THE BROOKINGS INSTIUTTION

HART SENATE OFFICE BUILDING

BROOKINGS ON THE HILL: CIVICS AT 250

Tuesday, June 16, 2026

PANEL ONE

SEN. TIM KAINE (D-VA.)

SEN. ANGUS KING (I-MAINE)

SEN. JAMES LANKFORD (R-OKLA.)

MODERATOR: E.J. DIONNE, JR.
W. Averell Harriman Chair in American Governance and Senior Fellow, Governance Studies, Brookings

PANEL TWO

ALYSHA BUTLER
Social Studies Teacher, McKinley Technology High School
2019 Gilder Lehrman National History Teacher of the Year

RACHEL M. PERERA
Robert and Virginia Hartley Chair in Governance Studies and Fellow,
Brown Center on Education Policy, Brookings

ANDRE M. PERRY
Senior Fellow and Director, Center for Community Uplift, Brookings

JON VALANT
Herman and George R. Brown Chair in Education Studies, Senior Fellow and Director, Brown Center on Education Policy, Brookings

MODERATOR: E.J. DIONNE, JR.
W. Averell Harriman Chair in American Governance and Senior Fellow, Governance Studies, Brookings

* * * * *

DIONNE: Welcome everybody. Welcome friends of civic life, all of you showing up today. It's really awesome. I wanna thank, I mean, my many colleagues at Brookings whom I'm gonna name later on, 'cause I wanna get to the senators quickly. I also want to thank all of the Hill staffers who helped put this together. You work very hard and the work is often unheralded, but there are some of you who are gonna be sitting up here someday, and I'm really looking forward to that.

It's a real honor to welcome this extraordinary group of senators, Senator Angus King, whom as you know is an independent in Maine, Senator James Lankford, a Republican from Oklahoma, and Senator Tim Kaine, a Democrat from Virginia. They are drawn together as co-sponsors of the CIVICS Act to promote civic education and knowledge of the Constitution in our schools. I was tempted to call you the Civics Three, but then I'd get 97 phone calls complaining about that. But it's really an honor to be with you. I wanna make clear that Brookings is not here to endorse or oppose this bill, but Brookings does care a lot about the health of our civic and democratic life. And an exchange on civics education is an excellent way of honoring our nation's 250th anniversary of self-government, aimed at promoting the idea that all of us are created equal, and to advancing life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. And I know our panel will give us a lot of happiness today. So welcome to you all.

Senator King, a majority of states already require some coursework on civics. What is not happening out there? And can you describe briefly, while you do that, what this bill does do and doesn't do, and why you all are doing this?

KING: We do have civics being taught, but it's sort of an afterthought. I think when many of us were in school it was a, it was a course. It was a required part of the curriculum. You know, math and science and, and civics was something you took, that you learned about the structure of the U.S. government, you learned about the history of the government, the Constitution, and that has really fallen away, largely, for reasons that escape me.

Our bill is, is sort of narrowly focused on, there are grants that are still being provided to the schools with regard to civic education, but believe it or not, there's no stipulation that those grantees say anything about the Constitution. It's sort of like saying, "We're gonna teach people to drive, but not tell them about the steering wheel." And so that's what this is really talking about, is, is the Constitution itself. And I think we're seeing in our, in our country, people that are, they, they don't have a feel for how the system works. Checks and balances they find annoying rather than an essential part of the, part of the system. So that's what, that's what our bill is about.

But the larger question is really, we, we really have to do a much more thorough job, I think, about civics education because if you, if you don't understand the system, then you don't understand your role in it. And that's why I think we, we, that's why the three of us and others—I think Tim was just saying, I think Roger Wicker, the chair of the Armed Services Committee is one of our co-sponsors, Republican senator from Mississippi. But this is, it's just a, like I say, it, it, it's unthinkable to me.

And by the way, if you're wondering what it says on my tie, these are the signers of the Declaration of Independence. You can see Hancock and Jefferson and Adams --

KAINE: You know, they were all wondering. I mean--

KING: Yeah, they were. Yeah. Yeah, what does--

DIONNE: I covered them earlier in my journalistic career, actually.

KING: --what does it, what does it say?

LANKFORD: It's actually a rare day it's not a lobster on his tie. That's the normal tie.

KING: So that, that's the, that's the basic rationale, EJ.

DIONNE: Thank you. I, I wanna ask Senator Lankford, there's a big debate among advocates of expanded civics education, including constitutional education, over whether it should focus on teaching the facts, teaching what the Constitution says about how government works, or should it teach the facts but also help students develop civic skills, dispositions, media literacy, encourage debate on hard issues in what you might say is a civic and civil way. Which way is the right way?

LANKFORD: Oh, wow. Yeah, that, that's a both-and kind of question to deal with. We have to teach people the most basic principle of, even the Constitution itself was a compromise and a lot of debate that happened behind the scenes, and it was a narrowly passed document initially in coming to a lot of agreements.

So the most basic principle that we still have is that we still have to debate things out. This wonderful first word of “we” that's on it gets more complicated when you have 330 million people that are all “we” in trying to be able to determine how we're gonna still work on our more perfect union. So there is an importance to beginning all of your conversation with we have to figure this out, because this is still about we. And it's not about me, if I can be so bold, and I have a lot of people that come up to me and poke me in the chest and say, "You work for me, so you have to do what I tell you to do."

And I smile at them, I say --

KING: I know some of those guys.

LANKFORD: Yeah, I know. I, I, usually smile at them and say, "You know, in my great state, there are four million people. And we have to decide things. It's not all about you, it's about we.” We still have to be able to figure this out. So I do think that's important, but that basic concept only works if you understand the United States Constitution and that we are this constitutional representative republic, that

we have an order and a structure, that no one gets to take it over, but we have a structure that has been established that we continue.

So that's why I say I think it's a both-and. We've got to learn how to be civil, but we can be civil to each other because we have a structure to be able to make this work, the United States Constitution, and we've got to be able to understand that. In my state today—one quick comment—my state today is voting in primary election day. I'm not up on the ballot this year, thankfully, but it's primary election day. Not a lot of people show up on primaries to be able to vote in primaries. So why is that important? That's a basic understanding of the United States Constitution and what it is to be a representative republic and for us to actually engage on that.

DIONNE: You know, I'm, I'm glad you mentioned “we,” which sometimes I say it's my favorite word in the Constitution and we don't think about us as “we” right now as much. We think of ourselves as multiple “we”s, divided “we”s. And so I wanted to ask you, in this divided nation where half the states are governed by each party, roughly speaking, why won't debate over civics and constitutional education look like the same kind of fiercely partisan debates we have about everybody else? Because people have profound disagreements about what the Constitution means, and what civics, what is civic right now? How do, how do we not descend into that?

KAINE: It might look like everything else looks, but it will be an argument about a really important topic that a lot of times people ignore. So, are there difference, you know, different opinions about what cruel and unusual punishment is? There's gonna be arguments about that. But if, the thing about the civics bill is it really centers on the Constitution.

