

THE BROOKINGS INSTITUTION

FALK AUDITORIUM

VETERANS AND DEMOCRACY: BRIDGING DIVIDES AND STRENGTHENING CIVIC KNOWLEDGE

Washington, D.C.

Monday, November 6, 2023

OPENING REMARKS:

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PANEL 1 - VETERANS AND CIVICS:

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PANEL 2 - VETERANS AND POLITICS:

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O'HANLON: Good morning, everyone. Welcome to Brookings. I'm Mike O'Hanlon with the Foreign Policy program. And I'm going to turn things over to start to my good friend Joe Plenzler, with We the Veterans and Military Families, an organization that we're collaborating with today to bring, I think, a quite important and timely discussion on what veterans can do in our society to help with civics and with democracy — certainly challenges that are significant at this time in our history. So, Joe, thanks for joining, and after we hear from you, we'll convene panel one.

PLENZLER: Good morning, everyone. My name is Joe Plenzler. I'm a retired Marine veteran, officer of elections in Warren County, Virginia, and a board member with We the Veterans and Military Families, who is co-hosting today's event with Dr. O'Hanlon and Brookings. Thank you for joining us this morning, in advance of Veterans Day. We're here to talk about the challenges facing our constitutional democratic republic, and what veterans in their families can do to help bridge partisan divides and reinforce the foundations of our political system. If you're joining us today, it's probably because you, like me, are very concerned. Democracy is under assault around the world, and also, sadly, here at home. None of us can afford to admire this problem. Today, you're gonna hear two very important conversations. The first is about civics, and how veterans are banding together to help better inform our fellow Americans about our rights, and more importantly, arguably, our responsibilities to each other as citizens, and also how we can improve public trust in our elections. We believe public understanding of civics and faith in our electoral process is a national security imperative. The second conversation you will hear today will be about how veterans are working to help create a less hostile and more effective political environment. They'll discuss much needed systemic improvements to the way we choose our leaders and also what the media can do to strengthen democracy.

All of today's panelists are either veterans or immediate family members of veterans, and I think they all would agree with me that one of the very best things about our military is that it's comprised of people from all across the country, from every ethnic background, religion, and economic status. And once in uniform, we lay aside our differences to support and defend the Constitution of the United States and protect the American people. A veteran's oath to the Constitution does not end when we take off our uniforms for the last time. If we are to preserve our 247-year experiment in democracy, we all have to do our part. We need to remind ourselves that people on the other side of political issues we care about are our fellow Americans, not the enemy. We believe that America's 17 million veterans and their families can play a critical role in calling all Americans back from their political end zones to the center of the field to work in good faith for the common good. I'll end by thanking Dr. Michael O'Hanlon and his colleague Alejandra Rocha for collaborating with us to make today's event reality. As long as I've known them, Mike's always been a true friend of the

American servicemen and women. He has traveled with us to dicey foreign battlefields and risked his neck to get a firsthand look at the wars we fought. And he's always willing to provide a stage and shine a spotlight on the issues veterans care about. So, I thank you for your friendship these many years and for inviting us to Brookings. Over to you.

O'HANLON: Joe, thanks for the kind words and the wonderful introduction. And I'm here with Jennifer Morrell, Ellen Gustafson, and Jeremy Butler, going from my left to further left. And they are all tied to the military, as Joe said, in one way or another. Got a good, strong Navy, but also Coast Guard representation, also Air Force up here. But most of all, they're all now trying to work hard to work with broader communities of veterans and military families to strengthen our democracy. And I'm not going to give them long introductions because my first question to each, just starting with Ellen, then Jeremy, and then back to Jennifer, is really to explain what they do with their current organizations and how they're trying to speak to these national challenges before us. So, that's a very simple, common opening question for all of them. After that, since our panel is focused on civics and the next panel on democracy, more generally — obviously there's overlap between these topics — but what I'm going to ask each, and I'll even play this game myself a little bit, is to give us a mini civics lesson on maybe one or two ideas in our democracy that they think are important for Americans to understand better than we currently do. In other words, not just to preach the importance of understanding civics, but to actually use today a little bit to refresh our memories on some key tenets. And then we'll go to your questions. And I've got a bunch already from the online audience, for which we're grateful that we'll go to fairly soon. So, if I could, without further ado, Ellen, welcome and over to you.

GUSTAFSON: Thank you so much for joining us, thank you so much. Well, my name is Ellen Gustafson. I am a Navy spouse, not a veteran, because I give orders better than I take them. And I am a co-founder and executive director of We the Veterans and Military Families. We are a pro-democracy organization that uses the strengths of the military family and veteran community to strengthen our democracy. And the reason we started this organization is actually almost funny. We know, as a community ourselves, as members of this community, that we are given credit for knowing all about how America works. People assume that if you're a veteran or connected to the military in a way, like being a military spouse, you probably know what the Constitution is, you probably know how the government works, you probably know how all decisions are made. And we know from experience, that's just not true. You are not given a fundamental training in civics either when you just, you know, go to to enlist and sign up to join the military. You may, of course, if you go to, you know, certain academic programs before the military, but you certainly don't when you marry into it. And yet, you're given credit for really being the voice that understands how

everything should and does work. And we, as an organization, just seek to validate that and to make sure that if you are given credit for knowing how democracy works, how the-- what the Constitution says, that perhaps you should. And we we take on issues that threaten our democracy — information integrity, extremists on all sides pulling for the eyes, and brains, and hearts of veterans and military families. And again, this need for a depth of knowledge about civics so that when we do stand as the most trusted group of citizens in our country, we validate that trust, and we can speak credibly to it.

O'HANLON: Excellent. Jeremy?

BUTLER: Thank you. Jeremy Butler. So I work for Ellen and can attest to her being very good at giving orders, but she also listens very well. So, I'll start off with that. I honestly kind of fell into the veterans' nonprofit space about nine years ago. I was working in D.C. at the time. My wife and I decided we wanted to move to New York City. I wasn't sure what I would do in New York, but found out about an organization, Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America, which does-- primarily focuses on advocacy around veterans' issues. Their headquarters was in New York City. So we started talking to the staff, and they were kind enough to offer me a job. Thought I would be there a year, as I just got settled into New York City, but ended up really taking to it and stayed there for about eight years.

I ended up taking over as CEO from the founder and then stepped down just a few months ago and joined We the Veterans, and sort of found two key things while I was there, with the focus on policy and advocacy. It was that a lot of what we had to do was not only sort of educate the public, and in many cases, the veteran and military community, about some of the issues that were of so much importance to us and that many in the community were struggling from, but also how to translate those needs into action. And what I mean by that is how individual citizens could work with their elected members of Congress to get these things done. So it was both a-- it really was like just an educational job. You had to go out, teach people about the issues that veterans in the military were facing, but then also kind of teach them about how our democracy works.

And it was a realization that many of us don't necessarily have that grounded background in our civics, how elections work, how democracies work, what goes on in D.C., and how you can be a part of the process, and in fact, how you need to be a part of the process if we're going to get anything done. So it not only got me very interested in better supporting our veteran community, but also in realizing that we have a lot to do to really strengthen our democracy by educating everybody on some of the areas in which we need help, but also opportunities to strengthen those. And I don't want to take away anything from the next panel because they'll be speaking on it. But, you know, also, I'm on the board of Veterans for All Voters, formerly Veterans for Political Innovation, and you'll hear more about that in the next panel, but there's a lot that we

need to do and focus on to improve this country, improve the democratic process from a nonpartisan way that is going to better represent what the vast majority of us want and hopefully improve the ways in which we can get those things done.

O'HANLON: Fantastic, Jeremy. And thank you for your service with IAVA, a remarkable organization. Jennifer, over to you.

MORRELL: Thank you. Really an honor to be here with you all today. So, I'm one of those unusual people that actually started as a military spouse, decided I didn't like being on the sidelines and became an active-duty service member myself, and then spent another 20 years following my husband around in the Air Force. So, kind of, I get to see. I get to see that from both sides, being both on active duty and as a spouse. I spent about ten years running local elections in both Utah and Colorado, something that I actually came to out of this desire that I think the military instilled in me to give back to my community to serve. And where I-- when I saw an issue, I felt like, "Hey, this is my opportunity to stand up and fix up."

In 2020, I started an organization called the Elections Group, again, out of a desire to serve the election community. 2020 was a tough year, and we saw an opportunity to reach out and provide support. Out of that came this organization, where now we've got close to 20 employees. We provide training and support to election administrators all across the country, whether that is templates or guidance documents to help them run their election communication information, to improve voter education training on things like audits, or securing polling places, training and recruiting coworkers, sort of the whole swath of things related to elections. And I'm really excited to be here to talk about the way that understanding how that mechanical part of our sort of civic environment works and why and how veterans can play an important role in that. So, thank you.

O'HANLON: That's fantastic, Jennifer. So now, I'd like to talk about civics spec-- you know, with examples from each of our panelists, including myself. I'm gonna anoint myself a panelist here and start the bidding on a civics lesson or two that we can all maybe think more about, or try to reinforce in our activities, in our actions, in our volunteer work, as all of you are doing with your organizations. And so, I'm just going to make two overall points that you can take for what they're worth, as a person who's a Peace Corps alum and, and the son of an Army doctor from Korea days, but otherwise not a veteran or an active-duty service member myself.

The two points I would, I would offer: one is that 'We the People' need to be involved in debates about issues on the use of force even more than we are. And the reason I say that, with a specific, it's sort of obvious at one level in a democracy we're all supposed to be informed and active citizens. But we also know that since World War Two, what's happened — and it's been very bipartisan — is that presidents have taken

more authority and assumed more authority, perhaps extra constitutionally, on the use of military force. We haven't had a declaration of war since World War II, even though the strong implication of the Constitution is you're not supposed to use force without one, and it's supposed to be a binding vote by both houses of Congress that is required in order to undertake major military operations. Now, of course, part of the debate here has been what's a major operation. But frankly, the problem began when Harry Truman decided to respond to the North Korean attack on South Korea in June 1950 without asking Congress for permission, knowing full well it was going to be a big war from the outset.

