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Tricia Johnson:

It's Aspen Ideas to Go from the Aspen Institute. I'm Tricia Johnson. 100 years ago this month, women won the right to vote, after decades of organizing and protesting women's suffragists celebrated a long awaited change to the US Constitution. Here's Peggy Clark of the Aspen Institute reciting part of the 19th Amendment.

Peggy Clark:

The rights of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any state on account of sex.

Tricia Johnson:

Today we examine the strides women have made toward gender equality and the remaining hurdles. Aspen Ideas to Go brings you compelling conversations from the Aspen Institute which drives change through dialogue, leadership and action to help solve our greatest challenges. Today's discussion is from the McCloskey Speaker Series held by Aspen Community Programs.

Tricia Johnson:

100 years after the passage of the 19th Amendment, women are in the majority in many ways. Most voters are women. The majority of volunteers for political campaigns are women. And increasingly they're candidates for public office. Women, says Cecile Richards are becoming the most powerful political force in America. Richards co-created Supermajority, an organization that helps women build economic and political power and organize for gender equity. Ai-Jen Poo and Katherine Grainger also co-founded the group. The women sat down with Peggy Clark, who leads the Aspen Institute's Aspen Global Innovators Group for a conversation about the 19th Amendment and what's ahead. Here's Clark.

Peggy Clark:

So let's just start by thinking about, I'm really curious about what each of you are reflecting or thinking about as we come up to this milestone. And Katherine, let me start with you. What are some of your thoughts At this moment, as we approach this time?

Katherine Grainger:

I think that two things that I'm really reflecting on, the first is power. And particularly as you think about organizing women's power, it took 100 years for these women to get to the point that they did in order for the 19th Amendment to pass. And so I don't want that to be lost, how long it actually took to get to this milestone. And then the other thing is throughout the course of the struggle to get suffrage, these women were really focused on "We're not building power for ourselves. What we're trying to do is create a world where we can elect better men."

Katherine Grainger:

And whether that was a strategy or the actual truth. It's been a prophecy. So part of the concern is that when women got the right to vote, that they're going to take everything over. And then men were going to lose power. And women continue to assure men that that wouldn't be the case. In fact, a lot of women walked away from it entirely, saying that they didn't think that women should be able to vote. And I think that that deference still sits with us. So I think about 100 years later, and what is being built with Supermajority, how we're really focusing on the fact that we are women, the majority of the population, and we're not wielding our power for the electoral results that we need. So that's the first thing.

Katherine Grainger:

And then the second thing that I've just been thinking about generally is the truth. This country is finally reckoning with the truth of our history. And in order for us to build anything new, we have to excavate the old. And all of the 19th amendment arguments and I'm sure we'll get into this later, really kind of erase the role that Black women played in the in this role. And Martha Jones just has a book that's about to come out called Vanguard where she's really unearthing exactly this. And telling the story of how Black women fought for the right to vote with the 15th Amendment, which gave Black people the right to vote, Black men the right to vote, and then continued for 50 years more to give women and Black women the right to vote.

Katherine Grainger:

And we'll get into how the splits and all that happened as a result of that. But those are the two things that I'm holding is how do we wield our power and our numbers and actually lean into that instead of trying to put it away to make men comfortable. And secondly, how do we build a new movement that's multiracial and really entrenched in our truth, so that we don't repeat the mistakes of the past that really did split feminism in the early stages of enfranchisement.

Peggy Clark:

Thank you, Katherine. That's so critical and also as this it's this moment of reckoning, everything is open. And I love the way you're inviting us to think about history in a really different way. Cecile let me turn to you, what are some of the things you're thinking about reflecting on at this anniversary moment?

Cecile Richards:

I guess I'm thinking about a couple of things. One is we are coming up on of course 100th anniversary at a moment in which women's political energy in this country is unlike anything I've ever seen. It's obviously women are now 100 years after suffrage began, as we know, didn't begin for everyone but 100 years later, women are the majority of voters, they are the majority of volunteers on political campaigns. They're probably now the majority of donors, which is really interesting. That's a kind of a new shift, and of course, increasingly they're candidates.

Cecile Richards:

I know this year in fact, we all know what happened in 2018. It was a watershed year for the election of so many women to Congress and women of color. This year, more African American women running for congress and ever in our history, although, of course, our rates of representation, still rank well below the rest of most of the rest of the world. So that's one thing is interesting is women 100 years later

actually have this political opportunity and will be determinative in not only the presidential race, but they'll be the majority of voters everywhere else.

Cecile Richards:

And then the second piece that is related to what Katherine said is the reckoning that is happening now finally, long overdue and will take a long time have sort of the basis of this whole the founding of this country, and the roots of white supremacy are so linked to the patriarchy. And I think the more that... I mean, of course, you just go back to the nobodies free until everybody's free. I think the exciting thing that we're seeing, particularly with young women and young women of color in the lead is the idea that we could actually build a new movement, one that we've never had in this country. A women's movement that actually is multiracial, multi-issue, where nobody gets left behind. And that's I think, is what's kind of fueling me in these moments and why this year is so exciting and different than anyone I've ever seen before.

