

You Might Be Right - Election Integrity - Transcript

Brad Raffensperger: We believe you need to look for the proper balance of accessibility with security. But if you look at it, by and large, America's very good at running elections.

Jocelyn Benson: The voters want a referee in these positions, not a politician, and that's what I've tried to be and many of the most successful secretaries on both sides of the aisle has been.

Marianne Wanamaker: Welcome to "You Might Be Right," a place for civil conversations about tough topics brought to you by the Baker School of Public Policy and Public Affairs at the University of Tennessee. Free and fair elections are a cornerstone of American democracy and the balance between election security and voter access has come under intense scrutiny in recent years. In this episode, our hosts, former Tennessee Governors Bill Haslam and Phil Bredesen and their guests discuss election security and what voters need to know about how their votes are counted.

Phil Bredesen: Well, Bill, this should be an interesting discussion today. Election integrity is something that it's in the news all the time. There's passionate views on every side of the issue and it's fundamental of our democracy.

Bill Haslam: Right. I think, like you said, fundamental or foundational to our democracy is this idea that every vote should be readily available to those people who are qualified, but only to those people who are qualified, and getting that right depending on what side of the argument you're on has become more than a little bit contentious.

Phil Bredesen: Also I think making sure that people are convinced that what goes into the voting machines is what actually comes out in the totals and be really interesting to hear. We certainly are talking to some people who are at the center of the storm.

Bill Haslam: Let's get going.

Well, Phil, we have two great guests on election integrity, and that's an issue that's obviously at the forefront of a lot of people's minds today, and I think really important. Brad Raffensperger is the secretary of state in Georgia, and to say that Georgia's been the epicenter of election interest would be an understatement.

Phil Bredesen: To say the least.

Bill Haslam: From contested presidential elections to Senate runoffs to new voting regulations and rules, Georgia's been at the heart of it, and Brad Raffensperger, who's Georgia's 29th secretary of state, is with us today. He was first elected in 2018 and then overwhelmingly reelected in 2022, despite some opposition from some various places. We'll leave it there. Interestingly, he's a licensed professional engineer and structural engineer. He founded Tendon Systems, which is a provider of high strength steel for construction projects. First elected to the

Georgia House of Representatives in 2015 and elected secretary of state in 2018. Brad, thank you very much for joining us.

Brad Raffensperger: Good morning.

Phil Bredezen: It's great to have you here, and I was interested to hear about that engineering. I think more highly of you now even than I did. I wanted us to start out, Brad, I mean, you're obviously famous and well-known for election integrity from the standpoint of resisting pressure and doing things the way they're supposed to be done. But I'm sure, I mean certainly here in Tennessee, as I'm sure it is in Georgia, there are well-meaning people who've been led astray with information about how much integrity there is in our elections, and I think all of us in public life have an obligation to address that in some fashion with them. I'm kind of curious what you think about what kinds of things might be done by government, certainly by state government, to give people who are concerned or skeptical about the integrity of elections some comfort that things are being done right.

Brad Raffensperger: Well, fortunately I served with a lot of other secretaries of state and Tre Hargett is one of the tops that we had nationwide as your Tennessee secretary of state. But by and large security has been our issue since day one. If you remember, when I ran for secretary of state back in 2018, our number one goal was to bring in a new verifiable paper ballot system. We had electronic voting, but we wanted to make sure that we had a verifiable paper ballot that we could do audits and then join a multi-state organization so we could have clean, accurate voter rolls, and so that's how we hit the ground running. Well, we also banned ballot harvesting. We wanted to give voters confidence in the process, and we thought by having a verifiable paper ballot, that was a good way that we could do that, having photo ID for all forms of voting. We've been pushing back and pushing forward for election integrity since day one.

Bill Haslam: Secretary, just quick definition, since all of our listeners might not understand, what is ballot harvesting and why is that a bad idea?

Brad Raffensperger: Well, ballot harvesting would be someone that's totally unrelated to the voter going up and down the street and saying, "Hey, dude. You have your absentee ballot here and I'll go ahead and I'll get that down to the election office for you," and so it's actually illegal in places like California, and so what you had is people that were just fanning out in the neighborhood and really harvesting, or collecting, absentee ballots and knocking on people's doors. In Georgia, we banned that practice along with many other states. We've outlawed it because we think the only person that should touch ballot is you, the voter, and the election official that receives your ballot.

