

Center for Strategic and International Studies

## Online Event

# “The Future of Voting in America”

RECORDING DATE:

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FEATURING:

**Andy Bernstein,**

*Executive Director,  
HeadCount*

**Aditi Juneja,**

*Counsel,  
Protect Democracy*

**Amber McReynolds,**

*Chief Executive Officer,  
National Vote at Home Institute*

CSIS EXPERTS:

**H. Andrew Schwartz,**

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*Transcript By  
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H. Andrew  
Schwartz:

Good afternoon, friends and colleagues. Welcome to the Center for Strategic and International Studies. I'm Andrew Schwartz. I'm Chief Communications Officer at CSIS. And I'm really pleased today to have all of you with us for this excellent panel on "The Future of Voting in America."

Before we get started, I want to do a few housekeeping things. I want to thank our amazing sponsor for well over 10 years, the Stavros Niarchos Foundation. Without their generous support we wouldn't be able to do these things, these great Schieffer sessions. And through the pandemic they've been so supportive of us going to virtual. So thank you to the Stavros Niarchos Foundation for all of their amazing support.

I also want to thank TCU and most importantly the Bob Schieffer College of Communication. I want to send a special thank you to my dear friend and mentor Bob Schieffer for everything that he's done for CSIS as a board of trustee member, for me in my career, and for all of the things that he's done for my staff and for all of our colleagues. Bob, we miss you and we know you'll be back with us very, very soon.

Before we get started today – oh, sorry – before we get started today, to tee-up this panel we have a short video about the future of voting in America that we're going to show you right now.

(Video presentation begins.)

MS. : American democracy is part of the national discussion in ways we haven't seen in decades. Since the 2020 presidential election, over 360 state bills have been introduced that challenge the ability of some citizens to vote. There have also been over 800 voting expansion bills introduced in the same time period. Our election process has always had its challenges, whether it's protecting voters themselves or the sanctity of a ballot box. Reform hasn't been easy, and the process has become politicized. Against this backdrop, fears of voter suppression and fraud run rampant. Whatever bills get passed between now and 2022 or 2024, revitalizing democracy ultimately rests with the American people.

In this episode of the Schieffer Series, our panel of nonpartisan experts will discuss obstacles the current system is facing, voting rights, policies that instill confidence in the system, and much more. This is the Schieffer Series. Let's dive in.

(Video presentation ends.)

Mr. Schwartz:

Now to our esteemed panel of nonpartisan experts. I want to introduce everybody. You have all their bios on our website. But I'd like to introduce Aditi Juneja. Aditi Juneja serves as counsel for Protect Democracy. She began on their communications team in 2018 and assumed her current role about a year ago.

We have Amber McReynolds. Amber is the CEO of the National Vote at Home Institute, and she's one of the country's leading experts on election administration and policy. She was recently nominated by President Biden to serve on the governing board of the United States Postal Service. When confirmed, she would be the only female member and the first with experience in voting and elections.

And finally, we have with us Andy Bernstein, who is the – who helped found HeadCount in 2004 and became an executive director of HeadCount in 2008. Under HeadCount – under his leadership, the organization has registered over a half a million voters and have become a leader in harnessing the power of music to drive social change.

Welcome to all of our panelists today. We've got a lot to talk about here with the future of voting in America. But the first thing I want to ask to all of you is, you've all chosen to do this work and it's a fundamental right in our democracy to vote. But it's getting harder to talk about this in nonpartisan terms. You guys all work in nonpartisan organizations. So how do you go about your work in this very politicized environment? Amber, let's go to you first.

Amber  
McReynolds:

Well, thank you, Andrew, and thank you to everyone at CSIS for hosting this today and inviting me to be a part of it. It's a true honor to be here.

So, first and foremost, I think, just – I know many of you have my bio, but I'm a former elections official. I'm also an independent elector and have been, and my experience in election administration really highlighted for me the importance of expanding the franchise, expanding access, but creating policies and processes and even technology that follows a certain set of values, and for me, those values are fairness, accessibility, security, transparency, equity, and reliability. And I kind of – the acronym for that is FASTER that I reference a lot.

But balancing all of those values is critically important to ensuring that we have good election policies that give voters opportunities and expand the opportunities that they have in the process while also making it more secure and protecting our election infrastructure from foreign or domestic bad actors, because that's something that's also been an increasing issue over the last six years is, you know, going back to elections being deemed critical infrastructure after 2016 and the cyberthreats that many of our systems have faced and there's been documented evidence for.

We have to now secure the election process, and we're really at a tipping point right now because I've never seen in my time running elections and in this industry, I've never seen the partisan politics and the infusion into the election process as it is today. I've never seen anything worse than what we saw in 2020 in the aftermath sense. And so we are heavily focused and we

continue to be focused on pushing for good reforms that value all of those important aspects that I mentioned and it – and we’re going to continue that narrative.

