

Michael Donovan: Hello, I'm Michael Donovan, associate director of the Penn State *Evidence-to-Impact Podcast*. Today I have Chris Witko joining me, associate director of the School of Public Policy and professor of public policy and political science at Penn State University, as well as Mike Pipe, Centre County chair of the Board of Commissioners and co-chair of the Election Board of Centre County. Today we have quite a panel of discussions here to cover, quite a few items, including challenges to local government during the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly with a focus on the 2020 elections, including all of the issues surrounding that, including vaccine distribution, closing schools, emergency management, and just general challenges to public policy making. Before we dig in, I'd like to give my guests an opportunity to introduce themselves. Commissioner Pipe, or as Mike as you'd like us to call you, please give our listeners an idea of your background, please.

Mike Pipe: Sure, thank you. I'm gonna be entering in my 10th year as commissioner here in Centre County. It's been a privilege to serve the citizens. Certainly, when you sign up for county commissioner, you don't know exactly what the community and the country is gonna bring you. We certainly had a really interesting past year with this pandemic. I'm happy to share my viewpoint and talk a little bit about the life of the commissioner during these last few months.

Michael Donovan: Great, thank you. Welcome. Chris, could you give us a background?

Chris Witko: Sure, yeah. Like you said, I'm the associate director of the School of Public Policy, a fairly new school here at Penn State which was started just a couple a years ago. Got our second group of students comin' in this fall, which has been really nice. Before I was here, I was at the University of South Carolina, and I did my PhD at the University of North Carolina.

Michael Donovan: Excellent, thank you and welcome, as well. As I mentioned, we have quite a few items to discuss today. There's quite a bit happening in the world these days that is very much focused on your areas of expertise. My first item of business here is for Mike. As you mentioned, I'd love to have a view of some of the biggest challenges that you and your fellow commissioners and the staff of the county have really encountered over the last month. How do you see some of the larger social and economic impacts of the pandemic really affecting local government and the local communities?

Mike Pipe: Sure, thank you, Michael. I appreciate the opportunity to be here and look forward to the discussion with you and Chris today.

Typically, county commissioners really function as a fiscal, budgetary, and contractual oversight of county government. I think an argument could be made that county government and county commissioners in Pennsylvania have played even more a larger role than ever here during the pandemic than we ever have before. Many of the decisions and many of the actions that each county has taken has affected the operations and the lives of those citizens who live in their counties. Our biggest challenge was, initially, during the stay-at-home orders. We saw a lot of different opinions, the struggles of local businesses come up. We as county governments did our best to try to put good information out there regarding the stay-at-home orders, CDC guidance, department of health information. It became a challenge after a while for many counties that did not have health departments.

The vast majority of counties in Pennsylvania, mostly rural, did not have county health departments and were not able to as smoothly put out some of that information. The Pennsylvania Department of Health really became our department of health. We did our best in Centre County, and I will argue that most counties did. The counties that really did have the departments of health at a county level, that had those relationships, has those partnerships already in place, I really feel that they were ahead of the curve. We slowly caught up to them. We're now in a stage where there's light at the end of the tunnel. We have the opportunity for the vaccines that are coming out in the next few months and into 2021. Our challenge now becomes working with our emergency management folks at the state and local level here to help with the vaccine distribution.

Our next big challenge is to talk to our citizens about who is first in that line. There's many different categories that the CDC's putting out. It's going to become very incumbent upon us to explain to our citizens why the CDC and the Pennsylvania Department of Health and our governor is putting those things out there. I think that's the next tension point and the next thing that we have to be very aware of as we go into the future. I think that we've tried to do our best when it comes to making decisions based upon data and research. At times, we've been building the plane as we've been flying it. That's been a challenge, as well. I think that as much as we can continue to engage with stake holders, constituents, businesses, you name it, and explain to them why we're putting certain information out there and making certain decisions, I think we'll be in a better position as we move forward.

Michael Donovan: Great, thank you. I really have to applaud all the work of Centre County, Commissioner Pipe, as well as the other commissioners in righting the ship here as one of your constituents, as well. Thank

you so much for your tireless work the last 10, 12 and continuing many months ahead.

Mike Pipe: I appreciate that. I was gonna say appreciate that. It certainly is a team effort. Thank you.

Michael Donovan: Along the same lines, Chris or Dr. Witko or Chris or however you'd like to be called—

Chris Witko: Chris, yeah.

Michael Donovan: Perfect. Awesome. Many of your years in academia and also in the public sector has really focused on unemployment and inequality broadly. As we've seen unemployment really skyrocketing across the country and today's job numbers be remarkably low in terms of growth and we don't really have much of an indication of that changing any time soon, could you really please discuss what you've seen that's different about this pandemic versus previous recessions or other times of economic distress that you've studied or experienced?

Chris Witko: Yeah.

Michael Donovan: Also, really how has this pain been distributed in an unequal way?

Chris Witko: Yeah, that's a great question. It's a really important question. I think there's a couple things that are a little bit different about this pandemic-induced unemployment. The big one is how quickly the unemployment came on. Between March and April of 2020, unemployment went from about 4 percent to 15 percent, so that was in about a month. If you look at the last big spike in unemployment we had, which was during the financial crisis, it took a few months to go from just about 4 percent to 10 percent. The rapidity of this was just unprecedented, I think, even if you went back and had good data on the Great Depression. Unemployment got higher, but it would've taken a much longer time to reach that point. One consequence of that is that the systems that would typically deal with this sort of stuff were just completely overwhelmed.

The unemployment insurance system, particularly in certain states—there was a lot of media coverage of Florida, in particular. Just absolutely impossible for people to get through on the phone. There were people who, after trying for a couple weeks to get unemployment insurance, just couldn't even do it and just gave up. Employment has increased a bit since then because of some of the reopening and things like that. Like you said, alluded to anyway, there was a pretty bad jobs report today. The unemployment rate is

officially six point seven percent. I was just reading. That is actually an understatement because a lot of people have simply left the labor market and stopped looking for employment altogether. It's a huge problem, and it's gonna be a problem for a number of months and a number of years.

