

THE BROOKINGS INSTITUTION

BROOKINGS CAFETERIA PODCAST

AFTER THE INSURRECTION, IDEAS TO TACKLE POLARIZATION

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## PROCEEDINGS

DEWS: Welcome to the Brookings Cafeteria, the podcast about ideas and the experts who have them. I'm Fred Dews.

The nation is divided, and on edge. On January 6th, an insurgent mob of Donald Trump supporters assaulted the US Capitol building, disrupting the ceremonial electoral vote count affirming Joe Biden's and Kamala Harris's election victory. The morning of the attack and for weeks prior, President Trump and allies challenged the election's results and encouraged his followers to, quote, stop the steal. As Washington girds for President Elect Biden's inauguration on January 20th, Congress impeached the president for incitement of insurrection, an unprecedented second impeachment of this president.

So, where do we go now? What kinds of political, social, and economic reforms could help us move forward as a more united nation? For some answers, I interviewed Darrell West, vice president and director of Governance Studies at Brookings. Our interview happened on Monday the 11th, so before the impeachment vote in the House of Representatives. But his analysis and policy prescriptions will remain relevant long after the passions of these weeks have cooled.

Also on this episode, Molly Kinder, a David M. Rubenstein Fellow in the Metropolitan Policy Program, discusses the enormous gap between corporate retail profits and pay for frontline workers that has grown during the course of the pandemic. While some retail giants like Best Buy and Costco have raised worker pay, others, notably Amazon and Walmart, have been far less generous.

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First up, Molly Kinder's "Metro Lens" on providing higher hourly hazard pay for frontline retail workers.

KINDER: This is Molly Kinder. I'm a David M. Rubenstein Fellow in the Brookings Institution's Metropolitan Policy Program. The experience of millions of essential workers in grocery, pharmacy, and retail chains during the pandemic can best be summed up by two words: sacrifice and struggle.

Sacrifice, because retail jobs on the COVID-19 frontline are dangerous, putting at risk what many workers told me matters most to them: the safety and well-being of their loved ones at home.

And struggle, because the pay for this work is often very low, averaging between \$11 and \$12 an hour. As retail workers risk their lives, and their family members' lives, rarely do they have the dignity of a living wage that allows them to meet their family's even basic needs.

But for many employers, the story is different. Large retail companies have been among the biggest financial winners of the pandemic. Back in late November, my colleagues Laura Stateler, Julia Du, and I published a report analyzing the pandemic profits and the pandemic pay of 13 of the top retail companies in the country. We looked at big household names like Home Depot, Dollar General, CVS, Kroger, and Target. Together, these 13 companies reported \$16 billion in extra profit compared with last year, a 40% increase. With only a few exceptions, these companies passed little of these extreme profits to the workers who are risking their lives. Together, these 13 companies raised pay by a little over a dollar an hour, or a 10% pay bump, while most companies did far less.

This gap between profits and pay is especially striking at Amazon and Walmart, the country's two largest employers. Together they earned an extra \$10.7 billion over last year's profits during (and largely because of) the pandemic—a stunning 56% increase.

At Walmart, starting wages are just \$11 an hour. The COVID-19 bonuses that Walmart gave its workers amounted to 74 cents an hour if you average the bonuses by hour through the end of the year. At Amazon, this extra pay was just under a dollar an hour.

This is far less than many of these companies' competitors. In fact, with far less profit to pay for it, and a *lot* less fanfare, several of Amazon and Walmart's competitors were far more generous to their workers. Averaged from the start of the pandemic through the end of 2020, an entry-level Best Buy worker would have earned 4.5 times more in extra pandemic pay than a Walmart worker and more than three times the extra pay of an Amazon worker. Meanwhile, Target, Costco, and Home Depot paid their workers extra pandemic pay worth three times that of Walmart's and more than double the extra pay at Amazon.

But what is especially striking is how Amazon and Walmart's generosity compares to what they *could* have given their workers with their record profits. Both companies could have *quadrupled* the hazard pay that they gave their frontline workers and *still* have earned more profits than last year, when workers weren't risking their lives.

Since March, the fortune of Amazon's founder Jeff Bezos has increased by over \$75 billion—that's 42 times the cost of all pandemic hazard pay that Amazon gave its roughly 1 million workers to date. Similarly, the wealth of Alice, Jim, and Rob Walton, who are the billionaire heirs to the Walmart fortune and the country's richest family, their wealth has grown by over \$40 billion since the start of the pandemic—that's 26 times the total pandemic hazard pay that Walmart provided its more than 1.5 million associates.

