

Center for Strategic and International Studies

## Online Event

# **“Civics as a National Security Imperative: A Conversation with Congresswoman Rosa DeLauro”**

RECORDING DATE:

**Wednesday, May 5, 2021 at 1:30 p.m. EST**

FEATURING:

**Representative Rosa DeLauro (D-CT),**

*Chair, House Appropriations Committee*

**Elizabeth Rindskopf Parker,**

*Vice President, Yale University Women's Organization; Former General Counsel, NSA and CIA*

CSIS EXPERTS:

**Suzanne Spaulding,**

*Senior Adviser, Homeland Security, International Security Program, CSIS*

*Transcript By  
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Elizabeth  
Rindskopf Parker:

Good afternoon. I'm Elizabeth Rindskopf Parker, vice president of the Yale University Women's Organization and a consultant with the Center for Strategic and International Studies. On behalf of the Yale Women's Organization and CSIS's Defending Democratic Institutions and the Smart Women, Smart Power Initiative, I'm absolutely delighted to welcome Congresswoman Rosa DeLauro for an important presentation.

As most of you know, the congresswoman represents Connecticut's Third Congressional District, and is chair of both the House Appropriations Committee and the Labor, Health, and Human Services and Education Appropriations Subcommittee. Congresswoman DeLauro has agreed to share her thoughts on the need for increased attention to civic education, the focus of bipartisan legislation she recently introduced, the Civics Secures Democracy Act of 2021, H.R. 1814.

She will be then joined in a conversation with the honorable Suzanne Spaulding, director of the CSIS Defending Democratic Institutions Project and former undersecretary at the Department of Homeland Security, where she was responsible for computer and infrastructure protection. Ms. Spaulding has been actively engaged in promoting civic education as a national security imperative since joining CSIS in 2017.

This event is also an important milestone for the Yale University Women's Organization, YUWO as we call it, founded in 1965. This year's annual YUWO meeting begins the 50<sup>th</sup> year of YUWO's Scholarship Program, which supports women whose higher education has been interrupted. During this time, YUWO has provided 362 women with \$475,000 in scholarship aid. We're particularly pleased that Representative DeLauro and Suzanne Spaulding have agreed to help us celebrate this important accomplishment with a conversation about civics and history education, something as important as it is timely in light of recent events.

Representative DeLauro.

Representative  
Rosa DeLauro:

Thank you. Thank you so much and good afternoon to everyone. I want to tell you how excited I am to be invited to join with you today. And Elizabeth, thank you for your warm introduction. And I'm excited to join the Yale Women's Organization to discuss the role of the – that civic education plays in protecting our democracy. You know, and it's not just about today; protecting our democracy for future generations. So a special thank you to the Center for Strategic and International Studies for helping to moderate today's conversation.

Also, delighted to speak alongside you, Elizabeth. And as, you know, the former general counsel for the CIA and the National Security Agency, you bring a wealth of expertise and knowledge that has helped not just protect, but improve the lives of Americans. In 2009, your paper, “National Security Advice for a New Administration: Initial Thoughts,” provided national security guidance to the Obama administration, and now with a new administration. And I know that we could use your expertise and your advice.

So pleased, as well, to join Suzanne Spaulding, senior adviser for homeland security, director of the Defending Democratic Institutions Project at CSIS, especially after the events of last year. And your work on democratic institutions is critical both abroad and here at home. So thank you for your dedication to these – to these issues. And again, I just might add, Suzanne, throughout your career you have advised CEOs, boards, and government policymakers how to manage complex security risks across all industry sectors, and I look forward to hearing your insights and how we can work together to address national security through civic education.

On January 6<sup>th</sup>, 2021, voices in power abetted a mob of violent insurrectionists that desecrated the nation’s capital. The attempted coup resulted in five deaths, the injury of over 60 Capitol Police officers, and the evacuation of the entire United States Congress while millions of Americans watched in astonishment and the world watched in horror. The breach represented one of the greatest systemic security failures in modern American history and exposed the current fragility surrounding many democratic institutions. In essence, it was an attempt to overthrow the U.S. government by overturning the November election.

