

#98: The Rich and the Rest

Jennifer Berkshire Welcome to Have You Heard. I'm Jennifer Berkshire.

Jack Schneider And I'm Jack Schneider.

Berkshire And Jack, as is so often the case, this episode is inspired by a book.

Schneider That would have been nice to know prior to sitting down to record. I wonder if you'll tell me what the name of the book is, Jennifer, and perhaps pause tape while I try to read it.

Berkshire am happy to oblige as always Jack. The book is called Let Them Eat Tweets: How the Right Rules in an Age of Extreme Inequality. It's by two academics. You'll appreciate that Jack.

Schneider I would have also appreciated like a full list of what my homework should have been for the episode, but go on, I happen to know a few things about this topic, but maybe not everything

Berkshire Moving right along the authors are Jacob Hacker and Paul Pierson. They're political scientists at Yale and UC Berkeley respectively. And I think, you know, the title seems sort of click baity, but I really recommend it to people. I think it's the best explanation of what we're going through politically right now that I've come across. And basically what they try to do is unpack what they call the conservative dilemma. And that's this dilemma that conservatives increasingly push an economic agenda. That's deeply, deeply unpopular, right? That steering all the income to the top 1% and sort of letting the plutocrats, you know, turn the country into their own economic playground is really unpopular. So what do you have to do in order to get that agenda through? And it turns out that steering people in the direction of cultural outrage is really helpful. And as I was reading the book, which does not mention education at all, I felt like, you know, I kept waving my arms in the air, you know, like, Hey Professor Hacker, Professor Pierson! Over here!

Schneider And if they had seen you waving your hand around in the back row there and called on you, uh, I imagine Jennifer that you might have given them this perfect example from recent news, which would be Donald Trump announcing via an executive order. The establishment of the so-called 1776 Commission, which is a kind of direct confrontation with the 1619 Project. And it is a classic example of an attempt to stoke a culture war this time in education in order to distract from potentially unpopular policy. In this case, the kinds of education policies being pushed by Betsy DeVos through Donald Trump's department of education, which if people were more familiar with, they might be inclined to ask some serious questions about, especially with regard to the future of the public schools, that they generally support

Berkshire Alas, they didn't seem to see me waving my arms and they ignored all of those zoom links that I helpfully kept sending them. And I just, you know, I wanted to point out to them that

they really should add education to their list of policy items, where there is an enormous Gulf between what the richest among us want and what the vast majority of people want. So for example, they go down a whole long list of things like social security and free college and healthcare. And what you see is that the plutocrats always, you know, they, they want the sort of most miserly policy path forward. Um, but the same is true for education and Jack. I happened to know that you have some data at your fingertips and I'm hoping that you will share it with us now,

Schneider Clearly you were reading my tweets rather than eating them, Jennifer, because, I was tweeting the other day about a study that examined the attitudes of the rich and super rich in comparison with the attitudes of the general public, with regard to education policy. And there are some really stunning gaps there, for instance, with regard to whether the federal government should make sure that everyone who wants to go to college can do so. So this would align with a kind of Bernie Sanders like free college proposal. 78% of the general public are in favor of that kind of policy activity. By contrast only 28% of the wealthy are in favor of that. And we can see here a real divide between the resources that the wealthy already have accessible to them, their attitudes about taxation, particularly on their own fortunes, and then the general attitudes of the public.

And this is also reflected in another stunning gap. And this has to do with whether the federal government should spend quote, whatever is necessary to ensure that all children have really good public schools. They can go to 87% of the general public favor, this kind of approach. And, you know, we could haggle about whether it should be federal dollars or state dollars. I think that's actually beside the point. The idea really is that the public is strongly in favor of fully funding, public education, not just for their own kids, but for all kids. And we see that among the wealthy only 35% are in favor of this. So these kinds of gaps are really important, especially if we are paying attention to the kinds of policies that are being enacted, not just at the federal level, but really at the state level where we see some really unequal kinds of approaches that appear to be serving the interests of folks who you're referring to as plutocrats, I tend to prefer oligarchs, but let's not quibble over that. And I hope that we have a chance to revisit one of our favorite states, which would be the wild West state of Arizona, where so much of this is playing out in a really bizarre fashion.

Berkshire Well, Jack, that happens to be exactly where we're going. I thought that in order to make this book come alive for listeners who haven't had a chance to read it...

Schneider Oh, Oh, Oh me. Yeah. It's not that I didn't have a chance to read the book, Jennifer, it's that you seem to have forgotten that in my pre-show prep package. So that's fine. That's, I'll just, I'll go along with it.

