



Episode 4: What does voting have to do with food insecurity?

Audio Transcript

Sarah Kuhns 00:00:24 Hi, everyone. Welcome back to Just a Bite. I hope you really like this episode. I know I did. I talked with one of my friends and mentors, Maria Bruno. She is the public policy director at Equality Ohio, and has done a lot of this work around voting civic engagement, redistricting, not just in her current role, but also in previous roles that she's had. It's just a really great conversation. I hope you leave this episode feeling really energized and excited, and hopefully this will sort of urge you to act. So let me give you a little bit of information about what races are being voted on this year. You know, what is happening as far as early voting and absentee voting and when election day is, so election day is November 2nd with both early and absentee voting happening right now, but we are past the date to register to vote for this year's election.

Sarah Kuhns 00:01:36 You of course can go ahead and vote for next year's still, but in order to vote in the November 2nd election, um, we are unfortunately passed the date to register. However, you still have time to request an absentee ballot if you would like to do so. So that deadline is October 30th at noon. So we have about 11 days, there'll be quite a few races that will be voted on this election. There is the 11th congressional district to fill Representative Fudge's seat. So folks, um, in Cleveland and in that district will be voting for a new US representative, the 15th congressional district to fill Representative Stivers seat that is in the Columbus area. And so they will be voting for a new representative there, of course, school board members, municipal government positions, really across the state, but especially in our main cities, there will also be some recall elections and local ballot measures. Um, so there'll be plenty of things to vote on in the November 2nd election. I also wanted to know that I'll be linking in the show notes, a one-stop shop for all things voting that is Ohio Votes. The website is very accessible and easy to use and can be really helpful for folks. So with that, I think we'll get on to the episode and I hope you all enjoy it.

Sarah Kuhns 00:03:25 Hi everyone. Welcome back. I'm here with Maria Bruno, who is the public policy director at Equality Ohio. And we're going to be talking today about redistricting and just overall democracy building. And so Maria, please introduce yourself.

Maria Bruno 00:03:45 Hello Sarah. Thank you so much for having me. Yes, my name's Maria Bruno. I'm the public policy director at Equality Ohio. Um, just to give you a little context, I also, for the last few years was with COHHIO, the Coalition on Homelessness and Housing in Ohio, where I, among other things administered the Ohio Votes program, which is a get out the vote program specifically targeting underserved Ohio and low propensity Ohio voters.

Sarah Kuhns 00:04:08 Yes, definitely. And that's how I know you. Um, Maria was my boss basically. So yeah, I was leading the charge in Dayton for Ohio Votes. She is the perfect person to have a discussion today about, about this topic. So I guess sort of the main thing that always I have personally heard is why do Equality Ohio, Ohio Association of Foodbanks, COHHIO, why do they care

that the folks that they serve are engaging in democracy and then also, why do we care about fair maps?

Maria Bruno 00:04:50 Yeah. Great question. Um, well I think it's a variety of different things. The first is that truly just from an ideological perspective, like we think democracy works best when everyone participates and the whole, you know, democracy is great. If you can keep it and that's not the exact quote, but you know, we've heard the just, and I think when you engage people who have historically been left out of the decision making process, we can definitely move forward. Their priorities as our slogan is sort of politicians pay attention to communities that vote. And so if we can get our more marginalized communities to show up for elections and to participate in the process, we think that their needs and PR and priorities will be better represented in their government. Fair maps are a key component of that because, you know, politicians, once they're in office have to sort of decide whether they want to be accountable to the people who got them there. And when you have really gerrymandered maps, the people who got them there aren't necessarily the voters, but rather the politicians and special interests, um, that helped them get into office on, you know, a really, really, um, heavily slanted map in a, in a slanted district. So we care about a fair process. We care about full participation and those are things that aren't unique to partisanship they're not unique to now versus 10 years ago. Um, they're just something that, you know, we believe in fundamentally every year, no matter what,

Sarah Kuhns 00:06:26 Right? And so we're not encouraging folks to vote for a candidate, but rather encouraging them to vote. Um, and I think another part of that too, is it's sort of a self fulfilling prophecy because folks that, um, folks don't vote when they don't think that they're being heard. And then that just sort of completes the cycle over and over again. So how do nonprofits engage in civic engagement campaigns? How are they different from the get out the vote efforts from partisan organizations are the parties.

