**#1404 Democracy Under Siege (Voting and Protest Rights)**

**JAY TOMLINSON - HOST, BEST OF THE LEFT:** [00:00:00] Welcome to this episode of the award-winning Best of the Left podcast in which we shall learn about the multiple tactics being implemented in an attempt to undermine the entire concept of democracy, because adhering to the will of the majority and allowing for unfettered protests is currently working to the distinct disadvantage of the Republican party.

Clips today are from the Bradcast, the David Pakman Show, This Is Hell!, CounterSpin, Democracy Now!, Another Way by Lawrence Lessig, and the Thom Hartmann Program.

**Guest Sarah Repucci of Freedom House on 'democracy under siege' Part 1 - The Bradcast w Brad Friedman - Air Date 3-8-21**

**BRAD FRIEDMAN - HOST, THE BRADCAST W/ BRAD FRIEDMAN:** [00:00:33] Sunday marked the 56th anniversary of Bloody Sunday in Selma, Alabama, when state troopers beat and tear gassed hundreds of peaceful protesters as they crossed the Edmund Pettus Bridge in a march for voter registration rights. The protesters were seeking justice and to ensure their right to vote would not be denied. At the head of the March was former congressman John Lewis and Reverend Hosea Williams. As the troopers advanced with clubs raised, the group knelt in prayer. And then the images of protestors, bloody and bloodied and bruised flashed across televisions across the nation and spurred Congress to pass, and President Johnson to sign into law, the 1965 Voting Rights Act.

As the White House noted over the weekend with the signing of an executive order by Joe Biden to promote access to the voting booth, Congressman Lewis’s fight to protect and expand the vote did not end that day in Selma, not by a long shot. He carried the mission to our nation's Capitol and remained a vigilant protector of our right to vote, knowing all too well the burdens borne to guarantee it, until the day he died.

Marking the 56th anniversary of Selma, the first during which John Lewis was no longer alive to March across the bridge in commemoration, president Biden signed an executive order to promote voting access, to allow all eligible Americans to participate in our democracy, to increase access to voter registration services and information about voting. The executive order is described by the White House as an initial step in this administration's efforts to protect the right to vote and ensure all eligible citizens can freely participate in the electoral process.

Noting that the president is committed to working with Congress to restore the Voting Rights Act gutted by the U S. Supreme Court and to pass HR 1, the For the People Act, which includes bold reforms to make it more equitable and accessible for all Americans to exercise their fundamental right to vote. That landmark legislation, HR 1, has been passed in the House, but awaits passage in the US Senate, where it remains unclear now, barring reform to the filibuster rule, that it will be able to pass at all.
In the meantime, president Biden’s executive order will direct federal agencies to expand access to voter registration and election information. The head of each federal agency will submit to the Assistant to the President for Domestic Policy a strategic plan, outlining ways that their agency can promote voter registration and participation within the next 200 days. These strategic plans could include actions such as leveraging federal agencies’ existing websites and social media to provide information about how to register to vote, distributing voter registration and vote by mail ballot applications in the course of regular services, considering whether any identity documents issued by the agency can be used in a form that satisfies state voter ID laws. And the order also directs the federal chief information officer of the U.S. to coordinate across federal agencies to improve or modernize federal websites and digital services that provide election and voting information to the American people, including ensuring that federal websites are accessible to individuals with disabilities and people with limited English proficiency. The executive order directs federal agencies to assist States under the National Voter Registration Act to improve and modernize vote.gov, to assist Americans in all States and territories, and even residing overseas with how to register to vote and obtained ballots, how to increase federal employees’ access to voting, how to analyze barriers to voting for people with disabilities, to increase voting access for active duty military and other overseas voters. To provide voting access and education to citizens in federal custody, and establish a Native American voting rights steering group, among other much needed actions to help improve access to the franchise.

At the same time, however, state legislatures are attacking and restricting the right to vote, specifically Republicans in state legislatures, with more than 200 proposals moving forward from Republicans and more than 40 States seeking to limit the franchise by making it harder to both register and vote.

The fight for democracy, it seems, never ends in this country or around the world

**Republicans Launch 253 Voter Suppression Bills - David Pakman Show - Air Date 3-2-21**

**DAVID PAKMAN - HOST, DAVID PAKMAN SHOW:** [00:05:26] Republicans know that they didn’t suppress enough of the vote in 2020. If they had suppressed enough of the vote in November, Trump would be president right now instead of Joe Biden. So Republicans have launched a nationwide voter suppression effort. It’s already underway with 253 different bills in 43 States, many of these bills premised on false claims that Donald Trump actually won the 2020 election.

Now you have to give them credit. They see the problem and they’re trying to fix it. The problem is record voter turnout in November gave the election to Joe Biden. As they see it, too many people voted. So the solution is to prevent people from voting. Now all of these bills in some way attempt to restrict voting and ballot access.

The Brennan Center for Justice has a great analysis on this, and the playbook includes strategies we’re familiar with. Make it more difficult to register to vote by banning voter registration that’s automatic. By shortening registration windows. That’s one part of the playbook. Purge voters from voter rolls, so they believe they’re registered, they show up and they’re not. You can do that by putting in place looser and looser guidelines for when people
can be unregistered and removed from voter rolls. Third part: make voter ID requirements stricter and stricter, which we know disproportionately impacts poorer people.

Now, how do they do this? The way you do it, it’s almost evil genius. In order to get --the voter ID is free, as they say. But in order to get the voter ID, you require more and more documents that you have to bring with you to be given the voter ID. And these are documents, which poorer people are less likely to have, people with more housing instability are less likely to have retained. And some of the documents you need to get your free voter ID costs money to get. Okay? And they’re documents that take time to get. When people can’t afford it to take time off from work, to deal with bureaucracy. So that’s how you deal with this problem of too many people voting through voter ID.

Another approach is you add elements of voter intimidation to voting. You increase poll watchers, that type of thing. Few examples: Georgia Senate Republicans have introduced a bill that would end no excuse absentee voting entirely. Meaning you can’t just say I want to vote absentee because I want to. They restrict the reasons that you can give to vote absentee. Georgia House Republicans have their own sweeping bill, which would reduce the early voting period. Again, just shorten the days, the number of days people can vote. Montana Republicans want to end same day voter registration. Missouri Republicans want a new voter ID requirement. New Hampshire Republicans want to ban out of state college students from voting in New Hampshire and they want to end same day registration. Iowa Republicans already approved a bill that would shorten voting hours. On and on and on.

Now at the same time that there are bills proposed to limit voting, there are also bills proposed mostly by Democrats to expand voting access. And hopefully some of those will pass. But Republicans aren’t even pretending. They haven’t been pretending for a long time. They openly want to win, not by winning the hearts and minds of people with policies that voters will like. They want to win by making it hard to vote disproportionately for people that are statistically more likely to vote for Democrats. At some point, and I believe that that point is now, the only way to deal with this is to pass national election reform and to pass it in a way that it overrides state limitations that Republicans want to impose and to prevent the next president from just undoing it. Easier said than done.

But is there any better time to do it than when Democrats control the White House, the Senate, and the House of Representatives for at least the next two years? The time to do it has to be now.