We’re going to continue to push for access and enhanced opportunities while also increasing security, and I think we have to – it’s important to continue to level the conversation back to what’s – what matters: a good voting experience, good security, good transparency. All those things matter equally in the process, and I think centering the conversation in that way is a really important aspect.

And then finally, as a former elections official, the United States is somewhat unique in modern democracies in that we have a lot more partisan politics in the conduct of elections. Most modern democracies have independent authorities or independent officials running the process that are separate from running for office or separate from the political party structure.

Unfortunately, in the United States, we have a lot of infusion of that in there, and I think we’re seeing some of the issues with that play out when the partisan politics nature of things is so heightened the way that it is today.

Mr. Schwartz: Aditi, where do you see this, from your perspective?

Aditi Juneja: So from our perspective, I think it’s really important that we continue to try to work across the aisle, and I feel like more than ever Protect Democracy is interested in working with Republicans who care about elections and voting rights and making that effort to do that outreach.

I think a question – so I think that’s on the kind of practical side of how do we deal with the increased partisan nature on a sort of day-to-day basis. But I think as we think about why we’re in this situation, that’s a question I think I’m becoming increasingly interested in, and really digging into what is happening in our political culture – the polarization, the increased openness to political violence, and the moralization of people across the aisle – and how that is affecting sort of how these issues are approached. Because if every election feels like it’s life and death and really high stakes in that way, then it changes what you’re willing to do to win it. And so trying to think about why the temperature is that high, and not be dismissive and just try to do a kumbaya moment, but rather really understanding where those fears are coming from and how to address them.

Mr. Schwartz: Andy, you see this, you know, in your work as well. And you know, in our discussions you’ve told me, you know, it’s not as simple as, you know, Republicans saying that, you know, the election laws are, you know, unfair and Democrats saying that it’s impossible – making it impossible to vote. It’s very complex. How do you lower the temperature?

(Pause.)

I think we've lost Andy's audio for a minute. Let's work on that for a second and –

Andy Bernstein: My apologies. Can you hear me now?

Mr. Schwartz: Yeah, we can.

Mr. Bernstein: All right. Unmuting always helps. (Laughter.) Sorry about that.

I was echoing what Amber said about values. I think that's a really good place to start, and there are some universal values around elections – that elections should be fair, trustworthy, and accessible, and also that government should work to make voting more – having more people participate than less. It's a really simple idea: Any government service should aim to be used. So policy around elections should inherently make it easier to vote, just like anything else. You don't intentionally put up barriers to provide a free service, and a very important service at that.

But I think that the other piece of this that I encourage people to look at is what do – what do – what does victory look like if it's entirely along partisan lines, and is that really a victory? If you have election laws being written by one side or the other – if the election laws are written only by Democrats, as one example, well, is that a win? You know, is half of the country believing elections are rigged against them, is that a win? Is that the outcome we want? I don't think that's what most people want. So I think sometimes you have to interrupt the partisan politics and say, well, what's the endgame? Is the endgame an election system that everybody trusts and is built collectively, or is the endgame an election system built by only one party? Because it can go in both directions, and that's what we're seeing. In blue states it's built by one party, in red states it's built by another. And I just don't think that's a good outcome for this country.

Mr. Schwartz: So how do you get past some of these arguments? I mean, the Brennan Center for Justice – which is also a nonpartisan group – that advocates for increased voting access, has tallied more than 350 pieces of restrictive legislation this year, many aimed at shortening early voting periods and imposing new requirements for mail-in voting. In addition to – of course, we all know about the new laws in Georgia and Iowa. There's at least 28 bills to restrict mail and absentee – and absentee voting, are moving in 18 states. So, you know – and a lot of these laws are about voter security. Some of them do expand access. And all of this is highly politicized, and yet, you know, to get to where you – where you say we need to go, Andy, we've got a long way to go. So what do – what do we need to do here?

Mr. Bernstein: Well, I think one of the interesting things that hasn't been talked about a lot is that some of the restrictive laws that are getting proposed are not getting advanced out of committee, and the ones that are getting advanced are much less restrictive than the original proposals. So while I think there is real questionable intent behind some of these restrictive laws, the fact that they have backed off some of the most kind of heinous things is a good thing. And it shows that the awareness of this issue has created positive political pressure where you can end up with laws that, you know, you first hear, oh, they're getting rid of drop boxes, they're getting rid of early voting, and then when the law actually advances those things are intact.

So I think the political winds are actually moving in a good direction, even in states that – you know, where a Republican majority is still doing things that a lot of people don't support on the other side. I'd be curious what Amber and Aditi think because I think, you know, from a policy standpoint Amber is incredibly knowledgeable about some of – where some of the things are that there can be bipartisan consensus around. And what are some of the things we really need to avoid if we want to expand voter participation? So I'd queue up them and their expertise here.

Mr. Schwartz: Amber.