In the aftermath of that harrowing day, it was clear that our country was divided more than ever and that our national security had been undermined at a catastrophic level. And following January 6<sup>th</sup>, the moment for legislation that could make our country stronger, safer, and less divided was here – and, I might add, long overdue. We had recognized – those of us who were trying to do work on civics education had recognized that we were a nation divided long before January 6<sup>th</sup>, which is why my colleagues and I introduced at that time, in September of 2020, the Educating for Democracy Act. And as we prepared to reintroduce the legislation in the 117<sup>th</sup> Congress, the bipartisan group of lead sponsors came together and we changed the name of our bill to make it clear that if we do not address the lack of civics education in America, we could lose our democracy as we – as we know it.

So, shortly after the insurrection, I was joined by Representatives Tom Cole, Republican colleague from Oklahoma; Earl Blumenauer, a Democratic colleague from Oregon; Senators John Cornyn, a Republican from Texas; and Chris Coons, Democrat from Delaware; to introduce the Civics Secures Democracy Act. It is the most comprehensive civic learning legislation ever

developed, with input from civic learning organizations around the country. It's based on research and experience and what is needed to broaden and strengthen civic learning in the United States.

Over the last several decades, civic education in American schools has seen a significant decline. The event of January 6<sup>th</sup> highlighted the consequences of this neglect towards civic education, and that can be seen in our current state of divisive politics and a lack of knowledge and an understanding of democratic principles, norms, and institutions. A robust investment in civic education is needed now more than ever as a continued deficiency in these values presents a national security crisis. We can remedy these shortfalls starting in our classrooms. Research shows that students who receive a quality civics education are more likely to vote and to discuss politics at home, more likely to complete college and develop skills that lead to employment, four times more likely to give back to their communities throughout volunteering and working on community issues, and more confident in their ability to speak publicly and communicate with their elected representatives.

The combination of a lack of funding to support high-quality civics learning, as well as the absence of testing and school accountability measures for students learning in the subject, as resulted in a significant number of U.S. schools dropping civics education classes from middle and high school curriculum and reducing the number of hours the subject is taught in elementary school. This growing problem is particularly acute in lower income urban and rural schools, which have reduced or eliminated civics learning to focus on literacy and math scores that are heavily weighted and sanctioned in school accountability measures.

Currently federal funding for civic education is only \$3 million, or just five cents per K-12 student in the United States. This discrepancy must be corrected. The Civics Secures Democracy Act of 2021 is a \$1 billion investment in civic education that would create a variety of grants to states, to nonprofits, institutions of higher education, civic education researchers, to support and expand access to civics and history education. The legislation would also fund the Truman Scholarship Foundation and fellowships named for President Madison and Revolution Era leader Prince Hall, which aim to strengthen and diversify the American history and civics teaching corps.

It is time we focused on educating our citizens to sustain democracy at home or we will continue to see the disturbing trend of our young people dismissing the importance of living in a democracy. Each member of Congress may represent vastly different districts with unique challenges, but we are united in our desire to uphold our democratic institutions and the values of our country. And in order to protect our democracy, bolster our leaders of the future, and to find compromise in order to come together

as a country, I believe a historic investment in civic education can serve as a solution.

We have an obligation to shield our democratic values from erosion so our children's children can enjoy the sovereignty and the prosperity that they deserve. So I look forward to our discussion today and I welcome any questions. And if I might, just for another moment, I wanted to read a quote in 2012 from Sandra Day O'Connor, where she says, "The only reason we have public education in America is because in the early days of the country our leaders thought we had to teach young generation – our young generation about citizenship. That obligation never ends. If we don't take every generation of young people and make sure they understand that they are an essential part of government, we won't survive."

And I think her words in 2012 were prescient. And so with that, let's carry on.