Of course, Amazon and Walmart do not have to provide living wages or hazard pay to their workers. Today, the labor market is extremely weak. Congress has not—yet at least—raised the federal minimum wage since 2009, but may well do so when Democrats take control this month.

But even if these corporate giants are not forced to share their pandemic wealth with the workers who make it possible, they should anyway. They have the means—and the moral imperative—to provide higher hourly hazard pay and to raise wages permanently. Their frontline essential workforce, who have helped nearly all of the rest of us get through the pandemic, certainly deserve it.

DEWS: And now, here's my interview with Darrell West, vice president and director of Governance Studies at Brookings.

Darrell, welcome back to the Brookings Cafeteria podcast.

WEST: Thank you, Fred. Nice to be with you.

DEWS: So, as we are recording this, it is Monday, January 11th. People will be hearing this starting on Friday the 15th and beyond. So I want to set people's expectations about where we are in this time and what they'll expect to hear. So we're just five days away from an insurrection, from an assault on the capitol of the United States of America. And in this episode, I'll be asking you to not only comment on what happened, but more looking ahead and more generally what kinds of reforms in governance and politics you think are needed to respond to this crisis. So if we can start with that, Darrell, I would just like to hear from you about what you experienced, what you saw, what you felt on the afternoon of January 6th.

WEST: Well, it was a completely shocking day, I mean, I was watching it unfold on television and the same way everyone else was, but we're only about two miles from the Capitol building. So it felt very personal and very immediate.

And just to see what was an insurrection, an act of sedition, and a literal coup attempt. Now, fortunately, the coup failed, but it was a disgraceful day in American history. I mean, I never thought I would see Americans acting as violently as some of those people did. I mean, we're used to seeing things like that happen in other countries, but it still is completely

shocking to see it happen here. The U.S. Capitol was breached for the first time literally since the War of 1812 when the British invaded D.C. And of course, all this happened right after Trump's speech. He still will not accept the election loss. He continues to tell his supporters the election was stolen from him, even though it wasn't. At that speech, he told people to march down the street and show their anger at the Capitol building, and they did exactly that. And they ended up taking over the Capitol and they stormed the floor of Congress. They actually temporarily stopped Biden's vote certification. They broke windows. They set off explosive devices. They assaulted police officers. It literally was an unprecedented assault on American democracy.

DEWS: Yeah, and I have the same feelings from that day. I'm still a little bit in shock from it. But now five days have passed. We've learned a lot more. We've seen a lot more video, much of it very horrific of the violence, but also some of the bravery and also emerging statements from public officials, members of Congress, although decidedly not law enforcement agencies besides the District of Columbia. Five days later, what are your thoughts about where we are now?

WEST: Well, I write a lot about political divisions and polarization, and a coup attempt is the ultimate in polarization. It literally is polarization on steroids and polarization pushed to an incredible degree. So it's obvious the country is highly polarized. There's been a dramatic increase in extremism and radicalization in the United States. I mean, some of the social media chatter that we now have learned since the events of last week are quite shocking. There was a premeditated plan on the part of some to do exactly what they did, which was to go down to the Capitol, to storm the Capitol, and to try and find the leaders. And there were some people who had open discussions about killing Speaker Pelosi and Vice President Pence.

And for me, I've been thinking a lot about this topic over a period of years. You recall a year ago I wrote a book entitled *Divided Politics*, which basically talked about the historical roots of divided America, how we got to this point and what it means. But the book also was a family memoir because I grew up in this conservative rural community in Ohio. My two sisters still live there. They still love Trump. They think the election actually was stolen from him. My brother is liberal and disagrees 100 percent with that, as do I. And so this whole thing has both this weird kind of professional element of someone who studies American politics. But then this personal experience within my own family. And I've had high school friends on Facebook over the last few days who basically have spread misinformation where they think antifa actually were the people down there engaging in the violence—it was progressive activists that did the violence, not Trump supporters, even though based on what we know now, all the people who've been arrested seem to be part of far right organizations and clearly supportive of President Trump.

So, all of this kind of reveals a lot of different problems about American politics, just in terms of where we are right now, the role of technology in fomenting extremism and radicalization, how quickly misinformation spreads. On our Tech Tank blog I have a new post about the role of misinformation in Trump's insurrection. So clearly, we need to think about how to deal with that aspect of it. And then, as you mentioned in your introduction, just all the problems in American politics, how we need to address these issues, what kind of reforms we need to undertake. I mean, I think all of us need to do a lot of soul-searching about how we reached this point and how we possibly may be able to get out of it.