Ms. McReynolds: Yeah. Well, what I would add – I think, first off, most of the legislation that we have seen – and we're tracking all of these bills and we've been heavily involved in states like Georgia. Most of what I have seen on the most egregious side of things is based on disinformation and misinformation. So this, for me, at least, goes back to literally one of the biggest challenges we have in the election security space, which is dealing with the fact that disinformation and misinformation is running rampant through our political spectrum, and frankly creating the partisanship, the fighting, the division, and all of this. Disinformation and misinformation is the core of all of these issues.

And a lot of this legislation has been proposed – a lot of it is duplicate. It's kind of jumping around states. So clearly there is a concerted effort behind the scenes by certain organizations to replicate some of these bad policies in various states. And they're getting legislators to propose them. But it goes to the fact that – and, you know, the election official community is a pretty small one. There's very few people in the country that have actually run an election. Even though you've run for office doesn't make you an expert in running an election. And when you look at the state legislatures, there's very few that were actually former election officials – maybe a handful around the country. There's only a handful of – there's only two people in the Senate now, I think, maybe three in the United State Senate – that were secretaries of state or a local official at one time.

So in the policymaking space there are very few, if any, people that actually have the experience administering this process, auditing, using technology

in this space, all of that. So that in and of itself has created a complete lack of understanding of this issue. And so we have this kind of reactionary response to an outcome and an election that some people are unhappy with. And so there's this huge response to that, coupled with a lack of understanding, disinformation, misinformation. And that's really why we're seeing a lot of these laws that are being proposed.

Now, I'm convinced that further education of the process – and when you actually sit down with legislators and show them what a process – a good process looks like in various states, that will help with some of this. And our organization is certainly doing that. We're doing proximity trips. We're taking folks to see good practices in various states. And often the response is, wow, I didn't know it worked that way. Or I didn't know it could work that way. Wow, can you help us do this in our state? And so I think that that is one, perhaps, tactic to try to educate legislators on these issues and help them understand why some of these policies that they're proposing, they're not just hurting one side. They're hurting the entire electorate.

And that means people that are going to potentially vote for them, just like it does the people that won't vote for them. And so, you know, we really have to kind of, again, level that conversation back to this is a process. It should be bipartisan. It should be nonpartisan. It should be secure. And educate them on what the best practices truly are, so that they're not just listening to the echo chamber or partisan organizations that are out to do a certain – achieve a certain goal.

Mr. Schwartz: Aditi, please jump in here.

Ms. Juneja: Yeah. I think that's all right. I would also just add that it's sort of important to note that, you know, the right to vote as a fundamental right is not one that has been extended to most Americans for all of American history, right? The idea that every American would have the ability to vote is, like, relatively new. It's, like, 50 years old. And I think a lot of what we see is legacies of unequal voting practices and the desire to keep certain people from voting. And as Amber said, some of that is misinformation and disinformation about who and how curtailing the right to the ballot actually impacts.

So, you know, mail-in voting was a huge issue last election cycle. And on both sides it seemed people thought – Democrats thought that it would benefit Republicans. Republicans thought it would benefit Democrats. There was, like, a lot of confusion and not a lot of good information. (Laughter.) And I think that that is sort of – that's sort of endemic. And as Amber said, we don't have policymakers who necessarily know that much about how to administer an election. And on top of that, I was talking to folks on the ground in Georgia last week. And they were sharing that they'll go and talk to a state legislature or policymaker and the response they'll get

is, yeah, I hear you, but I'm getting calls from constituents telling me I need to do something about this.

And so we also have not just uneducated legislatures but uneducated public who believe that things are happening – you know, the amount that the public believes voter fraud, for example, is happening is just totally at odds with the reality of it. And so things like voter ID, for example, are a solution in search of a problem. And so I think that we – it's not that we don't need election security. We certainly need that. But I think that sometimes there are news stories or narratives that take hold that make it seem like a certain thing is a problem, and folks get fixated on solutions to those problems, as opposed to paying attention to where there are real challenges or issues that are much more widespread.

Mr. Bernstein: And I'll throw in here that I think the misinformation that Aditi and Amber is referencing is a really important part of this. And unfortunately, we're seeing recently it's going both ways. There's no doubt about it. You have President Biden even just be unfactual in how he talked about Georgia. So I think a lot of the tactics that we've seen over the years – you know, we had a president who had a very loose relationship with the truth. Well, we're now seeing constantly that the way the left is talking about a lot of these laws if you actually read the laws there's a pretty big gap at least in what's perceived the law to be and what the law really is.

I don't think that's good. I don't think that's a long-term winning strategy. You can fool some of the people some of the time, and all the people some of the time – whatever the saying is. But I think it would be better if people could really just talk about these things in a factual basis. And right now we're seeing it on both sides, where there is just let's use the strongest words possible. Let's try to get the base riled up. Let's use this for fundraising – which is what's happening on both sides with advocacy groups. And you have a pretty confused public that doesn't know what to believe. And the media's played right into this.