I had a recollection: Ted Cruz and I had a bill in the NDAA in 2024 mandating that all military officers receive training about the Constitution.

KING: No, Ted Cruz and Tim Kaine. That's doesn't-

KAINE: Yeah. Now, now every military officer takes the same oath, every enlisted person, that we do, “I will support and defend the Constitution of the United States.” But we felt like—Ted and I were on Armed Services together for a number of years—we felt like there wasn't training of military officers about the Constitution who have to take an oath to support and defend it.

Ted and I would argue about a lot of provisions of the Constitution and have different points of view. Is the Second Amendment a right about militias or about individuals? I mean, I can give you a million. But if you have, you can, we can have arguments about unimportant things that will divide us, unproductively, or we can have arguments, debate, dialogue about the thing that really should center us.

And I would argue, even if you assume that there will be arguments, if you center the argument on a fundamental principle that we all take an oath to, you're gonna probably make, you know, more, more advances towards some common

understanding than you would if we allow our arguments to be about things that might seem interesting but aren't so important.

DIONNE: I was trying to think of the end of the joke, Ted Cruz and Tim Kaine walk into a bar. But somebody sort of finish that, finish that for me.

This is a jump ball for anybody who wants to pick it up. Alysha Butler, wave to everybody, Alysha. Alysha is, is joining us today on the second panel. She's been honored often for her extraordinary work as a history teacher. And I asked her what she wanted me to ask, and what she said is she pointed out that school funding matters to civics. She pointed out, for example—and she's done extraordinary work in this area—poorly funded schools can't take their students on trips to DC or to state capitals. They can't do a lot of the other things that well-off school districts can do. There's more pressure to focus only on math and reading and forget about all this other stuff. And so civics education might look like another unfunded mandate to school boards out there. What's your answer to that? How do you deal with the money problem and this problem of getting this a priority that somehow schools can fund?

Anybody wanna take that?

KING: Well, I can share one of the issues that's coming up with American education is, we're, we're getting older, as everybody knows. The student population is declining in most states, and many people in the public sphere say, "Well, if we got fewer students, we can spend less money." The problem is, in many of our states, those students who are there need more attention. More, the, particularly the generation that came through COVID, there's a, there's a real behavioral health issue and counseling and those kinds of things.

And the other piece is, as we, as we get older as a society, we have fewer and fewer people connected to the schools. You know, they don't have children in the schools. They, maybe they moved somewhere and they don't have grandchildren in the schools. There's, and there's a breakage of the linkage between the community and the schools that I think is something that's, that's a kind of underlying problem that we, we really need to be, be thinking about.

And as far as teaching civics, as that some kind of add-on to me, civics is, is as essential as English. It's the, it's the water that we swim in and we have to understand the, the, not only, I was about to say the culture. It's not really the culture, but it's the sort of legal structure that, that runs, has our country run, whether it's a town council all the way up to the, to the U.S. Senate. So that, that would be my thought.

LANKFORD: Yeah. I just wanna make a quick comment on this. First, first I need to brag for just a second. This is my, like, my only brag that I've got. I'm, in high school I made a five on my AP U.S. history test, okay? So when I'm talking to a history teacher, that's like the one thing I can say. They're like, "Oh, good for you." Anyway.

KING: He was also, he was also on his high school debate team when he was in the fourth grade. That's no joke.

LANKFORD: But that's not a history-related thing. So, I, I would say this: civics education is something that you can pull the thread through. While you're teaching English, you can be teaching civics. What are you reading? What, what's your background? Every teacher is determining how they're doing that with math, with whatever it may be. You can run a thread through all that.

I live right in the center of the country, in Oklahoma. Not many people from Oklahoma get to Washington, DC on a field trip, right? It, it's a special thing when students get here 'cause it is so expensive to be able to be here. But you can still learn about the Constitution. And thankfully there's so many digital resources and other things that are less and less expensive in the days ahead.

I think it's a choice that districts make on how you're gonna set priorities. And for me, the painful thing is several years ago I watched us, we stopped testing on civics and on history. We, we were testing on math and we were testing on English reading skills, but we stopped testing on history. So when you stop evaluating it, you lose its importance and begins to be able to drift away.

So we're not trying to mandate some new testing on that, we're just saying if you receive a grant, then you, on this, then you've also gotta teach the Constitution on it. So if you don't wanna take the money, you don't have to, but if you're receiving this money, you've gotta teach the Constitution because it's a basic principle on civics.

KAINE: And can I just say to Alysha's very important question, that's a great question to talk about in a class about the Constitution. So if you were one of my students and we're having a civics class about the Constitution and you said something like that to me, I would say, "Hey, class, where's education in the Constitution?" Nowhere. The word's not even mentioned. Up until Brown v. Board, the United States Supreme Court said over and over again, over again, it's state and local. Federal, federal government doesn't have a role. Well, wow, what does it say about a Constitution that education's not in, and that education's never been put in it?

And that would be, you know, that's a fascinating discussion to have about the Constitution. It's not only the Constitution we have, it's the Constitution that we don't have, you know, that would be—that's a really cool thing to discuss.

KING: I, I have to share one history note with you. I just finished a biography of Cicero, the Roman statesman, and the, the one quote from the whole book that stuck with me was he said, he once said, "To not know your history is to live your entire life as a child." I think that's a very profound observation because that, what really says is all you know is your own surroundings. You don't know the, the history of your civilization, of your society, of your community, and I just -- That's neither here nor there, but it's a, you can, you can use that anytime. To, to not understand the history, to not understand history is to live your entire life as a child.

DIONNE: By the way, I think Senator Lankford, your point's important about what we test for and what we don't, because the pressure on teachers and schools is especially in reading and math. And you know, I love history, so I'm for the test in history too.

You know, another word that's not in the Constitution is God. And you are a minister, so please say a silent prayer for us all right now. You've been deeply concerned about religious freedom and even have proposed updating the naturalization civics test about the Constitution and religious liberty. How does religious freedom fit into this Constitution? And again, how might communities not be, you know, deeply divided about what getting this right means? 'Cause we've had a, a lot of debates over how to think about religious freedom.

LANKFORD: Yeah, so I, I would back up a few years. Interestingly enough, 250 years ago right now, Thomas Jefferson was sitting on the third floor of a rented space in Philadelphia writing the Declaration of Independence. And “providence” and “creator” was all over that in the beginning, as, as a founding document, saying we, we understand these basic principles. When you get to the United States Constitution, 1787, and going through the ratification process, you, you had six articles, which by the way, I love reminding students anytime they go to the National Archives, look at the articles. Article One is the biggest, you know, and I just kind of leave it at that. That's, that's the legislative branch.

Anyway, so you've got --

DIONNE: I think there's an oath you have to take when you get sworn into Congress that you have to point that out.