In terms of the inequities, there's a lot of them. I don't think this is necessarily unique to this recession. It always is gonna hit certain groups harder when you have larger spells of unemployment, typically the less educated, more marginal people in the labor market and things like that. We are seeing that pattern, and maybe it's a little bit more extreme now. I think one thing is, even for people who are still employed, there's a lot of inequity. People who have PhDs and college degrees and professional jobs are able to work from home relatively safely. If the kids are homeschooling, then they may be driving you nuts. That's still better than exposing yourself to Coronavirus everyday at work. Whereas people who are lower educated workers are more likely to be out there on the frontlines, workin' in grocery stores and retail and things like that.

Of course, with the exception of healthcare professionals who are pretty highly educated, typically, and putting themselves on the line. There's a lot of inequities even with people who are still working. In terms of the unemployment, it's really differential across industries, right? The hospitality industry and that sort of thing has really been hit hard. I was lookin' up some numbers. From February to April 2020, employment in leisure and hospitality dropped 42 percent. The number of people employed in that industry dropped 42 percent. In most industries, it was 5 percent, 10 percent, something like that. Because you see workers working in different industries, different types of workers working in different industries, it's gonna of course impact them differently. Race and ethnicity has been a big factor in determining unemployment.

I mean, unemployment rates have gone up for every demographic group, of course. From February to June 2020, the unemployment rate for whites went from three percent to nine percent. For blacks it went from 7 to 15 percent. For Hispanics it went from 5 to 15 percent. We're also seeing gender inequities in this. Initially, actually, the initial round of unemployment didn't seem to affect men and women too differently. What happened is this fall, as schools—lot of kids were staying home, women dropped out of the labor market at much higher rates than men. There was a September—this was from an NPR story I was lookin' at. There were about a—more than a million Americans dropped out of the labor market, and 80 percent of them were women. Eighty percent

of the people who dropped out of the labor market in September were women.

That's right around the time that it was clear that schools—and a lot of areas were gonna be at, maybe, half time, half in person, half at home. Unfortunately, that childcare burden and that child education burden does fall disproportionately to women in our society. They've taken a major hit in the labor market. Unfortunately, that's gonna be something that's gonna have repercussions throughout their careers because droppin' out of the labor market is very bad for your progression in your profession or at your job and getting pay raises and stuff like that. That's gonna be an inequity this is gonna—if we don't actually try to take specific steps to remedy it, it's gonna be with us, actually, for decades for all of these women who have dropped out of the labor market.

Finally, let me just say this is fairly typical, but lower-income workers have been crushed by unemployment much more so than higher-income workers. A Pew survey from August showed that 33 percent of people in lower-income households reported that they or someone in their household had lost a job compared to 14 percent for upper-income households. We're seeing some of the underlying inequities that we have in our society, which have really been growing worse over the last few decades. In terms of income inequality, the racial stratification, and ethnic differences, that's been there for a long time. It's really just exacerbating all these underlying inequities that have been there for a long time and really laying them bare for us to see.

Michael Donovan: Really unbelievable circumstances that so many of our fellow Americans are experiencing and a lot more pain to come, unfortunately. Going from a macro-orientation towards the micro, the county level here in Centre County Pennsylvania, Mike, as a longtime resident of Centre County myself, I know that there is significant socioeconomic differences and employment differences, backgrounds that are very unique. That can result in inequalities as well. As you've seen other localities in the state government here in Pennsylvania balance the merits of shutdowns in various ways and more targeted orientations now as we've learning a little bit going—as the pandemic has continued, what have we really learned from your perspective? What can we apply going forward, especially with an orientation towards reducing that inequality that Chris discussed?

Mike Pipe: Well, as Chris said, the pandemic has really laid bare the inequities and inequalities when it comes to economic, racial. You name it. It has shown a super clear mirror of where we are as a country, state,

and a community. One of the most disparate things that has occurred or the disparity we've seen is through the access to broadband. Over the last several years, broadband has been seen as something that is an ultimate connector to job opportunities, family connections, to healthcare. You name it. It used to be you could be able to chat with people and play videogames online, social media. It has completely been—every aspect of our economy is really going into data connection. From that, I think the decision makers for the shutdowns and working at home, which I think most people agreed with, they were really the ones that were ready to be connected and had strong connections to their computers and broadband.

I think, it wasn't the people who were making the decisions had disparate connections with broadband. That really made the connections or the people who weren't able to get broadband, even decent DSL access—left them further behind as we've moved even more towards a work-at-home community and economy. It'll be very interesting to see, as we go forward, to appreciate the fact that, if we are going to—if businesses are going to make the determination—we don't need to lease as much space. We don't need as much footprint in the office. We wanna give a little bit better of a work-life balance. We at county government are having these same discussions. We think we're maybe half a year out from having to make some—once we see the pandemic really start to subside and vaccine distribution, so middle of 2021, we might be making some permanent decisions to say hundreds of employees may now be working from home going forward rather than coming into the office.

We need to situate that in a space where, if somebody wants to work in Philipsburg for county government or wants to work—or lives in Snow Shoe and wants to work for county government who has some issues with broadband, how do we, then, say to them the only opportunities you have are if you can work from home? Does that, then, cause more of a concentration and issues when it comes to—we're just hiring people who have broadband access. Again, that can perpetuate poverty. If we have good jobs, healthcare, retirement benefits but you can only work for us if you have a strong broadband connection, that's really even going to make it even more difficult. I think that means that government really—we can make small investments at the county level. I think most commissioners would agree.

It's really the state and the federal government that has to come forward in a new deal type, really huge broad—that needs to be the number one thing we're doing. I think you're gonna see that affect, then, transportation infrastructure when it comes to roads. That

typically was on the top of the list. If we're not driving as much, if we're not using mass transit as much, do we put that money into broadband? I think that really the thing forward for Centre County and many other communities is how do we keep—if we're going to be changing the way we work and live, how do we make sure we have the infrastructure in place and we don't further exacerbate the poverty we have in our communities? I think that's the big thing going forward that we can learn from the pandemic and make strategic investments going forward.

Michael Donovan: Along the same line, we've discussed in the past how the pandemic, actually, in some ways can serve as a bit of a catalyst for innovation in our public policy making. Could you discuss some of the—the role of innovation or opportunities that Centre County has seen in orienting more towards a digital environment and also how that can leave people behind?

Mike Pipe: Absolutely. As part of the CARES Act funding that every county received—every state and county received in, I would say, the middle of 2020, we were able to make strategic investments into allowing more of our workforce to work from home. That included additional servers we procured, more access licenses for basically logging in from your desktop from your home. We bought more laptops. You name it. We now have all that infrastructure in place that I don't know think that we're talking about just recycling it and returning it. We now have hundreds of thousands of dollars invested in that. How do we use that moving forward? We've purchased larger access points for broadband in our buildings here at the county because we need more access points for people who are working at home and a larger broadband access.