So I think that's – I think the misinformation piece is something that I hope over time things cool down and at least the press can kind of sift through this all, rather than picking up the strongest talking points, which often are very confusing.

Mr. Schwartz: Well, let me ask you this: The press and others certainly on the left have been quick to blame all the red states for this, and yet some of the laws in New York are much more restrictive than they are in Georgia and other places. So how do you account for that?

Ms. McReynolds: Yeah, let me – let me jump in here. So New York has literally be in almost every speech I've given for the last 15 years about what not to do. (Laughs.) And, you know, they have – they did not have any early voting opportunities and they did not have no-excuse absentee at all until 2020.

Delaware has had similar restrictions, Massachusetts, Rhode Island – I mean, there’s definitely in the northeast corridor that has had significant restrictions on opportunities to vote. And so that’s another one of those factual pieces of all of this.

And to be fair, they’re all moving legislation forward right now because they recognized in a pandemic they were not ready, and voters significantly adopted those other options in 2020. And so they’re –

Mr. Schwartz: But this is certainly not part of the narrative, though. People don’t know that the northeast corridor, the bluest of blue states, are behind.

Ms. McReynolds: Yeah. Yeah, I mean, and there’s many of us that have been highlighting some of these things for years, and just the lack of innovation or the lack of policy improvements – all of that. And so it is – there’s definitely blue state and red states alike that have not innovated. I always talk about Utah, and even Montana. I mean, they have, for years, had significant vote by mail, they have automatic voter registration processes. Some of that’s been on the chopping block a little bit this year, but they have had those opportunities. And they’ve innovated.

A lot of that has been kind of concentrated in the west, to be honest. Like this is – and it’s – and it’s interesting because my – I wrote a book last year. And in the book we actually highlighted the 19th Amendment movement. And all the western states were sort of the first states to adopt that change, and then it kind of went across the country. And the vote at home map is actually similar to what the 19th Amendment looked like right around 1920 or just before, when it finally went across the country.

So it’s sort of an interesting thing when you think about also the geographic differences, because they are pretty significant. And it’s – to me, it kind of highlights the cultural differences around the country as well.

Ms. Juneja: One thing I’ll add there is when people talk about blue states/red states, I feel like a big part of what’s happening here is any place where you have unified government there are bad incentives, whether that’s – whether that’s, you know – whether that’s – whether that’s for Democrats or Republicans. There are bad incentives to try to kind of keep a stranglehold on power and limit access to the ballot. And so I think that that is not a problem that is unique to one party or the other. I think the reason you see it is anytime you have unified government, you have less democracy.

Mr. Schwartz: Is that because the officials fear the voters? Is that – is that what it is?

Ms. Juneja: I think so. I think that when we talk about how complicated our election systems are and about access to the ballot, I think there are a set of – I think that for folks who have power and people – there are a set of people who would rather choose their voters than have their voters choose them.

Ms. McReynolds: Yeah, and I think it also – this issue, especially in these states where, to Aditi's point, that it's all one kind of party with the power, there's an establishment perspective, certainly. But then you go and look, and the primary – it's the primary problem, right? So, many of us – and I worked on this for years trying to open up opportunities for unaffiliated voters to participate in primaries, given that they are the largest voting bloc in the country and well over 40 percent of the population, and they're largely blocked from most states participating in the primary. And that's where a lot of these races, especially in these sorts of states, get decided because there's no competition outside of the primary. And so it's super low turnout, tiny portion of the population picking who will ultimately end up winning the seat because it's such a highly, you know, polarized one way type of environment. So I think it's kind of part of this whole ecosystem as well. When we talk about election reform, there's many aspects of where there needs to be improvement to get to a better system that works for everyone.

Mr. Bernstein: Yeah, I had – an interesting new development is that this is in the public eye, and that was never the case before. Election reform wouldn't come in in the top 20 or even probably top 50 issues that there was polling on. And previously, I think elected officials had a real incentive to keep things – keep the status quo because it was the status quo that got them elected, so elections didn't move forward in the way other things did. There was simply no political reason to.

Now you have that flipped on its head where this issue is in the public eye every day, and that creates interesting forces, some more toward polarization – pleasing a base, trying to not get primaried, as Amber points out. But I think that there is a positive right now in that at least people are talking about this. At least elected officials are talking to constituents and feel somewhat accountable on where they take our election systems. The question is, what is the direction they're taking them?

Mr. Schwartz: So, in your view, what are some of the major reforms that need to happen across the board here? Let's start with you, Amber.

Ms. McReynolds: Sure. Well, so I look at this kind of in a complete ecosystem, and there's a – and I've worked on a lot of reforms not only in the election administration space, but also in other areas.