Phil Bredezen: I've always found some comfort. We don't have across Tennessee, but we have here in Nashville where I live, a paper, I call it paper backup ballot. I'm not sure what the term of art is, but your answers in the voting booth get printed on a piece of paper which is then scanned into a system and it can be preserved, and I like that idea, not totally trusting the electronics. Has that, in Georgia, proved to be comforting to people? Does the paper ballot, is

that meaningful to them in terms of election integrity?

Brad Raffensperger: Absolutely. In fact, over 90% of all ballots now in America are cast with a hand marked paper ballot or a ballot marking device. The electronic voting that we had came in after Bush v. Gore in Florida after 2000. They said we need to update our systems, and so we went with electronic voting, but most of those systems never had a paper ballot, and so after you had an election, all you could do to verify it was press that button and get the same electronic answer. So by having a paper ballot, you actually can do an audit, and so after the 2020 race, we had 5 million ballots, 5 million paper ballots, and they were actually hand counted one after another, all 5 million of them, to verify what the results were. And you can do the same thing in any other state that has a verified by paper ballot like you have in Nashville.

Bill Haslam: Let me kind of back up. Do we have a problem in this country with election integrity? Do we have widespread issues or is it just isolated issues that get a lot of attention?

Brad Raffensperger: It's isolated issues, which you really see either voter suppression or voter fraud. It's very isolated. Many allegations were made after 2020 about double voting, and we just found a few cases of that. Then we had people said that lots of dead people were voting. We found a total of four and that's when a close family member or someone else moved into a house and absentee ballot had showed up for this person who had since deceased, so they voted for that person who had deceased and then also themselves. We found that out and they were prosecuted. But those are just four out of 5 million, the ballots that we had in one case. We had no underage voting. But there's all these allegations, but if you look at it, by and large, America's very good at running elections.

Phil Bredesen: Both of us have been, before governor, have been mayors of our respective cities where you're much more involved in the process of voter registration and keeping the voter rolls current and so on. I'm kind of curious, it seems to me that that good voter rolls are kind of part of the foundation of a solid process for voting that has got integrity and so on. Do you have any thoughts on things that might change or be different or how that process could be improved? We certainly always ended up with lots of wrong addresses and strange things in the voter rolls that needed to be fixed.

Brad Raffensperger: Absolutely. Regular list maintenance is really important. When I ran back in 2018, I said I wanted the authority from the general assembly, which we actually secured with House Bill 316, was to join a multi-state organization. We didn't identify it by law, but there was only one multi-state organization. That was ERIC, the Electronic Registration Information Center, and it required our General Assembly to give us authority to join that, but it's actually led by the states, so instead of being run by the federal government or run by some other outside organizations, it's actually the shareholders are the states. If you're a member of ERIC and you move to another fellow ERIC state, that when you register there, that state would tell us so we could begin the process of removing you off the voter rules. It allows us to have really clean, accurate voter rules. Regular list maintenance is really important, but we also understand the importance that it's done objectively, and ERIC is an objective measure, because when you

enter and you do things subjectively, that's when you start losing voter trust.

Bill Haslam: Brad, I've noticed several states have dropped out of ERIC, particularly some Republican states. What's pressing that?

Brad Raffensperger: Misinformation and disinformation, because it's actually run by the states and all sorts of allegations were made. It's funded 100% by the states that participate in it. What we would actually like to see is a counter movement to get states to become part of ERIC. If there needs to be some tweaks in some of the bylaws, we are certainly open to consider those, and it takes a majority of the states to make sure that we have solid changes. But we want to make sure we have clean voter rolls, so we'll work with whatever system we have. We're also looking at bilateral between states that have never been a member of ERIC so we can continue to have clean voter rolls. We think that builds voter trust. It also ensures we have voter integrity.

Bill Haslam: Go ahead.

Phil Bredezen: Well, what you're describing, I mean, helps keep voter rolls clean for people who move from state to state and so on, but there's also obviously enormous amount of moving around within a city, within a state. Are there other sources of information or other ways of addressing that particular issue?

Brad Raffensperger: Number one is Department of Driver Services, so we lean into our Department of Driver Services because we found that when Georgians move around the state, one of the first things they do after they update their power bill and things like that is they update their driver's license. Because if you ever get pulled over on the side of the road, what's the first question the police officer asks you? He asks for your license and ask for your vehicle registration. Then the next question he asks you, "Is this your correct address?" And if it's not, then you're going to face a fine for that, so people update their driver's license, and so when they move to another county or another part, wherever they move to, that immediately gets updated by Department of Driver Services who then we notify that because we have share in between us and our state, so we really can track voters throughout the state as they move. It's very helpful for us.