LANKFORD: You have to point out Article One's the biggest one of all the articles.

So you, there's six articles in the Constitution. There, there were no amendments when it was ratified in 1789 and finished up. They added then the Bill of Rights in from there. But Article Six is one of those articles that's much overlooked, quite frankly, when there's a conversation, 'cause people talk about religious issues and they'll always go, "Well, the First Amendment." And I go, "Well, yeah, it's okay, back up half a page to Article 6." Article 6 says there's no religious test for any officer of the United States. From the very beginning, there was an assumption that every elected official could have any faith or no faith or change your faith. There's no pre-qualifications to turn your faith on and off for any elected official in the United States, whether it's from local township mayor all the way to president and senators.

So the, in the very beginning of our constitutional construct, there was a protection of the ability to be able to have faith and live faith as an American. Then in the First Amendment, that First Amendment then comes in as this basic principle that Congress is not gonna establish any law establishing a religion. Establishing this most basic principle that was, quite frankly, world-shattering in its day, because in its day, the faith of the people had to be the faith of the monarch. No one believed that

you could have a nation where the faith of the people was different than the faith of the monarch. On that --

KING: In Virginia, at that time, your taxes paid for the minister's salary.

LANKFORD: That's correct. So in most of, and most of you know, they're all history nerds like all of us here in this group as well, but almost all the colonies had an established religion in the colony. This is prior to us obviously becoming the United States. You had to be that certain religion. In, in Virginia, it was Anglican. You had to be that if you're an elected official or a leader in that. In Pennsylvania, it was -- we can keep going on. Anyway, so, in fact, I, I'm a Baptist. We got kicked out of all the good colonies and ended up in Rhode Island, but that's, that's a whole different issue.

DIONNE: I wanna stand up for Rhode Island, but-

LANKFORD: Yeah, so for, this issue of faith was controversial even at the very beginning. We did not start as colonies with the freedom of religion. We established that with a constitutional construct that was an incredible risk because the world had not seen that before, but we took the risk to say, "We're gonna allow people to be able to have faith, live faith, change faith, or have no faith, and that be respected and protected by Congress."

KAINE: And, and if I could just say that the wonderful American historian and writer, Garry Wills, says that the U.S. Constitution is the greatest borrowing job in history because most of the ideas were borrowed from a preexisting constitution or legal framework, and the only two pieces that were truly original to us were freedom of religious worship and the combination of no establishment and freedom of worship, and war should be declared by the legislature, not the executive. Those are the two pieces that were new, that we gave to the world.

And, and the story about the First Amendment and how it got put together, Madison was the drafter. He didn't, he didn't believe we needed a Bill of Rights. At all. He said, "Well, states have bills of rights, and if you do a bill of rights, you'll probably forget something that you should put in."

But he realized he was a good counter. If I do a bill of rights, it's more likely to get the Constitution ratified by the states. But he also saw the persecution of Baptist ministers in Orange County, Virginia, being persecuted by, by the state of Virginia because it was primarily Anglican. And he was like, "Well, maybe we do need a bill of rights."

And so the fact that that powerhouse First Amendment, freedom of religious ac- worship, no establishment of religion, freedom of speech, freedom of press, freedom to assemble, freedom to petition government for redress of grievances. The Supreme Court has added in a freedom of association because if you assemble, you're associated. That's such a powerhouse. And they made it first for a reason. And so the, the clause about faith in Article 6 and then in Article 1, you're right, the

word God is not mentioned, but it definitely presupposes a pluralistic society where faith is important.

KING: EJ, let me, let me change the subject from, from religion for a minute because you, you mentioned this. You talked about media literacy. You sort of slid by that. But I think part of what civics education today has to be, I call it digital literacy. One of the observations I've had in public policy over many years is if you have a common agreement on the facts, it's very easy to solve the problem. The, the solution sort of just comes out of the, the, the consensus.

If you don't have agreement on the facts, it's almost impossible to solve the problem. And today we have what I call a balkanized news system where, you know, I hate to date myself, but when I was growing up, everybody got their information in America from one person. Who was it?

LANKFORD: Walter Cronkite.

KING: Walter Cronkite. And, and now you get the problem is this concept of human nature of confirmation bias, where we all go to the information source we already agree with, and it just pushes us into these separate worlds. And then you put on top of that the algorithm on the internet, which does the same thing to tend to put you into a different world, and that's one of the reasons we have so much trouble solving problems around here.

And a perfect example is immigration. Some people think of immigration, and they think of, of, murderers and rapists and criminals, and others think of immigrants like our grandparents who are teachers of the year. Which is it? And if you have these two different views, it's almost impossible to resolve.

So I think part of civics education should be digital education, teaching young people how to look for a multiplicity of information sources and also how to sniff out when they're being misled on the internet, because right now that's a real problem of, of... We have people in this country that are walking around in different factual universes, and that's one of the reasons we have so much polarization, both in our politics and also in this institution here.

Sorry, I got, had to be part of it.

DIONNE: No, I'm all for media literacy. Senator Kaine, you're from Virginia, a state that loves so much, loves history so much. You know that old joke, how many Virginians does it take to change a light bulb? Answer: eight. One to change the light bulb, seven to say how great the old light bulb was. And, you know, Virginia also actually has a strong civics education requirement. What difference has it made beyond, obviously, your very positive feelings about Virginia's electoral choices? But what differences do you see that making? What would, what can the rest of the country learn from how it's worked down there? Does the Constitution play a role in it?

KAINE: Yeah, that -- what, what a good question. I wish I had a metric, you know, to describe it. My wife just finished eight years on the state Board of Education and just got appointed to the Richmond Public School Board, a school system she helped integrate when she was twelve years old, and she's now sixty-eight, fifty-six years ago. And the commitment that's very bipartisan to civics education is very strong because of the history.

So yeah, what difference does it make? I mean, it's kind of hard to imagine, well, what would be the alternative if we hadn't focused on it? But I think one of the reasons that we embrace civics education was we had a repair job to do. I mean, Virginia was the leader of the nation in terms of presidents and vice presidents from 1776 through about the 1830s. And then we went into a long political eclipse because we decided instead of being innovators, equality-focused innovators, we wanted to cling to the institution of slavery and then Jim Crow and then massive resistance. And it really only was beginning in, like, the late, in the, in the 70s or so when we decided, geez, we want to turn from facing backward to face forward. And, and Democratic and Republican governors.

I mean, when I was born, Virginia wasn't in the bottom quarter in test scores. They were in the bottom quarter in the percentage of school children who attended school. We shut public school systems down rather than let kids sit next to each other if their skin colors were different. And we didn't let women go to most of our higher ed institutions like UVA. So there's been a, a decided focus, Republican and Democratic governors, Republican and Democratic legislators, what did all this get us but being a poor backward state?

