

THE BROOKINGS INSTITUTION

SAUL ROOM

UPROOTED: REDISCOVERING AMERICAN HISTORY

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INTRODUCTORY REMARKS:

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PANEL 1: THE INFLUENCE OF CULTURE AND CIVIC POWER IN SHAPING AMERICAN DEMOCRACY

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PANEL 2: THE ROLE OF IMMIGRATION, COMMUNITY WELL-BEING, AND INNOVATION IN ADVANCING THE US DEMOCRATIC LANDSCAPE

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**GILBERT:** All right. Good morning everyone. Morning. Alright, we're gonna try that one more time. Good morning everyone. Good morning. Thank you so much. Thank you so much. Welcome to Brookings for those of you who are new to Brookings, welcome back, for many of you who have been here before, attended events, meetings, and et cetera, I am Keon Gilbert.

I am a senior fellow in the Governance Studies program here, and also I serve as director of the Race Prosperity and Inclusion Initiative. I'm also a professor of public health at St. Louis University, and it is my indeed privilege and pleasure to introduce this new series led by RPII and Center for Technology Innovation with Nicol Turner Lee called Uprooted: Rediscovering American History.

Before I jump into a little bit more of an introduction, I do want to extend a thank you to our RA team, our comms team, Carly Bennett who's here, Elema Shakravani, Josie Stewart, our intern, Rebecca Boyte. As well as our communications team Adele Patton, who has spent an incredible amount of time putting together a number of graphics for, for this project, as well as Massi Colonna. And also I want to also acknowledge our RA who's who's at a distant, Kwajo Frimpong. Without their help, without their assistance, and without their commitment to seeing this project through we would not be here today. And so I want to make sure that I extend a thank you to, to you all very early, early on.

So to this series, Uprooted: Rediscovering American History, our scholars at RPII and CTI wanted to explore many of the themes of our areas of research. We wanted to be able to sort of think about what are the core themes, core areas of our work that allow us to not only to collaborate, but also to respond to the current moment as many of us have witnessed, the erosion of civil rights, civil liberties, and the challenge to democracy itself.

We thought about how can we provide a collective and unified response. And to do that, we thought, well, we need to tell the stories of America. And of Americans, and we need to need to be able to do this using evidence, using narratives, using multiple forms of data, multiple forms of communication to be able to not only draw together these narratives and these stories, but to also to produce them in a way that is accessible to the broader community.

I want to acknowledge our, our themes really quickly. Migration and immigration, which is being led by Gabriel Sanchez, civic engagement and community power being led by Rashawn Ray, inclusion and cultural politics led by Keesha Middlemass. I'm leading the community health and wellbeing theme and Nicol Turner Lee is, is leading technology and innovation.

When we think about the origins of, of this project, uprooted, we wanted to make sure that we really thought about the policy landscape, thinking about how these policies are starting to end decades of policy wins gained by social movements, but also how these policies will further displace Americans from their jobs, cause them to lose their homes, restrict education opportunities, and prevent access to health and social services.

When I think about my own experiences as a Black American growing up in Indianapolis, Indiana. I'm reminded of many of the experiences that I had with my own grandparents my grandparents who worked in domestic capacities, my grandparents who worked in construction, who worked as custodians in schools.

And one, one of my grandfathers in particular worked at Crispus Attucks, and that is how I got introduced to the idea even of American history by listening to him and my aunt talk about who Crispus Attucks was to Black Americans. And when I resonate and think about that as a story and that as an experience, and him working at that particular high school in Indianapolis, Indiana, it really in many different ways set a path for me to truly understand who Black Americans are, who Black Americans were, and even who my grandparents were to me.

For many of you who are new to Brookings, there are Black people and people of color who work at Brookings. We just happen to represent a large swath of them in, in governance studies. We are also committed to understanding and uplifting these voices, these experiences as they contribute to the daily experiences of, of other Americans as they contribute to civic engagement, as they build and think about as these communities and individuals build communities build social cohesion, build institutions, and participate in, in, in a number of different ways in community life.

As I think about some of the words of Manning Marable as it relates to this theme of uprooted in 1995, he suggested Black America sees itself as the litmus test of the viability and reality of American democracy because African Americans striving for freedom and human rights embodies the country's best examples of sacrifice for the realization of democracy's highest ideals.

This project, as I, as I noted, was conceived in response to many of the policy changes across all levels of government and in the business sector, in the fields of public health. Criminal justice and technology that are shaping a particular policy environment. We wanted to center this project not only as a response, but also to be a pathway forward as we reimagine what civil rights looks like as we reimagine what democracy will look like in the future after this administration and moving forward.

As we realize, as, as the population changes in America, what does democracy mean for those communities and those and those individuals and those families. The con, this context has unleashed ice agents into communities at unprecedented rates. It's also targeted longstanding scientific informed policies such as vaccine mandates.

It's also perpetuated the American digital divide and deepen the digital underclass. We have a real opportunity to prevent the full erasure of how America was built and how the principles of democracy can become more fully realized. How a union can become more perfect in its achievement of both equality and equity and not perfunctory that involves acknowledging and studying the impact of the arrival of the Mayflower and the White Lion.

One ship brought pilgrims and another brought enslaved Africans in 1619 to the shores of Virginia. We celebrate and welcome the contributions of the arrival of the pilgrims in our text and our oral history to tell the origin story of American individualism and those seeking freedom and self-governance.

But this happened at the expense of enslaving Africans. It is true and historically correct that we have agreed that establishing a political democracy is right, but to achieve it, racial discrimination is the social and economic engine to ensure its foundation and ability to thrive. We reject this notion based on the guiding principles and function of democracies and embrace a vision of a multicultural and multiracial society that WEB Du Bois called for.

That allows for us to be full citizens in America without shedding any of our social identities, but allow them to live free collectively and allowing these identities and culture cultures to sharpen the other. Our research dev dives into how communities of color, the politically disenfranchised and economically more marginalized have worked to demand freedom.

They have built communities and social in institutions to shield them from the everyday racism, everyday misogyny, antisemitism, and homophobia. They dare to ask the question, what is freedom to me and why is it being denied? How do we make freedom more accessible for me and for others? And with this I welcome to welcome you to Uprooted, rediscovering American History.

To move us along, I'm going to introduce our moderator for our first panel professor Christy Lopez, if you would like to come up. Professor Lopez is a professor of practice at Georgetown Law. She teaches courses on policing, criminal procedure, civil rights litigation, and is the faculty co-director of Georgetown's Center of Innovations and Community Safety.

She co-chaired the Washington DC Police Reform Commission in 2020, 2021, and was a fellow of the American Law Institute Principles of Law Policing and Projector. Professor Lopez graduated from the University of California Riverside with a Bachelor's of Arts degree, and received her JD from Yale Law School.

Clerked for the Honorable Robert L Esdall at the on the Supreme Court of Alaska. Welcome Professor Lopez.

**LOPEZ:** All right. Yeah. Great. So, it's so wonderful to be here today. I'm so grateful to be part of this conversation. I'm gonna ask each of you to just say a couple words of introduction about yourself before I go to you, Keesha, with the first question. So do you wanna start with introduction?

**MIDDLEMASS:** Thank you, Christy.

Good morning everyone. My name is Keesha Middlemass. I'm a professor of political science in the Department of Politic in the Department of Political Science, excuse me, at Howard University. And I'm also a fellow here at Brookings and I study prisoner reentry and public policies related to the lived experiences after a criminal conviction.

**LOPEZ:** Thank you.

**RAY:** Alright, great to be with you all this morning. Rayshawn Ray. I'm a senior fellow here in governance studies at the Brookings Institution. And similar to Keesha, also have and Keon an academic appointment as well. And broadly study racial inequality and think particularly about policing practices wealth and health disparities.

**LOPEZ:** Thank you both so much. So, I wanna start Keesha with a question for you about inclusion and cultural politics, which is, of course a, a key component to this entire project. And I want, it seems like a nice place to start to just for, to get your sense of what you mean when you talk about cultural politics, how that relates to inclusion and what the salience of both of those topics is to the current moment we're in.

**MIDDLEMASS:** Right. So as one of the themes of our uprooted series, when we think about cultural politics and inclusion, cultural politics really is determined by what you value. Where are your beliefs, how do those beliefs and values then shape your decisions? So they're micro decisions, which then translate into political decisions.

One example is boycotting Target, if you felt like Target's decision to literally undo all its DEI efforts and you stop shopping at Target, that is an individual decision based on your beliefs that DEI may be important in the commercial and economic wellbeing of the community. So the idea of having our values influence our politics is cultural politics in terms of inclusion and cultural politics.

We want to really think about what are our shared values. We talk about democracy. It is, I hope, a shared value and that we can uphold the ideas of democracy, the freedom of speech, the idea of having a free media, the idea of being able to vote without having your vote not counted, having your vote oppressed through other laws.

But this idea of having shared values will then lead us to shared interests, which will then translate into political decisions, either through your vote who you vote for, but also then just community engagement.

**LOPEZ:** And so you said a little bit about this and the context of Target, but where are we on this right now in your assessment?

**MIDDLEMASS:** So. Right now and I'll probably come back to this later, but it's this idea of division. So we are divided based on what we value right now, largely speaking across the country. Unfortunately, it's usually captured in partisan terms, but even just finding shared value in, in one's humanity, shared value in one's ability to work for their, and pay for their family's needs.

A shared interest in helping those actually obtain housing. A shared interest in public safety. That right now, unfortunately, we are again, collectively divided in how we achieve some of these shared values. And that will require communication but also events like this just to inform people about what's going on.

And then also what can we do about it at the local level, regardless of where you are thinking in the national political realm or the international realm, it's, we have to start thinking about our local communities. Who are our neighbors? Do you know your neighbors? Do you speak to your neighbors? Do you volunteer in your local community?

So despite being divided, I believe that we can start at a local micro level and think about what we're doing in our own communities. Despite those challenges.

**LOPEZ:** So I think that's a great segue to what I'm hoping to, that you'll talk with us a bit about that, right? Because Keesha, you've just talked to us about how inclusion's importance, but important, but right now we're really divided.

And Rashawn, I know you've done a lot of work in the, in the space of policing, and one of the things interesting about policing is that we have, you know, all the problems that Keesha's talking about, problems with the voting, housing, employment, you know, you

know, safe neighborhoods. Oftentimes the thing that sparks a reaction is an event of police misconduct.

Right? We saw that with Rodney King. We saw that with Michael Brown in Ferguson. We saw that with George Floyd, of course, in, in Minneapolis. Those events can spark sustained civic movements that then take on a broader life of their own that goes beyond policing. What do you, what do you think about the current conditions around immigration enforcement as a potential to spark that sort of movement and particularly perhaps a multiracial coalition you know, to help us both sort of address a lot of the issues that Keesha's talking about, but also to kind of get over some of that divide and division that we're feeling?

**RAY:** Yeah, I mean, it's, it's an important question and I think from. Los Angeles, if we go all the way back to the 1990s with Rodney King, through the Midwest, as you mentioned, and then, and then on the East Coast as well. These particular policing incidents oftentimes become very public. And I think for a lot of people, they try to make sense of whether or not the individual who in many cases was the victim in a situation whether or not that person could be their brother or their sister or their friend, or someone who they work with.