Peggy Clark:

Right, which is saying a lot because you've been in a lot of political battles since you were little at your mom's knee. And I know Cecile, you recently in a Newsweek article, you said that women are becoming the most powerful political force in this country. And I want to link that to what Katherine said, which is that there were elements from looking at history, leaving out a huge voices of minority women, a certain deference that we took. So I really want to invite us to explore that a little bit around what are some of these hardest lessons of history that we can bring forward? And Ai-Jen let me turn to you. What are you thinking about right now?

Ai-Jen Poo:

I've been thinking a lot about women across the board, across our economy, across all of our communities as we struggle through the layers of crisis that we're dealing with right now. I think all of us will agree that things weren't great for women going into the pandemic. There were certainly chronic crises that we were dealing with everything from structural racism to the epidemic of low wage work, where women were disproportionately concentrated in minimum wage jobs. Where you could work incredibly hard and not make ends meet, like not be able to put healthy food on the table for your kids.

Ai-Jen Poo:

That was pre-pandemic. And so if you listen now to women like domestic workers who are majority Black and immigrant women of color, who are actually responsible for caring for us. And many of them have been working through this pandemic, they're in a situation where they came in without a single paid... 82% of domestic workers didn't have a single paid sick day. And so we were talking about dramatic losses of jobs and income, such that in early March, women were calling and saying, "I'm worried about how I'm going to put food on the table." We had Zoom calls with women who would hold their phones up to the screen and literally to show us there was one cent left in their bank account. And that was in March.

Ai-Jen Poo:

And so that incredible loss of income and incredible financial insecurity that was created by an insufficient, at best, safety net that just didn't keep women workers safe. That combined with the fact that the majority of essential workers are women, and disproportionately women of color. So the people who have been keeping us safe and keeping our country moving, are women who are working

for poverty wages without access to health care, without access to testing and treatment, without PPE. And their kids are home from school and camp. So how are they supposed to take care of their kids, even as they provide essential services for ours or for provide a lifeline for lots of older people as homecare workers, who are some of the most vulnerable people to the crisis.

Ai-Jen Poo:

So I think women right now... We all know women are incredibly resilient, and incredibly powerful. And what is happening right now is unconscionable. It is a humanitarian crisis of epic proportions. And that is why women need power. That is exactly why we have to transform our politics and our government, and to have women who actually want to solve problems in charge. And that is, I think, a lot of what Supermajority is trying to do is to harness the incredible creativity and resilience and strength of women, that is too often expended on bare minimum survival. To unleash it towards building and creating the systems and the culture that we know is possible in this country and that we deserve.

Peggy Clark:

Let me turn to this moment that we're in, in terms of the election and what you're doing. And each of you in your own respective roles is in a position to be hearing from women, all different types of women about what they want and need right now. Katherine, tell me what you're hearing from women and how you think this political moment can address it.

Katherine Grainger:

Yeah, well, I just want to underscore what Ai-Jen said, which is so important, in terms of our safety net is that the United States has never had a commitment to the common good. We don't take care of each other. And we actually look at things like child poverty as the fault of the parent. And this whole like pull yourself up by the bootstraps mentality has always been a problem, but now it is exposing our fragilities. Like I think we've never seen before. And as part of that, too, it's exposing our systemic problems of white supremacy and misogyny.

Katherine Grainger:

And the reason I bring that up in the context of answering your question is that that's what we're hearing from women is that they are really struggling. These are women that I work with that are lawyers, etc, that can't figure out how to be home and parents, and also work a job and do all of the other things that they need to do. And there's no safety net in place to help anyone in any economic class. And I hope that that starts to create the type of empathy that we actually need to crack open in this country and build something different.

Katherine Grainger:

And that's what we're starting to hear is that this unequal structure that America is built on is starting to crack at every single foundation. And hopefully, what that can then turn into is real change. That we can parlay that to get people to start voting not just for our new president, which God knows we need, but for a new way of doing and being in this country that is more centered on women and feminism. And then starts to, as Ai-Jen says, solve the problems that are now being exposed at every level in this country. And that's what we're hearing people are really hurting, and they're afraid and they're angry. And they want to figure out how to change this, not in a in a transactional way, but a transformational one.

Peggy Clark:

So I want to Go back Ai-Jen to what you said, which is this is a humanitarian crisis, the likes of which none of us have ever seen or could even imagine. Our policymakers hearing that? Are people hearing that and seeing it in the depth of the way that you three are describing, particularly for women?

