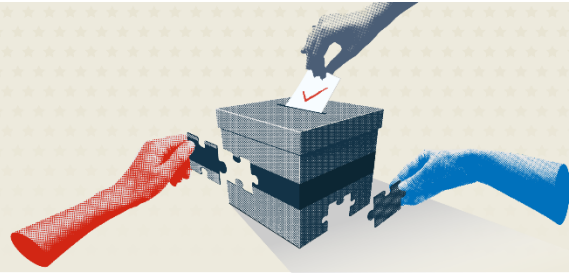


DEMOCRACY IN QUESTION

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The Brookings Institution

***Democracy in Question* podcast**

“What does it mean to be an American?”

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Episode Summary:

Since the founding of the United States in 1776, the definition of who gets to participate in politics and in civic life has been contested. What does it mean to be an American? Are some Americans more “American” than others? In this episode, host Katie Dunn Tenpas explores what we mean when we talk about being an “American” with Rashawn Ray, a senior fellow in Governance Studies and a professor of sociology at the University of Maryland, and Gabriel Sanchez, also a Brookings senior fellow and a professor of political science at the University of New Mexico.

[music]

TENPAS: Hi, I'm Katie Dunn Tenpas, a visiting fellow in governance studies at the Brookings Institution and director of the Katzman Initiative on Improving Interbranch Relations and Government. And this is *Democracy in Question*, a podcast about contemporary American politics and the future of democracy. In each episode, I'm asking my guests a different question about democracy so that we can better understand the broader contours of our democratic system. You probably noticed that there's a lot happening in U.S. politics at the moment, including a highly contested presidential race. But in this podcast, I'm trying to get at the deeper questions of how democracy in this country and abroad works or is supposed to work.

On today's episode, the question is, what does it mean to be an American? Since the founding of the United States in 1776, the definition of who gets to participate in politics and in civic life has been contested. Voting has been restricted in different ways throughout our history and was recently guaranteed for all Americans after the passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

But how we define who is American goes beyond who can legally vote. To be American is to share a set of shared values and ideals. Voting, or the exercise of civic duty, is just one of those shared values. Justice, equality, freedom are others. As new immigrants have arrived in this country, some leading voices have sought to define in narrow terms who "real Americans" are, a question that we continue to grapple with.

So, what does it mean to be an American? In this episode, I'm talking to two of my expert colleagues whose research is deeply rooted in issues of identity, race, and electoral politics.

First, I'll be joined by Rashawn Ray, a senior fellow in Governance Studies and also a professor of sociology and the founding executive director of the Lab for Applied Social Science Research at the University of Maryland. Rashawn is also a vice president and executive director of the Equity Initiative at the American Institutes for Research. He testifies to Congress frequently on topics such as racial equality, policing and criminal justice reform, and family policy.

And then I'll talk with Gabriel Sanchez, also a senior fellow in Governance Studies at Brookings and a professor of political science and founding Robert Wood Johnson Foundation Endowed Chair in Health Policy at the University of New Mexico, where he also holds other positions.

Rashawn, welcome to *Democracy in Question*.

RAY: Thank you so much for having me.

TENPAS: Well, I'd really like to just kick it off by having you tell us, you know, what does it mean—and answer the question sort of as broadly as you can, and then we can get more specific—but what does it mean to be an American? And how has American identity changed over time?

[3:28]

RAY: Well, look, I think what it means to be American is the perception is really about life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. It's the ability to bring one up from their own bootstraps, to have the ability to maximize the American Dream, and firmly participate in the political process and civic process, raise their family, and go throughout their life relatively unencumbered.

Now, I think that is in theory. When we actually look at people's everyday realities it doesn't exactly work out that way, especially once we start breaking down people's identities when it comes to their social location and experience.

TENPAS: And there's clearly been major demographic shifts over the course of American history. Can you talk about these shifts and how they play into American identity?

[4:16]

RAY: Yeah, most definitely. Obviously, people have to recognize that when our country was founded, there was a large percentage of Americans—Black, women, otherwise—who could not participate in the political process. One thing that supposedly makes America great is thinking about participating in the democratic process. And unfortunately, there are some people who want to roll that back and actually have it go back to a time when people couldn't really participate in that.

And for a lot of people, things have not been great for a long time. And so, when we think about these shifts over time we have to start there, because we have never fully done anything to repair, any sort of recourse, or any sort of reparations, particularly for enslaved Black people who dealt with that exclusion at that particular time.