The coming anti-protest laws w/ Alleen Brown + Akela Lacy Part 1 - This is Hell! - Air Date 2-12-21

CHUCK MERTZ - HOST, THIS IS HELL!: [00:09:27] So Alleen are these laws designed so they would only prohibit the kinds of protests that seemingly provoked the bill, that would be protests by those with weapons who have the express purpose of targeting individuals or a group of people for potentially deadly violence? Are these bills only targeting the exact kind of protest that we saw at the US Capitol on January 6th? Because I think a lot of people would think that these bills are in reaction to those events.
ALLEEN BROWN: [00:09:58] Yeah. So you would think that, but the reality is that these bills were not actually drafted in reaction to the events at the Capitol and the language contained in the bills is so broad that it could impact people protesting any range of things, nonviolently. So, the true origin of these bills is in a reaction to the police brutality uprisings this summer. So we saw the beginnings of these bills in the wake of the killing of George Floyd by police in Minneapolis and the protest that followed. A few States, including Tennessee drafted these sprawling bills criminalizing a range of protest activity. It happened that at the very moment that Trump's supporters stormed the US Capitol, legislators were kicking off their legislative session. So a lot of these bills were teed up, but after this insurrection, some of them were sort of rebranded and the ability of law makers to get support for the bills expanded.

So, in Florida for example, we saw Governor DeSantis announce this wide ranging anti-protest bill in the fall, framing it as a reaction to the protest over the summer. And then when it was actually introduced in the legislature right after the events of the Capitol, DeSantis reframed the measure as being also aimed at protecting against incidents like the attack on the Capitol. He said, "I hope maybe now will get even more support for my legislation because it's something that needs to be done." And I think originally, if you have a bill that's obviously meant to tamp down Black Lives Matter protest, police brutality protests, you're not going to get support from lawmakers on the left, a lot of Democrats. If you can now say that these bills are also about right-wing violence, then it opens the possibility for it to become a bipartisan issue.

CHUCK MERTZ - HOST, THIS IS HELL!: [00:11:57] This legislation, these proposed bills, as Alleen was just saying, were in reaction to what happened over the summer with Black Lives Matters, instead of as much of a reaction to January 6th. Akela, do these bills, in your opinion, do they address violent protest, more like the kind of violence that happened during the Black Lives Matter protest, or do they address nonviolent protest more? Do you think that these measures, even before January 6th, were they racist?

AKELA LACY: [00:12:34] So the measures definitely lowered the bar for what is considered a violent form of protest, and so it's more changing the definition to apply to a really broad range of things. And also, there are specific clauses that really target some of the things that we saw over the summer, related to property damage, but also to things like camping on government property, which we saw in a lot of state capitals where there were large movements of occupation of state grounds, and so we see specific language targeting those kinds of things. And then you also see language, I mean, the more concerning thing is that it really targets broad forms of protests, as far as intent to influence government or changing the definition of what qualifies as a riot. In some cases, we're talking about groups of three to five people or more are causing varying kinds of disturbances.

But I think your question on whether or not they're racist is an interesting one. Some of the closets in particular specify types of intimidation, which is very subjective, especially when you're talking about the climate around protests this summer, it's pretty easy to make the argument that you feel intimidated by someone. And this is something that's part of the grievances that were raised in protest against police brutality over the summer, that officers or bystanders often claim that they felt threatened as a justification for use of force often against Black and Brown people. So those were used to justify the killings and George Floyd in Minneapolis, as [Alleen] mentioned, Ahmaud Arbery in Georgia, countless other people,
and so when you look at those kinds of things, which if you’re not well versed in this kind of stuff, you could look at that and say, oh yeah, well, we don't want protests to be able to make people in their home towns feel unsafe, but when you really dig into what "unsafe" means, who makes the definitions of what being "unsafe" is, then there are racist undertones to those pieces of the bills.

**RED ALERT: Anti-Protest Bills Popping Up Everywhere**

*David Pakman Show - Air Date 8-19-20*

David Pakman - Host, David Pakman Show: [00:14:17] There are a series of bills popping up in a bunch of States that would criminalize and repress protests of all types. And this is really chilling, red alert, authoritarian type stuff.

In Nashville, Tennessee, lawmakers have put together a bill 8005 eight zero zero five. That Senate bill and House bill 8005. Already passed the legislature would make it a class E felony to camp on state or public property between 10:00 PM and 7:00 AM. Now, what's the idea there? The idea is have carte blanche have a blank slate to go after protests that will occupy a plaza for some time or a park for some time, once 10:00 PM comes, Class E felony. Start arresting everybody.

They are threatening convictions punishable by up to six years in prison and the possible loss of your voting rights. It makes it easier to charge protestors with theft if they mark up state buildings with chalk.

A Michigan bill will classify rioting as terrorism. Now what's the problem there? The line on rioting is in and of itself up for debate. This would make anything that you can call rioting, even if it's not, terrorism. It would make acts of "social and domestic anarchy punishable by up to 20 years in prison or a $250,000 fine".

In South Dakota, the governor signed into law stricter penalties for rioting and inciting a riot. Now inciting a riot is pernicious since animated protesting could conceivably look like it incited someone to start rioting. And that's a really broad catchall that is being applied there.

In Louisiana, there's a bill on the table, which could mean 15 years in prison for protesting, quote, "on critical infrastructure." What's the idea there? To repress protests near a pipeline that residents in Louisiana oppose.

Now, there are many more examples, more than 20 States over the last couple of years have proposed some of these types of bills.

The idea is sometimes to criminalize homelessness, sometimes it’s to criminalize protesting. Other times it's to restrict restrict speech in practice, although they claim that's not what they're doing in theory.

And this is the stuff that reminds us why we need to vote at every level. It's not just presidential, but we need state senates, state legislatures, governorships, because those are the origins of a lot of these bills.
And those are people choosing many of the state judges that might eventually decide on the legality of some of these authoritarian restrictions on protesting. Authoritarianism really does not like protesting. We know that from history.

Now, I think it’s also important to remember that this is not just about new laws. You can weaponize existing laws as well, which is why we need the right mayors and police chiefs in place. Mayors often choosing police chiefs. Because they can take advantage of existing curfew laws. They can focus on unlawful assembly angles on gatherings, and on and on. So it’s not just about state legislatures, state senators, and governors. We need the right mayors. We need to push them to select the right police chiefs. This is much more than the presidency. By the way, it’s also really weird, and of course, completely hypocritical, that many of the same people stockpiling weapons in case the government were to become tyrannical are in support of laws cracking down on unarmed protesters and are saying, well, if the gatherings are against the law, these protesters should find some other way to redress of their grievances. What? What? Things are completely backwards, of course. And this is just the latest.

The coming anti-protest laws w/ Alleen Brown + Akela Lacy Part 2 - This is Hell! - Air Date 2-12-21

CHUCK MERTZ - HOST, THIS IS HELL! [00:18:30] You write that prosecutors would be able to bring felony charges against anyone who was a part of a riot, where injuries are significant, property damage occurred, even if they didn’t personally cause it. So Alleen, in the situation with what happened on January 6th, would that mean that even those who did not enter the Capitol building, possibly even those who did not even go to Washington, DC at all, could be arrested, would have potentially broken a crime, people, not even involved in the actual protest, would be arrested for participating?