Ai-Jen Poo:

I think that there's an increasing awareness. I think that the general public is feeling The pain. The caregiving pain, the fear about what are we going to do if the schools don't open? And how are our kids going to get the care and the education they deserve? Everyone's feeling the pain and that includes policymakers. Now the extent to which there's bravery and leadership on actually meeting the scale of the problem and the challenge, and the level of pain that people are feeling it. That takes courage. And I think we are seeing that from some but not enough. And right now, for example, the House passed a bill called the Heroes Act that includes protections for essential workers that are so long overdue. How are we months into this crisis, and we're still fighting for PPE and safety and health protections for essential workers. It just doesn't make any sense.

Ai-Jen Poo:

It also includes relief, extending Leave to millions of families who are excluded from the first round of relief, it includes aid to states and cities. I mean, all of these things are no brainers. There's nothing extravagant here. This is about how we move through this crisis. And the Senate has had weeks and hasn't acted on it. So I would say now is actually the time, the senate before they leave, they have to do their jobs. And they have to take action on the Heroes Act and so much more. I mean, this is just the beginning of what's going to be needed to put a vision for economic recovery that uplifts women, uplifts people of color, uplifts all of our essential workers. And we know how to do it. It's not rocket science, there are actually clear policy measures and ideas and solutions that we can execute on and we just need to do it which is why again, we need women. We need women to vote We need women to organize. We need women to push senate and to run for office.

Peggy Clark:

No that's great. So let's turn to that a little bit and Cecile, let me turn to you. What more needs to be done to advance women's progress and rights?

Cecile Richards:

Oh my God, we don't have enough time Peggy to even like begin, but I yeah, I think we've established that this COVID crisis, which is I don't care what focus group you go to this is what is on women's mind. Because they're terrified for their health, they're terrified for their kids. They have no idea how to Go back to work. This whole work at home myth, if you're taking care of children and your family, etc. So but moving beyond that, what really was happening even before COVID because as Ai-Jen said it wasn't like life was great for women before all this happened is that we are still structurally are not set up in this country for women to be full participants in government, in the workforce, in anything.

Cecile Richards:

And I saw this, of course when I was at Planned Parenthood when the biggest pitch battle we ever had was literally in the Affordable Care Act to get family planning covered, which seems like ludicrous that we would have this fight. And of course, this administration is now trying to roll that back. But it wasn't

even until the Affordable Care Act, which is not that old, that women weren't penalized for their gender for buying health insurance, it was the first time that actually there was no more gender rating and that women couldn't be denied coverage because of pre existing conditions.

Cecile Richards:

So the structural inequities, they exist up and down. So we need to do more for health care. But my obsession right now is on the fact that we are in a childcare crisis in this country, we are telling women they have to Go back to work. There's no one to take care of their kids. And this government is doing nothing about it. In fact, I was just looking up under the CARES Act, where Delta Airlines got more money in the bailout than the entire childcare industry in this country.

Cecile Richards:

And as Ai-Jen said, it's not like we don't know how to solve some of these problems. It is like we do not have the political will. And we're not willing to say, as a country you know what, "Women, they're probably here to stay in the workforce. And so we need to figure out a way structurally for women to be able to participate." And that's what I feel like I hear from women, in our meetings at Supermajority across the country, where women literally think it's their own fault that they cannot figure out now, how to return to work, and make sure that their kids are taken care of somewhere, and that their parents who are now... You know, their mother who's living with them is got the care that she needs.

Cecile Richards:

And every single woman is trying to figure it out on her own and that isn't going to work. So I hope that what we can do in this election is one women demonstrate the political force that they are and what we need, not to have more than our share, but just to have a fighting chance of being able to participate, and that we have, in this next administration, an effort to really just sort of like level the playing field. And again, you could start with childcare. You know, Elizabeth Warren has proposed a \$50 billion childcare plan that would actually make it possible for everyone in this country to get affordable childcare. That's the kind of bold leadership that we need.

Peggy Clark:

Let's go back Katherine to a little bit of the history lesson. Since we are marking this 100th anniversary. And there were so many fits and starts in the women's movement. And I know that Supermajority has, in many ways, founded itself on some of the key lessons that we learned through that battle. So Katherine, would you mind giving the viewers a little bit of a history lesson about what happened when getting to you know, 1920, which took so long to get the women the right to vote. For those of us that are not as familiar with it, as you all.

Katherine Grainger:

Sure, and I love this story. So I'm happy to tell it, which is that the right to vote actually started out for a call for all disenfranchised people to have the right to vote. And so this is pre 15th Amendment when slaves had recently been freed and white women and Black people were working together to call for the right to vote. And that's what it was called, the right to vote. And then the 15th amendment passed first. And that created a huge schism within the movement. And when you think about it, too, Frederick Douglass was one of the leading people who were advocating for the right for women to vote.

Katherine Grainger:

And these early suffragettes who were white, were leading abolitionists. These things were all tied together. And this goes to Cecile's point about how misogyny and white supremacy they're one at the same, they're linked. So when the 15th amendment passed, and carved out women, that is when we started to see kind of the ugly underbelly of... Not see. The ugly underbelly of racism continued to be exposed where white women who were leading abolitionists, kind of separated and started to say terrible things about Black men, and the fact that white women deserve the right to vote more than they did, and it just it created a continued demise.

