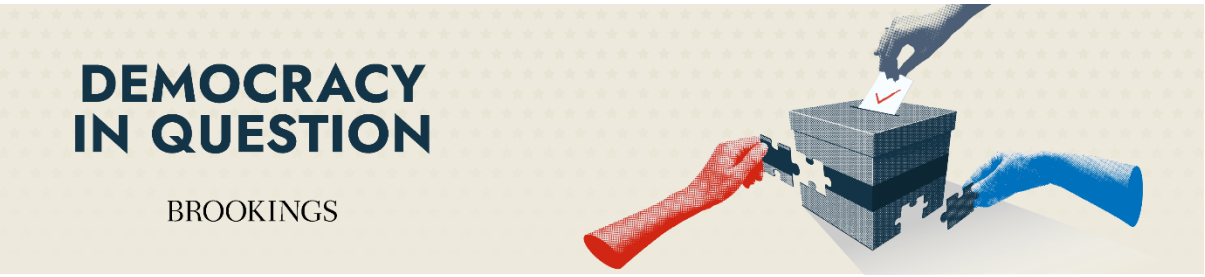

The Brookings Institution
***Democracy in Question* podcast**

"Does my vote really matter?"

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Episode Summary:

Voter turnout rates for voters 18 to 29 have been trending up, younger voters continue to have the lowest turnout of all age groups. Younger voters offer many explanations for not participating in elections--they are rigged, politicians don't follow through on promises, voting itself is confusing or difficult to assess, and ultimately, their vote doesn't matter. In this episode, host Katie Dunn Tenpas discusses why and how your vote matters with Keesha Middlemass, a fellow and associate professor of American politics and public policy at Howard University, and how public education can help recenter a culture of democracy with Senior Fellow Jon Valant, director of the Brown Center on Education Policy.

[music]

TENPAS: Hi, I'm Katie Dunn Tenpas, a visiting fellow in Governance Studies at the Brookings Institution and the director of the Katzmann Initiative on Improving Interbranch Relations and Governance. 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. 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 works or is supposed to work.

On today's episode, the question is, does my vote really matter? The 2020 presidential election had one of the highest voter turnouts as a percentage of the voting age population, around 66%. But that means a third of Americans didn't vote at all. And in most presidential elections over the past century, nearly half of eligible voters sat elections out. Participation in primaries, off year, and local elections tends to have even lower turnout. And historical trends show that the younger you are, the less likely you are to vote. And voters who are 18 to 29 years old routinely have the lowest turnout—under 50%—compared to all other age cohorts.

Nonvoters offer many explanations for not participating in elections, including that elections are rigged, that the two-party system doesn't offer enough choices, that politicians don't do what they promise, that the act of voting itself is confusing or difficult to assess, and ultimately that their vote doesn't matter. So, why bother?

So, does your vote really matter? To help explore and answer this question, I've invited two of my Governance Studies colleagues to the show. First, Keesha Middlemass, a fellow and associate professor of American politics and public policy at Howard University. She's author of the award-winning book *Convicted and Condemned: The Politics and Policies of Prisoner Reentry*. And then I'll talk with Senior Fellow Jon Valant, director of the Brown Center on Education Policy. He specializes in pre-K through 12 education policy and politics, including inequities in U.S. schools.

Keesha, welcome to *Democracy in Question*.

MIDDLEMASS: Thank you so much for having me, Katie.

TENPAS: Yeah, it's it's my pleasure. And let's just start off at the top. Does my vote really matter?

[3:12]

MIDDLEMASS: So, recent history says yes, your vote does matter. Now, within the United States, we have to think about federalism. We have to think about the jurisdiction you live in. So, for instance, in 2000 presidential election, 538 votes separated George W. Bush and Al Gore. And once the Supreme Court made its decision, George W. Bush was awarded the Electoral College votes for Florida, which allowed him to become president.

In recent congressional elections, you can see literally House members winning by small margins. So, in 2022, Republican John James won Michigan's 10th District by 1,600 votes, and Republican Zach Nunn in Iowa's 3rd Congressional District won by just over 2,100 votes. And so, you're looking at less than 2,000, 2,200 people determining the actual majority in the House of Representatives.

TENPAS: Yeah. And I bet if you even went to local elections, like for mayors or city council, you might find even smaller margins.