ALLEEN BROWN: [00:19:05] Yeah, I think some of the bills open up possibilities like that. They’re so broadly framed that, if you’re in a space where one person breaks a window, with some of these bills, you could be liable for being part of that "riot". If you helped pay for someone’s GoFundMe to go attend a protest, hypothetically with some of these bills, you could be implicated as part of a "riot". And again, I think it’s important to remember that it’s not going to be, if where these bills are passed, it’s unlikely that White people, like those that stormed the Capitol, are going to be the ones that are subjected to this. Their purpose is really not to target those people, but again, it offers the possibility to subject anyone whose part of a protest to harsher charges.

CHUCK MERTZ - HOST, THIS IS HELL! [00:20:01] And you also write that the Nebraska bill also creates new harsher penalties for obstructing traffic. Another one of the most common recent anti protest bill elements, including in legislation in Oklahoma, Arizona, Florida, Indiana, Rhode Island, Kentucky, and Mississippi. So, Akela, when we started this show in 1996, it was during the Democratic National Convention here in Chicago, and it was the first time I saw protests zones, fenced in—caged really, as the fences were at least 12 feet high, and there was one way to get in or out and inside the cage where armed Chicago police lined up around the edge behind barricades. Is the goal of these bills to further contain protest? And the reason I ask is what do you think happens when protest is contained, when it cannot disrupt how things function? What happens to protest when it can’t disrupt?
AKELA LACY: [00:20:51] Absolutely. The clear intent of this is to keep people out of the streets, to keep people from obstructing the normal flow of cities which is what got attention and made the wave that we saw this summer. If you can't disrupt then the protest falls apart, that's the aim of it. And not to equate the protests that we saw this summer with protest against the election, but after the attack on the Capitol, there were groups of right-wing protesters who had gotten permits to come in and protest in Washington, and because of what happened, obviously, they were confined to certain spaces where you had to walk through barricaded streets, and then there was a closed off, fenced off area where you had to be escorted in by a police officer in order to attend this protest, and we got there and none of the protesters showed up. Which I mean, again, not same really ethos behind what they're protesting, but just to show that if you add all of these constraints then that dissolves the action, and I think that is part of the intent here.

Some of the irony in this is that while there are harsher penalties for things like marching in the street, there are clauses that remove the liability for people who drive into protesters in the streets. So, at the same time as you’re adding a chilling effect on people who might want to go out and demonstrate, you’re also telling them that if you do go out and demonstrate and some way and tries to harm you while you’re doing this you won’t have any rights to sue against that, or those people will be protected. That's part of a number of the bills, which is pretty alarming as well.

We did see trucks and cars drive into protests this summer and kill people, like we saw in 2016. And so we're moving the barriers for that kind of harm while criminalizing non-violent disruption of normalcy, and that's part of the intent of the bill.

CHUCK MERTZ - HOST, THIS IS HELL!: [00:22:31] There are a lot of disturbing parts of your article, but that is probably the most disturbing. I don't know, I don't even want to try to grade them or rate them because there's a lot of disturbing things in these bills. So Alleen, as you write, in other States, bills would expand the definition of conduct that would justify use of force from bystanders against demonstrators, including things perceived as threatening behavior. Among those provisions, some states proposals would strengthen Stand Your Ground laws, all allowing deadly force should a person be confronted by a "mob" or "riot", and again, that loose definition of a riot. Including in New Hampshire, other provisions such as in Oklahoma, Mississippi, and Florida would protect a driver who fleeing a riot injures or kills someone.

So Alleen, how loosely defined is fleeing? Will this give the far right legal cover to purposely run down protestors? Are these laws intended to protect people like the suspect and the multiple shooting of protestors in Kenosha the summer or the killer of Heather Hyer?

ALLEEN BROWN: [00:23:36] Yeah, I think that's exactly - I mean, these are bills that are designed to, in addition to suppress protests, advance the careers of these lawmakers. So it's really playing off of people's fears. So, there was a lot of fear, there's a lot of people, a lot of I guess Republican constituents, seem to be very afraid right now, or were very afraid this summer watching the police brutality uprising. There's a lot of fear about the way the world is changing, and so I think that the idea that if you find yourself caught in this chaos of the world, you can just run someone over if you have to. You can defend yourself. I think that really plays into a kind of violent, defensive politics that the right often turns to. So yeah, I think it's really playing off of people's fear.
JANINE JACKSON - HOST, COUNTERSPIN: [00:24:32] A March 3rd, New York Times story, while informative, suggests a problem. How Georgia's GOP voting laws could impact Black voters. Carried a sub-headline that explained "Two bills moving through the Republican-controlled Legislature would place new restrictions on voting access, in ways Democrats say would have an outsize impact on Black voters." Except that impact is not a partisan claim but a demonstrable fact.

The Washington post had a piece by Greg Sargent using the word alarming to describe the GOP's voter suppression campaign. And USA today had one saying the country risks regression to the Jim Crow era. Both were labeled opinion. Do elite media think that whether or not the US, under pressure from racists, should go back in 2021 on the whole one person, one vote thing is a legitimate topic for debate? We need more, and better, and fast in order to push back on Republican's current anti-democratic campaign.

Ari Berman has covered voting rights for many years now as senior reporter at Mother Jones, he's the author of Give Us the Ballot: The Modern Struggle for Voting Rights in America. We'll talk with him about the overt, multilevel, deeply dangerous attack on the right and the ability to vote.

Participants in the January 6th attack on the Capitol were fueled by a mixture of things, but importantly, by a big lie about the theft of the election, itself fueled by a multi-year GOP effort to propagate urgent concerns about voter fraud. That effort, abetted by some media that now express dismay at the not unpredictable effects, but while the need to defend the integrity of US elections may be, for some, a sincere delusion, if you will. That's not what's at work when the Republican chair of a Georgia County Board of Elections demands that voter access be restricted, "so that we at least have a shot at winning". Or when Donald Trump declared of a defeated franchise expanding congressional proposal last year, "they had things, levels of voting that if you ever agreed to it, you'd never have a Republican elected in this country again."

Voter suppression is a Republican strategy, and it's not slowed or shamed in the wake of January 6th, but moving full steam ahead. Media's ability to confront assaults on democracy as precisely that will mean letting go of their go-to bi-partisan balancing act, woefully inadequate to a crisis that will shape the political landscape for years to come.

One thing folks might of seen is Georgia trying to make it a crime to give water to people who are waiting in line to vote, which I saw covered as a wacky fact check story. You know, "I saw this on Facebook, is it really true? Yeah, it actually is really true," but that was just a strange angle on what is really, just an ominous, dark cloud phenomenon. And I wanted to say the fact that these Republicans goal is a country in which great numbers of people who don't look like them have no electoral voice. I'm not saying that that's not reported, media acknowledged that that is the goal, but I feel like that should be the template for this coverage. That fact should shape coverage. Politicians should be questioned based on this knowledge. That it's not a misunderstanding and it's not confusion, it's a strategy to suppress votes. And I feel like anytime you don't name that, you advance it.
ARI BERMAN: [00:28:35] Well, I think the media has done a much better job of covering this issue than they have in the past. I think they have still been slow to cover the severity of it, although it's starting to get significantly more coverage. But again, a lot of these things are being still covered as the usual legislative debates where there's nothing normal about this process. This process shouldn't even be happening. There should be no reason that we're debating any of these bills.

