

THE ELEANOR ROOSEVELT PROGRAM

November 29, 1950

Description: In the opening segment, ER and Elliott Roosevelt respond to a listener's question about party politics and candidate qualifications. In the interview segment, ER discusses some of the issues facing the American youth with Alice Thompson, editor and publisher of *Seventeen* magazine.

Participants: ER, Elliott Roosevelt, Alice Thompson

[ER:] What uh what was that question you were talking about?

[Elliott Roosevelt:] Well, this is a question from uh Mr. Evans Jones of Chicago, and I think it's a very good one. Uh he's going to ask your opinion. "One of the difficulties connected with consensus voting is choosing between two candidates, neither of whom is particularly qualified for the office. I think it'll be most helpful if there were a place on every ballot where one could vote 'Both candidates unsuited for this office.' in the event that neither man receive 40 percent of votes cast, I think that new candidates should be chosen by both parties and another election held. I'd be pleased to hear your comments." (00:57)

[ER:] Well, of course my first comment is that when that happens it means that the people haven't really taken an active part in their party organizations, because if they took an active part in the actual choice of people, um there they would be able to see to it that there were good people chosen on both--in both parties. And so I think what you would have to say would simply be "Sir, go out and work in your party organization." Now, if the gentleman responds that he is an independent and he doesn't belong to any organization, therefore, uh he's had nothing to do with the choice of candidates and these horrible parties uh have presented him with two people, neither of whom he considers qualified, I'd -- then I would say that there is such thing as being too highbrow in this world to really go in and work at the level where you can help to create your machinery and have it good.

[Elliott Roosevelt:] Oh, I don't like that word machinery. I'm afraid [Elliott Roosevelt laughs] that you're getting back to a good old political machine. Now uh I'd like to ask you, supposing [ER: Well, certainly the--] I am an ordinary citizen, how do I start working? (2:26)

[ER:] Certainly the primary is-is machinery, isn't it? It's machinery for choosing candidates.

[Elliott Roosevelt:] But New York state doesn't have a primary for choosing a candidate for governor of the state of New York?

[ER:] No, it doesn't. Perhaps someday it will, but it does have primary for a good many offices and--

[Elliott Roosevelt:] County offices and town offices.

[ER:] And it does also have ways. If you go into your county organization or your local organizations, you can have some control over what the eventual convention does.

[Elliott Roosevelt:] Well, we'll just say that I'm plain, ordinary, average citizen sitting in a small town in New York State or any wh-- or any other state and I've never had anything to do with politics. How do I go about taking an active part in saying I want so and so to run for governor of the state that I live in? (3:26)

[ER:] Well, you begin by going into your local organization, and after all, when you are faced with two poor candidates, which sometimes happens, then you both vote for the party that you feel on the whole has been um the best record -- has given the best record uh over a period of years. Now what you do when you have to choose what party you will belong to is just that. You decide to belong to the party which perhaps hasn't always reached what you felt was right, but on the whole, has the closest record to what you think should be accomplished by good government. Then you go into that party and if you live in a small city, you join your local district organization. Work in that and believe me, if you work hard, you'll go up awfully fast to places of-of importance because the too few people who are willing to work. (4:33)

[Elliott Roosevelt:] Yes, but uh, Mother, I also happen to know because uh I've been fairly active in local political organizations and I have yet to find uh, for instance, that the political organization of the Democratic Party in Hyde Park, New York, or even Poughkeepsie, New York, or even Dutchess County, New York, had one word to say in this election of we'll say the gubernatorial candidates. (5:05)

[ER:] They haven't because they haven't gotten any organization. Dutchess County has no organization. It's worth has never been—

[Elliott Roosevelt:] All right well now uh let's take uh let's take uh Albany, Syracuse, Rochester—

[ER:] Well, certainly Albany has and so has Rochester.

[Elliott Roosevelt:] Did they have anything to say in the last election?

[ER:] They could have whenever they wanted to.