DEWS: Certainly. And I want to let listeners know that I will link in the show notes to your book, *Divided Politics*. We also did a podcast episode on that last year, also your Tech Tank post, and lots of other materials from Brookings scholars reflecting on and reacting to this turn of events. I want to stay on this question of polarization, Darrell, because you've

talked a lot about polls and polling. And just today and again, this is Monday, January 11th, Quinnipiac put out a poll that covers a lot of these issues. Can you briefly summarize what you see in that poll?

WEST: Yeah, you're right, this was a fascinating survey because this is the most comprehensive survey I've seen so far just about how people have reacted over the last few days to this insurrection. And it's actually filled with a lot of interesting results. So, for example, 74 percent of Americans say that democracy is in trouble. Although I'm a little surprised at that number, because you would actually think it would be 100 percent. Like everybody should recognize democracies in trouble when people are storming the Capitol building. But still, as far as polling goes, 74 percent is a big number.

Fifty-six percent believe that Trump is responsible for the storming of the Capitol. Fifty-two percent support his removal from office. Sixty percent say the Trumpism has been undermining democracy. About half do characterize what happened as a coup attempt. But one of the other really interesting numbers is I think all of us have been debating how we should think about Trump right now. And one of the most interesting numbers in this survey was his overall job approval rating. The survey found only 33 percent of Americans right now approve of his job performance. And I found that interesting because that is really the lowest I think I have seen in the entire Trump administration. Typically, he has been above 40 percent right before the election. I think he was up to almost 45 percent job approval rating. So if his approval rating has dropped to 33 percent like that is a very substantial indictment of what has been going on, how he's handling COVID, how he's handling the economy and then this coup attempt.

DEWS: Now, all those numbers that you decided look starkly different when you disaggregate them into Republicans and Democrats. Right?



WEST: Absolutely, and when you do the breakdowns between Republicans and Democrats, they're almost mirror images of one another. So when you look at some of these numbers, you know, in terms of how responsible Trump was for this, of course, nearly every Democrat says, yes, he was responsible for this and this was a coup attempt, and Trump has been undermining democracy. Republicans hold the opposite views. You know, they're far less likely to blame Trump, to hold him responsible, to say that he is undermining democracy. And so it really does show that people have their own facts right now. People are looking at exactly the same types of situations and reaching very different conclusions. And as a political scientist who studies American democracy and have done so for several decades now, this is really disturbing that something like this can happen and people still have such differing views on what's going on and who's responsible and how we feel about President Trump.

DEWS: Darrell, I want to move on now to getting your views on a number of possible reforms that could be made in the political system as well as in the future underlying economic and social issues. But again, I want to emphasize that we're recording this on a day only five days after this insurrection when the news continues to move at a blistering pace. By the time people are listening to this, any number of things could have happened. There's talk about impeachment in the House of Representatives, possible censure of the president or invocation of the 25th Amendment. We don't know what the landscape of this will look like by Friday, but we're not really here to talk about that. I'm not here to ask you about your views on that. I want to know more about where you think in the medium to long term our politics, our government, our society needs to go? A set of issues that will be pertinent, germane no matter what happens this week, no matter what happens next week. These issues are with us. And the events of January 6 are putting that in stark relief. So let's start with your views on what kinds of reforms we need in our political system to begin with.

WEST: That's a great question. I think there are lots of changes that we should be thinking about based on the polling data that we just talked about. It's clear that the role of the news media and the role of the big tech platforms are crucial in thinking about this whole issue, both in terms of how we got here and how we might be able to get out of it. One of the things that really worries me is our news media has splintered into partisan sites. You know, you can look at FOX, MSNBC, CNN, and of course, now they're very liberal and very conservative news outlets as well. And here very different realities based on the same developments. That clearly is a huge problem. And so just thinking about how to get the media to do a better job, how the media should be less partisan than it currently is, some of these outlets have been completely irresponsible in spreading clearly false news. So FOX certainly has been doing that. There are news sites, Newsmax and others, that have been repeating Trump's lies. And so getting a handle on that has to be a major priority.