There could of been a few tweaks made to the system. The number one thing I would have liked to see for example, is election officials allowed to process mail ballots quicker, so it doesn't take seven days after the election to release the votes in Pennsylvania or Georgia or other places. But that would have been a small technocratic fix to the system. The question is, why are they even debating measures to get rid of no excuse absentee voting? Why are they even debating bills to cut early voting? These are things that should of never even come up. If they were introduced at all, they should have never been passed out of committee, and they certainly should of never been passed by chambers and legislature, and they certainly never should have been signed at the law by governors.

And I still think a lot of people are covering this as a normal debate. It's not a normal debate. It's an effort to try to overturn the election by other means. That Donald Trump very publicly called on states to overturn the election results. He tried to get the courts to throw out the results, that failed, and now they're moving on to the state legislative strategy. Where they're trying to get state legislatures to enact laws that are going to have the same kind of impact, and instead of trying to find 11,000 votes in Georgia, as Trump asked the Secretary of State to do, I don't know how he's expects the Secretary of State to do that, but he asks him to do that, and now basically the legislature's trying to just reduce 11,000 democratic votes and potentially a whole lot more than that by changing the state's voting laws.

And these are not small changes around the edges, these are major changes that are going to affect millions of voters. In Georgia, 1.3 million people voted by mail. Many, many, many, fewer people will be allowed to do so. Hundreds of thousands of people voted on days of early voting that could be eliminated. In Florida, 1.5 million people used mail ballot drop-boxes, they just want to get rid of them entirely. So these are pretty major changes to the system that I think still need to be treated with more severity than they have been so far.

A New Form of Jim Crow: Ari Berman on the GOP's Anti-Democratic Assault on Voting Rights - Democracy Now! - Air Date 3-2-21

JUAN GONZALEZ: [00:30:52] And I wanted to ask you about the hearing before the Supreme Court today in oral arguments on a challenge to a pair of Arizona voting policies, again, that make it harder for people to vote. Could you talk about what those policies are and what the likelihood of the court’s ruling on this?

ARI BERMAN: [00:31:11] The case centers around two restrictions on voting in Arizona: a restriction that throws out ballots if they’re cast in the wrong precinct, even though those votes would still be valid for statewide offices, and a restriction on the collection of ballots. This disproportionately harms voters of color. Voters of color were twice as likely as White
voters to have their votes thrown out for being cast in the wrong precinct. And voters of color, particularly Native American voters and Hispanic voters, are more likely to rely on ballot collection, because they live in remote areas that don’t have regular access to the mail, so they rely on people to drop their ballot off for them.

The case is bigger than that, though. It’s not just challenging two restrictions on voting in Arizona. It’s really challenging the remaining parts of the Voting Rights Act. Remember, in 2013, the Supreme Court gutted the Voting Rights Act and ruled that states with a long history of discrimination no longer had to approve their voting changes with the federal government. But it left in place a part of the Voting Rights Act, Section 2 of the Voting Rights Act, that apply nationwide, that could challenge discriminatory voting laws after they were passed. Now the Supreme Court could weaken that part of the law, as well, and that would make it functionally impossible for minority voters to get protection under the Voting Rights Act at a time when new voter suppression laws are proliferating around the country. And this is what’s so dangerous. We need a strong Voting Rights Act more than ever right now, given the spread of voter suppression. But, in fact, the Supreme Court may say that the Voting Rights Act is practically nonexistent, at a time when voter suppression is spreading all across the country.

AMY GOODMAN - HOST, DEMOCRACY NOW!: [00:32:44] Ari Berman, talk about the record of the Chief Justice, John Roberts, on this.

ARI BERMAN: [00:32:49] John Roberts has been trying to weaken the Voting Rights Act for over 40 years. When he was a young lawyer in the Reagan Justice Department, he led the fight to weaken Section 2 of the Voting Rights Act, which is the part of the Voting Rights Act that’s at issue in this Arizona case. Then, 30 years later, when he became chief justice of the Supreme Court, he gutted the Voting Rights Act and ruled that states like Georgia and Arizona don’t have to approve their voting changes with the federal government anymore.

Interestingly enough, he pointed to the remaining section of the Voting Rights Act as a reason to get rid of one section of it. Well, now they’re trying to get rid of that other section that Roberts said was still relevant. So, this was the plan all along, to try to weaken the Voting Rights Act step by step, so that Republicans could pass even more egregious voter suppression efforts, so that voters of color can no longer look to the court and can no longer look to the Supreme Court for protection. And this would be a historic rollback of the country’s most important voting rights law and a really radical transformation — for the worse — of American democracy.

The Architect of The For The People Act (H.R. 1) Part 1 - Another Way, by Lawrence Lessig - Air Date 1-28-21

REP JOHN SARBANES: [00:33:50] So, I think about what I call the load-bearing walls inside the architecture of HR-1 S-1, these are the key core elements that I think hold it up and frankly meet the expectation of the public.

So, you begin right in Title I of HR-1 with all of these voting rights reforms, which were really pushed forward for five, six congresses in a row by our former colleague John Lewis. He authored something called the Voter Empowerment Act, and that’s right on the masthead of
HR-1. So, these are things that would create automatic voter registration, same-day registration across the country, a certain number of days of early voting, make sure that mail-in voting opportunities are broadly available to people everywhere in the country, but also, Larry, pushing back on voter intimidation, voter suppression. So, all these key voting reforms: that's obviously a central part of HR-1.

Another thing that is important to show respect for voters is to fix partisan gerrymandering, which really angers the electorate out there, and we understand that. So, we want to set up independent redistricting commissions that can determine how lines are drawn for congressional districts across the country. That's fundamentally respectful of the electorate because it makes it an objective process instead of being mixed up in politics.

A third key component is a whole set of ethics and accountability reforms so that when lawmakers go to Washington, either to serve in that case in the legislative branch or they go to serve in the executive branch, they behave themselves, which the public has a right to expect.

So, really strong reforms there to create transparency, deal with conflicts of interests, put ethical codes in place and so forth. A third thing that you mentioned, campaign finance reform: disclosure on where the big money's coming from because that's really demoralized a lot of people out there, but not stopping there. Creating a small donor matching system so everyday Americans can be the ones that lift up candidates and send them to Washington, and that also helps diversify the candidate pool because people who hustle and get out there and work and collect small donations can be competitive and viable. So, that's a key piece as well.

The last thing I'll just mention, because it's really important, and as you say, there's many other things, but essential part is robust measures to combat foreign interference in our democracy. Make sure our election systems are resilient and sound and robust so that Americans can have confidence that when they cast their vote it's going to be properly tallied and counted. And that's critical as well.

So these are all really fundamentally important reforms, but the three big ones that I would put up as the highlights: voting reforms, ethics reforms, campaign finance reforms.

