

THE BROOKINGS INSTITUTION

FALK AUDITORIUM

THREATS TO AMERICAN DEMOCRACY
THIRTEENTH ANNUAL A. ALFRED TAUBMAN FORUM ON PUBLIC POLICY

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Opening Remarks:

JOHN R. ALLEN
President
The Brookings Institution

Panel 1: Electoral and Institutional Challenges

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Vice President and Director, Government Studies, The Brookings Institution

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Fellow, Race, Prosperity, and Inclusion Initiative, The Brookings Institution
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Endowed Chair In Health Policies, University of New Mexico

ISABEL V. SAWHILL
Senior Fellow, Future of the Middle Class Initiative, The Brookings Institution

Panel 2: Digital Threats, Misinformation, and Disinformation

MODERATOR: NICOL TURNER LEE
Senior Fellow and Director, Center for Technology Innovation,
The Brookings Institution

JESSICA BRANDT
Fellow and Policy Director, Artificial Intelligence and Emerging
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P R O C E E D I N G S

GENERAL ALLEN: Ladies and gentlemen, good afternoon. My name is John Allen, I'm the president of the Brookings Institution. And it is my sincere pleasure to welcome you all to the thirteenth annual A. Alfred Taubman Forum. This series was established through the generosity of Mr. Taubman in 2010 as a way to inform the public and policymakers about major policy issues facing our nation. Among the topics we've covered in recent years include school reform, immigration, advances in health care, and artificial intelligence. This has been a tremendous forum for our institution and for the public. And we're so grateful to the Taubman family.

Today our topic is no less important than the very future of American democracy. As the audience knows well, America's system of government came under direct assault on the 6th of January during the capitol insurrection. That horrific moment which was largely motivated by coordinated efforts to overturn the 2020 presidential election shocked many of us to the core. And called into question unlike ever before the shared values and trusted institutions that have made our country a shining beacon for the world for nearly two and a half centuries. A beacon of democracy.

But the foundational cracks in our democracy predate this tragedy. With many of these upstream factors continuing to create immense pressure upon our democratic system from the national all the way down to local levels and all across the country. These governance challenges, and I'll list a few, are interrelated and make it incredibly difficult to identify policy solutions that advance towards a future that is both peaceful and prosperous for all people. But we're going to try.

Some examples. Income inequality. It's at its highest in a century. That makes it difficult for those born without significant means to claim their piece of the American dream. Our country's demographic is shifting as well in important ways. By 2045 Black, Latino, and Asian and Native Americans will constitute a majority of our nation's population. And handling that transition will have major implications for our society, but especially our

politics. It will test already strained relations within our communities and require policies that advance opportunity for all.

This path is fundamental to change. And is sadly not likely to be a smooth one. And I'll also add that changes in our nation's demography offer a breeding ground for white nationalism and white supremacist ideologies, direct threats to our national security. And of course political polarization, extremism, and hyper-partisanship have broken, and in some places shattered a shared sense of national unity and have created seismic rifts elsewhere, from the halls of Congress to the dinner tables all across America.

I'll mention technology in a moment, but a lack of shared facts also deeply compounds the difficulties of this moment and these issues. Through this time of extraordinary challenges many ask whether American democracy is up to the task. Can our leaders rise above this moment and make meaningful progress on these challenges? Right now the picture does not look good, it doesn't look promising.

There are challenges in terms of voting rights, electoral integrity, institutional capacity, and basic problem solving that raise fundamental questions about our future. Our forum today will seek to answer many of these core questions.

Now looking internationally to the global community, of which America is a leading part, climate change, extreme weather, and water shortages pose long-term threats that endanger those who live on or near the water, need water for agricultural and manufacturing, and count on predictable weather patterns to support their lives and their livelihoods.

Emerging technology such as AI, quantum computing, and advanced robotics are vastly increasing the pace of change. On the one hand this will likely make aspects of life easier and more convenient. Yet they also pose many issues in terms of privacy, security, and human safety.

And as mentioned, technology has accelerated the use and capacity of dis- and misinformation, disinformation and misinformation, which plays out every day, each and

every day on our mobile devices, our sources of news, and even on the field of battle. These informational distortions are a major source for the radicalization of large segments of our and the overseas populations in the world.

And indeed the rise of China and the blatant aggression of Russia in Ukraine and elsewhere are challenging the post-World War II liberal world order and creating deeply troubling problems in terms of global peace and security. And how we navigate these tensions abroad and how we champion democracy at home will in large part shape the world as it looks today and in the future.

So the challenges of the moment are many. Ladies and gentlemen, for our part we at Brookings, an institution dedicated to the public good, stand ready to answer the call. Today's forum will look at these challenges, particularly the electoral and institutional challenges and digital threats and dis and misinformation. And we'll look at them in greater depth and offer suggestions in terms of the ways of improving our political system and protecting American democracy.

I look forward to fruitful discussions of these important topics. And before turning things over to Darrell West, vice president of our Governance Studies program and the moderator of our first panel, I'd like to introduce William, Bill, Taubman. He's the president and chief operating officer of Taubman Company, and the son of A. Alfred Taubman, for whom, as I said, we have to thank for this event. We're so grateful for this family's support of this forum and for support of Brookings and we appreciate his participation today to open our event. He'll make some opening remarks and then we'll proceed to our panel discussion.

So, Bill, it's wonderful to have you with us. Thank you again for the terrific support that your family has provided to this forum. And with that, over to you, sir.

MR. TAUBMAN: Thank you. I'll be very quick. Thrilled to be here. My father was a strong believer in democracy in this country, fought for this country in World War II, and he would have been happy to be here and hear all this. He of course would

have been disappointed by some of the things that have happened over the last few years, and particularly on January 6th, but he would be optimistic. He was always an optimist. Sometimes in the face of facts he could be an optimist. But he would always be an optimist about the future of the country and by working together what we could achieve.

So with that I'll turn it over.

MR. WEST: Well thank you, Bill, and thank you, John. John, we appreciate your opening comments about the importance of this particular historical moment, the threats to American democracy and why we're sitting at such a crucial point right now. We need to take this issue very seriously and really think about how to address these issues. At Brookings we pride ourselves not just on identifying problems but trying to think about solutions as well.

And, Bill, it is terrific to have you involved with this program today as well. This has been a wonderful forum that your father set up many years ago. And we are now having our thirteenth annual A. Albert Taubman Forum, and we appreciate your family's support over that period.

We cover a different topic each year. And as John and Bill have suggested, this year's focus is on the future of American democracy. There are many threats to our electoral processes, the way in which our institutions operate and how technology affects our civic discourse.

So we're going to break our discussion into two parts. Our first panel is going to look at electoral, institutional, and political challenges. And then we'll have a second panel moderated by my colleague Nicol Turner Lee, that will look at the intersection of technology and democracy and the problems that emerge.

To help us understand these and other issues related to democracy, we're delighted to have three distinguished experts with us. Belle Sawhill is a senior fellow in Economic Studies at Brookings, and the author of many outstanding books. One that is particularly relevant for our topic today is "The Forgotten Americans, an Economic Agenda

for a Divided Nation.”

Gabe Sanchez is the David Rubenstein fellow in Governance Studies and a professor of political science at the University of New Mexico.

And we're also pleased to have Keesha Middlemass with us. She is a fellow in Governance Studies here at Brookings and also an associate professor of political science at Howard University.

If you have questions for our panelists you can email them to Events@Brookings.edu, that's Events@Brookings.edu, or you can tweet at Brookings.gov using the hashtag TaubmanForum.

So to get us going I want to start with Belle, and you have a book about America being a divided nation. We know there are sharp divisions, lots of polarization, hyper partisanship. Now there are lots of theories regarding the roots of our divisions.

And I'm just curious what you think the roots of this polarization is. Is the problem root more in economics or cultural issues, and what difference does the answer to that question make for democracy?

MS. SAWHILL: Well thank you, Darrell. I'm really pleased to be here for this great event. And you're right, I did write a book a couple of years ago about the so-called forgotten Americans. And I did so in the wake of the election of Donald Trump. I was very curious about why he'd been elected. And I first addressed it in economic terms, I am an economist. And I told a story about rising inequality and people and places left behind. And I did think that they mattered, but subsequent to writing that book, and even in that book to some extent, I've increasingly become convinced, looking at all the data and reading all of the good material on this, that the problem is more cultural than it is economics, although they do interact.

I later did focus groups, by the way, with the working class in four different American cities and so I've actually listened to people, not just read books and looked at data. And, you know, when I think about culture, culture is a very broad topic, but I think I've

come to the conclusion that of all of our cultural divides and cleavages, the one around race, and to a less extent, somewhat lesser extent, immigration, are the biggest and most serious.

Of course we're all thinking about race right now because of the terrible events in Buffalo just recently. And I want to emphasize in that context that the views that some people call replacement theory, the idea that immigrants are replacing native born whites or that Blacks are replacing whites, this view is becoming more prevalent.

I looked up the data recently and about one-third of Americans believe in one version or another of this so-called replacement theory. By the way it's not just anxieties about changing demographics, it's also a belief that there is a cabal of people behind it. Whether they be Democrats or Jewish Americans or someone else.

Now of course we've always had disagreements in this country and that's very healthy in a democracy. But it's no longer just disagreements about policy, it's increasingly really about identity and who we are and who we think we are as part of the American family.

And thus identities are increasingly mapped on top of our political identities. So you have Democrats who are largely young, tend to be very ethnically and racially diverse, tend to be female, tend to be secular in their orientation. And then on the other side you have Republicans who are older, who tend to be white and male, and more religious. And people with cross-cutting identities, which used to be quite common, are becoming rarer. And I think that's somewhat dangerous.

Both sides now see the other side as not just someone they disagree with, but someone or a group that is actually the enemy. And those who feel that they might be losing in this competition are getting so desperate that they are actively engaged in trying to change democratic norms and democratic institutions. They'd rather win than preserve those institutions.