I think, of course, another big shift as we go into the 1900s was there was a large wave of European immigrants that came to the U.S. that completely shifted the demographic landscape. As we moved well into the 20th century, we saw what happened in World War II. Oftentimes, we focus on what happened in Nazi Germany. But right here in the U.S., there were Japanese Americans who were interned, and it took them 40, 50 years before they got any sort of proper recourse or reparations specifically for that from the federal government.

We then had, of course, changes in how we think about bringing over migrants or immigrants, say from Africa or Asia or South America. And now we're at a place where the United States is quite diverse racially. And even though people try to lump Latinos together or Black people together, they are quite diverse, not only across the diaspora but throughout the world.

TENPAS: So, Rashawn, do you think we could switch gears a little bit and you can talk a little bit about how African Americans have defined or their identity as Americans has changed over time?

[6:07]

RAY: Yeah, sure. I think it's two things that come to mind. First is a quote by the great James Baldwin who said, "I love America more than any other country in the world. And exactly for this reason, I insist on the right to criticize her perpetually." When we think about that, part of what James Baldwin is referring to and bringing up is not only Frederick Douglass' "What to the slave is the 4th of July?" when he of course at the time he delivered this in the mid-1850s, I think it was around 1852, was saying that even though I'm free, to a whole bunch of other Black people they are not free. And while you all are sitting up here celebrating July 4th, there is a juxtaposition with my own identity.

And I think for Black Americans that happens particularly on holidays where there's a struggle, where what I just mentioned about what it means to be American is oftentimes precarious and even excluded for Black Americans in ways that it's not for others.

And I think that that's something that people don't pay enough attention to when we start looking at what it means to be American and the different ways that people's Americanness and their ability to take advantage of what I just said doesn't exactly play out, particularly for Black Americans.

TENPAS: Really interesting. And you also spoke a bit about the variation between what elite Black Americans think about compared to rank-and-file voters, Black American voters. Can you talk a little bit about that?

[7:37]

RAY: Yeah. Well, you know, for most Black people, we have always understood our Americanness through surviving from racism rather than from positive aspects of just being an American. I mean, even personally, I remember the first time in my life that I was referred to just as an American without any of the qualifiers attached was when I lived in Germany, ironically. I taught at the University of Mannheim in Germany when I was in graduate school, lived there for over six months. And that was the first time people just said, oh, you're an American! Instead of, oh, you're Black, or you're African American, or some sort of other qualifier.

And I think that that is the thing. Black people have always had to push in advance to try to showcase our Americanness. And so, when we start talking across the social class gradient, well we have to bring in a few other aspects. One in particular are the ways that Black people try to showcase their Americanness. The military is one big one. And the military for Black people and for others has always been a gateway in many ways to the middle class. And it was set up that way.

I mean, if we go back at the end of World War II and we have the New Deal coming from Roosevelt, the New Deal single-handedly pushed more federal money for the G.I. Bill and Social Security almost than any other pieces of legislation to date. And Black people were excluded from those. So, even though Black Americans were going to the military at higher rates than white people—and I need to repeat that because people just don't recognize that, that on average Black people are more likely to enroll in the military, they are more likely to come from military households.

But if we look at who's showcased as representing the military, it doesn't always play out that way. And that's problematic for military families like myself and others, who, for me, my grandfather served 21 years in the military—Purple Heart, Bronze Star, served in two wars. And yet he still, when he was at Fort Leonard Wood in Missouri, he was over a funeral detail and him and his team walked into a restaurant, and he wasn't able to be served. And it was a young white private who had to say, well, look, if you're not going to let my sergeant eat, then we're going to leave. He's not going to go out back.

And you can think about that in the military what that means. And so, whenever my grandfather would tell me stories about the military, it would end up with stories like that, where there should be great things about how he served our country in these different wars and how he has presidential commendations. But instead, in his head, it was when his roughly 18-, 19-year-old private had to stand up from him in a restaurant because he was Black. And him having on that uniform with those letters meant nothing.

But part of that, even with that exclusion from New Deal policies, we know that Black people have been able to use the military for upward mobility to get government positions. This is why people talking about kind of doing sweeps through the federal government is so problematic, because roughly 20 percent of government positions are held by African Americans. And so, if all of a sudden you're going to purge the federal government, what does that mean about purging Black people who are in certain occupations?