Bill Haslam: Brad, going back to Georgia, the big debate about election integrity is from those folks who say, "Elections aren't on the up and up, there's fraudulent activity happening all the time," versus others who say, "No, you've made it way too hard to vote. By all these restrictions you put into place, you've made it too hard to vote." In some ways, you've had to be on the other side of both of those arguments. People saying Georgia's new voting law was way overly restrictive. "You're making it too hard to vote." And then obviously famously during the 2020 election, "Hey, there's fraud that happened here. This election doesn't have a straight outcome." Help us understand kind of how you've approached both sides of that argument to make certain you get it right.

Brad Raffensperger: We believe you need to look for the proper balance of accessibility with

security. As it relates to accessibility, we have automated voter registration, and what that means is when you get your driver's license, you will be registered to vote unless you say, "No, don't register me." The reason we did that years ago under Secretary of State Brian Kemp, is that it allowed us to have clean and more accurate voter rolls because people updated their driver's license as they moved around the state, so that was job number one.

Bill Haslam: Can I interrupt you a minute? What percentage of voters have driver's licenses?

Brad Raffensperger: It's about 99%.

Bill Haslam: Okay.

Brad Raffensperger: Virtually everyone has a driver's license. Even if they don't drive, it's just a great form of identification. You use it when you get on an airplane. You use it just about every place that people see they want photo ID.

Bill Haslam: Got it. Okay.

Brad Raffensperger: But if you don't have that in Georgia, we have five other forms of identification that you can actually use in lieu of that, your military ID and other forms of identification. But that is also very important. We also have no excuse absentee voting, which was put into place in 2005 by Governor Sonny Perdue, who happened to be a Republican, and so that is anyone that wants to vote absentee can vote absentee without requiring an excuse, and so that's important. But we now have shored that up with photo ID, so no matter how you vote in Georgia, we have voter ID, and primarily we use driver's license for that.

We have 17 days early voting, so there's a great opportunity for people to be able to vote. We have election day voting. We have no excuse absentee voting, so we give voters a choice. You vote any way you want, and in Georgia what we see is about 5 to 6% people vote no excuse absentee voting. Right now, it's about 65% of the voters are voting early and about 30% are voting on election day. But that's the voter's choice. They get to decide, but accessibility with security, and we think that's the proper role. Different states do different things. Maybe they don't have 17 days of early voting. They have 15, maybe they have 12 days. That's their decision as it works through the legislatures.

Bill Haslam: We talked earlier with Arthur Brooks about how do we navigate disagreements. Do you have any specific recommendations for how to talk to someone who believes an election conspiracy theory? Someone goes home and they're meeting, they're with a relative who's certain that elections are all rigged. What advice do you have for folks to how to navigate those conversations?

Brad Raffensperger: Well, in many respects, I'd say get off of social media.

Bill Haslam: Period.

Phil Bredesen: That's good advice under any circumstances.

Brad Raffensperger: Other than this podcast. But you have to understand is that we have a system where we can do an audit of any single race. We can do a hundred percent hand recount of every single ballot. We identify our voters with photo ID and we think that's really important. We allow voters to vote three weeks of early voting plus two Saturdays. If you want to vote on election day. So we have all these processes in place, but you have to understand it's decentralized. But if you have concern, then volunteer to be a poll worker. Watch the process, learn the process. Become an election observer. In Georgia, we passed SB 202. We require now any observers to go through the poll worker training program so they know what they're looking at, so they're then an objective and an informed observer. We think the more information that you give voters, the more confidence they have in the process.

Bill Haslam: Secretary, two last questions. The first is this. I'm always both intrigued and impressed when people do the right thing, despite a lot of pressure, and you, like I said, famously have took a lot of pressure over the 2020 election in Georgia, but then also with the Voting Reform Act, it was called Jim Crow 2.0 by some others, et cetera. How have you kind of stood there in the face of firestorms, actually from both sides in your case and said, "No, we're going to do the right thing here." Just personally, how have you done that?