**LARRY LESSIG - HOST, ANOTHER WAY BY LAWRENCE LESSIG:** [00:37:01] So, the campaign finance reform one is obviously the one we've talked about for the longest period. And you've constantly emphasized just the practical day-to-day reality of raising money in Washington. I think when we first met you said something like, I've been in Congress so far five years, and I might've had lunch with members of Congress five times in those five years because if you have time to have lunch, you have time to be raising money and you need to be raising money. You don't have time for lunch.

And part of the objective of all of these reforms has been in a certain sense to liberate these congresspeople to do the right thing, to do what is in the interest of their constituents or what their political principles would tell them to do rather than their funders. Now, when you've tried to sell small dollar public funding to members of Congress, what's the argument you make to them that helps them see why they would be liberated if this is the way they could fund campaigns rather than the lobbyist funding or large-check funding.
REP JOHN SARBANES: [00:38:03] Well, it's a combination of things. One is I think that the fact that the members of Congress are so dependent, unfortunately, on high dollar donors and PAC money and so forth is because it costs a lot to run a campaign in America. The average congressional campaign, winning campaign, now is about $1.7 or $1.8 million every two years. So, campaigns are expensive. And I think the fact that members have to go chase that money from those sources makes them feel a little bit guilty because they know that the public has a different expectation. The public wants the attention of lawmakers to be on them, on everyday Americans and their concerns. They want the time that members of Congress spend to be spent with their constituents, reaching out, listening to them, being in their living rooms, not hanging out in K St. conference rooms with a bunch of lobbyists.

So, you can develop a kind of split personality as a member of Congress, where you want to lean towards your constituents, you want to be in those town halls, but you have to spend an incredible amount of time going raising money from these sources. And that's not what most members signed up for. They really do want to do the job. I think that's the important thing. And you use the word liberate. I really do feel like many members of Congress feel that this system has taken them hostage because it's the only way you can be competitive and raise money for your campaigns. But I don't think they like it. So if you present them with a viable alternative, one that can make them competitive still as candidates and allow them to raise sufficient dollars but one that now allows them to lean back towards their constituents, towards everyday Americans. I think they will choose that in a heartbeat.

And when I talk to my colleagues, they're very much interested in that. Now, they're nervous, too, because even if you don't like the system you're in, it can be tricky, and you're apprehensive about leaping into a new system. But we've been able to show them that, based on certain assumptions, if they chose to participate in a small donor matching system that put a 6-1 match behind small donations out there that they could be viable and they could be competitive.

So, we had to show them that it would work for them, and we did that. And that was a very powerful argument, but we also showed them, Larry -- and you're aware of this because you've studied it -- that, increasingly across the country, at the state and local level, these systems are being put in place. And when you see that happen, you also see an electorate that gets more engaged, more excited, feels more empowered, itself.

**Fight GOP Voter Suppression Laws - Best of the Left Activism**


With more than 253 bills attacking voting rights proposed in 43 states since the election and the Supreme Court signaling they'll dismantle the rest of the beleaguered Voting Rights Act, the fight to defend and expand voting rights is quite literally existential. So let's dive in.

At the federal level, as you've heard about today, there are two pieces of legislation that must become law. The first is HR-1, the For the People Act, which the Brennan Center for
Justice is calling the greatest civil rights bill since the Civil Rights Movement itself. The second is HR-4, the John Lewis Voting Rights Advancement Act, which would reestablish the pre-clearance requirements that were gutted from the Voting Rights Act in 2013 and established national pre-clearance for practices that disproportionately affect communities of color.

You can join the fight to pass these bills by calling and writing to your members of Congress and putting further pressure on them with safely organized local rallies with local chapters of political action groups. Common Cause has also created an HR-1 campaign page that includes all the ways you can take action, including signing up to text bank and phone bank voters in targeted districts, connecting them to their senators to support HR-1. Visit commoncause.org to get involved.

Of course, an essential piece of this work is also demanding the elimination of the Senate filibuster that was forged by racists more than a century ago, and used by racists and the last century to fight the Civil Rights Movement. It's worth noting that Stacey Abrams is proposing a bit of a workaround. She's calling on the Senate to invoke the elections clause of the Constitution to make the voting rights bills only require a majority vote like budget bills and judge and cabinet confirmations. This may sway conservative Democrats like Joe Manchin and Kristen Sinema.

On the state and local level, get very familiar with reaching out to your state reps, senators and governor if you're not already. Blue states are not exempt from voter suppression laws; looking at you, New York. So wherever you are, make noise and fight to protect and expand the vote and start helping the opponents of any elected official that supports voter suppression laws.

And finally, many of the new GOP voter suppression laws are voter ID laws. The organization Vote Riders helps fight voter suppression laws and helps voters get the ideas they need to vote. The work they do between elections makes a huge difference on election day, and they could use your help now. You can sign up to volunteer with them@voteriders.org.

The segment notes include all the links to this information, as well as additional resources, and, as always, this and every activism segment we produce is archived and organized under the activism tab at bestoftheleft.com. So, if upholding the core tenets of democracy is important to you, be sure to tell everyone you know about fighting GOP voter suppression laws so that others in your network can spread the word, too.

Democracy Strikes Back 'For the People' v. For the GOP Fraudsters Part 1 - The Bradcast - Air Date 3-4-21

BRAD FRIEDMAN - HOST, THE BRADCAST W/ BRAD FRIEDMAN: [00:43:51] "This bill will put a stop to the voter suppression that we're seeing debated right now," said Congresswoman Nikema Williams. She's a new representative. She represents the Georgia district that deceased voting rights champion and civil rights icon John Lewis had held for years. This bill, she said "is the good trouble that he fought for for his entire life.” To Republicans, however, it would give license to unwanted federal interference in state’s authority to conduct their own elections.
Ultimately, you know, by the way, just the way that the US Constitution says is allowable. But they say will ultimately benefit Democrats through higher turnout, most of them notably among minorities. So while they are claiming that this is some sort of federal takeover of elections, not that there would be anything wrong with that, to be honest, but the GOP, their opposition is about the fact that this will allow more people to vote. More legal voters to vote, which Republicans feel will harm their prospects of getting elected in a political atmosphere where they have no actual governing ideas beyond preventing voters of certain political persuasion from being able to cast a vote.

They seem to have completely given up on the idea of winning an election by winning a contest of ideas and values. And they are now simply hoping to suppress as many votes as possible, period, to make voting as difficult as possible. Period. Again for certain people. And to gerrymander districts to their advantage however possible, and hopes of winning elections by brute force, essentially.

HR 1 would require States to automatically register eligible voters as well as offer same day registration. It would limit state’s ability to purge registered voters from their rolls and restore former felons voting rights. Among dozens of other provisions, it would also require States to offer 15 days of early voting and allow no excuse absentee balloting. So, you know, just like going through a metal detector, I don’t even know what that lady was talking about.

**DESI DOYEN - PRODUCER, THE BRADCAST W/ BRAD FRIEDMAN: [00:46:10]** I’m not sure she does either.

The bill would mandate the nonpartisan commissions to be set up, to handle the process of redistricting congressional boundaries, instead of already gerrymandered state legislatures doing it for us. It would create a system of public financing for congressional campaigns.