Katherine Grainger:

But I think what's even more important is this is all orchestrated. So the 15th amendment was passed and never really enforced. There was a brief moment during Reconstruction, but otherwise, it was through Jim Crow laws. Black men were given the right to vote on paper. They never really actually actualized that except for like a four year period in our history. And the reason I bring that up is because the men in the south who we're fighting against the 19th amendment giving women the right to vote we're fighting against it because they didn't want the 15th amendment to be enforced.

Katherine Grainger:

So their argument was, "Okay, first of all, we can have more Black people voting by giving Black women the right to vote. But secondly, if you start to put the 19th amendment into law, then maybe they'll start enforcing the 15th Amendment. Which for the last 50 years, we've been able to keep it at bay." And I just think that's such an important lesson because it's showing how the status quo of white male supremacy reigns supreme still does. We're still here. And that as as we let ourselves be pulled apart by it, which is largely what happened through this 15th and 19th amendment fight. We actually don't transcend it.

Katherine Grainger:

And so going to this history and the important lesson of it, we actually have an opportunity right now to fix that and come together and say our whole system has been designed to keep power for these few. And it's not benefiting any of us and it's broken and it's not working. And we can instead of coming from a scarcity place where we fight each other for the scraps, we actually can come to a whole and build something that is abundant. And that is what I hope we're finally at that point. With all of the breaking opening that's happening right now.

Peggy Clark:

Cecile, let me turn to you. What are your thoughts on this, these lessons from history?

Katherine Grainger:

I was just so inspired by the way that Katherine frame that story, and I just wanted to build off of that by saying that one of the things we've really seen in Supermajority is women's resistance, fundamental resistance to a zero sum politics, and a desire to build. Build power together, and a resistance to feeling like we have to choose and fall into these hierarchies of power and human value that have divided us over time.

Katherine Grainger:



And understanding that the future we want, relies upon our ability to organize and build together. And that organizing is about addition not subtraction. That we need to keep adding and transforming ourselves as we add, learning and growing together. And so I think there's something really powerful about that inclination among women to resist the politics of zero sum choice, and of pitting against and being willing to do the work that is required to have the unity and the power to win. And that is, I think, what could be... That's the opportunity at this moment, that's what could be defining of this moment. And I think it's how we start to model the kind of multiracial democracy that we can be in this country.

Peggy Clark:

So Cecile you're a pragmatist, and you've been in a lot of battles. How would you respond?

Cecile Richards:

Well, it's sad and ironic that of course, everything Katherine is talking about all the efforts that were made in the south to suppress the vote. It's not like that's left... That is absolutely what is happening today. And unfortunately, of course, it is happening out of the federal government. And I know a lot of us were so inspired and got to spend time with Stacey Abrams in her really historic transformational run for governor of the state of Georgia.

Cecile Richards:

I remember going and actually campaigning with Stacey, waiting for her and a hall teeming with people and her having to walk through Confederate flags to get into the hall. So just there's a lot of things that have changed and a lot of things that haven't changed. Of course, that's a good example of an election where if everyone had actually been allowed to vote, and every vote had been counted, we would be calling her governor Abrams today. And so I'm a pragmatist in the sense of, I think everyone is looking into this election, realizing it is going to be a watershed election, there is more energy. There have been people been waiting for this election for about three and a half years.

Cecile Richards:

And yet, we are dealing with a completely chaotic voting system. One of the things that we hear from women, and most recently in focus groups, is that they are worried and scared about voting. Not just that their vote will be counted, which is something they usually worry about, but literally that it's not going to be safe to vote, obviously have an administration that is trying to prevent people from voting safely, like voting by mail, those kinds of things. And so I think it's really incumbent on all of us to do everything we can to realize there is this systemic barriers to equal voting. They continue to exist.

Cecile Richards:

And of course, they historically have fallen hardest on women, women with low incomes, women of color, women who have kids who can't stand in line for hours and hours and hours on end. But, yes, my hopeful side is and something I think we're also hearing from women is they're very resilient, as I just said, and they are ready to go. And we even saw, we texted into Wisconsin during that election, which I know everyone saw on television, when folks were forced to wait in line for hours and vote in person, and people did. And so I actually, I do believe in our democracy, and I believe that people want to vote and will vote, but there's a lot we have to do to make it possible to make it safe, particularly this November.

Peggy Clark:



No, I think that question of how can voters vote safely during COVID is a huge challenge. And so, should all the listeners be voting by mail? What would you advise people who are or listening about how they can support others and what they themselves should do?

