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Vincent Munoz

I think what we need to do is explain how our principles of free speech, free inquiry, will help serve the cause of justice.

Betty Friendan

The First Amendment, the constitutional freedom of speech and freedom of conscience that is the bulwark of our democracy.

00:21.94

Bettina Apthekar

There was a passion in what was being said, affirming this, what people consider a sacred constitutional right, freedom of speech and freedom of association.

00:34.51

Michelle Deutchman

From the UC National Center for Free Speech and Civic Engagement, this is Speech Matters, a podcast about expression, engagement, and democratic learning in higher education.

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I'm Michelle Deutschman, the Center's Executive Director and your host. Over the past year, conversations about democracy, trust in our institutions, and civic participation have taken on renewed urgency.

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Across college campuses, students grapple with political polarization, misinformation, and questions about how to amplify their voices in order to have impact. These challenges are further complicated by the systematic barriers that work to dissuade or prevent college students from voting.

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While hurdles abound, we are also seeing powerful and innovative efforts to reimagine civic engagement, including connecting voting and civic education to the values of community service and belonging.

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To help us better understand what this moment means for higher education and for democracy, we are incredibly privileged to be joined by someone who has dedicated her life to expanding participation and access. And that's California Secretary of State, Dr. Shirley Weber.

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But before we dive into our conversation with Dr. Weber, let's turn to class notes, a look at what's making headlines. As part of the response to the shooting deaths of Ann Nicole Good and Alex Preddy, Minnesota residents are driving a growing resistance to the Trump administration's aggressive ICE enforcement actions, mobilizing longstanding networks of civic engagement in Minneapolis and St. Paul to monitor, document, and resist raids and deportations.

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Organizers have put together trainings on how to document ICE activity and Know Your Rights, and neighborhood volunteers regularly track ICE vehicles and movements. On Friday, January 23rd, tens of thousands of Minnesotans participated in an economic blackout with supporters across the country joining in by not going to work and not spending money.

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One week later, a second day of action took place with businesses closing or donating proceeds and protests occurring in cities across the United States. The conflict between residents and ICE has also resulted in legal and political confrontations. In a show of force, the Trump administration sent a message to reporters by arresting former CNN anchor Don Lemon and independent journalist Georgia Fort.

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Lemon and Fort covered a January 18th protest at Cities Church in St. Paul, Minnesota, and there was no indication that either reporter engaged in disruptive activities.

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They have been indicted, nevertheless, by a grand jury and charged with conspiracy and violation of the FACE Act. Their arrests and charges raise grave questions regarding how free the press truly is.

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In better press News, a second federal judge rejected a government motion to dismiss a case brought by international students and Stanford University student newspaper. The Stanford Daily said reporters and editors on student visas have self-censored or quit out of fear that the U.S. government could retaliate against them for what they publish.

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We continue to see the emergence of academic freedom issues as universities and state systems move to limit how certain topics are discussed on campus. Texas A&M University is closing its Women's and Gender Studies program to comply with a new system board policy that limits discussions of race or gender ideology on campus.

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At the University of North Carolina, the system's Board of Governors plans to vote on a definition of academic freedom that would apply across the university system.

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There's a wrinkle, and that's that the North Carolina chapter of the AAUP has raised concerns about the proposed changes, which warning that the vague language could allow administrators to further restrict classroom teaching.

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In Florida, state officials approved a new sociology textbook that no longer includes discussion of systemic and structural racism, which faculty describe as a core concept in the discipline.

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More evidence of the sanitation of classroom learning. Finally, in an announcement issued after our conversation with Secretary Weber, President Trump called on Republicans to nationalize voting, doubling down on his assertion that the federal government should oversee state elections.

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This, in turn, leads to heightened tensions with state election officials who say the federal government has grown hostile to their work and to concerns among election officials that Trump and his allies will interfere in this year's midterm elections.

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Now back to today's guest, California Secretary of State, Dr. Shirley Weber. Shirley Nash Weber, PhD, was nominated to serve as California Secretary of State by Governor Gavin Newsom on December 22, 2020, and sworn into office on January 29, 2021.

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Voters elected her to a full term on November 8, 2022. Dr. Weber is California's first Black Secretary of State and only the fifth African American to serve as a state constitutional officer in California's 175-year history.

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Before her appointment in January 2021, Dr. Weber served four terms in the State Assembly and was a professor of African American Studies at San Diego State University for over four decades. Dr. Weber is a triple threat from UCLA, where she received her bachelor's, master's, and doctorate degrees by the age of 26. Prior to receiving her doctorate, she became a professor at San Diego State University at the age of 23. Throughout her career, Dr. Weber has championed civic education, voter access, and inclusion, especially among young people in historically marginalized communities. Dr. Weber, thank you so much for joining us. It's an honor to have you on Speech Matters.

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Well, thank you for the invitation. I appreciate it. So I'm always interested in the journeys of our guests. And so I kind of want to start with the road to where you are now. And I'd like to ask you a little bit about your childhood growing up as the daughter of sharecroppers in Arkansas during the segregationist Jim Crow era. If you could share how that impacted your trajectory, particularly as it pertains to voting and civil rights.

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Dr. Shirley Weber

Well, thank you. You know, I was a sixth of six children at the time. There were eventually eight of us. There were two other children born, but I was the baby of the family when my family actually came to California when I was about three years old.