And so there has been a real focus on education, and I think the civics education piece of it probably comes out of a little bit of a guilt complex. Like, man, we did it wrong for a long time, and we got a lot of catch up to do. And it's good that the desire to catch up has, has not been a partisan thing. It's been a bipartisan thing.

DIONNE: So I'd like to ask all of you to close two questions. One, just a fun question. Is there any teacher you want to shout out, uh, who made a difference to you in this sphere? I, I just recently wrote a, a little tribute to a, an AP history teacher I had who taught me early on that there were different ways to tell the American story. And he taught me about arguments we've had in our history over who we are, how to tell the story. And that was just a long time ago, and I wanted him be- at every school board meeting who was, where you had somebody trying to impose some orthodox safe version of history. Anyway, he was a wonderful man.

The other question I wanna ask, and you can pick one or the other or both. You know, a, a lot of people have thought about civics education and constitutional education as somehow it will get us by this political polarization we have. I gotta say, I'm kind of skeptical of that 'cause I think the polarization is rooted in politics itself, in real disagreement out there. And yet, you know, there, there is still an argument that at least knowing certain things might actually reduce this or at least give us something in common to talk about. I'm curious where you see this, and you can shout out a teacher in the process if you feel like it. And since you did so well in that AP history test, you could – start with you.

LANKFORD: I've got one. I've, I've, gotta start with that one. So let me, let me take the questions in reverse order. I, I do think civics education does benefit us as a nation because I would hammer on the issue of that first word I came back to again. “We.” We as a nation have become us-and-them rather than we, and that's not how we operate. That, that's like other countries. We're, we're drifting away from our core of we, and we as a nation have never agreed about everything. Never agreed about everything

KING: But somehow we've gone from being opponents to enemies.

LANKFORD: Correct. And, and it's gone from I disagree to I'm not even gonna talk to you. I, I talk to so many families now that they won't even get together at Thanksgiving because it breaks into arguments, and they're like, "My crazy uncle and my cousin start screaming at each other and we leave early, so this year we're just not even going."

It is, we have become so separated that we can't have conversation. That is being modeled in our politics, but that's not just being modeled in our politics, that is actually living in real life for a lot of people. We've gotta be able to break through that.

Some people say, "Well, Washington DC's crazy," and I smile at people and say, "Washington DC is a mirror to the country." That's how our Constitution sets it up. We are a representative republic. Washington DC represents the country, and if the country doesn't like what they see in DC, then we, they should understand DC's a mirror to the country. This is what we have become. So if we want this to be different, we've gotta figure it out as a nation on that.

So I do think driving that issue is very important to us. The shout-out goes to Mark Lemaster, who was my AP US history teacher in high school. He was so far left that we actually called him Marx Lemaster.

DIONNE: What happened to you?

LANKFORD: I know. Well, see, I, let me, let me finish the story. By the way, so it, it gets, it gets --

KING: Did you pass?

LANKFORD: I did barely pass. I got a 71 in his class the second semester, and a 70 the first semester, okay? And I got a five on my AP US history test. I remember when the results came out, he actually called me during the summer when they actually came out and said, "I can't believe this. You got a five."

Okay? And, and I remember saying to him first thing, like, "Well, somebody likes my writing on it" from there. But yeah, he, he just hammered on me on, on all issues on

this. But he was such a great teacher and he was somebody that really pushed to be able to learn more, to be able to dig, to ask questions on it.

And he was my hardest teacher and is the one I'm still talking about today. And if you're a teacher out there, there is a very real sense that -- don't, don't be too hard because the kids won't respect that. And I would say the teacher that was the hardest on me is the one I would shout out still today as the one who was most significant.

DIONNE: So you got the dialectical materialism answer right on that AP test. Thank you, that's beautiful. Senator King and Senator Kaine.

KING: Well, quickly on the, on the civics part, James mentioned the primary; today's primary day in, in Oklahoma, and that not many people will vote. One of the problems that's come up in our country, and this is sort of a structural...

Number one, parties are not mentioned anywhere in the Constitution. There's nothing in the Constitution about parties or primaries. In fact, the framers didn't want parties. You read George Washington's farewell address, there's this two or three paragraphs about how parties were dangerous, and Madison said the same thing in the Federalist.

But in any case, we now have this primary system which was designed to advance democracy, where you didn't have a smoke-filled room of a bunch of guys with cigars deciding who are the nominees. The problem is, people generally don't vote in primaries, and the people who do vote in primaries tend to be the activists on each side.

So you have a Democratic primary that's gonna favor the most progressive, and a Republican primary now that's gonna favor the most MAGA Trump loyalists, and the result is you get people nominated who are just miles and miles apart. It's almost impossible for a moderate to win a primary. We, we have a case in Maine this year where a fellow is running for governor of Maine as an independent who used to be the chairman of the Republican Party. Very capable, thoughtful guy, but he -- I, I haven't talked to him, but I assume he realized he didn't have a chance of getting the Republican nomination. So this is a structural problem that is creating division. You can now lose your primary, not because of your position on immigration or abortion or something else, you can lose it because you're not sufficiently hostile to the other side. Think about that for a minute. That if you're, if you're viewed as a RINO, you know, or as a somebody who's gonna compromise with those evil Republicans, that's, that's the, that'll knock you, knock you right off.

My favorite teacher, Roger Bergstrom. He was a drama coach, but also speech teacher. The thing I learned from Roger is the most important thing I learned in all of my education: how to write an outline, how to organize your thoughts. And that changed my life in terms of being able to answer an essay question in college or whatever. Just write a little outline of what your thoughts are, and then, then you can...I used to teach in college. A lot of students answer essay questions just by

writing. Not even paragraphs, just a lot of prose. Roger Bergson taught me to, to organize my thoughts for making a presentation and I, I love the guy.

A little, a note was, Roger was gay. He came out later, and I wonder if in the '60s in Virginia, if he could have kept his job if he was gay, and he was one of the best teachers I ever had.

KAINE: I'm just gonna answer the, the teacher question, because your staffer here is doing a great job of telling us our time's up. But, but it's, it's interesting that you asked it, 'cause I actually just said this in a HELP hearing about two hours ago. We had a hearing in the HELP Committee about AI and K12 education, and I asked everybody in the room to think about who their favorite teacher was and why. And I said, it's tied for me. John Hawley was the 9th grade English teacher who noticed that I was introverted and suggested, "Hey, you might wanna do some speech and debate extracurricular." So he wasn't my favorite teacher 'cause of the class, he was my favorite teacher 'cause he noticed something about me and thought if I did that—he wouldn't turn me into an extrovert, I'm still an introvert, but I'm just an introvert who's confident in public speaking.

And the other teacher was a guy named Joe McKenzie, who was my wood shop teacher, who loved to camp. He didn't have any kids, and about two or three times a year, he'd say on a Wednesday, "Anybody wanna go camping with me this weekend?" My family, they weren't campers. I'd never done it. I did it, and I turned into a lifelong outdoors person, camper, backpacker, cyclist, because of Joe McKenzie. Both of those were influential teachers because of things that they suggested to do outside the classroom, and that is why AI will never replace the foundational relationship between a teacher and a student.