[10:47]

And accordingly, though, we see that shift from more affluent Black people to less affluent Black people, and it's really what W.E.B. Du Bois called "the talented tenth," kind of the top 10 percent of individuals who experience life in a very different way. And in America, we see that where it is really the have and the have nots, just not more generally, but even in the Black, even in the Black community where it used to be Black people, regardless of their social class background, lived in similar neighborhoods.

That is not the case now. And we're starting to see really a brain drain being taken away from Black communities where people who are more affluent, who are highly educated, can't always do the work that they want to do in those communities where they're from. And it starts to lead to very different experiences and perceptions of what it being, of what it means to be American, and even what it means to potentially be conservative, liberal, Republican, Democrat, and independent.

TENPAS: That's fascinating and troubling. What about elites in terms of, like, political elites. Versus Can you talk about that as well?

RAY: Yeah. You know, I think one big disconnect that is happening today in America—and part of this is historical, right?—if we go back nearly 100 years ago, more so 80, one big thing that people always point out to is that Doctor Martin Luther King Junior's father was Republican. And what people don't realize is that was still on the back end of the Lincoln's party. Right? And nowadays, that is not the case. I mean, people don't realize kind of the Southern Strategy and the switch in the South

where a lot of Southern Republicans, or a lot of Southern Democrats I should say, at that time became Republican, and we started to have a switch in the parties.

And thinking through that is nowadays we're seeing another metamorphosis. And part of what's happening is that political elites, who are mostly liberal and Democrat, but not all, have a disconnect with the rest of these individuals who are not part of the "talented tenth," particularly for Black Americans. They might be interacting with this 10 percent, but the other 90 percent or 50, 60, 70 percent who are struggling, they are disassociated from, they are not in touch with them. And accordingly, they are missing key points about how to connect with them.

And so, if you have, for example, a young Black man who might be working in a working class job, say, might be a sanitation worker, might even work for the Post Office—which has always been a job that Black people have held high but might not exist in ten years—and might, say, be raising his daughter alone, and you're talking to him about what it means to have opportunity in this country. They aren't necessarily seeing that. And I think that that becomes highly problematic.

TENPAS: And and is it American, quote unquote, to participate in our democratic process? What does your research tell you on that front?

[13:43]

RAY: Yeah, most definitely. Look, I mean, it could be argued that voting is single handedly one of the best indicators of what it means to be American, and in addition to joining the military, which I already said Black people do at a higher rate. And when it comes to voting, there's this narrative out there—and I've written about this extensively—that some kind of way Black people don't vote, and it flies in the face of empirical research. What I found is that Black people vote on par or higher than their percentage of the population across the United States. And in particular states, especially in the South and the Midwest and a few other states that they single-handedly help to drive turnout for Democrats. And in two of the recent elections, Black Americans actually voted at a higher rate than white Americans. Normally actually vote at a higher rate than Latinos and Asian Americans, but on par oftentimes with white Americans.

But there is some kind of way this narrative out there that exists for that, which is so troubling because Black people fought so hard to have the right to vote. And see, this is a good example of how what it means to be American has fissures. For Black Americans, or for just most Americans, going to go vote should be how you express your Americanness, it's how you participate in democracy. But when Black people go vote, it becomes more about thinking about a collective identity or responsibility to buy into that collective identity in terms of Black people having to vote as a collective instead of their own individuality.

But look, on average, I've looked at states that, say, Biden won, that Obama won, when we look at the past Democratic presidents, and they would not have won those states if Black people had not been turning out in droves, oftentimes voting higher than their percentage of the state population.

TENPAS: Rashawn, in light of things that have happened in the 2020 election, throughout the Trump administration, subsequently, I like to ask my guests how nervous they are about the future of American democracy and to think broadly about our democratic roots and where we're headed. So, on a scale of 1 to 10, where do you stand on that scale in terms of your level of nervousness?

[15:58]

RAY: In terms of my level of nervousness, I would say a 7. I think that is pretty high. Probably seven point something something, maybe not quite 8.