I think that you're gonna see many county governments, maybe even state governments—I don't know this for sure—basically saying to their employees "You can now work from home." If there wasn't a pandemic, maybe that would've taken 5, 10 years. With the pandemic, it's taken months to fast forward us to that point. We are seeing the private sector in certain places in Centre County reach out to us because they would like to know how did we do it. How did county government do it? The private sector, with the money they received from PPP and certain loans—excuse me—that was just making sure that they could run their business. County government, we were able to take some of the money because we did have tax revenues that we received that we could still make sure the operations were going. We were able to basically invest that into new infrastructure.

We've gotten private sector people reaching out to us saying "You had these funds to do it. How did you do it? What did it look like?"

What are you seeing so far?" I do think it is important for us just not to jump forward and go in that space without some data and research. We're looking at are we still able to serve constituents in our community in the way that we were before the pandemic? Do we see improvements? Are employees enjoying that? We do have some employees that prefer coming to work. They prefer "I'm going to leave my home for nine hours or so. I'm gonna go to work. I like my 30-minute commute. I appreciate that.

But some employees are saying, "No, actually prefer this. It's worked better for my work-life balance." Again, it's having those kinda conversations with our employees and having that. I think coming out of this all, I think businesses, private sector, nonprofits, government can have actually better relationships with their employees because they have the ability to say with them "We're talking about maybe reformatting and rechanging how you're gonna be interfacing with your career, and we wanna know more about that." I think, at the end of the day, the human resources can really be—it can get us to a better place with how we're interfacing with our employees. Yes, we've been on fast forward for 2020 for sure.

Michael Donovan: Chris, I'm interested in your perspective, stepping back from the county level to the broader state level as well as some our discussions on federal level policy making. Through your career you've studied how the public and organized interests have different effects on the policy making process. I wonder what your take is on the current policy making climate where we have almost these natural experiments of very unique applications of public health guidance in different states, in different localities, and how those—we're potentially measuring those outcomes and effects and how the public engagement in some of these decisions is really a unique environment from past circumstances. I'm thinking about masking mandates, which have had staunch opposition in various localities and from various segments of the public. How does this level of public engagement with policy making really compare to your experiences, and what are some consequences or positive outcomes from it?

Chris Witko: Yeah, those are good questions. The first part, about different states, and even counties within states, doing different things and setting up opportunities to understand how these different public health or other programs work, I think is a good one. There's gonna be a lot of studies comin' out. This pandemic has been terrible, but it's going to birth thousands of dissertations, I predict, for academics in the coming years and lots of papers and even books. Yeah, we're able to take that data, and we're able to see do mask mandates matter? There's a study a saw of Kansas floatin' around

that seemed to show that, in the states that adopted—or the counties, rather, that adopted mask mandates, there's been a slower rate of increase of Coronavirus compared to those that didn't.

There's some methodological challenges. We don't need to get too deep into them. One thing I would say when you're reading this studies in *The New York Times*, just keep in mind that the counties that adopt mask mandates are not the same, probably in a lot of ways, to the counties that don't adopt mask mandates. It would go the same way for states, right? States that have really reacted vigorously with public health measures to Coronavirus are quite different in a lot of ways than states that aren't doing that. It's hard to make apples to apples comparisons. We have all sorts of ways we try to do that, but it is a challenge. In terms of the public engagement on these issues and, in some cases, public opposition on these issues, it's definitely there. One thing we need to keep in mind, particularly with the mask mandates, is—or mask practices, not even the mandates—masks are actually not terribly unpopular if you look at public opinion surveys.

I was looking at an Ipsos poll that came out just yesterday, in fact. This was a nationally representative sample. Seventy-two percent of people would support a state law mandating mask usage, and 69 percent would support a federal law. It's a pretty substantial portion of the population. Even in the summer, I saw a poll that showed that even a majority of Republicans were fine with a mask mandate. Now, what you answer to a survey could be a little bit different than what you do in your daily life. This is anecdotal. While I'm down here in Delaware County near Philadelphia and I haven't seen somebody in a store without a mask since, I think, April, May, something like that—it's nearly 100 percent—and my correspondents in the Centre County environments tell me, once you get out of state college, it's a little bit lower rate of mask usage.

I have friends in various parts of the country. I ask them what's goin' on where they are. It's hit or miss in more red, rural areas, I think you could say, in terms of actual mask usage. That's where a unified message coming from government, coming from political leaders in both parties, would really be helpful. There is a loud contingent of anti-maskers. We've seen protests at state capitals. We've seen probably, if you're on Facebook—I'm not on Facebook, but I'm on Twitter. The genre of mask refusers at stores having meltdowns is entertaining. We do have to remember, it's a pretty small group of people that are militant anti-maskers. We just need to keep that in mind. Even the protests that have been staged in various state capitals have really not attracted a large number of

people for the most part. I think a little—we just need to keep that in mind.

A little dicier proposition is when it comes to shutdowns because I think there you do get into real—really, what does it take wear a mask? If you're refusing to wear a mask, it's bizarre because you put a mask on, and you can do everything else you wanted to do. You can breathe through a mask. The people that have 'em under their nose, that's a little bit confusing to me. The mask is kind of not a big deal. When we start talking about shutting down restaurants, start talking about shutting down daycares and schools, I think that's where you do get into a lot of controversy. That's where you get more of a lobbying presence, in particular from the restaurant industry and things like that who obviously don't wanna be shut down. State government officials, even county government county officials, do have to be realistic about where their tax revenue comes from.

In a lot of states and localities, it's things like sales tax, restaurant taxes, entertainment taxes, and things like that. That is a pretty controversial issue. Even as our numbers have crept up much higher than they were in the spring in Pennsylvania, we haven't seen the same type of shutdowns that we've seen. I think some of that is because of the opposition that you do get and then legitimate questions about, sure, it's bad to have kids in school and have 'em exposed to the Coronavirus. It's also bad to not have kids in school and maybe learning at home in a home environment that isn't necessarily the best. There's a lot of dicey questions when we come to shutdowns and things that I don't think exist with masks. One thing Biden wants to do when he comes in is have a 100 days of mask wearing. If Republicans would get onboard with that, I think that that would make a big difference. Apparently, based on the studies, it would seem—it seems to help in terms of the spread of the virus.