DIONNE: I wanna thank the most extroverted introvert I have ever met. And Senator Kaine, and Senator King, and Senator Lankford, and I meant it, we need your prayers, senator, but it's really great of all of you to be here. Thank you so much.

Thanks so much. I'm sorry we didn't get to Q&A in that round, but we are gonna get to it in this round, and you can subject my colleagues to tough, riveting questions. There're a couple of young guys in the back who happen to be related to him. I would love to have one of you come in here. Oh, thank you. I'm so loud, you could probably hear me anyway.

We are really, I'm really honored to be here with my colleagues and with the aforementioned Alysha Butler who is a social studies teacher at McKinley Technology High School here in the District of Columbia, and you're gonna hear a lot about her gifts for combining history, civics, and civic activism in her teaching. She's won a whole bunch of awards and has been lauded all over the place. And I would've loved to have you as a teacher, because she arranged for her students to see “Hamilton” as part of her form of civics education, which is a great idea.

Rachel Pereira, my colleague, she is a fellow in Governance Studies at the Brown Center on Education Policy, and she holds the Robert and Virginia Hartley chair in

governance studies. Her research examines how racial and socioeconomic inequities develop in K through 12 education and the consequence of policies to reduce racial inequality. She's got an extraordinary background. The RAND Institute. She's got a PhD, of course, she spent five years with Teach For America. It's great to have you here.

Andre Perry, who is such a good teacher that someone he taught, what, 25 years ago, came out to this event just to be here. I don't know if -- you're not that old. It can't be 25 years ago.

PERRY: Yeah, it can't be that old.

DIONNE: Yeah, that would be me. He is a senior fellow and director of the Center on, for Community Uplift at the Brookings Institution. He's also a professor of practice of economics at Washington University of St. Louis. He's a nationally respected commentator on race. He's the author of a, of some important books, including "Black Power Scorecard: Measuring the Racial Gap and What We Can Do to Close It," and a book called "Know Your Price: Valuing Black Lives and Property in America's Black Cities." And he is a contributor all sorts of places. I, I could name them all, but we'd be here all day, all the networks and newspapers.

And Jon Volant is the director of the Brown Center on Education Policy, a senior fellow in Governance Studies. He specializes in K through 12 education policy and politics in the United States, and his work also examines inequities in education and how to mitigate them. He has got an extraordinary background. I, I told him I've been his colleague for a long time. I didn't realize how incredibly well-educated this guy is with a, a Ph.D. and master's from Stanford and all sorts of other things. His work has been featured all over the country.

And I wanna start with Jon, you and your... Oh, by the way, it is Jon's two kids are in, who are in the back there, and they are awesome kids.

VALANT: Sorry, guys.

DIONNE: So he would clearly make a great teacher given, or he and his wife both would make great teachers. You and your colleagues at the Brown Center have done a lot of work on civics education over the years. You pointed out that No Child Left Behind and the growing focus on linking education to jobs, which are both well-intended, have had, have, may have crowded out civics education over the years. Tell us what we know about what's happened out there.

VALANT: Yeah, that's right. So I think to, to get a sense of where we are, you have to look at where we were. And a lot of the story of where we are in civics education comes from where the country was in the late 20th century. And there was a sense, a kind of collective sense, that we were falling behind, particularly with respect to keeping up with peer countries economically. Like a, a real sense that if we didn't shape up, particularly in math and particularly in reading, we were gonna fall behind,

and we weren't gonna be ready for a 21st century economy that we thought was gonna look very different from the 20th century economy.

What I think -- and, and a lot of good came from that. I mean, there was, there was some structure that was imposed on schools. There was this kind of more seriousness with which some of those subjects were taught. There was also a cost, and the cost had a lot to do with a reallocation of time and resources from subjects like social studies to subjects like math and reading. And what I think we missed, and actually Senator King mentioned that when he was young—which I suspect was before No Child Left Behind—that when he was young, they did more civics and, and, you know, it felt like it was a core course.

Well, what I think we missed in that time period was that our 21st century democracy was gonna change even more than our 21st century economy was. And navigating our democracy right now is just very different from what it was a few decades ago. A lot of that is about how we get information. A lot of it, too, is about how we engage with other people. I mean, a lot, a lot of what we hear from when it comes to people's opinions about issues and how they see the world, it doesn't come in the face-to-face way that, you know, maybe our parents or grandparents saw it. It's someone yelling at you on Facebook, and it's, it's someone who looks angry and who you only see as, as this sort of caricature of, of view that you disagree with.

Well, to navigate that, there are some skills and there are some dispositions there, and we have to teach those. Those don't come to us naturally. That's not just something we get when we're, when we're born as people. We have to actually teach that stuff. And so what I, what I think we missed when we did this sort of transition where we, we so exclusively focused on math and we so exclusively focused on reading, is that really our problems weren't just preparing for a 21st century economy, and it wasn't just a, a literacy and numeracy, as important as those are. There's more to an education than that, and I think we, we kind of sold ourselves short.

DIONNE: Thank you. Alysha, you're on the front lines. Can you talk about how you make American history and civic knowledge come alive for students? Can you see the differences this makes for those who teach? What questions do they bring to you?

BUTLER: Yeah, most definitely. You know, I like to remind people that, you know, our students are constantly bombarded on a daily basis with social media outlets that are highly addictive and they're all competing for their attention. So then when they get to me, they kinda come with a chip on their shoulder, like, why should they give me their attention?

And my solution to that has always been to create lessons where you are definitely teaching with a purpose. Students should always be able to see themselves in whatever they're, they're learning about, right? And so, for example, most of my students are in eleventh and twelfth grade. They come to me already knowing about the March on Washington in 1963. But none of my students have ever known the

fact that before that, in 1958, 1959, you had over ten thousand students in '58, and then 26,000 students descend on Washington and doing their own march in support of integration of their schools. This was led by students, students engaging in their First Amendment rights.

Another example of that is making sure that my students are more than aware of the fact that, you know, we all know who Ruby Bridges was, and that's great, because maybe fifteen years ago, my students wouldn't. But few of my students know about people like Vernon Ricks, who is a member of the first group of African Americans to actually integrate my high school. And so when we talk about Brown v. Board of Education, I make sure that my students know who he is, and I bring him into my school. My students are able to ask him questions. And the great thing about it is that when they return the next day and they walk through the doors of my school, they walk with a renewed sense of purpose and respect, to know that they met someone that actually sacrificed and demonstrated bravery to enable them to actually sit, you know, in that seat.