So, this is really not fundamentally a question about whether an operation is big or small; it's that presidents find it convenient not to ask Congress more than they have to. Even presidents who have been senators before they became presidents, and even — and by the way, I'm a Democrat, but let me just put it on the table — Democrats are at least as bad at this historically as Republicans. Because it was Harry Truman who did not go to Congress, and it was also Lyndon Johnson who wrapped his use of force in Vietnam, in the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, which was, at best, a fig leaf for engaging in a major military operation. So this problem exists on both sides of the aisle. And I think the key central point, the key central point here is to recognize that it's through the Congress where 'We the People' can most actively participate in debates on the use of force. And don't forget, it's Article I of the Constitution that empowers Congress to declare war, and to raise and maintain armies and navies. It's only Article II that gets around to specifying the powers of the commander in chief in the executive branch. So if anything, the Founding Fathers, inspired by founding mothers as well, even though they weren't part of the voting at the time, wanted 'We the People' to be central to decisions on the use of force.

Second point I would make, and then we'll just proceed maybe down the panel, starting with Jennifer and working our way down if we could, is that I think we — those of us who have been in public service, veterans, Peace Corps, volunteers, whoever — we need to help shine the light on military history and history in general of this country. And the reason I say that, again, it sounds blindingly obvious, but it's military personnel who actually have to risk their own lives when the nation makes bad decisions on the use of force, and we have made plenty of bad decisions. We are a great country that makes a lot of mistakes. It took me a long time to figure out how to say those ideas in the same sentence. I felt like either I was being too political, anti-government, and left, or too 'rah-rah' right. But I realized you can say those things together, that we are a great country that's done great things in the world, that I think still backstops the international order in an important way. And yet, as I pointed out in my military history book that came out earlier this year, in our major uses of force since 1945, we've got a bad record overall. I put it at zero-two and two. In other words, we stalemated in Korea, it's too soon to say in Iraq — although certainly it's been very difficult — and we lost

in Vietnam and Afghanistan. This is not the fault of the military, although I think the military did a poor job overall in Vietnam, but the broader political system did a bad job in most of these wars. And that's more on us, as civilians, than it is on the military. But because veterans and their families, military families, wind up being the ones who bear the personal brunt and who see the direct effects of the use of force, I feel that they are most informed and most invested in the decisions that we make. And therefore, we should want their voices in this debate.

At the moment — I'll finish on this — because of some of the difficult roles of military officers or retired military officers around the 2016 election in particular, there's a hesitancy on some people's parts to feel like people with military experience should engage in some of these big debates. I think we need to hear from people with military experience in these big debates. I prefer that it not be politically partisan. But understanding the stakes, understanding the options, understanding the gravity of decisions on the use of force is something where we need as a nation to hear from our veterans and military families. So those are two quick points — I guess not so quick — but two points on civics that I would make. And I'll pass things back to the panel, starting with Jennifer.

MORRELL: Thank you. So in addition to exercising our right to vote, understanding the mechanics about voting, I think it plays a really important role in a civic and civil society. And misinformation, malinformation, disinformation — those all thrive in environments where there's a lack of knowledge. Unfortunately, we make that a little bit easier than than we should in some cases, and that's because we have 50 states with — and territories — with 50 different laws, rules, regulations, and policies when it comes to exercising the franchise and exercising your right to vote. And so, a couple of things I'll throw out in my civics lesson would first be to say, despite all of those differences, there are some commonalities, and that is, elections are ran by professionals. Most of the folks that do that job have been elected. They take an oath. They go through training. Elections are ran by professionals. Elections are ran transparently. In every single state, there's a requirement where any time equipment's being used or ballots are being processed, there are at least two people, and often those are bipartisan teams that handle process and do that work. Elections are also-- that bipartisan part plays a really important role. So again, transparent, bipartisan.

A couple of things just to sort of think about. If we want to talk about elections, we want to like talk about voting, we want to try to help dispel misinformation, really focusing on your own state. It's easy to get caught up in the sort of national discussion, but if you want it, you want to have a voice and you want to understand the facts. It's important to su-- to understand, "In my state, what are the registration deadlines? How do I register? How do candidates get on the ballot? How do ballot issues get on the ballot? What are the requirements for voting?" Those vary in every single state, whether you have early voting or voting by

mail. When ballots get processed, how they get processed, how you can return those "Are they in a drop box? Are they through the post office? Do you have to return those in person? How are poll workers recruited and hired? Can I be a poll worker?" Even when we talk about processing those ballots, again, we see differences in terms of how soon that processing can take place. When polls close, how results are reported all the way through canvas, and I'll just end with that. I think one of the important things, again, that we sometimes fail to recognize is we think, "Oh, there's this nefarious clerk or election person and they have this opportunity potentially to do all of these nefarious things."

The truth is, when we come to counting votes, we come to certifying votes, that is normally done with a board of community members, a board of county canvassers, a board of elections, who have the opportunity to be part of the process. Look at all of the things that took place. Verify the numbers, validate how many voters were giving credit for voting, how many ballots were cast if an audit was taken place, what were the results of that audit. All of those things go into that final sort of stamp of approval when they say to the state, "I can certify this election and say that the results I'm sending up to the state that will eventually. Right. Move on through the federal process are true and accurate." And I think, you know, there's so much information, so much information competing for our time and our attention. And so I'd encourage everybody, but especially our military members, to go to the source of that truth, which would be their state or local election official, and try to understand what's actually happening in my state or jurisdiction.

O'HANLON: Jennifer, before we go on to Ellen, can I just make sure — that was very, very eloquent and important — and I want to make sure I just give you a chance to drive home, make sure I'm hearing you correctly. It sounds like you are relatively bullish about the state of our election machinery in this country. Is that a fair summary?

MORRELL: That is a fair summary. Despite the challenges, I know we've all heard about the turnover, the threats, the harassment — all of that is true — but there's also a great effort to continue to improve the process. I would say we're actually, in some ways, better than we've been in a long time, meaning, we have more jurisdictions in states using paper. We have more jurisdictions in states that are performing audits. We have more jurisdictions in states that are implementing election official training and certification programs. So despite the stress of misinformation on the system, there's some good things that are happening.

O'HANLON: Great, thank you. Ellen, over to you, please.

GUSTAFSON: Yeah, you know, to piggyback off of what Jennifer said, one thing that we learned as an organization trying to understand civics from the perspective of being military family members and veterans, is that a lot of the questions around this fundamental thing, elections, come because of exactly

what Jennifer said. It's, it's actually run, according to the Constitution, by the state. Federal elections are run by the state. I think it's in the 14th Amendment. There's a lot of other constitutional amendments around how voting works, including letting women vote. So, you know, I think it's, it's fascinating because there's a lot of talk about people really being proud of knowing the Constitution, and then yet questioning why elections are run differently in each state. I have questions about that question because if you do know the Constitution, you would know that.

But, but I think that the core thing that we would like to do as a completely nonpartisan organization that is working in the space of civics, but not politics, make sure, like I said, veterans and military family members do know. We held an event a few weeks ago in New Hampshire with the New Hampshire secretary of state, and we invited veterans to come and learn how voting works. We set up a polling location. It was staffed with only veterans as poll worker volunteers. And we allowed people, the press, you know, any veteran in the community, to walk through how it worked. The woman who was in charge of that jurisdiction's elections never self-identified as connected to the military in any way, but she was incredibly diligent. She ran the process; she's been doing it for years. At the end of the day when I was talking to her, she mentioned casually that her husband served in Vietnam when they were married. And of course, here we are again; this woman who doesn't even self-identify but was called to service as a military spouse and is running a local election there.

Our experience with the amazing opportunity of veterans and military family members being part of the election process, we launched a campaign as an organization to gather other military and veteran organizations to come with us in a coalition and simply invite veterans and military family members to be poll workers. It's a paid position, but it's voluntary — very similar to the military. You sign up — you have to choose to sign up — and then you do get compensated. But you still have to choose to sign up. You might have some long days; you might be carrying boxes. You know, you're doing a service to the country. The amazing story that we have to tell is that in 2022, there was a deficit publicly, you know, sort of advertise deficit of 120,000 poll workers across America. That, in and of itself, could become a problem for running elections. If we don't have enough poll workers, not enough locations can open, lines are longer.

We put out a call through these other existing military veteran, military veteran organizations, and even mentioned in the VA newsletter, we put out a call to invite veterans to be poll workers. In 12 hours, 36,000 veterans signed up to be poll workers. And by the end of our six-month campaign, 63,500 signed up. So veterans and military family members filled half of America's need in 2022. That says two things. Number one, when you go to vote, you are likely being served by a poll worker who is a veteran or military family member, even one who forgets to self-identify as that. And number two, when veterans are called to serve

again, they do. And so what an incredible lesson in this opportunity to engage our community in all of the different realms of civics, not just voting, but what an important call to all Americans to trust the process.

O'HANLON: Thank you. And Jeremy, over to you, please.

BUTLER: I got to add on to that. I was one of those veterans that volunteered during the pandemic to be a poll worker. You know, I voted since I was 18, but honestly had no idea what goes into actually executing an election. And the very first time I volunteered, you know, it was because we had a shortage — talk about how generally it was the older folks that were running the elections, and they were going to stay home because they were scared of getting sick. And so it was like, okay, this is an opportunity to do something. One, I was shocked at how in-depth the training is that goes into it. And two, how rewarding it is. You're meeting people from your local community; you're helping them vote. You're seeing people that are coming in to vote for the first time in their lives. It's an incredibly moving experience. I really encourage everyone to do it, but I really encourage anyone who is in any way questioning the validity of our elections to volunteer to be a poll worker. And as Ellen said, it's a voluntary thing but you get paid for it. But you will walk away from that experience, I can almost guarantee, feeling very strongly confident about the integrity of our elections. You're involved in every step of the process. You see the two-person integrity with which everything is done. So I won't go on at length about it, but I can't say it enough. In fact, I have to head back up to New York because tomorrow I'm working the polls for tomorrow's elections. And it's something that I think once you do once, you'll come back to be doing again and again.

Getting back to the civics, and a shameless plug — we'll be coming out with a podcast soon. You'll hear Ellen, myself, and Joe speaking with guests. And one of the first episodes we recorded, we took the all the questions that are on the list of questions that immigrants get in order to become citizens, and it was a quiz of ourselves to see how we did. We actually only made it through about half of the hundred pool of questions, but it's an incredible process and I highly recommend that everyone do it, because you're going to find that no matter how smart you probably think you are about civics, that there's definitely some that you're going to get wrong.