Suzanne  
Spaulding:

Outstanding. Congresswoman, that was really such an inspirational start for our conversation. And let me begin by echoing my dear friend and colleague and mentor, Elizabeth Rindskopf Parker, in her thanks to you not only for taking time out of what I know is a very busy schedule to have this conversation with us today, but really for your leadership on this issue for quite some time. It's – you know, I think on some level lots of people understand it's important, but you have really seized this issue and worked hard in a leadership role to bring your colleagues along with you on it. And so I'm looking forward to talking about how that has evolved.

But you've noted that January 6th was a very vivid demonstration to all of us of what can happen when we get complacent about democracy – you know, the potential consequences of failing to invest in that civic education at all ages across America. But I know, as you said, that your interest in this issue, your passion about this issue long predated January 6th. And I'm just interested in what – how you came to this issue. You know, what was it? Are there certain things that kind of really – that you can look back on and say, you know, those were – those were kind of formative experiences for me or things that happened that really triggered this passion for me?

Representative  
Rosa DeLauro:

Well, you know, I think – and I thank you for the question. I think – and does it – in 2019, I had an opportunity to work with and talk with a number of individuals, including someone who's a very, very dear friend and a trusted advisor. And that's the former democratic whip of the House of Representatives David Bonior. And he briefed my staff and I on the fact that schools across the country had largely removed civics from the curriculum. And he was challenging us to go the extra mile.

Another colleague, David Skaggs of Colorado, who has been so interested in this whole area of how we deal and educate, you know, young people in these efforts. Les Francis, deputy assistant to President Jimmy Carter, the

White House chief of staff, the associate dean of Tufts, Peter Levine, Ted McConnell, Campaign for Civic Mission of Schools, and others had been looking at all of these areas and how they could bring together, if you will, given that we had – there was such a decline of student participation in civics education that how do we help to create a civil public discourse?

Because I don't have to tell you, it has become toxic. Our public debate and discourse is toxic. And that should – you know, we have – the Congress is a place where you debate ideas. And you could have – you could have differences of opinion with people, but it was the way in which you – the strength of your words, your intellectual argument, those capacities that enriched the debate and the dialogue and not the use of fists, or weapons, or ad hominem attacks on people that helped to create the – and adhere to the values of the country.

That has been eroded over the – you know, the past years. And I'll be frank with you, and culminated – you know, and I think leaders have a responsibility to – words matter. Words matter. And when you seek to divide people, when you seek to attack them and you don't seek to bring people together and to unify, it not only affects our political discourse but that public conversation, and the confidence of the people of this country to have in its democratic institutions. And that is, for me, the fear, that then our democracy is not as strong as it has been or as it is – should be now and should be in the future. And that was very – that concept was critically important.

I'm a history major. I came out of, you know, college, you know, with history and international relations, et cetera, really wanting to each, you know, because I think the – bringing that academic credential to, you know, our public discourse, where we're not trashing one another and where people don't – this last comment I'll make here – which – where people don't feel that they have the right to do that, to deface, to criminalize, to attack, to lie about all of those things are really – are adverse to what our political and our public discourse should be, and I think civics and understanding those norms and institutions is fundamental to that.

Suzanne  
Spaulding:

Yeah. You know, really well said. I could not agree more, and I do think that part of what rediscovering those fundamental values collectively does is it reminds us that we share those fundamental values, those fundamental beliefs, right, always in an effort to understand or have that civil discourse.

You know, you strive to find – go back and back and back until you find something you agree on, right, and then that's a starting point. So then you can disagree, but you know you have some basis – basic agreement on some fundamental things, and the lack of civic education has robbed us, I think, of that sense of fundamental shared values, fundamental shared beliefs.

I've recently had –

Representative  
Rosa DeLauro:  
Suzanne  
Spaulding:  
Representative  
Rosa DeLauro:

For one – for one more point.

Please. Yeah.

You know, it is also a moral responsibility of government that –you know, that needs to be shared as well. That is part of the value system, that we are not each in this for, you know, himself, herself, et cetera. It is about that moral responsibility that we have to one another, and when we were crafting – and it's in a book that I wrote several years ago – the social safety net of this country, there were Democrats and Republicans. Differing views, but they understood the challenges that we faced in the nation and they created a social safety net, not because they were naïve but because they understood what was necessary in order to move our government forward.