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My father was a sharecropper, had spent his whole life in Arkansas. His family had his parents and, you know, never was allowed to really go to school. He could write his name and he could read. He learned to read as he got older But he was never allowed really to go to school because there was always demands to work in the fields, to to the hard labor. He was from a family of five boys. And so all of them really worked hard, his father did.

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And his sisters were, you know, they cooked and cleaned houses and did various things. And some of them had restaurants and you name it. So it was a family. There were 16 kids, but there ah nine of them lived.

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And so we grew up in this situation where, you know, it was a two-room house, no running water, no flushing toilets. No stove, no gas, no electricity and those kinds of things right near the railroad track.

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But my father worked very, very hard and he took pride in the work that he did and him my mother did too. The interesting thing was that he kept arguing with the owners that they owed him more money. might They had their own property that they had as a farm, but they had to work If you're a sharecropper, you have to work white folks farms. Otherwise, you you become uppity. and And as a result, but you're constantly under attack and they won't let you buy feed. They won't let you do anything unless you serve them first.

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And so my father ah worked his own land as well as worked other land. And they never would pay him what he was owed. And you could not argue with them. You could not have a conversation with them because that in itself would end your life. Well, my father argued for his money.

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season after season. And eventually the person who owned the place got mad and and hit my father and what have you, and my father hit him back. And that was a kiss of death in Arkansas to basically fight back in front of white folks, in front of black people, anybody. And so the word got around real quick in August of 1951, I think it was, it got around real quick that my dad was going to be murdered at the end of the season. Once

he finished working the season, he was going to be lynched. And so my father, my brothers, my dad's brothers basically figured out how to get him out of Arkansas. They put him on a train late at night in a bed of a wagon and shipped him to my grandmother. My mother's mother had come to California many years before. also had all thought that my father ran away, abandoned his family, did the typical thing they think black men do. And as a result, my family was constantly harassed. My mother had to continue to work the fields.

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They had finished most of the crop, but his brothers and father did that. So they finished and everybody assumed that my dad was gone. My dad did not tell anyone other than my mother.

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ah His brothers knew, but you could not, if you had told someone that he had actually beat them at their own game, that would have been the death of ah of everybody in the family. and constant harassment. So they they would rather create the image that my father was no good, trifling, and left.

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About three months later, my father had worked and earned enough money, and they sent for the six of us and my mother to come to California. And we arrived in California December 1, 1951. And it was interesting because yeah my sisters and them remember this journey, ah but nobody knew exactly why my daddy came other than my older brother, my brother, the oldest one, who was actuallyx the way station when my father was being attacked. and was the oldest boy. And so they entrusted him to take care of my mother and everybody else and basically be, quote, the man of the house temporarily until we got to California. So my brother knew, and he never really told us. My dad never really told us. He just didn't trust white folks. He said he never did. And they never did him any good.

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That's what he'd always say. And so make sure we take care of ourselves, take care of each other. And that was where the family was. My mother, my grandmother, my uncle, and the relatives who had come to California became kind of the the family and the shield around us and the children. We eventually moved in the projects of Los Angeles and the Pueblos.

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It seemed like heaven being in the projects because we had been in a two-room house, two-room shack, really, most of our life. When we came to California, it looked great, you know, because... But we were in an apartment building with three of my other grandmother's friends, and it was like a quadruplex. And so each we slept in different places each night.

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The neighbors were generous. And my brother slept at the guy downstairs's house with somebody else. And, you know, so people were coming to California. And so we just kind of scattered among the four... four apartments and we ate at my grandmother's stay there. But at night we went different places in that quadruplex to sleep. So eventually we moved to a two bedroom house where all the care girls slept in one room and my brother slept in the living room. My parents slept in the other, it's full of rats.

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Unbelievable on Trinity. Oh my God, big, big rats. That's the only thing. That's the one animal I'm afraid of is a rat because I saw so many when I was little. Oh my God. I can live in any kind of place, but I can't live in a place with a rat. I don't care if it's little, if a mouse, people talk about mice. I talk about rats. Okay.

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So we moved into Pueblos and we stayed there. I stayed there most all of my elementary years from the time I was in kindergarten until I went to middle school. It was um a place that was unique in a way because there was ah and there were very few fathers in those in those projects because in those days, if you had a boyfriend or had anything, you you would lose all your social services, your welfare checks and those kinds of things. Well, my family was never on welfare. My father came to California. My grandmother got him a great job working in the steel mills of Los Angeles. He worked that union job for 35 years and took care of his kids, his family. That's why I have such ah an affinity toward unions, because they could not lay my dad off because he was there. He had seniority. He eventually got so much seniority they'd have to close the factory to get rid of him. And so it became the recognition that this was some stability in a difficult world where most folks got jobs that were you know temporary, didn't have unions. My dad was in a union job and kept that job. His family would eventually bought a home in Los Angeles, and that became the beginning of it. But in Arkansas, my folks never got a chance to vote. My grandfather never got a chance to vote. They all lived in Arkansas. On my dad's side, they never got a chance to vote. And so when my parents came to California, the first thing they did was register to vote. They were amazed that they could actually register to vote. My mother stayed home because my grandmother and my uncle decided that the city was rough and therefore they didn't want her working because two parents working with five or six kids is as a disaster in Los Angeles, my uncle said. And as a result, my mother stayed home. And so she volunteered at different things every while we were in school. And the one thing she discovered was that she could work at the polls. She thought that was exciting.