So, first, I think independent redistricting is absolutely essential. We passed that on the ballot in Colorado a few years ago. We're in the middle of doing the first independent redistricting process now. I'm convinced that that is critical to ensuring fair representation. And so I – and there's other states that have now adopted this, so this is definitely something to watch in this – in this cycle of redistricting to see the impacts.

The second piece is the primary reform that I mentioned. So unaffiliated voters are now – I mean, they by far are the largest voting bloc and growing, and it's growing significantly amongst Millennial voters and new voters coming onto the track. And so when you consider that and you consider that in the highest-turnout election that we had, in 2020, 80 million people did not vote who were eligible and we only had about 67 percent of the whole population – obviously, that was higher in certain states with good policies on the books – but overall, still, only a little over a third (sic) of the electorate voted, and we have 80 million people that didn't participate. And when they're asked, they often say I couldn't get off work or I missed the voter registration deadline or it could be a policy issue, but then there was also a significant number that said I was disinterested, or I didn't like either candidate or what have you. So I think this primary problem, where we want to bring more people, reform that process, do things like ranked-choice voting when there's a ton of candidates like in the presidential race, things like that help reform that kind of initial step in the political process.

I think the other thing is, and this is something I've been working on heavily, I'm very deeply concerned about this movement to make elections a partisan event, because they're not. Campaigns are, but election administration is about service to the public in a nonpartisan way, in a way that's secure and accessible.

And so I think we should be looking kind of at governance structural reforms, perhaps, to make that and protect the conduct of elections to be that – in that nonpartisan space and be free from partisan interference. Whether that be state legislatures, candidates, government, whatever it might be, there needs to be some insulation around that process.

And then, of course, the election reform issues, modernization of voter registration automatic. I'm a big fan of same-day, but that is something that takes a lot of technical processes to implement, and modernizing that entire process so that it's not a barrier. Vote at home, early voting, expanding options to voters, really, across the board are all reforms that, you know, we're going to continue to work on.

And then the security stuff, so post-election audits, boosting confidence, boosting transparency in all of these processes so that voters can see, and the public can see what's happening in the elections that are there since they're public elections, they're for the public. They're not for candidates or parties. And so we have to continue to work on those transparency and auditing pieces as well.

Mr. Schwartz: Andy, you work with registering a lot of young people. What kind of reforms are you looking towards?

Mr. Bernstein: Well, I think that, certainly, voter registration itself, even though it's HeadCount's bread and butter, is an antiquated system. So same-day voter

reg and automatic voter reg should be the norm. They're definitely serve the public better than the current systems, and I think that online voter registration, which has become the norm, still has a ways to go. There's a lot of differences by state and some do it a lot better than others.

But, ultimately, voter registration is a barrier and it's an unnecessary barrier, and we should all be working to modernize systems so there are as few barriers as possible.

Mr. Schwartz: Aditi, what are you thinking about in terms of reform?

Ms. Juneja: So I worked with Amber this past year on the National Task Force on Election Crises, and we put out a report after the election in January thinking about a lot of the things that came up this past election, and I think that's where a lot of our attention has been.

So there are issues that we saw this past election that we didn't know previously were issues. So, for example, the way we recruit poll workers and trying to do that on an ongoing basis, voter intimidation as an issue. We saw the lack of ballots at polling places, particularly provisional ballots, as voting sites got moved around.

So I think there's just a lot of investment in election administration that can be done and equitable election administration to work to decrease long lines, make sure there's sufficient funding. And one other thing we saw this past year was the pre-canvassing of absentee ballots was the reason we – and the lack thereof was the reason we didn't have election results for a few days. So that's something that we're thinking about as well. Alongside, there were heightened threats of violence for election administrators this year, and so that – these are all kind of issues on the election administration front.

And then certain legal structural reforms to think about. So I think we all found out this past year that ascertainment of the candidate is a thing that affects when transition happens and it seems like we need some clarity in the Presidential Transition Act to define what we mean by ascertainment, and also, the Electoral Count Act and the shenanigans we saw with state legislatures and how they got appointed and efforts to not certify election results or conversations that were brewing about state legislators appointing their own slates of electors just kind of separate from those that the voters selected.

These are all places in law where I think there could be some clarity and a lot of these laws are very old and outdated.

Mr. Schwartz: Let's talk about early voting, mail-in voting, for a second. In 2020, nearly seven of every 10 votes – nearly seven of every 10 voters cast their ballots

before election day in 2020. That's more than 111 million Americans voted before election day in 2020.

Now, of course, that's because of the pandemic the numbers were so high. But Americans seemed to really like that ability to do that. A lot of folks are saying you shouldn't be able to do this, should vote on election day. What do you all say about this? Andy, why don't we go to you first?

Mr. Bernstein: Well, I think – for one thing, I would say that I think this was a lot more than the pandemic. I think the pandemic created a moment of awareness, but the reason so many people voted early or by mail is because it's more convenient and more conducive to living everyday life. So I think that there was a really positive outcome from the pandemic, is just awareness of these other ways to vote. And as Amber can attest, that these – like, you know, mail-in voting systems have worked very well for a very long time, and just more people became familiar this year.