Berkshire Well, we haven't been able to hit the road for a while. So today our tour is virtual and we're going to be going to Arizona, which happens to be not just the wild West, but also one of the most polarized states in our union. And we're going to find out that people there tend to be in surprising agreement when it comes to something like funding their schools.

[Music]

Berkshire OK you've got your copy of Let Them Eat Tweets at the ready or you've just ordered it. Now we're headed off on our virtual field trip to the Grand Canyon State. And the first thing you need to know about Arizona these days is that it's hot. Not just in 40 plus days of 115 degree temps hot but politically fevered. No surprise, Arizona's public schools are a major target of all of that political foment. Lindsay Love is a school board member in Chandler, about half an hour south east of Phoenix. This part of Arizona has been a Tea Party stronghold and activists have made the schools a focus of their complaints and demands.

Lindsay Love And they've been going around to all the school board pushing for, you know, no sex ed, no equity, diversity and inclusion. And then also kind of leading this movement along with some of these parents who I guess now their color is green, who don't want mask policies.

Berkshire In other words, Chandler is a conservative place. In fact it was host to a recent standing room only Trump rally featuring Don Junior. But it's also a place that's in the throes of a demographic and political transformation

Love In Chandler, we're also an IT center. And so we pull in diverse families who move here. They like our schools, they move into housing. And that's shifted the political landscape a bit. But what we're seeing right now is I guess is kind of what you would call the last like death knell, I guess, where our Tea Party Republican groups are having like this last grand standing against changes that are taking place in Arizona.

Berkshire Lindsay's own story perfectly captures the change that's a foot in Chandler. She ran for school board in 2018 as a progressive underdog. She won, becoming the first Black woman elected to the board.

Love It is a pretty solidly red district. Historically we have one democratic representative to the house, Jennifer Powell, and I was the first Democrat elected to our school board. And we just got a second Democrat elected to our city council.

Berkshire Now if you're a regular listener to this program and you accompanied us on some of our previous 2020 trips - to Michigan, Wisconsin and Texas - you're probably picking up on some familiar themes by now. Intense political polarization, demographic change - these are trends we're seeing in a lot of states. But there's something else happening in Arizona that I'm guessing will surprise you.

Next month when Arizonans go to the polls they'll be voting on a measure to hike taxes on the states richest residents. The money will go to pay teachers more and to hire more of them. And wait for it - Prop 208 as it's known is crushing it in the polls. According to a recent survey 66% of registered voters say they'll be voting for it, including 53% of Republicans, including 39% who ID themselves as conservative. Dawn Penich-Thacker is the communications director for Save Our

Schools Arizona, a non-partisan advocacy group. She is thrilled to see this kind of support for school funding but she's not all that surprised.

Dawn Penich-Thacker .I'll actually say it's amazing. But also when you're just a regular person who lives a regular life and knows other regular people, it makes sense. Actually, it's amazing when you hear kind of the national rhetoric, when you consume all the political ads on, you know, every time you look at a screen, but then when you think about your own neighbors, your own family, the people you work with, then you realize that party aside, people love public schools. They went to public schools, they choose to put their own children in public schools. And at the end of the day, there's only one answer when you ask them, should we have strong schools? Should we invest in today's children? Regular people say yes. And I think that the ethos that is leading to such high support for education funding, even with all of the partisan attacks and rhetoric, regular people love schools, they love teachers, they know their importance and that's, what's rising to the top, which is really heartwarming for someone who, you know, gives up every free moment for this kind of work.

Berkshire Still at a time when things are so polarized it's pretty amazing to consider that there's this kind of agreement about a tax hike on the rich to fund public education. I asked Dawn to walk us through the strong support that Prop 208 is getting among Trump voters. And it turns out she knows one of them quite well.

Penich-Thacker Yeah, you know, I think of my own father who is a Republican voter here in Arizona. He has a red hat hanging in his, you know, little home office, but he will be voting yes on the education funding proposal. And it's not just because I'm his daughter. We disagree and he votes against me plenty of times. But someone like him who does support president Trump, who is a party line, Republican voter, at the end of the day, he feels like some things are just bigger than all that. And investing in education is one of those things. You know, we are an immigrant family. We came here for the American dream. To my Republican Trump supporting dad, that's just bigger than politics. It's bigger than Fox news. It's just the moral thing to do. And that's what carries him to, you know, supporting education funding in a year like 2020.