And I think that that level of connection oftentimes leads people to want to get out and mobilize and protest. We saw that in Minneapolis. When we look at the individuals who were, who were the most recent victims of, of police violence that became publicly known. I always say that because in the, in the United States, a person is killed by the police every eight hours, and there's a large percentage of those individuals who are actually unarmed at the time that they're killed.

So to your point, Christy, it's about. Recognizing that oftentimes what we see is not everything that's going on. And I think that a lot of people do recognize that, but these incidents when they become very public, really galvanize the public in many regards. And part of that has to do with emotional, with emotions, anger for frustration, people trying to figure out what to do.

And oftentimes what people do is they mobilize. And so when I look at this across the board and we really play out and look at victims, even though we know Black and brown people are disproportionately more likely to be killed by the police, but there are a lot of white people who are killed by the police too.

And when we look at immigration and ice enforcement, we're obviously seeing that run the gamut, especially when we factor in skin tone. Will we factor in social class where people are gender and sexual orientation? And so one of my colleagues and I Dana Fisher, who is actually a non-resident fellow here, professor at American.

She's done tons of work on protest and engagement and what that looks like. And a few years ago we did a, a set of studies looking at who came out for protest and why did they come out. And what we found was that it was very much a multicultural, multi-ethnic mobile mobilization unit that came out in many respects.

And when we saw that playing out, it then became why were they coming out? Oftentimes people weren't coming out only for one issue. They were coming out for multiple things. And we performed a cool kind of power analysis and quantitative analysis to be able to look at that, which is oftentimes rare when we talk about that type of research.

And again, we found that across the board things were highly correlated. So a person might be coming out as it relates to policing, but they're also out about immigration. A person might be coming out about women's rights, but they are also out about healthcare, or they're also out about immigration or racial justice.

So we see that fluidity happening in a bunch of respects. And one of the big things that I wanna see is as we look at where, for example, ISIS has not only targeted and we could, I think most people recognize those particular cities where they are, we can also do the same thing looking at ice, going to airports.

They're not going to all airports, they're going to selective airports and very specific places. And if you look at migration patterns and immigration patterns, that also starts to make sense. So as we talk about California through the Midwest and East Coast, as we start to see. Migration and more migration back to the south, or immigration back to the south, particularly in a state like Georgia.

Of course, we talk a lot about Florida, but even in Alabama and Mississippi and Arkansas, I'm very interested in the ways that Black people and brown people in particular are gonna start mobilizing. And I, and I wanna be clear about why I'm stressing this. If you're on the East coast, oftentimes your neighborhoods are closer together.

It doesn't mean that they're not segregated, we know that. But it might be one block over. If you're growing up, say in Atlanta, I'm originally from Tennessee, grew up in Atlanta, the next neighborhood might actually be three to five miles down the road. You can't just walk over there. And so we're starting to see changing makeups of neighborhoods where a lot of these historical Black neighborhoods in a place, say like Atlanta, is now also becoming predominantly Latino.

So I'm curious if some of the coalitions that we've seen in other cities we're gonna start to see in the South as well. And, and that kind of leads me to a question that I have for you Christy, which you spent your career Keon, read off your amazing bio. Of course. One of the things that I always think about is your work in the DOJ and really helping us to make sense and also bring to bear what has happened in our communities around policing and the work that you've done and your colleagues have done.

And as I think about these policing practices now, I think for a lot of people don't study this. They might view this as exceptional as some kind of way that is different. That what we're seeing is different than the past from thinking about stop and frisk, broken windows, aggressive gang enforcement in many ways has become normalized and institutionalized over time. As we watch interior immigration enforcement escalate, what are we missing and what are the warning signs that scholars, advocates, and policy makers should be watching for that?

Tell us that this type of enforcement posture is becoming permanently embedded in the architecture of American policing. And at this point how much harder has it become to uproot?

**LOPEZ:** So, definitely the work that I did at the Department of Justice in cities like from Ferguson to Chicago to LA one of the things that is because of that work, one of the things that's been so interesting to me about immigration enforcement now is how a lot of what America's seen on the television screens, communities in certain neighborhoods in Chicago,

in parts of St. Louis, all over the country, this has been the policing they have experienced. It has not looked qualitatively different than what you're seeing on your screens. And so part of this for me is, you know, the people's outrage and horror and disbelief that, that law enforcement is doing this. That's, there's been a lot of that outrage for, and disbelief for a long time, and it just hasn't been broadly known or acknowledged or, or frankly cared about enough.

And so I think there's great opportunity actually in that. I also think there are definitely some warning signs that we need to be mindful of. If and, and one of the ways that we know that is because what history tells us is that a lot of the most intrusive abusive police practices started in the immigration field, used immigration as the excuse for why it was okay for police to do this.

Whether you're talking about the case of Rignone Ponce, which allowed police people think that Terry stops started with the Terry case. A reasonable assumption, but it's wrong. The first time that the Supreme Court said that it was okay for a police officer to stop a vehicle based on only reasonable suspicion, a very low standard that allows for the operation of explicit and implicit bias and prejudices was in Rignone Ponce, a case involving an immigration stop at the border.

Also a case where the court said that you, that police were allowed to take race into account in determining reasonable suspicion. Or another case INS versus Delgado, where the court pretended that it's, it can be the individual can consensually allow the police to stop him at the workplace, demand documents from them, and demand that they answer questions and there's no re suspicion required.

Similarly, a case called, Montoya Hernandez, where the court allowed checkpoint stops based on no suspicion for the first time, which led the way to a host of suspicious searches. All of these practices are completely normalized today. They've led to the use of, they've made it very easy for police to confront a lot of social problems through crime enforcement.

They've contributed to mass deportation, well to mass incarceration, and now mass deportation. Right? And so we see that these practices that were once very abnormal became normal and they were introduced to our society through immigration, and then they were embedded in mostly Black and Latina communities.

So what's happening now? I think we see masking of agents, right? And not identifying them. We see saturation of broad swaths of communities even where there's de they are demonstrably, law enforcement is doing more harm than good, right? We see a desire to sort of water down legal restrictions on police even more.

And we see just a gratuitous use of force becoming just an everyday part of law enforcement. We would be foolish to think that these, if we allow, if we tolerate these practices that they will be limited to the law, to the immigration context or to this time they will become part of law enforcement.

So I think that's the thing we need to do is be very intentional about recognizing how abnormal these practices are and how they will become normal unless we really work to address that. And I know, again, sorry to go back to you, Rashawn, but this is a lot of what you've been doing right? In talking about how some of these practices have become normalized.

It's a very militarized policing in, in, in communities. And I'm wondering if you can talk to us a little bit more about that, about the historical sort of salience of that and what we can learn, kind of what the nexus of what we were just talking about how these becomes a circular kind of, practice.

And hopefully whether we can get some clues from that about how, where the struggle of Latina communities and Black communities is actually the more, more the same than different.

**RAY:** Yeah, most definitely. I mean, your, your points about the way that a lot of this, these types of enforcements, how they come from also oftentimes immigration cases or immigration related type of type of suspicions.

And I even say that because one of the things that we know that's happening currently that has happened for decades and centuries at this point is really the policing of brown people as if they have never been on this land and actually don't have the right to be here. And I think that has given law enforcement the credence to engage and behave in the way that they have.

And what we talk about, of course, law enforcement in the United States, it has roots pun intended back to slave patrols when we talk about the origins of law enforcement in the United States. And if we fast forward. A couple of centuries there. And we get to say the Civil Rights Movement. One of the big things I want people to think about, about the Civil Rights Movement, even going back to the end of legalized enslavement in the United States, is that the same individuals who were policing rights before those legislations and those acts got passed, were the same people policing the day after.

And so when we look at Minneapolis, for example, and I'm bouncing around to make the point of just how similar things are when we go to Minneapolis, after we saw those killings, the next step that they did after a whole bunch of stuff and stuff going on was to remove the person in power and to remove people.

The removal of people does not change policy, and I think that that is one thing that's very, very important for us to keep in mind. So when we talk about the, those historical links and those roots, I think through that. And when it comes to ice enforcement, it's pretty interesting because ice, of course.

Really came about after nine 11. It's a fairly new a agency, a fairly new division. And what's interesting is if I'm, I'm laughing to myself because as I think about my teenage kids, you go back to the 1990s or early two thousands, that's such a long time ago. And for us, I'm like, oh, that was so yesterday.

That was this morning actually. And so we could think about the timeframes in which that happened, but an an, an agency and an entity like ICE being around 25 years is not that long. And yet what we've been able to really document are changes there that from president Bush to President Obama even oftentimes the first Trump administration and then into Biden, primarily used ICE around not only border patrol, but also dealing with focused criminal potential cases that they were engaging in.

That's what led them into our communities. They were very targeted. Trump's second administration is the first one that is deployed ICE in a very, very different way. And that's

because he has authority to control that. And you mentioned how some of these things that are abnormal become normal. Let's just focus on ICE very specifically.

They had a, a hiring age band for age, which you know very well working for the federal government. That was, you had to be at least 21. And then also you couldn't be as old as me and start, start there, right? And so they had this age band there for a particular reason. They have now lowered that band down to 18.

Again, I mentioned teenagers again to think if, if they're teenagers in two, three years, they could be working for ice. We have to think about the implications of that. In some cases, not only can they not drink, they couldn't even go get a hotel room, but they could all of a sudden work for ICE and do these sort of things.

So I think that's the first part of it. The second part. It is also the watering down of hiring standards. Mm-hmm. Which, up to this point, at least in modern America getting hired for the federal government, I mean, woo. You gotta show a whole bunch of paperwork. It's a bunch of stuff that you gotta show, and you gotta go through an extensive background check that has not been happening for ice.

They are being hired on the spot with a huge \$50,000 incentive. And then these policing practices, particularly the use of force practices that they're engaging in, part of what's happening there is that their training has been watered down. It went from. Well over 20 weeks down to about 47 days. That 47 is symbolic and real to represent the current president and the number that he is in the order.

And so we have that watering down. It's removed Spanish language training. It's heightened use of force. It's decreased deescalation tactics. So you put all of these things together and what we are seeing happening should not be surprising to any of us. And I think that is when it becomes normalized, is when we start to accept what we are seeing as being as normal.

Having federal agents be in airports is not normal. Having federal agents with masks on go through our neighborhoods is not normal. But the longer that it happens, the more normal these sort of things become. So sociologically and social psychologically, that's what we know. Something that's abnormal.

When you do it enough times, it all of a sudden becomes normal. And that is what hap what's happening now, is that all of these practices are becoming normalized. And again, if we link it historically, what's happening now should not be a surprise to us. I think particularly because one of the failures that we make as humans is we make assumptions that things are gonna progressively get better, instead of recognizing that sometimes things stall and even reverse.

And that's part of what's happening now. Yeah.