MIDDLEMASS: Yes, indeed. You will find in some elections they will differentiate by a few hundred in school board elections, in city council elections, and those few hundred people, if you swing the vote a different way, actually have a different outcome.

TENPAS: And apart from thinking that your vote will actually have a consequential influence on the outcome of it, there's lots of other reasons why you should vote, too. Can you talk about those?

[4:47]

MIDDLEMASS: Yes. So, besides the outcome of elections, elected officials make so many determinations about our lives. The media tends to focus on presidential elections and big picture items, like determining negotiations between Hamas and Israel, or determining whether or not individuals will have their student loans forgiven, which the Supreme Court has just overturned. So, there are big national issues that tend to only be eligible for the president to address.

But our lives are affected by who gets elected for mayor and city council. So, for instance, when we think about police budgets that go up year after year after year, it is the mayor and the city council members that are deciding and signing the contracts for police. And so, those individuals can have a bigger impact on our daily lived experiences than a presidential election.

TENPAS: And I would also imagine that ideally in a democracy like ours, you want people to feel like their vote matters, like they are part of the system. They are included. They are enfranchised. How could we go about improving or increasing that sense of belongingness?

[6:03]

MIDDLEMASS: That is probably one of the toughest questions of how do you belong to a society or community in which you live, in which your family is there? And part of it, of course, is through your vote. But when you mentioned Jon coming on later and doing civic engagement, civic engagement is what do you care about? What issues do you really, really care about?

So, let's say if someone is really interested in climate change and the impact the environment is having on our lived experiences, what can that young person or their family or something that they could do via their social interactions—be it at church or through any organization they're affiliated with—what could you do to clean up a

river or a park in your local community? And that actually could have a positive impact.

TENPAS: By participating, by the sheer act of participating, you can actually improve your own surroundings and your own life going forward and your future.

MIDDLEMASS: Very much so, yes.

TENPAS: So, why is it the case that when you look at data about who votes and who doesn't vote, and it's longitudinal, the numbers and the graph lines are very predictable. And basically, the younger you are the less likely you turn out. And with each increasing cohort of age, voter participation goes up. So, can we talk a little bit about young voters?

[7:28]

MIDDLEMASS: Yes, of course. So, young voters tend not to vote for multiple reasons. So, if you think about a young voter that leaves their family home and goes away to college and there's an election and they've got a different address, they have to reregister. So, registration is a hurdle. And then if you graduate and you go to graduate school or you move for another job, you now have a new address and you have to reregister again. And so, the registration process can really alienate individuals.

There is also efforts to suppress college voters because they tend to be more left leaning and liberal and vote Democrat when they do vote. Which means that suppression efforts are tightening IDs, photo IDs so college students aren't able to use a college ID, which has their current location, versus their driver's license, which may be from another state, to register to vote. And so, that's one challenge that individuals have, because if you're gone for 3 or 4 years, you mean you should change your state driver's license. But a lot of students don't.

TENPAS: They may never have any intention … intention to move to Indiana or to Texas or wherever they're going to college.

MIDDLEMASS: Exactly.

TENPAS: Are there other reasons they don't vote? Do they also have these low levels of political efficacy where they feel like their vote doesn't matter or anything like that?

[8:53]

MIDDLEMASS: Yes. So, this whole idea of vote not mattering, unfortunately, the barrage of misinformation and disinformation since 2020, since before 2020, has really dampened their spirit. However, there is data that demonstrates that since 2008 and the election of Obama, younger voters are excited and will turn out and register and will turn out to vote when they're excited about the candidates.

And that is a challenge that we have in general in America, is there's lots of Boomers who are still in elected office. And younger voters are sort of like, hmmm, this person's been there for 30 years, maybe it's time for new blood. And then the

electoral system, of course, for multiple different reasons, individuals get reelected over and over again. So, part of this is just general excitement.

Second is also this idea of who am I voting for and what can they do for me? And so, young people in that age bracket of 18 to 29, they care about housing. They care about getting a job. They care about health care costs. They care about reproductive freedom. They care about the environment. And so, when a political party can address their issues directly, they feel more inclined then to vote. So, it's that combination of who is a candidate, but what is that candidate communicating to them that they care about.

TENPAS: And thinking about these younger voters, too, in the question before you mentioned that it's difficult to register and there are barriers to entry. It seems to me that that some of those are easy fixes. Like, for instance, maybe if your child goes to school in North Carolina both campaigns could go down to the campuses and have young voters walk around with clipboards and register students to vote.