Maria Bruno 00:07:03 Yeah. So this is something that we've worked really hard on over the last few years. Um, you know, the first year was really truly convincing people that nonpartisan voter engagement was even like a thing. Um, that was possible. A lot of people had only really thought of get out the vote and engaging voters within the partisan context with a party or a candidate. Um, and so the role that nonprofits have in engaging voters is that instead of coming from the angle of, Hey, I've worked for this party or this candidate, I want them to win and you can help us do that. It's Hey, I'm already in your community. And I know there's an election coming up and I'd like you to have the opportunity to speak up. And it's just a totally different dynamic. Like I, you know, the, the thing that we always say is political campaigns, target likely voters who already agree with them.

Maria Bruno 00:07:53 We are targeting unlikely voters and we're not asking who they agree with. Um, and I think it's a lot more genuine of an interaction then because the conversation remains on the voters wants and priorities, and it, it functions more as a service to those people rather than, you know, politicking within a nonprofit. It's much more about providing access to elections, to these individuals that are often, um, not looped in. And you can do that by working with some of the other groups that put on voter engagement events. There's like League of Women Voters. We have Ohio Women's Alliance. We have a lot of really great volunteer based organizations that partner with different nonprofits. Um, and those folks work in conjunction with each other to, to, um, basically add onto whatever that that organization already does. So if that organization already has events, we add voting as a component to that.

Maria Bruno 00:08:45 If that organization already has like an intake process, maybe there's an opportunity to ask people about their voter registration or to provide information about the election

at that point. Um, you know, taking those touch points and expanding upon them and including civic engagement opportunities among them and opportunities for voters to get engaged and also educated and also trained up to do more advocacy on, you know, for themselves. So, um, yeah, I think nonprofits really do have occupy a unique space in this conversation and provide a really good service. And we've gotten so much positive feedback. I mean, people went from not letting us in the door to asking us to come back in a year because once they'd have one event and the sky didn't fall, they'd say, oh, are you guys coming back? Actually someone asked when you will be back next year, uh, to, you know, help drive them to the polls or, uh, give them, uh, an absentee ballot request. Um, people really like that service when it is in fact a service.

Sarah Kuhns 00:09:40 Yeah. I noticed that definitely in Dayton, I mean, it was difficult at first because I think a lot of organizations think you're partisan and then, um, they don't, they obviously have certain limitations on, you know, who they can, um, be involved with. They can't be partisan. Usually I had a really good partnership with the libraries in Dayton and of course they were like, well, are you partisan? Are you with a party? Uh, we can't really engage with you if that's the case, but yeah, I definitely agree with that. And it sort of built a sense of community, um, you know, within the area that you're serving, we have a new process going on for the past couple months, um, which is redistricting. So this isn't brand new process that they had started based on, um, the outcome of the 2015 and 2018 elections where voters told their representatives that they want a fair process for redistricting. So you are, are more in the loop than I am. Can you give an overview of the new redistricting process?

Maria Bruno 00:10:58 Yeah. And you know, my new role at Equality Ohio has allowed me to stay engaged on this issue. And, you know, I, it might not be the most intuitive connection, but frankly fair maps mean fair representation and unfair maps mean that the real elections become the primaries and it becomes a game of who can demonize their opponents better. And it's not just opponents, but people who really just have any different lifestyle than they do. And of course, LGBTQ people are usually kind of top of the list when that becomes the conversation. And so we have in our desire to protect all LGBTQ Ohioans from not just, you know, hate or discrimination, but also just, uh, being victims of that demonization and extremism, we feel invested in, in the fair maps process. So yeah, there were two different voter led initiatives, both to get higher standards for, uh, the redistricting process it's really wonky.