Michael Donovan: It's fascinating to think about how communication and language matters in this case. I know that in some of your work, Chris, you've done some messaging trials and different testing of messaging. I recently saw some work coming out of veteran pollster Frank Luntz about how different populations perceive the actual use of language. In circumstances where something was referred to a lockdown, it was perceived more negatively than a stay-at-home order versus a protocol—or in addition to a protocol as a COVID-19 safety measure versus a mandate or directives or controls and how that really gets at some of the—how we communicate these public health messages really matters in how it bolsters—it foments anger about personal liberty and those

challenges around that. I don't know if you have any comment on that.

Chris Witko: Yeah, I think that's a very good point. I think there's two parts of that. One is the consistency of the message. In our highly polarized times, if you have Republican leaders saying, well, masks are nonsense or how we shouldn't have shutdowns, then you have Democrats saying another thing, of course it's gonna polarized, even if the public health advice is consistent with one of those perspectives. That's a problem. What we need is, when we have good science and we have good public health consensus, we need leaders on both sides to really be embracing that and getting it out there. Then you mentioned the other kind of framing stuff.

Yeah, whether you call it a lockdown or whether you call it a temporary business closure, those really evoke different images. There's been some studies of this regarding mask usage, as well. What type of arguments actually work to convince people to wear masks? Is it better to focus on the effect on the community? One issue is a lot of young, particularly males, feel like, well, they're not very susceptible to Coronavirus. Maybe we need to message them in a particular way where, yeah, you might—you'll probably be fine, but maybe you'll kill granny. That's not so nice. Different messages and even different messages with different populations, that's something that is being studied, whether to focus on the social benefits, the individual benefits, and things like that. There's a number of studies comin' out on that.

We'll see more in the future. The next pandemic, let's hope it's a long ways away. I think we'll have a lot more knowledge about how to do these things the next time around because back in really the last big, big one was 1918. There just wasn't all of the social science and behavioral science research goin' on at that time. Next time around, we should be much better equipped in terms of messaging and even in terms of knowledge of what public health interventions work and which ones don't work so well.

Michael Donovan: Mike, I wonder if you have any anecdotal evidence from encountering your constituents and the value of really knowing your audience and how to message this and frame some of the guidance. You're certainly on the front line of this in Centre County here in Pennsylvania.

Mike Pipe: I think there were several lessons that we in county government here in Centre County took from the initial few months. I think that one of the things that was important was to appreciate that we need to thank and constantly appreciate the work that was being done by our citizens and our residents that were masking, that were doing

the stay-at-homes, and whose businesses were affected. When we looked at the whole state back in April and May, we saw that we were doing a better job of containing the virus. We were doing a better job of staying at home. There was a lot of data that was put out there to give us governments better understanding of how much their populations were moving and their citizens were moving.

Centre County was one of the lowest in the state. That was in terms of staying at home. We had about 60 percent of our citizens staying at home during certain parts in the pandemic. Other communities that were seeing a lot more transmission in Pennsylvania were not, 40 percent, 45 percent. That 15 percent made a big deal. That fact that we were coming back to them and saying thank you so much for what you were doing and really appreciating what they were doing, I think, was important. Also, I think that the governor in Pennsylvania has since realized that the stoplight coding of the different phases of the pandemic was unhelpful because, just anecdotally, when you get to the "green phase," people think green means go. They have since completely abandoned that. It also was a little too simplistic, I think, when you're talking about red, yellow, green, where there's a lot more nuances. Then you're gonna be throwing certain parts of the state back in the yellow where others are green.

I appreciated the point. The point was, basically, to bring everything to a halt, slow the pandemic, and then figure out things, and start to reopen in a mindful way, but it was very challenging. I think, at this point, I've been hearing a lot of elected officials essentially admit and appreciate the fact that the people who are not masking in December of 2020 will never mask. It's never gonna happen. The businesses that are still not complying with certain CDC guidance or DOH guidance are not going to start complying now. The messaging really needs to be to the people who are still on the fence. There might be still some people who are like, "Do we really need to do this for another few months?" The messaging really needs to be focused on them.

People who are always going to mask or—and you're gonna see, I think in 2022, 2023, people who are still masking if we don't have vaccine distributions going or vaccine inoculation, people who are actually getting them. If you're still seeing people who are not masking saying they don't need to get a vaccine, then you might still see people who are masking just out of a precaution. It's gonna stay with us. It's not as if vaccine's gonna happen, and we're all done. There's going to be—this is gonna linger for several years. I even think it's going to be, depending what happens with the

political landscape, be litigated on a national level coming into 2024, potentially.

This is with us in terms of the culture, in terms of the zeitgeist. I do think the message, really, right now—and we're very cognizant of that—needs to be on the people who are really stressed out, getting stressed, and feel like maybe 2021 they start to relax certain things. We're saying remain vigilant. Protect your neighbors. Making it very local. Do your part. Let's get this through as a community. Those are the messages that I think that really help and have shown to be working here in Centre County.

Michael Donovan:

I'd love to pivot a little bit here. Now that we are currently in the beginnings of December, about a month past the November elections, I'd love to discuss, Mike, a little bit more of your role as the co-chair of elections here in Centre County and a little bit of our really sacred responsibility to maintain the integrity of our elections amid a remarkably challenging time. I'd like to hear what it's like to really design and execute a remarkable mail-in ballot system for Centre County, which was quite successful in real number growth, and also just a general election in terms of polling locations, all the remarkable changes that had to be taken in as a result of the pandemic. What is that experience like for you?

Mike Pipe:

The board of elections here in Centre County, which I'm a part of, is made up of the three commissioners. We have a fantastic staff that exists in the elections office and has been doing for decades. In addition, due to certain funds that we got from the state and nonprofits as well, we were able to expand out and hire a lot of temporary workers to make sure that this general elections happened, either if people wanted to vote in person on election day, if they wanted to cast their ballot through a mail-in using the USPS or a drop box, or if they wanted to vote early. We worked with the Penn State at the Bryce Jordan Center to set up a really robust early voting location that was well used and heavily used by many, many voters here in Centre County.