One of the most important ones that I think, and maybe it isn't that hard, but going back to what I was saying about educating the public when I was working at IADA to get people to take part in reaching out to members of Congress, was how many members of Congress we have. And again, this is always ironic to talk about in Washington, D.C., where there is, you know, taxation without representation. But, you know, it's the 100 and 435 — 100 senators, 435 House of Representatives. The 100 number is stagnant; 435, that is supposed to adjust. And in fact, it has adjusted throughout our nation's history to increase based on population. It hasn't changed in a long time. And I think this gets at one of those things where-- so I have two

points here. One is that, you know, we should be aware of the fact that with that number not changing and our population increasing, our representative democracy is actually getting less and less representative because you have people representing a much larger pool of people, and you go back to gerrymandering and things like that. Not only are they representing a large number of people, they're not always actually representing all of those people very well. So that's one thing. The other is the ease with which we can all play a part in that. So, if you're watching the news, you're listening to the news, you're reading the news, you know, and your mad about something that's happening in Washington, D.C. or something there, rather than tweeting about it, rather than yelling at the TV, rather than annoying your spouse or telling him or her how things should be done, you should have the phone numbers to your members of Congress —your one representative and your two senators.

And this goes back to the things that we would often have to teach people when we would want them to reach out to Congress. They wouldn't necessarily know that they had three individuals that they should be reaching out to, but you should call them. You don't need to talk to the actual member of Congress. The person that answers the phone, one of their jobs is to take information from constituents and relay it. That's a very quick thing that you can do. Pick up the phone, call your representative, and call both your senators, and say, "Hey, I just heard about this. I hope that you're going to be voting this way on it or that you're working on this." That's incredibly powerful because they need to hear more often directly from their constituents. That's how you actually get things done. And it's going to be much more productive. And, you know, my wife, that was how she started in Washington, D.C., as one of those people answering those phones. It's can be obnoxious because you get some angry people calling in. But if more of us did it in a professional and polite way, I think we'd see a lot better representation in Washington, D.C.

O'HANLON: That's awesome. So here's what I'd like to do. We've already received some questions, as I mentioned, by email. I'm going to weave one or two into a follow-up question, and then invite you all, if you have comments, questions, to participate. And then I've got a few more of-- by email that I can weave in as well. But I want to build on something you've all been talking about, but also combine it with a difficult issue that we've heard from in the audience, and ask you to reflect, maybe in reverse order this time with-- starting with Jeremy. So, it's pretty impressive that half of our election workers are military veterans or families if that's indeed the right statistic ballpark.

MORRELL: Half of the new ones.

O'HANLON: Half of the new ones. Well, that by itself is still quite impressive because if you think about it, we've only got about 20 million military veterans in the United States, and only about two million people in uniform today between active duty and reserve. So that's well under 10% of the population. Even

when you add in popula-- or family members, we're talking maybe 20% of the population that's provided half of the new workers. That's-- so I just want to give a shout-out. And job well done, keep it going, and don't let the rest of us, not in uniform shirk our duties either, of course. But the question is, we've had some problems with military veterans and family members, and servicemen and women in particular in the last few years, starting with the January 6th tragedy where more of the insurrectionists were military-related than the percentage of the population would lead you to believe. And we also, on the other side of the debate here, some people worry that the military has become too woke and that people are being inculcated with values that aren't representative of the country writ large. I was going to ask all of you to speak to those concerns. And, you know, I guess what it boils down to is how do we make sure that the military is an institution that has the kinds of values that we actually want to see, you know, sort of in a way further developed, further supported, further promoted within our society. Jeremy, over to you.

BUTLER: Thank you. And I'll just start this by saying these are all Jeremy Butler's opinions, you know, but I come to my opinions as not only a veteran but as someone who is still in the reserves. I've been in the military since 1999, 23 years — six years on active duty, and the rest of the years, including right now, as a selected reservist. So I'm on reserve duty on a regular basis. And I could go ad nauseam on this, but I'll try not to. Our military is most representative of our population as any organization, any group you will probably find in the United States. It's racially diverse; men, women, transgender, nonbinary. Any way you look at it, it's represented within the military, and that is the strength of it.

So one, you know, I get angry when people talk about the 'woke military' because one, you know, since Secretary Austin, you know, put in a stand down around this issue. You know, I took part in that stand down. It was like a one-hour briefing that we all got and that was kind of it. We moved on. So what I'm kind of getting at is beware the misinformation in my mind. So much of it comes down to misinformation, disinformation, and opinion packaged as fact, so talk to someone that actually knows, Our-- the strength of our military is our diversity, and we should be reinforcing that. That means making sure that as many people as possible are aware of the opportunities that the military brings and have an opportunity to apply for that. It doesn't mean lowering standards or changing standards. It means giving more people an opportunity to try and meet those standards because that's how we get the best of our people. And then frankly, the matter is, we are very short on recruiting for a whole variety of reasons. And again, don't listen to the pundits that tell you it's because of one thing. Talk to any recruiter that's out there, it's like six plus different reasons why we're struggling to make our recruiting numbers. One of the big ones is very few people can meet the height and weight and physical fitness standards that the military requires. It's not because of the 'woke' military or whatever they may say. That's an agenda item that they're pushing. So, what-- in my mind, 90% of the

problem comes back to misinformation. So we need to be smarter as an entire country, not just as veterans or military or whoever you want to talk about. We all need to be smarter about spotting misinformation and not letting it be the driver of how we feel about an issue.

O'HANLON: Thank you. Ellen?

GUSTAFSON: Well, and to piggyback off of what Jeremy said, there's two different actually great data sets that we can pull on to talk about actually both of those issues. One — and some of my colleagues are in the room — is from START at the University of Maryland, the Center for Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism. They do a really important data set about extremist violence, but you can actually kind of extrapolate what their data says. The data says that, yes, military veterans are often presented and look at-- look like they are wildly more involved in these kinds of extremist issues, whether it's violence or any other kind of action. The keyword there is action because when military veterans are targeted to be recruited to those groups, those groups know that military veterans have a bias towards action. So if you bring a veteran into any type of organization, they are more likely to rise up as leaders, they are more likely to be doers. When you look at incidences like January 6th, if you actually factor for just men as a percentage of the population, veterans weren't wildly overrepresented in that group. They were probably more likely to be leaders of any kind of action because that's what veterans would do in any setting, in any good setting, in any bad setting. So our job as a country, and our job personally as an organization, is to make sure that someone else is winning the hearts and minds of people who are really passionate about this country, really patriotic, and want to see something and do something. We need to make sure that we're offering the 'do something' that's good for our country, that's positive patriotism, that's patriotic participation, like being a poll worker, and not joining a group that maybe has nefarious means.

The other great study that responds to the sort of idea that the military is either 'too woke,' or as some more liberal people might say, a white supremacy organization. I mean, there's--you can see both sides. You see — depending on what media you watch — some people think the medi-- the military is way too liberal. Some people think the military is way too conservative. Rand recently put out a study that actually took the data, and it's neither. Just like Jeremy said, if you if you look on a whole, the military is neither wildly extremist in either direction. They pulled a whole number of issues, and it was very, very clear. It was a very small margin on both the far extremes. And that's the experience of someone like myself who's actually living within a military community today. I think one of the key benefits we have and why I'm so passionate about civics in a nonpartisan way is that I don't live in a social media or human media silo. I live with everyone. And that is incredibly rare in today's culture. I don't have friends that are all on one side. I don't see media that's all on one side because things that people are reposting come from all different perspectives. That's

something-- that pluralism is something that we should see as a goal. And all America should be looking towards the military in our community to actually model, again, which is why we're such an important voice in that civic tableau.

O'HANLON: Thank you. Please, Jennifer.

MORRELL: Well, I'll try and build off both of those great points. I'll just add, my husband ended his military career in a recruiting squadron. It was tough ten years ago; I know it's tough today. And it's the same in election offices — we're also struggling to recruit good members to serve. And part of that is due to the current climate, part of that are external factors. And so, one of the things I would just-- I don't know that I have a solution entirely, but as you've heard, being involved with elections, and that doesn't mean being involved with advocacy groups — those are all important — but if you really want to understand the mechanics and change the way you see and think about that democratic process being involved with-- directly with an election office is so beneficial.

And I would just put a plug for those that are exiting the military looking for sort of a next step, there's a really nice fit between the work that you've done in the military and the work that happens in a state or local election office. There's a growing need to understand physical security, right? Never before have we had to talk about active shooter training, securing a perimeter, locking down access, access controls. These are all things that come naturally to members of the military. They're really needed skills in local election offices. The leadership component, highly necessary in an election office. And really that sort of understanding about — we've got a job to do. It has to be done exactly in accordance with law, with really no room for error, and it needs to be done in a way that somebody is going to come back through and inspect that for quality assurance. These are all things that I brought from my military service into my work and role as an election official and into the work that I do now in supporting those. And so I think if we want to change that dynamic of of which side of the fence, I guess, those military members are on, I would encourage them to think about either playing a primary role in an election office, providing a support role, being a volunteer, being a poll worker — all of those things bring those skills that they've gained from the military in support of their community.

O'HANLON: Thank you. So let's go to you, please. And if anyone has a question, please just put up your hand and wait for a mic, and then identify yourself before posing your question. And I've-- if you're all too shy, then I've got a number written down from the online audience as well. So anybody want to start the bidding, so to speak? Over here, please, sir.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Hi, Steve Miska. Thanks for being here today. It's really great to see many of you who I haven't seen in a while. One of-- a veteran, and Michael self-identified, so I will too. I am an

independent, which tends to be one of the fastest-growing blocs in many areas around the country. One of the things I found was a lot of people conflate civics with politics and I was wondering if you could speak to how you adjust your marketing, what types of strategies you use to, to reassure people.

GUSTAFSON: Yeah, I'll jump in. So according to some data that we, we track, around 60% of veterans identify as independents — much higher than the gen pop. I like using that gen pop phrase. It's very-- centers me in the military community. But, you know, I mean, that's incredibly helpful to know. But also really interesting that people who sort of may be living as a result of policy decisions that impact their lives would leave that experience saying, I don't-- you know, "I'm not going to commit to either side" or "I'm okay with both sides," like whichever-- the negative or positive. You know, I think the way, the way we like to talk about civics is the ways in which you can enact positive patriotism without aligning with a party. You know, you can go and participate, incredibly patriotic-- I mean, this is a population, we love this country. We want to invest in this country, have our hands involved in making this country as wonderful as it can be. But doing any of that work that doesn't involve a political party is really civics. And I'm not saying, you know, that's not defining civics as an academic subject, it's defining civics as the relations between-- you know, and the rights and responsibilities and understanding those as a citizen. And I think, you know, bringing up the phrase 'rights and responsibilities,' because I think that's what is in the dictionary, by the way, if you want to look it up. The rights and respons-- understanding the rights and responsi-- the study of the rights and responsibilities of citizenship — that is what the dictionary says. But when we like to talk about the responsibilities, there is a lot of talk in America about our rights, and it is on all sides. You look at what's happening in the major debates politically right now. They are going to say the word rights. One side is going to be one set of rights, one side's another set of rights. But what about our responsibilities? I mean, it's not only about what we get, it's about what we must do. And that, to us, is also a core way to define civics — what we must do so that we may have a government that offers us and affords us rights and protects our rights.