[10:43]

MIDDLEMASS: In theory. There's theory and practice, of course. So, in theory, registration to vote is, of course, to ensure that you are eligible to vote. But registration practices in the United States are also a restrictive measure. Some jurisdictions have same day registration. Some jurisdictions, like Oregon, have complete mail-in ballots. Like, you don't even have to go to the polls. And so, other states have this ability to do early voting so that there's time before the actual Election Day in November to cast a ballot, and you don't have to be rushed, and you don't have to worry about missing work, or you don't have to worry about picking up a child after school, or for multiple reasons. They they have some flexibility.

But those efforts are also hampered by individuals who don't want to expand the electorate. In the best case scenario, there would be same day registration. You could use a picture ID issued by the government and then you could cast a ballot. But unfortunately, because of federalism and states having the ability to have different rules for registration within their own state, we have multiple rules for different jurisdictions. And that's where the confusion comes in.

TENPAS: Yeah, yeah. And I have heard a lot of interesting ideas about, you know, turning Election Day into a holiday and—

MIDDLEMASS: —which would be great.

TENPAS: Yeah, it might turn into three-day weekends for people, but—

MIDDLEMASS: —yes—

TENPAS: —unclear. But it's interesting to point out and highlight those, those barriers that when you're older, like you find time to register and do all those things. But clearly, even early voting is such a huge convenience in the sense that you can avoid the long lines on Election Day. And I'm sure that that turnout rates are much higher in those states.

[12:34]

MIDDLEMASS: Yes, and it's not just the long lines, because long lines are actual product of bad maintenance of election equipment that are only pulled out every two years. Long lines are also part of the election administration. And jurisdictions aren't investing in new equipment or are not fixing the equipment that they do have. And it's understandable because it only happens every two, four years. And there's other more pressing needs.

You also have to think about this idea of what does it mean to vote and why isn't the United States making it easier. And it's because studies have shown … there's generational or age cohorts. So, we've been talking about 18 to 29—so, that would be Gen Z if I'm getting my generations correct. But they are the more liberal generation, and they're more liberal than Millennials. And Millennials are more liberal than Gen X. And Gen X is more liberal than Boomers. So, as each generation is coming to age to vote, they will likely be more liberal. And that then of course scares people who are not left-leaning, Democratic voters. And so, whoever controls the machinery of voting, the registration process, early voting, same day registration, mail-in ballots, those individuals are then able to determine who then is eligible and able to vote.

TENPAS: Yeah. They can try to sort of tinker at the margins on on what turnout will look like.

[14:16]

MIDDLEMASS: Talking about tinkering at the margins, Biden won several states in 2020 because he was able to win Pennsylvania, Georgia, and Wisconsin by approximately 1% or less. And so, you're talking about like 10,000 votes total. Studies have shown that if 143,000 voters in those three states changed their votes, Trump would have been president in 2020. In 2016, less than 50,000 votes, if they had changed across 3 or 4 states, Hillary Rodham Clinton would have been president. So, back to the original question, does your vote matter? A lot of elections are won by very small margins.

TENPAS: Yeah. Yeah. And I think the interesting thing about U.S. elections, though, is that, sure, there are close margins amongst states, but in reality, it's maybe seven out of 50 states, maybe 10 out of 50 states that are what we call swing states where the outcome will determine who wins the Electoral College. And I could see young people saying, this is an absurd system and why don't we have a national vote? But we do have the Electoral College, we have a Constitution, it's really difficult to amend the Constitution. That's unlikely to happen.

It seems to me that you mentioned earlier the importance of having a younger candidate, at least not a Boomer, but younger than a Boomer, that they can relate to better, and then having issues that they really care about. And the combination of the younger candidate and the issues strikes me as something that would probably drive up turnout within that cohort. Is that accurate?

[15:57]

MIDDLEMASS: I think so, yes. So, when we think about 2008 and President Obama, pre-President Obama, Senator Obama running for the presidency in 2008, he brought a type of energy to the electorate that people hadn't seen before, not just because he was the first Black man to be able to get the nominee of the Democratic Party, but it was the idea that he was able to talk a language and speak about policies in a way younger people understood. And the same happened, of course, when he was reelected in 2012.

When we start thinking about younger candidates, I think about Hakeem Jeffries, who is the minority leader in the United States House of Representatives for the Democratic Party. And he was able to capture the imagination of younger people. He is able to speak their language, he cares about their issues, but he's also going to platforms where young people are. So, he's tweeting, he posts on Facebook—I know Facebook's not for young people—but he posts on Facebook.