Maria Bruno 00:11:54 And I can get into the details if you want, but I'll stay general. And then you can ask about the details, but, but the main gist is that there are a lot more requirements for both bipartisan cooperation, as well as public input. Unfortunately, the first round. So the first round of redistricting was for the Statehouse level seats. And then now they are currently in the process for congressional redistricting. Now, congressional redistricting, keep in mind, we are losing a seat. So we have to absorb that seat into the other parts of the map, um, which makes it, I think even messier than normal, because there's a lot of new decisions to be made. We basically noticed that there wasn't much engagement with the public before, like August and the deadline was September 1st. Um, and you know, we, we found that to be woefully insufficient in terms of allowing the public, a meaningful opportunity to engage on this process.

Maria Bruno 00:12:48 Um, we do think that the, the people on the commission were surprised by the level of vigor of some of the people that were upset that they didn't have a say, but, you know, everyone might have a different idea of what fair maps looks like. And that's all the more reason we need to have a conversation in public about it. If we are using the same working definitions of things like competitiveness, fairness, representation, you know, we can get a lot further along because

there's this mutual understanding of what those words mean. And instead, we've seen a really backdoor process where we don't know how they're getting to any of their conclusions. We just see the conclusions and then have 30 minutes to comment. And that's the system that the public has gotten. And it's really extra disheartening because we have seen such a lively and persistent push for a fair redistricting process.

Maria Bruno 00:13:41 And I just don't think it's too much to ask of our representation to want fair maps. I mean, to, to feel like the candidates that we are picking actually represent the people that they supposedly serve. And instead we're seeing all as gamesmanship. Um, so yeah, so the next couple of deadline, you know, there was basically, uh, like the legislature had first stab at getting the congressional maps. And once that deadline passed, then it moved to the redistricting committee. The redistricting committee is made up of the governor's office, the secretary of state's office, the state auditor's office, and two Republicans and two Democrats from the state house, one in each chamber. That's important to note for a few reasons, but among them that the three statewide seats are all on the ballot in 2022, which means the parties of the people in those seats will control this next round of map-making because since it was a partisan vote, those maps that they did approve for the state level are only good for four years, which means within four years, we're going to be doing this again. And the people at the helm are going to be the statewide offices. So elections are really critical for everyone this year,

Sarah Kuhns 00:14:55 Sort of to your point about how it's been a backdoor process when the voters have demanded that it be a transparent one, we didn't really see the final map that they had voted on until a couple hours before the deadline. And I think you even said in your, your testimony in September that, um, your job is advocacy and you can't even digest, you know, every line in that map to make a fair argument for or against, you know, those maps. Um, and so, yeah, we definitely haven't had a fair process. Um, I think that's a really good point that if folks are unhappy with how this process is going, we'll be back here again for four years later. Um, and those folks are on, on the ballot, you know, when that happens. Yeah.

Maria Bruno 00:15:56 Yeah. And I think, um, there needs to be some accountability to a failure to give the public a meaningful opportunity on the gate to engage. I mean, these maps are really complicated, right? Like gerrymandering, redistricting is a really complicated process that involves statistics and political knowledge and so much background information. And I think what was frustrating especially is we heard a lot of the people on the redistricting committee say things like, well, we didn't have access to the, you know, the software we didn't, you know, the, the numbers that you all the public are using are faulty. And it's like, well, the public has no more tools than you do, certainly. And a whole lot less time for this, and they're not getting paid to do it. But on top of that, like you can't complain about the tools they're using when you haven't provided an alternative, you either want input and you want us to be able to meaningfully engage, or you just want the appearance of input and you want to do what you want anyway. And, and I think it was made very clear by this process that they wanted the latter.

Sarah Kuhns 00:17:01 Yeah. And it seems like they really haven't changed for the congressional maps. I don't think they even have had a hearing yet.