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She signed up to work at the polls and paid like maybe \$15 or whatever it was, \$12, whatever it was. It wasn't that important. But she worked at

the polls and the Pueblos and the projects at the school and was really excited about it. Loved doing it. And so when we eventually moved across Los Angeles to 45th Street and to discover that, one, we didn't have any. The school was always crowded, so we had no place for people to vote. There was no church nearby that that had a place that people could vote. There was no library. Those facilities that were normally things that you have in in a community did not exist in 45th and Broadway. So as a result, my mother volunteered our house and our home became the polling place in South Central LA on 45th Street. And it became the polling place until she died. She ah had a great group of women who who did the voting. My dad was excited that our house was the polling place.

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And as kids, we saw our parents. We voted in in in that house. We saw folks coming and going. And my mother was known as the as the voting lady, basically. Everybody knew this voting lady who would, who everybody, she'd encourage people up now street, don't forget to vote. It's time to come to vote. And she had a team of women who loved to come and who worked from morning to night. My dad would set all the polling, all the booths up in our living room, take the furniture into the garage.

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He put everything in the living room. And so we had the flags, the whole bit, everything there for for folks to vote. I didn't think it was that unique, you know, because I had been a part of it. You know, I saw it. I didn't think it was all that whatever. You know, i just figured it was just normal for people to do that online. only to discover that it wasn't all that normal and that the records are still in L.A.

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registrar voters' offices of all the various places that polling places that took place. And my mom's house was one of those polling places that was there. But she loved doing it. My dad loved setting it up. They were strong advocates for everybody to vote and because they never got a chance to vote in Arkansas. And they saw this as voting and going to school, getting an education was the two things my dad thought was the most important thing that acitizen could do. And he was right. I mean, he pushed it on us and every last one of us vote and vote every election there is. all My nieces, my nephews, grandkids, whatever we have, they all vote because they know that mom and dad, their grandparents, their great-grandparents would be advocating for them to vote. So...

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It became a part of my life. I, um you know, the voting was in the living room. We knew when every voting took place, I'd have to um get up early enough to go out the back door, to walk down the long driveway because we couldn't go through the front door because my mother didn't want us interrupting people voting.

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And so we mastered that in the morning and the evenings and didn't go in the living room. My mother would always was a great cook and so she did. We didn't, in the neighborhood we lived, us before the McDonald's and the Burger Kings and all those other people to pop into your community. So they'd have to walk home or go home to have lunch or whatever. So she started just making lunch. I mean, she she would always cook enough for the next day. And so as a result, anybody who didn't want to walk home to lunch, it always go in the back. My mother always had chicken and greens and whatever else, as well as sweet potato pies and you name it for folks to eat if they wanted to eat. And so it became kind of a community situation with her as it as the person in charge of voting in South Central LA in terms of that particular precinct.

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That is a truly incredible story. i wrote down resilience, ingenuity, bravery, and then I wrote down voting lady, except now you're the ultimate voting lady, just with the secretary in front of it. I i hope your parents lived to know at least some of the successes that you were able to achieve in representing communities all across California. Yeah.

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They knew some things, but they didn't know that one. They did not know. They would be probably shocked like my sisters and brothers were when I told them that tomorrow I may be nominated. And they go, what? ah Are you how you serious? I said, well, if I say yes, what would stop you from saying yes? I said, me, I got a life, you know, things I want to do. And they were like, oh, you can't, you can't say no. You can't say no. Mom and dad would have a fit if you said no I said, yeah, I know. You know, it would be the ultimate for them. as But I think they thought the ultimate was UCLA, really. that that was That was it for them. They had never heard of a PhD. They didn't know who had one. My dad didn't know what it was when I said they want me to continue to go to school and get a PhD. And he was like, what is that?

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And I said, well, that's the that's the highest degree you can get, academic degree. And he goes, and his response was real simple. Let's go get it. Yeah. Yeah, so you did. And in fact, this is a perfect segue because, as you likely know, the majority of our listeners work in higher education. and especially in recent years, as democracy, you know, has faltered, much has been made of the nexus between colleges and universities and the survival of our republic, right? So... The president of Johns Hopkins University, Ron Daniels, titled his book, What Universities O' Democracy? And that's what I want to ask you about next, which is what do you think higher education needs to be doing to cultivate a deeper sense of civic responsibility among its constituents? Absolutely.

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Well, I think, first of all, we have to make sure that the people we choose to lead our universities are committed to more than just themselves. That it's not just a job, that it really is the foundation of who we are.

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And I was outraged, obviously, when I was looking looking at universities crumbling to the president's wishes that When I was at UCLA in the 60s and the 70s, that would have never happened. The students would have been outraged because this whole idea of freedom of speech, you know, basically the university having the responsibility to basically ah cultivate young minds and to teach us to be independent thinkers and to defend the democracy and the concept of of freedom of speech, all those things, it would never have allowed that to happen. A president of a university would have been insulted if that had happened. You know, i remember when the trustees tried to kick Angela Davis out of UCLA. You know, it was the president at UCLA. The Chancellor Charles it was his first name, but he was a chancellor forever. And he was stood with the faculty and the students because this was about democracy. And this was why people's rights to have freedom of thought and freedom of speech and those kinds of things. And so he was not about to come crumble to the trustees. I mean, you know, that was, you know, he... He thought they were these political people, but he was the president of of UCLA. and ah And so when I think about those things and I think the battles and the things that we fought over the years to have freedom of speech at universities and then have this happen,

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I was just appalled. i was i was so We owe that to the institutions to make sure that we are defending the democracy, helping young people have independent thought, whether they agree with us or not, to give to make sure that environment remains, that you have the ability to think differently and to do that with research and to do it in an environment that encourages it. You know, when I was at UCLA as an undergrad, the most exciting thing I thought happened was that we um we had a every it was I think it was twice once a week or every Tuesday, Wednesday, whatever it was, there was no class.