[Elliott Roosevelt:] Well now, that's a very interesting statement because you see now we're raising the issue of the predominance of a certain part of a-an overall machinery that is taken a hold of by what's known as a political boss. And we'll say that you live in oh the Bronx and you're Mrs. [ER: I'd rather take Manhattan.] Housewife of the Bronx [ER: I'd rather take Manhattan.]. All right, take Manhattan. You're Mrs. Housewife in Manhattan, and you're -you want to take a part of in your Democratic organization. Do you think-- (6:09)

[ER:] Okay, I'm sure if I went into my local Democratic club-uh that I could raise to be a leader.

[Elliott Roosevelt:] You could rise to be a leader? And uh do you think that the leader in your district really and truly picks the candidates?

[ER:] The governor? No, but he picks the next candidates up over him.

[Elliott Roosevelt:] He picks the uh legislators in Albany and he picks the—

[ER interrupts:] He helps to pick them, yes.

[Elliott Roosevelt:] And uh you think that ordinarily the political machine—

[ER interrupts:] And if he builds up a good strong political machine that's out for certain things, the top of the organization in Manhattan isn't going to be too anxious to make him um an enemy.

[Elliott Roosevelt:] Well, could I ask you a question then? Uh what you are advocating is that the average voter become a part of the Republican or Democratic machines in his community and he work actively. Is that right? (7:12)

[ER:] That's right.

[Elliott Roosevelt:] And therefore, uh you don't care which one it is [ER: Not at all.] just as long as he joins one of those two. Now suppose you happen to be an independent voter. What do you do?

[ER:] Well, you have a hard time.

[Elliott Roosevelt:] You have a hard time?

[ER:] Because you have very little to say about the choice of candidates. You vote uh for whatever the other parties hand you.

[Elliott Roosevelt:] All right, now the other parties hand you occasionally along comes an Independent.

[ER:] Yes, but rather rarely.

[Elliott Roosevelt:] Well sometimes you get selected.

[ER:] Hmm it's rather rare.

[Elliott Roosevelt:] Well, we won't go into recent history [ER laughs] but uh there have been cases where independents have been elected over all of the major party organizations. [ER: Yes.] But what I was trying to gain from you was whether you advocated [ER: But they usually go back to some party.] Yes, but whether you believe that the two party system is better than possibly enlarging the number of parties?

[ER:] Yes, I believe the two party system is better when I look at the countries in Europe that have a multitude of parties and decide that they are practically impotent.

[Elliott Roosevelt:] Well, of course there are certain people in, we'll say in labor organizations, in this country who've had high hopes of uh labor parties emerging in this country's - is very prominent factors—

[ER:] Didn't you see that cartoon of Mr. Gompers looking at the labor people and saying "I told you not to meddle in politics." [Elliott Roosevelt laughs]

[Elliott Roosevelt:] Yes, but uh still the labor leaders are always going to feel very much as though they had to get in in order to protect themselves.

[ER:] It's all right, but they can get in on the major parties.

[Elliott Roosevelt:] In other words, what you advocate for labor to do is to a select-[ER: And I don't think they can ever hope--] select your parties?

[ER:] I don't think they can ever hope to command and votes on a-in a group. The people of the United States are individuals. What the labor people can really do is educate. That they have the machinery to do and can do on-on issues and on candidate's records and so forth, but telling the American people how they should vote is terribly difficult, they're going out and vote the way they want to.

[Elliott Roosevelt:] Well, what about uh political action groups like uh a certain organization that you belong to known as the Americans for Democratic Action? (9:50)

[ER:] Well, all they do is to try and pick among the candidates what are the best candidates and advocate, whether they are Republicans or Democrats, that um they should be supported. [Elliott Roosevelt: All right. In other words--] And issues they-they try to educate--again it's an educational organization trying to use –

[Elliott Roosevelt:] It's an educational organization and should not be confused as trying to tell you how to vote in an election. You vote for this one or that one—

[ER:] No but it can quite legitimately-eh say "this candidate has such and such a record and we advocate that candidate's election."

[Elliott Roosevelt:] All right, now in answer, because I think our time is about run out on this particular conversation, in answer to Mr. Jones, you would answer that he is [ER: Getting --] wrong in his premise that we should have the right to say on the ballot 'Both candidates are unsuited for this office,' and unless one of the candidates has over 40 percent of the votes cast, there should be another election.