Brad Raffensperger: Just talking to people. I have my fact sheet. I'm an engineer, so I like facts and I just follow, give them the bullet points, and then I typically didn't answer everyone's questions because then I let people ask questions, and so that way then I can respond to it and give them, flesh it out. What exactly happened down at the State Farm Arena? What happened about this? What happened in different areas? I thought the more information that you give people, though, then they could leave. They may not like the results. I understand that. I understand how polarized we live right now. I'm in the construction business. That's where I cut my teeth, so I know how conservative job site trailers are and I understand colorful language. I'm used to that, and so I could handle all that. But also understand that when people had the facts, they could understand this is what it's going to be. Now, one thing in the construction industry, sometimes you have to make quick decisions on, well, with that supply chain disruption, what are we going to do now? How do we adapt to it? And so you get people information and what I found is that most people are good. Most people are thoughtful and kind, and so we just continue to lean into that.

Phil Bredesen: This podcast is built around the notion of Howard Baker, that the other fellow might be right, just suggesting people have a little humility about their views and listen to other sides. Can you think of an example in your own career where you really have, by listening to someone who opposed you, had a different view, changed your mind, where you became educated about and really changed your mind about an issue based on conversations?

Brad Raffensperger: Well, if you actually go back after President Trump was elected in 2016, what he said, and he started pounding this issue about having paper ballots and all of a sudden

it really raised my awareness about that, and when I ran for Secretary of State, that's one of the items that I put in there that I thought he's right about this. We do need to have a paper ballot system.

Phil Bredesen: Good.

Bill Haslam: Good answer.

Phil Bredesen: We really appreciate it.

Bill Haslam: Secretary, thank you. We appreciate the informative approach that you've taken to this and taking time to be with us. Like I said, election integrity is at the forefront of the conversation, and I think both Governor Bredesen and I would say getting it right and having people who've modeled getting it right is very important, so thank you for your time.

Brad Raffensperger: Well, thank you.

Phil Bredesen: He was an interesting guest. A man I admire, I have to say.

Bill Haslam: Again, if you look at, he withstood a lot of pressure from President Trump in the 2020 election and then President Biden called the Georgia Voting Reform Act Jim Crow 2.0. So to be able to stand your ground, I think thoughtfully and even dispassionately, maybe the engineer approach, it helped him there, I think is what we need in terms of solving the hard problems.

Phil Bredesen: It seems to me as I was listening to that, I got a little different perspective on a couple of things. I mean, I hadn't really focused so much on the paper ballots as being fundamental to convincing people about the integrity of it. I think that's worth exploring how you can do those. I mean, maybe random audits after the election is over or something like that, but that was one of those Howard Baker moments for me just listening to that.

Bill Haslam: No, I agree, and fortunately we have another guest, another secretary of state who I think is going to bring some more insight.

Phil Bredesen: Bill, our next guest is, I think it's going to be really interesting. Jocelyn Benson is Michigan's 43rd secretary of state, just reelected with a 14 point margin. Before that, she had been dean of Wayne State Law School in Detroit, and she's still involved with them through the Carl Levin Center. She has her BA from Wellesley College, was a Marshall Scholar at Magdalene College in Oxford and graduated from Harvard Law. We're delighted, Jocelyn, to have you on the podcast and look forward to the conversation.

Bill Haslam: Hey, let me start. When you look at the issue of election integrity, it's obviously a balance between access, we want as many people to have access to vote as easily as they can, and security, and I don't think most Americans don't want that to be a false choice of one of

the other. They want both. Help us from your role and somebody that's been in the job now, reelected, like I said, impressively by 14 points. Help us understand how you look to achieve both of those outcomes.

Jocelyn Benson: Well, first, thank you for having me. I'm grateful to be here to discuss really what is the most important issue of our time in my view, how we can protect and preserve this foundational element of who we are as Americans, and it's exactly as you frame it. It's a false choice to say that we have to either increase access or increase security. I wrote a book in 2008 on the secretary of state office and the role that we play in a bipartisan, nonpartisan way as guardians of the Democratic process. And in that I defined really nonpartisan secretaries of state as individuals who, and this has now become a tagline, but who are committed to making it easier to vote and harder to cheat. And in that way, I talked about how officials on both sides of the aisle, every step they make to expand access, to expand options to vote, to expand options for identifying voters, must also ensure we're simultaneously increasing the security of the process, especially when those overlap.