But I think it's because I lived in Germany and taught at the University of Mannheim for a period of time and studied the Holocaust, studied what happened in Germany. And I think a lot of people simply don't see it or understand it because of the past 50 years or so we've lived in a very different, more stable America. I mean, it's it's never been perfect, but so much better than it was in the past, particularly when we think about everyone having the ability to pursue life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

At the same time, however, I do think that there is enthusiasm about the Democratic ticket and the Democratic Party in terms of feeling that there are people who represent them across different areas, whether that be from the coast, from the Midwest, and feeling as though that their values are aligned to just give people the ability to have equitable opportunities.

TENPAS: Yeah, so a seven that's pretty high.

[17:07]

RAY: Yeah. I mean, look, again, you know, after living in Germany, spending a lot of time in Europe and other parts of the world, it's just my perspective. We are teetering on it. And I think a lot of people are realizing the extent to which we are teetering on potentially ending the democratic experiment as we know it. American democracy is as we've known it over the past 40 to 50 years may not be the same thing that we experience over the next 50 years. I mean, when you have presidential candidates making statements that people might not have to vote again or potentially lauding particular type of leaders around the world, I mean, we have to really take people to face value. For me, I really embrace what Maya Angelou says, which is when people show you who they are, believe them the first time. And I tend to do that, and it tends to work out pretty well.

I mean, if we go with that ideal type that I mentioned earlier—working class individual who's trying to just raise his family by himself—he's looking at the language. And he's saying, I don't know what you're talking about, but I do know what this person is saying. And if this person is all about economics and helping me to build wealth, then I'm listening to that.

And partly it's because a lot of Black Americans realize that we cannot out class racists. And in that regard, they look at Democrats saying, you keep saying you're going to solve this stuff. You said that you were going to address public safety. You said that you were going to pass the George Floyd Justice and Policing Act. You did not. You said you were going to engage in student loan forgiveness. And even

though that's happened for some people, I don't know a whole lot of people. And you said that that was going to benefit me. You said that we were going to get more investments in our local communities. And even though that's happening, people don't feel that. What people are feeling is they go to the grocery store, and they buy the same stuff that they did two years ago—because people like me, you like the same cereal and the same type of eggs and the same type of milk—and what you realize you're like, holy crap, what am I spending here? And my my jobs is not keeping track, how much I'm paid is not keeping track. But this other person is saying they're going to do that.

And part of it as well, the Republican National Convention, for people who watched that, there was more diversity on that stage than I think it's ever been at the RNC before. And people are paying attention to that. And even if people don't fully agree with what's being said, they are saying, wow, at least we are represented on the stage in a way that we haven't been before and I feel like these individuals could represent me instead of some of the people that Democrats put up there that they're like, they kind of lost me a little bit in who they think is representing me.

TENPAS: That's really interesting. And I'm curious and anxious to see how things pan out ultimately in November.

You know, in America I think also people really value their freedom of expression. And so, when you think about what it means to be an American, how does January 6th fit into that equation? And in addition to that recent Supreme Court rulings that might affect those cases?

[20:07]

RAY: It's going to be interesting seeing how history paints this. But from where I sit with the research that I do, January 6th was highly problematic. This wasn't just people expressing their First Amendment right. This was people breaking laws, hurting people, and killing people, and trying to take over a country where they feel like, as Arlie Hochschild would say, who wrote a book called *Strangers in Their Own Land*, where it's overwhelmingly white men from rural America—but not always; a lot of people on corporate America, Wall Street—who feel that their country is being taken from them, and they feel that the America that their forefathers came over to found that it is up to them to reclaim it and establish it.

The problem with that perspective means who does that leave out? And when we look at January 6th, we see that. There was an Auschwitz shirt, there was a noose hanging, there was a lot of racist statements made during that time. And people saw that. And particularly for Black Americans, they see that and say, wow, they are trying to make sure that not only that we can't vote, not only that we can't get the jobs that we deserve and that we're qualified for, but that we potentially don't exist.

And likewise, I think that the extension from January 6th is the role that Trump played not only in that but also in Black Lives Matter protests and calling out the National Guard for protests that were overwhelmingly peaceful. And it doesn't mean that there haven't been some Black Lives Matter protests that have been violent and destructive. But one thing we know from research is that on average, over 90

percent of Black Lives Matter protests were nonviolent, say, relative to protests by the Proud Boys or far right extremist groups.