Another section that’s been a focus of Republican ire, elected Republicans anyway, if not their actual voters, I'll get to that in a second. So another section would force the disclosure of donors to dark money political groups. And that's just the sample of the massive long overdue reform in HR 1, the For the People Act, that would bring, you know, to American representative democracy, some of which, by the way, does not go far enough as the bill, as currently written and passed by the House, includes a huge loophole that while mandating a hand marked paper ballot for all voters who may want one, allows elections officials to not offer that option at the polls, but only via mail-in voting if they wish.

So that's a big problem, with this legislation. Nonetheless, it is a wildly important bill and it would be a tremendous good for every, every voter in the nation, of every political persuasion. And so yes, Republicans in Congress strongly oppose it. While it passed the House on Wednesday as expected, the biggest obstacles are now going to be in the Senate where Democrats, unless they do away with the filibuster, are going to have a very difficult time getting this passed.

It appears that Republicans actually support this. Republican voters, not Republican officials. I believe there was zero votes in the US House from Republicans for this bill, when it passed on a Wednesday night. A new survey finds that a majority of Republican voters support this legislation. The Data for Progress poll found HR 1 has broad public support, more than two thirds of likely voters, that’s 68%, said that they would back the proposal. Just 16% said they opposed it.
The support also transcends party lines, according to this poll, with 70% of Democrats, 68% of independent or third party voters and 57% -- yes, a majority of Republican voters -- express support for this bill. 57%.

But, the Data for Progress poll also found that a majority of respondents support major provisions of this bill, not just the full bill itself, but piece by piece they're in support of this bill. The measures that receive the most support from likely voters were the prevention of foreign interference in our elections, limiting money in politics, and increasing election security.

More than half of the respondents, 58%, said that they supported voting by mail, a method that was heavily used by nearly every state in the 2020 election because of the coronavirus pandemic. That, even as Republicans in state houses around the country are moving hundreds of bills to shut down vote by mail and other procedures that their own voters, at least according to this survey, actually support.

**Guest Sarah Repucci of Freedom House on 'democracy under siege' Part 2 - The Bradcast w Brad Friedman - Air Date 3-8-21**

**BRAD FRIEDMAN - HOST, THE BRADCAST W/ BRAD FRIEDMAN:** [00:49:46] Sarah Repucci, how much of this year's ranking for the U S itself, which dropped, I mentioned, I think three points, how much of that was affected by that stunning turn of events in January? And what do you see as its effect that you wrote about in some detail there, it's effect on the rest of the world that once looked up, at least somewhat, to our always otherwise decidedly imperfect Democracy?

**SARAH REPUCCI:** [00:50:10] Yeah. The report that we just put out covers the calendar year. So actually the events of January 6th and afterwards were not included in there. So it might be even more surprising to know that we still dropped by three points before that had happened. We were worried, as you said about those norms for holding leaders accountable that has been undermined through the dismissal of inspectors general and other things. Also very concerned about mass arrests and violence at protests, especially last summer, and then the BLM movement. I'm also worried about lack of transparency around COVID-19 prevention and treatment.

But I actually think that what's most concerning in the U S was the systematic efforts of president Trump to over to overturn the will of the voters, and make these baseless claims of fraud, even after the courts had given them fair hearing and rejected them. And that's I think not surprising given how steadfast he was and how many supporters he had, that the credibility of our election is now being called into doubt by a significant portion of the US public. And so even if president Trump is out of office, even if he never runs again we have this weakness in the credibility of our elections and people's buy-in to our democratic system.

And of course, as you mentioned, that does have a knock on effect in other countries. If this is happening here in the United States, where we have really strong institutions, where the courts fought back, the media spoke out openly, they weren't afraid to criticize. Think about
what happens in a country like Cameroon, where people, where the journalists have already been silenced, where the courts are compliant and the legislature just goes along with whatever the president says. It can have a really strong domino effect in other countries.

BRAD FRIEDMAN - HOST, THE BRADCAST W/ BRAD FRIEDMAN: [00:52:00] And that's what, yeah. That's, I think what is most troubling to me, as troubling enough, what is going on with our own Democracy here. I mentioned before the before the break that it looks like the Georgia Senate has now passed a bill to remove absentee voting, excuse-free absentee voting, that they themselves had put in place but they didn't like this year's election results, so they're changing the laws. We're seeing that in more than 40 different States now more than 200 bills. Is that the sort of thing that would otherwise, if you saw it in another country, that would lead you to put out a report, a warning about democracy under attack in foreign nations, and is that what we're now looking at here in 2021?

SARAH REPUCCI: [00:52:44] Yeah. So definitely we believe as an organization that supports democracy that there should be as many opportunities for safe voting as possible. People should be able to vote. We should be aiming for a hundred percent enfranchisement. And so we look very carefully at the global scale, at countries that are restricting opportunities for voting or manipulating the system in a way that makes it so that people's vote count less or there certain portions of the population that don't have the same opportunities as others. And it is very worrying what is happening to our electoral system here and the possibility that we could have a situation by the next election where fewer people were able to vote, than the time before. We should always be trying to expand those opportunities.

BRAD FRIEDMAN - HOST, THE BRADCAST W/ BRAD FRIEDMAN: [00:53:31] We have been keeping an eye in recent years on this program on what I think is a similar sort of annual report on electoral integrity worldwide from the Electoral Integrity Project at Harvard University and the University of Sydney in Australia which has not ranked the U S very high on their own scale, which they credit to our terrible campaign finance system, gerrymandering of state and congressional districts, as well as restrictions to access to the ballot box in States around the country. Are those also the sort of specific points that are central to your rankings as well? At least in regard to the U S.?

SARAH REPUCCI: [00:54:09] Yeah, we look at all of those, but for us it's very important to always look at elections within the wider context, because democracy is about a lot more than elections. You can have a great election day, but if the campaign is restricted, if people don't have access to independent information in the media, if they can't gather to protest, you don't have a democracy. So we look at all of those different areas. And we've seen downgrades in the U S on the areas that you've seen, but we also are deeply troubled by equal treatment of different segments of the population in this country, and on the continued systemic racism that we see, especially against people of color and Black Americans in particular, Native Americans. We've been worried in the past about access of surveillance, about the outing of whistleblowers who were trying to hold the government to account, corruption. So we've seen weakness in a range of areas and certainly the US has fallen well below the countries that most people would think of as our peers like France and Germany and the UK.
The Architect of The For The People Act (H.R. 1) Part 2 - Another Way, by Lawrence Lessig - Air Date 1-28-21

LARRY LESSIG - HOST, ANOTHER WAY BY LAWRENCE LESSIG: [00:55:17] Let's let's talk about Ezra Klein for for a minute. And I love his most recent book, Why are we are so polarized. But in that book, he expresses the skepticism that has been echoed by some even in the Academy that shifting to a small dollar matching system might amplify the dynamic of polarization. And if all you’re getting money from if you’re depending on the small dollar givers then the people who are putting up their own money tend to be the most partisan and the most extreme. I wonder what your reaction to that is and whether this is something that we should be watching or careful of.