The tech angle, I think, is really important, Fred. You know, we have a Center for Technology Innovation, so we do a lot of work on various aspects of tech policy. I'm very worried about the use of these large tech platforms to spread misinformation and just outright lies. I mean, we saw it during the campaign where President Trump continually argued there was massive mail ballot fraud that was taking place, even though there is absolutely no evidence to really support that. And since the election, there have been dozens of lawsuits filed all across the country looking at this question of election fraud. And Trump has lost in every venue all across the country in a number of different states, including in cases where the presiding judge was someone who was appointed by Trump. So even his own judges are disagreeing with him. Yet we continue to see massive misinformation and repeating of lies, which then incite people to engage in the kind of violence that we saw on Capitol Hill.

So, I've been thinking a lot about the need for digital literacy campaigns as a way to get a handle on this. Everything is now oriented around technology and digital platforms.

And so we all have to figure out how to become better consumers of news information. We need to be able to evaluate more authentic and more authoritative sites from less authoritative sites. And large tech platforms have a responsibility to do a better job. Twitter, for example, has banned President Trump from its platform. He had, I think, 88 million followers. And Twitter was one of his primary means of communicating directly with people who support him, as well as others who are paying attention to what he has to say. I think that is a good move. Facebook has put a temporary limit on Trump's Facebook postings through inauguration, but then that raises questions about what happens afterwards, like are they going to relax the ban or are they going to let him come back? He's going to continue to argue that he was robbed and he won the election in a landslide. Are they going to allow him to keep saying that? So I think there's a lot of things going on both in the news media area as well as in the technology area where we need to do a better job. We need organizations to be more responsible. We need the tech platforms to be more accountable for what happens in their space.

DEWS: Let me follow up on that, because we've also seen over the last couple of days that Parler, an online social media platform that was used by a lot of people to organize and discuss their plots to commit a coup, basically been de-platformed. The Amazon Web Services has pulled them off their servers and Parler's lawyers have quit and all kinds of other ways that that particular service is being de-platformed. But so people on the right are complaining that you're de-platforming us, you're depriving us of our rights to free speech. So while I think we want to definitely have a digital literacy campaign, we're in a world where the actions of some of these top digital companies is causing the reaction, that's not surprising, that you're just trying to silence conservatives.

WEST: We definitely need to take free speech seriously, it's in the Bill of Rights, it's in the U.S. Constitution, and we don't want to do anything to disrupt that. But inciting

violence is not part of freedom of speech. Like even in the pre digital world, in the brick and mortar world, there are a number of court cases that place limits on freedom of speech. We all know the famous example, you can't yell "fire" in a crowded theater, which is going to lead to stampedes and possible injury and the loss of life. Like, you can't engage in dangerous acts that cause harm or lead to violence. And so as we think about restrictions on the digital world, it's not a pro-free speech or anti-free speech issue. You can't use these platforms to incite violence. And we've already seen lots of ways prior to the assault on the capital where Twitter, Facebook, and other platforms were being used to organize a violent takedown.

And so I don't have a problem with these platforms putting restrictions on individuals and or organizations that are facilitating violence. I actually think there is a legal tradition that's consistent with that. I'm perfectly comfortable with what we've seen so far in terms of some of these restrictions.

DEWS: Let's move on to what you think some of the top political and governance reforms could be. And I want to draw particular attention to the Electoral College, because a lot of people have been saying if we didn't have an Electoral College, none of this would have happened, assuming that Joe Biden had more votes than Donald Trump. And in fact, you wrote a paper for the Policy 2020 series in 2020 calling for the abolishment of the Electoral College. But that was, I think, in August. So starting with the Electoral College, how does the Electoral College look today?

WEST: Think how simple the 2020 presidential election would have been if we had direct popular election of the president as opposed to the Electoral College. Joe Biden ended up winning the presidency by seven million votes. It wasn't even close. And if we'd had direct popular voting, this would have been an easy election with far less contentiousness. The problem with the Electoral College is it turns everything into not one national election, but a series of 50 state elections. And it's basically winner take all in almost every state. And so we

all have to spend hours and hours on Election Day and then for several days afterwards, thinking about how much did Biden win Arizona by and how close was Georgia. And so that basically increases the tension and emotion associated with the presidential campaign in a way that is unnecessary.

I used to teach campaigns and elections at Brown University. And for years, I actually defended the Electoral College. But in the last few years, I've been thinking a lot about this. And I did write that post a while ago on why it's time to abolish the Electoral College. And the reason I reached that--and that was well in advance of this particular general election, so it's not particular to what happened in November or thereafter--I just think it's an outmoded relic that is no longer useful and actually is the source of a lot of problems that we see today, because twice in the last five presidential elections, we've had a split outcome, meaning the person who ended up becoming president by winning the Electoral College did not win the popular vote. And by the way, in 2020, we actually came pretty close to that situation. I don't remember the exact numbers. Someone actually did the analysis. But I believe that if there is a shift of 45 or 50 thousand votes in 4 states, Trump still could have won the Electoral College while losing the popular vote by seven million votes.