So what do we do to save our democracy? I'll try to be very brief here. As John Allen said, policy solutions are not easy to find or even to identify.

But first I think we do have to talk about the specific threats to democracy right now that include the fact that two-thirds of Republicans and one-third of the public believes that the 2020 election was stolen, that state legislatures are changing electoral rules and appointing Trump acolytes or people who believe in electoral fraud to key electoral positions, that voting rights are being curtailed, that Republican primary candidates who believe in the steal and arguing about it, are winning races.

And we do need guardrails on some of our existing laws, such as the Electoral Count Act, which is a 19th Century law that was almost used in January during the insurrection, that would enable the Congress to overturn the popular, even the electoral vote.

Now that's not the only thing we need to do, that's more in your wheelhouse than mine. I think we also need other sectors, not just the political sector, the business sector, the non-profit and civic sector, sports and entertainment, most importantly, to recognize this threat and to use whatever tools they have to mitigate it.

Business leaders for example may not want to speak out on any specific policy issue but they could not give a campaign contributions to those who are promulgating lies about the election.

I think we need also to speak more persuasively and with a little different message to what some call the exhausted majority, that large group of the electorate that's neither very liberal nor very conservative, and not especially engaged. But very many of them don't like what either activists on the right or the left are saying or doing. And I think they are one reason that Biden won over Trump, but they might also be one reason that Youngkin won over Kane in the gubernatorial race in Virginia.

And, yes, we need to regulate social media, it's a complicated topic so I won't say anything more about it now. I think there's more to come.

And finally I think we need to have efforts to help groups get to know one another better. I have been writing and speaking for a long time now about national service

and about the potential it has to mix up different groups in America as well as providing services to local communities. And the theory here is called by psychologists, Contact Theory. And it looked at the empirical evidence on it. Do people who get to know each other really become less prejudice and learn to live with one another better? And the evidence on that is quite powerful.

So I'll stop there. Look forward to hearing from others.

MR. WEST: Thank you, Belle, those are great points. I love that concept of the exhausted majority. I personally find it exhausting every day waking up and just seeing one event after another that challenges the notion that the arc of history is bending toward justice. So there are many days where it seems like that is not the case.

Gabe, I want to bring you in. You are a keen student of public opinion. What are voters saying about American democracy? What are their concerns, and do they think our democracy is in trouble?

MR. SANCHEZ: Thank you, Darrell, very much for that question. I'm very happy to be part of this important discussion and look forward to engaging with my colleagues here at Brookings to hopefully find solutions to some of the challenges that we'll be discussing today.

As you noted I've been tracking attitudes toward democracy over the course of the past two years, which allows me to shed some light on how the public feels about the state of democracy right now in the United States as well as other attitudes about our political system that hopefully will be helpful to our discussion today.

Big picture first. There's been a consistent finding across all reputable national polls and surveys that strongly suggest, unfortunately, that American democracy is already at risk of failing. For example, a survey MPR commissioned earlier this year found that 64 percent of the American population believes that the U.S. democracy is in crisis and is at risk of failing.

A strong indication unfortunately that the situation is actually getting worse

and not better. Over 70 percent of respondents to that MPR poll said that democracy is more at risk of failure now than it was a year ago, right? And put that in context of the January 6th events a year ago. So that's, for me as a scholar of public opinion, not a good statistic because again it suggests things are getting worse and not better, according to the public.

Similarly, a majority of Americans think that the nation's democracy is in danger of collapse, according to a Quinnipiac University Survey, with almost no meaningful variation on this attitude based on partisanship, race, gender, or other demographic identities. So it's consistent across essentially the entire population.

This survey also reveals that 76 percent of Americans think political instability within the country is a bigger danger to the United States right now than external adversaries. This amazingly suggests that Americans recognize right now that we are a bigger threat to our own democracy than any other potential external threat.

Sadly, over half of Americans, according to that poll, 53 percent to be exact, expect political divisions of the country to worsen over their lifetime rather than to get better. Again, unfortunately, painting a pretty unfortunately rainy picture in the context of how things look.

Let's take a look at young adults. A national poll of American 19- to 29-year-olds conducted by the Institute of Politics at Harvard's Kennedy School indicates that a majority, 54 percent of young Americans believe that our democracy is either in trouble or is already failing.

This is particularly troubling given the implications for longer term consequences associated with negative views about our political system among young adults. This survey also finds that only 7 percent of young Americans, again defining young Americans as those under the age of 30, view the United States as a healthy democracy. And 13 percent believe that the nation is already a failed democracy.

A truly powerful statistic, 35 percent of this sample of young adults believes

that there is a 50 percent chance or greater that they will see a civil war in their lifetime here in the United States. That is over one-third of American adults under the age of 30 that unfortunately believe they will see a civil war in their lifetime.

I'll turn to an academic survey I'm involved with, a very large 15,000 plus sample in the collaborative multi-racial political study or CMPS for short. Allows us to look at some different attitudes across other demographic measures, including race, that hopefully are important for our discussion, and again indicate, unfortunately, that we are living in a country in need of significant reform.

Roughly 70 percent of Americans believe that the country is governed by a few powerful interests looking out for themselves rather than being governed for the good of the overall people. Which is unfortunately a strong indicator of just how weak our democratic system of government is right now according to the public.

That survey also reveals that a large segment of the American electorate believes there was voter fraud in the 2020 presidential election which impacted the results of that historic election. As already noted, we know this is an important driver to negative views about democracy and the ability for the public to use elections to create reform.

To give you some context, in that survey 57 percent of white Americans believe that the election was essentially stolen. 26 percent of white Americans in particular believe they definitely view that there was fraud in 2020.

I like the CMPS survey because it also helps us understand that racial and ethnic minorities are also highly susceptible to misinformation regarding voter fraud, as 38 percent of Latinos and 30 percent of African Americans in that survey indicated that they also felt that there might have been some fraud in 2020.

We cannot have this discussion, in my opinion, without mentioning the significant and steady decline in trust in government in Americans. This is an important indicator to us political scientists because we know it's correlated with a host of other outcomes that are really important to us, including civic engagement.

As folks that study public opinion already know, trust in the federal government across essentially all branches is already at or near all-time lows. For example, 74 percent of white Americans, 67 percent of African Americans, 63 percent of Latinos, and 64 percent of Asian Americans, according to the CMPS, believe that they can only trust the federal government to do what is right some of the time or never.

In closing, the CMPS also asked Americans if they believe that our democracy is strong enough right now to protect them from police brutality, one of the most salient issues to communities of color across the country. Unfortunately, another strong indicator of just how weak confidence in our democracy is right now with the public, only 36 percent of respondents believe that democracy can protect them from police mistreatment, including only 31 percent of African American respondents.

So the data clearly indicates that we are at a critical point in our nation's history and without major efforts to increase confidence in our political system, we simply might not be able to win back the public's trust.

Again, not a rosy picture that I paint, but hopefully this is important context that will hopefully give folks the opportunity to think through some of the solutions to these challenges that we raise throughout the rest of the day.

Thank you.

MR. WEST: Okay. Those are sobering numbers. 70 percent believing democracy is at risk, many fearing a risk of political instability. And then a third of young adults seeing the possibility of civil war in their lifetimes. Those are all pretty scary numbers.

Now, Keesha, we know that the state of our information ecosystem is part of the problem. It's certainly not the only part of the problem but there is a lot of misinformation about elections. We also see similar problems are popping up with the pandemic, climate change, and other types of issues.

How is the state of our information ecosystems effecting national discourse and the way in which our system operates?

MS. MIDDLEMASS: Thank you, Darrell, it's a pleasure to be included in this important conversation.

And so this idea of information, particularly that is spreading on social media but then becomes part of the echo chamber that is picked up by mainstream media is the little lies and the misleading information, the information that is weaponized to deceive or manipulate people. And when it comes to American democracy it's this misleading, these lies that are told by Republicans. And let's be clear, this is not a both sides argument. There are elected officials on the Republican side, their supporters, their lawyers, that are spreading this information.

And so you can think about the biggest threats, in my opinion, which are echoed in Gabe's data, are the two layers of that elections really matter. So it's the erosion of trust above voting, the types of machines people use, the way the ballots are counted, who is counting the ballots. That became a huge issue during the 2020 presidential election.

We saw multiple court challenges about the rules of eligibility. Think about the changing voter ID laws, the new restrictions that will be implemented now actually, but going forward for the mid-term elections in November. The ending of early voting on Sunday in some states, the questioning by lawyers on the Republican side about the validity of mail-in ballots. This whole idea of who counts the ballots. So that's the first level.

But the second thing to consider are the lies told about the actual election outcomes. So it's the administration of elections. So it's not just how individuals cast ballots, but who is counting the ballots. And the idea of election fraud is just now rampant when data time and time and time again shows that it is a small, miniscule, less than like half a percent and half of that percent that are actually engaged in voter fraud.

And then if you just look at the media and the stories about voter fraud, they tend to be Republicans. So this whole idea of the misinformation about the election system, and then who is counting the votes, continues to undermine trust in the system.

And in a democracy the public needs to trust the system. And when the trust is eroded, when the system is no longer believed to actually have correct outcomes, then more and more people will be disillusioned, and they will actually believe the lies spread via mostly social media but also through some traditional media sources.

And so each of the court challenges that we saw in 2020, each of the lies, they chip away a trust in the system. And when the public no longer trusts the actual system, the design of the ballots, who counts the ballots, who certifies the ballots, that really becomes the threat to American democracy. And when the majority of people in the country don't trust the system, then the system of course is under threat.

So just to put it into perspective, think about the chaos of the immediate post-2020 presidential election. We did not know who was actually going to be president of the United States. And it was multiple court challenges and this whole idea of voter eligibility in which the vote was counted. This then makes people question the system. And when the questions start becoming more apparent, people will stop voting because they don't think, one, they already don't think their vote counts, but now they're like, will my vote even be counted.