[ER:] Yeah, I think that's silly.

(Break 11:04-11:19)

[ER:] The problems of today's teenagers and their behavior are the subject of many discussions by many people. So this afternoon, instead of mere discussion, Mrs. Alice Thompson, editor and publisher of *Seventeen* magazine is my most welcome guest who will tell us what she is doing about these problems. Mrs. Thompson—

[Alice Thompson:] Mrs. Roosevelt, first I want to say what a great privilege it is to be talking to the world's most loved woman.

[ER:] Thank you very much, and before we go on, Mrs. Thompson, I would like our listeners to know that you are the first and only woman publisher of a major magazine in the United States, which position you've achieved after seventeen years in the magazine business. What is the primary objective of your magazine?

[Alice Thompson:] Well, I would say it is to be to the young people of our country what my generation would have liked some-would have liked someone to be to us: to be an advisor, a counselor, a friend--this sounds very pretentious, and we don't mean it that way at all. Uh, we try to use gentle remembrance, uh projecting ourselves backward, remembering the problems of our own time, which aren't emotionally too different from today. And to give our two and a half million readers, or thereabouts, really all of young America, a feeling that they are not alone in their problems: their shyness, their fears, their insecurities, that we the older generation walked that way too.

[ER:] That's uh-uh very nice to feel about it, I think. I wondered how you-I wonder how you learned um what would appeal um most to uh the age group that your magazine goes to.

[Alice Thompson:] Well, I think we go on learning all the time. There are certain rather known factors. Fortunately young girls still like clothes and beauty and we think that's fortunate, but we go out, all of us senior editors and junior editors, and talk to groups of young people and we make very short speeches. Most of our speeches consist of letting them ask us questions, and this corrects our viewpoint considerably, and then, of course, we get some two thousand letters a month from them. (13:48)

[ER:] How many?

[Alice Thompson:] About two thousand letters a month.

[ER:] Hmm, that's quite a large correspondence because that age doesn't usually like to write letters very much [ER laughs].

[Alice Thompson:] Only about their personal problems, Mrs. Roosevelt.

[ER:] And then they write letters?

[Alice Thompson:] Yes, they're quite articulate.

[ER:] Now that's very interesting, I think probably just because you're not someone they actually know in person it's easier to write. [Alice Thompson: I think it's much easier. I think it's much easier to go to uh friendly strangers.] Well now, do you write for boys of that age as well as for girls, or is-is this primarily with girls in mind?

[Alice Thompson:] It is primarily with girls. We do have some boy readers, but I suspect they're looking at the pinup girls. [ER and Alice Thompson laugh]

[ER:] Well, uh what do you find is the greatest concern among these young people of yours?

[Alice Thompson:] A great world concern, a concern that is very much all of our concern, but they're perhaps more articulate about it. They are desperately eager for a world at peace, a world of greater safety, greater plenty. These young people have grown up through depression and war, they want peace. (14:59)

[ER:] Well, um is that what they worry about the most or do they worry about their own personal problems more?

[Alice Thompson:] That's very strange, Mrs. Roosevelt, because there is a real split in these young people's letters. There will be a le--single letter half of which is extremely mature, very concerned with world problems, and then in the end will end up with the "How can I get a boy to ask me for a date." [ER and Alice Thompson laugh]

[ER:] That--that division between the personal and the--and the world is-is very characteristic of the young.

[Alice Thompson:] I'm afraid it was true of all of us.

[ER:] [ER laughs] I agree, it was too. Well um, do you find that um they have problems that they want to talk of with you about their parents and the rest of their families or don't they--do they on the whole seem to you to get on pretty well in their families?

[Alice Thompson:] Their greatest personal problem is their family, is their parents; uh not because parents are such a problem, but because the young people are trying to understand their parents and seeking understanding terrifically from their parents. I think this again is this age old conflict of one generation trying to reach another generation. I think the older generation doesn't give enough recognition of their maturity, and I think the--the younger generation forgets that the older generation was ever young.