TENPAS: Yeah.

MIDDLEMASS: His staff will post things on Instagram. So, part of it is not just using traditional media, but meeting people where they are to educate them about what is going on.

TENPAS: Right. These candidates who are running for office need to work at it. If they want to get the youth vote out, they need to find ways to connect with them.

MIDDLEMASS: They do. And elected officials could help by changing the registration laws.

TENPAS: Yeah. Do you think that's the biggest barrier? Like if you, amongst the many reasons they don't vote, is that to you the most influential?

[17:33]

MIDDLEMASS: It is one that I have seen. So, being at Howard University, a lot of students are coming from out of the DMV area. And so, they're coming from other states, and they try to register in their home state and get an absentee ballot. Sometimes the absentee ballot arrives late. I know from studies done by political scientists that absentee ballots aren't always counted.

And then back to the moving, when young people move every time you move a new address, or when women get married and change their name, they have to get a new ID and have to reregister. And so, sometimes it seems like registering should be easy. And it's easy when you live in the same address and your name doesn't change.

TENPAS: Yes. There are ways to make it more complicated.

MIDDLEMASS: Yes, yes.

TENPAS: It's self-inflicted. Yeah.

MIDDLEMASS: It's self-inflicted. So, for me registration is the first hurdle that should be addressed to increase voter turnout.

TENPAS: And you would need to lobby state-by-state in order to achieve that goal.

MIDDLEMASS: Unfortunately, yes.

TENPAS: Yeah. Yeah. So, a lot of times people think that when voting participation is down and if it's down in a particular key cohort, that that's a bad sign, or a bad indicator of the health of our democracy. When you think about lower turnout among the youth vote, do you think that's a bad sign for our democracy? And I usually ask all of my guests this question: on a scale of 1 to 10, how worried are you about the future of American democracy?

[19:02]

MIDDLEMASS: So, a little background on me. I'm an institutionalist. I believe in institutions. I believe in the power of institutions. And so, I am nervous about potential current reactions to election outcomes. But I'm not worried about American democracy and the future of American democracy. I feel that institutions and the people that are in the institutions would be able to continue to protect the ballot, continue to protect the ability of Congress to do its job. Yes, there are moments in time where we may not like the decisions institutions make, but the fact is, is the institutions and the people in the institutions are going to be able to at least support the idea of democracy and be able to allow American democracy to go forward into the future.

TENPAS: Yeah, we've definitely had some rocky spots in our in our history.

MIDDLEMASS: So, yes. Yes.

TENPAS: We can overcome. So, where would you be on that scale of 1 to 10 in terms of where are you now in terms of worried about the future? Sounds like you're pretty low.

MIDDLEMASS: I'm pretty low. So, let's say like a 4.

TENPAS: Okay.

MIDDLEMASS: There's there's there's some challenges but I'm not, you know—

TENPAS: —you're not wringing your hands—

MIDDLEMASS: —pants on fire.

TENPAS: Yeah, yeah, yeah. Well, thank you so much for coming to the show and talking about this fascinating issue. And I might want to talk to you after the election, too, because I am curious to see what happens in this election in terms of the youth vote and their participation rates.

[music]

MIDDLEMASS: Well, thank you for having me, Katie, and I'd love to come back. Thank you.

TENPAS: All right. Great.

[music]

And now Jon Valant, who in addition to his leadership of the Brown Center, also studies the politics of education, examining issues related to public opinion, partisan politics, and the goals of public education. Jon, welcome to *Democracy in Question*.

VALANT: Glad to be here.

TENPAS: So, we just heard from our guest and your colleague, our colleague Keesha Middlemass. We talked about young voters, and we talked about why they might not want to vote. Does my vote matter? Of course your vote matters. But despite the easy answer to that question, I would think, it's hard to encourage younger voters to turn out. And I think that your background and your scholarship ties nicely to this question. So, could you talk a little bit about how education plays a role in this, ideas and people's mindset about whether their vote matters?

[21:39]

VALANT: Sure. And I think really it's a two-part question. So, the first part, the question of why is it that young people vote at lower rates than others, well, there are a lot of reasons for that. And we know from research that some of it has to do with habits, that voting is a habit that you form over time. And young people just haven't had as many opportunities to go and vote. So, many young people who don't vote now might vote more in the future.