So that kind of demonstrates the problem that we have right now, that the split outcome clearly is problematic. The Electoral College empowers small and medium sized states over the large states. The impact of one vote in Wyoming is much more powerful than a single vote in California or New York. And the problem is right now, when you look at polling on the Electoral College, people do bring a partisan lens to that. So in general, right now, Democrats want to get rid of the Electoral College and Republicans want to keep it. But I believe we're actually very close to that political dynamic changing. And what's going to change the politics of the Electoral College is when Texas, which is starting to become a purple state and becoming much more competitive for Democrats, when Democrats either get

close to winning Texas or if they actually win Texas at the presidential level, you're going to see Republicans want to get rid of the Electoral College, because if Democrats are able to win California, New York and Texas, Republicans will no longer be able to win the Electoral College. They will have to want to get rid of the Electoral College at that point.

And so you can just see how within a matter of 10 years, I believe we will get rid of the Electoral College and it will be done on a bipartisan basis that both Democrats and Republicans will reach the conclusion that this is an outmoded relic that no longer serves any good purpose.

DEWS: I think that's a good segue, actually, to the next thing I want to ask you about, which is gerrymandering. And there's actually an Electoral College tie-in here that I just learned about today. A Wisconsin state legislator is proposing that Wisconsin change its electoral vote allocation to be more like the way that Maine and Nebraska do it where they split it up by congressional district. But we know that in Wisconsin, congressional districts are very much gerrymandered to benefit the Republican Party in a way that kind of is overwhelmingly not matching the statewide voting pattern. I mean, Wisconsin has a Democratic governor and state officials and its legislature is predominantly Republican and it might even be supermajority Republican. I'm not sure. So in splitting up the electoral vote allocations in Wisconsin, I think one estimate would have been, even though Joe Biden won the state, if it was run like split vote, Donald Trump would have had six of that state's electoral votes and Joe Biden only four. So that says something about the Electoral College, but it also says something about gerrymandering that I know you have some thoughts on. You want to talk about that?

WEST: Gerrymandering is a complete scourge on American democracy right now because we have a lot of states that are gerrymandered in a partisan direction such that the percentage of the vote does not match the percentage of the seats, the legislative seats that

particular parties get. There's some states where Democrats almost have to get 55 percent of the popular vote in order to be able to get half of the legislative seats in that state legislatures. So it's really a question of fairness. And I should point out, it's not just Republicans that engage in gerrymandering. When Democrats have been in control, they've done exactly the same thing. I think it's equally bad, regardless of who is doing it, because it creates this basic unfairness. Like, we want a political system where there's a close match between the percent of the popular vote that an individual gets or a party gets and the percent distribution of the seats in Congress and in state legislatures across the country. And we simply don't have that right now. And so it shows that one of the big problems of our system is a lack of equity in the process. You can win a majority of the popular vote, but not get a majority of the seats. And it breeds a lot of public cynicism because people can see the unfairness of the system. They can see the inequitable nature of it. Trump says the system is rigged. And this is actually one point where I agree with him. It is rigged, but it's rigged in a very different way than he likes to talk about. It's rigged because of gerrymandering, the role of money in politics. We need campaign finance reform. There are lots of changes that we need just to introduce more equity into our political system.

DEWS: I want to follow up on campaign finance reform, because that's another very interesting and important topic. But one more thing about gerrymandering is that gerrymandering is a result of state legislative houses drawing districts and in most states, I think, still the legislature draws the districts and in some states, they now have some kind of independent commission that does it, although the degree to which these commissions are independent is still up in the air. But is there any role, is there anything that the federal Congress can do to encourage states to draw a more fair congressional districts?

WEST: Well, the thing that we need is more of these independent redistricting commissions, because the evidence actually is that they draw the district lines in a much

fairer manner than legislatures when there's a dominant party that draws the lines in ways that favor their own position. So that clearly is wrong. I'm not sure other than through court decisions, there can be a federal role in that because one of the unique aspects of our Constitution is a lot of the control over elections is delegated to the states. That's how the framers set it up. That's what the Constitution says. That's what actually creates some problems. And so some of the inequities that we face clearly come across a number of different states. But the solution is probably not going to be a national solution, but a series of state reforms. And there are a number of states that already have moved to independent redistricting commissions and we get much better results. We had fair results. You get a closer connection between the popular vote and the number of seats that political parties get in state legislatures.