**LOPEZ:** So I really wanna pick up on one of the things that Rashawn said about you can change the person, but that doesn't change the policy, Keesha. And this is like, he's right. We are not gonna get better unless we're intentional about it. What do you, what can we do at the national, state, local level to either ensure that policies get us through and over, and maybe even in a better place than this moment might lead us to believe we'll be or what policy mistakes could we make in, in, in sort of, you know, squander this opportunity and make it worse?

What can you tell us about that?

**MIDDLEMASS:** I promise to answer your question, I am going to do some, some historic rooting at this moment in time because what Christy and Rashawn just said, it's really important to think about immigration and asking for papers and passes. That's straight outta the slave codes when you post reconstruction.

And those operating as police will challenge you if you're able to be in the community. You think about sundown towns and, and being, if you're Black, you better leave before the sun goes down. Yeah. All of these then have so foundational. Enslavement, they leaked into multiple policy areas within the United States and those policies become path dependent.

So they just repeat themselves through different administrations across time. And we are now seeing, unfortunately, we're like going back 'cause we're doing the same things that we did in the 1860s and we're now doing them in the 2020s. So this normalization also gets to the idea of where ICE is being located, but they're, where they're not going is also an important policy decision.

'cause policy is about what government does, but it's also about what government doesn't do. So we know that those that are undocumented are a huge economic engine in this country. But you don't see the chicken processing plants rated. You don't see the farms and agricultural hubs of California, Florida.

Wherever we grow things for people to eat, those places aren't being rated. And ICE is not checking papers of the businesses hiring people. And so we start thinking about the impact of policies that become normalized. It's also the idea of what government does and does not do is the political positioning of where, as Ray said, where ICE is created.

So what do we do? Circling back a little bit, the civil rights movement had been going on for decades until TV was in everybody's houses. So people visually seeing the dogs being literally let loose on children. You see the beatings of John Lewis and others on tv. This is where social media becomes really, really important, is being able to share those stories so more people can see them, to bring light to the unjust ways.

Where do we go from here? How do we fix this? Most of the ideas of democracy are found in the First Amendment, the freedom of speech, the right to protest, the right to a free press. I'm forgetting one, religion. A shout out to Afroman who challenged the right to actual speech through raps. Just Google Afroman.

You'll figure, you'll figure out what I'm referring to if you're not familiar. But this idea is we have to, as individuals take hold of the rights that we already know are embedded in the Constitution. We already know they're embedded in certain laws. What does that look like? Be active in your community.

So back to that micro being able to change our community. Volunteer. Does your library have reading sessions for those that are under in underserved communities? Go read to kids on a Saturday morning. Know your neighbors, but also take the time to vote. Right now. I think one of the biggest challenges is being, is civic disengagement.

And so we have to educate our friends. We have to educate our families regardless of you don't think voting matters. We have seen recent elections, basically Miami, where the new mayor won by like five or eight votes. So you might not feel like your vote matters, but in this moment in time, because civic engagement is so high, your vote may literally be the tipping point.

You galvanizing your people, your community to vote for candidates that share your values can literally change the outcome of public policies because the elected officials are the ones writing those policies. I don't know if I got to your question, but I, I tried to circle around.

**LOPEZ:** You did. And, but now all I can think about is lemon pound cake, so.

You're right. Alright, so, I just wanna close before we go to q and a, I want to close with one question, and you both have touched on this in terms of sort of next steps, and, you know, it's, it's kind of, you know, we'd be fooling ourselves to say this is, you know, an easy moment. And we're all confident we're gonna get out unscathed.

But you've both given us some ideas, and I agree. I think the, I've, I've always said that the First Amendment is the best amendment for all the reasons that you mentioned Keesha. But I wanna know if we, I wanna focus on moving forward and I wanna talk about the fact that, you know, history gives us many examples of where communities have divided against themselves, Black and Latina communities, other communities, right?

Or they've come together. And I think whether and how we get through this is going to depend on which path happens, right? Which path we take. And so, I know this overlaps with some of what you've said already, but are there specific things focused on this part of it? Ensuring that we are cohesive as communities rather than divided as communities.

You know, steps that we can take now, whether they're policy steps, organizing steps whatever it might be to try to ensure that we do whatever we can to come out better from all of this. Rather than worse.

**MIDDLEMASS:** I hope we come out better, but it's going to take some work. And what does that work look like? It, and I know I'm repeating myself, but I really truly believe that local politics then shapes other politics in going up to state legislators, to the state, to the national politics. Studies time and time again show that generally people will hold local office before they run for congress.

They'll hold office except for the current president. They'll hold office somewhere else before they run for president. So the idea is if you care about what happens in your local community, there is a mayoral election in dc. What does that look like? Who shares your values? Inform and educate your neighbors.

Unfortunately, misinformation is still a big deal. It will continue to be a big deal. And so to find the time to make the time, not find the time, make the time to educate yourself on the issues, and then vote. I know we've got an online community. You are not, if you're not in DC it matters to educate yourself on the candidates, educate yourself where their issues are, and then make sure you're registered, check your registration and then vote and take someone with you and get them to take someone with them.

And this whole idea of, of voting is known as sort of the first right of all other rights, and it matters as to who we put in office as the electorate.

**RAY:** Yeah. And my from my sociological perspective, I'll give you all a micro meso, macro kind of set of solutions here. I think on a micro level, which is really about us as individuals, our social interactions.

I think we really have to start paying attention to and curating what information goes into our brains. And what I mean by that is a lot of us are very averse about social media. We make assumptions that the algorithm is giving us certain things that we actually want to see. And in some cases that is depending on how you think about the algorithm, but you can actually manipulate that and change it to get the information that you actually need to get.

And I think that is the first step that we have to do. We have to think about what information we're getting and more importantly, nowadays, potentially what information we're not getting. And we have to ask ourselves what we're not seeing from the news. We kind of started this and some cases talking about mobilization and protest.

Kind of what we can do. There are a lot of protests actually happening that we do not see on tv, but people are posting that information. It is accessible. We can see it. We actually have to go identify it and find it. And then what we should do is actually share it back with others to help to make sure that they recognize what's going on.

Right. We've been, we, we continue to be bamboozled and hoodwinked about what's actually happening here in other places, and we have to take ownership over that process. And the same way that. Policing practices, whether that be during the Civil Rights Movement where TV showed up and the news showed up.

And nowadays where a person can film on their phone through social media, and that's the reason why we know about the incidents that we're talking about. We oftentimes have more power than we think we do. So I think that's the micro level piece, the meso level piece, and how we think about organizations becomes critical that if you're part of an organization and your organization for various, oftentimes historical reasons, focuses on a particular demographic of people, think about what it looks like to create more multicultural, diverse coalitions to bring people to the table, to sit at the table.

John Lewis, who you referenced, would always say, well, him and Shirley Chisholm, right? I kind of put 'em together that, you know, if it on one hand it's, you know, if you don't have a seat at the table, bring a folding chair. And then John Lewis would always say that that if you're not at the table, you're on the menu.

So what that means for us who are trying to build diverse coalitions, what we have to think about is if we're building a group at the table and it all looks like us, then we are actually serving up the people who we are also trying to be in community with. And we have to think consciously about that piece.

I hope people got that. And then the third piece is on the macro level, on the policy piece. Gabe Sanchez and I have been writing about this Shara Baes and I have a piece that'll be coming out, which is really about how VP Vance has said that federal, federal agents should have absolute immunity now.

A lot of people are starting to learn about qualified immunity, which suggests that oftentimes if people are working for a government entity, they can't be, they can't be sued. And so for law enforcement, that means even if they engage in wrongdoing, that people, people, including police, consider to be unjust, which Christy knows about this so well that all of a sudden that they wouldn't be able to be sued and instead the municipality is sued and that's your tax money that pays for that so forth and so on.

But the point of saying that is absolute immunity takes it to a whole different level. And I think that is something that we have to be very, very careful about, potentially normalizing. And so the piece with Rag and I were talking about the reasons why federal agents should not be given absolute immunity and instead should actually be liable if it is viewed as such that they should be.

And I also just want to highlight and even talking about rag. And Gabe is that all of us the three of us in particular representing different racial backgrounds, which also then represents different communities, but more importantly for the scholarship that we do represents different communities, was deliberate in how we thought about bringing our pieces together.

I mean, even what Keon is curated with Uprooted is thinking deliberately about these coalitions and bringing that together. And I even think just looking in this room, we, we can see that here in person. So I think that those are things that we can actually do on the micro miso macro level that actually gives us some power back.

How we think about the information that we actually access when we show up for a community meeting. What does that look like? Could we bring and partner with another organization to actually diversify our table, to diversify ideas, to actually see that we have more in common than we think we do, and then build a broader coalition for change.

**LOPEZ:** So important. Keesha, do you have anything to add to that?

**MIDDLEMASS:** Rashawn covered it.

**LOPEZ:** Alright. Alright. So let's see if we have any questions from the audience. If you do, please just raise your hand and they've got my, we've got some questions.

**MIDDLEMASS:** Can you please stand and stand up when you,

**LOPEZ:** How about up here on the left? Yep.

**AUDIENCE QUESTION:** Alright, how y'all doing? My name is Dominic Lewis current Congressional Black Caucus Foundation intern. My question, it pretty much got hit on in the last bit, in the last bit that you all touched on, but there's an increasing in rising substantial amount of young men that find themselves captured by the rhetoric of our current administration.

These same young men then apply and become border and custom enforcement agents. So these are the same young men that we're talking about right now. How do we strategically address this very online reactionary movement in a way that gives these young men a hope in our institutions in a path forward beyond cyclical, partisan politic?

**RAY:** That's a great question and something that I think about if research thought about Keon as well and some of our other colleagues, and really what you're highlighting Dominic, is the ways that oftentimes boys and young men are becoming radicalized online. And for many of us, when we hear online, we think the wild, wild, you know, www dot.

But really what we're talking about is social media and in particular YouTube. So there's analysis documenting that while everyone is using social media, people are really using it in different ways for a lot of young people and also a lot of young women. They are. More likely to be on TikTok or a couple of other platforms.

Boys and young men are more likely to be on YouTube. And that doesn't mean that people aren't also on TikTok and YouTube, but more so, and part of what happens on YouTube is long form, form content that I have examined and studied. That is essentially what some people will call the red pill community.

There are other ways to frame it, which is really when you get down to it, it's about oftentimes the disdain for women and the progress that that women are making in society. What it also picks up on, though, and this is what your question is touching on, so well, it also speaks to how there are a lot of men feeling as though that society is passing them by, that the economy is no longer for them.

That they are often oftentimes have some of the highest rates of loneliness, some of the highest rates of suicide, some of the highest rates of being underemployed. And we have to be very real about those real problems. And I think part of what they are trying to say is. What part of what they are trying to say is that we feel excluded.

I think about Arley Hockschild's work, a sociologist at Berkeley who came out with a book called Strangers in Their Own Land, which is a book based, a qualitative book based on southern Louisiana of men and women. But one of the big things that stood out is how men really felt disconnected to what is happening in America, that they are literally standing on this land and they don't feel like it's theirs.

And of course we could talk from a uprooted perspective on whether or not it is theirs or not, but, but from the standpoint of I think highlighting that is what can we do about this? I think one of the biggest things that I noticed here with doing this analysis, and you all could do this, is fairly simple.