And so the real challenge is, and as my colleagues on this panel have already intimated, it's that whole idea of how do we fix this? Part of it unfortunately is basic education. And why I say unfortunately, is because a lot of Americans don't understand how the electoral process works, the election system works. And so we need like basic education, civics education, reintroduced into like K through 12, like you should not be just learning about the system when you're a senior and ready to go register to vote on your 18th birthday.

I think that the education about civics in America is missing. We also need a national voting rights law. Yes, the Voting Rights Act has been decimated by the Supreme Court, but I'm just talking about a national voting rights law that creates one set of standards across the country in terms of ballot design, machines that are used, who counts, what

counts as a vote.

And then of course the challenge of regulating social media and the whole idea and the challenges around the First Amendment I know that are going to have to be discussed so that the threats to democracy are not constant and can't be tweeted out or posted on Facebook because these threats really do undermine this very idea of democracy and being able to count a vote.

Thank you.

MR. WEST: Thank you very much, Keesha. I love that idea of civics education. It does seem like K-12 has gotten away from that. Certainly when I was growing up that was a required class. It seems like that is less likely to be the case now. And it's actually something we need.

And as you suggested, there are problems at multiple levels in terms of the information ecosystem, our political and electoral institutions, and just the way our political process operates.

Now problems are actually easy to identify and each of you have articulated a number of different issues. And as John suggested at the very top of this, solutions are much harder to come by. Now each of you started to mention some possible solutions, but I want to push you a little bit further on this because this is really the most crucial question.

What can we do about this situation? It's very easy to wake up, see all the events taking place, get depressed, become fatalistic, conclude nothing can be done, and we're kind of on this path to a loss of democracy. I don't want to accept that as the future. I don't want that to be our reality.

So let me just put that question to each of you. Belle and then Gabe and then Keesha. What can we do? Belle, we'll start with you.

MS. SAWHILL: Well first of all I completely agree with Keesha about civics education. I would say people have to take, not only learn it but take a test before they graduate. Go to an immigration ceremony, which Richard Reeds and I called for in our last

book, to see what it's like to become an American and to see how excited people who are naturalizing feel about the process and what a privilege it is. And that those of us who are born in the U.S. should take that responsibility very seriously.

I have to say something about the fact that when you have one major political party whose leadership is failing to call out some of the myths that are out there, that's a big problem. As Keesha said, there is a narrative out there about electoral fraud. And as that narrative gets established and mainstreamed, we are in deep, deep trouble. And all of our leaders, including both sides of the aisle, absolutely need to be speaking out about that.

I would also call out not only social media, conventionally defined by cable news, I saw some data recently on the proportion of people who watch some of the, I'll call them right-leaning cable news shows. They are actually perpetrating a lot of, or promulgating a lot of lies. And they should not be, you know, we used to have a thing called the fairness doctrine. And we should not be allowing the media to promulgate actual lies.

So it's difficult to know what to do but those are a couple thoughts.

MR. WEST: Thank you. Gabe, your suggestions on what we can do to strengthen American democracy.

MR. SANCHEZ: Yeah, I think that's the most important question, right, for us and everybody these days.

So here's a couple of suggestions. One, relatively simple that deals more with election process, and the other probably more highlighting how difficult it is to solve some of these challenges.

The first is, I've been able to meet with some of the smartest minds from the Navajo Nation on thinking about voting. Folks have probably seen the administration putting out a report specifically in the context of challenges to Native American voting and access to the ballot box.

And one of the things I've learned from my colleagues on the Navajo Nation

is that unfortunately, voting precincts for tribal elections across the Navajo Nation don't line up with voting precincts the way that the States of Arizona and New Mexico define that.

So just think if you're Native America trying to figure out where to vote on a very vast area of land, often traveling a far distance to reach the place to vote. And you go to the place you always go to travel on elections and guess what, they tell you it's not the same precinct that you're voting in today for a New Mexico or Arizona election.

That to me is a relatively straightforward and process-oriented question that can simplify the voting process for Native Americans in particular and put their minds at ease that it's not an overly complex system that, let's be honest, some folks in the Native American communities might think is designed to be overly confusing and challenging for them to be able to voice their political opinion and voice their overall attitudes about politics. So that to me is a relatively straightforward, easy to identify a solution problem.

The other that I'll highlight that I didn't get a chance to reference in my opening remarks is, unfortunately, we consistently found in our surveys of Latino eligible voters and the whole population, that a large segment of that community is fearful of voter intimidation specifically through violence directed at their community at the polls.

And, you know, you don't have to think how can folks imagine that there might be violence at the polls when they're unfortunately seeing exhibits of violence directed towards communities of color almost every week these days.

And so to give you an example of how challenging it is to solve that problem. This same issue was rampant, obviously, during the 2020 election. Myself and other colleagues of mine got a number of phone calls from both Secretaries of States offices, they said they're very interested in finding solutions to that problem we were seeing in our data. And they would ask us, hey, Professor Sanchez, we are thinking about inviting our police officers to the voting polls to hopefully increase safety perceptions and improve the overall process, specifically for Latinos.

And I said on first glance that's a great idea but then had to remind then,

unfortunately, there's a long history and legacy of having officers, Border Patrol, immigration officials, present near voting locations to suppress the Latino vote. So unfortunately having armed police officer presence is probably going to do more harm than good.

And I think that also speaks, unfortunately, to the low confidence levels that Latinos and other communities of color unfortunately have with police officers these days.

So that just gives you an idea of how a huge problem, right, doesn't have, unfortunately, a silver bullet solution that can increase confidence and really at the end of the day make Latinos and other folks feel safe to be able to exercise their right to vote.

MR. WEST: Thank you, Gabe. Keesha, your thoughts on what we can do to strengthen American democracy.

MS. MIDDLEMASS: So I think that one thing that literally we should be thinking about is a positive campaign of propaganda of truth. There's so much misinformation that we literally need to be able to coordinate challenges in real time.

And I'm just thinking about young people that are on their devices all the time. Like they have got speed, sort of this whole idea of using technology to respond to electoral attacks immediately. But I think the same thing should be done for the lies told on social media, across all social media platforms.

And I think the other thing we should do on an annual basis, and if we include this around the census, but particularly around redistricting. So to Gabe's point that Native Americans will go to a voting place, a place to vote, the voter polls, and it's not their location. I think that it is incumbent on government to publicize these new voting places but based on the redistricting map.

We just went through redistricting. People literally will be voting and they may not be going to the same place they voted for the last 10 years because their district has been changed. And I think it's incumbent on the government, local, state, and federal government, to actually educate people about their polling places and not just do it the week before election but have it as a continuous educational process to help people understand

the change so then people are aware of it prior to actually casting a ballot.

And now I have to go move Omar, my cat, in the background. Thank you.

MR. WEST: Cats always like to make an appearance on these webinars. Okay. We're starting to get some questions from the audience. And I do want to remind people if you have some questions for our panelists you can email to us at Events@Brookings.edu, that's Events@Brookings.edu or you can tweet at Brookings.gov using the hashtag TaubmanForum. So we can get questions through either of these means.

So one question that is popping up is our listeners and viewers have noted that our panel and many analysts who are out there describe our current political condition as an existential threat to democracy. And so this person believes that many of the current reform proposals are not up to the challenge. And this person suggests we need to amend our Constitution. Meaning, we need big ideas to solve big problems. Others are actually calling for a new Constitution and we need a new process to create a constitution that better suits 21st Century America as opposed to 18th Century America.

So the question I want to pose is, do we need big ideas, should we be amending the Constitution, do we need a new Constitution, are there other big ideas out there that could make a difference. Belle, we'll start with you.

MS. SAWHILL: Well I do think it's an existential crisis potentially. And I do think we should consider whether or not our current Constitution fits with modern times. It is, there would be no harm it seems to me, and a lot of good, if we at least had a debate about the Constitution.

We could start at the high school level, going back to what we both said about the importance of civic education. And first educate students about the existing Constitution, but then involve them in a debate about whether it needs to be changed. And make sure that they hear from experts who've looked at this and thought about ways it might be reformed or revised.

For example, do we need a senate? Is the senate more like the House of

Lords in the UK? And should it just be advisory or should it actually have voting power. Should we have term limits on Supreme Court Justices? Should we do away with the Electoral College? You know, the list goes on and on. And these are big important questions. And I think actually having the debate would be very, very useful. And I mean a debate. I mean a formalized debate at the local level.

I have actually been a jury person on some of these high school debates and they're wonderful, and the kids do great on them and they learn through them. And they learn to take the position of someone they disagree with. And I can see this going on in high schools all around the country. And the winners of the debate at each level moving up to the state level and finally to the national level and that getting covered by the media. And getting citizens more interested in government itself.

MR. WEST: Gabe, do we need to be thinking bigger about dealing with this existential crisis?

MR. SANCHEZ: Absolutely. When the challenges are this big, right, I mean the phrase is go big or go home, right? I think we're really at that critical juncture.

I think as my colleague noted, two relatively straightforward potential solutions that can only be accomplished at that level of reform, that many of us are educators, we hear from our undergraduate students all the time, how is it that a presidential candidate can win the vast majority of votes and still not win the election. That's the Electoral College.

Keep in mind, young people, they've really not seen an election in the United States where the popular winner has actually become president, right? Just think about that for a second. And then we wonder why young people might be disenchanting with our political system, turnout might not be as high as we like. We've got to remember, they've lived through chaos politically through their entire lifetimes. It's going to be very hard to convince them that our current system is working effectively, right, without major reforms like that.

And the other is the role of the Supreme Court in our political system. This has already been raised. Most undergraduates who start to get into these debates and these discussions obviously point out how is it that a relatively small elite body can overturn decisions that are made by folks that are actually accountable to the voting public, right?