Some of it is about barriers, and it's just too hard to vote in this country. And one of the big barriers when it comes to voting is registering to vote. And so, 16- and 17-year-olds, they haven't registered to vote yet. And so, we've seen some progress when you have pre-registration, or you have same day registration or these kinds of measures that get students up and ready so that they can just vote when they they're of age.

And then as you as you sort of let on, there are some motivational issues, too. So, a lot of young people look at our politics and our government and they just don't see themselves in it. They don't see a place for themselves. And that's particularly true for certain groups of young voters. And a lot of that, I think, is really because our schools haven't done their sort of fair share in preparing students to be good citizens.

And this is the second part of that question where really schools have to prepare students not just to vote once. It's not just the act of voting, but it's preparing students to contribute to a strong democracy in a cohesive society. And that is really a primary function of our public education system. And it's one that over time, I would argue, we've started to neglect.

TENPAS: And you mentioned that 16- and 17-year-olds haven't registered to vote, but I thought they couldn't vote until they were 18.

VALANT: So, that's right. They can't vote until they're 18, although actually there are exceptions to that. So, my hometown, which is Takoma Park, Maryland, you can actually vote in municipal elections at age 16 or 17. But it is true that in federal elections you have to be 18 years old to vote. Now, some states, in fact many states, actually allow pre-registration so that you can register to vote before you turn 18 so that when you turn 18, it's one less hurdle that confronts you before you actually vote.

TENPAS: Oh, I see, so it's kind of advance registration to make it easier when you're off at college or wherever you might be.

[23:46]

VALANT: That's right. And really, schools have an important role to play when it comes to registering students, because a lot of kids turn 18 when they're in their senior year of high school. And most states either allow or require schools to provide some kind of voter registration materials to students as they're turning 18 years old. Now, whether schools actually do it has been very uneven. So, even in states that have relatively strong requirements to get students up and running so that they can vote, we've seen that a lot of schools just don't do it, or districts that just don't prioritize it.

TENPAS: And I'm wondering if, you know better than I do, but it seems to me that the emphasis on STEM education, the science and technology, mathematics, has that emphasis on STEM come at the cost of marginalizing the education that was directed at civic education?

[24:33]

VALANT: That's a great question. And I wouldn't put them as competing, because I think a STEM education is really important, and in lots of ways, I think building civics education and building STEM education, those can be compatible.

But it is the case that the goals that we have sort of seen collectively as a country for our education system have evolved over time. And we've come to a point now where we have what I would argue is a very narrow-minded view of schools, that they prepare students to be productive workers. They're preparing students for career or for college. And we really have lost sight of what was a core function of schools as we saw them early on, which was to prepare students to be good citizens who are contributing members of society.

And if you'll allow me just a second of history, I think it's I think it's important—

TENPAS: —I was just going to ask you to explain the historical arc of public education in America. And if it started with this emphasis on becoming a good citizen.

VALANT: It did.

TENPAS: So, please do.

VALANT: Yeah, it did. And so, a lot of the sort of early purpose of education was really assimilating citizens, new citizens to the country and trying to bring in new communities and have this cohesive society here in the U.S. And over time, schools tend to sort of take on the problems of the country, and they generally have tried to address those problems.

[25:46]

And the pivot that is kind of most defining for what our schools do now came in the early 1980s. It came in 1983. There was a report issued by the Reagan administration called “A Nation at Risk.” And really what it did was it set off a lot of alarms that we were losing our economic competitiveness relative to other countries. And it was because we weren’t developing the academic skills that we needed to develop, and we weren’t preparing students to enter the workforce with those skills.

TENPAS: What was the evidence that they brought to bear to show that? And, you know, my memory of the early 1980s was not sort of an economic collapse or anything where there was, like, a huge trade imbalance, like what was what was the catalyst for producing such a, such a report?

[26:29]

VALANT: So, what was really extraordinary about the report was how little it was actually based on. So, it pointed to some test scores comparing U.S. students to students internationally. But really it was the rhetorical flourish of the report. It spoke in very scary language. And I think even the authors didn’t expect it to have the impact that it had, but it did. And it sort of set in Americans minds this idea that we’re falling way far behind when it comes to preparing workers.