So I think that these are things that are very much worth protecting. I think they get to that core idea of a government service should be accessible and used by as many people as possible. And we want – a thriving democracy needs more participation, and these are obvious ways to drive participation, and they work. You know, despite the massive scrutiny of voting by mail, nobody can find any problems. So, I mean, how many things in the government world, if you put eyeballs on it, come up as clean as our mail-in voting system did for this election? I'd say almost nothing. All government bureaucracies have flaw after flaw after flaw, and yet, you know, half the country looking for those flaws couldn't find them. So I think that we are – it is very clear that this is a pro-democracy, pro-voter system, both early voting and vote by mail, and it's very much worth protecting and expanding.

Mr. Schwartz: So when you say clean, you mean there were no irregularities, it was nothing – there were no – it wasn't illegal, the votes were counted properly? Is that what you mean by that?

Mr. Bernstein: Yeah. I mean, we all know, you know, what happened, and we all know the accusations that were made, and we all know that there has been no credible evidence to surface of any major irregularities with voting by mail, certainly not any fraud. And when you think about the scale – when you think about the number of votes cast, you think about the decentralization of the system, you think about how quickly it all came together post-pandemic in many states, and you think about how many people were actively looking for problems with that system, it really is a remarkable success. You know, I think we overachieved compared to any reasonable standard.

And I'm sure there were problems, and I'm sure there are things that are not perfect because nothing is. But considering all the things I said, I think

you have to look at how we – you know, the 2020 election was one of the great victories just from a bureaucratic standpoint, to pull off an election that had so many changes and pull it off relatively problem-free. In a lot of ways, the 2020 election was the best ever just from looking at lines. Like, there were not big problems with lines on election day. They happened in the primaries. They happened on the first days of early voting because people were so excited. But by the time we got to election day, this major problem that President Obama talked about in 2012, said let's do something about that, it's incredible that by 2020 on election day this problem had mostly gone away.

So I think we have to take some time to congratulate ourselves as a country that the 2020 election really did work. And the proof is in the lack of proof otherwise – that when people are actively trying to say there was something wrong with this election, they can't find anything.

Mr. Schwartz: But, Aditi, what do we do about the people who are still saying, you know, mail-in voters are rigged, they're – you know, the people who are politicizing it, the misinformation, the disinformation, you know, the votes were, you know, found in a creek, you know, those kinds of things?

Ms. Juneja: So I think we need to understand why people feel that way and where they're getting that information from. I think there are two problems. One is the information, but the other problem is that people want to believe that. And I think that things are changing in the United States and there is fear around those changes, and I think there needs to be more done to address that.

And so I – so I think there – these problems are around race and the racial divisions in our country. It's around the demographic change. There has been polling done that while we're expecting the country to be majority non-white by the 2040s, there are some folks who think that change has already happened. And so there is status threat that people are feeling, there is threat to kind of their position in society that people are feeling that makes it easier to believe that, you know, votes were stolen or found in a creek or whatever than people voted in ways that they don't agree with. And I think there's real work to be done to help folks understand why people have perspectives that are different from them and not to see them as an enemy – and that's work that needs to be done, I think, on both sides of the aisle. But that – the openness to doing it may differ depending on whether you feel like you have something to lose or something to gain.

Mr. Schwartz: So, Amber, how do we keep this from being politicized – you know, early voting, mail-in voting – which seems to increase participation, it seems to eliminate lines, hassles, people having to get off from work early, people having to deal with childcare, people having to deal with weather, and all sorts of things?

Ms. McReynolds: Sure. Well, I – so the long lines thing – and I’m glad Andy brought this up. I mean, this issue has literally been the top issue in election administration for two decades. So, I mean, you brought up 2012 and the Presidential Commission on Election Administration. Literally traveled around the country trying to figure out solutions to the long lines. And many people have tried to figure out how to measure it, and how do we report it, and how do we tell people what to expect, and all that? And what I’ve always said is, let’s focus on how to eliminate it from a policy point of view.

And so vote at home and early voting absolutely solve the challenge of long lines on election day. And it also does another thing. If we have everyone voting on one day – and this often doesn’t get talked about enough – but there is a lack of resiliency in the process. And what I mean by that is if you’re pushing everyone to one day and you – now you have to vote all those people – if you have any system failures, power outages, natural disasters. There was an election on 9/11, which a lot of people forget, in New York City that day. Pandemic, now we have that example.

But the more – if we’re going to push all of our voters through that process, it’s going to take 10 – probably 10 times as much equipment as would be needed if you can vote more people prior to election day. It’s the similar thing of you can’t pack the entire New York City population on one ferry to go across the water. So that’s the other thing that I think, like, if – without early voting and vote by mail, elections would even be way more expensive than they are, because it would take way more people, way more locations, way more infrastructure, way more equipment to do all of this for one day. So there’s some real advantages from a capital investment perspective.