So, we see these differences, and then we see the responses of law enforcement, the military, and the federal government to be different. And I think this is what people are talking about, that when Black people truly express their true Americanness, or at least try to, that there are consequences for doing so. That everyone knows that Donald Trump's behavior, that if he was Barack Obama, he would not be allowed to do it. And as long as there's a demarcation between those two things, Black people and other people from marginalized backgrounds will never truly be able to take advantage of all of the possibilities in life, liberty, and pursuit of happiness that American democracy supposedly offers. And this is why we are still in an experiment and far from this being a place that is equal for everyone.

TENPAS: Well, Rashawn, I really appreciate all your thoughtful and research-based responses. And it was a fascinating conversation. I really appreciate your time too. I know that you're really busy and, thank you for being part of this new podcast.

[music]

RAY: Thank you so much for having me.

[23:00]

TENPAS: And now Gabe Sanchez, who in addition to his academic roles at the University of New Mexico, is also a vice president of research at BSP Research, a leading survey firm focused on the Latino electorate. Gabe, welcome to *Democracy in Question*.

SANCHEZ: Thank you very much for having me. I'm very much looking forward to the conversation.

TENPAS: Yes, me too. And as everybody knows who sort of follows American history and American politics, there clearly have been significant demographic shifts in our population. So, what does it mean to be an American and how has American identity changed over time?

[23:51]

SANCHEZ: Yeah, great question. And I'm just going to dive right into this because I think it's an important conversation to have, especially as I'll start to connect our underlying values to demographic changes.

But in the United States, I would say that our political culture is largely the way we define who is, quote unquote, an American. In short, acceptance to the main values that have defined our political culture, or our value system politically and socially has been the way we have defined ourselves as a nation and really provided the foundation for our overall political identity.

Some of these values include, and this is stuff that academic researchers like myself track over time—some of these will be very familiar to our audience—liberalism, which is essentially that classic doctrine of in the United States we have individual

freedom. Right? But that's contrasted with individual responsibility or civic republicanism, which is often how we get to the notion that it suggests that we need to be involved in our civic affairs, including voting in order to call ourselves a true American.

We also have a value of equality of opportunity and Protestant work ethic. This notion that you pick yourselves up by your bootstraps ideology, so to speak, in the United States.

And finally, one that's got a little bit of an asterisk to it, because there's been some debate about it over time, is whether or not a commitment to religious faith fits into our definition of what it is to be an American and our overall political culture, or our value system.

But in essence, public opinion data has consistently found over time that the overwhelming majority of Americans continue to support these underlying values and will agree that this is part of what defines being an American and what goes into our overall American political identity.

A final thing I'll say on this question is that it's key for us to understand that unlike most countries in the world who really define their nationality based on a connection to the land or that geography in which we're talking about, because a lot of folks have multi-generational connections to that land, in essence other than Native Americans we're a nation of immigrants. So, it's really our political values which has helped define who is an American in this country, which is somewhat unique from other places in the world that, again, have a regional connection to land.

TENPAS: Yeah, that's fascinating. And and when you talked about the various features of being American, is it American to participate in our democratic process?

[26:12]

SANCHEZ: You know, that's a really important question, you know, that I think gets at somewhat of the contrast in some of these underlying values. So, at the end of the day, right? as I noted, the underlying political values sometimes clash with each other. In this case, right? civic republicanism, which suggests it's our responsibility to be involved in solving our collective social problems, can contrast with our individual level freedoms, which at the end of the day we often hear even the U.S. Census asks people who say they did not vote, why did you not vote? One of the most common things that's often noted is, right? it's my individual freedom as an American to express myself by not voting or not participating in the political process.

And the reason why this is so important is if you go all the way back to folks like Alexis de Tocqueville, right? when they talk about what is unique about U.S. society, folks like him often note that what has made our U.S. system of democracy work is this kind of continued support for civic engagement. Many scholars, for example, have noted that it's our willingness to work together to solve collective problems that has made our democracy work over time. Therefore, if we see slippage in that value and a movement towards what is often referred to as "rugged individualism" that can clash with this notion of having a civic responsibility, that can be a challenge or a problem for democracy.

TENPAS: And you've spent a lot of your scholarly life focusing on the Latino electorate and also the Native Americans. So, can you talk about from their perspective this idea of what it means to be an American and how it affects those communities?

[27:46]

SANCHEZ: Yeah, absolutely. And I'll start with thinking a little bit about how changing demographics might impact not just how Latinos or Native Americans address this notion of what is being an American, but how the wider population might start to think differently about defining our political culture and how that situates with this notion of who is a quote unquote, "real American."