And it set us down this path where then for the next few decades, really until kind of the modern day, the infrastructure we’ve built in education policy is all organized around creating these academic standards in subjects that are important and relatively easy to measure. So, math, and English, language arts, and we build these standards and say, okay, so students in third grade, this is what they have to know. And then when they move to fourth grade, this is what they have to know.

And then we’ve built testing around those standards. So, students will go to school, they’ll be tested on how well they mastered the standards, and then schools might be rewarded or punished based on how well their students have mastered those standards.

Well, when you build an accountability system like that, and when it’s so focused on a couple of subjects, schools tend to redirect all of their attention to those subjects. And that is what we’ve seen over the last few decades. So, we’ve seen our public education system really focus on numeracy and literacy, which are absolutely core functions of schools, and preparing students to be to be workers is absolutely a core function of schools.

But what isn’t being measured and what isn’t part of any of those accountability systems are really the sort of collective priorities we’ve set for schools is preparing

students for a democracy that I think has changed a great deal in recent decades, where our education policy and practice really just hasn't kept up.

TENPAS: So, it's it's kind of astonishing, but maybe it shouldn't be surprising that when you change the incentives at the national level or even at the local levels, it trickles down such that schools need to teach for the test and that their resources are allocated according to their performance on those tests, their students' performance. That will shape the behavior in terms of the curriculum. And subjects that are less rewarded, maybe arts, obviously things having to do with civics, and maybe history find their way lower and lower on the priority list.

What's interesting to me that, too, though, is that this one report that was issued in the early '80s wasn't challenged later by—I know that the next president was President Bush, also a Republican—but you would have thought that the Clinton administration and the relatively newly established Department of Education that was established in the Carter administration, might have wanted to change the the script, so to speak, and have our public schools focus less on testing. I mean, I agree there should be some accountability, but there's probably a middle road where you test students occasionally, but you don't focus all of the aspects of the school itself on a test.

[29:21]

VALANT: No, I think that's right. And that really is where we've been. And the politics of education are a little bit different from politics in some other fields. We actually had a sort of reasonably strong bipartisan coalition that that drove a lot of those education reforms of the past few decades. And so, one part of it is this test-based accountability that we're talking about. The other part of it is these certain forms of school choice that let families pick the schools that their kids attend, which for a long time was charter schools, which are publicly funded and privately run schools that are still sort of part of the public education system and governed by a lot of the rules that govern public schools.

TENPAS: So, you're talking about vouchers, too?

VALANT: So, vouchers are the very contemporary, sort of reincarnation of that. And that is that is a particularly important question for this moment. So, when we had this kind of bipartisan coalition where you had conservatives who for a long time really liked school choice policy, and they saw in it this this opportunity to bring market reforms to education where, you know, only the schools that are the most appealing and the most successful, those will thrive. And then other schools will close. And you'll have parents as consumers that are making decisions.

And, you had Democrats who had a very different vision for what schools should be. And they were open, some sort of some parts of the Democratic Party, was open to the idea of school choice, but it was more focused on the just sort of inherent unfairness that if you have money to choose where you live or to choose which private school your kid attends, you have some form of school choice. But for some families, they just don't. They just can't afford to make that choice.

So, we had this kind of compromise for a long time, which was that we would have some kind of school choice policy, but it would take the form of school choice within the public sector. So, it would be you could sort of pick from schools across your district, or it would be these charter schools that are sort of quasi private.

[31:07]

Now, what's happened in the last few years is, as we've started to see more polarization in politics in general and in politics of education in particular, Democrats sort of got sick of the idea of charter schools and they backed away from that. And Republicans have moved toward these very large-scale private school voucher programs. And this is really happening just in the last few years. And what these programs do is they offer essentially all families in the states that have passed these policies—and it's about a dozen states—they offer all families the opportunity to take public funds and use them to pay for private school tuition or to pay for certain approved educational expenses. And there's essentially no Democratic support for that idea, and actually, there's some opposition among Republicans, too.

But what that does is when we're thinking about the impacts of that kind of thing for democracy, is it essentially removes any opportunity for a government role to shape what it is that students know. And really any ability for us to ensure that there's some baseline of core skills and knowledge and disposition that students have as we're preparing them to be citizens.

And so, in these places that have moved in that direction, we are very much moving away from a model that takes seriously that schools are really the public institutions that we have for instilling those skills that people will ultimately need so that they can be contributing members of our society and democracy.

TENPAS: That's fascinating. Are there some similarities between these 12 states? Are they regionally similar or how would you describe them? Could you characterize them?