Berkshire Which brings us to the overarching theme of this episode - the vast gulf that separates the education policy preferences of most voters vs the priorities of conservative plutocrats. Just a few years ago, Arizona legislators enacted a universal school voucher program. The idea was that instead of funding schools or systems the money would go direct to parents on edu-debit cards. Save Our Schools gathered enough signatures to force voucher expansion onto the ballot and voters rejected it by a margin of 2 to 1. Dawn says that for all of the money and influence lined up behind school choice in Arizona, the commitment of voters to public education is strong even across party lines.

Penich-Thacker Somehow as much as think tanks and lobbyists try to politicize education. Somehow people still have that core within them that knows that schools are important and that teachers work hard and that we need to invest in kids that they're not going to become successful, just left to their own devices. And so it's kind of psychologically interesting, but I

think it is holding true even today that people are able to somehow separate out what they know to be true of the importance of public schools from some of the really political ideology they may hold in all other areas of life.

Berkshire So Jack, you mentioned at the top of the show, the 1776 Commission, and this was this whole move by Donald Trump to announce that he's going to bring the power of the federal government to bear behind what he calls patriotic education enough with the schools, indoctrinating the kids, turning them into fiery leftists and socialists rebels. They're going to learn about the founders.dot dot. So I think that as you noted that this is a perfect example of the kind of distraction, airy politics that we hear about and let them meet tweets. And that if you actually look at where the money is flowing, like what are the plutocratic priorities or the oligarchic priorities as you described them, you don't see tons of money lining up behind the idea of say, getting people on the right onto school boards in order to demand patriotic education. Instead it's things like the micro school idea that is really taking place in, wait for it, Arizona.

Schneider The conservatism of, you know, the 1950s through really the 1990s really was focused on things like the content of the curriculum. So if we look at the history Wars that we talked about on our episode with Dana Goldstein you can see that there's a long history of conservatives fighting to have their story told in textbooks and recognized in curricular standards, but there's a different line of conservatism that has its origins in Barry Goldwater's run for president where the aim is really not about trying to tell a patriotic story about America or to try to ensure that know values are being taught in the schools. It's really about unmaking public education. And this is something that we've covered a lot in our show. This more libertarian oriented line of conservative thought is really focused on exposing schools to markets on limiting, spending on reducing taxation and on breaking teacher's unions, empowering individuals to make choices in a free market rather than pursuing this pseudo Bolshevik collectivist approach that public education represents to them.

Berkshire That's a really good explanation, Jack, and that sort of perfectly captures the latest trend to emerge in Arizona. And that's these for-profit micro schools. So let me just, I mean, it's almost hard to believe that this, this is what's coming down the pike but what's scary about them is that they're being backed on the right by the Cokes and the Waltons and by big money from Silicon Valley. And the idea is that instead of a teacher you'll have a guide and a guide can well run a micro school out of their home, just like an Uber driver makes his or her living out of their car. And then they can have as many as 10 kids, they get paid per head. So for a kindergartener, it's like \$3 a head. And so the, the micro school guide salary could top it, it can't go any higher than say \$26,000. So you can see how closely this adheres to the idea of really lowering costs. There's no license required. The guy doesn't have to have any kind of training and, and then they provide the school building. So you can see why this would really excite people who see public education as a collectivist structure that they don't want to have to pay for.

Schneider These micro schools are the latest manifestation of the age, old quest to ring a profit out of public education. And they're the newest incarnation of the rhetoric around, you know,

personalization and customization in education, the need for breaking the public school monopoly. So if you aren't paying very close attention, you might be duped into thinking that, you know, this is an important advance in the way we deliver schooling. When in fact it's actually designed to deliver value to shareholders or to the private individuals who own these companies. They've been compared in many cases to Airbnb and Uber and those comparisons are often disparaging, but the, the leaders of these organizations will make the comparison themselves because they know that the people who they need to win over are the far right conservative legislators, often at the state level who they need to convince to not regulate them, to not identify them as schools, but rather as service providers and to allow funds to flow from the public purse into private pockets

Berkshire Back to Arizona. But first, a quick review. We've been plumbing the vast gulf between the policy preferences held by most Americans when it comes to public education and the priorities of plutocrats. Which raises the all important question - what does this mean for the way people actually vote. Well, that's where the story gets a little murkier. Next we're headed to another conservative part of Arizona, that would be Prescott. Kari Hull, who is Save Our Schools' outreach coordinator for northern Arizona, spends her days talking to voters who are outraged about the defunding of their local schools.