Just look up, say the top 10, top 20, top 50 podcast. And there are analyses that kind of breaks down those podcasts in different ways. Political orientation being one. And what you see is there's a huge slant toward, toward the right. And part of what comes out of that language is then radicalizing people to not only be a part of, say, wanting to give \$50,000 in joining ICE, but also agreeing with those tactics.

Because for as many people that are joining ICE or trying to, there are also a lot of people who are going along with it and are satisfied with the type of policing practices that we're actually seeing. So I mean, we really have to, I mean, it's such a longer conversation that could be had with your question about what's happening with boys and young men and them feeling left out of the economy and left outta society.

But part of what it means and what it speaks to politically is that the right has done a much better job at signaling them to them than the left has. And I think that's something that the

right has taken hold of, and that's something that the left really needs to pay attention to and try and learn from.

**MIDDLEMASS:** We also have to think about that the advancement of girls and women into leadership roles, but also through education does not mean that boys and men are being oppressed. It just means that girls and women have reached a sense of equality and how we address that is. Gotta be multifaceted. It's gotta be at the political level too, but it's also ensuring that boys know they have opportunities too.

It's girls just seem to be taking advantage of the same opportunities. They're going to undergraduate and getting their degrees at much higher rates. And then girls, young women are now going into medical school and law school and graduate school at such increased rates that I think, not just think, I know boys and young men are feeling left out, and this may, well, not may, it actually has to start with at the younger grade or younger level.

You gotta start thinking about boys at 6, 7, 8 and not thinking about them as young men. I'm not saying those young men have been lost, but this idea is we have to think about boys in a different way to ensure that they know they have opportunities. So the next generation does not feel left out. What do we do for the current young men on, on YouTube?

I don't know. But I know that there has to be sort of this counter revolution to let them know that they are a part of society, they've got social networks, and that people do care about them and then bring them back into the larger fold of community.

**LOPEZ:** Yeah. I sort of feel like we need a pretty direct conversation about how we don't need .

The world can be better for everyone without misogyny and white supremacy and just like, actually creating the vision of that world, like with, you know, instead of trying to accommodate the sensitivities and concerns. It's a, it's a, it's a different approach. How about the, very back there. Yeah.

**AUDIENCE QUESTION:** Hi, my name is Betsy I'm inarsala and I'm a very retired person. But I had a colleague who used to come to every Brookings event of this nature, and he was always playing the devil's advocate. And I, he's no longer with us, but I know he would've said today, one of the things he often said, and that was at the time of September 11th when Homeland Security was created.

There were no more than a thousand people, hu individual people involved with ISIS and the other groups like isis. No more than a thousand. And within two years, Homeland Security had a million employees. Huge overkill. And the thing that makes people of my generation uneasy to a great degree is, what was this really all about?

Either, either the people that created Homeland Security were really dumb, or there was something else really going on from the very beginning. And that, of course, is what we think. So I just wanted to throw that out. The other thing is I know a lot of people living around the country who are doing all the things that you've suggested, civically involved in their communities and so on and so forth, and they would love to know about this initiative because they're all feeling sort of like the ship at sea by themselves.

You know, sort of cut off from all the things that we knew our whole life and invested our lives in, you know, all those things that's like all the rugs are being pulled out from under us. So they're still staggering around trying to do all those things, but it would be nice for them to know that Brookings, somehow or other isn't afraid to stick its head up out of the sand and have an initiative like this.

But on the other hand, I know if you publicize it, you'll draw some scrutiny. You may not want.

**LOPEZ:** Oh, we like scrutiny. Right. So I think, can you, can we, can you can you speak to that point particularly about, and I think especially you Keesha, this sort of relationship with media communication and these policies and how, like the role that I mean that's such a huge point.

Like there's not a, I don't think there's a dearth of, of imaginative ideas. The issue is like getting people to collate around those confused around those ideas.

**MIDDLEMASS:** Right. So the convergence of media politics and policies really comes down to how an issue is framed. So when you think of the post 9/11 era, it was all national security and homeland.

We had not talked as a society, an American society about a homeland until post 9/11. And then all of a sudden that 9/11 became the trigger for not just creating the Department of Homeland Security, but investment in the FBI and law enforcement and going after library lists. If you were taking books out, that seemed dangerous.

And now you can Google how to make things I was gonna say a bad, not a bad word, but make, you know, things that go boom. You can now go on the internet, but the idea is the federal government invested in policing and surveillance of very particular communities. And then that just expanded out from Homeland Security and it became normal for other than federal agencies to survey. And then you start thinking about the federal agencies that are copied by state surveillance, the arm of surveillance. So it's not just police.

To this idea of social media is how is an issue framed. Politicians then capture that idea and then they create policies. The best ex, best example. Two examples. I think they're the best. Welfare queen was discussed in the 1970s in an article in the Chi one of the Chicago newspapers. It was picked up by a politician called Reagan. I know it's ancient history for young people. And then it became policies in the eighties. And then those policies have gone through about reforming the actual welfare state.

Anchor babies is another framing of those that come undocumented and have babies that are American citizens. And a whole bunch of policies now are framed around the phrase anchor babies. The framing really matters because that's what politicians catch onto. And then policies follow that.

So back to social media. What are we consuming, but also what are we sharing? How are we educating? When I retweet something, it's about trying to make sure people see facts. I hope they see me as a, as a credible messenger, that I'm not just saying stuff, but it's saying from a grounded understanding of issues. And that consumption of information also then has to be shared with others.

It's not just retweeting things, but it's talking about it. It's going back to the dinner table. When we used to talk about politics. Well, now you gotta talk about it in like social media forums when you're not actually connected at the physical level.

**RAY:** I mean, I'll just quickly say thank you for your questions and channeling your friend.

The biggest thing, and Christy knows this as well, one interesting thing about law enforcement is sometimes people miss is how it swallows things up. What I mean by that is whether we're talking local, state, or federal level, when leaders and elected officials and appointees sit in a room and they're trying to figure out where to allocate an additional line of funding or additional responsibility, law enforcement oftentimes speak up, speaks up.

On one hand it's because they might actually be positioned physically to be there, but it doesn't always mean that they're the right people to be there. I think ice, going into airports is a good example. They are physically available. It doesn't mean that they are the best and most qualified to be in that space.

And I think that that is one of the things that's happened with Department of Homeland Security. Whether we're talking this recent action or we go back to this beginning, that iteration over time has been the expansion of funding that goes into DHS that gives more power and responsibility to a law enforcement unit.

And when we look locally at police, local police departments, we see that they go, they get paid to ride around and look at potholes and get cast outta trees and do all that somebody needs to do deal with the potholes. I'm not sure if we want police dealing with the potholes though. And I think that speaks to how we look in searching jurisdictions.

Law enforcement budgets, for example, might end up being 30 to 40% of a municipality's entire budget. And I think with Department of Homeland Security, we are seeing some of, some of that action at the federal level.

**LOPEZ:** And just to add to the communication point, the I think that, and it goes to your point about having responders be other than police.

There's been polling that has shown that now people will say that if there's a mental health crisis, they want someone else coming besides the police. And they didn't pull, pull that idea outta thin air. They, they did that because they started seeing that groups just started doing it. And then people started seeing, oh, this is a thing that can happen.

And so those same polls show that when when you ask them, well, if you have a dispute with your neighbor, do you want the police coming? And people will say, they want the police coming more than the police say they want the police coming, right? Because they don't know of an option. And so part of the communication and, and growing this is just doing it and then, and, and watching it grow in, in, in all, all over the place.

It's that, it's that micro or mese level. There was a question over here. Maybe one more.

**MIDDLEMASS:** One more?

**RAY:** Yeah. This might be our last one. Yeah, sorry.

**AUDIENCE QUESTION:** Alright. Thank you. Hi. My name is Tanya Gola. I'm the executive director of the University of California Washington Center. I know it's really hard to do like real time analysis of what's going on, but I'm really struggling to try and articulate the change in terms of the law enforcement activity in my neighborhood.

So, I grew up about two blocks north of here along Kennedy Street. So in the 1990s what you would see is law enfor, MPD would stop Black boys on the corner, kind of any Black boy they saw and shake 'em down, see if they have money, see if they have drugs. So. The, there, there's no pre sense of reasonable suspicion for that particular targeted group.

And we fast forward to today, or like, not today really, but September, October and November, 2025, what we witnessed was ice agents enforcement and removal operations driving around jumping outta cars and targeting Latino men. And now we've seen the data, it's almost all Latino, almost all men, that they were specifically targeting, asking them for their papers.

That slowed down after the Molina decision in December. And now what we're seeing is MPD followed by two unmarked vehicles that often have their license plates covered up with duct tape. Mm-hmm. The agents have masks. The agents are filming the community and they're, but okay, so what they're doing now is using pretextual stops.

So they are expired tags, open containers. So there's some, I I'm just sort of struggling, like, is there a difference between these three things or not? Is it just who's paying attention? Is it just the targets or is there a real difference? And I was really struck by your comment that like these things are, you know, these practices are being tried in this community and also DC as you know, is a long standing testing ground for federal enforcement.

So I'm curious as to like, what is your take on, like, what's actually different and what does that mean for how we move forward?

**LOPEZ:** I just need to say shout out to University of California changed my life. But I will yeah, I think it's a great question. And you know, my view is that these are these, this is a singular practice that it's just, it's manifested different ways in different times depending on who the least popular outgroup is at that moment, or a particularly vulnerable group.

And so there is a connection. It is the same struggle. And that I think is, is a a point that we really need to emphasize to that. That is one of the ways that we get people to sort of rally around together, around these practices is it, it truly is. And it, one of the nice parts about getting really old is that you're like, oh no, I know this because I've actually seen it.

This is, there's no question that there is a through line here. So I, I'll have both of you can respond as well or better.

**RAY:** I'm good.

**LOPEZ:** Alright. Alright. Well thank you all so much. Thank both of you for your wonderful conversation and I look forward to the next panel.

**RAY:** Alright. I also have the pleasure of introducing our moderator for the second panel and I'm gonna be quick given time. It's so, so much that I could say about our moderator. Feel

free this second panel if you all already wanna come up and get ready to get rolling. But Dr. Jonathan Cox is vice president of the Center for Policy Analysis and Research at the Congressional Black Caucus Foundation.

Previously he was an assistant professor at the University of Central Florida graduate of Hampton University, got his PhD down the road at University of Maryland, go Terps, and has done quite a bit of work thinking about higher education, racial inequality. Also has done a lot of work locally at the state level and also at federal levels around a host of critical issues that are really, really important.

And we appreciate your time this morning, Dr. Cox. I could keep going, but I wanna make sure you all have ample time. So thank you for being here so much.

**COX:** Thank you. Thank you. And good morning, or I guess good afternoon at this point, everybody. Very, very excited to be here. Oh, it's all good there. I was wondering, I thought it was like a, a magical mic where I didn't hear it, but only you did. So again, good afternoon. Very excited to be here. Not only because of the great topic that we're talking about today, the series that I'm really excited for, but also because I get to engage with some, some incredible people, some folks that I have known for quite some time that are, you know, partners in all this work.