[32:44]

VALANT: Politically similar. So, they they lean Republican, although it's also a couple of purple states. So, Arizona was the first state that really pushed kind of all in on this. And I think it's the most fundamental change in the kind of core foundation of how we govern and run schools certainly in in my lifetime.

And it's happening very quickly. And so, some of these states are just now seeing what are the implications of just sort of turning education over to the private sector and starting to back away from public education systems. And a whole lot more states are about to find out what the effects of that move are before even these initial early adopters get to a point where they can show anything. It's it's happening so quickly and without any real evidence to guide what's going on.

And the kind of very early evidence we have suggests a whole lot of problems. So, one, for example, some of my colleagues and I have been looking at, who it is that benefits from these programs, and it's by and large wealthy families that are getting these private school vouchers, because often the voucher isn't enough money to

actually pay for private school tuition. So, if you're a wealthy family, you're sort of taking this money from the state and then you might have to top that off and pay the rest of that tuition. But if you're one of those low-income families who were sort of part of the motivation, in theory, at least for some of these programs, they might not be able to pay that difference.

So, it's not that it creates new opportunities. There's a real risk that what is going to happen with all of this is that we will have some very stratified school education systems in some states. And that where we have that stratification, we are just losing our grip on our ability to instill some of those skills and dispositions we really need kind of across the citizenry.

TENPAS: Right, for our democracy. So, in a sense, are they outsourcing education at the state level by providing these opportunities?

[34:35]

VALANT: I think that's definitely one way of of thinking about it. So, in the context of our politics right now what we've seen in the last few years is a real erosion in attitudes toward K-12 education and just sort of the confidence that people have in our public education system. And that's not that's not unusual in the context of American institutions. So, if you if you were to look at polling over time, all American institutions are polling at lower levels of confidence. It's kind of particularly true for for public schools, and particularly *particularly* true among Republicans.

And I think a lot of that has roots in the COVID-19 shutdowns and the backlash that that resulted from schools being closed for quite a long time. And that backlash, it first kind of became a push towards some of these culture war battles over critical race theory and over transgender students' rights that we're still kind of dealing with in schools. But more recently has really become a push to to sort of poke at the foundations of our public education system to potentially set up this structure outside of public education that is really hostile to the the public education system that we've now had for centuries.

TENPAS: Those are fascinating developments. And I am a pretty careful newsreader, and I had not come across those. So, tell me, you know, in your perfect world, what could public education at the state level or at the local level be doing to make better citizens? What are some tangible, concrete ideas that you have?

[36:07]

VALANT: Yeah. So, there's a lot that schools can do, and some of it is just hard to measure. So, it just doesn't fit with that infrastructure that we've built up with policy. But just just to give a few examples. So, our media landscape has changed very quickly over the last few decades, and our efforts when it comes to media literacy have not kept up. So, making sure that students understand what is real, and what is what is fake, and what is a good source of information, and what's a bad source, and just sort of show them that they can be tricked, and they can be duped. That is that is one, kind of one area of skill building with direct implications for for democracy.

Another—and this is a little more abstract, but it's an area that I I work on and that I care about—is instilling in students what we would call intellectual humility, which is essentially the idea that we're all wrong all the time and we're we're all vulnerable, and that's okay. And we should embrace that. And that's part of being human. And as a result, you want people to seek out competing perspectives and to sort of keep an open mind to the idea that I might have this wrong, and I might need to find a new way of doing this.

And so, if you're in school, maybe that's debate, you know, maybe that's setting up debate in, in school where you're taking the perspective of that you might not agree with on an issue and trying to really think through, okay, if I were arguing from this side, what would I say? And sort of keeping an open mind and being able to assess arguments in evidence.

And then in addition to that there is—I mean, it's a long list—but one more to highlight is schools have a real role to play in instilling an understanding and a belief in our core democratic norms and institutions, because that's really where Americans go to learn about our government and our democracy. And so, some of that is about facts, right? It's just teaching. What is the structure of of the U.S. federal government? But a lot of it is, is really just ensuring that people understand why we have the system that we have and why it matters that we preserve it.

TENPAS: And currently, at what age do they have, like, a civics class or do they start to learn about the Constitution and those kinds of topics?