Maria Bruno 00:17:09 No. And so people are suing [indistinguishable]. Okay. So there are three lawsuits. Now the commission is, is unhappy because of those lawsuits are taking time away from their redistricting time, which is just really rich when you consider they've had all year to do it. Um, you know, this is kind of like the equivalent of someone getting in trouble and then like being like, well, I can't go to detention and also do my research project. And it's like, well, that is not our

problem. I mean, it, that's just not my problem. Um, you have to do both because you've put yourself in the situation to need to do both. So yeah, it's, we are not getting the public hearings again. We are also getting a lot of excuses that blame people who are really just looking for representation, um, about these delays. And that's just absolutely unfair.

Sarah Kuhns 00:18:02 Yeah. Going back to sort of, you know, what Equality Ohio has been doing, especially with redistricting, but also just generally making sure that LGBTQ Ohioans are being heard, um, making sure they're engaged in the process, that, that sort of thing, you know, what have you been doing other than, of course your, your, um, testimony, which I was excited to see? Um, well, have you been doing in this space? I know you have a real passion for that.

Maria Bruno 00:18:32 Yeah. Um, well, if you'll indulge me for a few minutes, I might take this opportunity to plug a couple of projects we have coming. Okay, great. Um, so you know, a big component for what we are focusing on this year is just like public education around LGBTQ issues. We feel like over and over, we find that a lot of the fear and a lot of the hatred is, is really founded in misunderstandings of the issues. We find that even our allies who might take us at our word, like, yeah, we want to support you. Yay. But like, they don't understand the foundation of the issues well, enough to be explaining to their friends why their friends should be also supporting this. Right. So we're trying to turn our allies into advocates and we're trying to educate the public around these issues more generally. Um, we also are just like trying to build positive energy around LGBTQ people.

Maria Bruno 00:19:17 We see so often that they become the butt of the joke or the, you know, people causing all the trouble. I mean, it's, it's always a bad conversation when we talk about the socializing of LGBTQ people in Ohio. And we really, really want to confront that head on, we are doing two projects that are coming up that I'm super excited about. The first is called Ohio Can Play, and it's going to be focused on, um, trans youth athletes. And it's going to engage, uh, sports organizations, students, kids, parents, anyone, and everyone in just saying why we care about having inclusive youth sports, you know, sports are about fun and teamwork and competitiveness and, and people are making it something ugly into this. You know, people aren't playing youth sports to become professional athletes on the whole, right. And so this whole conversation around taking it so seriously, really misses the point in our opinion.

Maria Bruno 00:20:14 So we want to bring the conversation about youth sports back to where it belongs and just kids having fun and growing as people. Um, and so that we're going to have a bunch of videos from anyone and everyone who just says, you know, maybe it's a funny story about what happened when they were playing youth sports. Maybe it's just a general statement of why they support, you know, trans athletes participation in youth sports and inclusive sports in general. And so that's going to be going, uh, early November through, I think like the end of January. And then we also are going to be doing holiday cards where we are going to be having queer families, both found families and, you know, blood families, they're going to be sending holiday cards to, uh, their legislatures and their governor and their senators. So, uh, we'll have people send it, you know, it'll be like kind of a form they'll, they'll upload their picture or they'll write a little postcard message and then we will on their behalf, send them a holiday card to that, to those offices. Um, and so we're really excited about both of those. We think it's a really good opportunity for people to remind the elected officials that supposedly represent them, that they are here and they are just like everybody else and full of love. And again, create that positive momentum around LGBTQ people.

Sarah Kuhns 00:21:26 That is so awesome. Yeah. I mean, I think those both sort of tie in making sure that Ohio is a welcoming place for all people, but especially LGBTQ Ohioans. Um, and I think we need some of that. I think also along with the, you know, the redistricting process and everything, we

don't want our LGBTQ Ohioans to have to feel like they need to move elsewhere and, you know, to make sure that Ohio is a welcoming place. So, um, that's so exciting. Um, and then let's move to voting what barriers prevent marginalized and vulnerable communities from voting, and then, you know, how can we alleviate those, those barriers? Not only just, um, non-profits, but also, you know, the government, you know, how policy can impact that.