And so as was shared, right, I currently work for the Congressional Black Caucus Foundation. I oversee our policy and research division. And I can say unequivocally that I love my job, right? I love it with a passion because I get to do great work in service of our mission to develop leaders and foreign policy and educate the public.

But all also towards the advancement of global Black populations, right? As a former academic who did not always get to focus on the communities that I wanted to, I really get to appreciate the opportunity to be able to do so now. And I know that resonates also with the panelists that we have today who are engaged in work that, that covers, you know, similar things towards similar aims.

And so before we jump into it, I would love for y'all to just maybe briefly introduce yourselves a little bit more to, to the audience.

**LEE:** Sure. Well, good afternoon everybody. I'm Dr. Nicol Turner Lee. I'm a senior fellow in governance studies here at Brookings, and the director of the Center for Technology Innovation and a proud partner to my dear buddy Keon Gilbert, who has launched this initiative.

So, really excited to sit in this capacity. Many of you know me in my tech capacity. But this is also a unique opportunity to sort of intersect I think areas in which technology policy in and of itself has become very extractive, exploitative and requires sort of a different approach to how we actually look at ways in which it's actually doing real community building and it's advancing racial equity.

I almost forgot, I'm also the author of a new book. It's at the Brookings bookstore. It's actually not so new, but it's new enough to still go get it. Digitally invisible, how the internet is the New Underclass, which really was a compilation of my 30 years plus experience in technology in communities, but more so sort of this dictate to the extent to which the digital divide intersects with systemic inequalities.

And so how we really need to look at this as a form of digital visibility, which I think also comes with a certain level of power extraction that we experience when communities are not connected.

**GILBERT:** Great. As I mentioned before, I'm Keon Gilbert. I am senior fellow in Governance Studies and also director of the Race Prosperity Inclusion Initiative and professor of public health at St. Louis University. My work largely really centers on the idea of how do we achieve health equity, and in particular, how do we do that by engaging and working alongside communities so that they have the opportunity to not only define problems and issues, but also to be involved in solving those problems and issues and thinking about the different types of data that we need or evidence that we need to address these problems and solve issues, but also to influence policy making.

**COX:** Indeed. Really great. You also did not mention that you have on excellent shoes, sir.

**LEE:** Exactly.

**COX:** It always matters because when you look good,

**LEE:** I was gonna say the same thing.

**COX:** You feel good and you do well. Alright, so I wanna jump in into the discussion. I really wanted to get us going and so just to begin, I think it would be great if you all could, or both of you could talk a little bit about what's to come for this series, right?

We're kicking off this uprooted series and so just for each of you just to give a little bit of a preview of what it is that you all are gonna be focusing on in your individual areas.

**LEE:** So what's so nice about this and being able to do set Brookings is the ability to partner with my colleagues who you already recognize their brilliance from the previous panel.

And I think that that really speaks volumes to what we've been able to do in this space alongside our partners like John Cox. So the work that I do really focuses on the democratized access to technology. And when I say technology compared to what most people think technology is today, it's not just ai.

I tell people AI has become this consumable, digestible piece that has defined all of technology. But you heard in the prior panel that much of what we also talk about is social media. We also talk about telecom policy, where we decide to build networks. If we actually go further, technology encompasses innovation, who's at the table deciding what innovations actually get created and deployed.

And so from my part of this, when I approach Keon about working on this, it's really important for us to see the evolution of technology, not just the internet and the extent to which, and let me just put this out there, there were people of color who were at the forefront of technology innovation many, many decades before we actually made this a public policy concern.

There are so many things that you all experience on the day-to-day basis from the technology of the signaling systems of red light and green light cameras, the, the cotton gin.

All of those technologies actually were created by people who actually represent communities of diverse perspectives. What does that also mean?

That technology, unfortunately, has not been readily available. And so what we espouse to propose in this vertical is the extent to which we actually envision technology as a civil and human right, the extent to which we see the economic capacities. We understand the cultural efficacy. When you have people who sit at the table, who reflect the lived experiences of the people around them, they come differently.

I'm a mother. I have a different patience than my husband when it comes to my children, right? I hit different. And I think that is one of the areas in which we don't spend a lot of time talking about. We spend a lot of time in this space that I'm in just recognizing all the contributions, but we do not interrogate the intersectionality of race.

And power in class and how that actually falls upon the technologies that we are seeing. Just think about the conversation we had in the last panel. They went right up my alley. I was like, I should just pull up a seat and sit next to them. You know, talking about social media, that is one of the conversations that we need to have, right?

Where do communities fall within this space where technology can be used to support and contribute to greatness, or it can be weaponized, it can be used for surveillance and in ways that actually erase communities. And so we are really excited because, you know, again, those of you who follow my work here at Brookings, those of you follow technology people.

We all talk about this stuff, right? We sort of do not leverage power and its role in creating systems of oppression that really can redefine and reconstruct our participation in democracy. So hopefully we'll talk a little bit more about that. You all know I'm like a preacher. Don't get me started on technology.

You know, this is called uprooted. I'm about to be upended, right? In terms of the things on this. But it's such an important and critical aspect that I really am, and my, my buddy here really allows us to go into that aspect of this project alongside the other components. Great.

**COX:** Keon, what about you?

**GILBERT:** Amen.

Amen. Amen. Well, first of all, I, I need to make sure I, I acknowledge something really, really quickly. Everyone is giving me way too much credit. This was as, as best as possible to describe a group project. I know many of us probably hated group projects, but this was a, this has been a successful group project, and in many ways this the emergence of uprooted is in many, many different ways.

Part of a, a, a group chat, not signal that has become public mm-hmm. In a very different way and hopefully a more productive way. The, the idea of, of this project and even sort of thinking about the individual themes really does center sort of our own areas of expertise as a person in public health.

And thinking about health equity, I wanted to make sure that we really sort of thought about not only the history and development of public health, and not just healthcare, but sort of

thinking about the broader infrastructure itself, which includes not only healthcare professionals, but public health professionals who are concerned about population health issues.

And also in particularly thinking about the population health issues of those who are most disadvantaged in lots of different ways and live in communities that don't have all of the resources that more, more affluent communities have. So we really sort of need to not only think about not only the people, but their context.

One of the things that I try to emphasize to my own students is the idea of context and how much it matters in terms of shaping not only our daily decisions about our health, our health behaviors, but also sort of the, the broader infrastructure of communities, cities and neighborhoods that also shape those decisions as well.

Based on where you live, you may have access to sidewalks, you may not. I've even witnessed some, some neighborhoods not too far from here in, in Maryland where there's sidewalks just on one side of the street. And you look at, you know, our infrastructure and think, well, how did that happen? In many different ways.

Those are policy decisions or decisions based on whether or not there were enough resources. As we sort of even think about our own Washington DC and think about where are bike lanes and where are they not.. Again, thinking about opportunity and in opportunity and access, we also have to sort of really consider and think about who has the power to influence not only healthcare access, but also access to other social resources and social services that really make health important.

Of course the intersections of health and in public health and in the field, we think about other issues related to housing, to thinking about employment. Often what happens in across these sectors is that we care about them and we can talk about them and we can talk about their influence on health, but we really don't have the power or, or authority to influence these other sectors and institutions and systems.

And it becomes really important for us to be able to think about how best to restructure policies to be able to do that. One other quick thing that's important is also thinking about the public health workforce and healthcare workforce. They're both shrinking for lots of different reasons. Many physicians have talked about how the corporatization of healthcare hospitals has pushed them out in lots of different ways and caused them to not participate.

In a recent study, they some folks looked at a, a decline in the public health workforce at state and local levels, and saw that between, about, I think 2021 and 2023 there was a, about half of the public health workforce at state and local levels declined. And we've also witnessed because of this administration, nearly 30,000 people have lost their jobs and the federal workforce who work in different sectors of public health.

And so these are real challenges that we have to think about in terms of how do we move forward in advancing the health equity agenda.

**COX:** Thank you both for giving us a little bit of a preview. And I'm, I'm clearly very excited, again, talking about the history of the, just the three people that are up here and working rally, both of y'all actually being on panels for our organization, for our annual legislative conference.

Right. Talking about these very same issues that you are bringing up now and that you're gonna continue forward, right? 'cause these are evergreen issues, particularly now in this time. And so, I wanna come back to you, Nicol again and so you did talk about AI already. We're gonna get into that a little bit later.

Okay. I wanna start off a little first, I wanna get back to this book that you talk about, which is available right in that bookstore, I think right around the corner. Go ahead and get it on your way out. And so again, the, this a book that you wrote digitally invisible, right? Really thinking about, this creation of this new underclass where you talk about this idea, right? And I think that's really such a fundamental part because you can't talk about any type of technology now without talking about access to the internet, right? That is a major need, right? It's a necessity. And so how does a lack of access or barriers to access really define the experience of vulnerable populations in particular, and what does it mean, as you say, to be digitally invisible?

**LEE:** So it's interesting, I'll kind of relate it back to Keon, 'cause I also work on health policy. In my book, I made a point of going across the country to talk to different communities. So I found myself in rural areas, urban areas, you know, among older people, younger people, school aged students. It was just really a fascinating experience.

I did this actually before the pandemic, the pandemic hit. And then I actually went back and revisited many of the communities I had traveled to, only to find out there were even more devastating consequences. You know, kids not being able to go to school in a community that was already a K through 12 consolidated school.

An urban Black community where this principal had gotten every kid a tablet and at the end of the day, the pandemic hit. And she said those tablets were like books without paper. And I write about that in the book, which really stuck with me. After doing this kind of work for so many years. But I'll relate it back to like what Keon talked about.

There was one particular person that I met in a park, in a library in Phoenix, Arizona. And her name is Francis. And Francis was trying to get a library card and she was literally screaming, crying, doing every imaginable motion to get this library card at the local library. And the librarian said, well, we can't give it to you because you need this id.

And so she. Stormed outta the library and as a very good researcher, I watched her and then I followed her and I told her I wasn't a police or a caseworker. I was doing a story on the internet and how people use it and what should have been a 15 minute conversation ended up being a two hour conversation.

Francis needed a library card because she needed to get on a computer, this Black woman, because she had stage four breast cancer and the only way that she could check her health records was going to a public kiosk. And for me, that was just in 2022, 2019, and this woman was probably gonna die and leave behind the child that was actually in the library at the kiosk working on a project because she couldn't afford to pay for a connection in her home and her doctor was actually communicating with her via that mode.

For me, that was really striking because I continue to see stories like that, you know, from, you know, even visiting a school in Maricopa County, if you all remember before ice, there was this sheriff in Maricopa County that was picking people up off the street and this grade school kids that were first through third grade were carrying phones.

And I said to the, one of the teachers, why does everybody carry a phone? She said, it's not what you think. I said, well, what are they doing it for? She said, well. Those kids need a lifeline to a parent, a guardian, a friend, in case they come home and no one is there. And so for me, that sensitivity of not having access to broadband informs the conversations that I have.