And then lastly, you know, when we're doing lessons on the Underground Railroad, I don't have to just give my students examples of how that worked, let's say, in New York or Philadelphia or even in Mexico, right? I can give examples right over there in Georgetown, with the cemetery known as the Mount Zion Female Band Union Cemetery, which was established in the early 1800s. It was one of the only cemeteries at the time where Black people were able to be buried. It was also a stop on the Underground Railroad. And so what I do every year with my students, I take the entire eleventh grade class. We raise money through PTA grants. We also seek outside funding, and we take the entire eleventh grade to the cemetery along with all the science teachers, the math teachers, the English teachers, the art teachers, the tech teachers. And what we basically do is we have opportunities for the students to engage in interdisciplinary project at the cemetery, where we engage in historical preservation. And we also take this opportunity to give respect to our ancestors that are buried there.

These type of activities help our students not only learn about their history, but it also provides them opportunities to become civically engaged and to understand how they can give back. And once they're able to do that, they never look at their surroundings without some type of a new purpose, and also understand that they have a vested, they're vested in their community.

DIONNE: Thank you. We're gonna have a sign-up sheet if you wanna take her high school history class.

Andre, you've done a lot of good work on how race and inequality have shaped educational opportunities and outcomes. How would you apply those to civics education? I've always thought of civics education as empowering at its heart. Can it be?

PERRY: Oh, absolutely. And I wanted to pick up on what Alysha said around school funding, and this is somewhat something that we say all the time, that education is

the great panacea. But reality is that education doesn't predict for wealth. Wealth predicts for education. When you live in wealthy communities, you have great outcomes. And unfortunately, we've used education as a cudgel to, to throttle wealth creation among many different communities. So while I, I don't wanna throw cold water on the idea of civic education, but there are limits to it. If we do not address the inequalities that we see in housing, education, transportation, wages, it will be hard to have education get the kind of traction it needs.

Now, with that said, um, I'll be quoting Dewey on occasion. John Dewey is one of my favorite philosophers. He said something to effect of, "Democracy is born anew with every generation. Education is its midwife." We do need schools to inform and empower individuals, particularly those who are disempowered by government. Another quote: "Education is not preparation for life," or "Education is not preparation for life. Education is life itself." We must instill in children the values that are necessary to eradicate the inequality that exists.

We have too many people, and this is in, in NAEP we just saw a fall-off in social studies, who don't know their history. And when you, when you look at what's necessary to balance a factual accuracy with democratic coherence, we don't have the accuracy and we're not focused on the coherence. Again, we must give people the, instill the virtues, the ethics to remove the dregs of, of racism, sexism, homophobia.

This is what the purpose of education is. And so we have an opportunity, in my opinion, for, with civics education, not just to teach a bunch of facts, not to say who's gonna be the most patriotic, but who are now going to have the, the virtues and the behaviors that will lead us to where we want to go as a community

E.J. DIONNE: Thank you. I like the idea of trying to teach virtues of self-government and self-rule.

Rachel, you have done a lot of great work on school boards, who they are, what they do. On the one hand, you document that the many culture war conflicts on school boards and that they were dramatically visible during the pandemic era. But you have also seen school board members as what we might call the unsung foot soldiers of democracy. Each of these points in a different direction when it comes to implementing and expanding civics education. Can you talk about the challenges and the hope?

And then I wanna encourage people, I've got another round of questions, but I really want, if there are hands that go up at this point, we can bring some folks in after Rachel is done before I go to my last round of questions, but go ahead.

PERERA: Yeah, thank you for that question. So in our school boards work, we found that conflict rise sharply everywhere during the pandemic. School board members report conflict over a number of culture war issues. And it's subsided, but it hasn't gone away; it hasn't reached pre-pandemic levels. And the consequences of those conflicts, I think, are manyfold and are going to directly inhibit our ability to improve

civics education. You know, I think there's sort of these broader trends that come out of the culture war conflicts, and then there's more sort of specific ways that these conflicts have been codified over this last several years in state law and local law that are hampering local efforts to promote civics.

So for example, we know that since 2021, 20 states have adopted laws restricting how teachers can discuss divisive, so-called divisive concepts. This includes issues related to race, gender, and sexual orientation. And these laws have now been in place a couple years, and we have really strong research suggesting that they are having harmful negative consequences on classroom instruction. We know from national surveys that teachers are limiting classroom discussions of political and social issues, so students are having less opportunities to practice disagreeing with one another on these complex issues.

We also know that teachers are changing their curriculum and instructional practices. And on both of these dimensions, social studies teachers are, have been particularly hard hit. They are more likely to say that they are limiting classroom discussion and changing curriculum and instructional practices. We also see a lot of preemptive compliance. So we see teachers reporting, even in states where there are not local laws prohibiting them from discussing divisive concepts, that they are proactively limiting their students' exposure to, you know, discussions about social and political conflict in an effort to avoid any significant backlash from their local community.

And these dynamics, I think, are bad for student learning. They're bad for promoting civics education, and they're going to make any efforts to promote civics or to revitalize civics more difficult.

And I appreciated your question, EJ, to the senators earlier around, you know, how do we ensure that this doesn't become another culture war issue? And I, I think that we, I don't think that we can. I think that the, the question of how do you teach civics well is getting at the heart of some of these issues, and the only way to, you know, navigate them is through those issues and having those conflicts, but they're going to be contentious debates around how do you teach civics and how do you instill these skills in students.

And then the other thing I would mention in terms of challenges that are making promoting civics more difficult, there have been broader trends in federal policymaking and in state policymaking that I think are creating real challenges for public schools. One is that we've had a significant erosion of our civil rights infrastructure at the federal level. And I, as somebody who has done work on civil rights and education over the last decade, fundamentally believe that public schools' ability to fulfill their democratic function requires that those public schools are accessible to all students. And we know that they are not accessible in practice, and we are moving further and further away from a status quo in which the, all students have access to a, a publicly funded education free from discrimination.

And so I think that, that, that, those broader dynamics are creating additional challenges in terms of public schools being able to fulfill this civic function.

DIONNE: Thank you so very much. I really like the phrase practice disagreeing with one another, 'cause it's an important thing to be able to do in a free country.

I'm gonna, if there are hands, I wanna turn to Jon because there's a question I've been waiting several hours to ask him, but if somebody puts a hand up, Carly can bring you a mic. Yeah, this gentleman. But if you could wait for a moment, I want to ask, you know, Carly or whoever is on that side, but let me ask Jon my question, and somebody can get this gentleman a mic over here. But yeah, hang on for just a second.

The question I wanna ask Jon is, you have been doing research on intellectual humility. Now think of that, somebody at a big Washington think tank is studying intellectual humility, and Jon told me that he would offer his services to the House and Senate if they request it. Can you talk about this, you know, why does this matter to civics education? And I, you know, instinctively, as soon as you said this, I said, "Yeah, this is really important in political debate." Talk about your research.