An example is how we identify voters before giving them a ballot and making sure we're doing so in a way that ensures only eligible citizens are getting a ballot and voting and identifies them before they do that, and then, secondly, doesn't create identification requirements that would inadvertently leave people out of the process, and there's ways to do that thoughtfully. The state of Georgia has done that for many years. We in Michigan have worked to do that, and you have to frame it outside of the political dichotomy and really just make it about making it easier to vote and harder to cheat.

Phil Bredesen: As I understand it, Michigan is one of those states that has same day voter registration.

Jocelyn Benson: Yes.

Phil Bredesen: The opposite end of the spectrum from where we are in Tennessee. But it seems to me that it would at least raise some concerns about verifying the authenticity of the voter, and how do you on that sort of timescale, make sure that it's harder to cheat. How do you actually handle that?

Jocelyn Benson: A couple of ways. One, we benefit from the fact that Michigan was not the first state to give citizens the ability to register and vote on election day. A number of other states have done it, and that gave us a sense of how they tackled the security issue, and it combines the two things. One, you have to make sure you're identifying everyone and verifying their eligibility, and then you have to have a real time way of making sure they haven't voted elsewhere, and so we have that through our statewide registration system that enables us to verify someone's identity and register them to vote, and then as a first time voter meet any federal identification requirements as well. Then they are run through a system and given a ballot once it's verified that they haven't voted elsewhere.

We have electronic poll books in precincts throughout the state, and that helps verify someone's voting record prior to them being given a ballot having registered. Then, in addition to that, you can only register on election day in certain places, so you can't just walk into a precinct and register on election day. You can only register at a clerk's office, and we have done things like put clerk's offices on college campuses so that college students can still register and vote on election day. But we're very clear that we have very secure avenues to doing that, and it's not just that you can go anywhere and register and get one of those sacred ballots.

Phil Bredesen: What percentage of the votes on election day come from same day registrations?

Jocelyn Benson: A very small percentage. The other interesting statistic about that is that the vast majority of citizens who are doing it are in one of six communities in our state. They're all college communities with the exception of Detroit and Dearborn, although there's educational institutions in those communities as well. That helps us make sure we are supporting. We know that the vast majority you get are registered to vote in those communities. We're giving clerks the resources they need to go through that process. But it is, relatively speaking, a small number, but still a sizable number that we need to make sure are following the rules and have access to their vote while complying with security requirements.

Bill Haslam: You've literally written a book about secretaries of states and their role in making certain that our elections are done the right way. Depending on which party you are, in most instances, there's the sense of either elections are fraudulent or they're making it too hard to vote. Just go to 30,000 feet. Not just Michigan, but generally in this country. Are our elections, is there fraud of a significant degree in our elections and are people who should be able to vote being prevented from voting? I'm asking a generic big picture question.

Jocelyn Benson: Yeah. I think it's important to look at the evidence and make evidence-based assertions at the micro or macro level of what is happening, and we know that there's very little to no evidence of any type of deception or voter fraud or particularly voter-initiated fraud in the process, and that when it is identified, and we have a lot of checks in Michigan and in other states to catch it when it happens, not the least of which includes identifying voters before they get a ballot, but also including other provisions in place to make sure that only eligible citizens are registering and all the rest. So we can catch it when it occurs and then we prosecute it. I'm very clear both always during and after an election how serious we are at prosecuting those who would try to infiltrate with our elections process. But when we're able to do that and catch it and prosecute it when we find it, you find that it's minimal. It's certainly not widespread.

Similarly, when it comes to ensuring access, the limitations on access oftentimes are outside the realm of the process itself, meaning sometimes it's because community members don't have access to identification or don't even know where to go vote or it's an educational gap that leads to, and as we've looked at it, historically marginalized communities in particular having low turnout rates, and I think it's the responsibility of election officials to proactively meet voters where they are, be they young voters or new voters or new citizens or returning citizens and

make sure they do have, if they're eligible to vote, the tools they need to do so. That mitigates any perception of suppression and actually ensures we're able to increase turnout among all communities, and that's a lot of what we've worked to do in our state.

Bill Haslam: But is there an issue around people not having identification? It just feels like most people have one of the forms of authorized identification.