So I think, you know, having spirited debates about these, really investigating what the potential implications might be is where we're at. And I think if we don't think about major reforms in that way, we're going to be having the same conversation in 10 or 15 or maybe 20 years. But unfortunately at that point it might be too late to actually right the ship.

MR. WEST: Keesha, your thoughts on big reforms as opposed to incremental reforms.

MS. MIDDLEMASS: I believe in both. We know the big reforms are politically challenging in a polarized society when the two parties seem only can't even communicate in the same language. It's all English but they're all talking past each other.

We have to remember, and Gabe just mentioned this, is that Democrats garner more votes than Republicans at the national level and so the effort to suppress the vote is a Republican agenda item. And they've made every effort to shrink the size of the electorate. And to truly be a democracy we should be expanding the electorate, that everybody that is 18 and older that is eligible to vote should have an opportunity to vote.

Now what does that look like? Maybe it's just literally mail-in ballots. The State of Oregon does it and they have actually improved the number of people voting on a regular and consistent basis. Mail-in ballots worked during COVID.

So this idea of going big, yes, let's change the Constitution, let's have a debate, let's figure out what is the best way to change the current system. Until a Constitutional amendment or a new framing of the Constitution takes place, I would love to see federal law come out of Congress and signed by the president to create a national mail-in ballot, or at least the whole idea of changing the rules so that the national standards are

the same.

Right now for those that may not know is every jurisdiction in the United States has its own power to design a ballot, to contract out for the machines that count the ballots, they have to get volunteers in to help people register to vote but also then to cast the ballot. And just having one national standard would actually go a long way.

Where's the money for this? You know again, expanding the electorate is bad for Republicans so there would always be fights over actually paying for these things. But I do believe the effort is to create a national standard as an incremental change until those big changes can be implemented.

MR. WEST: Thank you very much. So, Belle, Gabe, I've mentioned the role of the courts and the Supreme Court in particular. And of course we're at this very interesting juncture now where people are anticipating the Supreme Court is about to overturn *Roe v. Wade*, despite the fact there are large public opinion majorities in favor of the existing policy.

If that happens, how would that affect our democracy and how will people view our judicial system?

MS. SAWHILL: Well I think that the use of the judicial system are already deteriorating in the sense that the Supreme Court refused to be viewed as above politics, is increasingly being viewed as politicized. And that is a travesty. It's along the theme that we've all been talking about of loss of confidence in our institutions. And when we lose confidence in that particular institution it just adds to the rest of the problem we've all been talking about.

And I think that the fact that there are over 60 percent of Americans who do not want *Roe* overturned suggests that the court is really going beyond where most people are. Most people have very mixed views of abortion. They don't want it to be legal in all circumstances, but they also don't want it to be illegal in all circumstances.

And I'm still hopeful that the court will think hard about that. Not only about

the law itself, or the opinion itself, but also about their own reputation as a key institution in our democracy.

It is, I have to say one sort of cynical thing finally here and that is that if conservatives are, many of them, pro-life as they seem to be, they ought to think about common sense God reform.

MR. WEST: Okay. Gabe, you originally brought up the issue of the courts. Your thoughts on the role of the courts and particularly the role that courts play in a democracy.

MR. SANCHEZ: Absolutely. I mean I can't say a whole lot more than my colleague, Belle, who's a much stronger expert in this space than I am. But the thing I will channel is, I think all of us immediately when we hear #MeToo reform courts or the role of the courts in our political system, immediately think about the U.S. Supreme Court. And for good reason.

But let's keep in mind state courts drive some of the most important policy decisions of our lifetime. Those decisions aren't made by elected officials accountable to the public, the courts are taking on those challenges.

And on one hand that means we have to think deeply about how the courts are structured across U.S. states, of how they get their appointment, elections, etcetera. But also hold election officials accountable for passing the buck on some of these controversial decisions because they don't want to be taking a vote on record and are allowing the courts to assume more and more power and control over important political decisions that were never really intended to be up to the courts in the first place.

Keesha mentioned redistricting. How many states across the countries maps that will define the political outcomes for the next 10 years are going to be made by courts, right? Far too many of them in my opinion. So I think as we're thinking about big decisions, big reforms, yes, let's think about the federal government, let's think about the U.S. Supreme Court, but also recognize the tremendous variation that's happening in this

vacuum where states are moving aggressively into areas we never thought we would see states really driving decisions. Everything from immigration to voting rights.

So I think that's what I would like folks to think about, what's going on in your own state and how might you be able to engage there.

MR. WEST: Yeah, that is a great reminder too, like have people focus not just on the national level, which is where people often focus, but on the state and local level. Because there are lots of things that could take place there where it's closer to people and they may feel a stronger ability to make change at the state and local levels.

Keesha, your thoughts on the court, and as Gabe mentioned, you know, we are seeing the courts becoming more interventionist, not just on abortion policy and redistricting, but there was a new campaign finance ruling allowing a candidate to use campaign money to repay personal loans that they gave their own campaign. People worry that that's actually going to just encourage greater corruption in American politics.

So your view on the role the courts are playing in American democracy.

MS. MIDDLEMASS: Yes. Just to echo what my colleagues have said, that the courts are playing a huge role in not just voting rights but just rights in general. The courts have at the state and the national level, have moved in to making these critical decisions that voters then don't even have an opportunity to express their decision until the actual next election.

So my sense is that yes, we need to figure out and better understand as a population, better understand the power of the courts. But more importantly, to hold elected official accountable. Elected officials are the ones that nominate judges and then appoint judges actually at the federal level. But at a state level most judges are elected. And so they are in the same cycle of, you know, running on a campaign slogan, raising money, the whole idea of getting reelected based on the decisions they make on the courts at the state and local level.

It's so problematic that we have to literally go back to this idea of the vote

and our individual right to vote is what then actually can account for all our other rights related to the courts making decisions but also then elected officials making decisions that are implemented at a later date.

So this whole idea that we cannot -- this is the point that I really want to make is we can't separate the institutions from the individual voter because they're all connected in the same ecosystem, political ecosystem and people really do have to take on the individual responsibility of figuring out who are their elected officials, what do those elected officials stand for, and then consistently voting on a regular basis.

MR. WEST: Okay. We have another great question from one of our viewers. Is there any reason to be optimistic about American democracy right now? I'll just add on, like are there positive developments that are taking place that make you believe that even though this is a big challenge and a big problem facing the United States and the world right now, there actually are some things going on that should make people optimistic?

Belle, any grounds for optimism?

MS. SAWHILL: Well I've been reading a new book by Yascha Mounk, he's a political scientist at Johns Hopkins and his book is called "The Great Experiment." And in it he talks about the fact that in any diverse democracy or diverse society there are always going to be strains and conflicts between different groups. And, you know, it's a global and an historical phenomenon. So we should think about this way, you know, separate from just the U.S. situation.

You know, you have Shia versus Sunni, you have Catholics versus Protestants in Northern Ireland. You have Hutu versus Tutsis; I mean it goes on and on. And it's always been difficult, he says, for democracy to prevail in any society in which there isn't a lot of homogeneity of the population.

And the U.S. stands out as a country in which we have a lot of diversity and are getting more. And he has an optimistic take on the prospects for creating a diverse democracy. He says it will be very hard but that if we don't work at it and we aren't

optimistic about it and we don't paint a more positive picture about what it can mean and what a wonderful model it can be for the rest of the world, we will have missed something.

And I cannot begin in the short time we have here to begin to articulate his optimism, but I can recommend the book. Yascha Mounk, *The Great Experiment*.

MR. WEST: Great. Gabe, any grounds for optimism on your part regarding American democracy?

MR. SANCHEZ: I'm an eternal optimist so I love the question because, you know, in the context of this conversation we need something to point to give us some optimism.

I mean the only thing I can think of off the top of my head is we stress so much of the outcomes of the 2020 election and everything that happened after the election. But let's remind ourselves that turnout was incredibly high despite a plethora of challenges, right? Many people literally risked their lives from COVID-19 to stand in line and cast their ballot, right?

We also saw huge record-breaking turnout in terms of the protests movement around criminal justice reform, mostly by young Americans. So if we think about the turnout, particularly of young adults in 2020 despite all the obstacles and challenges that they faced, as well as the huge, huge energy that they put into an issue they deeply care about, right, criminal justice reform. It gives me a sense of optimism that particularly young people have the energy, they want to see reform, they unfortunately don't see it according to my polling, the elections and voting as the vehicle to create that big picture social change, which is where we have to focus our energy.

But the fact that they still have enough faith in our system to turn out the way that they did, to march and protest, and the numbers that they did, gives me a lot of optimism that the future looks bright if we can remove some of the obstacles and barriers out of their way to allow them to put that energy to good use.

MR. WEST: Great. Thank you. Keesha, any basis of optimism on your

part?

MS. MIDDLEMASS: Yes. So despite the challenges there's been a great movement, particularly in blue states of expanding and making it easier to cast ballots. State legislators have proposed hundreds of laws to make it easier to vote and those bills are expanding eligibility to vote by mail, increasing early voting opportunities.

But more importantly, and an issue dear to my heart, is they are removing restrictions based on a felony conviction. So just last year Iowa ended its lifetime ban on voting for those individuals that had been convicted of a felony. California's restoring their right to vote of people that have been convicted of a felony. And so in this particular area around voting, states are removing some barriers. And so I'm optimistic that more barriers in states will continue to fall.

MR. WEST: Okay. I'm going to close this panel with my own source of optimism, which is demography. Now it's very possible, and perhaps even likely that Donald Trump is going to run again in 2024, and perhaps even be elected president. But if you look at the changing demography of America, the views of younger voters versus older voters, I think that by 2028, and certainly by 2032, a candidate like Trump would not be able to run nationally for president and win.

So the argument that many Republicans are embracing right now is not a winning argument in the long run. They can do very well right now, they may recapture the House, possibly the Senate in 2022, they may do very well with the presidency in 2024. But on a longer-term basis white nationalism is not a winning political argument given the changing demography of America.