So, I'll say that although the values that define our political identity have remained pretty constant over time, there has been a pretty fierce debate about whether our political culture and underlying political values have been negatively impacted by the changing demographics we have all experienced here in the United States.

And just to give folks some context, right? some numbers, to give you some indication of why underlying demographics are so important to understand, according to the most recent Census data, nearly every county in the United States has become more diverse over the past decade. Every single county across the country with more than a third of the U.S. population now living in a county where people of color are now the majority.

And this isn't just occurring in urban areas, which is often how you think about these things. I think most people realize, okay, in big cities we know it's more diverse. But even in rural counties across the United States we're seeing increased diversity.

And unfortunately, because there's this perception that this is driven by immigrants and the browning of America, it is often not exactly external migration anymore that's driving those patterns, but I think most political pundits, most everyday Americans think about changing diversity as being driven by immigrants. And unfortunately, what this leads to is this perception that immigrants might be the culprit if we think that there's been a weakening of our political culture, or we think that somehow our political culture is changing because the nation is becoming more diverse.

So, what's really fascinating to me is that when you actually look at surveys and you track support for this underlying political value system, it's often immigrants who are more likely to buy into these underlying values than Americans like myself who were actually born here in this country. So, for example, if you look at support for the Protestant work ethic, it's actually immigrants who actually say things that are more in line with that underlying ideology than those of us that were born in the United States.

TENPAS: That's fascinating. Are there any other examples where there were surprising sort of attachment to traditional American ideals that are no longer as popular but, for instance, pulling yourself by your up by your own bootstraps and that kind of Protestant work ethic. Anything else?

[30:17]

SANCHEZ: Yeah. I mean, I think that underlying notion of why you see a lot of what we often refer to as somewhat of a conservative or more of a Republican bent to our political values, like pick yourself up from your bootstraps, or not relying on the federal government, etcetera, it's often immigrants who are much more likely to agree with some of those statements.

And what's interesting to me is that's what makes immigration policy so complex, particularly for Republicans. Because on one side of that issue, right? there's this underlying notion of fear, of of diversity, and a perception that immigrants are bad for the economy or bad for the country. But on the flip side, a lot of Republicans recognize that these immigrants are much more likely to buy into that underlying value system and obviously are vital for the economy, particularly for small businesses who rely on that labor for their overall economic wellbeing.

TENPAS: And it's also striking to me that the sheer demographic data that shows that in every county across the United States, it's become more diverse ethnically. This notion that you you want to oppose something, I mean, it's already here. Like, the changing face of America. Like, the train has left the station. But do you still think that there's a subset of the American electorate that wants to turn the clocks back, so to speak?

[31:35]

SANCHEZ: Well, I think there definitely is. And you think about even some of the contemporary political language, things like let's "Make America Great Again." Right? On its face doesn't sound like it's cueing race or cueing diversity. But a lot of social science research has indicated when a lot of particularly white Americans hear those type of statements, "Make America Great Again," part of their perception of when was America great? It might have been great before we had all these immigrants and there were so many minorities in the country. And I think that's where that underlying racial cue comes from that we often think about in the context of contemporary political discussion or rhetoric.

Sometimes it's a little bit more direct. Right? Framing immigrants as the scapegoat, unfortunately, is a little bit more direct and invasive. But these underlying messages like "Make America Great Again" often sometimes cue this underlying sense of fear of others, fear of diversity, somehow that's changing the country and not in a good way.

TENPAS: And I know in other ... in some other minority groups there, there tends to be a divergence between what the elites in that group think and what the rank-and-file voters think. Is that true also in the Latino population and in the Native American populations?

[32:47]

SANCHEZ: Yeah, absolutely. There's always a distinction between elites and the masses across a wide range of substantive policy issues. Often, elites tend to have a more ideologically extreme view than the voters that they propose to represent. And

so, that could be the case with Latino, Native American, any other racial and ethnic interest group as well.

And part of the reason why this is important is that it's connected with this overarching concern all of us at Brookings have with political polarization. So, while most Americans remain relatively moderate in their political views, interest groups on both sides, liberals and conservatives, tend to have much more of an ideological extreme bent to them, which I think fuels the perception that we are too ideologically distinct from one another to actually work together politically to solve problems.