Jocelyn Benson: Yes. We've recently also expanded the list of identifications that are possible for in-person voting to include student IDs, so that's addressed some of the issue. I think, again, it's a responsibility of myself to make sure people have IDs in our state because we need an ID for a number of things, so we've worked to do that. But there is data that shows there is an overlap between historically disenfranchised communities who have either minimal access to identification or perhaps difficulty actually traveling to a polling location, and so recognizing that we have to serve everyone and make sure wherever someone is, if they're a citizen and eligible voter, we have a responsibility to ensure they can participate and have the tools they need to do so. It is, I think, important to be proactive in doing that to mitigate any concerns, particularly among historically disenfranchised communities, of suppression.

Bill Haslam: You, again, wrote a book about the secretary of state's role in terms of being the guardians of democracy, but it also seems like it's easy to get accused of stacking the deck for one side or the other, so when I hear you say, "Well, we only have a limited number of early or places to same day register, have same day registration, but one of those is college campuses." As a Republican, I go, "Oh, those probably tilt a little bit to the Democrat side." How do we make certain that the people who get to set the rules but who are still elected on a partisan basis are setting them in fair ways?

Jocelyn Benson: Yeah. That's a great point. Just to clarify, you can register to vote on election day anywhere in our state. What I was saying is what we see in terms of who's actually doing it, it's really just six, meaning where are voters in large numbers registering, including on election day. But in every one of our 1500 jurisdictions, there are places in the clerk's office where citizens can register and vote, and we track that, so we make sure, again, everyone has staff and resources to manage that, and the fact that we've seen just sort of the concentration of those taking advantage of those rights in certain areas of the state help us also allocate resources accordingly. But it happens everywhere. But you sort of recognize that we're in a political environment that yields, and some frankly do, of my colleagues do, certainly make decisions I have seen or talk in such a way or interpret the law in such a way that could be seen as putting your thumb on the scale.

I think that is antithetical to what we're supposed to be doing as election officials and that's why I am so grateful for leadership like my friend Brad in Georgia and other places where people are very intentional about not doing that. But I've also seen on the other side, because we are in a political arena, there's pressure especially for elected officials who aspire to higher office to play the game of the political parties as opposed to the game of the voters. What gives me great hope that that is not a successful strategy is that by and large voters often reject those

individuals either at the reelection process or when they do seek higher office, because voters want a referee in these positions, not a politician, and that's what I've tried to be and many of the most successful secretaries on both sides of the aisle have been.

Phil Bredesen: One of the things which pops up in the news from time to time, certainly, has been the number of threats that election workers have received across the country in this very passionate and politicized kind of environment. Has that been an issue for you in Michigan? Has there been a chilling nature on people willing to do just that basic election activities on election day?

Jocelyn Benson: Interestingly, we've actually seen the opposite. Now, there have certainly been threats and harassment and misinformation and all of that affecting our community in Michigan, but we have seen in response to those threats a number of citizens step up to serve as poll workers. In fact, we recruited 11,000 new poll workers in a state that has only 5,000 precincts in 2022 and a full 30,000 new election workers in 2020, and at the same time, we're seeing a lot of people step into the clerk role, an elected election official's role, fully knowing that we're in this moment where these challenges exist, but wanting to serve and wanting to step up and be on the front lines, and that's been really inspiring to see all across the state. In part, it's because some of our most focal clerks and the highest profile ones have stood proudly in defense of our elections, and I think that has led to many others wanting to follow suit as opposed to walking away from the profession.

Phil Bredesen: That's encouraging news.

Bill Haslam: Obviously, we're concerned about the domestic issues that face us with election integrity, but increasingly we have to worry about cyber threats coming in from other countries, of folks trying to electronically steal elections or influence elections, if you will. Help us understand what you do to make certain that Michigan's elections aren't impacted by bad actors from around the world.

Jocelyn Benson: Well, we work a lot with our federal partners because these challenges, and they're challenges that are increasing, frankly, in this current moment with the war in Ukraine and other places. Our foreign adversaries have a lot of incentive to try to upend our democracy here in America, and we recognize that that can hit us in Michigan, but it could also hit us in Wisconsin, or even in non-battleground states, and so we work together as secretaries across the aisle quite effectively to combat any potential for foreign interference, and we get a significant amount of support from CISA and the Department of Homeland Security and a number of federal agencies that work together to keep us briefed to ensure that we are aware of any emerging threats, to ensure that if something happens elsewhere, if we can learn about it, we do so that we can be prepared for anything to come our way.