DEWS: So you just mentioned a few minutes ago campaign finance reform and the need for campaign finance reform, and I'm reflecting on the fact, as I understand it, some 10 billion, 14 billion dollars is estimated to have been spent on the 2020 presidential election alone. And in the recent Georgia special Senate runoffs that ended on January 5th, spending on that was in the hundreds of millions of dollars I've heard. It's maybe the largest amount spent ever on a state level election, maybe just a runoff. Those are astonishing numbers. And I wonder what kind of campaign finance reform policies you might want to advocate.

WEST: You're right, I mean, money in politics is a huge problem because the money basically allows people to distort the process for the wealthy to gain disproportionate influence over what happens. It really skews the whole policymaking process. It's not just the amount, but it's the power of large donors over small donors and also the secrecy that pervades the entire campaign finance system. So I'm old enough to remember there was actually a time where that was not the case. Right after the Watergate abuses of Richard Nixon, campaign finance and money and politics played a big role in that particular scandal.



And so Congress reformed campaign finance to basically create more transparency and disclosure in the process. And so for a brief period in the late 1970s and into the 1980s, we actually had a pretty well functioning campaign finance system. There was a lot of public disclosure. People could give money to candidates, but the source of the money and the amount of the money was disclosed publicly and so people could see for themselves the money flows and who is supporting particular individuals. And if you had worries about corporate influence or wealthy influence, you could kind of see what was happening. What started to happen in the late '80s and has basically accelerated through the current period is one by one there were huge loopholes created in that system that has now produced a wild west of campaign finance, where there's secret money, there's almost no transparency in the process, and large donors can contribute an extraordinary amount of money and really achieve disproportionate influence.

And so we've reached this climax in 2020 where money is just a huge problem. In my *Divided Politics* book, I laid out a number of ways to think about it. But basically we need more equity in the process. We need more transparency. We need to have public disclosure of the money. We need to get rid of secret money in the election process because that just destroys public confidence. People believe that special interests dominate the process. And they're right. They do. We see that all the time on tax policy, in the education area, in health care, you can kind of go policy very by policy area. And money has distorted popular preferences and made it difficult for the views of ordinary people to be reflected in Washington, D.C.

DEWS: I read a statistic the other day that said that the 50 senators who will caucus with the Democrats after Senators Warnock and Ossoff take their seats represent 41 million more Americans than the 50 who caucus with the Republicans. And we've always heard that sometimes people are frustrated with Congress because it seems like it doesn't get anything

done. And it seems to me that a lot of that is in the Senate, which has some very arcane rules about what bills can be debated and what it takes to pass a bill. And that brings us to the filibuster. So, Darrell, am I on the right track when I think that one of the institutional issues that contribute to a Congress that appears to not get things done, as it were, that then kind of can contribute to the polarization in America is the filibuster? And if so, what can we do about it?

WEST: Filibuster is a big problem because the way that it works is that on non-finance related bills, which is a lot of public policy questions, that any single member of the U.S. Senate can object to the proceedings and basically stop consideration of a bill by saying they want to filibuster. Now, in the good old days, you actually used to have to actually filibuster. You used to actually have to talk. And I remember in my younger days, there were times where an individual senator would basically hold the Senate floor for hours and hours talking about something as a way to stop a particular legislation. The southern senators in the 1960s were famous for doing this to stop civil rights reform. But there have been lots of examples since.

Now you don't even have to talk if you just threaten the filibuster, you basically stop Senate consideration and you need 60 votes to cut off the filibuster. In a highly polarized time period, it's almost impossible to get 60 votes on anything and certainly any major issue of public policy, whether it's health care or anything else, that is a very challenging standard. And I think in a democracy, we have to be careful about imposing supermajority requirements on Congress and on legislatures because it's so hard in a polarized time to get 60 percent of people to agree on anything. And so there is serious discussion now about whether we should get rid of the filibuster. The Senate actually has got rid of the filibuster in regard to judicial nominations. And I think it's time to have a serious debate over that because, you know, one of the ways in which Mitch McConnell was able to delay some of

the Obama reforms that Obama wanted to introduce was through the filibuster. And right now, we have a Senate that is literally tied with 50 Democrats and 50 Republicans. And so even though McConnell is going to be in the political minority through the threat of a filibuster, he could stop Biden from doing many of the things that President Biden would like to do.