[ER:] Well, I've found very often I get letters from parents quite often, and then sometimes from young people and um eh every now and then when I speak in colleges or in high schools, I'll have some child

come up um after some question had been discussed, let's say like civil rights, I remember that quite well, because I remember speaking in a college in the Midwest and having a little girl come up to me afterwards and say, "Well, of course, I believe in civil rights, but what do I do with my parents?" [Alice Thompson laughs] So I asked her where she came from and she told me, and I said, "Well, I think in that case, you're going to have to have a good deal of patience because it's going to take a little while to convert your parents to all these ideas" [ER laughs].

[Alice Thompson:] We have--a number of our letters are on this question of civil rights or uh understanding between peoples who are different, and we find that this is one of the great cleavages between the older and the younger generation, and we counsel as you did, patience.

[ER:] Well now, that again is an example of their taking an interest in a question outside themselves, isn't it? (17:46)

[Alice Thompson:] Yes they um they are [ER: Oh--] they are much more extroverted than--than my generation.

[ER:] Well that's um probably, of course, it's been pushed upon them in a way, because there's a great deal more in school and college today, I think, of trying to make them understand, for instance, about the United Nations, and about the war situation, one thing and another. Um so probably that's been developed by pressure from teachers and circumstances of the world. [Alice Thompson: Events, just events.] But um uh you can't ever quite at that age obscure the--the personal reaction, and particularly at a time when um the world is going through so many changes, it's probably very difficult for these um children uh to--to bridge the gap between generations.

[Alice Thompson:] Very difficult, but I find in them a greater flexibility than let's say their brothers and sisters just ten years older. I don't know why this is true, but we notice it. [ER: You do?] Yes.

[ER:] That's--that's very interesting. Well now, are today's young people creating a greater or a smaller delinquency problem than, let us say, the children of ten years ago?

[Alice Thompson:] Oh, Mrs. Roosevelt, don't ask me, this is my pet hobby.

[ER:] Oh well, I'd like to hear what you have to say on it [ER laughs].

[Alice Thompson:] Well, first of all, no one can speak authoritatively because there are no comparable figures. The figures were not gathered nationally even as recently as ten years ago. And we personally believe that there is no greater delinquency at all. Uh we deplore what there is, of course; it's a waste of our young material and our young lives. But we are very angry at the nation's press uh that labels everyone under thirty practically a teenager, [ER: Mhm.] because this makes good headlines. I would suspect that this younger generation reflects the regrettable lawlessness that is abroad in the world today, but as far as personal delinquencies, um misbehaviors in different directions, I don't believe it was any greater than my own age, and I get very cross at parents and remind them frequently that we were called "flaming youth." (20:17)

[ER:] Well, would you say perhaps that there is um a little bit less discipline in this generation than there ha--was in your generation? [Alice Thompson: I--] Home discipline, I mean.

[Alice Thompson:] I personally do not sense that. I think I've perhaps--you're always subjective in a thing of this sort, and I was brought up in a--in a quite modern home. Um I don't sense less discipline. I sense a general less caring in the community about its young people despite the "teen-canteens" and so on. Eh an

increasing uh awareness on their part that they need direction and a strange lack of awareness on the community's part that some activities must be provided for them or they're going to get in some kind of difficulty. Their dominant characteristic is energy. Ah I don't think its delinquency, I-I think it's misdirected energy.

[ER:] Well, that's a good way to put it. That's a very--uh that's-that's a wise way to put it I think because of course many of us are not conscious of the amount of pent up energy that exists um in nearly all young people beginning from the first time that they're able to walk. I think you just take uh a baby learning to walk and think how much energy that child has-as that goes right on through the teenage uh group. [Alice Thompson: It can be quite appalling.] [ER and Alice Thompson laugh] Well, do you-do you really see any difference between the twenties and the thirties and today?

[Alice Thompson:] Yes, I see less greed and more world concern in today's young people than I saw in the young people of the twenties, of which I was one, and of the thirties, which I can vividly remember. (22:11)

[ER:] Well, that's a most interesting thing to um to have you say because I think most people um don't give the young people credit for being as serious-minded as they seem to be. And now we'll have to stop for a minute.