The benefit of Michigan's decentralized system is that there's very little one person can do from the outside to actually interfere with the process, and we have a paper trail of all of our ballots. We have post-election audits to ensure we're able to catch any types of blips or challenges. In

other words, we have a lot of eyes on it and a lot of partners helping us track any potential threats.

But that said, I'm very concerned about the potential for AI-generated content being used to mislead voters. We've often said that the biggest security threat to our elections from foreign adversaries comes not to the election infrastructure, which we've pretty much protected, but really to voters themselves and the hacking of their minds and the confusing of them about the process, and because technology, particularly AI technology, is so new and is advancing so quickly, there are many opportunities for domestic and foreign bad actors to take advantage of that. It's another thing that we're prioritizing, developing some strategies and solutions to combat the misuse and abuse of AI by domestic and foreign adversaries and working with partners at the state and federal level to, again, explore potential threats as we try to stay ahead of emerging threats and be prepared for the ones we already know about.

Phil Bredeesen: There's a wide range of possible kinds of threats that range from computer hacking to disinformation and so on. You're right in the core of this. Of the possible threats, what's the biggest one you worry about? What keeps you up at night the most?

Jocelyn Benson: The potential for AI-generated content to mislead voters. I think that is the new frontier. That is where we've got the least amount of regulations or protections in place with this new technology. We're in the process in Michigan of getting out in front of it and bringing thought leaders together to help us develop a plan. But vulnerabilities and unknowns and unknowns are the biggest challenges and threats and the biggest vulnerability and unknown right now comes through this sort of technology space of AI-generated content. Let's be clear. There are a lot of folks particularly in the tech industry that have a responsibility for what people are distributing, particularly using social media platforms and elsewhere. I would say globally and overall the threat of misinformation and the way in which that targets voters to either deter them from voting, confuse them about voting, cause them to lose faith in the voting process and thereby potentially protest the results. All of that is linked to misinformation, and I think it's likely to be the biggest threat to our elections, and it's certainly likely to be the biggest tactic, the most significant tactic that foreign adversaries utilize to try to undermine democracy in America.

Bill Haslam: Help us. One of the things we're trying to help our listeners do is navigate difficult discussions. Whether it's at Thanksgiving with relatives, and I'm sure you find yourselves in the middle of sometimes trying to bring one side back, sometimes the other side back, of either friends and family discussions that are either convinced that elections are fraudulent or convinced that folks are being prevented from voting who should. Help our listeners know how to navigate difficult conversations with people who are certain there's a conspiracy going on one side or the other.

Jocelyn Benson: I think the most important thing is to listen and to listen respectfully and understand where people are coming from, where they've received the information and why it may have resonated. There's always, oftentimes, not always. Oftentimes a kernel of truth that you can try to identify and sort of piece it out from there and talk through that. Also really, as

citizens, wanting to have those conversations after listening, becoming well-equipped in the process itself, and we in Michigan try to make that information available. We actually have a site that debunks myths about our election process and a number of other things, so by also kind of becoming well-versed in the process, and if you don't know an answer to a question, working with that person to look it up.

But really just trying to, in a very factual way, peel back the layers of the onion of someone's argument and sort of identify where the facts and the evidence lie. Now, some people will sort of not be interested in taking a walk down the path of evidence and facts, and you have to also kind of understand where sometimes you can't be effective. But I do find that facts and transparency can rule the day oftentimes, but it all starts with listening and with respect and finding common ground and then trying to have a fact-based discussion on where we may differ.

Phil Bredeesen: Let me end up with kind of a thought question here. This whole podcast is grounded in the Howard Baker Center at the University of Tennessee, and its name, You Might Be Right, comes from his famous quote about listening and keeping an open mind because sometimes the other fellow, the other person might be right. In that spirit, can you think of a time in your own life, in your own history, in your own education growth where by listening with an open mind to another side, you actually changed your mind in some significant way on an important issue?

Jocelyn Benson: Yeah. I think in particular around the issue of education for me, and it's a great question and I think a thoughtful one for every elected official to really think about, but there are oftentimes I think in the education arena, very simple approach to have sort of a simple solution to a very complex issue, and we only will find the solution—

Phil Bredeesen: Not just education.

Jocelyn Benson: Right. Pretty much everything. As someone who's didn't really come up in a political environment and isn't really driven to one side or the other outside of my just simple commitment to voting rights for every citizen, I actually really appreciate listening to where people are coming from, and we found this on economic development as well, and understanding really what are the themes that can bring us together to find a compromise, and the themes are often we simply just want government to work for everyone and we want it to be accessible to everyone and want to believe in its integrity. All those principles apply to elections as well.