Maria Bruno 00:22:21 Yeah. So, I mean, I think a lot of the hurdles tend to really be logistical. Um, and I think if you are thinking about your own voting process, think about all the decisions that you make in the process of that. When are you going to do it? How are you going to cast your ballot? How are you going to get there? What ID are you going to bring? You know, all those questions that we ask ourselves, each of those prevent or present a potential barrier we have in some ways, very accessible elections compared to other states, we truly do. We have, you know, uh, early voting window that hopefully will not continue to be chopped down, but that is right now, you know, it's, uh, 30 days, um, we also have absentee ballot request forms and absentee ballots as an, as an alternative, we have early in-person voting, but we also have weird limitations that don't have any founding in really like any election security.

Maria Bruno 00:23:17 It's just limiting for the sake of limiting. So for instance, dropboxes, which are, uh, you know, you hear a lot about them, but, uh, they're important because they're essentially, they're the mailbox that you put your ballot in without needing a stamp. The stamp is a potential barrier. Getting access to the boxes is a potential barrier. If someone, you know, on the south west corner of Columbus wants to go to our county boards of elections and they want to take the bus there. I mean, it's like an hour. It's not, it's not quick. Uh, so having one over on that side of town would be really convenient for someone, you know? And, um, so it's, it's the logistical hiccups along the way that really create, you know, needing a printer to print out an absentee ballot request. Um, every time you need access to something else in order to cast your ballot, the ID requirements also get are trickier than people think a lot of people, especially who are impoverished or, uh, who maybe have changed their name, you know, they're license might be either out of date or expired.

Maria Bruno 00:24:17 Both of those present problems. We have poll workers who God bless. Uh, they are so important and everyone should try to go be a poll worker, but, you know, they get like a couple days of training and sometimes forget little rules that often unfortunately impede people's access to the ballot. So, as an example, just this is a really common one. So I'm going to say it, um, your address on your Ohio license or ID does not need to match your voter registration address every single year. Without a doubt, we get tens of tens of calls about this. Uh, and usually it ends up that we work with the board of elections and they kind of make sure that that rule moving forward is implemented correctly. I mean, no, it's not malicious the way these things happen. It's just someone doesn't have a ride. They don't have, uh, a stamp and everyone has a really busy life and they have other stuff to do.

Maria Bruno 00:25:07 So, you know, that one hiccup is like, oh, is it really worth it? They're not going to listen to me anyway, we got gerrymandered maps anyway, right? Like all of these, all of these things compound on each other and just create general voter apathy. So I think what we can do is make sure that every logistical hurdle possible is eliminated or alleviated to the extent that we can, if the, if there's not a specific administrative or election security function, then it is just a barrier for the sake of a barrier. We also are seeing attempts at the Statehouse to maybe, you know, death by a thousand cuts, create more of those barriers. And none if I don't think any of them really, that we've seen proposed recently had anything to do with election security, despite that being the reason for those bills, supposedly, um, they're all just cuts at voter access. So, you know, LGBTQ people,

they're more likely to be homeless. They're more likely to have other forms of marginalization. They don't deal with more name changes, sometimes gender marker. All of those are potential hiccups. And, you know, these are for Ohio residents who are completely eligible to vote and they're not being able to actually cast their ballot because of these logistical hurdles.

Sarah Kuhns 00:26:19 Yeah. I think the homeless piece is really important to note too, because if you don't have an address that's really difficult to, um, cast your ballot, not only just an absentee ballot, but even, you know, just going into a polling location and casting your ballot. Um, so of course there have been nonprofits and even churches and things like that who have encouraged homeless folks to use their location as their permanent address. But of course, you know, that comes with barriers too.

Maria Bruno 00:26:54 And also it might be worth mentioning the, um, you know, what we recommend as far as for homeless voters. Um, yeah, for, as far as registration goes, yeah, use a nonprofit or some other organization that has approved your use of their address. Um, and we recommend like it being where they stay like near where they stay, right? Like we want their address to be as much as possible to be a reflection of where they actually live. Um, but the other piece too is vote early. Um, you only need the last four digits of your social security number to actually confirm your identity. Um, and so that provides a lot fewer hurdles as far as the ID requirement piece of election day voting.