MORRELL: Thanks, Ellen. So the reality is the 10,000 plus jurisdictions that run elections in our country are often elected officials. Most of your state election authorities are elected officials. So there's a tie, right, to a political party. But I think when you take the opportunity to go tour an office or go work with an office, when you work with the practitioners, what you'll often find is a focus not on the politics, not on the candidate, not on who wins or loses, but on the mechanics of how things are run. And so I think whether it's election administration or some other element of government, if you want to separate the two, it's focusing first on the mechanics — what needs to be done, how is it done, what does the law say. That would be my answer to them.

O'HANLON: Great. Okay, ma'am, please.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Hi, Melissa Bryant — veteran, colleague with many of you. Good to see so many of you, and I really appreciate the tone of this conversation. Full disclosure, formerly working for Secretary McDonough. I'd be remiss if I didn't point out that government is also looking at nonpartisan ways to get veterans and all of our citizens involved in voting. The National Voter Registration Act has been on the books since 1993. That's the Motor Voter Laws — why when you go into the DMV, they ask you if you would like to register to vote. It's just that simple. But it took 30 years for it to be normalized. Only the Department of Defense was actually doing voter registration or doing overseas ballots — the things that we're very familiar with in the military. VA now has a pilot program in Michigan, a purple state, secretary of state who is a military spouse, who all very much supported — and Michigan's doing a lot of great things in voting, if you want to look at the mechanics of of balloting and online ballots and things like that, interesting to look at — but you can vote in the-- actually not vote, register to vote at the Saginaw or Detroit VA medical centers, or you can register to vote at the Detroit regional office. And that's something where, again, it should be just commonplace. Are you here to be served for one thing from your government agency? Would you like to register to vote under the Executive Order 14019, Promoting Access to Voting? The entire federal government is trying to normalize voter registration across the board, just like you have at the DMV. We should have more of that greater access. I think it helps the messaging that you're talking about in making this nonpartisan, taking the heat out of it, taking the politics out of the policy.

O'HANLON: Let me just add to the mix, if I could, and then you all can respond. I'll bring on a couple of the other questions from the online audience. And I've got probably enough to do maybe two batches, but I'll go back to the live audience in between. So one question is, "How can veterans encourage civic engagement for high school students?" Another question is, "Do reserve military members have a particular role to play, given that they are often more integrated day to day with their communities since that's where they live and work?" And, but on the other side — I'll throw in sort of a flip side to this, and then go to all of you, and maybe each person could speak to whichever questions most move you or motivate you — at a point where military recruiting's become more challenged and we also see fewer members of the military recommending military service, even to their own children, even to their own friends, how do we address that trend? Is that just a reality or is there some way to maybe change the direction of the curve back towards a more enthusiastic endorsement of military service by current military and families? So, why don't we start with Jennifer?

MORRELL: I'm going to take the first one. States that run great high school programs, it's usually twofold. There's some sort of-- one, there has to be a law that allows for early registration. That means

somebody can register when they're 17 so that they're registered and ready to vote when they turn 18. And so for states that have resources, they can go into high schools, or have a high school program where they go in and they educate high school students, and that includes sort of informing them how registration takes place and what their avenues are for doing that, whether that's a paper or former online. The second part of that is a growing use of high school students as poll workers. They're very tech savvy. They understand the mechanics much better than some of our veteran poll workers, — and I'm sorry, I don't mean veteran as in military veteran — those that have served for a long time, some of our our older workers. All are great, all are useful. But high school students can be a really important part of that.

Where-- what can veterans do to help with those two programs? Often where they're successful, it's because the state or the local jurisdiction has the resources, meaning the people, and usually some sort of financial resource to send someone into the high school classroom to do that. And so, I don't know if that's a volunteer opportunity or some opportunity for a squadron or somebody to come in and support a program like that, but it certainly seems that that might be feasible. I remember in the Air Force we actually went in and did reading. We helped elementary schools with sort of reading, tutoring. So it seems like there's probably an avenue to do that. My one word of caution is, we love when third-party groups come in and provide help and support — that's great. But work with your local election official because sometimes the messaging or the interpretation of things can get garbled. And when you're giving one message that's contrary to the local official's message, that sort of leads us to that mis/dis/malinformation. So, yeah, I think that's a great question, and I would love to see more programs like that be fully staffed and moving forward.

O'HANLON: By the way, before we go to Ellen, if I could just add, there's actually another question that sort of speaks to what you were just talking about and let me just put it on the table if people want to address it: "To what end do 501(c)(3) veterans' organizations. that sometimes are not quite as well motivated as yours and sometimes contribute to the disinformation, to what extent are they a concern? And how do we separate the conscientious from the more polemical organizations, even within the military veteran's community?" So, you may or may not want to talk to that. But Ellen, please.

GUSTAFSON: Yeah, thank you. Well, so I mean, I think, first of all, it is incredibly important that all the government agencies under this executive order that Melissa was talking about are making it as easy as possible to register to vote, especially because, you know, look, people have all kinds of opinions about all kinds of different government agencies, but it's the government for everyone. And so the more there are completely, you know, just as nonpartisan as you can be — the VA seems pretty nonpartisan to me; you just go get health care — it's great to have organizations like that make it easy to register to vote. So there's no sense that somebody is trying to get one group of people or another. Veterans are, veterans are not a

monolith. The military is not a monolith. It's all kinds of people that are going to go in and get VA health care, so that is an incredibly important thing to talk about because, you know, there's no motivation to say, "If I want veterans, therefore I'm only going to get this political party." It's everybody. So that's number one.

Number two, I think the opportunity-- I mean, when I was younger, before the last 20-something years of war, we did see more sort of connections, military veterans coming into schools. I'm sure it was at the time more connected to recruiting in the sort of, you know, internecine period of the eighties and nineties. But it was really useful to have more interconnectedness between, you know, military veterans in a community, and talking about not only their experiences, you know, in war but also just the experience of serving your country. I, I'm sure there are many places where that still exists, but I think pushing back to that is probably really helpful for the military is meeting its recruiting goals. But an additional thing I think we forget, and especially we've forgotten the last 25 years — most of the military is not the one cool, tough guy, war movie. It's just not. That's-- and that's awesome. One of the things that I experienced when I started in my-- early in my career, I was connected to the military at the Council on Foreign Relations — sorry, Brookings — and I worked for, I worked for military fellows.

And at my first experience, I went —I had no military background — I went to a fancy dinner at a military installation, and the CSs, the culinary specialists, were brought out. They were junior military members who had made the meal, and they were trained to be culinary specialists. They did their job, and they were introduced by name, by where they were from, and they introduced what the meal was. It was one of the most emotional experiences I've had as an American, and I've been a military spouse now for 13 years, and this was still one of my most emotional experiences, because the dignity that came with being part of the mission, and your part of the mission was making the meal, was so powerful. And I think if more young people could see that you, by doing this job in the military, have the dignity of service no matter what that job is, is really important because it's not just about going to the frontlines and being some tough guy that they're going to make a movie about, it's about doing your job honorably and that your job is part of the larger mission. And that is so important in America today, and that's really the basis of civics. By being a citizen and doing your part, you are part of a larger mission. That's something that every young person in this country could really benefit from, and that our country would benefit from. So I think if we make more connections in that very small way, we all would get a lot from it.

BUTLER: I'll try and quickly touch on a few of these. I don't have kids, but I was at a conference recently where there were some social media influencers whose-- the purpose of their platforms was to sort of educate high school and younger people around civics, and they made a few really good points. They said one of the best ways that we get through is to not try and just teach civics, you know, that's-- people are

going to be bored; they get that in school and move right on. So, the best way to do it is to take current events, and make them, relevant, and explain how there is. And so, two of the examples they gave is, you know, what's currently going on right now with Senator Tuberville putting a hold on military promotions. You know, a lot of — I mean, not just kids — but a lot of us in general are like, how in the world is one senator able to do that? So explaining how that works, and how the Senate works, and how that one person can have such an oversized effect. The other one was around the Dobbs decision in the Supreme Court. Explaining that, you know, these are judges appointed for life by a partisan president, the background of how that happens, and how they can have such an outsized influence on people's lives. And so, that was a key takeaway that I thought was really interesting, it's "Don't try and teach civics; try and take current events and, you know, sort of trick them into learning some civics while you're talking about them.'

On the reserve side, I'm a reservist, and it is true. So, like living in a community, you know, when you're on active duty, you generally, you know, you live in a community where it's mostly active-duty service members; you're on a base. Just by nature of the way things operate, you're segregated from, a lot of times, from society. As a reservist, we live all around the country. You've got reserve centers in the middle of very nontraditional areas. And so you do have an opportunity to be sort of a goodwill ambassador a lot of times. That said, it can be challenging because we're also told, like, you know, "Don't wear your uniform around," and things like that when you're traveling. You know, wear civvies, and stuff like that, and change. There are times, though, when I don't do that for a variety of reasons. Sometimes I'm driving to something, so I'll put on the uniform, get into the car. But the number of times when people stop you and want to talk to you, which is a good and bad thing — you know, I'm late, I gotta go — but like, people want to say, you know, "Thank you for your service," and they want to ask some questions or little kids, you know, want to come up and talk. And it's a great opportunity to engage with people in your community, to teach them about the military, teach them about the reserves, and educate them about a facet of our society that most people don't have a connection to anymore.

And so it is, I think, an opportunity to use the Reserve and the National Guard, who are, in the post-9/11 era, called on more and more and more to do major things. They're being called up on a very regular basis. We've almost all been mobilized. The National Guard, you know, I always give a shout-out to the National Guard, and the Coast Guard, for that matter, like, two of the most underrepresented and underappreciated assets that this country has. And as a reminder, the Coast Guard does fall under the Department of Defense in time of war. The Department of Homeland Security would not. Anyways, long story short, thank the Coast Guard, too, because they do incredible things, that includes regularly deploying with the military, including overseas.