REP JOHN SARBANES: [00:55:57] I've heard that comment. I don't agree with it, Larry, because I think in fact you have to step back and understand what this perspective on the part of average folks out there is on how campaigns are funded and politics is controlled. And when they see that big money has this role of overpowering the voices of everyday Americans, it creates a real cynicism, a sense of helplessness, and that then contributes to people opting out of the political town square, as I often say. They leave and hunker down and say, I don't want to be engaged in politics because frankly my voice doesn't make a difference.

What happens is if you get your you're typically or formerly civically engaged person who decides to withdraw from the political town square, then that creates a kind of vacuum, and you start to see extreme elements rush in, and they take over the political discourse which is, I think, what's happened over the last few years. I view that those citizens who vacated the town square, the ones that volunteer in their community, are civically engaged, but have turned off of politics, they can be a ballast in the ship of state. When they vacate, then the ship starts to teeter from one side to the next because those extreme elements find a real opportunity to enter and take over the conversation.

So, I actually think that if you created a system where people have more confidence that the elected officials that they vote for are going to keep representing their interests and not get hijacked by the big money, they would come back into that town square and they would add their voices, and it would actually diminish the influence of these extreme elements.

But under the current circumstances, that's not what's happening here. So, I think if you have a system that creates more confidence, more trust, more appetite to re-engage civically from a broader number of people, you actually moderate the influence that some of these extreme voices have had on our politics.

So, my prediction of the future, if you have a system like this in place, is that more people start pouring back into that political space. They add their voices, they contribute to a discussion around policy and ideas that then can lead to the kind of compromise and policy making that the public and the country wants to see. If you don't do this, if you don't find ways to create that confidence and restore trust, we're just going to keep going in the same direction where a smaller and smaller group of louder voices ends up dominating the political conversation. And we know that's not been working recently. So, let's go build a
system that restores trust broadly. And I think these money reforms are right at the heart of that.

LARRY LESSIG - HOST, ANOTHER WAY BY LAWRENCE LESSIG: [00:59:07] So, your proposal HR-1 also has an alternative which you and I have talked about a lot and people listening to this podcast have heard a lot about which will be a pilot study for the system that Seattle has adopted for its local elections, a voucher system. And one of the arguments that those of us who support vouchers advance -- I agree with you, I'm not convinced by Ezra's argument -- but to the extent there might be something to Ezra's argument, it could be resisted if more people actually were participating in the project of contributing to campaigns, if you could flood the zone with lots of ordinary people who wouldn't necessarily be motivated by single-issue, extreme questions. So, if you had vouchers inside of the system complemented by the matching funds, then I guess your view must be given you want this pilot to be conducted that that might add something more, or do you think it's something that might mitigate the concerns around this polarization point?

REP JOHN SARBANES: [01:00:09] Yeah, I think it's a very important proposition to test, and I do think that it could add value to this overall effort of pulling people back into the political space as we're discussing it. So, the voucher idea is one that we ought to take a look at in terms of how it could relate to federal campaigns, congressional campaigns. We've seen the success of it in Seattle. There's good data that's come out of the use of the vouchers there in terms of diversifying the voters and donors that participate in that, leading to broader voter engagement, not just donation engagement, but voter engagement, etc. So, by all of the measures you would want to use to judge whether you're running campaigns and designing a system of financing them, that would broaden civic engagement, that effort has done very well and I think pointed out the potential of it.

So, I think it's one of the reasons that we felt strongly really from the outset of designing this small donor system that we would want to pilot: how is that effected? How can it be enhanced? What sort of kinks do you need to work out with a system like that around vouchers if you were to do it at the federal level? So, we've created this opportunity for states to step up and make application to be part of a pilot or demonstration, a program that could test what this looks like. And then you pull the data from it, along with the other results of what the program is yielding, and then you may be able to build that in as you move forward. So, I think once you establish the baseline, you're fundamentally going to restructure opportunities around campaign finance that lift up the voices of the broad community.

The opportunity for refinements or building on top of that, I think, grow. And, look, that's what is at the heart of all of the reforms in HR-1: to put everyday Americans -- I keep using that phrase; I don't know that there's a better one -- but put them back at the center of their politics, whether it's voting or the respect for the public interest that many feel lawmakers have fallen away from, or whether it's redesigning how we fund campaigns in America to show respect for the public. All of these things are designed to say that Washington has learned, is trying to fix the politics and the way we govern in a way that lifts up the voices of people out there. And I think the voucher system as we've seen at work in Seattle is something that ought to be tested and piloted as we move forward and potentially then incorporate it into a broader model of campaign finance reform.
Summary

JAY TOMLINSON - HOST, BEST OF THE LEFT: [01:03:18] We've just heard clips today, starting with *The Bradcast* laying out the requisite history of the fight for voting rights. The *David Pakman Show* gave an overview of the more than 250 voter suppression bills being pushed by Republican legislatures at the state level. *This is Hell!* in two parts, discussed the anti-protest laws that go hand in hand with the voter suppression. The *David Pakman Show*, again, gave an overview of the state level anti-protest laws. *CounterSpin* addressed the need for the media to call out racist voter suppression for exactly what it is. Lawrence Lessig on *Another Way*, discussed the pillars of democracy reform that we need. *Democracy Now!* looked ahead to the case at the Supreme Court that is attempting to decimate the rest of the voting rights act. And *The Bradcast* laid out the new regulations proposed by H.R.1, the For the People Act, which enjoys broad bipartisan support among voters, just not politicians.

That's what everyone heard, but members also heard bonus clips, *The Bradcast* looked at the status of American democracy through an international lens and Lawrence Lessig on *Another Way* discussed the interesting debate over the effect of campaign finance reform on partisanship.

And polarization really interesting stuff for non-members. Those bonus clips are linked in the show notes and our part of the transcript for today's episode. So you can still find them if you want to make the effort, but to hear that and all of our bonus content delivered seamlessly into your podcast feed, sign up to support the show at bestoftheleft.com/support or request a financial hardship membership, because we don't make a lack of funds, a barrier to hearing more information. Every request is granted, no questions asked.

And now, we'll hear from you.

Critiquing charitable giving - Maureen from Boston

VOICEDMAILER: MAUREEN FROM BOSTON: [01:05:07] Hi Jay,

I’m Maureen, and I live in the Brighton area of Boston. I’m not your typical listener. I’m retired because of disability, but I’m also an elder, 74 years, and live in an assisted living residence.

I have listened to you since the inception of your podcast. You were in my earphones when I learned of the Marathon bombing here. You have been on buses, trains, trolleys, and walking with me for over 15 years.

Now, to the point of my calling. Thank you for your recent show about the unfairness of allowing charitable tax deductions. I have argued that for years with liberals who become angered when I complain about billionaire’s gifts to certain types of schools or their former colleges or gifts to charities to help poor people in one country or one situation over another.

For most of the past 22 years, my income was well below any amount needed to pay taxes. As a result, my donations are my decisions made because I believe in causes I champion; the
ACLU, Oxfam, and my church. Now, I can only manage a little here or there to them. To me, charitable giving has been a luxury, not a financially good investment.

Finally, you offer your digest of arguments to back me up.