So in the longer run I'm actually quite optimistic that we can solve this problem. I do believe the next decade is going to be very rocky, very chaotic, and there's going to be a lot of conflict.

And so the challenge is really getting through the next decade. If we can do that, I think all of us actually should be optimistic about the future of American democracy.

I want to thank Belle, Gabe, and Keesha for sharing your thoughts, lots of great insights. If you want to follow their work, each of them write regularly at Brookings.edu and you can find their latest thoughts on many of these differing topics.

Now for our second panel I would like to turn things over to Nicol Turner Lee. She is a senior fellow in Governance Studies at Brookings and director of our Center for Technology Innovation. She is going to moderate the second panel addressing technological challenges to democracy.

Nicol, over to you.

MS. TURNER LEE: I have been transported over. It took me a minute, but I am here. I think we're waiting for one more panelist.

But hello everybody, I'm excited to actually facilitate the second part of this dialogue. And I'm excited to do that with colleagues and friends that have really had some stake in the way that this conversation is heading. I'm appreciative of the prior panel who delved into the issue of election. And now on this panel we're actually going to dive into the threats to democracy, particularly the digital threats, that some of us have become even more familiar with, if not, you know, prior to the last 24 hours, but for the last few years.

Joining me today are folks that I think are going to help us delve into a little deeper into this topic. Quinta Jurecic is a fellow in Governance Studies and senior editor of Lawfare. Tom Wheeler is a visiting fellow in Governance Studies at the Center for Technology Innovation. And Jessica Brandt is policy director of the Artificial Intelligence and Emerging Technology Initiative, as well as a fellow in the Foreign Policy Center for Security, Strategy, and Technology.

Hi, everybody. Now one of the things I want also to say to you all is a housekeeping rule. We will be taking questions and answers. Please continue to place those questions on the hashtag TaubmanForum, or send them via email at Events@Brookings.edu.

So I want to jump in because I think it's so interesting we got a prep call.

We have now seen a series of current events actually roll out that I want to get into. Particularly how the use of misinformation and disinformation actually emboldened the violent act that we just witnessed in Buffalo.

But before we get started, Tom, I want to go to you. And I want to start with some level setting for the people who are watching today. I want us to focus on why we are still hashing out misinformation and disinformation campaigns in our society. You know, given that the topic of this is like our future of democracy, why are we still here, Tom Wheeler, because I know this is an area that we can't seem to get out of?

MR. WHEELER: Well I think the first answer and the quick answer I guess is because we're not living in China or Russia. We're not being told what the truth is. And, you know, we have had these kinds of challenges before. I mean think back, you know, shortly after the founding of our nation and the Sedition Act in which said there are things that you cannot say. So we have always had these struggles. Let's start there.

We are having a different set, a different manifestation of these challenges now as a result of the confluence of a new set of forces, and they're technology based. Technology has hollowed out economic opportunity for many Americans. And at the same point in time technology has created the opportunity for those Americans who are dissatisfied with that to express themselves.

And then the third leg of the stool comes along and that is that a handful of companies have decided that that kind of expression can be incredibly profitable. And that feeding the dissent is something that is a good business policy for them.

I mean, you know, our founders created as our national motto, you know, E Pluribus Unum, you know, out of many one. And the economic model of the digital platforms now is to go against the Unum. And the Unum is important because democracy works when tribalism fades and the collective, a rising tide lifts all boats, becomes the belief.

And what we have now is a profit structure that says let's promote tribalism. Let's see what we can do to make sure that there is this kind of discord because this kind of

discord sells engagement on our website and that kind of engagement allows us to deliver eyeballs to advertisers.

And then a cause precedent of all of this is how those very same platforms, we've been talking thus far about the information going out from those platforms. The information coming into those platforms is information about you and me. And then how that information is manipulated to go back and feed that drive for divisiveness that promotes profitability.

So one last point. What this has ended up doing, I think, is turning our information system inside out. You know, John Allen, at the outset talked about the lack of shared facts that we have as a nation. It used to be that the mantra or the belief was that the antidote for misinformation was more information, that truth will out.

What technology has brought us today is a business model that says that additional information will not get out because what information there is targeted, again based on personal information they have about each of us, is targeted to what we want to hear.

So I think that's the challenge that we have to deal with in terms of rediscovering the Unum and how do we use technology to promote that oneness.

MS. TURNER LEE: You know I love what you're talking about, Tom, because, you know I focus on AI bias, right? And so part of what I always use as analogy that we're now in this society where we're all in on this playground. There are slides, there are swings, there are monkey bars, there's, you know, whatever, sandboxes. But the difference when you went to recess when we were growing up is that you all played together, or you moved around and you swapped out those different play instruments. Today, you know, the white supremacists on the monkey bars, the cyclists are at the sandbox, we're all in our different cocoons and we don't get this opportunity, like you said, to find out what our shared values are or our shared conversations are because the algorithmic amplification has actually kept us apart.

I love, I'm going to pick up on what you talked about because it really touched me from the standpoint of why and how we got here over the last few decades.

Jessica, I want to pivot to you though because as we think about the growth and what Tom said, like how we've actually gotten to the space we're now a profitable enterprise, but also in sort of the way the technology is designed itself to parse out our press and our voice. How does this impact, you know, global challenges, or even national security concerns?

I would think that anybody who's looking at the way that we have handled this information and disinformation would think that we're a complete wreck in the United States when it comes to trying to get to a space of safety, you know, and that puts us at some vulnerability I would assume, with other countries.

So speak a little bit about those implications as well.

MS. BRANDT: Sure, happily. And thanks so much for having me.

Yeah, I mean to sort of situate this in the context of geopolitics and national security I'd say, you know, I think liberal democracies are facing what I describe as a persistent competition in the information domain. Where authoritarian challengers have recognized and are actively exploiting certain sort of T asymmetries.

You know, in particular, you know, Russia and China, I think recognize that open information environment. You know I think they confer tremendous long-term advantages on democratic societies, but they create certain inherent vulnerabilities, you know, in the short term. And so, you know, outside actors can at very low cost and, you know, with possible deniability, inject themselves in and try to influence domestic discourse. And efforts to foreclose that activity, you know, really bump up against rights to expression.

You know, where autocratic states on the other hand, they really, you know, they often sort of control their own information environments quite tightly which I think in the near term affords them a degree of unity.

You know, Russia and China, in particular, can sort of freely exploit Western

social media platforms without worrying about commercial damage to those companies. And they can also, you know, use deception with relative impunity because there are virtually no normative constraints on lying in those little systems.

And so where I think democracy really depends on the idea that truth is knowable and that citizens can discern it and use it as a basis for self-government, you know, autocrats really have no such need for a healthy information system and to thrive and in fact benefit from widespread, you know, skepticism and that the truth exists at all.

And I think democracies have been slow to recognize the nature of this contact and to really develop a strategy of pushback.

MS. TURNER LEE: Wow. Thank you for that. Because it's so scary as I think about what you just said, and again, thinking what, you know, relating that to what Tom said, that perhaps, you know, Tom, you might have remembered years ago when Reed Hundt, chairman of the FCC, talked about the public square. You know, it seems like we wanted to use technology to develop the public square but now the public square doesn't look anything like the people, the populous, in a more truthful way where you have, like you said, those voices that sort of infuse the marketplace but you can discern the truth somewhere in there.

And, Quinta, you can tell that I'm quite emotional, like John Allen was because we just saw misinformation lead to the racial massacre of 10 people in Buffalo. People who look like me, who were just shopping on a day. You know, my mother could have been that person if we lived in Buffalo, could happen anywhere, it's just very disturbing that much of that was based on this great replacement theory which as some have, who follow white supremacist movement, have seen them usually being something that was coupled by itself in a vacuum but the use of technology, as Tom has indicated, has allowed it to be a greater discourse.

And it's also placed out there with the governor of New York just put out, that somebody's gotta be accountable for this. So your work, you've looked at the liability

structures of Section 230. I love for people who are not aware of that for you to kind of explain that as well to people. But, you know, is that enough? Because what we're actually seeing is misinformation/disinformation that is lending itself to the incitement of violence in very, very radical ways.

And it's also creating, you know, this ideological truth that lend themselves to the type of this devastating consequences.

So talk to us a little bit about Section 230, liability, has your thought changed in the last 24 hours on how we should actually be, you know, really negotiating the types of protection that tech companies need to have in these instances.

MS. JURECIC: Thank you so much, Nicol. Yeah, I think it's important to acknowledge that we're having this conversation in a particularly heavy moment.

So as you said, I'll give a brief overview for those who aren't familiar. Section 230 is the Communications Decency Act which has been in the news a great deal recently. Shields technology platforms from liability for third party content on their services. It also provides them with the legal leeway to remove things if they so choose.

So the example I usually give is, you know, if I tweet something defamatory about you, Nicol, on Twitter, you could sue me, but you can't sue Twitter. And Twitter also has the legal right to take that tweet down if it so chooses.

There has obviously been a great deal of discussion around Section 230 reform in recent years. I think as a result on both the political left and the right of dissatisfaction with the state of civic discourse, the state of the Internet.

I actually think, unfortunately, that this weekend's shooting is a good example of how the limitations of discussing Section 230 in this way. I absolutely agree, Nicol, I think it's impossible to disentangle the shooting from the Internet and from how information travels. We saw, for example, how the document that the shooter posted, the video that he took while he was carrying out the actual events, have really spread across the Internet despite plans by technology companies to try to, you know, act in advance to

prepare to take such things like that down after the Christchurch shooting in which something similar happened.

And I think that there's definitely plenty of room for criticism in how big platforms have really failed resoundingly to remove that material. Also, as you say, you know, I think it's impossible to ignore that we're at a point where it's very easy for a person to access that kind of information online and become, you know, fall down that rabbit hole of really hateful and ugly thinking and become radicalized because information is so widely available.