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There was no class offered. And what it was, though, the university sponsored these s to come to the campus to talk about whatever the latest issues were and to challenge students. And we were, you know, we were in the huge audience. We were in the huge stadium where where basketball took place. And that's where we had these discussions. And I mean, and they were all the way from the very, very extreme right to the extreme left.

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Students could ask questions. You know, I got a chance to see people and hear their thoughts that I had not seen before. And if I went back to the

dorm, you know, there would be students talking about it. But this whole idea that this is the place where you grow.

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This is where you actually become an adult. This is where you you break the chains from your parents. And sometimes that would freak my parents out because I think so differently from them. But I'd come back to probably where close to where they were eventually. But this was the growth period.

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The university had that as a responsibility to cultivate that for us. And to give us a generation of free thinkers, people who who supported the democracy, who respected other people's thoughts as well. And so, i you know, when when you come out of that environment and then you walk into something where somebody decides they can tell the university what they're going to do and what they're going to teach, that is shocking to me.

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You know, shocking, because we were never taught to be abusive and this and that, but we were always taught to be able to think. and to believe that our thoughts were important and that the institution supported that. So, you know, I look at the world and I think, you know, you begin to crumble when your universities don't have freedom of thought.

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I had a ah faculty member who came to visit us from i from China. And a really interesting woman, she was so had had decided that she wanted to do her research on black women, which was interesting. And I couldn't believe that. And she was from China. And so she wanted to do this research. And so she came into our classrooms and and she was just amazed at how she could walk into a classroom, mine or one of my other faculty, and actually encourage students to think differently.

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to let them have their expression and engage in this back and forth conversation with the faculty member, with the students, and still be talking about it when they leave the classroom. This was appalling to her. I mean, she had never seen that before.

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She never seen students write papers where they had opinions that they had to document and support. They only, she said, they they would ask you, what do you want me to say? And that's what they would write.

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And she said, no matter how I tried to force them to think differently, they would not. And if I gave if I gave any student anything less than an A, the university would be furious because they only wanted the students to copy the ideas that were in the booklets that they had.

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And so she was amazed at the fact that our students would follow us to our office and talk about these issues and argue with us that what they thought and how we encouraged it.

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We encouraged this freedom of thought. And so I think about that when I look at what's going on and I think, oh, my God, the university cannot crumble. It cannot crumble.

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We couldn't agree more and we don't want to go back to a time where universities are telling teachers what to teach and students what to think. And I certainly can reflect on my time as an undergrad at Berkeley and part of my growth and using my voice was casting my first ballot in an election there. And one of the things I find increasingly troubling, you know, all of these efforts to suppress the vote of different kinds of groups, particularly marginalized groups, but there is especially an effort to reduce the ability of younger people, especially people on college campuses from voting. And obviously, you know,

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We are so privileged to, you know, have a leader like you and be in a state where we are expanding access to the ballot, right, through automatic voter registration and same-day registration and mail-in voting. But that's not how it is in other parts of the country. And I'm wondering if you could talk a little bit about what you think campuses, not just in, you know, California, but across the country can be or should be doing to break down some of these barriers and build up participation from younger voters.

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I totally agree. You know, ah we're fortunate in California that we have decided to do certain things like pre-register students to vote so that at 16, they can start pre-registering. And we send them a nice little note at 18 that this is your moment, your time. Let's do it. We encourage them to work at the polls. When I was in Germany recently, the one thing that was amazing to ah the parliament in Germany when they had come to visit was that we let ordinary people work in the polls.

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And like my mother, ordinary people, young people coming working in the polls to help them understand this democracy is their democracy, that

this is what they're fighting for. And this is how difficult it can be if you don't pay attention to exactly the details of what needs to happen in an election. So there's no question about that. And when I talked to colleagues across the nation, I was talking with some secretaries of state recently at their annual convention, and everyone doesn't have the kind of ah flexibility with regards to registration. There are more efforts to take everybody's information and turn it into something else. to not let people, they you know, vote on the register on the day of elections. They try to make it much more difficult and more rigid. And we're very different in the fact that we and a few other states actually want people to register to vote, want them to vote and want them to participate. In this environment with ICE and everything else, that someone was asking a question about people being intimidated at the polls and and will there be, you know, those kinds of things where people show up at the polls and don't want people to vote. And I was proud to say when I talked to many of our Californians and they say, what are we going to do about this whole issue of voting when it comes up? And and will people be intimidated? And I said, they may be. And I talked about the various things we do, but I also reminded them. I said, the good thing with California is that we have we have everybody with ah a a vote by mail ballot.

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I said, so you don't have to walk through any ICE people. You don't have to walk through the police. You don't have to any of those things. You can put that ballot in your box on the campus. The big boxes are sitting on the campus. ah They're at the post office. They're at the libraries. You can go to your regular voting place and put it in. So you don't have to worry about somebody stopping you in a line at a polling place to basically stop you from voting or to make you feel that somebody's going to snatch you out of the line unnecessarily because you look differently. That's there. And of course, you know, we're in the battle for it because folks are trying to take that away from California. You know, they're trying to make it more difficult for us to register to vote. ah They're trying to make sure that we show up for every election to show our picture, which means would invalidate vote by mail.