And then lastly, on the nonprofit side of things, I would remind people that every veteran group or VSO that's out there, don't take it for granted that they are a 501(c)(3). Many of them are (c)(4)s, some are (c)(19)s. You can go into detail about what all those mean, but even the ones that are (c)(3)s often have a political bend. And I don't mean that in a negative way because they are still maybe operating from a nonpartisan standpoint but take everything with a grain of salt. Do your research, learn about the organization, where they come from because a (c)(4) is very different from a (c)(3) and a (c)(19). A (c)(4) can have a very partisan standpoint, but they come across sometimes as being nonpartisan or speaking the truth and things like that. So, my view is always do your research and learn about the organization. Don't just take what they're saying at face value. Once you get to know them, certainly then you can understand how that is. But you know, it's like, "Oh, it's a veteran's group. They must be just a (c)(3) doing God's work. And, you know, I believe them when they say, 'X, Y, and Z.'" I would caution you in making that quick of an assumption.

O'HANLON: Thank you. Before I ask you, I think, we'll-- we're unfortunately at about 10:58, so I'm going to have to do the transition to panel two before I ask you to thank panel one. And we'll do our seamless, no-coffee-break transition, with apologies, but get coffee if you'd like in the course of the next hour. But let me just say, this has been fantastic, and I really appreciate not only the broad spirit and the culture of service that you all reflect and undergird, but also the specific points that you made and the takeaways that I think could be useful for me and everybody else up here. Now, let me very briefly, as we're about to leave and about to ask for a round of applause for this great group, introduce Bill Galston, my colleague here at Brookings — once a marine, always a marine, himself. So we started with Joe Plenzler, we're going now to Bill Galston, who will convene an amazing panel to talk about some of these same issues, but also maybe even from a slightly more political and sort of broad definition democracy perspective on the role of military families and veterans in our overall national experiment with democracy. So thanks for being here, all of you, but please join me in thanking the panel.

GALSTON: Well, I think there's no need for me to welcome you officially because you've already been here for a while. But I do need to introduce myself. I'm Bill Galston, a senior fellow in Governance Studies here at, here at Brookings — not Foreign Policy — and I am, I'm teaching or co-teaching a course this semester at the U.S. Naval Academy at the Stockdale Center. And those of you of a certain age will remember Admiral James Stockdale. He was a genuine hero who displayed exemplary courage and endurance during what I believe were seven years as a prisoner of war in North Vietnam. But I think it's fair to say that the military was his *métier*, not politics. I mention this because Ross Perot chose him as his vice-presidential running mate in 1992. I will never forget the vice-presidential debate because Admiral Stockdale

came out on stage and said, "Who am I and what am I doing here?" Those were very good questions, which I think he answered only in part during the debate. But I'm feeling, I'm feeling the same way myself.

And so let me just say very briefly, I am a Vietnam-era veteran of the Marine Corps. I believe very strongly in service, universal service — I'm of two minds about the abolition of the draft, in part as a consequence of the Vietnam War. In my younger days, I was a passionate advocate of universal service, whether military or civilian, for all 18-year-olds in American society. And when I got to the White House in 1993, I had an opportunity to do something about it as, as one of the founders of AmeriCorps. But more broadly, my work here at Brookings focuses centrally on dangers to democracy at home and abroad, and what different groups in American society can do to make sure that it remains intact and strong for future generations.

Before I turn to the panel, just one more point. I have long believed that veterans have a unique potential contribution to American society and American politics. But I think it's important to note that that contribution has diminished sharply during my lifetime. Let's take the baseline: 50 years ago, 1973. In that year, 75% of the members of the House of Representatives were veterans, 80% of the members of the United States Senate were veterans. If you look at the current Congress, 18% of House members are veterans, versus 75% 50 years ago. Seventeen percent of the members of the Senate are veterans, versus 80% 50 years ago. Does that make a difference? You bet it does because every single veteran knows the difference between politics and war. And most American civilians in elected office don't make that distinction. That makes a difference. Well, I've had my say.

Now it's time, now it's time for the panels. And I am--not being as young as Mike, I don't have the same good memory, and so I'm going to have to refer to pieces of paper here. I'm gonna start with Todd Connor, and I'm going to, I'm going to ask him about the organization that I believe he was central founding, entitled, or called, Veterans for All Voters. So a few questions, and I'll repeat the same questions for each member, each member of the panel. First of all, what is your organization about? What is its mission? Why do you consider that mission to be so important for the future of American democracy? And then on a more personal note, what is it about your background that drew you to the precise mission that you have turned into an organization?

CONNOR: Yeah. Bill, thank you, and thank you, Brookings, for hosting this conversation and the last panel. I'm going to take those in reverse order, if I may, because I think it speaks to how I got to this point. I spent the last ten years or so building a — we don't need to go in the 'Wayback <machine,' — but, you know, once upon a time I was in the Navy ROTC business school-- business, started a business, and then started an organization that helps military veterans start businesses called Bunker Labs. And I see some familiar

faces from that work, incredibly inspiring work. Nothing better than helping military veterans start businesses. We did it in chapters across the country, from Bozeman to Miami to Raleigh-Durham to here in Washington, D.C., helping about 1,200 veterans every year and military spouses find their way as entrepreneurs. And there's a lot of sorts of context in history with that. It's not germane to this conversation.

But I will tell you, every single day before, during, and after 2016, and the political turmoil that we were all sort of subject to as citizens in this country — continue to be subject to — I experienced this sort of personal split screen in life of deeply inspiring experiences, pitch competitions, military veterans, entrepreneurs, rolling up their sleeves to working together across political ideology. Frankly, politics was not part of that conversation. Took a real discipline to say we're here to be neighbors and friends. But knowing that there was political lines of difference in those rooms, but that people would just come together to be civil, pursue their dreams, and do it in a spirit of camaraderie and partnership. Deeply inspiring; reminded every single day that America is full of good and decent people, and not just military veterans, but others that we were interfacing within the entrepreneurial community.

And then, you know, go home after an event, turn on the TV, and watch just the disaster play out. That was the 2016 election. And irrespective of political ideology, you know, I voted for candidate — I think we all voted for a candidate — but I want to put that aside and say, "This feels so dysfunctional." And really, I started my own journey in 2018 to say-- to really get grounded. And I think this is important, and this is where I want to raise the stakes for an audience like this to develop a theory of the case about what is going on, and how do we move beyond it. And read widely, believed some things, was skeptical of some things, fundamentally adopted — I think this comes from an entrepreneurial background — a system-level view of the situation. I think behavioral understandings are fleeting. I can understand that people are outrageous, but like, let's move beyond that. Why, why is outrageous incentivized? What is going on that this works as opposed to this doesn't work? How do we get to a place where this doesn't work as supposed this does work on both sides? And I picked up a book by Michael Porter and Katherine Gehl — Michael Porter from Harvard Business School, Katherine Gehl, a businesswoman out of Wisconsin — called "The Politics Industry." And fundamentally, they framed an argument that we're operating in a political duopoly, and it's an unregulated marketplace. Duopolies and monopolies are illegal in this country, or they at least have to be regulated because absence of competition causes all sorts of adverse behaviors that are tolerated because you don't have choices. And we're living in a political duopoly. And you can, by the way, you can participate as part of that duopoly, as I do, as most of you, and still see it as deeply flawed.

And so, I became really compelled by that chain of logic and found out that others were as well. And here's the thesis and the mission of our organization, and I'll transition: If you want to fix American politics,

you need competition. Eight percent of people, voters in this country, determined 83% of the United States Congress in the 2022 cycle — research from Unite America. How is that? Because 86% of districts are either gerrymandered, or even if you get rid of gerrymandering, 76% of districts are self-sorted. Rural people live amongst rural people and consume rural sort of centric information. Urban people, same thing. So gerrymandering is bad. But, but even if you get rid of it, you're still stuck with a sort of geographic self-sorting that is taking place in this country. And most incumbents are running in a closed primary system without competition. And then there are in red or blue districts. So if you win the primary, you win the general. So we fundamentally are just lacking competition in our political system. And if you want to fix that, you've got to go to 50 states and get them to change the way in which they conduct elections and introduce competitive models that are majority models that allow registered independents — Ellen said 60% — you know, 61% of young veterans are registered independents. It's the fastest-growing voter bloc in this country. They are the majority in many states, but they can't vote in closed primary systems. And so, you got-- so the thing that inspired me was, wow, the answer is deeply technical — get rid of partisan primaries, introduce open primaries, ranked-choice voting, or other majority election models, which eight of the ten world's healthiest democracies have. We are tied with Chile at 27th and getting worse, and Chile is getting better. And these technical interventions can create outsized impacts immediately. And we have success in Alaska as to how this model works and how the people behave accordingly. And we have success popping up all across the country. So I think we can be on the precipice of a movement — I want to talk more about that — but I became compelled, surprisingly, even myself with this technical intervention that can lead to competitive elections and begin to restore what's wrong with this country.

Here's-- because here's my final thought. What I don't think is wrong in this country is that we're a country divided. I just fundamentally reject the frame. I think it's actually gaslighting that's fed to us by institutions and political parties that feed off of our outrage. And so, what if the big truth was actually much more normal than we think, that we haven't allowed registered independents to participate? We haven't allowed competition. And the people that stand to lose by us having competition, and more moderates and regular folks involved in democracy, are the same people that are keeping us outraged. And so we're on a mission to upend that. And that's what Veterans for All Voters is doing. We're fighting for election reform, nonpartisan — some of our volunteers are in the room — and we're organizing in states. The work is not here in D.C.; it's in Juneau, Alaska; it's in Springfield, Illinois; it's in states across the country. And you don't need every state to change their election laws for things to feel different. You get four or five states with versions of final five voting models. You get ten U.S. senators who act like adults, not because it hurts them, but because it helps them in their own re-elections. And I think that's pretty inspiring.

GALSTON: Todd, you've gotten us off to a really terrific start.

CONNOR: I came in heavy, Bill. Sorry.

GALSTON: Next is Scott Cooper, who was a fellow Marine. In his case, he served for 20 years as a naval flight officer. I am told that he deployed five times to Iraq, twice, twice to Afghanistan, once to the Far East. Wow. You came home for good and ended up founding a group called Veterans for American Ideals. So, same question to you-- questions to you as I address to Scott. Floor is yours.