When we think about tech access and tech justice, it's really important for people to be connected so that they can get access to some of the things that we're doing. Now, I see Ashley over there when it comes to learning, when it comes to healthcare, when it comes to employment, these are verticals that improve the quality of our lives.

They are economic drivers that define for people social mobility. I'm a sociologist, like Rashawn. There is cause for having these types of connections via technology. If you are trying to make it in a world that being in line no longer matters. And so for me, I am a constant person in my research. I mean, we just did something last year, the future of the internet in the age of ai that we cannot leapfrog into new technologies without really getting to the fundamental premise of how do we ensure that people have access where they live, and they're not trying to figure out how to afford broadband over bread.

Hmm. Particularly in a society again where we just see the closing of, of physical structures and the shift from analog to a more digital space. And I pointed out Ashley, because this is actually interesting if I can, and one of the things we'll talk about with the initiative, it's something I do my work.

When we think about digital access, right now we are in the midst of a conversation about children not having screens. And it is a big deal that we are saying take these phones out of the hands of young people because it's a distraction. And you know, I have a 19-year-old and 23-year-old and I probably did a barely bad job as a parent 'cause I didn't know what they were going on right at that time, I have to say.

But what I found to be so interesting about this conversation are two things. We recently just found out from a Pew research study that Black and Latina kids that actually get online using AI, for example, are not using it for emotional support. They're using it to do their homework, the free stuff, and larger numbers than we've ever imagined.

We also have figured out through my research, that Black and Latina kids who do have screens in their hand often have it because they're in a calculus class and their parent could not go to the store and buy them a Texas instrument calculator. And so it's really important as we look at technology and we look at high-speed broadband availability that we consider I what I call them, these alternative scenarios, a ways in which people interact with technology in different ways.

I mean, my claim to fame actually is in people who know me started with the first minority broadband adoption study in 2010, Darrell probably members, I wrote my first study about how Blacks and Latinos use the internet. And at that time we were developing the national broadband plan. And interestingly enough, the same stu things that I said in 2010 still persist in 2026.

We still do not have ubiquitous access that allows people to offload into a digital economy that's going to improve the quality of their life. So we have to take that serious, right? I know. We're like, AI is like going into old country buffet. We want everything, right? I tell people, it's

like you go into the buffet, you fill up the first two plates, and then you realize at the end of the line the good stuff of the last four items, right? It's the filet mignon. It is the better choice of seafood. It's everything that you're supposed to be eating. But you filled it up with everything else in the beginning of the line because you were greedy.

And the second thing is you were like, it's here, right? My husband is taking an AI class and every time he takes another module, he comes up. He says, look what I learned. I said, if you come up here one more time, tell me something else about what you learned. But that does not suggest that we need to pass over the people who are struggling. To just get basic access. And so I think we need to do a lot more research there. I'm very grateful to the foundation for keeping this information and this conversation live.

**COX:** Thank you. Yeah, that's definitely great. And I'm, I'm glad you touched on the AI 'cause I want to get into that. I wanna do, I wanna bounce around a little bit first before we get back to you on ai, which is coming to Keon with this. Because we know that there's intersections between AI and health, right?

That we're starting to see more and more of. We're actually having a, one of our health equity summits is coming up soon where we're gonna be specifically talking about AI and immersion technology in the health field. Right? And so I'm really interested in to what you have to say about this Keana.

So, we know that it's AI is being embedded into health systems, maybe not always in the best ways. And so what is the role for AI when it comes to the future of public health? And how can public health professionals use AI like responsibly and ethically, we'll say?

**GILBERT:** So it's a great question. Be before I answer, I, I want to tell you, tell the audience and tell my mama I still have my TI81 calculator

**COX:** Cost a lot, you better still have it.

**GILBERT:** Well, exactly that, that, that was the one

**LEE:** Donated.

**GILBERT:** She said, she said, you going to get one and that's it. And I still have it. So, I, I was like, wow. I, yeah. But it also, I mean, I think in many different ways speaks to, not only the longevity of these questions about technology and who has access and how we will, how we will utilize these tools.

Your question about how this is being used in public health and healthcare, and so essentially in many different ways. You know, several reports from the COVID-19 pandemic have identified that you know, public health agencies have been using AI tools to, you know, essentially carry out core functions of public health.

So monitoring and assessing disease progression, thinking about different ways of spatial modeling. How do we then sort of utilize that data and the information to then deploy public health resources. So if you see clusters of, of disease emerging in particular communities, how do you use AI tools in responsible and ethical ways to then be able to develop some

strategies that we can send public health professionals out to start to better understand why there is a particular cluster in a particular community, particular neighborhood.

So I think we're, we are seeing AI happen in sort of being used more in those spaces as we think about, you know, the general core functions of public health, but also in healthcare in terms of thinking about how are we using it to diagnose disease. I'm, I'm reminded of, you know, the early days of like WebMD.

Yep. Yes. Where people, you know, were experiencing their own symptoms and starting to, to Google or, or whatever, you know, symptoms and you could have anything from a flu to cancer or something like that sometimes, right? And so as these tools not only are getting better, but it's, I think in many different ways, it's also allowing, empowering patients to have some information to even better communicate with their, with their providers.

And so as we think about the self-education part, there's a real importance and emphasis on making sure that the information is as accurate as possible as people are looking for information. And also, we know that when we go to our own, you know, healthcare visits, our physicians are using these tools as well.

They are literally entering information into computers during our 12 to 15 minutes with them to help, help sort of determine, well, what's the best course of action? I think other ways that these can be used more ethically and more responsibly is also not only empowering patients, but becoming parts of the tools of communication between patients and providers.

We know through decades of research that. Part of the reasons why there are disparities in health outcomes is because often patients of color lower income patients do not get the same recommendation treatment recommendations. They often get more severe harsher recommendations because there's this, there's this belief that they will not follow up to to care.

So if we think about the use of, of AI and technology. People are gonna start asking questions, well, you didn't ask, you didn't offer these other things that I, that I heard about or that I've seen other people talk about. And so I think even these online communities can be really helpful in terms of helping people to understand what are their treatment options besides the one or two that a physician or other healthcare provider may suggest.

**LEE:** Can I, can I jump into that as well? So I I love what Keon said, and I think we're seeing this balance, right? So we see among the healthcare community these administrative efficiencies. So the ability to use like transcription AI has actually, to Ian's point, it's improved the experience for patients of color who technically have some concern when their physician does not look at them, right?

They literally, you know, feel office visit may be meaningless because they don't feel, they have not, they do not have a connection with their provider, which I think is one of the reasons why people actually trust their provider. So we've seen those kinds of things. We've also seen in the health space a lot of scientific discovery when it comes to ai vaccinations, pharmaceuticals what we're researching on our side and Keon and I just actually started talking about ways in to intersect is like actually a lot of improvement on that side.

Where it gets tricky is that the data could be wrong, and I think that's one of the areas which I think we have to continue interrogate. So I was actually on the hill speaking for the

Congressional Hispanic Caucus Institute, and I used this name Henrietta Lacks. How many people in this room know Henrietta Lacks?

Okay. So Henrietta Lacks, her cells were extracted, stolen. Provided for the discovery of cancer treatment. That has just basically changed the, the way in which we actually solve it in many respects. She, she has I forget the particular cancer cell, but her, which one is

**Speaker 9:** Hela?

**LEE:** Hela, yep. Her cells actually helped create Hela, but there's a challenge.

Henrietta Lacks died poor, she died exploited, and she died at the end of the day, a Black woman. And it was just a couple of weeks ago that out of the six settlements in her family has waged that they just received closure, I think on the second of the six. And why do I bring that up? For me, Henrietta Lacks represents what we have to do better when we apply AI in healthcare.

We need to improve upon clinical trials that actually represent the lived bodies of people who are not necessarily in the dominant data sets when it comes to information. You know, one of the reasons, one of the things when someone asked me, when I came out my book, I was on a conversation and someone said, had Francis been subjected to ai?

Would she not have been in stage four breast cancer? And I said. Yes, she still would've been where she was because the likelihood of the density of the breasts of Black women are not often seen in radiological screenings and imaging in ways that actually make sense. I mean, there are AI tools like pain threshold medication that are being tested on men and being used on women.

And so we have a lot more to do. And I mean, in what I spoke about last week too, even with immigrant women, one of the reasons we don't see a lot of Latino women doing clinical trials is because they don't wanna show up at the door and then be told that they have to be subjected to deportation or their information has to be collected.

So we have to do a better job when it comes to AI and health of making sure, and I call this word based on a, a, a colleague who's a non-resident here, Renee Cummings. We have to ensure that this data is not traumatized. Much of what we talk about in health, criminal justice employment education, we are dealing with public systems that are baked with inequalities.

And so I, I love the way that, you know, Keon comes in as a person who's worked in this space, and I just ride along on that train, right? Because I think it's so important to raise issue with conversations around data and health, so we're not replicating the systemic inequalities that we have the ability to solve.

I would also say another thing is people don't understand the same type of facial recognition technology that we embed in surveillance gets embedded in health tools. There are pulseometers that a brown finger trying to take a pulse will not be recognized. Or people who are not seen, who are digitally invisible as AI actually becomes a compliment to technology innovation.

**GILBERT:** If I can just add a couple of things. A big part of what you, you talked about was really historical trauma.

**LEE:** Yes.

**GILBERT:** And in many different ways. Not only does this series sort of help to think about that, but also to think about a pathway forward during the COVID Pandemic when you know, many different options and tools were being used to think about not only vaccinations, but how to get people involved in trials in many different ways.

Sort of unearthed historical medical trauma, medical mistrust, historical mistrust, community mistrust of not only the public health community, but of research institutions, medical, medical schools sort of the, the, and government in many different ways. And asking people to participate in clinical trials.

Rapid clinical trials was really challenging for lots of communities. They did not give many communities of color to, to participate in the very early stages of that. And a lot of it has to do with this. And if we thought about a different way of using technology at that time. Mm-hmm. And, and I, I will, I'll admit, as a public health professional, as a public health professor, it was a failure of us to not utilize technology in a more significant and useful way to communicate.

Often having conversations within my own family and friend circle about some of the INF misinformation that they were hearing. Not only about vaccines, but also of COVID, COVID treatments, COVID testing and recognizing and understanding that yes, there are gonna be lots of questions, lots of problems, but how do we utilize some of these tools to better inform and better educate communities?

And so there's lots of different strategies that we can utilize to do that. And also making sure that we have people on the ground, like whether they're health champions community health workers, making sure that they also have a better understanding of these tools so they can utilize them to communicate with the communities that they work with.

**COX:** Absolutely. Yeah. And so I'm, I, I love all the things you were saying. Things are really great. It kind of feeds into some of the next questions I wanted to get at. 'cause I wanted to connect us a little bit more to to policy directly and then really think about like this current administration's major policy lever that has been used in this year. Has it only been one year?

**LEE:** Right.

**COX:** And so, I wanna talk about the executive orders. These executive actions, right? So a, a lot of you are really aware of this, right? Since returning to office last year, right? The president has issued an unprecedented number of executive orders, right? Nearly 40 were issued just in that first week alone.