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And all of those kinds of things that we have found to work for people, to make it easier for people to vote over 81, 82% of all Californians who vote, vote by mail, you know, because they like basically the convenience of having the the flexibility to have several days to do it and to do it at their convenience and so forth and so on. So, you know, we are doing that. and And as I look across the nation and see what's happening with the SAFAC and a whole bunch of other things happening, that are coming out of Washington.

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And this whole desire to stem to have all of us standardize our voting and have those kinds of things. Once again, it's an effort to try to really to minimize those who are voting, make it more difficult for those

who have worked and who have children and families to actually vote. More difficult for those who lack transportation to get to the polls. All of those things are direct efforts to stop the voting. And it's really, I tell people all the time, it's interesting to me because The current president always voted by mail in Florida. He mail was voting for New York but because he's a New York registered person, but he got a vote by mail that was sent to Florida and he voted from Florida. Now that is convenience. And then to talk about, oh, I think that is fraud and deception, it is not. It is once again catering to the citizens and those who are in this nation who want to vote and to make it convenient so that they don't have to, you know, miss out on the most important thing that's going to happen for them that year, which is to cast a ballot.

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Absolutely. And, you know, certainly that includes a lot of students who attend college out of state, right, who also rely on mail-in ballots. Now, I want to get a little bit in the weeds because at the end of last year, there was a new U.S. Postal Service rule that went into effect that I think is going to impact younger and older voters alike, which was about postmarks and postal possession. And I was wondering if you could just talk a little bit about what that rule means and what it means for mail-in voting, I think that like when you look at the headlines, it makes it seem like, oh, wow, maybe I shouldn't do it that way because it won't count because of the postmark date. Like it's not very clear. And I didn't know wanted to share some thoughts. Yeah, it's not very clear. And we were shocked that they had been talking about this for the longest and then decided to just drop it on us shortly before the election, even though they had been preparing for this. So we immediately had to go into a crisis mode and make sure that we had lots of information out, lots of publicity on this whole voting issue and helping people understand the postal service. They claim they can't guarantee that they can actually post market the day that it comes in. Well, that's because obviously you haven't made it a priority. because you were able to do it before. So now you're cutting the budget. We've had this happen once before when they were cutting the budget and limiting the number of folks working in the polls a few years ago. So we have to make sure that our folks thoroughly understand it, that if you're going to vote by mail on that day, walk it into the post office yourself and they will stamp it while you're there.

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So if you're actually going to vote that day, don't put it in a box that day. Anything that goes in before that day will be postmarked. But don't put it in that day and then discover that they just happened to not get near it. And as a result, didn't do it. There's certain ballot boxes or areas that have been identified as more difficult. And it's interesting because they're not the ones that are in the inner city. Because, you know, you've got plenty of postal services there. It's those that are way out and that have been voting by mail for a long time and don't have may not get to the box in time or the person who's driving the bus or the truck or whatever they've got. So we have been putting out material telling folks, if you're doing it on the day of an election, you have to go in to ensure that it's going to be postmarked. Go into the Postal

Service, stand in line, give them your thing and ask them to and they will postmark it while you're standing there.

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Otherwise, you can do it the day before. Or if you are in a situation where you're near a ballot box itself, one of those big things at the library or some of the other places that we pick up, you can actually put it in those and those are safe and secure and they will be handled for that particular day.

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But don't stop using your vote by mail if you need to. I mean, they just say, we're going to do it and we're going to do it faster. We're going to do it um ah earlier. We're not going to make sure that it's handled. I tell folks, don't be turned around and discouraged. you know That's one of the things that happens oftentimes. And when you do, you basically disenfranchise yourself.

32:10.81

And you give power to those who want to stop you from voting. And there's nothing worse than that. So even if you get your ballot today and you mark it today and put it back in the post-off mailbox, that's fine.

32:21.59

Try to do it as soon as possible rather than late. And don't be afraid to stand in a line to give your ballot actually to the the polling place itself. It takes a little bit more, but you need to do it.

32:32.06

Well, we'll make sure that we have links in this episode and including one kind of to that. This is one of those things where it's like, don't procrastinate. But like you said, I think the idea is they want people to feel like it's so difficult so that rather than actually have to disenfranchise them, people sort of make that choice. Now, a different thing I want to ask you about, which is that even in an ideal world, right, where people have access to the voting, to the ballot and and to the voting booth, and they're able to get their votes in and counted, there are a lot of Americans that feel like still somehow their vote doesn't matter. I think especially in this moment right now where the government getting you know, violating, you know, a lot of the fundamental principles upon which this country was built. And a lot of Americans, especially young Americans, feel like the systems are too big or too broken to change.

33:23.42

And I'm wondering what you say to people who feel disillusioned about the value of their participation. Well, i I try to remind myself because

people often ask me, how do I stay still so positive and motivated in this in this environment in which we exist?

33:40.28

One, you know anything worth having is worth fighting for. This is something that people have fought for for a very long time and will continue to fight for if we believe it is important, and it is.

33:50.81

It is really the only voice that you have of real significance. And I say that because when you think about it, no matter how powerful someone else is, no matter how important any of us on this call are, we all get one thing. We get one vote.