At the same time I want to give two sort of complicating factors here which I think are important to keep in mind. So one is when we think about Section 230, as I said at the beginning, Section 230 also gives platforms the ability to take things down. And so, you know, when we think about, you know, that manifesto, that video, that's not something that we want widely available.

And I think it is important that, you know, platforms like Twitter, Facebook, You Tube, Twitch, acted quickly, you know. They could be doing better but they're acting as well as they seem to be able to at the time, to take that material down.

And I also want to point to, viewers may be familiar with this. Texas law HB-20 that was allowed to go into effect by the Fifth Circuit, U.S. Court of Appeals for the Fifth Circuit recently. I think there's a lot of lack of clarity about whether or not, if that law is in effect, whether or not it would allow platforms to take content like this down. It might, it might not.

And now there is some complicated legal questions about how that law interacts with Section 230. But I think that that ambiguity is a really good reminder that, you know, in many ways I would say that platforms do not have enough accountability for what they allow to go on. But in other ways, that shield from liability allows them to take action in ways that are actually extremely important even if I would completely agree they are not doing enough.

And one final point that I also think is worth keeping in mind here, you know, when we talk about disinformation and misinformation, I think we often talk about it in the context of the Internet. And there's a reason for that as we've all spoken so far. But at the same time, you know, I think the most prominent advocate of the replacement theory, and in the New York Times went into this in a really excellent series that I'd encourage viewers to read, is Tucker Carlson, who has the Primetime slot on Fox News.

So should we be concerned, and should we be thinking more about how misinformation, falsehoods, hatreds, travel online? Absolutely, yes. But I think it is, you know, you asked at the beginning, Nicol, to Tom, why are we still discussing this, why is this still such a problem. And I think the fact that, you know, it's not just the dregs of the Internet or unmoderated corners online where these things are being discussed and spread, it's Primetime every night, really drives home just how difficult a problem this is.

MS. TURNER LEE: Well look, I asked that question of Tom rhetorically because, listen, I mean let's just be straight here, I'm a sociologist. We're dealing with some of these domestic terrorism acts because we still have been coming out of, you know, values for this country that is still based on many of these things.

I agree with you, it's not just this, you know, replacement theory, but it's also the attack on critical race theory. It goes back deeper than this, right?

But, Tom, what's so interesting about, you know, this misinformation pieces, you know, when you were with the Federal Communication Commission, this is an area that I know you dabbled into. It's like the erosion, you know, the conflict that exists between the type of First Amendment rights we want in our democracy and then the free press, right, that is independent of the type of profit driven models that maybe drive algorithmic amplification or what Quinta's talking about, you know, this type of tribalism that both you and Jessica and everybody's been talking.

Where are we with this? I mean is this a take of, our press is not independent, that the Tucker Carlsons can even exist, but we need other voices? Like

where do we stand when we talk about democratic participation and voice?

MR. WHEELER: Well let me pick up where Quinta left off because I thought she made a really good point. You know, I'm not sure we're talking about an erosion of the free press so much as we're talking about the redefinition of media economics, right?

And cable television was the first manifestation of that, right? About how we used to have this homogeneity because at least in terms of video communications because we're all using the airwaves and they were the public airwaves, and they were limited. And then along comes cable TV and there is no limit and all of a sudden, yeah, you get the golf channel but you also get, you know, oh, yeah, and some really extremist kinds of content.

And again I go back to the fact that it's economics that's driving that. But I would also, I keep coming back here. Let's be reminded that this is not our first time at this kind of rodeo. You know, the early political press of the United States of America was gutter press, all right? I mean we begin the 20th Century with yellow journalism, you know, which was how do I tell lies and create fake news in order to sell subscribers, to get subscribers? Oh, wow, there's an economic model that we see again, right?

And so the challenge becomes how do you do that and how do you do that in an environment, how do you overcome that. How do you bring sensitivities and balance in an environment that is protected by the First Amendment, which says that government's activities are constrained but the alternate is that the corporate activities are unconstrained?

And so how do we find a new common ground, back to the same point I was making before, and our challenge in the connected world, in the Internet world, is that we have, really, I think a Venn diagram, if you will. I can't draw it here but let me do three circles that all interrelate here, right?

The first one is, as I mentioned previously, how the companies are suborning our privacy and turning our personal information into their corporate asset. Which then drives the next circle, if you will, which is market concentration, which is if I control this asset of the 21st Century, which is information, then I can control the markets. And that

drives the third circle down here, which is what information is going out across those vehicles and at the intersection in the middle. You get an explosion.

You know, you get targeted information based on the private data that you yourself had swiped, if you will, that is turned around and sold for profit that then drives your reaction that starts the whole thing again.

And so I think that if we are going to deal with this challenge, we've gotta deal with all three parts, all three circles. We've got to say how do we get privacy by design, how do we get competition by design, and how do we have truth by design?

And the problem is, you can nibble away at any one of them but it's where all three of them come together that the greatest challenge exists, and you can't get to that point unless you deal with all of them.

MS. TURNER LEE: Wow. I like the way you do constructive ads to tell you the truth. Is this what your book is about, Tom, that's coming out?

MR. WHEELER: And there's a new book coming out with the steps.

MS. TURNER LEE: Yeah. I love the way you've actually reconstructed it, right, because, you know. Jessica, I want to bring you in. And again for those of you who are watching, please send your questions to Events@Brookings.edu or tweet at the TaubmanForum.

It's so interesting what Tom said, right? Because it can actually have an opportunity, or it can be very perilous. So you take what's going on in the Russia/Ukraine conflict, and to a certain extent, you know, the Ukrainian president has sort of used this to really gain the empathy that we all have had as to what's going on there. And we've seen the Russians use it in ways that could be considered, you know, empathetic to their cause but also propaganda.

And so how do you balance that? And if the United States, because we don't have any norms in this, or shared values around this, are we not really taking leadership on this? You know, like in your work, what do we do with it? Because I think

that's again the opportunity/perilous side of technology in the end.

MS. BRANDT: Yeah, sure. Well let me just say maybe a word about what I think leadership will look like. You know, because, you know, I think rather than taking a reactive and sort of tit for tat approach to pushing back on, in particular in this case Russia, but also China, you know, activities in the information space, tempting though that may be, I think, you know, that leads us down the wrong pathway because Russia and China are choosing these tools because, as I mentioned, you know, they draw on certain asymmetries where the advantage rebounds to them.

And so, you know, competition is about the pursuit and use of advantages. And what we need to do is, you know, do an audit of our own service strengths. And we have many, you know, so I think in order to push back we're going to want to reset the competition onto a playing field that is, you know, to our advantage rather than, you know, terrain at which we are, at least in the near term, disadvantaged.

So I guess that's going to require some activities in the information space but it's also going to require thinking, you know, beyond the information space.

You know, I'd say within the information space, the first thing we need to do is seize the initiative, harvesting truthful information, you know, to defend our interests and the integrity of the information space. So, you know, we have this sort of what we've called the persistent engagement approach that we applied to cyberspace. I think we should carry it into the information domain.

And I actually think our government has done quite well in the context of the Ukraine crisis. I mean, together with London, Washington made an extraordinary series of intelligence disclosures that I really think help set the frame through which, you know, many people around the world understand what's happening in Ukraine. That is a markedly different approach than we saw in 2014, and it's not that our government didn't know what was happening in 2014, but it didn't communicate with allies, and it certainly didn't communicate with publics around the world.

You know, I think that those disclosures really, you know, I think they bound our life together, they made it harder for fence-sitters to fence-sit, I think they really, you know, increased the public appetite for a much stronger response here in the United States and in Europe.

Again, I think they really, you know, set the frame through which people are now interpreting new information, right? So Russia, aggressor, and Ukraine, defender, and, you know, it's not that it's completely forestalled, you know, Putin's ability to carry out, you know, disinformation operations but it's made it harder to kind of push that rock up a hill.

You know I think the second thing we need to do in the information space is to uphold the freedom of information worldwide because it's the right thing to do but also because it puts autocrats on the back foot. I mean fundamentally their fragility is to open information and so, you know, I think we need a strategy for encouraging if we were, you know, gesturing at I think, Nicol, investments in independent and local media, you know, here at home but also in, you know, closed and increasingly closing spaces, because robust civil societies and news ecosystems which, of course, are interlinked, you know, really I think speaks truth to power and keeps citizens informed.

And then I think if we use like the diplomatic, economic, financial, and other tools, you know, that are available to us in other domains to do things like we did in 2018 when we just took the IRA offline for a couple of days around the 2018 midterms or in 2020 when we, you know, used it to fend, you know, hunt forward capacity.

So using our cyber capacity again where appropriate and then, you know, within authorities, existing authorities, to make it harder for perpetrators of info ops, you know, to carry them out. And then, you know, using the centrality of our financial markets to, you know, to punish and, you know, through sanctions, those who carry out such operations.

That's just a couple of ideas, but that's sort of how I would think about, you know, what a strategy should look like.

MS. TURNER LEE: You know, I think you're on the right track, right?

Because I think the challenge that we're having is the same way that, you know, people like President Allen have tried to put out domestic terrorism what, two or three years ago in terms of white supremacy. We can't seem to get, I think it's the United States' common language and become a leader in this space because we're still dealing with our own issues, like Tom would say. Like we still have to deal with these other issues, which, Quinta, questions are coming in, I know I'll get to the questions, but I want to go one more round with a couple questions I have.

But I do want to go back to you, going back to Tom's unpacking of this diagram. You made this remark that said, you know, if people wanted, if companies wanted to take down stuff they could. But that's really been central to this debate as well, which is content moderation strategy. It's no secret, even though he said I'm waiting a while to see how the box and the spam accounts work. But people who are billionaires like Elon Musk, want to purchase these public squares.