Cecile Richards:

Well, I think the most important thing we can do right now is of course, push in every locality and state, because of course, it's all decided, at the state level. To push for as many options as possible. Many states have liberalized the way that you can register by mail, vote by mail, no excuses absentee drop off balloting. And I mean, this is just sort of the really sad state of our democracy is like you look at a state like Arizona where I think upwards of 70% of people vote absentee early, no excuses absentee. And a state like Pennsylvania that only recently even got the ability to do that. Where only about 3% of women take advantage of that.

Cecile Richards:

So the disparity is huge. It's an issue that we're working on at Supermajority, certainly Stacey at Fair Fight is taking the lead on. But we don't have a lot of time to get this right. One thing I'll just put a plug in I'm really excited about is at Supermajority we've launched Supermajority Home, which by September will be a web location, a portal where any woman, although any person, can find out if she's registered, make sure she hasn't been thrown off the rolls. What are the voting rules in her community and literally where she can vote and how she can vote. It's that simple. And so I think it's important for all the Aspen world to be doing everything we can to be thinking about how do we make it easier for women who already face a lot of barriers to democratic participation.

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Peggy Clark:

Let me turn to you Ai-Jen and also Katherine on that question of what can women do or men and others who are listening to get involved and how can they act about some of the frustrations that we're all feeling right now and the poignant challenges and desperation that we're seeing from so many? What would you recommend? Ai-Jen, let me start with you.

Ai-Jen Poo:

Well, I would start by calling your senator to vote on the Heroes Act, and really underscoring the urgency of what is in the Heroes Act which is money that is going to help us survive this crisis on every level and it includes money to make sure that the elections can happen in a fair way. So I just I do think it's urgent and important and very timely for people to call their senators and urge the passage of the Heroes Act, and to really sign up to figure out how you can be a part of mobilizing voters. And I know, Supermajority is going to be trying to reach as many women as we can, through our Woman to Woman voter mobilization program, and we'd love for anyone to join us and be a part of that effort.

Peggy Clark:

That's great. Katherine, would you like to add?

Katherine Grainger:

Yeah, the other thing I would say is to underscore what Cecile said, which is vote. Our presidential elections, usually less than 50% of the population chooses who's president and that's just crazy. And so we have a real opportunity to get some power back right now, and people have to participate. The second thing is, and I'm starting to see it more and more and I find it so refreshing as people are finally speaking up and speaking out and demanding more and demanding differently. My father is out there door knocking every night no matter... I'm like there's an election currently, I don't even know what it is, but he's doing it. And I think that we all have to engage in our democracy right now in order to take it back and demand more. And so vote. It's really important and so few of us do it.

Peggy Clark:

Right. So I think all of you are building a new women's movement and building a new, Katherine as you described it, kind of a social construct. But as we reflect on this 100th anniversary, usually you hit a 100th anniversary and it's a celebration you say this is great it's been 100 years. But there's a lot of poignancy and difficulty to reflecting on the schisms because between the women in the feminist movement and Native Americans and blacks. And tell me how you think we can learn from the lessons of the past to rebuild the women's movement in a different way, right now. Katherine, can I start with you on that?

Katherine Grainger:

Sure. I mean, I think that we have touched on it quite a bit where we talked about that any movement needs to be multiracial, and really kind of lean into the fact that women will be the majority in this country if we unite together and work together. And so I think that that is that's crucial. I also feel like we have really kind of run from what is patriarchy and tried to make excuses for it. So we are in a system where it is not designed for women to be successful, and we are constantly coming up against patriarchal barriers. That we're not doing anything to on Earth, we make excuses for them, or we have an exceptionalism mentality.

Katherine Grainger:

And so in the 70s, universal childcare was front and center and being called for, and we chipped away and chipped away and chipped away at it. But now that's radical again. And so we really just need to get back to and this is where I started from. I think this is a celebration. I mean, it is a celebration that women have had the right to vote for 100 years. It's also the beginning of an arc for building something better. And I think we need to lean into that and really fight tooth and nail to start to do this excavation

work that we were talking about at the beginning of this segment where we can build something different.

Katherine Grainger:

And the last thing I would just say is that if you look at the world leaders in this country who have handled COVID beautifully, they're majority women. And this goes to Ai-Jen's point about our leadership is different. And again, going back to the celebration, we had a significant amount of women running for election this year. It was a milestone. The fact that we haven't broken through yet is frustrating, but I keep thinking that we're at that precipice. And I think we're kind of at that midpoint of the arc until we really realize our power.

Peggy Clark:

Cecile, do you think we're at the precipice? What are your thoughts about that?

Cecile Richards:

Oh, absolutely. It's a new day and it feels different. But I just want to underscore what Katherine said. I mean, this is long term work. This isn't like no matter what happens in November, there's a lot still to do ahead. And in some ways, that's just the beginning of what has to happen, but I think it's important. One of the conversations that we have a lot at Supermajority, especially with a very young staff was just so I know idealistic envision areas that we've talked a lot of time about equality. And we really don't talk about equity and all the issues that the women's movement has been fighting on, whether it's childcare access, whether it's equal pay, whether it's educational opportunity, running for office, it's experienced differently for women of color in particular.