Sarah Kuhns 00:27:33 Thank you for that. Yes. What policy changes can be made to make sure that we are, you know, equitable and allowing everyone to vote that as eligible.

Maria Bruno 00:27:45 So a few, I mean, a million things, but to name a couple, um, you know, more dropboxes is definitely a high priority for the exact reason that I just mentioned, just being able to literally get to a polling location or an early vote location. You know, now they only have one early vote location per, um, per county as well. So like, you know, you could have multiple on different sides of town. Um, and it's not even something that we are really like burdening the local boards of elections with these are things often, at least some boards of elections actually want to do. Um, both Hamilton County and Cuyahoga County wanted to increase their number of dropboxes and were prevented from doing so because of guidance that, um, that inferred that they were not allowed to do that. So we certainly can't block loads of local boards of elections from administering adjustments to increase voter access at a minimum.

Maria Bruno 00:28:43 Um, even more helpful would be, you know, having things like an online, uh, absentee ballot request form. We always are. We tend to hear that that is not possible or secure because of the signature function. I just want to point out that that is not true because by, by virtue of their voter registration already being on file, they have a copy of their signature on file, which means that the actual ballot, when it comes and has a signature, has something to match up with. So the absentee ballot request form does not need that same, very verification. So that is a long way of saying that that would be an easy thing to implement that the reasons for not doing so are faulty at best. The legislation introduced last year, they wanted to limit dropboxes to only the last 10 days, and then they wanted to move out the deadline for absentee ballot request forms, which in substance, those two provisions combined would mean that absentee ballot request form dropboxes would be functionally eliminated,

Sarah Kuhns 00:29:46 You know, 2020. It was obviously a huge voter turnout year. Um, this year looks like it's probably not going to be as much as last year. Um, but I think we should really make

the case as, so why people should vote in local elections, especially with, you know, the election coming up on November 2nd.

Maria Bruno 00:30:09 I would be happy to talk about the importance of local elections. No, you know, local elections are something that cannot be overstated the value of them, because I think, you know, if you're thinking of yourself as one voter, which you probably should think of yourself as one voter, you know, one of how many and the, the more localized the election, the smaller that out of how many number is, which means that, you know, just mathematically your vote literally counts for more, especially in these low turnout elections and these local elections, they have huge power on your day-to-day life. I mean, things like trash collection and, you know, street cleaning and money to police officers or money to affordable housing projects, all of these types of things, these issues that we care about one way or the other funding or not getting funding are made at the local level.

Maria Bruno 00:31:04 And so the local decision makers are incredibly important. The other thing that can't be undervalued is judicial elections. I know those sound really boring, and you know, I'm not getting arrested for anything tomorrow, so why do I care? But it has huge implications in the like legal system that you live with them. And having judges that, you know, can be responsive to violations of your constitutional rights. For instance, you know, having a judge that's actually going to rule in favor of those rights is really important. Um, and it also, you know, sets the standard for the behavior of people in the community because they know what the judicial system looks like one way or the other. I mean, if prosecutor elections, if a local judge elections, those really do impact the culture in the, in the community and the city councils, the mayors, those have huge impacts on the services that we rely on every single day, whether we think about it or not

Sarah Kuhns 00:32:02 Yeah, one way or the other, you know, make sure that you're represented by the people that are in line with your values. And so of course we have to make the pitch to voting is not the only thing you can do as a citizen. How can citizens make a difference in their communities and engage in democracy? I have a feeling I know what you'll see,

Maria Bruno 00:32:25 But yeah, I think you've given this pitch before, haven't you? Well, you know, I think the big thing is engaging. The people that supposedly represent you, every, every person that is on your ballot is someone that is accountable you, and you can engage them on and off election season. And whenever a politician or an elected official or a person of power is making decisions, they are thinking about who's going to be mad at them and who's going to be grateful to them. And if you are not speaking up one way or the other, you're just not going to be top of mind as they're making decisions. Whereas if you are hounding your local official about something that's really important to you, or setting a meeting with people in your neighborhood to meet with, you know, your local officials, to talk about an issue and get it on the priority list.

