, you see, it's a Captain America shield. Next to it is Thor's hammer, Mjölmir. I'm a big nerd, so I have a lot of Marvel stuff around here. Secretary Adams, if you want to come by, I can show you around all the nerd stuff that I have in my office.

MICHAEL ADAMS: I'm more of a DC Comics guy, sorry. People are either Marvel or DC, right? So I'm DC.

STEVE HOBBS: See? This is over. This podcast is over. But I do have two DC Comics displayed here, only two because I want to appear bipartisan during elections times. I've got to reach across the aisle, so I'll let you check out my DC Comics that I have here.

ASHLEY: Common ground over comics.

STEVE HOBBS: There you go.

ASHLEY: Secretary of State for Washington, Steve Hobbs, and Secretary of State for Kentucky, Michael Adams, on Let's Find Common Ground. I'm Ashley Milne-Tyte.

RICHARD: And I'm Richard Davies. Thanks for listening.

ANNOUNCER: This podcast is part of The Democracy Group.