34:05.98

We don't get two or three. It's not based on your income. It's not based on how much property you own. You get one vote, the same vote your parents get, your grandparents got, the same vote the president of the United States gets. He gets literally one vote.

34:18.32

And I think people need to continue to remind themselves of that, that this is extremely important and that you this is the only voice you have that is there that can change. And it does change things. And it empowers you to and basically bring people into ah the process who can help you make more change. You know, I think about, you know, the the battles we fight every day. Sometimes people forget.

34:41.40

And yet, day by day, week by week, we're beating these battles down. If we didn't do what we did with regards to all of the things that are happening with the government or wanting, the president wanted to take all of our data away.

34:54.75

And us fighting back, we fought for six months and we won so that he cannot have California's data. You know, ah he tried to stop Prop 50. We fought before the election. And then after the election, we had to fight to get it on the ballot again. We fought it again. So these are things that happen because you have chosen people to serve you who basically represent your interests. When you look at some of the other states that what they have done, the president says, I want all your data, your social security numbers, your this or that. Texas handed it to them.

35:27.03

Utah gave it to them. You know i'm saying? And they didn't have to. But those are the people you chose. Those are the people you picked to

represent you. So don't just cast it aside and it doesn't matter. It really does matter.

35:40.02

You know, it really does matter. If I was not there, along with Rob Bonta and this particular governor, we don't know what would have happened to California's data. California, the largest voting base in the nation, and we're not going to fight.

35:53.30

You know, you need to pick people that you believe going to fight. And just in a matter of an election, you can flip, as we see, everything in a direction that we never thought would ever get flipped.

36:03.99

diversity, equity, inclusion, those kinds of things that we've just kind of embraced as our lifestyle is now being tossed out the window and seen as something horrible and negative. Somebody was telling me in the museums now, and i I was supposed to go to the museum this past week in DC, that a lot of the history in the museums is being taken out.

36:23.03

This is almost some like some horrible movie that in the 1400s or something or 1200s where people would go through and burn libraries and burn books because they didn't want people to think. And now we're in almost the same situation where people are telling me, you're going to take out all this information on the first floor of the African-American Museum because you don't like slavery?

36:43.75

Well, neither did we. But that is your history so that you never repeat it again. And so what is happening is that we have, um you know, young people have to and everybody has to realize that this power that we have, we have to keep pushing and you can't get discouraged. And I'm really proud of the folks that are that are constantly fighting these battles and that that are in the streets now, finally realizing that these little steps that they took initially have become big steps.

37:10.04

And that's way it starts. It starts off with a little bit of intimidation, a little bit of taking of your rights, a little bit of putting police in the streets in Washington to do whatever and bringing in the military. And then people realize, wait a minute, hold up. This looks like something I saw in a movie or something I saw in a history book or something that I read about in Germany. This is the stuff that's that's the way it starts with a little bit and it keeps moving. So I tell those who are who are thinking about, does it matter?

37:37.69

Does it matter? You have to ask those folks who didn't do something. You ask those Jews who in in in Germany. did Does it matter that that you know that you're going to let people do a little bit and then all of a sudden you discover your whole world is crushing?

37:52.09

It does matter. And every vote counts. Every voice counts. Every stand-up counts. Every boycott counts. If you're going to do something, everything counts. And all of these things have been won because people decided that they would not sit down, that they would stand up.

38:09.46

And that's the generation young people come from. I tell them all the time, you know, you guys tell me you're going to do all these great things when you got into positions and you look at the history. yeah You know history is a history of greatness.

38:21.72

And don't don't don't disappoint your ancestors. you know Make sure you continue the battle and continue to fight because this stuff is worth it in the end. It's worth it. Absolutely. And you know i wrote I just wrote down a bunch of things, right, including we can't afford to be discouraged. you know It's like the stakes really are too high. We've talked a lot about standing up in particular, you know, voting and using your power to elect people who will represent you and write fight back when things are happening. um Some people aren't ready to sort of, you know, it's not that they're not ready to vote. Some people, I think, want to go beyond voting. And so I'm wondering if you could also talk a little bit about some of the things that you think, especially, you know younger women, voters can be embracing in terms of civic engagement. I guess what I meant is, especially for those people who don't see themselves necessarily as very political, like they're not going to run for office, they don't want to, you know, sort of be in the fray that way, what other things can they be doing?

39:23.29

Well, most of us don't start off wanting to be run for office and don't want to be in the fray. you know um I tell people all the time, I love to just chill out and do something else. But I also realize as the consequences of not doing what I know I should do are too great.

39:38.10

So even though this stuff is complicated and difficult and those of you looking at it, even those who are marching in the streets right now, most of them probably have never marched before. you know and But they look around and they've been waiting and waiting for the world to change and it won't change without them.

39:54.23

And so you're going to have to do something. If it's no more than getting on the phone and calling people, writing letters to the editor, making sure that you provide food and sandwiches for those that are outside marching. If you've got folks outside in the cold, take them a pot of, take a big thing of coffee for them so that they know that you really help them and want to be with them, and that you're supportive of the things that are there. I remember aunt, when we were talking about the civil rights movement and one of my older aunts, and so it was back in the day and folks were kind of hesitant about getting engaged. And she was like, and she was older, she didn't walk very well. She said, You know, I'm not, she said, I'm not going to, I know I'm not going to be out there doing these kinds of things, she said, but I can tell you this, if there's a wagon going down the street, I'm going to get on it and I'm going to hold my legs up so I'm not a burden. So that i they don't have to pull me and my feet as well.

