

Tanya Domi:

Hi. This is Tanya Domi. Welcome to the Thought Project recorded at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York. Fostering groundbreaking research and scholarship in the arts, social sciences, and sciences. In this space, we talk with faculty and doctoral students about the big thinking and big ideas generating cutting-edge research, informing New Yorkers and the world.

Tanya Domi:

Heath Brown is Associate Professor of Public Policy at John Jay College in the Graduate Center, CUNY. He studies policy process, interest groups, presidential transitions, and educational policy. He is the author of five books including his newest, *Homeschooling the Right: How Conservative Educational Activism Erodes the State*, which was published by Columbia University Press in January 2021 and is the subject of our podcast today.

Tanya Domi:

Welcome back to the Thought Project, Heath Brown.

Heath Brown:

It is a pleasure to always be on the Thought Project. I am so excited to be back on the Thought Project and thank you so much for having me on. It's a real pleasure.

Tanya Domi:

It's good to see you and hear your voice, Heath. So, congratulations on your new book.

Heath Brown:

Yeah, thank you.

Tanya Domi:

*Homeschooling the Right* published by Columbia University Press in January. We had to delay this a little bit because his schedule changes, but the publication of your book ironically or coincidentally coincides with a couple of really stupendous events in US political history. The sustained attack on the electoral system by the former president of the United States, who led a daily disinformation campaign after the election, asserting that the election had in deed been rigged.

Tanya Domi:

He urged his supporters in a rally on January 6th to go to the Capitol and make the case using violence. Although he didn't say it literally, this was a well armed mob that descended on the US Capitol building on January 6th. Consequently, five people died that day in an attempt to stop the verification of the electoral votes, which is once considered a mere formality in our political history.

Tanya Domi:

Now that you have written this book, it just jogged my thinking. Do you see any parallels to these events and the massive shift away which has been happening for several decades, at least three to four? The massive shift away from public schools for the children of conservative and right-wing parents, who

have chosen to homeschool their children. Do it probably under less standards or very little standards according to the findings of your book. Have you thought about that?

Heath Brown:

Yeah. I thought about it a lot and it really was the inspiration for the book. The book's title captures the focus of the book, the book's title is Homeschooling the Right. The focus here is on very much the conservative wing of the homeschooling movement, which is powerful and significant and large, but not the entirety of parents who homeschool.

Heath Brown:

When we think about the community of homeschoolers, especially now given what we've gone through over the last year, we have all sorts of people who decide to homeschool. Progressives who homeschooled because of concerns about excessive focus on testing.

Tanya Domi:

Right, test taking. Yeah.

Heath Brown:

Homeschool families in the military who choose to homeschool because of the frequent moving. That's not the focus of this book. The focus of this book is on the families who homeschool and also believe in the conservative causes are often voting for Republican presidential candidates. And who for about 40 years have been closely connected to the conservative movement.

Heath Brown:

Again, this is not every homeschool parent, but a significant portion and it has been the most politically active group. One of the things that I do is I track this movement, the homeschooling movement back to its very earliest days. I did that in the book not knowing about the violence that was going to be committed at the Capitol at the beginning of January.

Tanya Domi:

Right.

Heath Brown:

But at the very earliest days of the conservative movement in the early 1970s, there was this conflict over textbooks in Kanawha County, West Virginia. The very infamous battle in the textbook wars was over the inclusion of a couple of readings from civil rights leaders including Elridge Cleaver and Malcolm X. That conservative members of the local school board believed were profane, believed should be taken out of the curriculum.

Heath Brown:

They believed this and pushed for them to be removed. Initially the school board said, "No." They said, "This is what they had voted and this was going to be a part of the curriculum." The protests from activists opposed to including these readings at first started in the typical peaceful way that many protests begin. But ended with dynamite explosions at schools, people arrested, the violence that was

used to oppose the local Democratic process that chose the books that were going to be used in the curriculum foreshadows the kind of violence that we saw at the Capitol.

Heath Brown:

When it was all said and done, one of the leaders of the movement opposed to these textbooks and know that when the opposition organized itself, one of the first things they did was to pull kids out of school. They said, "If you don't change these readings, if you don't take out of the curriculum these writings by the civil rights leaders, we're not going to return our kids to the public schools."

Heath Brown:

A large portion, a couple 1,000 kids were pulled out of the schools in a way that's reminiscent of the decision of many homeschooling families to remove their kids from the public schools because of an opposition. Either the curriculum or to the environment or something going on at the public school.

Heath Brown:

But in a quote to the New York Times one of the leaders of this opposition movement said that she wasn't even satisfied with the ultimate rulings. That ultimately opting out of schools was going to be one of the things that families would have to consider.