[38:11]

VALANT: So, it varies quite a bit from place to place, because education is locally governed and different states and districts and schools will do things in different ways. But basically, what what you see is, you'll see that elementary schools will sort of take these baby steps toward teaching some of that, and then it'll ramp up in middle school, and by high school is when you'll see kind of formal civics classes and government classes where students are really learning about the three branches of government and kind of what we might remember as government class.

But just as important as that is that, in my view, is that kind of early building of that foundation in elementary school and in middle school. And for another example, sort of showing students, giving them experiences in these, like, baby mini-democratic systems. So, in schools you might have school government, you might have student council, whatever, whatever it is, you're letting students live in a safe little democracy in which they have voice and they're kind of trying to understand how does this work and how do I feel it out?

TENPAS: And they get to vote.

VALANT: Exactly. Yeah, exactly. And they they see themselves in it. They see how it matters. And that can start as early as early elementary school.

TENPAS: Right. And I would imagine that in addition to education itself, that sort of socialization at home plays a big role in terms of of citizenship.

[39:26]

VALANT: For sure. Socialization at home and socialization at school, which actually is another one of those things that has become very difficult in recent years, in large part because of cell phones. And so, one of one of these issues that is very much of the moment and is not likely to go away anytime soon is it's gotten harder for students to socialize in school when they look around and all their classmates are on their phones. And that's true in school, that's true out of school. But it's just sort of the landscape for that kind of socialization has changed. And so, yes, some of it for sure happens at home. And it's it's from interactions between parents and kids and kids and siblings.

But really that is one of the core purposes of schools, is developing those social emotional skills in creating in kids this ability to make friends and to to sort of understand how to navigate disagreements and conflicts and all of that. And that is absolutely a core function, too, of schooling.

TENPAS: Yeah. So, I imagine you're a supporter of the phone bands that are occurring in some schools lately.

VALANT: I am, I am, yeah.

TENPAS: So, a lot of people tie kind of this low voter participation to or use it as an indicator for how healthy our democracy is. And I like to ask my guests at the end of the episode how they feel about American democracy and its future. And on a scale of 1 to 10, how nervous are you about the future of American democracy? And I guess in your case, I would highlight sort of this recent development of in a sense, outsourcing or privatizing education to some extent. Does that in and of itself make you a little bit wary about the future of democracy?

[40:54]

VALANT: So, I I am worried about it. So, when I think about democracy, I think about it in the very long term. So, there are certainly a lot of things we can do right now, today, to solve some very immediate problems. To my eye, the ultimate functioning of our democracy is the sort of primary input in that is all of us. And what are our values, and what do we know, and what do we care about, and how do we interact with one another, and see one another? So, when I think about the future of democracy, that's what I think about, is I think about people, and I think about us, and how are we training people to navigate those systems. And I I am very worried about that.

And a lot of that has to do with how quickly the world has changed around us. So, the way that students are interacting with other people, the way they're they're getting information about the world, the way that they are are learning about people who disagree with them, all of that has changed radically over the last few decades.

And I would argue that in that time that we were really worried about preparing students for this 21st-century economy where we had to be globally competitive with workforce issues, we just missed on the the big point, which was that our 21st-century democracy looks very different from our 20th-century democracy. And

getting people ready to navigate that democracy requires some actual teaching. And I I worry that we still haven't learned that lesson, and that we haven't learned that lesson at a time when change is only speeding up.

And so, I worry about all of that. I worry, too, that we adults who are in the system deep somewhere in our kind of cold, polarized hearts, I think we have an understanding of what America is and what our institutions are, and we just sort of have a sense of the way things were and maybe should be with respect to kind of government and institutions. And I worry that young people are growing up in a different environment and they're hearing different things about those institutions.

And so, when we look over the long run, whether it's that technology is changing faster than our educational practice and policy, whether it's that our norms are changing, and we're going to sort of feel that with future generations, more than I think we feel with with our current generations. And then we have these really serious attacks on our public education systems, I I am concerned over the long run.

TENPAS: Yeah. And where would you be on that scale from 1 to 10.

VALANT: On 1 to 10 scale, I will put myself in at an 8.5.

TENPAS: Oh, wow. Ooh, using a fraction.

[music]

Well, it's been a pleasure to talk to you and I I've learned so much today, and now I know what to read about when I focus on education articles in terms of that, those those efforts in those 12 states. That's really fascinating.

VALANT: Yeah. No, my my pleasure.

TENPAS: Thank you for your time.

VALANT: Yeah, thanks for having me.

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.

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