40:46.81

She said, I will hold my legs up so that it makes it easier for those who are protesting to pull this wagon to where we need to go. And that's why i tell people, you can't do everything, but you can do something. You can call people. You can make sure your city council person knows what you think. You know, if you're writing letters to the editor, you can do that. If somebody's got a petition to do something, you can do that. You see young people now videotaping everything because that, interestingly enough, has become um very important.

41:12.76

where people didn't think it was that important. And yet you guys, you have these phones with you 24 seven. Now you figured out there's a good use for these phones other than just reading TikTok and whatever. It's really about recording the history that you see and making sure that your voice, while you may not be the one testifying, but your voice in video or whatever it may be is being heard now around the world because people can see what's going on. I tell folks, and you figure out a way that you can do something.

41:38.65

Like I said, even if it's if it's folks out there protesting and doing things, take them some coffee, take them some sandwiches, do something to date so that they know that you basically are standing with them.

41:51.92

you know Whether you can do it physically, otherwise that you're still willing to do it. Make sure you know that you want to contribute to campaigns, whether it's \$5, \$10, whatever it is. Make sure you do your part. That's the piece that's there. Don't be complacent. Don't sit by silently and watch what's going on. Folks have done some amazing things

in this era, but also in the earlier era that basically should give us the kind of courage to do things that we have to do. You know, I know sometimes when I've had, when I was in the assembly, had very difficult legislation, particularly dealing with issues of of lethal force and all those kinds of things. And every time somebody would try to talk me into making it weaker and more, maybe just voluntary, not mandatory, all those kinds of things that weakens the bill. I would think about it and they said, come back tomorrow. If you do, then everybody agree and we'll move forward. And I would go home and i invariably I would always think about somebody that I knew who made enormous sacrifice, much more than I was making. you know Maybe I wouldn't be popular, maybe whatever it is. But I would always reflect on the fact that there were these generations of people who did things that I never knew, but did things that changed my life.

43:04.28

And I at least can do this. That was my response. I can at least do this. And as a result, interestingly enough, my motivation to do that kept the folks with me, kept us moving forward and always got us the positive results of the bills that we wanted. So it is really important for you to understand that. And I tell folks, be sure to read your history so you understand who these people are, so you understand the power of Fannie Lou Hamer.

43:27.56

and how much she suffered, and how she was beaten, and all these things, thrown in jail, lost use of her kidney. I mean, these kinds of things, when you look at it, and what does she want to do? She wanted to register to vote.

43:38.01

She wanted to register to vote. That's all. And she gave so much, and when you look at that and you think to yourself, God, all I have to do is turn on my computer and register to vote,

43:48.38

And this woman lost her kidney because they beat her so bad that she lost the use of one of her kidneys ah while she was just simply trying to register people to vote. So learn your history, know your stuff, you know, young people. You'd be so proud of who you are and what you came from.

44:05.37

You know, it they're all interconnected. All these themes we're talking about, history, education, right, museums, voting, participation, and this idea that you know, that I think of that quote, we stand on the shoulders of giants, right, that we have a responsibility, right?

44:21.82

To continue. Now, one of the trends that I've noticed that sort of kind of emanated from the deep social and political polarization that we're encountering right now is, again, in another attempt to sort of discourage participation, or that's how I see it.

44:36.27

Some allege that promoting voter registration and civic dialogue on campus are quote unquote political in nature and therefore should be restricted. I see this as a false narrative. and But because of this, again, like you were saying, just that little bit of intimidation, we see people shying away from this work. And I'm wondering how higher ed and other industries should respond to these allegations and ensure that they're not being accused of partisanship when really what they're doing is supporting participation writ large.

45:04.82

Well, I think, you know, I think one of the things that coming out of the university as a faculty member, all of us have a responsibility to broaden the minds of young people and to give them what they need to be independent thinkers.

45:18.68

Independent from me, independent from somebody else, independent from whomever. And it comes in that environment of learning. And so I, you know, when people tell me that, I kind of laugh because the whole world is political. The people who are telling me about something that they don't like is political. The fact that you want to stop me from having conversations on campuses is very political because you because you don't like the conversation. Okay. And it also keeps us from understanding that having these conversations is healthy.

45:47.70

And it is not dangerous as these people have made it. You know, we've been on campuses where we've talked to the most radical of folks and nobody ever thought about doing anything harmful to anybody because that's the nature of the campus. That's the nature of the country. The ability to talk to folks and to to hash out what you want.

46:04.99

and And in the end, you might move somebody. You may not one way or the other. But in the end, you say, hey, let's go have a cup of coffee and you leave. I mean, it's that kind of thing that has to happen and that we have to see rather than always the enemy, the attack, the person who I could you know denigrate and that I can't be in the same room with people who think differently than I do. How crazy can you be? you know How limited, how small minded can you be? And so, you know, I think more than anything, professors in classrooms and other places have to be free to

talk to make sure the students understand rather than you just feeding them something they need every day.

46:42.10

You know, I'd often walk in my classroom and I would just simply write four or five words on the board from something that happened that day. And I'd sit down at my desk and say, what do you guys think about all this? And they would have an amazing conversation because it was a very diverse class coming from different points of view. And nobody's really limiting anybody that they can't talk. And and you you're challenging these folks to think differently. And then in the end, you say, OK, now come back and tell me your position once you've done your research. What do you think about this?