Cecile Richards:

And part of the work we have to do is really center the experience of women of color. Because until we understand that, until white women understand that we're actually not going to build the world we want to build. And that's work we got to do every day and that's why it's frankly been such an incredible journey to be on with Ai-Jen and Katherine our friend Alicia Garza who's another part of our merry band and Jess Morales Rocketto and Deirdre Schifeling is that beginning to learn from each other, about our blind spots and all the work that has to happen. I do think that has not happened in my lifetime in a way that it is now. And again, I want to give a lot of credit to young women who are demanding this.

Peggy Clark:

Absolutely. in a completely different way. And I love the way you frame that center the experience of women of color, center it, it's not peripheral, centered. And then you know, I think also you reflecting on the way we talk about white supremacy and patriarchy now, and we didn't really talk about that, before those were kind of third rail words that if you use them people thought you were being extremist, but in fact, the moment we're in shows that to be different.

Peggy Clark:

So you know, I want to ask two things. One is, what are you worrying about right now? I mean, maybe that's a silly question, because we're all carrying around these huge worries. But as it relates to this moment of trying to realize women's rights more fully in this year, what are you worried about?

Ai-Jen Poo:

Yeah, I'll say that. I'm worried. A little bit about too much symbolism and signaling and not enough action and real change. And I'm just thinking about everything from how wonderful culturally it is that people came out and clapped for essential workers every night for months. But to this day, we are still fighting for basic rights and health and safety for essential workers and the distance between our awareness and when lives change feels like it's too long, too far.

Ai-Jen Poo:

And so I think that some of this work is very long term work. And I really want us to think about how we move structural change forward, solutions that really get at the root of why there's so much fragility in our society and our economy right now. And build it in a way with courage that we've never marshaled before, frankly, at least not in my memory, with the kind of courage that that meets the challenges ahead. And I wanted to bring in your question about kind of, what are we celebrating? What are we not celebrating? I was thinking about the many women of color, especially Black women, who've played such a role in strengthening our democracy over many, many generations, and every election.

Ai-Jen Poo:

But I'm thinking in particular about a woman named Dorothy Bolden, who is from Atlanta, Georgia, and she was the founder of the National Domestic Workers Union and she was a neighbor of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. And in the height of the civil rights movement, she knocked on his door and said, "I want to be a part of the civil rights movement. Domestic Workers like me, we want to be a part." And he said, "Well go organize domestic workers." And that is what she did. And the only two requirements for being a member of the National Domestic Workers Union were one that you're a domestic worker and two that you are registered to vote. And I think each of us in our different worlds, in our different movements, our different issues, our different concerns and priorities, we can be like, it's this and it's vote. And it's like, that's part of how we get from the narrative and the kind of symbols to the real, factual change.

Peggy Clark:

That's really beautifully said. So I want to turn to each of you personally, and we all, all of the viewers listening to this right now and so many people are suffering right now and feeling strange in a way we haven't felt before. And it is true that you are role models to so many, all three of you and many, many people follow you and Ai-Jen, we watched you at the Academy Awards and Cecile, we watched you doing battle for our reproductive rights. And we've thought about who you are as individuals. And we see you show up day after day. So how are you taking care of yourself right now? What is some of the self care that you're using that's keeping you strong in this moment? Really unparalleled moment and pressure? Cecile, can we start with you?

Cecile Richards:

Ai-Jen knows I hate this is like my most hated question.

Peggy Clark:

Oh, I didn't know.

Cecile Richards:

So, yeah, I can make it short and sweet. But one my dog, Ollie, I think we've all talked about even before this call. I know that there's a dog to be rescued in New York City. That's probably too flip to say, but everyone's got a rescue dog. Ollie's keeping me sane. And being with my kids. I think that's it. But I also think there is... Just, want to bust a myth real quick. I think there are folks who believe that for those of us who do social justice work as our job that we are these put upon, beaten down folk and it is a privilege of a lifetime to get to do this work.

Cecile Richards:

It's not easy, it is hard. But to get up every day and feel like you can actually begin to like move things a little bit towards a better place, is a privilege that very, very few people in this country, in this world ever have. And so, even though I like to do things and make my own pasta and do kind of things like that, that are just fun. I have such joy in my work that I want to make sure that I never minimize how important that is to me.

Peggy Clark:

Okay, that's great. Katherine, what about you?

Katherine Grainger:

Well, I agree with Cecile and I always say that the revolution needs to be based enjoy and so I spent a lot of time dancing in my bathrobe. That brings me a lot of joy. I usually am on the road about three weeks out of the month. And so this pause for me has been kind of exceptional. I've never spent as much time in my apartment ever. And I use my oven for storage, mail storage, I would put my mail in there, it's been in there for years. And I actually took it out and I'm learning how to cook for the first time in my entire life. And it's wonderful and it's actually allowing me to kind of decide how I want to eat and when and it feels like quite a luxury.