Kari Hull So these are just think of, you know, busy working families. They scoot off their kids to the public school, but who they voted for to represent them in this community tells them, Oh, yes, I support public schools. Oh, you know, they all love these hometown friendly lawmakers. And then when they go down to the state legislature, they don't vote the way they say they're going to vote, but who's got, who knows that? Nobody, Oh, I'm going to go follow SB 42 79 through the legislature. People have a, you know, two or three jobs these days, these are just like average working people. And so they don't understand. There's a disconnect between people understanding where the defunding is coming from. So they're voting against their interests.

Berkshire When you hear about parts of Arizona turning blue, Prescott is not one of them. Where Kari sees an opening is the belief among so many voters that support for public education should not be a partisan issue, a conviction she happens to share.

Hull It's taken 20 years or more for us to get to where we are. It's going to take that long to dig us out and get back on track. Our public schools should not be impacted by whether there's Democrats or Republicans elected to office. You know, they're just public schools. I mean, I always thought, you know, just like hospitals or police or firemen, you know, and when, when you hear that these public programs and services are going to be privatized, that just doesn't, that does not sound good at all. Because when your public neighborhood district schools close, a lot of people don't have access. They don't have transportation for the private or the charter schools. They talk about the voucher system providing school choice. It's literally the opposite of that. If that were to get fully, like if that were to happen and our voucher system took over our public schools, our neighborhood schools would close. So then what choice do you have?

Berkshire Political analysts are predicting that 2020 could very well be the year that Arizona turns, not just purple, but fully blue. Dawn Penich-Thacker says that support for public education will be a major factor in making that happen.

Penich-Thacker For people who've always cared about education, we see some of these competitive districts as an opportunity to start making progress instead of just fighting terrible ideas with our time and energy. And then on the flip side for people who've never been incredibly informed about education. They have seen so much about teacher pay and student funding in Arizona, that they finally understand. We need to do something about this and the easiest way to do about it without becoming an education finance wand is to realize that you want to vote for the people who are willing to work for it. And I think that's the element that we're seeing a lot. And that's why there's a lot of momentum around candidates in particular who use supporting public education as a major talking point, because folks, all, everyone wants to see it get done

Berkshire For the last stop on our Arizona adventure we're headed to Maricopa County, where Democrats are hoping to make some serious inroads. And we happen to have one of them standing by.

Eric Kurland My name is Eric Kurland. I am running for the house of representatives right here in district 23, which encompasses Scottsdale, Fountain Hills, Rio Verde, and Fort McDowell.

Berkshire If you're a Have You Heard superfan, you may remember Eric from the episode we did about teachers running for office back in 2018. He lost that race but it was close. And so he retired from teaching in order to run again. And Eric says that the demographic changes we've been hearing so much about in this election season are key in his district.

Kurland Our demographic mimics what has happened around the country where flipped voters have flipped. We have a higher education background here, really active in their local schools, and they enjoy their public schools more than the average in income. It just seems like this is the exact demographic that we've seen, where people have made choices based on data, based on evidence rather than based on what they wish was happening. They're more apt to flip.

Berkshire As I talked to Eric, I was struck by just how sunny he seems, at a time when a lot of people are feeling, well, not so sunny.

Kurland Well, I hear a lot of people who are despondent, don't get me wrong. And I get that way too sometimes. But I really feel like this is a, this is a moment from my fifth grade science curriculum where you're talking about for every action there's an equal and opposite reaction. We've been under the thumb of one party rule in Arizona for so long. We've swung so far out of normalcy at the national level that we're going to swing back. Now, I think that this is the moment that everybody here has been waiting for, if it's not going to happen now, when will it happen?

Berkshire In fact, Eric is feeling pretty positive these days - and not just about his race and the direction of Arizona.

Kurland All eyes are on our state, but inside the state, all eyes around Maricopa County. Within Maricopa County, their eyes are on 23 because we were the number one turnout district of all 30. We are that demographic that we spoke about earlier. So they're not just going to be watching this election. They're going to be surprised by the outcome, but then they're going to watch how we govern. And when they see how we govern, they're going to be like, huh? People putting issues over ideology. That's unique. People over politics. You know what? I like that. And then we have this new awakening that just kind of spreads across the Southwest. We've already got kind of on this national level part of a firewall, but when Arizona joins New Mexico, Colorado, Nevada, Washington, Oregon, California, as this kind of fence, we're no longer looking at Wisconsin and Michigan and Pennsylvania in presidential elections. The shift will be seismic. People will be staying up late every election night. Not because they will want to watch Chuck Todd talking at six, six in the morning Eastern time, but because they want to know how the west coast decided the election. It's going to be huge

Berkshire A big thanks to all of our experts on the ground in Arizona, a state that we will be keeping a close eye and ear on. And Jack and I will be back after the break for a little history lesson. It turns out that the most affluent among us have never been all that keen on the idea of public education, or paying for it. And Jack is going to reveal to me the topic of this episode's In the Weeds segment for our Patreon subscribers. What do you suppose it could be??