And again, the reason why that's so important to stress is remember, de Tocqueville and others thought what's inherently American is our ability to work together across political ideology to solve common everyday problems. And so, if we get to a point where average everyday Americans think that's impossible because we're too apart far apart from each other politically- or ideology-wise, then obviously it becomes much more difficult to push forward this notion that we can work together politically, we can work together to solve problems.

So, I think that's where we start to get into this danger, and it starts to influence our overall perception of political identity, right? where we don't have support for consensus and incremental policy action because we think things all become really about winning election and winning policy battles at all costs. And I think that's a very dangerous notion for our overall democracy.

TENPAS: And it also is striking to me, it seems as though maybe elites are tone deaf, like, shouldn't they know better what their constituency wants to hear and how to speak to them and communicate with them effectively instead of advocating more extreme views or being kind of the embodiment of those extreme views?

[34:47]

SANCHEZ: That that absolutely can happen. Right? And I think in some cases, interest groups sometimes find themselves pushing for particular policy platform agenda items without really recognizing that that might not even be in line with what their constituents or the population that they intend to serve actually want.

I mean, in fact, I know I'm part of a team at Brookings that is really looking at how to do a better job of actually doing data collection with the community that's in a community engaged way, so we hopefully get much better data about what the community actually wants that's not being driven by elites, but it's actually fueled from the bottom up.

TENPAS: And let me just take you in a different direction. If we sort of buy into the notion that participation in American politics is part and parcel of being an American—right? it's a civic duty—what do you anticipate in this election? And what have the most recent election shown in terms of the Latino electorate and the Native American electorate?

[35:44]

SANCHEZ: Yeah, I mean, if we work off the the underlying perception or our value system that participation in democracy is part of what defines being an American, then we have to look very closely at, really, potential obstacles. Or really, I would think about in terms of public policy-driven or structural barriers that get in the way of average everyday Americans being able to engage in the democratic process, whether that's through voting or any of the other channels that we have available to us as Americans.

And so, when we look specifically at the Latino or Native American populations, both of those communities tend to participate at least through voting at lower levels than other segments of the population. And again, we can't just assume that's because of choice. Are there any structural barriers that get in the way of participation?

And one of the underlying demographic trends we see with the Latino population in particular is around age. We know that in this country, young Americans tend to vote and participate in other ways in our political system to a lesser extent than older Americans. And there's a number of different reasons for that. The age of the candidates, not being able to connect with young people on issues that they perceive to be important, and a host of others.

That becomes really important for the Latino community because Latinos are significantly younger than whites. And when we look at eligible voters, we're talking about 12 to 15 years younger than whites across different states in the country. So, we really have to think deeply about what is it that's not engaging young voters, because that's systemically tied to the Latino population. So, that's one structural barrier that we really want to think deeply about.

Others are much more direct. You think about photo ID laws, for example, that in many states require you to show a photo ID in order to access the ballot box. Well, again, social science research that my team has conducted over time shows that both Latino and Native American communities are significantly less likely to have the required ID in the first place to be able to vote, and the underlying documents needed to get a photo ID.

So, really looking at those structural barriers and trying to do something to alleviate them opens up the door for more of the Latino and Native American communities to be able to participate in democracy.

TENPAS: And and about the younger Latino voters. I mean, that's true, I think, across the board that generally younger people are less likely to show up at the ballot box for a variety of reasons. But is there anything, any kind of reform or any kind of efforts that could be made that you think that might speak to them and encourage them to participate?

[38:10]

SANCHEZ: Yeah, I mean, one of the most important things is ideological, and it gets into whether or not we really should be worried about the state of our democracy. When we look at data and we ask Americans, or young Americans in particular,

whether or not they feel democracy is working, or whether, or not it's failing or is in trouble, countless studies indicate that our democracy, unfortunately, is in a very fragile state. And in particular, to answer your question directly, a growing number of young Americans really perceive that they're losing faith in our election system. One specific data point: there was a Harvard University youth poll conducted relatively recently that indicated 42 percent of young Americans do not believe that their vote actually matters anymore today.

And so, if you think about that really troubling statistic right there, that indicates that a large segment of our young people probably don't really think positively about voting, because at the end of the day, they don't perceive that their vote actually matters. That it could be big money interests that are actually driving what happens in our country and not the individual level voter. And that's a very scary statistic.