Maria Bruno 00:33:12 You know, those are the type of things that do translate into action because politicians, ultimately they want to be liked and they want to get positive reviews. And, you know, you have more power within your community than you realize. I'm sure that's often the case. And it's just a matter of feeling confident and empowered to actually speak up when things are bothering you. And when you like things and saying like, this is awesome, let's do more of this. Let's, you know, I loved this. Um, it doesn't have to be throwing tomatoes at the school board members. It can, it can be saying thank you for something that maybe they did that seems small, but had a really big impact on you, but also telling them if they're, if they're doing something that you think is harmful and that can come in the form of, you know, letters to your newspaper meetings with your elected officials. I mean, truly if you get three people together from a single Statehouse district, and try to set a meeting with a representative, you will at least get into a meeting with their staff. I mean, this, this

is their job to listen to their constituents. It's just that constituents often don't take them up on it. Um, and so then they listened to who does show up, which is frankly lobbyists. So, uh, you know, speak up and participate in the process at each term.

Sarah Kuhns 00:34:28 Yeah. It doesn't end at the election. That's just the beginning, right?

Maria Bruno 00:34:33 No, and most lawmaking at all levels has an opportunity for hearings and those hearings are usually open to the public.

Sarah Kuhns 00:34:40 Yeah. And you can, you know, testify at them and everything. I think too, just as a pitch for democracy, building organizations like Ohio Votes, um, or the League of Women Voters, you can register other folks to vote those organizations, target folks that are low propensity. Um, they are non-partisan, you know, things like that. And so you'll really be making an impact. I think a lot of the folks that's like one of the first times they have ever been engaged on voting, um, or, you know, civic engagement because, you know, the parties just don't target them most of the time.

Maria Bruno 00:35:20 And that's something, I think that like people who are kind of more closely in the political apparatus don't necessarily always appreciate is like, we get bucked all the time. We get texts all the time. We get calls all the time. I get flyers all the time, you know, these communities don't. And oftentimes when we talk to them, they're like, this is the first person who's asked me about voting in 15 years, which is really a state of affairs when we live in a so-called swing state. Yeah. I think also like for folks who are not themselves marginalized and like, how can I help, you know, give your resources and your time to organizations, uh, like Ohio Votes, like other groups that are Ohio Women's Alliance does stuff, legal women, voters does stuff. Uh, NAACP does voter engagement, a lot of different groups do voter engagement work. It's a way to be involved in your community in a way that's meaningful and also utilize as a skill set. I mean, if you're like, just so knowledgeable about these elections and like, what do I do with my hands? You know, answering voters questions is a great place to start.

Sarah Kuhns 00:36:18 Um, so Maria, I think we're just about finished. I just wanted to give you the floor and give the folks listening a little bit more information about Equality Ohio and how they can learn more.

Maria Bruno 00:36:31 Yeah. Thank you. Um, so Equality Ohio is an LGBTQ plus advocacy organization, uh, advocacy and education organization. We push for legal and lived equality for, uh, LGBTQ Ohioans. And, um, there are a lot of different ways that you can engage with us. I mean, obviously the, you know, and follow us on social media sign up for the newsletter, things like that. But also we have a youth advocacy coalition that is the second Tuesday of every month at 7:00 PM. If you are yourself, a young person or you work with young people, it's a great place. We're going to be working on some projects, specifically prioritizing the issues coming up in the communities of young, young LGBTQ people. We also have a faith coalition that I would be happy to put people in touch with, uh, with the right person. JM is our faith organizer.