[Music]

Berkshire Jack, as we were hearing that inspiring, but also kind of confounding account from Arizona. I kept thinking about the new book that our friend Derek Black has written, *Schoolhouse Burning*. We're going to have him on the program next month. He has this great quote in the book about the various things that public education was needed to do in the early days of the Republic. And he says that, you know, basically it came down to transferring responsibility for education from the individual to the government. And you know, that's really, what's at the heart of so many of these Wars that you know, that the people who are driving the kind of plutocrat pushback that you're seeing on the ground in Arizona are really, they don't buy that, right? They want their vision is the guide in the 21st century micro school, right? Because that's how you, you wrest control away from the state. And back to the family, that's how you, you work around the need to pay for those services with taxes. And I think this is, you know, like that partly explains why these, these battles are so intense, but I think it also gives us some inspiration that when, when you see people joining forces across party lines in Arizona to back something like a school funding increased by increasing taxes on the rich, it tells you that they have a vision that's bigger than that.

Schneider We talked in our last episode with David Menefee-Libey about policy treaties. And I think here's a really interesting case where we might apply it, where it turns out that public education itself is a policy treaty. It just happens to be 200 years old. And that conservatives

who were convinced a couple of hundred years ago to enter into this treaty, right, they gained a lot from it. We can do some future show on what was gained and lost in the common school movement are now indicating that the treaty is no longer anything that they want to abide by. They want to break it and they see an opportunity to advance their interests right now by breaking that treaty. And what I think is so interesting is that when we talked with David in our last episode, you know, he was saying that these treaties are never settled and it's not settled 200 years later, right? That, that the very existence of the system is still on the table. And the fact that we take it for granted is actually historically, it's been a strength, right? That everybody expects it to be there. But in this case, it's a weakness, right? That people are asleep at the wheel. They expect that public education is something that will always be there for everybody in perpetuity. And those who are intent on dismantling the system, see this as a window of opportunity, people are asleep at the wheel. Let's, let's pull this thing apart.

Berkshire Since the theme of this episode is Jennifer reads something and then Lords it over her cohost for not having read it. I want to just try it out. One other, another quote that I came across that really just, I think, captures perfectly this moment. There was an interview with Robert Putnam, author of *Bowling Alone*, and many other books in of all places, the Sunday Styles section of the *New York Times*. And he had this great quote. He was talking about the pandemic response and he said, "The virus turns on this. Are we a we, or are we an I? And I thought, Oh man, that's so what this is about. And the answer on the right, and the answer from the plutocrats who are funding their efforts is you're an I. An eye for an eye.

Schneider And also you read the Sunday styles section. So everybody knows that now.

Berkshire Yeah, I do. That's where I get most of my fashion tips. Well, Jack, you've been so good natured through this whole episode. I have a special surprise for you. I'm going to let you pick the topic for our extended episode that we call in the weeds. This is where our subscribers gathered together, and they hear us hold forth on some topic. And usually part of the fun is that I spring some topic on you and listeners who chip in a couple of dollars a month, sit on the, you know, sort of the edge of their seats wondering, well, Jack really, was he really going to know about this?

Schneider Well, I see what you've here is make me complicit in your paywall scheme, Jennifer. So before I participate, let me remind our listeners that there are lots of ways to support the show without opening their wallets and pocketbooks. So if you're listening and you like what you hear, please go on and give us a review. It helps people find the show. We always appreciate when you engage with the show's Twitter handle at, have you heard pod, we've gotten some great ideas for episodes from you that way. And we also just like hearing what you thought about our latest episodes. And then finally, my favorite is when you share an episode or just the show in general with colleagues or friends, some of you have started doing that on Twitter. And it brings me endless joy in the same way that the dollars raining down through the Patreon, brings our producer endless joy. So with that, I'll say, Jennifer, let's go into the weeds and let's talk about the 1776 Commission. And let's talk about some of the specific proposals that are on the table and just how far out there they are.

Berkshire If you can't wait to hear us hold forth on the 1776 Commission, all you have to do is go to patreon.com/haveyouheardpodcast. And you'll see a list of all the cool extras that you can get just by throwing a couple of dollars our way each month, like a custom reading list for each episode. You'll get smarter and smarter. And of course the opportunity to join us in the weeds and a million thanks.

Schneider One thanks.

Berkshire On that note, I'm Jennifer Berkshire. This is Have You Heard.