Peggy Clark:

That's great. I love that story about the oven. Ai-Jen, what about you?

Ai-Jen Poo:

I think Cecile and I are kind of sisters from another mother on this question because my big slogan is winning is self care. Which I really believe and I do yoga. I tried to sleep and what COVID has taught me is the incredible joy of a walk in the neighborhood. So I've been walking a lot more and just kind of slowing down at different moments. But I will say that yeah, the way that I will feel cared for is if everybody goes to vote in November and we win.

Peggy Clark:

That's right. Can we turn voting into a dance party? That's the way we started this conversation so what song are moving to guys? Maybe Ai-Jen, I was so taken by when you started caring across generations. You said "Starting a social movement is sort of like a love affair." You have the deep passion and you put you make a mix tape with your songs. So if we had a playlist for the women's movement, what do we put on it? Anybody want to throw some songs in for us to dance to?

Cecile Richards:

I have a playlist at Supermajority and I think you could even get it on... Probably we can send it to you. I've spent a lot of days on a bus across this country and listen to everything. But I will say the biggest joy is every staff meeting we start at Supermajority starts with Beyonce, and it is it completely changes the mood, you can do anything.

Peggy Clark:

Perfect. We love it. We love it. Okay, we want to get that playlist. Maybe we can send it around to all of our viewers. Anybody want to add anything else about songs or dance moves before we go to Q&A?

Katherine Grainger:

I mean, I think we should always end on Beyonce.

Peggy Clark:

We need to always end on Beyonce, right. Let's go to some of our viewers.

Tricia Johnson:

Crystal Logan, Vice President of community programs and engagement at the Aspen Institute reads questions from the online audience.

Cristal Logan:

Our first question is as funding for childcare is discussed, is the living wage also being explored for high quality childcare providers so that the childcare industry does not have to continue to recreate substandard pay scale and workers without benefits, which therefore leads to our children receiving substandard care? Who wants to take that?

Ai-Jen Poo:

Well, there is a lot of movement on child care on every front. And just last week, Vice President Biden released the third plank of his economic agenda. The first plank was infrastructure. The second plank was climate. And the third plank is the care economy. And it's really the first time there's been a major presidential campaign that has made the care economy a core part of the economic agenda, as opposed to siloing it as part of the women's agenda or some other piece.

Ai-Jen Poo:

And major investments in the childcare workforce is at the heart of that proposal. So making child care jobs, living wage jobs with benefits and real economic security and the right to a union and a voice at work is core to that vision. And so as is training and is a whole vision around innovation, so there's a lot there. And it's not just childcare. It's also long term care, which is a growing issue. As our older population in this country grows, and we've seen through the COVID crisis, just how unprepared we are for that. There is a whole vision around expanding home and community based services for the aging and people with disabilities in the proposal.

Ai-Jen Poo:

So I think that there's a lot that is in the Vice President's agenda. And then I think it's up to us to really push Congress to move forward on the visionary proposals like the one that Cecile mentioned with childcare. And we've been working on an agenda that is called Universal family care. The idea that there

should one day be one fund that we all contribute to that we can all benefit from that helps us pay for child care, long term care, support for people with disabilities and paid family leave. Basically everything you need to take care of your family as a working person.

Cristal Logan:

Thank you. Our next question is we've seen such leadership coming from our younger population on several issues, gun violence, structural racism, etc. What is your message for this group on the opportunity of now related to voting?

Cecile Richards:

It's really interesting. That was a question. Cristal, sorry, I'm going to just jump in here. Ai-Jen and Katherine. Because I was just pulling up the numbers again, and 4 million young people turn 18 every year. So doing some just quick math that's 16 million young people who are not eligible to vote four years ago, who can go vote this fall. So if nothing else, investing in the organizations that work with them, investing in them as leaders and giving them opportunities, it seems obvious, but these are the these are the efforts that are the least funded, the least supported.

Cecile Richards:

And it's just funny. We just did at Supermajority, we just offered up a seven week training program for young leaders. And we thought we could take maybe 800, we had 1,800 young women applying the first 10 days. Young, overwhelmingly young women of color, just eager, eager to have an opportunity to participate. And so I really think it's a question to ask for the groups that you work with, what are you doing with young people to help them be the leaders that we need them to be and that they already are, they're just looking for support and opportunity.

Cristal Logan:

Our next question is, Ai-Jen Poo talked about the importance of women organizing and growing together, and the issue of a lack of benefits among many essential workers in America. What are some ways that we can support women in these essential positions so that they can organize, grow and advocate for themselves in a system that is failing to protect them?