Suzanne  
Spaulding:

Yeah. Yeah. Exactly. I think, you know, your points about how the lack of civic education contributes to a decline in trust in institutions in our democratic institutions is spot on, and part of that is a lack of understanding about what – how the institutions are supposed to function, a lack of civic identity and civic responsibility, sense of civic responsibility, that ours is, in fact, as said by the last president, who presided over an insurrection, a government of, by, and for the people. That “by the people” is really important, and part of what civics does is to empower individuals, I think, right, to be those agents of change, to be effective agents of change. Our institutions, our democracy, is not worth preserving because they're perfect but because they are susceptible to change, right, and we have to be the agents of that change.

I came to this, you know, relatively late in my career, to the – to the recognition of the importance of civics education. Like you, I was a staffer on Capitol Hill at one time, multiple times, actually, and so I

Representative  
Rosa DeLauro:  
Suzanne  
Spaulding:  
Representative  
Rosa DeLauro:

That's right.

That's right. I kind of took this –

You know this place. You know it, right?

Suzanne  
Spaulding:

Yeah. Yeah. And I sort of, you know, so absorbed that sense of how our government works, kind of took that for granted. But when I was the undersecretary at DHS watching what was happening to our election in 2016 and recognizing that even the malicious cyberactivity, for example, around voter registration databases was really about undermining confidence in the legitimacy of that process –

Representative  
Rosa DeLauro:

That's right.

Suzanne  
Spaulding:  
Representative  
Rosa DeLauro:

– and so when I got out, I – and went to CSIS, I thought, OK, if I were Putin and I wanted to undermine trusted democratic institutions –  
Right. Right.

Suzanne  
Spaulding:

– I think, next, I would go to the justice system, because it's the other place where the public's confidence in the legitimacy of the process is so crucial to accepting legitimacy of the outcome and where a democracy is dependent upon that.

Congresswoman, all of that is to say, you know, I wonder what it is that gives you hope when we look at the – what an enormous challenge this is and how incredibly important it is. You get up every day and you go out there and continue to push this. What is it that gives you the hope and the energy to keep going?

Representative  
Rosa DeLauro:

Well, it was like that very day that the – on January 6th. Let me just say, you know, that night, that night, there was – it was unanimous. You know, there was advice that don't go back to the chamber to finish the counting of the electoral ballots. You know, we want to make sure that, you know, everyone was safe. But we had the information that the place – that the chamber was secured.

But every member wanted to go back that night to be in the House chamber so that we could continue the vote, because it was so important that we demonstrate that this government stands, that it is not – our democracy is sacred, it stands, and not a group, not a mob, not an attempt at a coup or insurrection was going to deter this country, get it off its track, get it away from its values. We were going to certify the legitimacy of our November election.

What was disturbing was that 139 members on the other side of the aisle who voted to overturn the election. That is something that we have to work on. That is something that we have to work on. I think that's serious.

I was also here, by the way, after 9/11. And again, with fundamentally – my hope is in the strength of this government – that day, again, imperative, that late day, we were on the steps of the Capitol. And we agreed, we had to go. There was – during the day, no one knew what was happening in this country, and that we stood there, Democrats, Republicans, House members, Senate members, and we sang "God Bless America," because the country needed to know in both instances that they are not going to destroy our democracy.

I have to say one other thing, because this is what's happening. And that's why youngsters need to know about this. When you take a look at the body blows – democracy is fragile. Democracy is fragile. And, you know, when you take a look at our freedoms of speech being threatened, freedom of the press being threatened, the legitimacy of our elections being threatened –

now, you say it often and often enough, you create this divide. And that divide is there.

But we have to work at it and we have to bring it back. And I believe – I believe, as you all do, that we need to start. We need to start in middle school. And that is where, you know, in talking to kids about the norms, the values, the institutions, what we stand for, et cetera.