VALANT: Yeah, thanks, E.J. So this is some work that I do with a colleague of mine, Tenelle Porter, who's an expert in this area. And, and what intellectual humility is, is it's the understanding that all of us are wrong all of the time about all kinds of things. And that's a wonderful thing. That is being human, and that is what gives us opportunity to grow. It's what allows for diversity of perspective and thought, and what makes it fun to be around other people.

And Andre mentioned something I wanna come back to about, you know -- so I think, I think it's fair to say that we don't have as much intellectual humility around as we might like. I don't think that's because of schools. I don't think that's schools' fault. And I think there's a, there's a temptation to, to sort of blame schools whenever we see any kind of problem around American society. And yet, schools are the institutions we have to instill skills and dispositions.

And so what we've been doing some work on is trying to understand, can we, can we do something to actually instill that in students? Can we get students to disagree better with other students and to maybe hold their minds open for just a half second longer when some of these issues that Rachel's talking about, when, when we get controversial issues that come up in, in classrooms? And the answer to that looks like yes, that it is actually something that is teachable. And there's some, some research on intellectual humility that shows, for example, that when teachers model it, when they, when they show students how to be intellectually humble when you're approaching a new subject, that their students will, will mirror that back to them.

And so we- we're sort of giving a lot of thought to this being one of the many virtues that we think schools should actually spend time on, in addition to spending time on those facts and teaching about the Constitution and doing all kinds of other important stuff in civics ed.

PERRY: And by the way, the stoics were right about this, that virtues actually lead, lead to the good life. That there's a lot of research coming out right now that shows

how the installation of virtues, inside, outside the school actually leads to higher levels of wellbeing, less levels of suicide and the like. So the, when I talk about the purpose of education, those are the kinds of things we should be talking about

DIONNE: All right. So the gentleman here will demonstrate intellectual humility in the brilliance of his question. Go ahead.

AUDIENCE QUESTION: Thank you, I, I hope I can be humble. So I originally had a question about civic apathy among students, but, is it, is it Dr. Perera? Dr. Perera, through your, your conversation, you inspired me to have a much more important question. I'm from the University of Texas at Dallas, and I am a history student. And my classes are held behind closed and locked doors at the behest of my professors because we are worried that our students could be pulled out by a secret police force, or that due to Texas law, that my professor could ask us a question and get fired, despite having tenure.

I want to ask, does civics education require an open-door policy where we can talk about what we feel is important, or is that something that the government should be worried about controlling? Does it require the open-door policy? Thank you.

DIONNE: You know, I just want to say that this was very similar to the second question I wanted to ask Rachel, which is, can we have this conversation without, you know, a deep kind of culture war that really, where one side tries to shut the other up effectively?

PERERA: Yeah. It's a great question, and I think I'd respond in two ways. First, I think we do need to recognize the reality that educators, including those in higher ed, are facing right now. And many are taking steps that they believe are necessary to limit their risk and to create safe learning environments where, you know, you don't have outside folks coming in and recording.

And so, you know, I think that educators are facing a very difficult set of decisions on their day-to-day. And so I, as somebody who is not in the classroom, can't really sort of speak on what I would do on that day-to-day. But I do think more broadly, you know, we need to rethink how -- I'm trying to, I lost my train of thought for your second part of your question. But I do think that there, there are promising approaches for, like, civics education, but we're gonna have to have hard conversations.

PERRY: But, but, but let's be clear that this, the kind of civics education that's required will have risk.

PERERA: Right.

PERRY: You know, there, there have been teachers and students that have lost their lives for the benefit of the, for the benefit of civil rights, for extending privileges to women. They've left the schoolhouse to do it at times. So when we talk about

civics education, and, and it's really narrow in a sense of we're talking about curriculum and instruction, but a lot of this occurs outside of the school, and it's what you do, how you respond. There's gonna be risk to this, for teaching basic facts about slavery, about women's suffrage, about all these different things. It is, has been politicized. And so there's gonna be risk. And I'm not saying go out there, get arrested. But these things happen as part of the civics education that we all receive.

DIONNE: By the way, one of the reasons I shouted out my high school history teacher is because he turned the classroom into a place where people actually could debate each other and could debate their understanding of American history. And, you know, was Hamilton right to crush the Whiskey Rebellion? And there's a great conversation you can have about whether that was the right or wrong thing to do, and it's inherently controversial.

I wanna see if there's another hand that wants to go up. Why don't we take two, let's take two, we'll take both of you, and then I'm gonna toss out a couple of closing questions, and people can skip the ones they think are too hard. But, over here, please. And then the person in the back there.

AUDIENCE QUESTION: Thank you all for being here. My name is Sophie. I'm a student at UC Berkeley. I'm studying political science and psychology. And my question is primarily for, for the teacher on the panel. One of the questions I have kind of comes from an understanding of my own education. A lot of the profound teachers I had in subjects like social science and government have recently been, you know, resigning their posts, figuring it's really difficult to teach these subjects with the current political climate. And just like, you, you spoke to, Dr. Perera, it's hard to have open dialogue, and they don't wanna feel like they're limiting their students' ability to engage with disagreement. This is a hard question to answer. And so, you know, "I don't know" is a very valid response. But, can you think of any short-term solutions right now from a teacher's perspective that can help to keep teachers in the classroom long enough to just engage in the civics discussion? Ways to kind of keep them, you know, interested in what they're doing in a way that doesn't necessarily lean into this preemptive—I don't wanna call it censorship—but just altering the curriculum so that they're not facing consequences for teaching what they think is important for students to be learning.

BUTLER: Yeah, that's a great-

E.J. DIONNE: Wait, can you hold? I just wanna bring in the second questioner and then we can go down the line. There was a voice in the back there. Somebody had a hand up, I thought, but maybe not. Okay, I guess -- was that? Yes, it was, I think it was you. Okay, please go ahead.

AUDIENCE QUESTION: Hi. So this has to do with the question that was asked on the earlier panel, but many of you touched on this as well. So, when, when I think about civics education, you talked about the knowledge piece, and then you talked about the participation piece, but to me, there's a, a third part of it. When I work with

students and then also my background, when we talk about…I think the third piece is a ownership piece or a responsibility piece.

And so my background is military, so when we switch from talking about the Air Force to our Air Force, it makes a big difference when you're working with people. So when I'm looking at civics education, I think when we talk about the government, we expect the government to do something for us. And if we can teach kids to talk about our democracy and their obligation to that democracy and how they're gonna fit into that, is that anything that, that any of you think about when we start talking about civics education?

DIONNE: We, us, and our. Bless you. I mean, I, I think the “we” is so important here. I'm gonna ask Alysha to go first on this question 'cause you've gotta get to a graduation, is that right?

BUTLER: My son is graduating from the fifth grade, yes. Very much so.

E.J. DIONNE: Wow. That's important, that's important. And, you know, in answering her question, I, I told you earlier some moment that you wanna, you know, describe when you saw civic light go off in some student's eyes. But you can take—I think they’re sister or brotherly questions. Go ahead.