DEWS: So, Darrell, you've talked about a set of digital reforms, you've talked about a set of political reforms. Let's move on to underlying social and economic issues that you and many scholars at Brookings have been and continue to focus on. I'll draw particular attention to the new Blueprints for American Renewal and Prosperity, a series of papers that are on our website, or they're being published on our website in the coming weeks that address a lot of the issues, even beyond politics, that are at the heart of the political and social divisions in our country. Can you address some of those that you think rise to really high moment here?

WEST: Well, there are three broad issues that I believe are fueling some of the populist backlash against our political system, some of it has been enabled by Trump, but it is not unique to Trump. These are issues that have been developing over the last 40 years. Trump took advantage of some of these, but the issues were there well before President Trump. And the three particular ones I want to highlight are just the high levels of income inequality we see right now, the geographic disparities across the country, and then systemic racism as a plague on American politics. And I can discuss each of these in just a little bit of detail.

Income inequality has really reached heights that we have not seen in over a century. I mean, you literally have to go back to the 1920s and the 1930s to see income inequality as high as what we have today. I mean, in my Divided Politics book, I talked about growing up in a farming community. My parents didn't have a lot of money, but I was fortunate that my mother actually worked at a local university, Miami University of Ohio. And so I went there

and I got the employee tuition discount. And my annual tuition was, I think it was around 150 dollars, which has to have been like the big bargain of my lifetime. Getting an education created tremendous opportunity for me, allowed me to teach at Brown University, to get a job at the Brookings Institution. It gave me opportunities that I never would have envisioned growing up. Today, young people face a much more challenging situation because of the inequality. The cost of college education is much higher. The cost of buying the first home is really expensive. Health care is really expensive and you basically kind of go down everything in people's lives. It is really hard for young people today. They do not have the opportunities that I had when I was growing up 40 years ago, and that fuels a lot of resentment, which is completely understandable. This is one area where I agree with people who are upset about the system being rigged and the system is unfair. I tell them, you're right, it is completely unfair from the standpoint of diminished economic opportunity in America.

The second piece is the geographic disparities. Some of our Metro colleagues did an analysis and they have found that only 15 percent of American counties generate more than 70 percent of our GDP. What that means is almost all of America's economic activity is taking place on the East Coast, the West Coast and a few metropolitan areas in between. Like much of America is being left behind. Trump is 100 percent accurate when he says that large parts of the heartland, the Midwestern community where I grew up, is completely left behind. Rural America has been left behind. Big parts of the area between the Mississippi and the Rocky Mountains have been left behind and it fuels cynicism. And when you combine this with the problem of political representation, I mean, we're pretty much in a situation where there are about 15 prosperous states and 35 not very prosperous states. And what that means in terms of the U.S. Senate is the prosperous parts of America have 30 senators and the not very prosperous parts have 70 senators. And so you can see how there's a very real risk that Trumpism is going to outlast Trump himself because the economic inequality is going to be

there after Trump. These geographic disparities are going to be there after Trump. So many of the underlying factors that have fueled the polarization are still going to be there. And so we have to undertake serious steps to improve economic opportunity and to bring those parts of America that are being left behind along with us.

And then the last thing that I will mention is just systemic racism. Racism pervades every aspect of American society, the economy, the political system. You can go area after area and see the tremendous disparities. Our colleagues Rashawn Ray and Andre Perry have written extensively on this topic in terms of the wealth inequalities, the income disparities, the lack of equitable access to education. In COVID, we've seen tremendous racial disparities in health outcomes. African Americans are much more likely to get COVID and then to die from COVID once they have it. They have less access to quality health care. And then they have the issue of law enforcement and the inequities that we see there, as well as in the criminal justice system.

So there are these underlying issues in American society and American politics. If we want to address polarization, we have to understand why different parts of society are angry and to undertake meaningful steps to address those issues. It's not just a question of getting rid of Trump. I'm not a big fan of the guy, but getting rid of him is not going to improve income inequality, geographic disparities and systemic racism. They are still going to be there. These are issues that we have to address. We are not going to solve the problems in American politics unless we can solve these root causes.

DEWS: Well, yeah, it's an extraordinary set of interlocking challenges in our politics, in our media, in our society, in our economy. And these are what the incoming Biden administration has to grapple with. And I'm interested in knowing what you think some of the things that the new administration and also Congress can do to address some of these issues.