COOPER: Well, thank you very much. There we are. It's green. It's an honor to join the stage with you two today. And, Todd, you started it off extremely well, and my story is very similar to yours. I retired ten years ago from the Marine Corps and spent a good bit of my time in Iraq and Afghanistan. I think if any human being, but especially veterans, looks at their life, they want to do something meaningful and good. That's what motivated me to join the military. And when I retired, I was looking for that same type of meaningful experience with what I was going to get paid to do. And by six degrees of Kevin Bacon and some great mentors, I was offered a job at Human Rights First. And Elisa Massimino took a chance on me, and she said, "Hey, I think there's an opportunity to leverage veteran voices for good." And so I got to spend the next five years actually doing a lot of work helping refugees, and specifically, a unique category of refugee called the Special Immigrant Visa Program that allows the interpreters and translators from Iraq and Afghanistan to find safety in America.

I was still at Human Rights First when the 2016 election happened and was equally distraught by what I was seeing around my country. And it's why I'm working on the kinds of things that I'm working on. Mine is similar to Todd's, but what I would say as we think about this, and it goes back to the previous panel, there was a wonderful essay that Phil Klay wrote here at the Brookings Institute in May of 2016 called, "The Citizen Soldier." And one of the points that he makes in the essay is he says that one of the great acts of faith is to join the military. You have faith that your country will use your life well. I continue to have that faith, and I saw that faith shocked by the events of the last several years. And I realized that there was a problem when-- well, one, I voted for the first time in person in 2014, the year after I retired. And the 24 elections prior to that, I would call Mary Ann Collins in Casper, Wyoming. She was the county clerk. I grew up in Casper; my mom is still there. And every two years, I'd call Mrs. Collins and say, "Hey, Mrs. Collins, it's Scott. I need a ballot for the primary and then also for the general." My mom taught Mrs. Collins two daughters piano, and she was always excited to hear where I was or what I was doing. And she would send me an absentee ballot, I would fill it out, I would mail it back to her. And I have great faith that my ballot was received, was counted, and was legitimate. That is, in fact, the system that we have. How do we shore up our faith and confidence in those systems? Part of it is by volunteering as a poll worker, which I do, along with Jeremy and

65,000 of my fellow veterans, hopefully, more in well, certainly the 2024 election. So I'm not sure how to shore that up, but I know that one of the ways that we do that is that we push back on this notion that somehow it's rigged or we're not part of the solution.

And I'll finish by one quick story about what we're working on here. My mom, as I mentioned, still lives in Casper, Wyoming. She's like the sweetest lady on the planet. And a couple of years ago, she told me, "Oh, I've just stopped watching the news. I'm so frustrated by all of it." You can relate, right? The exhausted American. "Well, except for George Stephanopoulos. I love George Stephanopoulos," she says. And I push back with my mom. I said, "Mom, you don't have the luxury of stepping aside and checking out." To quote my friend Steve Miska, "Citizenship isn't a spectator sport." And so how do we solve this? We solve this by by shoring up faith in our institutions, whether it's volunteering for the dogcatcher, the city council member, or the school board member, or a national election. And we say, "Look, we don't have the luxury of not participating. And the solution lies in us in helping to shore up those institutions." And so, if I can use whatever political capital I have, because somehow I'm viewed as, as I'm viewed as much braver and better looking than I deserve to be seen because I'm a veteran. That's what you should be doing today.

GALSTON: Thanks so much, Scott. And last, but certainly not least, is Kelly Kennedy, who has a biography that boggles my mind. She served in the Army from '87 to '93, including tours in the Middle East during Desert Storm and in Mogadishu — real garden spots. You spent five years covering military health at Military Times, and you're also the author of two books that I'd never heard of, but I'm going to read them now. One is called "They Fought for Each Other: The Triumph and Tragedy of the Hardest Hit Unit in Iraq." And if that weren't enough, she's coauthor of "Fight Like a Girl: The Truth About How Female Marines Are Trained."

KENNEDY: With Plenzler's wife.

GALSTON: Yes. And you are now the managing editor for the War Horse, a publication that I hadn't heard of previously. So, what is the mission of the War Horse? How does it carry out that mission? What's drawn you to it? And perhaps more broadly, what is the distinctive contribution that you think veterans can make, not only to the coverage of veterans' affairs but more broadly? The press's contribution and veterans' contribution to the country at this moment of, I would say, peril for our democratic future.

KENNEDY: Yes. Thank you for having me here. And I'm also honored to be on this panel, but I definitely came about it in a different way from from how you guys did. So, the War Horse is a nonprofit newsroom, a true (c)(3). We believe that as newsrooms across the country shrink and disappear, veterans and military issues are not going out to the public. There are no longer veterans and military reporters in these small newsrooms, if there were before, and they were kind of lacking before. So our-- we're like

ProPublica, any newsroom in the United States can take our stories and run them for free. So we're providing a service for newsrooms that are short-staffed, but also for the democracy. You know, the the idea that people don't know enough about the Defense Department, which has the biggest budget in the United States, is unnerving. We talk about how few veterans there are in our in our country. People don't understand us. I had someone pitch a story the other day about how men who join the military are drawn to violence. Okay, look, let's start fresh. You know, like, people just have very, very strange ideas about the military. But I, I also think about the the statistics you were talking about at the beginning with, with veterans in Congress. Veterans in Congress doesn't necessarily mean that we're, we're voting less for war or more for veterans and for veterans' issues. So it's important to understand that veterans are also not demigods. You know, we're, as I think it was Ellen was talking earlier, my civics lessons came long after the military and not necessarily because of the military. So it's important for people to understand that we're just people too. We're not, we're not necessarily up on a higher level because we're a veteran, even if we do feel often called to serve. So there's there's that piece of the mission.

We also feel like we're a soft-landing ground for veterans and service members who are looking for a news source that feels good to them. We can cover things through-- national issues through a military lens. You know, you look at climate change, what is the military doing for climate change? You look at trans issues. How are laws in Florida affecting families who have trans kids who are in the military? It just puts a little bit of a different spin on things. I think it brings us back toward that center, "Oh, okay. Let's let's think about the policies here and how it's affecting our military." I also believe that when you vote for a politician, you are voting for or against war with that vote. I think that we have a tendency to jump into situations without thinking about the long-term effects, as we've seen with the PACT Act — it's going to cost our country billions of dollars. There was a story in The New York Times this morning from Dave Philipps, who's an amazing reporter, about Marines who were doing special missions in Syria and blowing up stuff and came back seeing ghosts and just horrific stories. And we're not taking care of people properly in that way. And I don't think our voters understand that when you vote for, for war, it goes long past that. We could talk about the socioeconomic issues that are in the countries we go into too, but that's probably for another day.

When I say that I came about this in a different way from other people, I I joined the Army in 1987. There hadn't been a war for a long time. I was-- my dad was laid off. I wanted to pay for college. I got out of the Army in 1993 going, "Holy crap, what just happened? I never want to be anywhere near the military again." And here I am 30 years later. So, I would go-- I joined the Army knowing I wanted to be a journalist. And my very first newsroom, there were no other veterans. There was no one who knew how to cover veterans' issues. So here I am, the COP's reporter, jumping on every every military story, every veteran

story. I mean, from college on. And it just it never stopped. So by the time the Iraq war started, I thought, "Oh, what the hell," and I went back to grad school and studied Middle Eastern and Eastern European politics, and then embedded in Iraq and Afghanistan, went for it again. I think it's probably one of the most important issues to our our country. I think veterans and newsrooms are extraordinarily important. You look at the work of Chris Chivers, where he is able to identify shrapnel and come up with a whole story based on that. Or Tim Gibbons Nath, who's in Ukraine right now, just like leading the pack on helping us understand what's going on there. There's newsrooms that are doing an extraordinary job — Military Times, Military.com. A lot of those guys are veterans. I think that our, our civilian newsrooms need more of that coverage. And that's why we're here, that's why we exist. I think I got everything.

GALSTON: What a great start. I have a follow-up question for each one of you, starting with Todd, working our way down. Todd, you've taken the optimistic side of one of the great debates in American political science and political analysis these days. Your argument, in brief, is that the American people are not really that divided, but it is our electoral system, electoral mechanisms, plus a long and mostly unchallenged two-party duopoly that has created divisions that wouldn't otherwise exist. That's your thesis in brief. What led you to that conclusion?

CONNOR: You know, frankly, a lot of reading — some stuff that's very vaulted, some stuff that felt very practical — attending four presidential conventions, working in Congress, looking at the United States military, looking at communities. And I think, more than anything, looking at this situation not coming from a political context. And this is where, you know, inspi-- you know, what inspires me with some of the writing by business thinkers — people that write about, you know, competitive strategy in a corporate context and just fundamentally different frames — I think we're, we're so conditioned to believe that this system of elections is so immutable that this is just the way it is. And in no other sector do we think that, in this great sort of country of free enterprise, where we absolutely expect choices, where we insist on convenience, where we insist on participation in other ways, it feels like our political system has felt wholly exempt. Like it just operates under a entirely different set of gravitational pull.

But you begin to look around the world and understand that we are — you begin to do two things. Number one is look around the world and understand that we're an outlier for how we conduct this-- our own elections, our own State Department. When we go and do democracy implementation work in other countries, always avoid election systems that lead to a binary decision framework. Because here's how you win a binary decision argument: "You don't have to like me. You just have to hate that," and that's the net sum nature. And that actually doesn't have anything to politics, that has everything to do with behavioral science and decision theory. And so, multi-choice environments are critical if you want to get rid of negative

campaigning. It's not about behavior, it's about what's the persuasion path. So other countries have figured this out. Our own state government understands this when we go and do democracy implementation work in other countries. We avoid these plurality election systems definitely avoid two parties because it's a formula for ethnic conflicts and other deleterious effects.

And then you go back in our history, and you understand that in the United States of America, the Progressive Era fought for and got direct primary elections to take party away from party bosses. So we got these systems of government, and in about every 50 years in this country, we go through a cyclical self-correction where we actually get constitutional amendments. Things that we think are impossible today have historically happened with some frequency and repetition in this country. Citizen efforts to intervene and systems that become calcified are part of the American story, part of the American history. It's how we got the Progressive era, direct democracy, other forms of correction to the political system. Because what happens is political power encroaches, calcifies, takes power for itself, and then the citizens step up and say, "Nope, that's too far," and we take it back. So we are just in that cycle, but most Americans don't have sort of the opportunity to look back and sort of take time to study this problem.