I think we were very blessed to have a primary election that was actually one of the ones that was delayed by five weeks, so we were prepared to do an election in April, in late April. The state passed legislation nearly unanimously, hugely bipartisan, to delay it by five weeks to give our community some time to prepare and get some things in place in terms of proper protocols, proper PPE, making sure that we understood the fact that most people who work on election day as poll workers are in the vulnerable category when it comes to COVID-19. We really had to take, maybe, five additional weeks to just reformat. We were able to recruit more poll workers. We were able to consolidate a few precincts here in

Commented [DMW1]: Agreed. Let's cut it here at the conclusion of Mike's comments.

Commented [KMJ2]: This might be a good place to stop since we pivot to talking about the election. This is probably a little more than 30 minutes in.

Centre County due to the fact that some of our polling—this is never going to ever happen again. In 2019, we had polling locations that were at nursing homes, that were at senior-living facilities.

I don't think that's ever going to happen again. I cannot see another nursing home saying "Sure, come on in. Let's bring people in," just because of what we know about how viruses carry and the precautions that need to be taken. We needed to make some adjustments. We needed to make sure that we had in-person voting locations for every citizen here in Centre County. Out of that knowledge and the work that was done in the primary, we were able to really completely augment and stretch out a lot of the things that were happening in Centre County during the primary but gettin' ready for general. Now, hindsight's 20/20. We had the largest turnout ever in terms of the number of voters coming out to vote in Centre County. That was in addition to the fact—or we should appreciate the fact that Penn State students, some of them voted but not nearly the amount that we've seen in previous elections here in Centre County.

The fact that we didn't have a large participation from students—and of course the pandemic made it very difficult for them to vote here, or they decided to vote home. They weren't sure if they knew they were going to be here in November due to the Mask Up or Pack Up campaign here at Penn State. There were so many different things, and it all culminated in essentially about a thousand volunteers working at polling locations on election day, getting training ahead of time on that, helping to set up the locations with proper protocols in place, sneezeguards, gloves, disinfectant. You name it. Also having mail-in vote count center happening at the Penn State here in Centre County. About a thousand people came out and said, "Yes, we wanna make this election run." It was quite phenomenal.

Again, that's going to—this conversation about mail-in voting is going to be a lingering conversation going into future years just because of the fact that it was the first time it occurred.

There's some differences in Pennsylvania in a large way, and there's differences of opinion about how it was handled. It should be a very interesting discussion as we go forward. I do think that every community within the whole country did a phenomenal job pulling off this election in the midst of a pandemic, midst of a very heated presidential campaign. It really strengthens, I think, a lot of people's resolve in the American democracy. It was fantastic to see. Whether people voted, again by mail from their home, early voted, or voted in person, it was tremendous to see the kinda

turnout we did across the country. We're setting a record for the total amount of votes of either candidate in the presidential election by tens of millions. It's pretty remarkable to see the country come out and vote in such a large way.

Michael Donovan: Again, as a constituent, thank you so much for putting in such a strong process. Chris, from your perspective as a political scientist, what does this election spell, not in terms of the outcomes necessarily, but in terms of the process? I really think about what the future repercussions of expanding vote by mail in various states and how local and state governments have really risen to remarkable challenges here. If you could just discuss that, that'd be wonderful.

Chris Witko: Yeah, I agree with you. I wanna also say kudos to Mike for his work and others around the state and around the nation in his types of positions that really made this work with incredible effort and dedication. We all owe 'em a debt of gratitude. I think there's a lot of positives that come out of this in terms of the process. Mike mentioned that they got all these different volunteers to act as poll workers. That's good news. If you get younger people in the habit of being poll workers when they're young, probably a good number of them are gonna continue to do that in the future. It's been a problem getting younger folks into that role for a number of elections. That's a real positive thing, I think.

In terms of some of the innovation around ballots, vote by mail has expanded in a lot of places. In some places, that will stay. I hope it does because it's obviously much more convenient. We've had incredible engagement and turnout. As Mike said, we've had higher turnout in this election as a percentage of the population than any election for like 100 years, based on what I saw. That's been really good, the levels of engagement, a lot of experimentation with different types of voting. As a country, I personally think obviously we're better off if it's easier to vote. It's an important thing to do, and we shouldn't be putting barriers and hurdles in front of people who want to have their voice heard. That's what democracy's all about. America historically makes it extremely difficult to vote compared to other countries, other democracies. Hopefully, we're gonna lower these barriers.

Some states have had vote by mail for a long time or no-excuse absentee ballots for a long time. A lot of places will probably move in that direction, but a lot of places won't. In Georgia, they expanded a lot of this innovation, and we're already seeing a lot of pushback against it. It's a red state. Even the secretary of state, Raffensperger, who's been really good in a lot of ways in ensuring a good vote count and all that is—I think I saw a story the other

day that he's in favor of some more restrictions on vote by mail and making it easier to vote. Of course, it's been quite controversial in Pennsylvania, even though the initial vote by mail—the loosening of the voting restrictions was supported widely by Republicans and Democrats. There was some chicanery, I guess you might say, in the legislature about getting those votes, those mail on ballots and those absentee ballots, counted early, right?

The Republicans didn't go along with the plan that Wolf and the Democrats wanted to have to allow those to start be counted before election day. That causes a lot of issues, not actually any real issues but perceptual issues and issues where a cynical politician could exploit the fact that it looked like Trump was way ahead in Pennsylvania, when in fact it was completely illusory based on the vote counting procedures. You're gonna see pushback against some of this stuff in red states for sure and even states like Pennsylvania, which are more purple but which have a Republican legislature. I think in a some ways this has been a really heartwarming election when you see the engagement.

In other ways, it's quite scary that you see people really willing to undermine people's faith in democracy for their own cynical purposes. Unfortunately, we've seen more of that than I've ever seen in my life. Biden won by, obviously, a large margin and wasn't even particularly close. You just have people questioning the legitimacy of the election and, in the process, questioning the legitimacy of all the officials, partisan, nonpartisan, that made this election go off really without a hitch. Not only is there no evidence of widespread corruption or anything like that, there's really no evidence of even small-scale corruption that we've seen.

Michael Donovan: Mike, did you have a point to make?

Mike Pipe: I did. I wanted to piggyback on something that Chris was saying and I think is important which is there is going to be—we already have in Pennsylvania legislation. Even though the legislative session ends in—at the end of the year, there's already legislation been proposed to eliminate vote-by-mail balloting. It's become very political. Whenever you make voting political, which maybe that is what it is, it is a challenge. I will say, though, that election officials need to recognize, and myself included, that this was the first time that mail-in voting was done in such a large way in Pennsylvania. We should be open to, maybe, some improvements or changes within the process. I do think that, when you look at the way that—specifically how the vote by mail counting was done, the legislation—or the opening of the mail-in ballots, the legislation was so vague. It was basically of paragraph about how that's done.