And then the other thing that’s come out of this election – and, frankly, vote by mail is the only form of voting that has been growing substantially for the last little over two decades. Every single year it keeps growing. Every state that opens up more opportunities, it grows and grows and grows, because people are busy. They actually like time at home to research issues and fill out their ballot. I know I do. I’m a working mom. I vote my ballot with my kids every election. And it’s a civics lesson for them. And they go through and they say: What is mayor, mom? And I get to explain to them what our city government does. And we’ve done this for years.

And so – and it takes me three days to fill out my ballot, but that’s OK because they’re getting a whole education with this, and it’s a super long ballot. So you know, if we – if I have to fill out that ballot in the polling place it’s probably going to take at least 45 minutes to an hour, because of the length of our ballots in Colorado. So I think when these people are sort of suggesting that we get rid of these things, they’re not thinking about the long downstream impacts of all this in a big way. And it doesn’t help anyone on either side of the aisle to increase the cost of elections, reduce resiliency, create a less agile environment, none of that.

And agility and adaptability is something that in the election administration world became of great importance in 2020 during a pandemic. And so we have to think now I think not only about securing our systems and making them more accessible, but making them more resilient. Along with the workforce, along with the infrastructure, along with all of that. And that all goes in and plays into that as to why it's important. And then finally, it doesn't benefit one side or the other. And there's plenty of studies that have now come out post-2020 that have demonstrated that very fact, that these options provide access for all voters, regardless of party affiliation, and there's no benefit on one side or the other.

Mr. Schwartz: Let's look at – because everybody's been so focused on the Georgia law, let's take a look at the Georgia law for a second. You guys all have read it, you know it in and out. Republicans say it's not voter suppression because the law actually expands early voting in some areas, and it doesn't ban it on Sundays. The food and water policy that's been so – we've heard that cited so many times – it's only enforceable within 150 feet. And there's other things they say that the minimum number of drop boxes that must be available in each county's, you know, now been expanded. You know, so what is it that is so wrong with this law, from the point of view of people who have been, you know, talking about it since Brian Kemp signed it? Does anyone want to take a crack at this one?

Ms. McReynolds: Yeah, I'll jump in. So, you know, again, most of what happened in Georgia was driven by disinformation and misinformation, constituents calling certain senators and House members. I met with many of them. And they shared that with me, just like Aditi said. So there was a public perception on one side of the aisle, because, again, they're relying on what they've heard on their news channels and what they've heard from certain people – regardless of facts. They're pushing for reforms because they have facts that are not facts. They're relying on perspectives that are not true.

So, the sort of energy behind all of it is kind of based on this disinformation and misinformation. The good thing in Georgia is that when it all was sort of – when all this started, automatic registration, early voting, and vote by mail were all kind of on the chopping block. Like, there was going to be significant rollbacks on all those three pieces. Those of us who were kind of working there were able to educate legislators on why that would be bad for all citizens across Georgia. So many of that ultimately was rolled back in a significant way from where it started. So that's a good thing.

What's amazing about Georgia's law is they actually did manage to reduce access while also expanding it. And what I mean by that is, you know, with the early voting they did codify weekend early voting. And it actually is going to expand it in most counties. That's true. However, simultaneous to that, they reduced drop box options. So they've taken options away from voters that vote by mail, or choose to. They've shortened the window when you can request a mail ballot. They didn't listen to us on creating more of a

permanent list, like what Arizona has had or like what Florida has had in a semi-way. But they really kind of reduced the time period to request a ballot.

And we agreed with shortening it before election day to make sure voters get their ballot in time, but we would – we would actually articulate that you should allow voters to sign up at any point in the year because people don't always fall into that window or think about these things all the time. So on the one hand, yes, they expanded some early voting opportunities. On the other, they restricted them.

And then they particularly did some things that some of the larger counties did – so Dekalb – or, Fulton County had a mobile voting center that they used during early voting, which is something that a lot of counties are adopting because it builds resiliency, it adds additional options, it gives you space where it's often hard to find space – in libraries and certain things like that. You can use the parking lot with your mobile center. We did this in Denver. And it's wonderful from an operational perspective. And it actually solves a lot of logistical problems that we often have. So they banned all of those. So Fulton County now cannot use these major investments that they've made – whether it be mobile centers or drop boxes. A lot of counties are going to have put drop boxes away now or remove them.

So there's those things. And then I think the most egregious part of the law that is still – that I – that got added at the last minute is really about challenges. So there's been this addition of opportunities for anyone to basically challenge any number of voters without really any parameters around what that would look like. And so there's significant concern over the cost to counties. We have to have a hearing within 10 days. If there's a lot of these filed, it's going to create a lot of controversy and a lot of cost for the local level. And frankly, create fear amongst the voting population. If you get challenged, then you have to go and sort of articulate – like, prove you're need or your desire to vote. It's contrary to our right to vote.