I was going to contact you about this, but now I’m compelled to do that. This week, I received an eleven-page screed from The Leadership Institute, ending with a billing page! If I donate $50 above the regular $50 charge, I will receive a “complimentary copy” of Resistance Is Futile.

The missive is well-composed propaganda (of course in serif letters) arguing public universities are becoming dangerous for those espousing “intellectually challenging conservativism.”

U. Cal Berkley cancelled a scheduled appearance by Milo Yiannopoulos and Ann Coulter during a time, 2017, when tiki-torch-carrying mobs were roaming the country-side. Of course, Ms. Coulter has every right to her racist, anti-female, anti-gay rhetoric, and she has the right to send things through the mail, even unsolicited. However, it’s unfair that we reward such behavior as tax deductible to Ann and to The Leadership Institute.

Final comments on the deep humanity of patronizing patriotism

JAY TOMLINSON - HOST, BEST OF THE LEFT: [01:07:06] Thanks to all of those who called into the voicemail line or wrote in their messages to be played as VoicedMails. If you’d like to leave a comment or question of your own to be played on the show, you can record a message at (202) 999-3991 or write me a message to jay@bestoftheleft.com.

Thanks to Maureen who was referring to our reposted episode Naked Capitalism has a fig leaf all about how philanthropy is not only not as good as people like to think, but also that it is used to paper over some of the horrors of capitalism that people would never stand for if not for the bandaid that is philanthropy being placed over the gaping wounds of poverty, massive inequality, lack of access to healthcare, corporate lobbyists, controlling government and so on.

Now, today, I just wanted to talk a bit about Biden’s first prime time talk that happened last night. There was plenty of cheerleading for the vaccine rollout and consoling for the lives lost, but there was one part of the speech that really caught my attention. It probably went off other people's radars but it got me thinking in an interesting direction. I want to share that.

PRESIDENT JOE BIDEN: [01:08:20] And there's something else we lost. We lost faith in whether our government and our Democracy can deliver on really hard things for the American people. But as I stand here tonight, we’re proving once again something I’ve said time and time again til you’re probably tired of hearing me say it. I say it to foreign leaders and domestic alike, it's never, ever a good bet to bet against the American people. America is coming back. The development, manufacturing and distribution of vaccines in record time is a true miracle of science. That's one of the most extraordinary achievements any country has ever accomplished. And we also just saw the Perseverance rover land on Mars, stunning
images of our dreams that are now reality. Another example of the extraordinary American ingenuity, commitment and belief in science and one another. And today, I signed into law of the American rescue plan.

JAY TOMLINSON - HOST, BEST OF THE LEFT: [01:09:28] So, that's the clip I'm going to reference. Nothing groundbreaking, obviously. And I'll preface my thoughts by saying that I'm not angry about that clip. I'm not elated about it. I'm not going to do an epic takedown or a sycophantic praise. I'm just fascinated by it. Biden starts out encouraging faith in our country's ability to get stuff done. And I totally resonate with that. I put out a commentary or a bonus clip somewhere about FDR's second inaugural speech which was all about encouraging people to have faith in our country's ability to get stuff done. So, I'm totally down with that talking point. And then he starts stoking patriotism in our great science. And that's what really pricked my ears up because the way I hear that is it sounds like he's basically trying to trick people into believing in science by cloaking it in patriotism. This whole talk he's giving: there's a few different perspectives you could have. You could have the blind acceptance view where you just hear the words and say yes, I believe the country can do things, and yes, our science is good and we've done good things and just move on with your life. Then there's the cynical view which tries to pick it to pieces and get to the underlying meaning or the motivation for why he is saying things like that. So, that's where my mind goes initially, which is that our country actually has a major problem with not believing in science. And no matter how often we tell people science is pretty cool; you should check it out cause that's how we know reality. They're like, eh, I don't know, though. So, politicians, communication experts will tell you well, cloaking anything in patriotism is a pretty good way to get people to accept whatever you're trying to feed them. So, it's nice that we have a president who's trying to cloak something like science in patriotism rather than fascist tendencies or whatever else. So, it's not bad what he's doing. It's just that when you hear him do it and you kinda hear through the words a little bit, do you think, Oh yeah, I'm just being reminded about how anti-science America is, but there's a third perspective and that's the one that I'm becoming [sic] to adopt more and more often recently. And I'm calling this the clear-eyed, less cynical view. So, you can still see through what's being said but be less cynical about it. Interesting.

And it's reminding me of a similar experience I had with the inauguration ceremony. We were chatting on the Backroom of Best of the Left with the researchers and the transcriptionists, and we all were chatting about the inauguration about whether it is pomp-and-circumstance bullshit, or if there is some purpose to it. And I was saying that I had come to a new understanding of ceremony because people do ceremonies, humans need them, for reasons that I don't think we fully understand from obscure tribes and minor religions to all of the major religions and secular governments, everyone does ceremonies. So, an inauguration ceremony is like the secular equivalent of a religious ceremony. It plays the same role of infusing meaning into actions and the progression of time and things are changing, but it's okay that they've changed because we've done a ceremony that allows us to move to the next stage. It's a very strange thing people do, but it's just ingrained in us. And I would argue that patriotism isn't much different. It's one of those things that people do. People, for reasons we don't fully understand, need patriotism. And if you think that patriotism is bullshit, then it may be hard to not be cynical about it.

That's been my experience for most of my life. But the perspective that I've adopted more recently is this sort of fascination coupled with acceptance of the fact that this is actually
pandering, stoking patriotism. This is actually how to get through to people and to get stuff done. If you want to move society forward, pandering to people's sense of patriotism isn't just a gross thing that politicians do to get votes. It's as critical to the body politic as oil is to an engine. If you try to run the machinery of state without properly greasing the gears, you are bound to not get very far. And you don't have to like it. I don't like it, but I have found that understanding it and accepting it has helped me move beyond my traditional annoyance with it and given me a deeper understanding of the complicated and extremely messy inner workings of the human collective. So, that's what I got from Biden's talk about sending a rover to Mars.

As always, if you have thoughts on this or anything else, I would love to hear them. Keep the comments coming in at (202) 999-3991 or by emailing me to jay@bestoftheleft.com, That's going to be it for today. Thanks to everyone for listening. Thanks to Deon Clark and Erin Clayton for their research work for the show. Thanks to the Monosyllabic Transcriptionist Trio Ben, Dan, and Ken for their volunteer work helping put our transcripts together. Thanks to Amanda Hoffman for all of her work on our social media outlets, activism segments, graphic design, web mastering, and actually tuning me into the whole concept of government ceremonies being the secular version of religious ceremonies. That's where I got the idea. And of course, thanks to everyone who has become a member or purchased gift memberships at bestoftheleft.com/support as that is absolutely how the program survives.

And now everyone can earn rewards and support the show by telling everyone about it using our Refer-o-Matic program, bestoftheleft.com/refer. For details on the show itself, including links to all of the sources and music used in this and every episode, all that information can always be found in the show notes on the blog and likely right on the device you're using to listen.

So coming to you from far outside the conventional wisdom of Washington, DC, my name is Jay, and this has been the Best of the Left podcast coming to you twice weekly thanks entirely to the members and donors to the show from bestoftheleft.com.