One of the things I'm going to do with regard to this, as soon as we can, and get schools back, et cetera, I'm going to initiate a program in my district. And I have great hope for it. I'm optimistic. I am an optimist. I'm going to do it with middle-school kids, work with all my schools in the district, the K-through-12 schools, and look at middle-school kids, where we do a program on civics education, bringing people to talk to them, get them engaged in, you know, what this is all about, what our Constitution is, the Bill of Rights, understanding it, understanding what, you know, the executive branch does, what the courts do, et cetera, and why they have a stake in it.

You said something before. People need to be encouraged to have a stake in their government. John F. Kennedy – 75 percent of the nation at that time trusted government. I shudder to think of how – what that percentage is today. And I think civics is at the root of this effort.

So I'm optimistic because I think it is – you know, I think there are many, many members of the Congress and of the public, and certainly in the public sector, that get this the way you do and the way the Yale Women's Organization does and that we need to engage together.

Suzanne  
Spaulding:

You know, it's great to hear your reasons for hope. And certainly you're right that the coming together of the overwhelming majority of members of Congress on January 6th to assert that this constitutional process was going to go forward was certainly one of those moments.

And you've managed to get bipartisan and bicameral, you know, support for the federal government stepping in and doing something to help promote civics. And yet I think you would concede that it's a long way from becoming law. And you are going to – you have a challenge on your hands.

What do you think is the, you know, source of that? Why – you know, in that moment, where everybody sort of gets how important democracy is and that we – I mean, civics is, on some level, kind of a motherhood and apple pie –

Representative  
Rosa DeLauro:  
Suzanne  
Spaulding:

Right.

– to get into the specific curriculum, right, at which point it explodes again. Why is it so hard to get your colleagues – some of your colleagues on board

with? Is part of it the federal role versus the local role? What do you think is –

Representative  
Rosa DeLauro:

Well, I think, first of all, you know, you're right. I've been – look, and I can tell you, I picked up the phone and I called my – you know, my colleague Tom Cole from Oklahoma. And I said, Tom – because he had been looking at stuff – I said, you know, we need to talk about civics education. He said to me, I'm there, Rosa, I'm there. And, you know, and again, you're right about the bipartisan, bicameral support for this effort.

I think that there is – and I think it may be one more attempt at misinformation – I think that there are groups out there who want to say about the civics education that what this is going to be is the federal government dictating curricula for our elementary schools and our high schools, et cetera. And nothing is further from the truth, because what the legislation is about is providing grants to states that will determine, you know, what the course of instruction will be. It would also be to institutions of higher learning, nonprofit groups, et cetera. This is not an attempt to dictate what is being taught in our schools. It's about having people understanding our history, who we are, the genesis of this great republic.

Suzanne  
Spaulding:

Yeah. And certainly helping our young people, but also, again, folks of all ages have some training and understanding of how to engage in civil discourse is – has got to be a nonpartisan –

Representative  
Rosa DeLauro:

It is.

Suzanne  
Spaulding:

– objective, right, so that – and can help with the extreme polarization in our country, if we understood better how to recognize our implicit bias, right, and to listen to others.

I mentioned the conversation with the two Supreme Court justices. And I thought one of the most amazing things in that was just the fact that they had such a civil conversation between two people, right, who are known to vehemently disagree on really important issues that they're passionate about. And so it can be done, as you say. And as you indicated, it used to be done in the halls of Congress, right.

Representative  
Rosa DeLauro:

Right. And we have strong bipartisan support. You know, I get a chance to talk to student groups. You know, I love doing that. But I always tell them it's oftentimes when they're sitting on the steps of the Capitol and I speak to them. And I just say, what is it that we do here? You know, understand that we engage in debate over and over and over again, every day, on serious issues that face this country. How do we – we debate with words. We do not debate with weapons or our fists and so forth.