Maria Bruno 00:37:18 And they're really hoping to build up the positive faith message about how our religions guide us towards inclusivity and love and all of those wonderful things. We also have Ohio Business Competes. If you are yourself, an organization or business, the Ohio Business Competes coalition is a group that specifically pushes for LGBTQ people to also be covered under our non-discrimination laws in Ohio, which is currently not the case. You can be discriminated against for your LGBTQ plus status. So, um, that is a coalition that works to change that as well, which the fairness act and equality act at the federal level. Um, and if people are also interested in doing work

at the local level, we have local organizers that help with that too. So we're hopefully your one-stop shop to figuring out how you can help, uh, the, the queer community and in Ohio.

Sarah Kuhns 00:38:09 Yes. You're very busy. Yeah. Um, I will make sure to put information in this show notes about all, uh, Equality Ohio's priorities, especially those holiday cards and the videos that you could submit for trans athletes and, you know, support around them. So thank you so much, Maria. I appreciate this conversation.

Sarah Kuhns 00:38:43 So I hope you enjoy that conversation with Maria Bruno. I have a few quotes for you. I did cheat a little bit this time and pulled out two different quotes to just sort of end this conversation about civic engagement and democracy. I wanted to share Maria's words with you all, um, from our testimony that we, that I had referenced during the conversation, this was her testimony to the redistricting commission on September 14th. And so she says, I promised you, the people of Ohio will be watching and as is evident by the many, many passionate testimonies we've seen in just the last few days, we have no intention of looking away. Anytime soon we were here yesterday, we are here today. We will be here tomorrow and the day after that. And no matter how squiggly these districts become, no matter how many constitutional provisions requiring transparency and accountability go ignored, we will still be here getting in the way every single time, plenty of Ohioans don't feel like they are being heard for many reasons.

Sarah Kuhns 00:40:08 Um, redistricting just being one of them. Um, but the great thing is how full those hearing rooms were with Ohioans demanding to be heard, not just advocates or non-profits who do this for a living, but everyday Ohioans. And I was really encouraged by that. My hope is that we can continue to engage Ohioans, not just in this process, but democracy as a whole. I think we all win when all Ohioans, especially those who are unlikely and low propensity voters, especially those who we serve are engaged in democracy. So I really enjoyed that discussion with her. You know, like I said before, please look into Equality Ohio and Ohio Votes. I think they are great organizations that are doing a lot of this work on the ground. And then secondly, we released a report with the Center for Community Solutions about a survey we conducted with over 350 respondents asking them about the impact pandemic benefits has had on their households.

Sarah Kuhns 00:41:31 And the really made this clear that these benefits were essential in making sure that these families were able to weather the pandemic. So I wanted to share with you this quote. So the report, which was by Alex Dorman and Hope Lane of the Center for Community Solutions stated that when asked to describe the impact of these benefits slash assistance programs in their own words, respondents were unequivocal and how helpful the programs were. It is difficult to imagine their circumstances, if the temporary emergency help had not been available, many expect that the end of the programs will have detrimental effects on them and their families. Some of these programs may have been designed to be temporary, but they have demonstrated their necessity. And the lives of people in this sample were markedly improved because of them. Of course, they go on to explain the importance that, um, the monthly child tax credit payments, SNAP, emergency allotments, pandemic, EBT benefits, and unemployment benefits had on their lives and their ability to care for their families.

Sarah Kuhns 00:43:02 So we talk about these things as temporary, but most of them don't have to be. And the federal recovery legislation that is, you know, sort of stalled in Congress right now, but we'll hopefully move, continue to make its way through. Congress is really a way to make these things permanent and continue to make a difference in these family's lives. And so I sound like a broken record, but I am going to say, please call and email your legislators and urge them to make these things permanent and the federal recovery legislation or the Build Back Better plan. This is of

course, another great way to engage in democracy, um, and make sure that the folks that you're electing are working for you. And so that will of course be linked in the show notes as well as, you know, all the things that we have mentioned here today. And then of course, one last plug. I know I had said this at the top of that episode, but please vote in this year's election. It's November 2nd. I think Maria and I made a really good case as to why you should be engaged in local elections. And so I hope that you will go ahead and do that, but I would just want to thank you all for listening and I will see you next time.