(Break 22:32-22:57)

[ER:] One of the things, Mrs. Thompson, that is said to me quite often, and I-I really wonder about it a little, and that is that young people of today primarily look for security. Now you've said that they wanted world at peace, and of course they want that so as to feel um stable and safe in the world, but I think what people mean when they say that "people look for security" is that they are primarily troubled about um the material things in life and where uh-where will they be um secure from that point of view, and that they don't have today the kind of um, oh, adventure and sort of love of adventure that made it possible for young people to start out and settle this continent for instance, and that in that way there is a lack in modern young people.

[Alice Thompson:] Well, I think that uh those critics are confusing frontiers. Uh after all our grandparents went across in covered wagons for what reason? And not to meet Indians. And not to meet deserts. And not to meet hardship, but to find security, uh a way of life. Uh this has always been man's aim, to find a peaceful way of earning his living and providing for his family and his children and I think today's drives are no different. Uh this idea that they are so materialistic, that they want all kinds of protections and so on, uh is rather laughable when you just look at the number of them who are going into science, philosophy and so on. These professions, right or wrong, do uh not pay off in material rewards. Uh more and more of them, among the girls too, are interested in research science, one of the poorest paid things in the world.

[ER:] Yes, that's true, and I think people don't stop to realize that. That um a great many young people uh are choosing their vocations because they love their vocations rather than because of the money return in them. (25:15)

[Alice Thompson:] The two articles that we have run that brought the greatest response on the career type of article, was one on occupational therapy, which was I think we called "Career for Heart and Hands," and one on nursing, and neither of them notable for their uh great monetary rewards. I don't think the young people are looking for any more security than their papas, and their mamas, and their grandpapas, and their grandmamas. [ER laughs]

[ER:] Now you talk about their elders, do you think that these young people reflect the prejudices of their elders? [Alice Thompson: Well--] Or do you think they fight them?

[Alice Thompson:] They fight them. Uh I think the elders have been indoctrinated, and I think that uh all of we elders are getting over a great many of our prejudices, uh after all we weren't born with them. Uh I think that, yes, the young people are in conflict uh with some of the--[ER: You think they're in conflict? They don't just accept them? Take--] No, they in conflict with uh many of the uh ugly ideas we have acquired. I only hope they keep in conflict and resolve it.

[ER, overlapping:] Well, I think it's wonderful for them to be in conflict, it may make a little trouble at home now and then [Alice Thompson: It does indeed!], but I think it's better for the world as a whole [ER laughs].

[Alice Thompson:] Yes. they-they-they are-uh they're very idealistic, and uh they're terribly articulate. [ER:] Well now, an-an older man came into see me the other day, and said something that I thought in a way reflected a great sense of disquiet about uh his own world. He said he wondered whether religion was failing, and um he hoped his own wouldn't fail, but he really was troubled. Now do you think that this younger generation um is less religious or more religious than we were at their ages or that their parents are?

[Alice Thompson:] Well, you must know that anything I say represents just my own looking around and what we get from the magazine. Uh I feel that today's young people are uh less formal in their religious practices, and I'm not sure this is a good thing because I think formality sometimes helps reinforce us and reassure us. But in their hunting for spirituality and deeper meanings they are no less religious. They are desperately hunting for a philosophy.

[ER:] Well, I-I think probably that's completely true, and I think too that a great many of them who were forced into certain religious patterns by their parents may have revolted but will've--will come back to some kind of formal um acknowledgement of religion. (28:14)

[Alice Thompson:] I certainly hope so, and I think that they are perhaps more fortunate than some of our young people who grew up in a generation where parents said "We will teach them nothing, and then they will make their choice." Well they have nothing or no basis on which to make their choice. [ER: They nothing to make a choice about, have they?] Precisely.

[ER:] Yes, that's not such a good way to do it. I'm-I'm troubled about another thing and that is the reading habits um of the young people uh, do you think they're different from what their parents were?

