

The Future of Democracy Ep. 36 - English

[00:03:22] Hi, good afternoon, welcome to The Future of Democracy, a show about the trends, ideas and disruptions changing the face of our democracy. I'm your host, Sam Gill. And this show is you can think of it as the op-ed page of our democracy. It's where we break down and go into greater depth on some of the most challenging, even fractious issues confronting our country. And there certainly are plenty of those right now. We find ourselves as a country not only in the midst of multiple serious crises around covid-19 and the knock on economic effects of the pandemic. But we're also seeing how a once in a generation cataclysm is exacerbating long term crises around race and economic opportunity around inequality, just to name a few. As a result of this, we not only faced conflicts about what to do, we face perhaps the deepest divides we've seen in a generation about the right philosophy to even guide what to do. Part of that was evident during what we should call election week. So my guest today leads one of the major think tanks in the country, the American Enterprise Institute. His organization has always been and is at the forefront of both immediate crises and challenges confronting our country and long term questions and what they mean about basic ideas that should animate the American project going forward. So we're going to get we're going to cover a lot and get right into it. So please join me in welcoming to the show Robert Door for Dorsami.

[00:04:51] Hi, how are you? Sam, how are you? Good. Good to have you.

[00:04:55] Nice. Nice to be here. Thanks for having me.

[00:04:58] So I think we should just dove right into it, because I know the American Enterprise Institute is expert in so many of the critical domains we've got. We're in we're trying to enter a presidential transition where at least we're we're in a period in which there's going to be a new executive in the White House.

[00:05:16] We're facing compounding crises due to coronavirus. It's a health crisis. It's a fiscal crisis. It's a social crisis for American Enterprise Institute and led by your scholars. What are some of the kind of key top steps that you are advocating we need to take as a country?

[00:05:34] Well, I think we're very concerned about the economic hardships caused by the virus and by the implications of the virus and the slowdown in the economy, most of our economic scholars have advocated strongly for another round of some sort of fiscal effort, reasonably priced, targeted, appropriate, but large, because the the the effects of the virus and what we need to do to stay safe during this difficult time are pretty hard on the economy and pretty hard on working people and especially hard on people

who work in the areas of the economy that are at the lower wage scale, an area where I pay a lot of attention to because helping people move up and out of poverty is what I've devoted my life to. So we think that the Congress and the Senate and the House and the president, either the current president or the president elect, need to pretty quickly do one more fiscal stimulus to shore up our economy during this difficult time.

[00:06:40] So we've got, you know, the facts around the question of a fiscal stimulus are pretty stark. We've got people are going to be coming off pandemic unemployment assistance pretty soon. That clock is ticking. It seems to me you're more expert. It seems to me there is, if not a wide consensus, some consensus, that sort of monetary policy, Federal Reserve policy is pretty much exhausted what it's going to be able to do. And that's really more about supporting capital markets than it is, as you point out, about people at the lower end of the income scale who are trying to make rent or put food on the table. You know, interestingly, a lot of the discussion right now about fiscal policy has not been dominated by what targeted might mean or what the price tag is. It's really been dominated by the political dimension. You know, will can abide administration and a Senate, which is a good chance to remain in Republican hands, be able to get something done. You know, you guys are focused on the ideas, but as someone sitting in Washington, I'm not so sure that you're right about that.

[00:07:41] I think it has a price tag. I mean, I think that's been a big ingredient to it. And the political dynamic had to do with, you know, who thought they were going to win the election and who was holding out for a better deal after the election. Senator McConnell came out pretty much the second day after Election Day and said, I'm ready to start talking about doing a package now. So there's something that they all can agree on doing. And I think that the situation is so serious that they ought to just do it that and do what they can get done and then talk about doing more later, if that's necessary. But the amounts they're talking about in any other year would be so large that they're unprecedented. And yet all of a sudden we need to do twice what would be an unprecedented number. And I think that's just not that's that's hindering our ability to get what needs to be done now. So I you know, again, I ran social services programs in New York state of New York City. I know what that kind of spending can do to shore up people when they're in a crisis. And, you know, one trillion is a lot, a lot. We could certainly use it now. So I was hoping that with the election being over that we could get back to the business of governing. I think it's unfortunate that the Trump administration has been obdurate in the beginning to begin the plan, the important work of governing that needs to get done.

[00:09:15] And I wish that they would stop that and get to work. But I think the Republican Senate, if it's a Republican Senate or the Senate, is eager to do something. And I think that the members of the House are eager to do things.

[00:09:28] And what do you see as being really critical in whatever gets done?