Oftentimes, I could come at an issue, particularly public education or other areas where we recognize that the solution to ensuring our common goal, that every kid has access to quality education is reached, is actually found through multiple perspectives and bringing them together, as opposed to just sort of one path that one party may promote. That's I think one example. I think it's always a combination of having a set of values, obviously, that you bring to the table, but a willingness to be open to how other policy solutions that you may not have looked at or other perspectives may still fit into those values, may still advance those goals, but

may take a different route that may along that route gather more supporters based on the amendments or compromise that they entail.

Phil Bredeesen: Great. We've enjoyed talking with you and really appreciate very much your taking this time with us.

Jocelyn Benson: Oh, thank you. Thank you for your years of service, both of you, as well.

Bill Haslam: Well, thanks. We agree with you that this is one of the core issues of our time, to make certain that elections are secure and accessible, but also to convince people of that. One of the things that concerns both of us is the dwindling lack of, or dwindling distrust or growing distrust in institutions of all types, and we want to make certain that in this vital process of democracy, people don't lose their trust.

Jocelyn Benson: Yep. I agree. I think it's incumbent upon all of us, regardless of where we sit on the political spectrum, to recognize whatever it is we care most about, it only can come to fruition if our democracy works for everyone in a meaningful way, and so we all have a stake in ensuring that basic founding principle of our country is preserved, and history teaches us that is the only thing that will preserve it, if we all work together to ensure that that's the case.

Bill Haslam: Well said.

Phil Bredeesen: Thank you.

Bill Haslam: Thank you.

Jocelyn Benson: Thank you.

Bill Haslam: So, Phil, what do you think? How do you feel about election integrity and access to the ballot in the United States?

Phil Bredeesen: After talking with these two people, I feel a lot better than I did before I talked with them. I think both of them were sensible. They were both less partisan than I kind of expected in terms of their view of the world, and it just underlines one of the enormous strengths of this country is just the hundreds and thousands and tens of thousands of people like that who are out there just making it work day in and day out. It doesn't make the headlines and the evening news and those kinds of things, but these are good people doing the work.

Bill Haslam: Yeah. My feeling going into this, and this has just been kind of confirmed, is that by and large our elections are fair in the United States. Like I said, are there some anomalies and some issues? Sure. But I think they're on the margin and almost never affect the outcome. I also feel the same thing with ballot access, that most of the people who should get to vote do, and again, I've rarely seen a case where somebody said, "Well, such and such election was won by this side or that because this group of people that should have voted didn't."

Phil Bredesen: Yeah. I think there's a tendency to, when people take actions, a various source having to do with registration or voting or identification, there's a tendency I think on both sides of the aisle to sort of project onto that their assumption that the other party is acting inappropriately and for the benefit of their own party, and I'm sure there's some of that, but there's also things I think you can look at objectively and say that is a reasonable kind of thing to ask.

Bill Haslam: To me, the real issue here is, you see it in Gallup surveys and everything else, people's trust in institutions of all types continues to decrease, and that's concerning. I compare it to a little league baseball game. The umpire might not always get the call right, but the game's a lot better as long as we have an umpire. Without it, we have a problem. When we basically say every umpire, whether it be media, election officials, the judicial system, et cetera, that every umpire is too biased and we shouldn't listen to what they say, then we have a problem.

Phil Bredesen: I think it illustrates, what you're saying is exactly right, but illustrates what to me is a very fundamental question. I mean, both you and I are totally bought in and part of these institutions.

Bill Haslam: Fair, fair.

Phil Bredesen: Whether it be in business or politics or anything else. I think one of the questions I think any of us have to ask is, what is it that we've done that has caused this enormous distrust to arise out of these institutions? I mean, in what way have we failed our duties to citizens that they're so easily persuaded that these are useless or even counter to their interests? I hope that certainly both Democrats and Republicans, rather than railing at people not trusting these kinds of things, can figure out what it is that they have done and what the concerns they've generated are from. We need to answer the question why.

Marianne Wanamaker: Thanks for listening to "You Might Be Right." Be sure to follow on Apple Podcasts, Spotify, or wherever you listen to your favorite shows. And please help spread the word by sharing, rating and reviewing the show.

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