So I think that's the worst part. And then I think the second most concerning thing is the kind of power grab a little bit by the legislature to take authority away from the secretary as well as the county officials that run the process.

Mr. Schwartz: Aditi, what are you – why do you think that this law has become so politicized?

Ms. Juneja: The 2020 election, and we had a Senate runoff that garnered national attention. I think that, you know, we don't have – despite the fact that voting laws and election administration are not great in a state like New York, we don't have big national fights about early voting in New York. And the reason for that is it's not a swing state in our presidential election, and as our politics have become nationalized the discourse and the focus on

how election administration is done is also focused on those states and those places. And so I think that's why.

Mr. Schwartz: When you all think about this issue, do you think about it as a national security issue? Andy, do you think about it as a national security issue, voting?

Mr. Bernstein: Well, I think that America's democracy kind of struggling in some ways is definitely a national security issue, and I think the world is watching I think is the sense; that, you know, certainly on January 6<sup>th</sup>, that was a national security issue. So I think there's no question that America, you know, having trouble with things we should not be having trouble with is, you know, fundamental to national security.

Mr. Schwartz: And what gives you hope for the future of our democracy as you're thinking about these issues, as you're, you know, planning for the next election – as you're planning to register more voters, as you're thinking about the future of our democracy?

Mr. Bernstein: Well, as I said earlier, the fact that people are paying attention and the fact that we're talking about this stuff I think is a really good thing. The fact that we're thinking about our right to vote not just as a given, but as something that we have to manage and work toward to make it optimal is a really positive thing. And I think that we have a generation of young voters – I mean, we had the highest young voter turnout since 1972. We have a generation of young voters who are coming in recognizing that this vote isn't just about who they're picking, but it's an act itself that is somewhat in jeopardy in some ways, especially for historically marginalized groups that are targeted by these – voter-suppression legislation. So I think that we are moving in a really good direction in that you have higher participation and higher awareness of what's at stake.

Mr. Schwartz: Amber, I want to ask you the same question: What is giving you the most cause for optimism about our state of our democracy, about the future of voting, about, you know, going forward with future reforms?

Ms. McReynolds: Well, I would say that the – I feel the most optimism from the people that run the election process. Many of them faced unbelievable threats to their lives, their family lives, their offices, their staff. Many of us that work in the space experienced the same kinds of things post-election, which was not something that many of us expected. And so my optimism really lies with the incredible number of election officials around the country that ran this process with integrity, with honesty, out of fairness, and made sure that the process was secure.

And I'm – the other side of that, I'm deeply disappointed at how the election official community has been attacked in this way. And then I think one of the other – as I said before, one of my biggest concerns with – as we go

forward is what to do about disinformation and misinformation and this idea that people are creating their own facts. You can have your own opinion, but you cannot just create facts to fit your narrative. And this post-election process, the big lie, the conspiracies, all this stuff, all it does is diminish trust amongst the American electorate, and that doesn't benefit either side. It's destructive to our democracy.

And so, you know, I'm – I am also deeply optimistic in the American voters. And you know, we have to make sure we have an election system that is as resilient as they have been through a pandemic and dealt with what so many voters and so many families and so many people across the country have dealt with during this incredibly difficult time for everyone in our world and in our country. And so, you know, we have to make sure we build and we continue to improve an election process that is just as awesome and resilient and great as the American public has been through this very difficult pandemic.

Mr. Schwartz: Aditi, what gives you optimism?

Ms. Juneja: You know, I always find – I always find that when we lay out the problems in a panel like this, talk about possible solutions, I find ending on optimism can sometimes be like a copout for people to do things about the – about the issue itself. And so I think what gives me optimism about kind of the state of world is how many people are focused on this and how many people are concerned, and the real massive civics education lesson we got vis-à-vis the pandemic. Like, we all learned, including myself, so much more about election administration and voting, and I think that creates an opportunity for reform and to fix some of our issues.

But I just want to say that, everyone who's listening, there's no optimism without action. So us spouting optimism – (laughs) – is not very useful if the people listening don't do anything about it. And there are so many ways to get involved and so many ways to participate in trying to make sure people have the access to their most fundamental right, which is the right to vote.

Mr. Schwartz: Well, I want to thank everybody for this conversation today. I think it's, you know, one of many conversations we all need to be having on a constant basis surrounding our democracy, our elections, and our ability to vote in primaries, in all kinds of elections. So thank you all so much for being here today. Amber, Aditi, Andy, really appreciate your time. Thanks for joining us for the Schieffer Series.

We will have a transcript of this event. We'll have on-demand video of this event, as well, all on our website at CSIS.org. So thank you all for joining us today.

(END)