So I think that we are in a correction cycle in which the people that are in charge cannot be the ones to save us from ourselves. It will come from citizens. It historically always does. And, and that's why we're organizing military veterans as citizens to step forward and help the American public understand there's a path out. And why veterans? Because Americans trust veterans. And so we're leveraging that goodwill to say there is a path out and we can actually do it. And lots of states are changing the way that we do things. And there are issues in this country that seem impossible, like legalizing gay marriage or cannabis, or once upon a time, direct democracy, or once upon a time, the right for women to vote, or once upon a time, you know, 18-year olds' the right to vote. Those things seem impossible until they-- it happens somewhere that surprises you, and pretty soon it seems inevitable.

And I think election reform can be a tipping point moment. Well, we have to create that tipping point. But I think if three states get on board with smarter policies, like you saw with cannabis, every state would be having a conversation about, do we like the way it's being done? And who stands to win is the American public. Who stands to lose are people that whose business model is outrage. The worst thing for a candidate? Fundraising is a normalized environment. If I don't have a foil, I can't raise money. So that hurts the business model. It hurts the business model for media, political consultants, political parties. And that's not like a ding, it's just, it's a system-level understanding of how this all works. And so we've got to move beyond emotion towards system-level perspective. And I think that, that is actually what inspires me to do this work.

GALSTON: So, Scott, I'm going to turn the conversation in what I consider to be a painful direction and, and you may too. As far as I can tell, one of your great passions is doing right by the people overseas who have helped the U.S. military and the United States and are in danger as a result of their principled cooperation with us. And you've been particularly passionate about the Special Immigrant Visa Program, which is designed to accelerate and ease the process of getting those people here to the United States. I'm not the only one who thinks that with regard to the people who helped us out in Afghanistan, we have failed to do our duty. Why is that? And what do you think you and we can do about that?

COOPER: I guess I get the easy questions, don't I? Well, let me start with a couple of things that-- one talks a little bit about what Todd's doing; I'm quite optimistic about this. But then to your question there, I think the theory of the case is being tested and we'll know a little bit more because, over the course of the last seven, eight, nine years, part of the theory of the case is that as a veteran, you were taught how to cooperate with people on your left and your right, that partisanship was something that was anathema to you. And if you can run on a country-over-party idea, then things are going to get done. Organizations like With Honor and New Politics, Leadership Academy, and several of those, have that case. And with only 18% of the House, 17% of the Senate as veterans, I don't know yet. I don't know if, if military veterans are somehow more predisposed to cooperate. That's, that's a wonderful project that we should research.

To your point about how do we overcome some of the challenges that we had with those 'wartime allies' — it's probably the best term in Iraq and Afghanistan — and how did we not have enough political will to welcome them here? I think part of it has to do with a certain nativist xenophobia that is not unique to this time. If you look at 1924 and the Immigration Act, as we closed the doors on Ellis Island, there's been other periods of that. We worked very closely with John McCain when he was chairman of the Armed Services Committee, and he would push through every year in the NDAA a certain number of visas, you see about 4,000 or 4,500, despite the fact that his chairman of the of the Judiciary Committee would not waive jurisdiction because it was an immigration issue and therefore it was under the jurisdiction of the Judiciary Committee. And thanks be to John McCain, because he would just force those things through in a manager's package of amendments. I think part of it also has to do with how we view America. We love to point to Ellis Island, the Statue of Liberty, and yet if I were to see the term 'those illegals,' you know what I'm talking about, right? That is a scapegoating and a demonization of a certain people that are looking for something better. I also worked alongside Iraqis and Afghans that were looking for something better, and they knew if they could spend two years working with us, that was the golden ticket. And then once they're here, we've spent countless hours —many in the audience here have as well — trying to help them get jobs, get them back on their feet, and the like.

And so, how do we overcome this? I think part of it is to recognize that that narrative of someone looking for something better looks to come here. They're not looking to immigrate to some far-off country. Kerplakistan is not the place that they're looking to immigrate to. They're looking to come to America. They were looking to come to America 100 years ago. That is the great value of our country. And so my hope is that we can come to a more sane idea that those that are looking for a better opportunity, this is the place. And again, back to, you know, my own role, our own role as military veterans, which is to say, "Hey, there are people that risk their lives alongside us. Those people are just as legitimate in people's minds and that we want to be part of this great experiment here in America."

GALSTON: I didn't mean to throw you a curveball, but I actually thought it was a fastball in your wheelhouse. But it is it is a tough question for this country: Have we kept faith with the people to whom, you know, we have incurred a debt? And it will be, I think, a stain on our national honor if we can't get the job done. Kelly, I'm, I'm going to ask you to speculate a little bit in response to something that Jeremy reminded us of in the previous panel. You know, take a look at military recruitment. It may well be that some cultural factors are helping to diminish the attractiveness of military service at this particular point in time. But it's also the case that only one in five young Americans is even eligible to be considered for recruitment. So, you might say 80% of the problem has nothing to do with culture or motivation, but everything to do with basic eligibility. Why is this? Well, it's not a state secret that we have an obesity epidemic in this country. We have a drug epidemic of this country. We have a group of young people, some of whom are disproportionately unlikely to finish high school. We have a K-12 educational system that seems not to be equipping a lot of people even to get across the threshold on the AFQT, you know, the Armed Forces Qualification Test. What can publications like War Horse do to cover this issue of basic qualifications, to throw a spotlight on this problem? Maybe you're already doing it. Maybe you aren't. But how are people like you handling this very fundamental issue of military readiness in the United States today?

KENNEDY: Probably from both sides. So we did a story recently-- I'm thinking back to 2007, when we were writing stories about military health, and how, in every war, there are these innovations that come out that help the civilian populations as well. And one of the things that I remember hoping for then was that mental health would become better spoken about in this country. And I think that one of our problems, one of our recruiting problems, actually came out of this. You know, we're more willing to talk about depression, and even PTS, and kids, and a whole plethora of of health problems, mental health problems. And then, we don't recruit those kids if they are taking any kind of antidepressants. So, I think we have to get a handle on what mental health means in this country, whether, you know, we were-- on the other side of the coin, are you

more likely to have mental health issues when you're in the military if you had them when you were a kid? So at the same time that we're recognizing a problem and addressing it, it's affecting our country's security.

We're also seeing that with autistic people. There's been some studies that show that autistic people are really good at looking for patterns — some autistic people are really good at looking for patterns — aren't as likely to get bored by looking for those patterns as some other people. So they can be helpful for our country but also are not eligible for service in a lot of cases. So I think educating people about those issues can help.

On the other side, we've got a big series coming out about women in the military and how since 9/11, at least 100 women have died in non-combat combat, unnatural deaths, including suicide. And some of the experts are calling it murder by suicide because we're seeing that the rates of women who kill themselves after being sexually assaulted or sexually harassed are particularly high. So, I'm sure that after that series comes out, there will be families who are talking about, "Do you really want to do this?" And our goal is to say to the military, "You've been talking about change since Tailhook for forty years. Fix this. You know, you can teach a guy to shoot a gun, you can teach a guy to kill people. Fix this. Teach them to keep their hands to themselves, you know." So, I think that there are problems that we built ourselves within the military. I think there are problems that are maybe solutions in the in the country that we could be dealing with. As far as the obesity, obesity problem, in World War II, we gave people good sandwiches and made sure they had good school meals. Maybe we go back to those kinds of solutions. And there are groups that are looking at that. There's, there's definitely ways to get at this. But yeah, it goes to education. If we're not thinking about those issues, we're not going to address them.

GALSTON: Thanks so much. Before I turn to questions in about 30 seconds, let me just plant a seed. I think it would be fantastic if veterans were to found an organization with a goal, and that is, over the next decade, to double the percentage of 18-year-olds who are eligible to be considered for military service. Right now it's 20%; what about 40% in ten years. Just a thought. If anybody, if anybody in the audience physically or participating online, wants to take up the thought, let's talk. Okay, it's your turn. And yes, I see a gentleman in the back. Please, please introduce yourself. And if, if you've seen military service, I think that would be of interest.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Thanks, Everyone. It was such a great conversation. Isaac Riddle — I'm a Marine veteran, so Semper Fi, and I'm also a volunteer with Veterans for All Voters. I have been really impacted by Robert Putnam's now old book, "Bowling Alone," and I am really thinking about the loss of civic third spaces and cards on the table. I don't think that online analogs solved that problem. And so I would just

like to hear how the panel thinks about this loss of these cross-cutting civic third spaces where we can go and not only interact with each other but learn about organizations that we might not bump into otherwise.

CONNOR: Well, thanks, Isaac. And Isaac's an extraordinary leader, you should all get to know him. He's doing phenomenal things. I think it's a big problem. I think I actually bowled with Robert Putnam a few weeks ago — or no, this is months ago, a few months ago — but at South by Southwest. And that was, like, pretty next level. Yeah. And it was an old space in Austin that had been converted bowling alley that had once been a sort of a community center that sort of personified what we're missing. I'd say a few things. Number one, hating the same people is not the same as loving the same things. And people are often misled into false communities bound by shared hatred. And it's a really spiritually devoid sense of belonging. And we see that play out in lots of places, including politically, right? So there's false sense of like, "I've got a home because we all hate the same thing." These people don't have your back. You just-- that's the lowest form of community, is hating the same things. And so, how do we create that? I don't know. But, but what happens is a vacuum emerges, and then it gets weaponized, and we do have to figure it out.

Part of what we're dealing with is is this loss of civic fabric — you know, the veteran-serving statistics. Part of what was also true post-World War II was, 49% of veterans started businesses. They were living in economically diverse communities. You know, there was a low-income family in town and a-- and the banker in town. And those folks went to the same church on Sunday and probably joined the same VFW hall. The VFW Hall is the American Legions. Those were the original business incubators. It was all delivered through currency. Part of why Israel has such a high participation rate in the entrepreneurship economy is because they have required participation in the military. So, there's so much benefit to a connected culture. And that's, you know, like if you said, "How do you advance the entrepreneurial economy in the United States?" I'd say mandatory service of some form. "How do we reduce political extremism?" Some form of third space belonging, which we have. The touchstone of having been in the military to say, "No, I know that I can get in a room with people that think differently and it's okay." And I realize how often we can take that for granted.