BUTLER: Well, I will say, though, if you're, you're getting ready to jump into education, just, you know, keep, keep your head up, right? And remember it's all about the kids and enlightening the students, right?

The first thing I tell teachers is, number one, you know, make sure you understand your standards, what you're supposed to be teaching. Because oftentimes, when I go around, I speak to, to different teachers in different parts of the country, there's a lot of fear. But then I ask them, it's like, "Well, let's take a look at the standards together. Does the standard actually say you cannot teach this?" Well, if it says you can teach this, well then why are we afraid to teach that, right? So definitely making sure that you're rooted in the standards is important.

But also to be aware that your contribution to education does not have to be just within those four walls. There's many different organizations you can be a part of. You know, I always tell teachers, I mentor teachers, "Please be involved in different conferences.” You know, present your own research, what you see in the classroom, things that have worked for you, what your students should be seeing.

And just know that you're not alone. And I think being able to be out and being a part of different organizations helps you to understand that and to know that a lot of times what you see in education and in history is cyclical, right? A lot of what we're dealing with today is very similar to what educators were dealing with in the 1920s, right? And they persevered, right? And that's our job for today.

DIONNE: A true history teacher to remind us of the 1920s. We should let you go off to your son and give you a hand. Thank you for what you do.

So I just wanna go down the line, if I could, Andre, Rachel, and Jon. And Andre, you know I was gonna ask you this. You love John Dewey, and so do I. What would Dewey do? You can answer the other questions in that context.

PERRY: Yeah. And, you know, what would Dewey do in this context --

E.J. DIONNE: WWDD, that works.

ANDRE PERRY: That, that's right. And it gets to the question of ownership that was asked a little bit earlier. Dewey would definitely want children, families, teachers to deliberate, participate in the civic process.

You know, schools present a unique opportunity for students to actually engage in the politics that surround their schooling. Many of us had the opportunities as high school students to serve on debate clubs, to go to school board meetings, to present to teachers. That's part of the process. Parents have a enormous opportunity to participate in the process. And the teachers themselves. And so schools are uniquely situated in that even before you can vote, you can deliberate. You don't, you don't even have to be a citizen. You can deliberate. And so for me, it's always about owning civics, owning your politics, owning and participating.

But I just wanna be clear, the reason why we don't see a lot of enthusiasm or people not feeling like they've owned it, because it has been denied to many Americans and non-Americans, potential Americans, throughout history. When you deny people an education, a quality education, because let's be clear, we can present schools and not provide quality. Alysha can take her students on wonderful trips. A lot of schools don't have that opportunity. A lot of schools don't have the AP exam. A lot of schools don't have the teachers, mind you. And what that does, it discourages the student. It discourages the parent.

So for me, that deliberation process is absolutely necessary. But if you don't get it, it's more a reflection, and that's what we do, we blame the, the students, we blame the parents for not engaging. What we should be, really be blaming is the inability to engage with the curriculum, with opportunities that will liven up that civic spirit

DIONNE: And Rachel.

PERERA: Yeah. The two, so two ideas were in my head as I heard the questions. And one is the need to improve relational trust between teachers and students, teachers and families. I'm thinking specifically about the work of some of my colleagues at the Center for Universal Education at Brookings who've done some really excellent work on family engagement. I think the more you have strong relationships between folks in schools and folks outside of schools, it becomes harder to sort of believe the things you hear on the internet or believe, you know,

something you might see online. You have more trust in your teacher in terms of, you know, their decisionmaking, and that teacher feels, you know, more able to do their job well, not worried about the potential for backlash popping up. And so I think that's a really important piece of it.

And I think there's another important piece of, you know, improving the conditions to promote civics in school, and that's around community cohesion. And I think this goes back to Andre's earlier point around, like, schools can't solve all these issues. And so I think, you know, the more work we can do to support communities in sort of developing community institutions and relationships with one another and engaging folks in sort of these very local, hyper-local issues, I think the better positioned schools will be to promote civics.

And I think some of the trends in education policy are moving in the opposite direction there, right? Like, when you have school choice, for example, and we're seeing a rise in school choice, you're removing that connection. You are removing the connection between the school and the community. And so the, the school no longer is a community hub where I know it's my neighbor who's teaching my kid, and I can have a conversation with them. You're creating completely different sort of relational dynamics that I think create a lot more challenges for promoting civics in schools and for, you know, schools doing their job well in a number of other dimensions

E.J. DIONNE: Thank you. And Jon to close.

VALANT: So I'm gonna pick up this, the second question because I love that question and I love the framing of ownership, and I have just a, a couple statistics for you.

So when it comes to the NAEP, NAEP is, you know, the nation's report card. There's a civics exam and we have scores for eighth graders. And the, the results that get a lot of attention, and they're not very good, but the results that get a lot of attention are the sort of top line, how did kids do on the eighth grade NAEP civics test? 2% scored advanced, 20% scored proficient. That's actually a pretty high bar, but that's not very many kids getting proficient or better. 48% kids scored basic and 31% scored below basic. That's not a high bar. So that's, that is a third of the country where really they're missing just basic facts about the, the state of the country.

But in addition to giving those test questions where we see what it is that kids know, the NAEP also asks a bunch of survey questions at the end of the NAEP. And some of the most revealing answers, I think, come out of the survey questions that come with it. And to me, the most striking result in the entire NAEP civics is it's really a question of, of ownership. So kids are asked, "Do you think you'd be able to explain the rights and the responsibilities of United States citizens?" And so that's, that's eighth graders across the country taking this test. 15% said that they definitely can, and then only 31% said they probably can. The rest are not there. And so I, I think we have a lot of work to do in talking both about those rights, but just as much in

responsibilities that we have to one another, and I think our kids are telling us we're not doing a good enough job with it.

DIONNE: Thank you. I wanna do two things. One, I wanna thank the people who did so much work on this. Elisabeth Donahue, the VP at Brookings for Communications and public affairs. This whole event arose because she is an extrovert and had a conversation with a senator on an airplane and set all this up. Bless you, Elizabeth. Maryam Alhassani has done so much work on this that she will be qualified to run advance in some future White House. And she's also really good at communicating 'cause Senator Kaine and I could feel the burning of her eyes in our head as we were going on too long. Jenna Portnoy, who did so much work in helping all of us set this up. Aysha House and the whole public affairs team, and Molly Reynolds, who's the vice president of our program at Brookings, who makes everything we do possible, so I wanna thank her.

The other thing I wanna do is, Andre brought up John Dewey. John Dewey once said, and I'm quoting him here, "Democracy begins at home, and its home is the neighborly community." I wanna thank everyone who participated today and everyone who turned out, and the senators and this panel for creating, at least for a moment, but maybe a little longer, a neighborly community here on Capitol Hill. Self-government is a gift, and we have to nurture it, and thanks to you all for thinking about how we can do it. Bless you.

PERRY: Great close.