WEST: I'm actually optimistic about the future of the Biden administration just because I think there are a number of things that he wants to do that he probably is going to be able to do, in part because we now have a Democratic president, a Democratic House, and a Democratic Senate. Now, the Democratic margins both in the House and Senate are very narrow. So that clearly is going to be a big problem going forward. But Biden, I believe, needs to stay focused on these underlying problems that I've talked about. And I think when you look at how he describes his priorities, he understands that. Like, he understands the inequality problem, the geographic disparities and the systemic racism he needs to address each of those. And I believe the COVID pandemic will provide a vehicle for him to start to make progress on these areas. I mean, Congress already has passed some COVID relief, but there's a lot more that we need to do. We did not include money for state and local government within the most recent COVID package. And that's a mistake because a lot of the education issues and health care issues that have been generated by COVID are administered at the local level. And so if we're not giving money to state and local governments, it's going to be hard for them to improve the distribution of vaccines, to help people adjust to a world of online learning, to provide equitable access to health care through telemedicine and video calls to your physician.

So, I think there's a lot that Biden can do on a lot of these fronts. And the pandemic provides a vehicle to help him accomplish these things. I think Biden is going to proceed on two different tracks. There are some things where he needs congressional passage in order to get things done. So clearly additional COVID relief falls within that category. Addressing inequities in the tax system, raising taxes on the wealthy—that's going to require congressional action. But there also is a second track where Biden is going to be able to do a lot through executive orders, because one of the things that has developed over the last several decades has been the rise of a strong presidency and the weakening of congressional

powers. And again, this is not just a Trump thing. You look at the transition from Clinton to Bush to Obama to Trump, presidents have taken on more and more power and we can debate. There certainly are problems with how much power there is in the presidency. And I do think Congress needs to think about how to rebalance that. But Biden will have a lot of power to do things through executive order. He's going to reverse a number of Trump policies through that means. Some of the things that Trump has done in terms of weakening environmental regulations Biden can do not just through congressional action, but through executive orders. Some of the immigration related problems that we've seen Biden can do through either executive orders or through executive departments. So I'm optimistic because I think they're going to be things that Congress will do. And I think there also are going to be some things that Republicans are going to join Democrats in doing, especially in the Senate. And then the things that they won't do, Biden will be able to address through executive order. So I think people should expect Biden to hit the ground running the first 100 days. There's a lot of challenges he faces, but I've been impressed so far with his appointments and with his sense of priorities. And I think a lot of things that he wants to focus on are the things that I think are the underlying issues that have fueled the past polarization.

DEWS: I think that's a great segue, Darrell, to the last thing I want to talk about in this conversation. And that's to reset us back in the moment. We're just days away from an attempted coup, an assault on the U.S. Capitol in Washington, D.C. And there are definitely a whole range of policy reforms, social reforms that you've talked about that address a lot of these issues. But I want to get back to where we started, and that's to ask if you would share your sense of--you just said the word optimism. You're optimistic about the Biden agenda, but are you optimistic about the future of depolarization, if you will, about kind of resetting in America, the ideal of citizenship and how we all relate to each other, even if we have different political ideas?

WEST: I mean, I recognize it's hard to be optimistic after an attempted coup. You know, it's such a fundamental violation that it would be easy to conclude America is going off the rails and we're never going to get our act together and we're going to lose our democracy. I don't really believe any of that. I actually am still quite bullish on America. I believe Americans are quite resilient. And even though I don't want to underestimate the magnitude of the political, economic, and social problems that we face and that we've talked about today, I believe that the Trump era, in particular the coup attempt and then the COVID pandemic, we put them all together, it is a learning moment for America. It's a time for all of us to think about where we are, what the problems are, and what we can do to address them. And going back to the public opinion survey that we talked about, even though there is a lot of polarization there, it's like Trump only has a 33 percent approval rating. It's like almost 60 percent think he's been doing a terrible job that creates an opportunity to address polarization, to solve problems, to undertake some of the reforms that we need to undertake in order to address these types of issues. So I don't want to minimize the challenge that we face, but I do believe we still control our own destiny. I do think America will get its act together, and I do believe we are going to address some of these problems in the near future.

DEWS: Well, I appreciate that optimistic note and I'm glad to end there. Darrell West, I want to thank you for sharing with us your time and expertise today.

WEST: Thank you very much, Fred.

DEWS: A team of amazing colleagues helps make the Brookings Cafeteria possible.

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Our podcast intern this semester is David Greenburg



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Until next time, I'm Fred Dews.