Ai-Jen Poo:

I love this question. I would say that to really reach out to all your elected officials and candidates in your area and let them know that essential worker protections are really, really important to you and should be a priority. And I would support women's organizations and organizations that are organizing essential workers. The National Domestic Workers Alliance works with women who are working as homecare workers, nannies and house cleaners. There's a group called United for respect that works with retail workers. There are unions who've been fighting really hard to unionize workers who've been going on strike, teachers who are having to go on strike to keep the children that they educate safe. So there's just a lot of organizing and activism happening, support those campaigns and support their demands.

Cristal Logan:

Our next question is what can individual women in the US do to further these causes other than voting and supporting politicians? How do we encourage the private sector and our employers to play a part?



Katherine Grainger:

You know, I'll just jump in quickly. I had experience in the marriage equality movement around this where private sector folks were coming out and saying, we're not going to set up shop in this state because you're anti gay, or come work for us and we will have packages that recognize your families and are good on equality. And really spoke up and put their resources behind homophobic and anti gay states and elected officials.

Katherine Grainger:

And we haven't seen that be mobilized around gender in the same way. And I think there's a huge opportunity to do so. So women who and men who are in positions of power, they can really stand up and say this is what it looks like to have equality in not only in our company, but we're not going to go to places that are bad on abortion or bad on pay equity, etc, etc. and take a stand. Because capitalism is in our water. And that is what we care about. And when people say this is going to have a cost benefit to you, that you discriminate, it actually makes a difference. And so there's a real opportunity, I think, for all of us to use our bully pulpit and that way, and we've seen it be beneficial with other movements.

Cristal Logan:

Our next question is what is the most effective way to get out the vote for change in a very gerrymandered district?

Cecile Richards:

Well I'll take that. Yeah, we have to change obviously the lines and so many elections this year will state elections will determine whether lines are redrawn post census in a non partisan way. So working on local elections and statewide elections is incredibly important. There isn't really any other... There's no quick fix right now to doing that, but you're exactly right.

Cecile Richards:

I think the thing that is important to remember is, at least I come from Texas where we've had... I mean, drawing lines that are partisan, is just like in the bloodstream. It's like what we've always done. We are seeing women, we are seeing women of color, we are seeing young people win elections that everyone wrote off. And so I also think it's just as I think we saw, and we certainly saw in Texas in Beto O'Rourke's race, we saw in Stacy's race and other places where, as Katherine said in the beginning, there's a lot of places where I mean, we don't vote as a people.

Cecile Richards:

And so if you can expand the electorate, and that means getting out there, doing the grassroots work and at this point, of course, not going door to door but texting voters, the kind of thing we do at supermajority, you can actually expand the electorate and I think focusing on that is a way we can actually flip some seats and then influence the way lines are drawn so that we have a congress and we have legislatures that more truly reflect the diversity of the country.

Ai-Jen Poo:

And just something quickly to add to that is that we can in most states also vote for judges that draw these lines, and so don't ignore those races as well. It's the whole ballot makes those determinations.

Cristal Logan:

And our last question is what's the number one thing you think we should be advocating for to better support and empower American women right now?

Ai-Jen Poo:

Well, I'll say one that is never popular, but I still feel very strongly about which ism I'll go to the Equal Rights Amendment. We have not passed the ERA in this country. What it does is we put in the constitution that you can't discriminate on the basis of sex. That's all it says. And how we use it is solely up to us. So you could have an entire campaign of lawyers, activists, policymakers, etc, that could reinterpret how women are protected on the basis of gender in this country. And so I think that that would be my thing.

Cristal Logan:

Anything else to add?

Katherine Grainger:

I would underscore the importance of the care economy. I think it's something that is fundamental to all of our lives, and we've never invested in it, we've never supported it and we've just left it up to each individual to try to figure it out. And it's impossible. And I think if we put that foundation in place, it would unlock so much power and potential among women, but really among everyone.

Cecile Richards:

Elect a woman Vice President, which it's getting closer to women, electing a woman president. And having a government that looks like us, as we have seen on the Supreme Court with Sonia Sotomayor, Elena Kagan, Ruth, having a government that begins to actually look like the people that represents is the most radical and revolutionary thing that we could do. So I hope that women will vote. I hope you will support women who are running for office. But I hate to leave this call without at least referencing the fact that 100 years after the beginning of suffrage, we have the first, best chance to actually put a woman in the executive branch whoever she may be.

Cristal Logan:

That's a great place to end. Thank you so much for this amazing conversation.

Tricia Johnson:

Ai-Jen Poo is executive director of the National Domestic Workers Alliance, Cecile Richards is the former president of the Planned Parenthood Federation of America. Katherine Grainger is an adjunct professor at New York University's Wagner graduate school of public service, and Peggy Clark is vice president of policy programs at the Aspen Institute. Their conversation, held July 28, was part of the McCloskey speaker series at the Institute.

Tricia Johnson:

The Bridge Podcast a sister show from the Aspen Institute is also carrying this conversation. The podcast pairs wise women from different generations and geographies and revelatory conversations about what matters most. Find this conversation and others featuring Cecile Richards, Ai-Jen Poo, Madeleine

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