[00:09:34] Well, I think you have to do something to help people either stay employed or maintain income while they're searching for jobs, and we wait for the economy to come back if we especially in the hospitality, tourism and travel industry, those are those are big components of our economy. And they're not they're not everything. But they are they are they do involve a lot of people who work pretty close to the edge. And I think that that's what I think that those industries in that area needs to be focused on. I think there needs to be something done with regard to states. But you have to be careful there because some states are in fine shape and other states are in very bad shape. Some states have managed their fiscal situations really well and some have not. And but there's a there's a deal to be made there.

[00:10:27] What do you know?

[00:10:28] One of the and I would say, general, long time advocates of employment wage protection programs that are that they are more prevalent in Europe's social democracies have certainly seized on this crisis as to them kind of exhibit A for why we ought to have some of those systems. What what do you what do you make of the calls for not only providing assistance, but sort of revamping the way we provide that kind of assistance?

[00:10:54] Well, I'm actually I don't support that. I think that this is a situation that's very unusual. Someone referred to it as sort of one hundred year event and to then make significant long term irredeemable changes to our safety net system. The system that I've worked in for many years based on an emergency, I think would be a bad mistake and will be very hard to undo. I believe in a safety system that promotes work. I think that getting people into employment helps them raise their income, but it also gives them the dignity of earning their own wages and it also helps them in other ways and qualities of their life. It makes their families stronger. It makes their health better. And I think that one of the downsides of some of the ideas that you talk about is that it tends to disincentives work. And so if we were to do something now in emergency that we're locking in. A kind of permanent income or guaranteed income, regardless of whether someone makes an attempt to work or go to work, I think that would be a big mistake. We had something like that in the old welfare system, and it did great damage to families and communities in the places that I came from in New York City. But all across the country, I believe in a system that says you're your first effort is to see if we can help

you get a job. If you get a job and the wages aren't enough, we'll support those wages with wage supplement. And we do that a lot in the United States, but we're not going to give you a guaranteed income regardless of what you do. I think that would be a mistake.

[00:12:31] But what do you I mean, right now we're letting people get laid off and then providing unemployment assistance. And what we've done is just the employment assistance. What about the argument that we should just pay employers even more to keep people done, some of that, but to really focus on keeping people employed?

[00:12:47] If he was in part created by economists today? I mean, Glenn Hubbard and Michael Strain really was their idea. They wrote the original paper. They proposed that they talk to congressmen about it. It did provide enormous relief to businesses so that they could keep people employed. It has some downsides. It's new. Anything time you try to do something, it's that new and that unusual. That fast you're going to have make mistakes. But I think all in all, it was successful. But it is, I think, running out of money. And I think that the idea that the goal is to keep someone employed, not just to replace their income, is a good idea and fundamentally strong idea, because once they lose jobs and are out of work for an extended period of time, it's just much harder to get them back into work. And so I support those. My personal opinion is I support those on. Our scholars have written about it.

[00:13:50] So what kind of a philosophical question I wanted to ask you about, given your deep experience in social, you've run major social policy and human services systems. You designed and ran them during a period in the 90s where I think the valorization of work became did become the ascendant orienting value on the left and the right around social policy, sort of through welfare reform of the 90s and onward.

[00:14:15] And we're in it. We're sort of in an interesting crisis point. It strikes me on both the right and the left around the opportunity argument. On the right, you see sort of this surging populism among some portions of the right, really born of sort of economic dislocation, despair, social immobility, in addition to economic stagnation. And on the left you there is just then sort of a groundswell of attention to focus on inequality over, say, inclusive growth, which had really been a more dominant paradigm for about 10 years. And our discussion around race in particular, I think over the summer really highlighted this, that this is really about even in equity, even inequality is sort of the wrong word. And I'm interested how you assess those these more recent contours of the conversation about economic opportunity.

[00:15:08] Well, first of all, I'm impressed by the experience of twenty eighteen and twenty nineteen and the way in which the American people