In other states, they had a little bit more of work through on how it looks, how it works, again, as Chris mentioned, giving more time for the workers to do prior to the opening of the polls on election day. It would really be phenomenal if we could get some, I would say, improvements and some more ability for there to be clarity in terms of some the things that we didn't really see that were happening or, I guess, weren't in place here in Pennsylvania. Again, I think it was—you're seeing a lot of court cases filed here in Pennsylvania. I think, as the legislature realizes—you know what—we really didn't think through all the things that could happen, I think we actually can get a better piece of legislation. It's a phrase that we're familiar with where it's improve not replace. I think that there's a real potential to improve a lot of that, again, much like with a lot of the stay-at-home orders and other things that occurred with the pandemic. I think we can learn from how we did things and make improvements in the future.

Michael Donovan: Mike, that really gets at what many in the public policy world would view as a traditional role of our local and state governments to serve as the laboratories to move forward the needle and the state of the field. Obviously, there'll be piecemeal progress and steps backward in various way over time as states approach it differently based on their polities, of course. I'd love to discuss a little bit a remarkably important topic of the day and how it intersects these two communities really closely and that would be the upcoming vaccine distribution for COVID-19, whether it be the Moderna or Pfizer or the variety of others that will hopefully be coming more readily available and released in a tiered approach to healthcare and more susceptible communities on down to those without preexisting conditions that reduce their immuno-response.

I really see this as an intersection of a remarkable moment in time where we're lifting up state and local governments as remarkably important to our strength of our economy, our government, and just the general lifeblood of America, at the same time lifting up, really, science and data-based solutions, evidence-based solutions. This is a time where this is very heated discussions of the integration of biomedical evidence. Management science and logistics will be coming into this, social sciences and public policy. It's really a wonderful integration moment that—we have an opportunity in front of us.

Of course, at core to this is really how do we have an environment where there's the most equitable and timely distribution of vaccines to various populations? That raises some of the many—many of the same issues that came up as the initial pandemic, rather. This can be for anyone, but could we discuss some of the challenges of

really setting up vaccine distribution at a local and state level, what roles Centre County will have in this, and what this means as an integration moment for a lot of these disciplines?

Mike Pipe:

Sure, I'd be happy to jump in, Michael, and talk a little bit about how the state of Pennsylvania's going about this. In October of 2020, they put out an executive summary of some of their main guiderails when it came to vaccine distribution: who would be responsible for it, timeline, the process, who would be making the decisions. That was a helpful document that was put out there in terms of appreciating and understanding what the role of the states would be looking like. As we know, each of the 50 governors will really have the ability to decide who will get the vaccine first, what that will look like. They essentially taken the CDC recommendations and have said we're gonna go with that. Here, locally in Centre County, we will be working very closely with the Pennsylvania Emergency Management Agency to receive the vaccines, identify the entities that would be distributing the vaccines, doing the vaccines.

I think our main focus is going to be for the individuals that are in the public, so to speak, not in nursing homes, not in correctional facilities. When the general public will be able to be—get the vaccine, that is gonna be a challenge because we're essentially gonna be saying who gets the—or how do we get the vaccines. There's gonna have to be identifying protocols in place for that. People are gonna be very interested in getting this vaccine, so we have to be very, very strategic about how we do it. We have to be mindful about security. We have to be mindful about personal data when we're taking this into a place. As you said, you put it very well. It really is the intersection of almost everything that's occurring right now in our communities and discussions related to health policy, security, even the pandemic, getting back to life as it was.

We need to be very mindful of it. I do think you're seeing right now, there is being a little bit of a breadcrumb trail or a longer runway being done right now about the safety of the vaccine. You just saw the three former presidents, President George W. Bush, President Clinton, and President Obama, saying that they would go on camera to take the vaccine. I think it's important not to politicize the vaccine, but it is important to have individuals from both sides of the aisle, community members. I would think that religious leaders, leaders of nonprofits in communities, those would be the ones that, if you see them coming out and saying "It's safe to take the vaccine. "Please join me in taking the vaccine," that would be really phenomenal. I do think as counties, we are being tasked with helping to distribute the vaccine. It will be

something that we're focusing on in the coming months ahead, for sure.

Chris Witko:

Yeah, that's really interesting to hear, Mike, from somebody really on the ground at the frontlines. I think a big picture to all this is, I guess, Pennsylvania as a state is pretty well positioned bureaucratically in terms of havin' a pretty good public health apparatus at the state level and things like that. It does vary by county. Like Mike said, some of the rural counties don't even have a public health department. In fact, Delaware County, where I live, didn't have a public health department until very recently. A neighboring county is actually handling the Coronavirus response because those things aren't up and running even here, which is a pretty—it's got hundreds of thousands of people in it.

For a rural county in Pennsylvania or a rural-ish county, I guess you might say, Centre County's gonna be pretty well positioned because of the tax space there and the types of folks that live there with good education and things like that. It might not be the same in every rural county in Pennsylvania. There's gonna be a lot of variation across different states. Pennsylvania's in a much better situation than other states we could probably think of pretty quickly that have really not had the level of investment in public health infrastructure and stuff like that. My colleague, Simon Haeder, has written about how we've just disinvested in general in public health over the last several decades in the United States, the basic public health. We saw that with the inability to successfully contact trace and do basic things like that.

A lack of resources, of course, is also a huge problem. The states and localities are getting hit by declining tax revenue due to the decline in commerce. We really do need the federal government to pay for some of this stuff. There's gonna need to be additional people hired to distribute these vaccines. There's gonna need to be public health campaigns at local levels, state levels. There's gonna need to be lots of spending that's gonna have to happen in a time when states and localities don't have it. We do need the federal government to step up and provide some money for that. It looks like, basically, this week there were some discussions heading in that direction between McConnell and Pelosi and a group of senators. Mitt Romney, Joe Manchin, Susan Collins, and some others got together and made this a point, that we need to get that going.