And so there there are tons that we could talk about, could highlight a couple just some of the outcomes for y'all that I'd love to get some of your thoughts on. Again, interestingly, because this is such a major policy leverage literally shaping the way in which the federal

government is in enacting everything right now at CBCF, we created this executive order tracker to help us understand what some of these executive orders are.

For us, the impacts on Black communities in particular, we know that that extends beyond just Black communities. And so again, y'all is premier researchers in both of your fields around this. I want to get some insight into this. And so I'll start with Keon really quickly, right? And so one of the executive orders, right, withdrew the US from the World Health Organization.

We could think about the, the placement of the secretary of of Health and Human Services and the going back on vaccine mandates, all these different things, right? Because you talk about this idea of not only missing disinformation, but you know, trust, public trust, right? And so how do we overcome.

This miss and disinformation that we're seeing particularly when things are issuing from the federal government and what's the role of evidence-based public health strategies and evidence-based policymaking to help rebuild and restore that trust? Is it even possible? Right.

**GILBERT:** Thanks for that really easy question.

I, I'll start by echoing and paraphrasing. I think it was senator, an Angela also Brooks, who said that RFK is a threat to public health, is a danger to public health perhaps, I think may have been the word that she used. And part of that is when you come from a particular perspective I mean his own sort of history in, in public health, especially around vaccines, you know, was birthed out of misinformation.

And when you think about that as his own sort of trajectory and sort of orientation to health he's gonna bring, he's, he's brought that lens to the office, not only decimating the public health workforce at the federal level, but also sort of rewriting narratives and reshaping in many different ways, very long held scientific facts that vaccines work as an example.

The idea that they are sort of, you know. Recommended only in response to outbreaks such as measles in Texas is problematic. Mm-hmm. When we think about sort of the messaging and what we, what it seems like we are not going to learn the lesson from the COVID-19 pandemic about the ways that we message about public health interventions, who are the messengers about public health interventions.

We are going to repeat many of the challenges that we experienced then, and people not really having very clear information and clear pathways for pathways forward. Part of that also part of your question also reflects on the potential gaps or existing gaps in data that will exist as a result of not collecting some of the routine surveys that we've, that, that we've been collecting for decades to better understand people's health risks, people's health behaviors, and being able to disaggregate them by a range of social identities.

That information has been critically important, not only in terms of thinking about deploying federal resources, but even state resources. And so the question then becomes how are states and cities going to fill that gap, not only in terms in terms of data, but also thinking about filling those gaps.

In terms of sort of the resources that, that have been, you know, distributed to states in particular? Also, just another part of your question, we still have 10 states that have not expanded Medicaid.

Mm-hmm.

Mm-hmm. Those states are in the Rust Belt, the Black belt, the Bible Belt sub. Many, many states where there's a higher concentration of Black and brown communities.

Low income communities, and many of those states also have the lowest health rankings across the country. And so when we think about what this administration and the damage, just even to those two, those 10 states, will, will, will, will have, we are going to see a deepening of disparities. We're gonna see a deepening of inequalities in across chronic diseases, meaning people will not have access to preventative screenings, people will not have access to a range of different treatments once they are diagnosed.

We won't have the public health infrastructure to make sure that we sort of, you know, are able to detect and monitor disease in different ways. And so this, I mean, as I've said, this administration will be, will be a danger to, to many of those communities. The last thing I'll, I'll, I'll say is some of our work has tried to sort of recenter or, or engage community-based organizations, municipalities, especially small to mid-size cities, to better understand some of the ways that they are trying to not only fill the data gaps, but also to create data equity infrastructures or data governance.

And making sure that they create data dashboards and data platforms that are transparent and accountable, allowing them to see what their government agencies are doing to address many of the problems and to make government more efficient. Those are some of the tools and strategies that I think will be really important, not only now, but moving forward to help rebuild and repair some of the trust that that you asked about.

So I'll stop there.

**COX:** Very good. Nicol, I wanna bring you in just really quickly on this before I dive into your executive orders. Which is the, again, kind of connecting back to this idea of misinformation and disinformation. And so. I'm wondering about just the telling of our stories or the telling of these communities that you talk about that are becoming digitally invisible.

Making sure that we have that involved, particularly when we're thinking about technology as it's moving forward.

**LEE:** So, I'm gonna deviate a little bit 'cause I'm gonna talk about the tech part. I promise I'm gonna get to it, I promise. I have to go in on what we've been seeing in terms of the executive orders and how that has been reordering and restructuring American life as we know it.

I mean, let's just start with the rollbacks in diversity, equity, and inclusion and the spiraling effect that's actually had on communities of color, particularly Black communities where it has led to banned books, it has led to greater scrutiny of higher education. It has led to deals not being sealed with.

Corporations that may suggest their internal practices are in compliance with equal opportunity, but yet do not have the behavioral signals that suggest that the this administration is willing to work with them. It has led to defunding a variety of private and public sector entities. It has led to more than 400,000 Black women being dismissed in roles in corporate America as well as in the federal government.

It has led to young people trying to figure out how to pay for an education when their major has been deprofessionalized, where going into education, these were middle class opportunities and jobs that have been through executive order devalued. I can keep going. I got a couple more I wanna make sure I put out there.

I mean, we have seen state's rights challenge in terms of their ability to make decisions for local citizens. That make sense? You know, on the internet policy side, right now we're seeing states being challenged if they are too burdensome with AI regulation because they wanna get more data centers that essentially may pollute the environment and kill everybody before they even functional.

Right? But the bottom line, these executive orders as a composite have done a lot to uproot communities of color. And I think we need to like sit there for a minute. We need to stop and think about how the power of a pen has actually, you know, regressed on our progress. In the next few weeks, we will find out about voting rights, an issue that has been legislated in the court for so many decades, a bipartisan issue that has been approved in terms of reauthorization.

But yet we may have people bringing a birth certificate to prove citizenship to vote or mail-in ballots that really apply to military and students disenfranchising more people. I mean, this is an unusual time. I've been doing policy for 30 plus years. I know I look 25, but I'm really not. And I started, just so people know, not as a technologist, but I did my dissertation on civil rights and social movement theory.

And what this suggests to me is that we are at this space where we have to really reconsider how we actually capture and become less uprooted as a result of that. And technology is no different. I mean, we see under the former administration, we saw a lot of effort to actually frame responsible, ethical AI. Inclusive AI that actually put in place consumer protections, a national blueprint on what it meant to actually have agency.

Rashawn mentioned earlier this quote, I have to actually now give John Lewis the late John Lewis, my friend, more credit. I use it this way. How many people in here have a patent, a copyright, a trademark on AI? Just raise your hand. Something related to AI. Well, I use it like this. Rashawn, my mother used to say, if you're not in the kitchen cooking the meal, you're on the menu. Many of us are on the menu of these new technologies without protections. If the decision is wrong, if we're trying to apply for a mortgage, if the decision is wrong, if the analysis from the AI transcription at the doctor's office says, we have one thing, my daddy was told he had prostate cancer. He died of stomach cancer.

These types of mistakes are fallible. They have consequences that are irreversible that can lead to loss of life, loss of prosperity, loss of dignity and visibility. And what DOGE did was to reorder and revise history in many respects, and I tell people now in my research, we will see in five years the consequences of not actually embracing words that make up the very part of our history. Words like women, words like equity, words like income. Will be dismissed. They've been dismissed, they're gone. And how we actually recurate that to reflect the lived experiences of people in our society will be very challenging because AI

does something that the human cannot do. It can break it really fast and make it harder to fix.

And that's where we're going to be as we think about the erasure of communities. I often think about the work that I do, and some of you may know this, some of you may not. But I have an AI equity lab and it started to be able to do a key onset to bring people who are actually subject matter experts to the table.

So if you're talk about AI and health, we're the clinicians, the doctors, the patient advocates. If you're talking about AI and criminal justice, we're the law enforcement alongside the community advocates the public defenders, if you're talking about housing, who sits at the table when it comes to housing, we're the low income fair housing advocates compared to the private developers.

We've tried to create a space at Brookings where all of those communities can come together with subject matter experts sitting alongside technologists to not just develop tools that we think may work, but really be very pragmatic and purposeful as we develop AI that's in compliance with the law law, but also allows us to reach more people in a positive way.

For me, those conversations are at the heart of what we're experiencing now, right? The people who are supposed to be at the table developing healthcare systems and healthcare technologies at work for all are not at the table. We are all just commodities of a technology that now, like I said, at the old country buffet, we know we're not supposed to be eating two plates of food, but we feel that it's necessary.

For us to survive in a society that has essentially said that the robots will take over humans. At the end of the day, the executive office just put out a national ai another guidance in terms of what it actually wants to protect. I can tell you in my history so far with this administration, the last one was about beating China.

This one may be about beating ourselves because when you look at that, it's about protecting us from technology as parents, protecting our children, ensuring that our electricity is protected. In my mind, I think this is sort of contradictory to what we actually said about a I being the most transformative capability that we have ever had or ever seen since Edison.

So my point there is we're gonna have to figure out ways in which a Keyon actually indicated it, which I think we'll find out through this project. How do you use the technology to revise, reconstruct, and actually reestablish? Because I wanna be clear with people, this stuff is not lost. My mother still cooks the way she does.

I still talk to my children the same way I do at the dining table. People still show up and listen to the same music. We're still the same people. People ask me for a long time if I would change the word equity in my AI equity lab, and I had to remind them that I will always be Black. I will always be talking about social justice, and I'm sure sometime it's gonna make a comeback.

They said disco wasn't gonna come back and it came back with bell bottoms. Okay. My point is we have to stay true to the fact that these trends. Political, social, and otherwise they're just, like Keesha said, they're narrative construction. And at the end of the day, we have the ability to fall in line with that narrative, or we have the ability to provide the evidence, the activism, and the revering of the narratives that are true to us.

That's why I can't, I just love this initiative. I don't feel uproot. I told you I feel appended.

**COX:** This has been really great. Right. I wanna, I know we, at this point I think we're gonna take audience questions. I, I have many more questions we could talk about, but we wanna make sure we get some from the folks in this room.

So if we have anybody that has a question, if you could raise your hand, mic will be brought and then we just ask that you stand up. Stand and ask your question. We have one towards the front.

**AUDIENCE QUESTION:** Hi. It's been such an interesting afternoon. I work with seniors, senior services around dc. We've been struggling to get more equity in, in the social services area, but it strikes me that both of your topics particularly are really important in that senior space health, obviously, and health equity and technology.

Where the, the, you mentioned, you know, doctors now I know my own dad who's 91 years old. All the doctor's reports are all sent by email. He, he doesn't do email. He, he can't see those. That's right. So to, to me, both these topics, you didn't mention it, but have a particular importance in the senior serving space.

**LEE:** Yeah, I mean, I would, I would agree. I'm working on a project now, which is actually developing a list of questions that patients, especially seniors should be asking of their doctors when they start to think about the role of technology in their care. So to your point you know, I have a mother-in-law that's going through cancer and I found that she cannot get to even like the most I think it's, it's, it's one of the, the, the milestones of, of medical care where all your records are online and all the doctors can share it, right?