47:09.84

It is extremely important that we not be intimidated and not being put in a situation where everybody has to think like everybody else and walk in the same direction. That is dangerous. And it is and it will basically kill any democracy with regards to not having folks being able to be free thinkers and to challenge what we do.

47:29.68

That's extremely important. And I think once folks realize that young people particularly, and when they get in environment like that, they thrive, they love it because it is freeing them from whatever they've known all their life to be able to challenge it and to create out of it their own thinking and to basically encourage others to do likewise.

47:51.06

Absolutely. And kind of continuing your your theme of how you stay optimistic when we have talked about a lot of the sort of challenging and negative forces. And obviously, this year is a big year for elections. And so I'm wondering, can you talk about what gives you hope about this upcoming generation of voters. And, you know, you've talked a little bit about how educators can encourage students to be open-minded and ah be not limited in what they're rethinking about, but also what educators can do to help sustain the momentum in terms of participation, especially in our run-up to, you know, November.

48:28.44

You know, it's extremely important that those who are active and who are engaged in whether whatever party or no party or whatever it is, that they understand that they only the only way forward is through this whole education and voting system. That's the only way forward. Any other way forward is destructive and can basically create, as we've seen, create more harm and hurt than we've ever dreamt of before.

48:54.23

It is an extremely important that people understand the power of just conversation, the power of thinking, the power of sharing and embracing people who are so different than you. you know It's a false narrative that there's only two ways of thinking in the Democrat and Republican way. you know That's a false narrative because there's so many other things you can think of. And there's so many other wonderful things you work on together with people of different parties. I was in the Capitol the other day during the governor's address.

49:23.58

And I can't tell you how many of my Republican colleagues came up to embrace me and hug me because we'd worked on so many projects together. And I'm doing another project that I'm working with. And one of them was very clear, said, listen, when you when you're doing that project, call me because I really believe in diversity and this and that and so forth and so on. So it it's it's good to know that people still believe that they can have friends, they can have relationships, they can create new thought that's there. And it is critical that we do that.

49:52.98

I refuse to be discouraged because I've seen people who've been discouraged. I know it happens, like I tell people, when you have nothing to vote for and because there's no choices that are there.

50:03.77

or I also also know what like when when you can't vote, when you can't vote and when you have nothing to vote for. That's a disappointing part in your life. When you have, whether you agree with it or not, you got something you can fight for. You got something you can talk about. You got something you can rally your friends around to basically participate. So I think all of us have to make sure that whenever we're doing that, we're including young people in it, that they are, i'd tell them, you're not my future. You're my present. You're the people who are basically voting right now, who are changing other people's minds, who are working our campuses, doing things to make it easier for young people to vote. This is your future. This is what you do. This This is going to determine what your tuition is going to be like next next season. You know, all those kinds of things. this is not the This is not some far, far off land. This is the present. This is exactly what we're fighting for in terms of what kind of education that you're going to have, what kind of information you're going to have, what you're going to do, how you're going grow, how you're going develop. So I refuse to be discouraged because the consequences of not having a future is too great. And I don't want to give my grandparents, my grandkids something that I did not have. They should have better.

51:10.10

My dad, with all of his limitations, all of his challenges in life, lived every day with the simple belief that tomorrow would be better for his children, period. And he had far less than I have.

51:21.30

And I have to at least be able to say what this man said, who had less than a sixth grade education, that tomorrow would be better for our kids. If we can't say that, then we are really, we have to retool ourselves and get ourselves together because every generation moves forward, not backwards.

51:37.69

well I can't think of a better note to end on. I feel like it's been a huge privilege to get to talk to you. and it's also been incredibly inspirational because even in the work that the center does, you know, it can be hard to keep your head up. And so these are all really amazing reminders of how we really just can't afford to be discouraged um Is there anything else you want to share before we officially close?

52:08.76

Well, i just want I want to thank you guys for what for what you're doing. It is extremely important that we constantly keep the conversation going, that our universities commit themselves to this. And that we see what I do is just ah the the ordinary person trying to do some extraordinary things because they we're in extraordinary times. And that I don't have any special skills. I don't have any silver capes. I don't have any of those things. I just have a deep, deep desire to make sure that my world is as good as my dad gave me, if not better.

52:43.35

That this is our world and that we have the power to do it. It is not beyond our reach, only if we keep our arms down. But as long as we're out there pushing and pulling and and moving forward, it is within our reach.

52:58.36

And don't let anyone tell you that it is not. Every vote counts and every voter counts. So I just want to make sure people understand that, that this is a simple, simple walk to the polls, a simple walk through America, a simple voice that we bring out and we can see it every day on television. And it's really clear that this is our democracy and some people have decided they will not give it up.

53:23.00

and neither should we. So thank you so much very much for having me with you. want thank my staff. They always work very hard to get me somewhere or where I need to be. But I really appreciate you folks and and what the university is doing. It's an amazing thing. We have to keep it going.

53:36.89

you know We have to keep it will, and i hope we have another opportunity to collaborate both with you and with your amazing team um as we all work together to increase ah participation and you know uphold the pillars of our democracy. Exactly. Exactly. Thank you so very much and have a great day.

53:54.23

Thank you. Okay, that's a wrap. For our listeners, you can learn more about California's civic engagement initiatives, including the Students Vote Project and our episode notes. Thank you again to California Secretary of State Dr. Shirley Weber and to her team for joining us this month.

54:11.62

We'll be back with more soon. Talk to you next time.