appear in working class communities to have responded to that progress. A very tight labor market, combined with a safety net system that rewards work with various transfers and benefits to make work. Pay led to the lowest child poverty rates for all Americans and lowest poverty rates for African-Americans, Hispanics, and then rising wages in a tight labor market. So I thought my view has always been to help people get above that, that very low line of the poverty line, get people up to a start and get them into work. That's better than the other. The alternative and we are good at that. What we're not so good at as a country is helping people move up from there. And that's what we're trying to readdress some of our work in our poverty studies program with the addition of Scott Winship. He's very focused on mobility. How do we help? It's one thing to get people above the poverty line, but they're still struggling and they'd like to flourish more. They'd like to have higher income. They'd like to have more skills. And I think that we have to really focus on that next step challenge in helping people move up through their life, through the acquisition of skills, the continuation of work, and by their they move safely into the middle class and then no longer in need of various systems, various social benefits that reward low wage work. So that's what I think is the big challenge now when it comes to race. I think that and again, I think this was partly reflected in the way in which the voters voted. I think that there's a feeling that we can over emphasize race as the issue in low income families, even with the difficulties that happened over the summer. There was a reaction to that, too. And in my experience and we have a scholar in Raleigh wrote a wonderful piece in The Wall Street Journal about the importance of personal agency. Race does not determine one's outcome. And a lot of the rhetoric that came out during the summer was that race did determine people's outcomes. And I just don't think that's true. And I also don't think it's helpful to low income kids and low income families to be told that by virtue of their race, they're going to be held back for sure in America. I don't believe it's true. And I also don't think it's helpful to tell them that.

[00:17:35] But put aside how we perform that argument, which I think is distinct and important, and especially at a moment like this where there's no microscopic cultural dialog, it's all sort of macroscopic. I guess I just want to comment in on this, though, because I think it strikes me in the discussion about inequity, particularly with regard to race, there's two kinds of moral arguments coming together. One, you addressed, which is the mobility argument, which is the question is, is the American idea really open to everybody? And I think one of the argument that race determines your outcome is you could intellectually just take it as a reflection that it just empirically doesn't seem to be open to everyone according to this consistent pattern. But there's a second argument, which is that there's something about the gap that should trouble us if the gap is about whether it's wealth or income or mobility consistently seems to favor one set of people as a result of

it, whether it's race is the proxy for whatever the socioeconomic factors are. And and and then there's another group of people that, again, on average seem to be at a lower end of the gap. And everyone may be above some sufficiency line, but that gap seems to be morally troubling to us increasingly. And I'm curious, again, how you think about this.

[00:18:48] Well, I want to just credit you for describing the first dilemma correctly. And there is a distinction between opportunity and mobility and equity and outcomes were for opportunity and equality before the law. But we can't guarantee equal outcomes in the civil rights movement. And the effort to move our country should never have been interpreted as being that being the goal, that we don't distribute people equally across the income spectrum by race, by law, by fiat. We can't do that with regard to the gaps they're worth noting and they're worth studying and evaluating and working on to close. But they aren't necessarily only about race. They could be about family. They could be about neighborhoods. They could be about schools. They could be about economic opportunity in those communities. And I just think that I happen to have done a lot of work in efforts to promote the benefits of to parents actively involved in children's lives there from day one. And this is a problem for African-Americans and for whites and for Hispanics as well. But it's an issue that is does contribute to people not reaching their full potential. So I just again, I acknowledge the gaps and I recognize. This is troubling and disturbing, I understand why people react to them when outcomes are different by different races, but I don't think it's necessarily about race. I think it could be about neighborhoods, as Raj Chetty has shown, or about family formation. It could be about quality of schools that children are exposed to, could be about the extent to which there's early learning or good programs for parenting for families. So I, I just worry about an excessive obsession about race.

[00:20:42] Well, so what would you say, given that what how do you see either your work or American Enterprise Institute participating in a conversation right now that is that is elevating race and different in more forceful ways than at least the recent past.

[00:20:59] What do you see as the role of your institution?

[00:21:01] Well, we are you know, we sort of you know, I'm sort of unusual. I'm an anomaly. I came from being a practitioner in government, in social services, as a welfare administrator in New York City, New York State. I came here five years ago to set up a poverty studies program and then to do a lot of some changes. I became the president. My job is to get our scholars in the discussion and to recruit the most thoughtful, the most empirically solid researchers on these topics and have them engage in the discussion in an open, constructive policy, positive way with people who disagree with us, the

left and the right. There are a lot of disagreements within the right, and we do that all the time. I helped to edit, along with my friends at the Brookings Institution, along a jointly written as a book on poverty and opportunity and how to improve it. We are in Congress. We are talking to people in the administration on ideas on how we can address these issues. We've been long proponents of things like the Earned Income Tax Credit, which raises incomes for people at the bottom. I've worked on issues concerning food stamp benefits and Medicaid, and we have an expert who is an expert in child care, the provision of child care in the United States. So we engage in that discussion all the time. And the thing is, Sam, and I want you to feel good about what you do and what this show is about. Ideas do matter. It actually has an effect. People are listening. It's not always the thing. It's covered on the nightly news when people are yelling at each other back and forth about some extravagant thing. But little by little, policy changes do occur. Governing does matter. Legislation does get past. People's lives are changed. And my view is, having been at this for a while, is that that that's a good thing to devote your life to because it does lead to positive results. So I'm that's what we do. We do it in foreign policy. We do it in domestic policy. We do it in economics. And we do it on issues concerning social, cultural and constitutional studies as well.