But she can't see and she can't see it. Well, she doesn't understand how to actually go in and read these reports. So I find that the way I'm enabling her is by looking at her portals. And I thought to myself, here's where AI could actually be helpful. What if those reports were done where you could be auditory, right?

Where it could be read to you? What if those reports were done in a more accessible manner for seniors? What if there was some way that you could connect it to their phone, that you have a new report that actually just landed in your inbox? There are ways that we can actually think about how we can use the technology.

But guess what? I realized that because I'm experiencing it. I probably is, am a person who needs to be sitting at that table, and I'm probably not the most qualified. You understand what I'm saying? So we need to really think about the ways in which we leverage technology to support communities, not necessarily to exclude them and make them much more invisible in the process.

And health is one of those areas. Financial services. Another, you know, one of the other areas that I'm very sensitive to, we'll talk about within our component of the initiative are fraud scams and abuse. Seniors are being taken by so many scams from romantic scams to scams on, you know, I need your full bank account.

And a lot of times with ai, the voice sounds like your daughter and seniors are just constantly being you know, placed in these scenarios where they cannot even recover the loss. And for

low income seniors, that's really bad because, you know, I used to say when I was working at a previous think tank, the greatest asset that most low income seniors has with their social security number.

Because some of them didn't have the assets needed to pass on generational wealth. So yes, we are gonna look at that, but that is an area, I'm glad you brought it up, that oftentimes gets lumped into everything else, and seniors really have to be taken seriously in this debate to ensure more equitable access.

**GILBERT:** I'm just gonna add one quick point just around community engagement in the sense of building better community so that seniors or someone is communicating with seniors about not only some of the issues that Nicol mentioned, but just to quick again, bring up my mother who's at the, at the poop food pantry, supposed to be listening.

She had a conversation with her friends about Medicare. As she was sort of changing or thinking about changing her own plan, she realized many of her friends have made no changes in years and recognizing, and she said, well, you're missing out on a number of benefits because you've not looked at your plan.

And so many of them have not looked at what changes their plan has been or if they should even think about switching to a different company. In many ways because they have become comfortable with what they have, but also recognizing or not even sort of taking into their own, own their stock, that their needs have likely also changed.

Yes. Or parts of their health have likely changed. That might sort of lend themselves to making some changes. And so we also need to sort of think about how we can leverage not only technology tools, but sort of building community in more important ways with, with seniors to be able to have those kinds of conversations.

**COX:** Great, thank you.

**LEE:** Yes. And ensuring that social service delivery really begins to think about, and I, and I did this work back in the nineties, believe it or not, how social service delivery provide provisions itself online. And in line, right? Because that's the other part of it. When I was doing my book, I went out to a place called Garrett County, Maryland, which is about two hours away from here.

And I realized when I talked to one of the social service agents that they said it took two hours because it's got, they've got more cows and people, that's actually the name of the chapter. The topography is so great. It took two hours to get to a client to actually enter the information on pen and paper, because if people didn't have internet, most of them were Amish, two hours to go back to the office and then often two to three weeks to go back and revisit those folks to see what their disposition was or if they needed food, et cetera.

That should not be happening with the availability of technology today.

**COX:** Do we have time for another question?

**AUDIENCE QUESTION:** Hello. Thank you for your talk. The panel has been really informative. I do have some research on how AI has been affecting the workplace

interpersonal relationships, and recently there's been a lot of discussion about how this, you know, workplace displacement and how people will be needed to re-skill.

But I'm wondering has, if you all know of any discussions around how different demographics are going to be affected by this? Because oftentimes with re-skilling, I I, I'm seeing that people are like, oh, they already have these technical skills, so they're gonna have to, it's not gonna be that big of a jump to like learn these other technical skills, but I don't know, sometimes I feel like they're just ignoring larger parts of the, the United States.

**LEE:** I mean, I think there, there has been some really great work done by the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies, a place I was at prior to coming to Brookings. And that was done maybe a couple years ago on the idea that worker, low income, low wage workers and Black workers in particular would be affected, disproportionately affected by AI.

Now you fast forward to today, I think there's an interesting story that's actually happening right now. We are actually finding that white collar jobs, particularly those that are very repetitive at the entry level like law, finance, et cetera, are putting out data that's actually starting to tell us that those jobs are gonna be eliminated.

If you're a paralegal or if you're somebody in the law firm in the finance that's just crack, you know, cracking numbers and stuff like the AI could do it better. What's so interesting to me is that that is happening more rapid than we're seeing in the blue collar sector. 'cause I haven't seen my plumber come yet as a robot and fix my toilet.

Right. But we are also seeing potentially, I think the creation of new jobs. So one of the things that I often talk about is, okay, so companies wanna use AI and maybe let's say robotics. Well, who's gonna turn on the robots? Who's gonna make sure the floor is prepared for the robots to move around?

Who's gonna actually ensure X, Y, and z? I think what we should be talking about, I was just in a discussion about this yesterday with higher education, how do you, how might hybridization look like across the job creation and do job disruption sector? And I think to your point, how will this affect various demographics?

So I do think that there will be some of the jobs that some demographics do that will still be needed. And that will affect primarily a lot of small businesses. My colleague Darrell West and myself talk a lot about data centers and job development. And you think about it, there still has to be someone doing food service, maintenance, light security, you know, small businesses have a great opportunity there.

But I do think we're gonna see this pitch up where we're gonna try to explain the white collar disruption differently than we do the blue collar disruption. And I think that will, and Jonathan, I know you've done, your team has done some looking at that. That's actually gonna change, I think, the way we look at the demographic displacement as well.

So yeah, more to talk about it. There's a lot of work going on at Brookings in that space. I'd advise you to continue to watch, and I know that we'll be talking about it as well at the center that I lead as well as through this initiative.

**COX:** One more question. One more question. Yeah, we can take that.

**AUDIENCE QUESTION:** Thank you. Thank you all for the panel. I'm super excited to see what comes out of uprooted. My name is Ashley Stewart and I wrote my question down so I wouldn't forget. You both talked about the inequities that can and are being reproduced in the health and tech spaces due in some ways to a lack of data historical mistrust medical mistrust.

And while I think that that is a very important issue, we're simultaneously living in a what is still an extractive and increasingly exploitative and almost a surveillance state. And so how should we be talking to our communities in particular about giving up their data participating in research, what questions should we have them asking?

**COX:** And before you all answer, you also should have said that you are a former fellow I know with the Congressional Black Caucus Foundation working with CPAR. But yes, please go ahead and answer.

**GILBERT:** Just really quickly. I think our project on data governance is a really good example to point to in terms of thinking about better connections between researchers, communities and government and the ways that they are trying to foster and build community, community bonds and trust.

So that. Communities understand that the data that they give or the data or being more in control of this process will help to build not only sort of more responsive, but more trustworthy and accurate data. So I think that's a, a, a strategy, particularly at the local level that can really happen in to sort of answer and address some of some of your question.

**LEE:** Yeah, and I, I agree. I think governance is a good way. I think how Ian's talking about it, what governance looks like on your data management strategies, your projects in general, that's gonna matter. But I also think like where we're gonna actually get to some solutions is when we workshop these issues among respective communities and groups.

So just another shout out, we're doing a lot of work with tribal lands who have different perspectives on their, of the role of technology AI in terms of, you know, their historical relationship with the land and the environment and community. It's fascinating. I'm finding it fascinating. We're finding out in Africa internationally, there's a different perspective of how people at co-locate these identities.

So I think actually to your point, there is no simple answer. I mean, the hope would be that there'll be rules and regulations that will level the playing field and ensure consumer protections. But in light of the abyss that we're currently experiencing right now, I think we need to dive deep into these tranches of communities that are actually articulating for themselves what they'd like this to look like for them.

**COX:** Alright, thank you. All right. Thank you all to our panelists. Please join me. Give a round applause.

**LEE:** So I think I, I think Keon, Keon asked me to just say some closing words.

**COX:** Absolutely. Go for it.

**LEE:** I think I'm a stand up because my knee is locking up. I've been at Brookings almost 10 years and there's an explanation for this.

So Keon just asked me to just do some closing words and I want him to come up as well as we, we sort of close out uprooted because it was really important as you've heard all the conversations today. To sort of end this on a different note on July 4th, 2026, America will celebrate 250 years of its independence.

And it's clear that over the course of this administration, as we heard in conversations, there's been efforts to revise history, to dismiss cultural efficacy of the people whose culture and values and norms are very much embedded in the fabric of our society. As my friend Andrew, I always says that these are the people who built this country for free.

And as we think about this forthcoming celebration, let us not part with the fact that we still have joy and agency in this, that these issues that we talk about, yes, they are functions of the consequences that this society and our nation has made. Starting with the transatlantic slave trade to other areas where we've taken people from their roots and placed them here all the way to the folks, and I'm a New Yorker, that came to this country via Ellis Island. We are an amalgamation of so many cultures and people and who gives us the right. To say who is more or less patriotic. Let me remind you that when the American Revolution happened, there was a man by the name of Crispus Attucks, a Black man who took the first shot, the greatest patriot, alive during the American Revolution.

He was a patriot just like everybody else. And I think the ancestors before him said, what my dear fav my favorite poet, Langston Hughes, said, I too sing America. And so I offered that because I think it's not just been the challenges that communities, Black Americans, Latin Americans, Indian Americans, Arab Americans, people across the diaspora have experienced in these last few months and years.

But it's the fact that they've remained resistant, they've remained rooted. These are for people who are gardeners. The time when you actually have to prune, revisit, reward, reposition, rethink, and start a conversation on what it means to withstand history, a history rooted in white supremacy that essentially has been challenged decade and decade, again by the resistance, persistence, the joy, the allyship of communities that understand that we belong here.

And so I wanted to say that because you know, when Keon approached me, I thought about my own personal experience as a single mom. My kids are now 19 and 23, but they were three and eight at the time. And I remember how difficult it was to raise my kids by myself. But one of the things that kept going through my mind was that my grandmother did it when she was 15, raising 15 children, or starting to have 15 children.

She was 15, raised 15. She would've been born. Yet my mother and father did it when they were actually just coming out of a family, one that lived in a one room apartment, and the other one who was the provider for his family. I could do it because Shirley Chisholm, Fannie Lou Hamer, Harriet Tubman, Crispus Attucks, Medgar Evers, Martin Luther King, my mentor, Reverend Jesse Jackson, so many people did it before us to provide us with both the activism, the reverence, the spirit, the joy of why we have to have this conversation.

We're gonna be here after this administration. We're still gonna belong. And I think this is one of the reasons why Keon and I sat down together and said, yes, we may be uprooted,

but we also will ensure that history does not forget where these conversations have led and how we will ultimately re-prune them to ensure that we are not forgotten.

So I want to say look out world, there's gonna be a lot of research, evidence-based research, conversations, podcasts, what else you got in store, Keon?

**GILBERT:** More art. Colt. Yeah, all of it.

**LEE:** All of it. All of the above. And we wanna thank you on behalf of RPII and the Center for Technology Innovation for coming today and being part of this rebirth in terms of uprooted to resistance to joy.

Thank you.

**GILBERT:** Thank you.