That's good. Hopefully that can happen. The bill that's being talked about, there's a lot of money in there for vaccine distribution. We do need that. It has been impressive to see how the states and localities have responded, adapted, filled the gap, that has been left

by federal inaction. Really, you do need the federal government here as a partner. Ideally, the federal government would be leading these efforts in a coherent and coordinated and competent manner. We don't have that at the moment. Maybe we will. In any case, at a very minimum, we need the feds to cut some checks. It is gonna be an incredible logistical challenge to get this distributed. I think the last big, big campaign was probably the polio vaccine in the '50s, right?

If you go back to the '50s, that was a time when America was walking on air. We were pretty good at doin' big things, the D-Day invasion, that sort of stuff. The people had a lot of confidence. Government was competent. We had just gone through the New Deal. I'm not sure we're in the same place in terms of basic blocking and tackling by our governments at this point. Goin' into the pandemic, we thought we were the Pittsburgh Steelers, but we were shown to the Philadelphia Eagles I think, sad to say, in terms of being able to do the basic stuff that government has to do. We need to rapidly improve this or the rollout the vaccine is gonna be as much of a disaster as testing and contact tracing was last spring and in the summer and now.

Michael Donovan: I really think so core to this is trust, trust in institutions, trust in the actual vaccine process and the approval process. Core to building trust and maintaining is some of the persuasion and motivation that social science has studied so much. It's really shows a vital integration point of so many different disciplines and an opportunity, really, to utilize what we've learned from research in other communities. I would like to talk a little bit about, introspectively, on both the state and the county level, what are some missed opportunities of the last 10 months, 8 months? Continuing into the future here, how can we actually, as time goes on, adapt and adjust? What things would we be doing differently from each of your perspectives, if anything comes to mind?

Chris Witko: I'll jump in first. I think we have seen the consequences of, basically, a disinvestment in the public sphere, particularly in public health. We've been living in an era of permanent austerity for almost, really, for years, maybe almost decades at this point where some of the basic stuff of government has been cut to the bone. We paid a price for that in this spring and this summer, and we're continuing to pay a price for that. Even some things at the federal level haven't been functioning as well as we might've liked. I think that's one thing. We really need to reevaluate our overall approach to government and particularly, in this case, public health. We do need to have a little bit of slack in the system so that, when these unexpected events happen, which will happen—there will be pandemics.

We know this. There will be terrorist attacks in certain areas that kill a lot of people. There will be bad things that happen. When you could just cut everything to the bone and there's not enough excess capacity there, that's a huge problem when these things happen. We're a wealthy country. There's really no excuse for this. There's really no excuse to not be able to hire a bunch of contact tracers and get them to work quickly. There's really no excuse to not be able to rapidly roll out testing and things like that. I think it probably hasn't been, but it should've been a wake-up call to everybody in this country, that we really need to be serious about having a competent, functional, adequately staffed government that can keep its people safe and healthy. That's one thing that I would hope would come out of this.

Mike Pipe:

From a local level, I think one of the challenges that Pennsylvania will have going forward will be to appreciate if—and I'm already hearing it already which was the last pandemic we had was 100 years ago. In 100 years from now, we'll let that governor and those commissioners figure it out at this point. The point is that's not appreciating history. There have been other pandemics that have occurred. They've just not been as severe or as drastic, or they've been more localized. It's something that needs to be taken in account when—I don't know how and at what point, but we need to appreciate that this is something that could happen again. It could happen in a sooner fashion than many of us think.

The discussion, I think, for county governments will be do they or do they not create county health departments. I think that there will be a robust discussion about that. I think it'll trend more towards the state needs to put some more resources out there or the federal government has to help states reach rural communities that do not have the funding to put county health departments in place. Prior to the pandemic, I think we maybe had one or two people that were regional for the whole region. It could've been more. In terms of trying to piece together what their staffing looked like, it wasn't many. Going forward, that might change because the key thing that we've taken, at least I have taken, out from this whole thing—many others have, as well—has been the relationships the county health departments had in place prior to the pandemic allowed them to succeed. You just can't get a county health department up and running in a few months.

You might have the technical aspects there, but you don't have the relationships. That's built over many, many years with promoting vaccines for kids, doing research or outreach on many other issues. That's gonna be something that county governments in Pennsylvania, at least, are going to be talking about going forward.

How can the DOH be more responsive to us? Also, when it comes to future stay-at-home orders or future virtual learning for students, I think county governments and school districts have been put into a very awkward position where there is a very, very vocal minority that do not want either of those things to happen, schools closed—or I should say remote learning—or business to be closed. The research and the data goes more towards the, if you wanna have less deaths, less cases, less infection, you do want to limit those as much as possible.

Now, again, we're learning in the—research that's coming out saying that there have been whole classes of students in certain school districts that went virtual that are gonna all fail. They're all failing in every category. There has to be a conversation about, if we're gonna do this virtual learning, what things do we put in place? Do we just send kids home and say you're not gonna learn at all because there's no research that shows that it's gonna be beneficial? Do we do even more worse damage if students are "virtual learning?" Again, it's gonna get political. That's what happens. I think that, as long as we have local, state, and—with this new incoming administration, we have leaders that are willing to look at the research and the data and make informed decisions going forward. I think that is important. As I said earlier with another question, the post-pandemic, if we ever can truly get to that point—I think we will—it will be a lot of rehashing. It will be a lot of finger pointing. As much as we can look at the data, make strategic decisions, and have good leadership, I think we'll be in a better place.

Chris Witko:

Yeah, if I could add, I think those are really good points. Some of these questions are hard, right? Pointing fingers is not really appropriate. Whether to close schools and make them virtual is a difficult decision because it's not clear what's the best call because there's real cost to kids not being in school. There are some costs to kids being in school and obviously exposing teachers and maybe bringing the virus home to parents. A lot of kids live with their grandparents or elderly relatives and things like that. That's just not an easy choice. You can justify, really, decisions in different directions. There's other things that are clear that we need to be doing. I appreciated Mike's point about you can't just stand up a public health department in a week or two. That needs to be there. That capacity, that governing capacity, needs to be there all the time. If people think we're not gonna have another pandemic for 100 years, maybe we'll get lucky, and that'll happen. That's not consistent with what I'm reading from scientists who study this sorta thing. We do need to have that capacity in place. Frankly, we're a wealthy nation. There's really no reason why we don't have that capacity in place.