[00:23:08] So I'd like to that's actually a great way, I think to a bigger picture question I wanted to ask you, which is sort of a long winded version of do they matter? But I think I sort of which is, you know, we're we're in a moment where John Meacham said something along these lines that I agree with, which is American politics were dominated by a dialog that had some kind of some parameters that were well known from about the 30s to the eighties, that we then have kept going really about what does democratic capitalism mean and where do you restrain it and where do you unleash it? And there's been a pendulum that is sort of swung in the developed world. And it really feels like the last four years on the right and the left have been a big departure from that. It's still there, but it's not the only conversant discussant in the room anymore. But those are the only two people in the room. And just kind of thinking about the right, thinking about conservatism as a philosophy. What is what's your view about what's next, given what I just would not consider President Trump to be a conservative in that mold at all.

[00:24:13] And he's not a populist. And on four big issues, he really upset the apple cart of situational conservatism. One is on entitlements. He had really no interest in making any effort to constrain the growth of entitlements or look out for long term deficits or the debt. Second is on immigration. We tend to be more open to free markets, free people, the free flow of labor. He took a very strong and negative approach to that trade is a big one. We're for free trade. He's not as much and was willing to really impose tariffs on both adversaries like China and friends like Mexico and Canada. And then when it comes to

the role of America in the world, I mean, even this week, he's sort of unilaterally, I think, rashly insisting on the withdrawal of troops from engagements that may be preserving the peace and protecting American interests around the world. But he's against that. So and he's popular. Let's not forget that he tapped into something that a lot of Americans respect and like and appreciated and felt was wrong with our kind of elite from the ivory tower view of these issues. And I think we learned a lesson. So what I think needs to happen among conservatives is we need to work these things out. We need to find a way to see what President Trump challenged us with. That's worth keeping. And that is a viable. Important adjustment to our worldview, but also cast aside those things that are clearly not helpful and will be, in the long term, not helpful to the future of the United States. And I think that's what we're about to do and are going to have to do, whether it's at AEI or other places with emerging leaders in the Republican Party. And it's going to be an interesting period for us to see how who carries the day, who makes the best argument, who wins the support of the body of the electorate. And so we've got some work to be done. There's no question about it. Conservatism is. Classically thought of, just as you say, has been challenged and has been sort of knocked on its heels, and some of it is worth preserving, I believe, very strongly, but some deserves a little bit of adjustment. And my job is to be a place where people can come together and talk these things out in a civil way and see if we can come to some resolution.

[00:26:50] We I think we'll put aside I think you've raised is the kind of the governing coalition question that's more political.

[00:26:55] But what what what is an example in that latter category of a place in conservatism where you think there is an opportunity for fruitful rethinking about what is the idea as opposed to just making reestablishing the case for the idea?

[00:27:12] Well, I do think it let me I think in one area is in trade, I think that President Trump, when it comes to certain kinds of absolute commitments to free trade, which are where I begin, pointed out to us that sometimes in a global world that can have very negative impacts on Americans and we ought not to be deaf to that. We ought to recognize that maybe we could transition. We need to address, we need to recognize. And we also need to make sure we're not being taken advantage of by foreign trading partners. So I think that's definitely an area that's not going to I don't know that we'll go back to where we were on that topic that that's been done and pretty solidified. And the Democrats, of course, are not going to back off that either. So that's a that's a good one. That would be the one that I think is most prevalent in areas like entitlement. I think we need to do something about the costs of our government. I want us to get back to some sensibleness about what we can afford and with regard to our commitments and in immigration is another, I

think, as again, coming from a city of immigrants, New York City when I left was forty five percent foreign born, which I know not quite Miami, but it's it is a great place to live. And I loved it. And I think immigrants really saved and reenergized the city. But I think that open borders, that leads to a influx of of labor that puts pressure on wages at the bottom is something we ought to think about carefully and be conscious of. And so those are two areas where, you know, the sort of big hearted free markets. What does it matter? Freedom always wins is still true. But we ought to be thinking about the consequences in the short term to vulnerable populations was we could do we could do a show on each one of those.

[00:29:19] So as we looked at it, I would and I'd like to ask you kind of a personal question is which I believe your father was John Doe or the Kennedy civil rights official. And I sort of think about the moment we're in. And he was witness to and was a part of two really defining periods in American history, one just for our listeners as the top DOJ official and civil rights.