TENPAS: Yeah, that low political efficacy and that tends to kind of alienate. So, you've actually provided a really easy segue to my next question, which is on a scale of 1 to 10, how nervous are you about the future of American democracy?

[39:33]

SANCHEZ: I'm very nervous. You know, on a scale of 1 to 10, I probably put myself some days at a 7 if I'm being very optimistic, and on not so good days more in the 8 to 9 category. Because I think all of the data provides evidence that we really do have a very fragile democracy right now. And a lot of that comes directly from voters themselves. I know NPR conducted a survey relatively recently, for example, that found that 64 percent of the American population believes that not only is the U.S. democracy in crisis and risk of failing, but that it's getting worse and not better. So, I think it's those studies that that really give us a lot of evidence to suggest we all should be worried about the state of democracy right now.

TENPAS: And what about alleviating that worry? Is there anything you would sort of recommend that citizens think about doing, or is it really just showing up and voting and participating, that you can sort of speak and vote for candidates that you think will help mend and improve our democracy? What's the answer?

[40:32]

SANCHEZ: Yeah, great, great question. I mean, I think one of the things that we can try to tackle is mis- or disinformation. We know, unfortunately, that that's on the rise in the United States and a lot of the misinformation that Americans are being bombarded with undercut their perception that our democratic systems are working. Right? And we see evidence of that from high percentages of the American population, and not just Republicans, that believe there was a lot of fraud in the last presidential election and worry that there's going to be a lot of fraud in the 2024 presidential election. So, trying to combat some of that misinformation with facts obviously can help overcome some of those dangers.

But I think you're exactly right. As more Americans participate in democracy, cast ballots in our system, see that their vote is tabulated correctly, right? over time that hopefully will overcome some of the dangerous data that we're seeing now with a

large segment of the population just really not believing that their vote counts, or is actually going to make a difference.

TENPAS: So, this question about what it means to be an American, I'm guessing that there is some variation across groups in the United States that there will be different definitions. And so, I'm thinking that your expertise would enable you to describe how the Native American culture, what it means to be American for that culture. Is there a specific answer?

[41:50]

SANCHEZ: The only thing that I'll speak to is the nuances to this question of what makes somebody American specifically for tribal communities or Native Americans. And what I'll say there is, right? first as we started our conversation at the onset, just defining what makes somebody an American according to our political culture or our political values, it's really important to note that that's not often been a voluntary process.

Those political values in the United States, unfortunately, have been forced upon large segments of our population. Whether that's tribal communities, right? who have really had all of our underlying political culture in the U.S. directly forced upon them. We think about boarding schools, for example, as a mechanism in which our political value system, really from the federal government's perspective, was forced on tribal communities.

Or slavery as the other dominant example. We cannot assume that this underlying political system was just voluntarily accepted by all Americans, right? particularly Native Americans who unfortunately have had that forced upon them.

And so, when we ask the question, does it require participating in the political system to call yourself an American, for original Americans, Native Americans, that's an interesting question, because I've read a lot of scholarship that suggested for tribal communities, participating in federal election can be perceived as not being loyal to your tribal community. Because remember, we have tribal elections that pick representation and leadership from tribal communities as well.

So, we just have to think about even that underlying question of what defines an American must be nuanced for different segments of our community. And tribal communities, Native Americans are obviously a population where we need to think deeply about what that actually means to them.

TENPAS: So, Gabe, that's this has been a fascinating conversation, and I really appreciate your time and your incredible expertise. Having all of that recent polling data and survey data is so useful when you're thinking about these kinds of issues. So, thanks for being a guest on *Democracy in Question*.

[music]

SANCHEZ: Thank you very much for framing the questions so well to have a great conversation that hopefully will inform some of our viewership.

TENPAS: *Democracy in Question* is a production of the Brookings Podcast Network. Thank you for listening. And thank you to my guests for sharing their time and expertise on this podcast.

Also, thanks to the team at Brookings who make this podcast possible, including Kuwilileni Hauwanga supervising producer; Fred Dews, producer; Colin Cruickshank, Steve Cameron, and Gastón Reboledo, audio engineers; the team in Governance Studies including Tracy Viselli, Catalina Navarro, and Adelle Patten; and the promotions teams in both Governance Studies and the Office of Communications at Brookings. Shavanthi Mendis designed the beautiful logo.

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I'm Katie Dunn Tenpas. Thank you for listening.