[Alice Thompson:] Yes, I think very definitely because I think that our whole cultural level has improved, at least I like to think so. Um their um-their fiction habits as we see them are less escapist but much more important. They are reading books that I, in my day, frankly considered awfully dry, very dull. Uh they are reading books by noted commentators, uh by noted world figures; they are reading books on, of all things, economics, and they are quite willing to wade through uh lengthy pamphlets on the United Nations and its work. Uh they are reading much more serious things than I did. (29:28)

[ER:] Well now, that's very interesting because um sometimes you-you are led to believe as you look at your real youngsters, your ten and eleven year olds, they don't read anything but comic books.

[Alice Thompson:] Mrs. Roosevelt, they get tummy aches from that much candy. [ER laughs] And suddenly--[ER: And then you think they suddenly change.] That's right, that's right. Uh I went through it with my own children. I went through it in a period of radio listening, and all the rest. And since I had

grown up in a home that didn't approve of censorship, I uh enforced none. Along about eleven or twelve if the child has been exposed to other things in the home and in school, and today every child is, uh this habit falls away. At least it does among the girls, I am not sure about the boys [ER laughs].

[ER:] Well, um I'm-I'm glad to hear to you say that the girls are reading more serious things because I would not have felt um secure that that was so; I would have been a little afraid that um their interest, for instance in the classics had died down a great deal. Because I know--I was always amused by my husband who would ask some of the younger generation um about some book, for instance, he took for granted everybody knew intimately, and he would be met with a blank expression [Alice Thompson laughs] and he would look so disappointed afterwards, you know, how anyone could not have known this or that about whatever it was. And um I haven't had--just had an idea that perhaps they did read the classics or what we knew as the classics much less these days.

[Alice Thompson:] I think they come to them later, and I think that is perhaps a good thing because many of us have had classics spoiled by too-early exposure.

[ER:] Yes, that's true. You think they come to them later?

[Alice Thompson:] Yes, I-I think that more and more the classics are becoming a pleasure reading on the college level rather than that dreadful phrase "required reading."

[ER:] Yes, required reading. Well now, what do you th--you've told me already that you find a great many girls are going in for um science and research and things like that, but what do you think are the um, perhaps the major careers that they go into? Or want to go into?

[Alice Thompson:] We know there's only one major career they want, Mrs. Roosevelt: [ER: Marriage.] Marriage. [ER laughs] Uh they don't discuss, as we did, marriage or a career. Uh they want marriage and they expect to be a part wage earner. Uh they've seen the economic picture and know this is necessary for a time. Uh they call it "marriage with uh some work outside the home, until the children need me."

[ER:] Uh well, suppose that uh they have to go on working even when children come, what happens then?

[Alice Thompson:] They uh--we have some of them in our own office and find them uh very adaptable. Uh most of our young girls in high school today are looking for further training beyond the high school level. It may not be college, it may be nursing training, it may be therapy, it may be hygienist and so on. They plan at least one more year, and most of them two more years uh to get some tool with which to earn their trade, their living, and with this, they are quite prepared to go on working after marriage, and uh many of them have discovered that after babies come, uh grandma is a wonderful babysitter, and they manage.

[ER:] That's really um something that they um have acquired in this generation, I think. But I also think, at least I find among a good m-a good many young people, that they finally decide it's better to stay home as long the baby is small because uh they can't trust anyone that they can afford to pay for. (33:29)

[Alice Thompson:] That's right, uh today uh a woman must make uh quite an amazing salary to afford--the only thing I can call it is "a mother substitute."

[ER:] Yes, and that's very expensive. And I like the thing that is happening, which is that I find some of them are staying at home just as long as they need to with the small children--.

[Alice Thompson:] We like this too and we still think it's the most important wom--work a woman can do.

[ER:] Well I-I think that's um--uh that's undoubtedly so, it's the creative functional thing that a woman was made to do. But it's good also to have the career and the outside interest.

[Alice Thompson:] Well I'd be the last to deny that, Mrs. Roosevelt.

[Alice Thompson and ER laugh]

[ER:] That's very good. Now I'm sorry we have to come to an end. Thank you so much for coming over today.

[Alice Thompson:] It's been a great pleasure.

(34:22)

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