[00:29:43] I mean, I believe he was dramatic.

[00:29:45] He stated James Meredith's dorm room when they integrated was just unbelievable front line presence and then helped to lead the legal team during Nixon's impeachment in a way that has been, I think, appropriately lionized historically is just with the utmost integrity. And we're in this moment of extreme echoes of both of those periods this summer. And it just and you've seen, obviously, acts of acts and expressions of dissatisfaction, but acts of great heroism over the summer about race and what we need to talk about race. And then, of course, we went through an incredibly rancorous national conversation and process around cronyism and corruption in the Trump administration. And I know it's always unfair to sort of what would he say, but just having grown up with him, lived with and lived through that yourself, what reflections you have having been having, having been a part of that, threw him on the present moment. What you think those moments can tell us about today?

[00:30:47] Well, thank you, Sam, for saying those nice things about Dad. And he did do great public service for our country. He started in the Eisenhower administration. President Kennedy and Robert Kennedy liked him and they kept him. And then he worked for President Johnson as well. And he was a great leader in the civil rights movement from the Justice Department and then in the impeachment, where he served for Peter Rodino as the special counsel in the impeachment committee into the conduct of President Nixon that led to three articles of impeachment being voted on by bipartisan majorities. And his designing of the case contributed to that result significantly. I think he would I would point out that he while he was a strong fighter for voting rights and civil rights in the South and a strong enforcer of

the law when it came to violence against civil rights workers and others who were being intimidated and attacked, he also was a law enforcement officer. So he would he wouldn't he is not a supporter of violent disturbances and this violence that's taking place from all sides. But but but it would disturb him. It would upset him. And he would think that that was doing damage to the cause of equality and equal justice under law. And so I think he'd be a little concerned about that. He would also believe and say that we've made progress. I think some of the rhetoric about systemic racism in America is no better than it's ever been would have upset him. He believed that progress had been made and has been made. And the election of President Obama was an example of that. And, of course, hundreds of examples of public officials winning elections all across the country who are African-American. So he would be a little discouraged by that. But he would also recognize that these are hard battles and we're not done and we've still got more work to be done. And he would say that he was not a he was tough, but he wasn't mean. And he wasn't a fighter in the way that some of the people in the public dialog are. Now, that would upset him. He was a person who believed in the facts. And in taking your case to the court and proving it fact by fact, by fact. And that's why I wrote that, that I think he would have thought that the deliberation concerning President Trump back when his impeachment was considered, he would have thought that move too quickly, that the case had not been really successfully made so that the overwhelming majority of Americans would agree. And their Republican representatives, the party of the guy being impeached, agree that something really serious like impeachment need to take place. Now, I would like to say one last thing. This business of what's happening with regard to the voting and elections, this would really upset him because he no, he knew how to build a voting case. And you had to have the facts. You had to prove it. You couldn't just say it and you certainly couldn't say it. When the whole country is looking to you to respect the result of an election and follow the tradition of toleration of the opposition in a peaceful and appropriate transfer of power, so that with you you can hear what people are saying. But when you look at the specific cases in each of these instances, there's nothing there. Or if there is, it's very little it's not enough to upset the outcome and to have people assert that they've proven really. Debilitating and faith crushing offenses of upsetting and turning an election without facts, he would feel very offended by. So, you know, I'm hoping we get through this and let the courts deal with these cases and that we can have, as we've had every presidency since Washington. Ay aye, aye, aye. Appropriate toleration of opposition, gracious transfer of authority to a new president. But if dad were around this, this last chapter of the Trump administration would be offensive to him.

[00:35:03] Well, we'll try to get most of those adjectives to apply to the eventually to the actual transition get to get the ball. But you can follow

Robert on Twitter at Robert Daw. You can follow the American Enterprise Institute on Twitter at AEI. Robert, thank you so much for joining us.

[00:35:18] Thank you for having me. I appreciate it very much, folks.

[00:35:22] As as you know, we've been changing our schedule, so just keep an eye on CFG or hash tag KnightLive. You can also follow at the same Guille on Twitter for information about future episodes. As a reminder, as always, this episode will be up on the website later. And this episode, every episode is available on demand at KF.org after your show. You can also subscribe to the Future of Democracy podcast on Apple, Google, Spotify and wherever you get your podcasts, email us at every show at that. Or again, reach out to me on Twitter at the Sam Gill. There's a two question survey on your screen. If you're watching live, please take it. And as always, we will say goodbye to the music of Miami singer songwriter Nick County. You can follow him on Spotify until next time. Thanks so much and stay safe.