Michael Donovan: Thank you, yes. I have one final question here before—I'll give each of you the opportunity to present some closing remarks, kind of a summary of our whole conversation. There's a lot to cover. You represent two communities. One being from the policy making and practitioner orientation in Commissioner Pipe here. Then, Chris, from the academic and research community in public policy and political scientist environment. How can we better integrate these communities? How can we learn from each other and try to continue to expand this relationship?

Mike Pipe: Sure, I'd be happy to jump in. I think that it would—I love data. I love research. I love the history of how we got here and how we can do better in the future. I will say not every commissioner's like that. There are times when my perspective of "let's do a lot of policy. Let's get heavy with that. Let's really do the research," is good. There are other times where it's not. We need to go forward. You need to make a decision, as they say, the gut. You need to make a decision and go forward. We don't have time to look at it. Right now as we have precarious position when it comes to government at every level, it would be very good to stop and say, "Let's get more research policy and discussion going on, and let's merge these a little bit more."

Any elected official that doesn't, as Chris said earlier, look at the thousands of research documents or how did we do this, the postmortem of how did we do this, these local stay-at-home orders, however you wanna look at them, but if we don't—there's kernels of truth in those that we can take for other decisions that we're making. If we just say, "That was that." I don't think Centre County will, but I have heard other commissioners and other elected officials saying, "It's not gonna have any bearing on how I go forward." I think that's a tremendous disservice to what the country just went through and what our communities have gone through. I think, on the elected official side, it has to be, when the research comes out, look at it, study it, and understand it. I will give kudos to the rural policy group that's out of the Pennsylvania General Assembly. They will put out good research when it comes to rural communities. I know many commissioners like that because they're able to say, "Okay, I'm a rural community. I'm an elected official. I can put this to good use."

I think from the flip side of things is we as county governments need to be more willing to share data, share our information, our perspectives on how we got to certain decisions because I think that'll help the research analysts and the policy writers appreciate, okay, that's how elected officials think. That's how they get to where they're going. That's how appointed civil servants get to

where they're thinking, as well, and carrying out these things. I think it has to be mutual. It has to be reciprocal. It has to be a closed loop in these discussions. If there's a silver lining that comes out of this, it is the fact that practitioners, the elected officials, and then the policy wonks and the folks who research this, we should be talking. We should have more conversations going forward. More forums, more groups that are looking at these kinda things I think are certainly helpful.

Chris Witko:

Yeah, I think it's obviously essential for academics to work with policy makers. That's important to the mission of the School of Public Policy here at Penn State. We are a land-grant institution. Part of what we're supposed to be doing, really most of what we're supposed to be doing, is serving the public in that way. There can be problems with that, obviously. The way academics write and some of the technical details and things like that aren't going to be easily consumed by policy makers who are very busy, and often, like most people, they don't have PhDs in statistics and stuff. They're not gonna understand the data analysis. We need to do a good job of presenting those data and those findings in a way that policy makers can consume it. There needs to be institutionalized channels to make that happen. I think more now than ever, those channels are actually taking place. There are podcasts like the one you're doing, right?

There's your Evidence-to-Impact Collaborative, where we're actually—you're studying how do we get our scientific findings to actually be consumed by policy makers. There's actually rigorous study of this question happening so that we can improve what we're doing. In the School of Public Policy, we have a masters of public policy program where we're trying to train people to go into the public sector and so to take some of this knowledge that academics have and put it to use, whether it be in terms of managing people or understanding how to do analysis to understand whether policies are working or not. I think there's a lot of opportunities now that didn't even exist 15 years ago or 20 years when I first started gettin' out of grad school and started doin' this kinda research. There's many more opportunities to share academic findings with policy makers. I think there's been a pretty good uptake, at least on the public health side.

This is all happened so fast. It's like governments couldn't keep up with the research demands. There's been a lot of stuff comin' out of universities, research groups, and it seems to me like politicians and policy makers are paying attention to at least the public health stuff. I think there's a lot of opportunities on the social and behavioral science side of things as the vaccines get rolled out and even in terms of mass usage for partnerships between scholars and

policy makers. What messages work when we wanna get people vaccinated? This is something that we could collaborate on. I'm certainly hoping for that, Mike, if you're potentially interested in that. Let's actually rigorously study which messages work. We have a big opportunity here to do this. Of course, we can find things out and use it for this particular vaccination campaign, but we can also use it—obviously, there's been a growing anti-vaxxer movement, if you will, in the country.

That's gonna be general knowledge that's gonna be useful. We're gonna have another pandemic whether it's in—hopefully I'm long gone by the time that happens. I don't think it's gonna—these are gonna happen more frequently, based on what I'm reading. This knowledge will be useful in the future. There's a lot of opportunities right within this current crisis to collaborate and more generally to do it. I'm really happy that I think we're actually moving in that direction where there's more institutionalized ways of communicating findings with policy makers. I'll just put this out here right now to anybody that's listening to this that might be a policy maker in Pennsylvania, whether at the county level, state level, if you need anything, get in touch with us at School of Public Policy. If we have an expert who works in that area, we'll connect you. We're happy to do what we can here.

Michael Donovan: Excellent. Thank you, Chris. I do wanna give each of you the opportunity for any closing remarks that you haven't had a chance to say yet, although that last question did sum things up pretty well. I don't know. Mike or Chris, either one, anything before we conclude our conversation today?

Chris Witko: No, I don't have any final comments or anything. I appreciate the opportunity to come on and speak and listen to somebody's take who's out there on the frontlines at the county level, implementing and reacting to a lot of this stuff. It's been really interesting. I appreciate it.

Mike Pipe: I think likewise, Chris offers great perspectives. It's always helpful to—as an alum of Penn State, I always like to see the folks who are doing the heavy lifting when it comes to the research, so it was great to hear your perspective, Chris. I appreciate Michael and your team, Melissa, putting this opportunity together. I think it's something that more elected officials, if they would collaborate with these and listen to the conversations we're having, it'll make them better public servants and, in turn, help to make better communities. Thank you for the opportunity.

Michael Donovan: Thank you both. With that, I will conclude our conversation. Again, this is Michael Donovan, associate director of the Penn

State Evidence-to-Impact Collaborative. I'm joined here today with Professor Chris Witko, as the associate director of the School of Public Policy and professor of public policy and political science at Penn State University Park, and Mike Pipe, Centre County chair of the board of commissioners and co-chair of the election board for Centre County. Thank you very much for your time.

Chris Witko: Thank you.

Mike Pipe: Thank you.

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