How is that going to impact some of the debates that we're actually having on content moderation that feed into more democratic online platforms and systems, and what's the danger if we begin to actually do what Tom says, place more capitalist pressure on these platforms to actually, you know, be open and free and honest?

MS. JURECIC: Right. I think it's notable, you know, that Musk sort of came into this conversation about purchasing Twitter, saying he wanted to return the platform to its free speech roots and then almost immediately seemed to kind of backpedal whether or not he realized that was what he was doing, and acknowledged that there were some things he wouldn't want to un-Twitter.

So there were some remarks the other week where he said that he might want to remove or hide or prevent from amplifying tweets that were in, and these are his words "Wrong and bad." That's pretty vague. And I think it speaks to just how difficult content moderation is, but you can't just take down the bad stuff. Because we all disagree about what constitutes bad. Now there are some things that are unambiguously bad, but

there's a lot that we would disagree on. So I think that just points to how difficult this is and how necessary, that Elon Musk seems to be acknowledging that.

But, yes, absolutely, I see your point. And as to Tom's point, I think that, you know, the fact that we have a platform like Twitter which is relatively small as far as these big platforms go, but I think conscious about its weight in terms of influence insofar as it's sort of the home for journalists, myself included, for politicians. It's become a really key gathering space for a number of different communities.

Black Twitter is often pointed to as an example of a sort of vibrant social media community that the platform didn't expect but really took advantage of the space that was opened. And so I think for that reason we often think of Twitter as a public square, which is precisely why people will sometimes become upset when their tweets are hidden or removed because it's, you know, I should be able to say anything in the public square.

At the same time the Musk potential purchase really drives home Tom's point about how, you know, this is a public square in one sense but it's also a square that is owned by a private company. And that private company can change hands. And there is in the same way that, you know, the Twitter can remove video of the Buffalo shooting and the manifesto, there's also nothing that's stopping Elon Musk from purchasing Twitter and saying, you know, I want to remove all tweets that have the letter X in them, or the letter B, or everyone whose first name is Bob, can no longer be on Twitter, right? He has the complete freedom to do that.

And I think the sort of erratic, perhaps, approach that he's been taking to the acquisition really drives home just how dependent we all are on these spaces, on essentially the good will of the private individuals and the private companies who are running them.

I wouldn't say I'm optimistic enough to hope that, you know, some lasting regulation might come out of this that might change that situation, but I do think to your point, Nicol, you're absolutely right that it really drives home just how perilous a situation we're in, just how easily things can change. And for that reason I don't think it's a stable end of state.

It seems like something will have to give one way or another.

MS. TURNER LEE: Which brings me to this question, I'll just throw it open to all of you, and maybe, Tom, I'll start with you. I mean that's part of why we're having this discussion today, right, the threat to democracy. Because it's been so hard to sort of legislate or regulate these things because of potentials that inherent in everything that everyone has said.

So who decides the truth when it's all said and done? Because you need, like Quinta said, you need a platform that extends beyond the telephone tree when it comes to civil rights, and you also need a platform that doesn't come out in the wild, wild west with site violence. So who decides, who arbitrates the truth going forward?

MR. WHEELER: Well now we truly are in Philosophy 101.

MS. TURNER LEE: Right. Who makes the final decision?

MR. WHEELER: You know, I want to go back to something that Jessica said. She talked about how autocrats are making the rules internationally. And I would also just add to that, there's two sets of autocrats that are making the online rules. One is international, as you referenced, Jessica. And the second are the corporate autocrats. Because they're making just as autocratic my way or the highway kind of rules as Putin and Jinping and others.

But Jessica talked about how do I put the autocrats on their back foot. Transparency. You know, let's have some understanding of what's going on. How do you, the less arguing about what it is exactly truth and more about putting out information so they can fight about what truth is. Let's have that kind of transparency.

You know, you were talking about Musk. I find it fascinating that I read an article the other day that 20 percent of his 8 million followers are bots. And no wonder he's worried about bots. But how do you have transparency about what's going on in this information that is being manipulated, targeted, and amplified?

And then how do we turn around and say we need to promote, you know,

volume, need to promote veracity over volume. Because the business models now are all about volume. To get back to Mr. Musk, he said that he has a business plan to increase the revenue, to double the revenue in the next couple of years. And something inside me says I doubt if the key to that business plan is veracity.

MS. TURNER LEE: Jessica, what about you, who decides? Because I mean again you've placed us in this space of international governance, right? And I think as Tom was talking about, a lot of it is based on profits but internationally what we have seen when it comes to misinformation, disinformation, goes back to the previous panel that Darrell moderated, which is electoral integrity.

Who decides is really this question. Tom, I'm standing on the philosophical side because I would actually like to know and then we can get into some policy suggestions and go to these questions. But who decides, Jessica, in terms of your opinion?

MS. BRANDT: Sorry, two years - -

MS. TURNER LEE: I want to tell you, there's always one person on every call now that forgets to unmute the button.

MS. BRANDT: You know no one person or entity, and that is both the strength and vulnerability, you know, that we've been talking about. It hasn't come up in this conversation, but it often does, and I just want to make the pitch to strike faking news as a frame from our lexicon because I think it fundamentally misunderstands the problem.

It's not actually information that's false, you know, sort of verifiably or demonstratively true or false, but information that's polarizing and misleading that is so much of the problem that we face. And I think obviously defining the problem is very important if it shapes how we deal with it.

So, you know, I think some things are properly understood as a content problem. Hate speech, you know, CSAM, these are content problems, and they can be dealt that way. But this information I think really isn't. I mean when I think about what Russia does, it's about, you know, lifting up the most extreme views that already exist in our

societies to try to make them, you know, appear to be more salient.

And so, anyway, I think though pacifists, you know, leads us down, you know, we need platforms to police behavior, which is to know what they do. But legislative efforts that really focus on transparency, as both of my fellow, you know, panelists have emphasized. And then I, you know, approaches like labeling and de-amplification rather than outright bans.

So, you know, I'm no fan of Russian state media. As you can tell, this is what I spend a lot of time looking at and thinking about. But I was really not in favor of European governments asking, you know, Facebook for example, to impose outright bans on that content, you know, no matter who posted it. Especially when there are these other tools in the toolbox that can work. And because I think it sets a really dangerous precedent because many other governments are going to ask many other platforms to take down many other forms of content that they don't like for many other reasons. And so I just think it sets a really, you know, it's a really slippery slope.

And I think we now have a greater sense of exactly what happened in that episode because there was such a civic society outcry in places where, you know, strong civil society exists. You know, but in the very early days what we got was, you know, a tweet from a senior Facebook executive saying we're going to take action, with really no sense of what that action was going to be or why. It was what European government asked you to do what, and what are you doing? Because we really can't, as researchers or policy analysts, you know, figure out how to chart a course forward if we don't understand like what game we're playing. And then just for broader, you know, transparency, you know, reasons it's especially important that we understand what, you know, governments are asking platforms, you know, because these are conversations civil society needs to have a window into, if not a voice.

MS. TURNER LEE: And, Quinta, you know what, I'm going to do a variation of my question. And then for those of you who are watching or about to do your questions, I

got a couple in the Chat, I got some sent previously.

But, Quinta, I want to push you on this, right, because, you know, I think that legislators think that Section 230 or try to find ways for transparency in ads or political advertising has been one of the areas, is actually going to solve a lot of things, right? But there's something about, and again, I'm just very sensitive to what happened in the last 24 to 48 hours, I just have to be honest.

If we think about, and I love the way Jessica put it. This use of terms of like fake news, hate speech, misinformation, disinformation, this sort of all coupled together when they should be disaggregated. But at some point, you know, my mother's spreads fake news, I don't want her to go to jail, right, because she said a story she didn't read. But there's got to be something alongside, maybe Section 230, I mean that allows us to regulate or legislate these other bodies.

Because an informed democracy means that people know, you know, they not only have access to share their views, but they also know that there areas that have been pre-mitigating or settled that are just uncomfortable moments, as Tom said. They're not the unifying source of our democracy, they actually split us apart.

What else can we do besides actually looking to older laws that weren't written for the Internet, to actually put our foot down, at least on hate speech or disinformation and misinformation in ways that are destructive to the democracy?

MS. JURECIC: It's a great question. So first off let me turn to transparency. I'll definitely, I don't think it's enough, but I will add my voice to the chorus of those calling for transparency. There is a law that's been introduced in Congress, the Platform Accountability and Transparency Act, that would allow designated independent researchers access to platform information. Which I think would be a great and really important first step.

Because among other things, you know, part of the difficulty with these huge platforms is there are all kinds of, you know, tweaks that you can make that people can respond to in many different ways. And it's really hard to know what will work, you know,

what do you want to slow from amplifying, what kinds of things do you want to allow, what do you want not to allow, what kind of bans are effective, what kind of bans are ineffective?

It's impossible to answer those questions just by speculating. And giving researchers access to that data will at least mean that we're not, you know, to use the old joke, you know, looking for our keys under the spotlight because that's where the light is. It would allow a great deal more visibility into the mechanics of what is happening. And so I do think that having access to that information might help with the second part of your question, Nicol, because we will be able to say how do these systems work, how can we understand them, how can we make them better?

So to the second part of your question, because I do think you're absolutely right that transparency is important but it isn't enough. I think the problem is that, you know, the passkey First Amendment makes it really difficult for the government to step in here. As much as, you know, there was kind of a democratic argument for that that we should not want private companies to be playing such a role in dictating what can and can't be said, that it makes more sense from a democratic perspective for a democratically elected government to do that.

At the same time the First Amendment places really strong constraints. And so we end up in this strange position of, you know, asking a private entity whom we don't and shouldn't trust, to, you know, make these tweaks to make civil discourse healthier. And I do think that you're absolutely right that that is an incredibly difficult situation to be in and seems deeply paradoxical in any number of ways. I mean there are obviously technical tweaks that can be made.