And I said, you know, don't be afraid to stand up for what you believe in. But listen to people who are opposed to what you believe in. Understand

where they are coming from. You can help them. They can help you to get to a point where you can agree. You may persuade them. They may persuade you. And that is what this exercise of democracy is all about, and that's what we do. You know, we may get heated in our words, you know, but that's part of the discourse. But we do not attack each other either physically or character of others. We have a chance to talk through issues with each other to hopefully come to some common ground. That is what our responsibility is here.

Suzanne Spaulding: Yeah. And I love – Elizabeth, please, jump in.

Elizabeth Rindskopf Parker: Well, I was going to say this has just been a phenomenal conversation. What powerful leadership you both have shown. But Representative DeLauro, you know, perhaps we could say that sometimes a crisis is an opportunity. I think there is a crisis in civic education

Representative Rosa DeLauro: Mmm hmm.

Elizabeth Rindskopf Parker: But you have grasped it as an opportunity to correct something which has been decades in the creation, this total decline in attention to civic education, which I think does contribute, as you've said so powerfully, to the just disarray and the disagreements that we have, the inability to come together and speak collegially and effectively about policy considerations, issues so important to our democracy. I want to be mindful of your time and Suzanne's.

Frankly, I was tempted to just let this conversation go on. It has just been fabulous –

Representative Rosa DeLauro: Thank you.

Elizabeth Rindskopf Parker: – and I cannot thank you for your time but more importantly for the leadership you have shown, the singular leadership in introducing this bill not once but twice. As we close this conversation, Suzanne, I want to give you a final word of I'm sure thanks for the representative and her remarks, but I want to thank you for yours, too, and your leadership.

Suzanne Spaulding: Well, back at you, Elizabeth.

And, yes, Congresswoman, this has just been great. And as – like Elizabeth, we – I could have continued this conversation for a lot longer, and I hope that we will have an opportunity – maybe we'll even get you back with some of your colleagues to talk about –

Representative Rosa DeLauro: Great.

Suzanne Spaulding: – a bit more about civics as a national security imperative, which is really the focus of our strategic dialogue at CSIS. But thank you not only for today,

but as I said at the outset, for your work every single day. I love hearing about what you're doing back in the district in terms of promoting civics, and I hope your colleagues across Congress will do similar kinds of things.

We are talking with a number of folks about the possibility of, you know, promoting the idea of a year of civic renewal so that, you know, we get companies to sign up. I talked with Brad Smith of Microsoft about the importance of making sure that all Microsoft employees have grounding in civic education, and former flag officers, and Elizabeth and I have been talking with the business community generally. And, you know, can we get folks to sort of sign up and commit to doing some specific things to promote civics over the course of the year as we hopefully come out of the isolation of COVID and start interacting personally, where it's so much harder to demonize people than you're just sitting online. As we, you know, come out of the, you know, tragedy of – I would say – of January 6th. And can we embark on a year which we mobilize around this national security imperative?

So your leadership is so vital and so welcome in this area. And this has been a great conversation and we're really, really grateful. So thank you so much. And I want to thank Smart Women, Smart Power. Also I need to mention my colleague at CSIS, Beverly Kirk who heads that, provides a wonderful forum for empowering women leaders and women's voices, and normalizing them as experts in this national security field. And certainly, that's part of what we strive for in our civic education as well.

Representative  
Rosa DeLauro:

I look forward to working with you. I think this has enormous possibilities. I am optimistic about where we can go. And I would welcome all of your advocacy. And, you know, Congress is an institution that moves with external pressure. And with all of what you are doing and the groups that you are engaged with, that would be external pressure to help us to move forward. I think – what I think would be, in this time of real – of upheaval, I think it would be so welcoming and calming and productive for this nation and going forward. So thank you so, so much for this opportunity.

Elizabeth  
Rindskopf Parker:

And may I just say, on behalf of the Yale University Women's Organization, how proud we are to claim you as one of our own.

Representative  
Rosa DeLauro:  
Elizabeth  
Rindskopf Parker:  
Representative  
Rosa DeLauro:

Thank you.

It's terrific. Thank you so much.

Thank you. Thank you, thank you.

(END)