For so many people, their only perspective is what they see on, you know, talk radio or cable news. So, we have to get back to it. I think young people are smart. They're smart and skeptical, and I think in some healthy ways, around social media and this kind of like false-- I think a lot of people went through the 2016 cycle, like expressing outrage on social media, and maybe with some hangover effect that like that doesn't really do anything. And what's a better solution? So, I don't know. I think it's a real issue. We don't talk about it enough. Schools have a role to play. I think national service in some form probably has a role to play. Revitalizing play space senses of belonging has a real role to play. And I think, you know, elevating the

conversation about responsibility of citizenship. The best thing about working with the military community is — and you know this from, you know, Veterans for All Voters — it's like, we get on our calls and like, "Here's what I need you to go do," you know. And then people tell me, "Here's what I need you to go do." And it's like this powerful place of uplift by obligation, and we need more of that. We're just in sort of a-- to shift this sort of selfishness narrative of like, "It's all about what I need." It's like now. So, we have work to do there, but I'm glad you flagged because I think it's a big part of what's wrong.

COOPER: I have another thought. And you touched a wonderful nerve because Robert Putnam is one of the people that underpins so much of what I do. And it's cool that we're in an audience that everyone knows that book, "Bowling Alone," from 2000, that says, "Hey, these organizations provide social capital." That's, you know, his term. Whether it's a church group, whether it's a youth organization, whether it's, you know, the Freemasons and Toastmasters, and Elks and Moose and Eagles, and everything else like that. There's a new documentary out called "Join or Die." I can't recommend it enough. Robert Putnam is the main character in this, but his point being is, join one organization, a church group, whatever, and the facts show that you will live longer. Now, it is not just veterans, but this conversation is about veterans that are, you know, building social capital. I'm going to be a little impolitic here, and I think, to, to several other veteran organizations, they need to get busy. The underpinning civic kind of work, I think, was done two generations ago by Girl State and Boys State. Anybody participate in that? Like, like the best students got selected to go to Girl State or Boys State. That's an American Legion program. American Legion, you need to get busy and energize that and create some kind of logarithmic, logarithmic growth for that kind of organization. I think, also-- and my last point here is, when was the last time someone got a casserole delivered to their house? Yeah. Okay, military family, good. A lot of times it was the good-hearted busybody at your church, right? And I mean that in the most endearing way. That is the social capital that we need to find as well, because whether it is polling stations and having faith in our electoral system, or taking a casserole to someone's house that's a new neighbor or someone that has experienced a loss, that is the social fabric that Robert Putnam is talking about. And so, I think, you know, to everyone out there in the audience, you don't have to change the entire country. Tend to the garden where you live.

KENNEDY: We're completely analog, but we see veterans as our communities, so we're arguing that all the time. You know, funders fund nonprofit newsrooms that are reaching out to small-town communities, which they should be, we don't have that base exactly. So we're trying to argue that veterans in our community, and we're struggling with this conversation. How do we, how do we make that less analog? How do we how do we bring people in to talk? How do we make it more of a community?

GALSTON: Just a personal comment. Bob Putnam is a friend of mine. We're both getting along in years, but he's a little bit ahead of me. And I once asked him, "Well, you know, how are you coping with getting old?" And he looked at me and smiled and said, "Bill, I have the definition of old. Old means older than me." Well, what a Putnam-ish answer. We have time for at least one more question. Yes, sir.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: John Brown and Marine Corp veteran. Thank you very much. John Brown, Marine Corps veteran, graduate of Bunker Labs, and a member of the We the Veterans slack channel. Have we seen evidence that veterans running for office or taking a leadership role has led to healthier politics? Or do they just get caught up in the vortex that Todd was talking about, the duopoly? Thank you.

CONNOR: I have a lot of opinions about this. I think people can do the right thing in spite of the incident for a little bit. And then one of two things happens. They lose their election. And we saw some very courageous people on both sides do the right thing, which didn't look like pure party loyalty, and lose their elections, or they can form. So you wonder like, "Wow, that person used to be so great. Why did they become such as sort of a talking head for their like most partisan interests?" I just go back to, it's just really about the incentives. So, I want to spend a little bit of time helping better people win in a bad system. I want to spend a lot of time changing the incentive structures of a bad system. So that's my theory. I was very inspired by Senator Dan Sullivan of Alaska on the Senate floor last week, Republican, to his colleague Tommy Tuberville, saying, "Enough is enough. We've got to shut this down." And you got to wonder, he goes back to Alaska, where, in his next reelection, he's going to be appealing to the majority of Alaska voters, the majority of whom are registered independents.

So the verb that lingers all throughout Congress is, "I don't want to be primaried." No one's losing about winning their general. Eighty-six percent of districts aren't competitive in the general. They're worried about losing the primary, and that would prevent them from a self-interested standpoint in saying, if you're a Republican, Tommy Tuberville, shut it down. But not Dan Sullivan. So the question for me is, how do you get more just in that one example? And we could pick examples from the left as well. Afghan withdrawal, lots of things. You know, the border crisis. We need stronger leadership from Democrats on those two issues to say, you know, "This is not done right," right? But look to who is saying those things and look to how their elections are served by that. And I'm deeply inspired and ringing the bell to say we need more of that. If you want more of that, then get more election systems like Alaska's got and you'll see more behavior that speaks to that.

COOPER: I think the jury's still out on your question, and so I think there needs to be a study on this. We're all kind of waiting for Godot a little bit. And what I would say where we're still waiting for the Joseph Walsh moment. Joseph Walsh was the Army general counsel in 1953 who confronted Senator Joseph

McCarthy when one of his subordinates was being attacked and said at long last, "Have you no sense of decency, sir?" Everyone remembers that. The challenge we have is, what I would say is, is moral courage. That's what we're expecting from these military veterans, right? The Hugh Thompsons out there. Hugh Thompson, you know, from the Mỹ Lai Massacre, that, you know, pointed his helicopter gunship at his own troops to prevent the massacre of civilians. Where is that? Now, I think we look at examples like Adam Kinzinger and Liz Cheney — from the state where I grew up— and more importantly, the willingness to stand apart from the group at personal risk for what is right. There's a wonderful long-form piece that's a precursor to a biography of Mitt Romney that's coming out. And Senator Romney, who is leaving the Senate, notes that he was confronted by at least a dozen of his fellow senators of the same party who said, "Oh, I just wish I could have the courage like you. I wish I had constituents like you do." And he finally found a response to that, which is., "There are worse things than losing an election, trust me."

KENNEDY: I think, I think we need to look at some of the issues that are causing such extreme partisanship within the military and without. We've definitely redistricted ourselves into a whole-- you know, if your extremist candidates are the ones that do well in particular districts, how do you get out of that without fixing the district? I look at who the election deniers were in the last elections, and they tended to be veterans. We did a story about that. So we-- it's important to provide a news source where people feel like they can trust that it's, it's aimed at them, that it addresses their issues. I feel like a lot of the issues that we're seeing right now are people who feel like they don't have that sense of community. Like you were talking about before, veterans come out, the transition is difficult. How do you keep them in the community? How do you make them feel strong and like themselves, and like they can serve without, without going to a place that's maybe dark or too far in one direction or another?

GALSTON: Well, at some risk, I'm going to try to squeeze in one more question. If there's one burning question left... sure.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Hello. Good morning. My name is Ralph Perpignan. We lost another veteran yesterday, Saturday, for cancer during the burn pits. So this is for him, Jimmy Milock. The answers are civic and fact-checking. If we know the civic laws, we do the fact checks. And how do we get these? How do we get us to still watch what the media plays out, to fact-check what they're saying? Because both sides, both sides, right or left, we do want the same thing. If I'm in Kentucky talking to some old veterans, we have the same issues, the same concerns. But the media plays a dividing part. So how do we force the media to be more accountable and how we hold ourselves accountable to fact-check what they're saying and how they are saying it?

GALSTON: Thirty seconds for each one of you.

KENNEDY: It's hard. It's really hard. You know, there was a story in the Post this morning about how they just got a new publisher because they're losing money, because it's no longer Trump years, and they don't have that catalyst to bring people into the headlines. I think some of the answer is in the reader. What are you reading? Are you being drawn to that, that headline? Well, if you keep reading those headlines, and that's where the news organizations make money, then that's where they're going to play. Maybe we need more nonprofits?

COOPER: I'll be brief here. I think one of the things that we should think about is this demonization of the media that everyone likes to do. I have such respect for Kelly's doing, and for journalism as a profession. Remember, 50 years ago, the most trusted man in America was Walter Cronkite. And suddenly, today, we can't trust anyone in the media now. It is one of the most important and honorable professions, that of a journalist.

KENNEDY: What he said.

CONNOR: I donate to The War Horse, and I support their journalism. If you're not paying for it, don't trust it. That's kind of my view, because someone's paying for it. So, it's either you or someone who wants you to think something. So, I think, you know, reaffirming that, I'll go — since Bill had a business idea, I've got one for someone, which is BNN, the next major news network, Boring National News. It's a real issue if you're in — I say like, what's the airport test? What do we put on the waiting rooms in the V.A. hospitals? It's a real issue. And you can't really put on CNN or Fox News. And so the question becomes, what do you put on? So I think there's a market opportunity there. C-SPAN? I mean, absolutely. You know, so I think there's a market opportunity there. But the last thing I do want to say is — because this is about how I think about how we talk about the American political problem in a lot of ways — there's a lot of tentacles and Scott's doing amazing work, and the War Horse, and what we're trying to do, and everyone in this room. And I think, at some level, it's like I feel like we're lecturing the American people on healthy eating, but they live in a food desert. I'm like, step one, give them a grocery store with more choices, and they will begin to do things that surprise us. They're looking for different ways. We don't have elected officials that represent them. It's 86% representing 8%, so we don't have representation. We don't necessarily have this media environment. Entrepreneurs are part of the solution. Let's put some new news channels out there. Let's support things like the War Horse. Let's get involved in civic organizations that we agree with. And let's take it back. Well, we can. Historically, we always have. But it's our time now.

GALSTON: In conclusion, a few years ago, an old friend of mine, a journalist by the name of Joe Klein, published a book called "Charlie Mike." I didn't know what that phrase meant, but I was instructed and taught that meant continue the mission. And those, I think, are two resonant words right now. You know,

people who've been educated by life experience in the military to think about a mission and to think about bringing people together from all sorts of backgrounds with all sorts of opinions to execute that mission together. That's a critical skill. And translating the idea of continuing the mission into civilian terms at this point in American history, I think, is one of the most important missions that anyone could undertake. Thanks to our wonderful panels for exemplifying 'continuing the mission.'