So I talked at the beginning about the difficulty a lot of firms have been having in taking down a video of this shooting. You know, it seems like that is an area that is ripe for improvement. But at the end of the day I think I do kind of share your anxiety that those are sort of, it's fiddling around the edges and it's not getting to the core of the problem.

And maybe this is my pessimism, I worry that the core of the problem is the

people who are using the platforms rather than the platforms themselves that, you know, as you pointed out, these are really deep societal fissures and problems and so it is going to be very hard to address that, although I think, you know, we can tweak it around the edges and make things a little healthier without really tackling the underlying societal issues. And that, unfortunately, I think is a topic for another panel.

MS. TURNER LEE: I know, just read my stuff because that's all I talk about. The computers don't discriminate, we do. Jessica, go ahead.

MS. BRANDT: I don't know if this is an optimistic point or a pessimistic point, but like we can't lose the forest for the trees. What we're trying to do is protect and defend democracy to its rights to privacy but also expressing our integral. And so I would much rather live in a messy, chaotic information environment in which, you know, misinformation thrives than one that's ordered either by governments or by companies.

And so, you know, these tensions are going to persist, and maybe we're doing it right, you know, if we live in that space. It is not to say that we shouldn't be, that many actors in this environment have responsibilities, governments, platforms, and individuals, but to expect any one of them to solve the problem really actually doesn't solve the problem, it creates new problems.

So this isn't a problem that can be solved, it can only be managed.

MS. TURNER LEE: Well, you know, and I would like to say on that, is one two cents moderate no longer these questions.

I do think though, and this conversation came up maybe two years ago, that we do have laws on the books, like the KKK Act for example, to help us sort of think about the framework of hate speech that there is some act because the NAACP, among others, sort of tried to put a lawsuit around this. To suggest that there are some parameters that actually define appropriate and inappropriate behavior.

While we do want to live in a messy space, I agree with you. I mean I want to be able to talk about anything I want to talk about. We do have to recognize, I think this

goes back, Tom, to your point in terms of the market capitalization of our information ecosystem is that our ability to share our voices should also be that everyone else is protected equally to do the same.

And when you have a very monopolistic platforms that do that it goes back to what Tom said, you gotta go back to the same way, media a long time ago, right, before media consolidation. You know it's a very tricky area and it's one that I think that we just have to keep looking at above the line, how above the line practices are affecting democratic safety. And that to me keeps me up at night.

MS. BRANDT: On the KKK Act, I think that's a really important point. Because there is, there are things on the books that are outlawed, and Section 230 just sort of doesn't protect violations of federal criminal law but what I wanted to mention was election misinformation.

There's a really interesting prosecution that the Justice Department has brought of online trolls who public misinformation essentially telling people to go to the polls at wrong times, telling them to text their vote, who has been prosecuted under a provision of the KKK Act for election misinformation.

So that's one case. It's not going to solve everything, but I do think just to add an example to put some of your point, Nicol, there are ways to think creatively.

MS. TURNER LEE: Yeah, I had a blog on that, maybe I'll dust it off.

Okay. So there was a couple of questions. I'm going to read Cynthia Mallard's question because it's going to give me less trouble as a non-partisan independent think tank.

Let me go to her question. We desperately need this back, I think she's talking about democratic information ecosystem, and apply it consistently to web channels as well as broadcasters who enable letting their opinions be misconstrued as news by the viewing public. What are the thoughts on such a plan?

So I guess Cynthia's question, much like the question from Bob. Bob, I got

your question, I just couldn't read it because I think Cynthia said it nicer.

What kind of guidance do we place on the broadcasting community?

Because at the end it seems like these are blended ecosystems. Tom, do you want to jump in?

MR. WHEELER: Well as a guy who once had to regulate broadcasters, the challenge is how do you get a nexus. So let's just go back real quick.

The previous panel had talked about the fairness doctrine. And the interesting thing about the fairness doctrine is that it really came to pass shortly after the Second World War when two things were going on. Everybody saw how Hitler had been massively successful in using the new median of radio and film. And there was great concern about global communism coming in and taking over. So we gotta make sure that the American people receive both sides of the issue. And that's what the fairness doctrine was. And we will apply it to broadcasters.

And it was in effect for about 20 years, over 20 years. And then the Supreme Court finally ruled, it was challenged in the Supreme Court in the *Red Lion* case. The Supreme Court said well, you know what, these are the public's airwaves and the license is given to use the public airwaves are to serve the public interest needs and necessity. And therefore the public has a right to say, through their elected officials and the designated regulators, that there must be fairness in how that is used.

And that was policy until the Reagan Administration when the Republicans organized to eliminate it and the chairman of the FCC said oh, there's nothing different between a television and a toaster. And so the fairness doctrine was kicked out. The Democratic Congress came back immediately and passed a law reinstating it, and the president, Reagan, vetoed that law.

So step one, the only thing that has been held to be constitutionally viable is technology that uses the public airwaves. The next iteration of the information revolution in cable television, per se, did not use the public airwaves. Therefore there was no nexus to

do anything to oversee what happens on cable.

And then number three, clearly the Internet is built and riding on private networks, not public networks. And so that nexus disappears again.

Now having said that I don't think that that is an excuse as to why we shouldn't go searching for new solutions. But we have to have solutions that themselves reflect the new realities. You know, it's very interesting, Senator Bennett introduced a bill last week. I understand there will be a bill introduced by Representative Welch in the House this week, to create a new agency, digital platform agency, that has a new process where they create standards, codes of conduct, that with the public and the industry, and then enforce those. And it's a whole new approach, it's the same approach that has proven successful for how we do technology standards.

And so we need to be, you know, Cynthia and Bob raised the right question. We can't look backwards for an answer however, we've got to invent our own.

MS. TURNER LEE: Yeah. And, Jessica, let me jump into you. Just to tie up what Tom said, the Department of Homeland Security just came up with their own Disinformation Governance Board. I mean are these efforts going in the right direction in terms of the type of government and policy intervention, you know, that you were sort of like shy of?

MS. BRANDT: Yeah, I mean I think these are very different sorts of government policy interventions. You know, I think the Disinformation Governance Board, I think was quite poorly named because as I understand it, it wasn't actually to do very much governance at all. And as we've described it, you know, governance in this space is quite a challenge.

You know, as I understand it the initiative was really more about informing, you know, sort of senior department officials about trends in the information environment that might work. And there, you know, I think that's an entirely, you know, sort of legitimate and useful exercise, right? I mean I think especially in the sort of information ops that I study

which are situated within a broader array of authoritarian, you know, foreign interference activities that really exploit gaps and seams in our understanding and in the way our government is structured.

That said, there are, you know, very I think real concerns about, you know, government looking at the, you know, activities, information domain activities of American citizens. And so, again, as I understand it, I think, you know, the initiative, I think the initiative needed to be considerably clearer about that bright line between domestic and foreign activity. And I think, you know, cast its efforts in that space.

But I think, you know, for our government to be looking holistically about challenges in the information domain and how they might affect, you know, affect their respective work, I think that's, I think we need that. Again, I mean as I said, I think autocrats really exploit gaps and seams and they're great people, you know, in treasury who are doing work on malign finance and there are, you know, fantastic people who are, you know, in different parts in the niche, you know, watching these trends. But if they're not talking to each other and they're not connecting, you know, building that connective tissue and likewise just on technology trends broadly or not, if we're not like bringing in expertise on how technology, you know, shapes the remix of various government departments, then I don't think, you know, we're doing our jobs very well.

So, you know, from that perspective I think, you know, that impulse to want to step up and be informed, you know, build a holistic, or bright picture, I think that's right.

MS. TURNER LEE: So, Quinta, this question to you, I'm going to combine it because we're running out of time. This has come up a couple of times in some of the questions.

I love the way Jessica talked about the word "exploited," right, because there is some conversation that potentially the partisanship that we have in this country is exploited these domains too, right? So there's that one discussion in terms of echo chambers. And the reason why we continue to receive misinformation/disinformation

campaigns happen.

And the second thing is that political grants to organizations have also exploited these opportunities, right, in ways that have led us to this conversation today, which has become less philosophical and ideological more, right, that it's happening.

What do you do about that? So what's the plan and how do you legislate the legislators and the other people who are on the fringe of their support, you know, supporting their views, to get to a more perfect solution?

MS. JURECIC: I think it's really difficult, you know, it's hard precisely because the people who would be writing the law that we might want to see are themselves part of this discussion. And so you end up I think with a little bit of a snake eating its tail. And you see that as well in, you know, in our discussion of the DHS Disinformation Governance Board which I would agree with Jessica, I think is, you know, something that seems perfectly reasonable, perhaps poorly named but was instantly seized upon by a certain corner of the media and made to sound particularly nefarious. And I think that kind of gets to how any of the, you know, interventions that we desperately need can be made to seem nefarious by the same actors in our political system who are exploiting those divisions.

And so my best solution is just to make any reform maybe really boring so that no one will pay attention to it. You know, you kind of slip it in without making a big hubbub. That's a bit of a joke, obviously this is something that we would want robust democratic debate about. But I do think you, you know, you really put your finger on the problem there. I wish I had a solution.

MS. TURNER LEE: I think we all do. Well, listen, we're out of time so we're not going to get to the full solution here. I think the conversation has been actually very robust, very timely.

And I want to thank Tom, Jessica, Quinta, for joining us during this Brookings forum. All of you attending, we also want to say thank you, this is the Thirteenth Annual A. Alfred Taubman Forum on Public Policy out of Governance Studies. Please, as

Darrell said about the previous panel, follow the work of myself and the folks on this conversation because we are writing about this pretty much every day.

And, Tom, can't wait to see your book. Same way I can't wait to see mine.

MR. WHEELER: See yours too.

MS. TURNER LEE: Right, exactly. But I want to say thank you again to everybody for participating, and let's keep this conversation going.

Thank you very much.

MS. JURECIC: Thank you guys.

MR. WHEELER: Thanks.

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