Heath Brown:

The thread that I try to build over the book is this idea of opting out, and opting out of all sorts of things. Not just education has been one of the defining characteristics of the conservative movement over the last 40 years. Battles over what families can opt out of, what people can opt out of, what rules they can opt out of it. We see in all sorts of things, everything from the privatization social security to the ways in which LGBTQ issues have played out, especially over the last 10 years.

Tanya Domi:

Sure. Yeah.

Heath Brown:

This politics of opting out aligns very closely with the homeschooling movement and the two of them are intertwined in leadership, ideas and ultimately on how things have played out within the Republican party over this time period. There's a lot of threads that I try to pull together for what ultimately is a relatively small number of students educated at home each year.

Tanya Domi:

Right.

Heath Brown:

When it's their political intact...

Tanya Domi:

It's there to the overall number of students and so on. Yeah.

Heath Brown:

We're talking about 3%, 3% of enrollment in the past. Now this year it's been more, but it has been 3%, but rose quickly from the passage of state laws in the 1980s up through the mid 2000s rapidly increasing to something like 1.5, 1.7 million students educated at home. This is a small, but still significant group of students.

Tanya Domi:

Absolutely. How did you get interested in this topic? I mean what pulled you into it?

Heath Brown:

Two primary things. I did my doctoral research on charter schools, a related but distinct educational movement that I can talk about some of the parallels. But my doctoral work and my research that I did in graduate schools focused on the politics of the charter school movement. So that brought me to the area of education policy, but then a couple of years ago I wrote a book about The Tea Party. In writing that book-

Tanya Domi:

Yes you did.

Heath Brown:

... that I talked about before, one of the things that I saw was, many of the leaders of the Tea Party movements were women. When I started to look at their background, many of them had previously served as leaders of homeschooling organizations. It occurred to be that they had learned about political organizing. They learned about political activism. They learned about how to mobilize a community through their experiences in the world of homeschooling. That they used that later as a basis on which to form local tea party organizations.

Heath Brown:

That just struck me as so significant because I hadn't heard before people talking about this relationship between homeschooling and the Tea Party. It struck me that it was more than just ideological that there was actually something going on, on the ground and I wanted to investigate.

Tanya Domi:

Right, the organizational, that's really fascinating and not surprising in this and I keep coming back to this issue. I mean I'll bring it up later in my questions, but school is where we become citizens. Where we leave our homes and go into a classroom with different people. This is how we're shaped to grow up in America and learn about our country. Sometimes in really diverse situations and sometimes not, but we have this whole group of people in America that are in parallel institutions in education where young people are being formed.

Tanya Domi:

I'm thinking about my area of research in the Balkans, because what happens is everybody gets Balkanized according to certain characteristics, like their ethnic group or their religious group. They're all in parallel organizations and institutions. It's really interesting to see this and the research that you have done to lay it out. It's very vibrant.

Tanya Domi:

I am curious though, also I kept thinking about Reagan and Reaganism and about what he did in California before he became president. But I'm also curious in your historical research, did you make any connections between the aftermath and consequences between the Supreme Court decision on Brown v. Board in 1954? Then the followup in many cases was, they just weren't going to desegregate. Many, many white people left public schools and formed religious private schools, that seems to be a big moment and it actually, it's from my childhood.

Tanya Domi:

I actually experienced this in some ways, although I didn't live in the south per se, but I don't know if you recall, Hillary Clinton was a young law student working for Children's Defense Fund. She was sent down south to go look at these schools under the auspices that she was going to enroll a child. These are really white Christians, maybe you connected to that or not.

Heath Brown:

Yeah. No, absolutely. There was this time period, post Brown versus the Board of Education, where part of the massive resistance that we saw in states like Virginia especially...

Tanya Domi:

Yeah, Alabama.

Heath Brown:

Alabama took the form of segregation by other names, by other means. One of the ways that that was done was through publicly supported vouchers that allowed families to take public money and move into white only private schools.

Heath Brown:

In Virginia that was ruled unconstitutional in the late 1960s, but we have the persistence of segregation academies that lost some of the public funding that they had been given early on in the 1960s, but persisted. Segregation academies spread, were a way that white families could opt out of the public school system-

Tanya Domi:

Right opt out, exactly.

Heath Brown:

... into a private often Christian education setting, but that movement of segregation academies ran head long into the Supreme Court that ultimately ruled that the operating these schools as non-profit organizations was against the rules. That operating them as non-profit organizations that segregated by race was unconstitutional, but also this was expensive. Operating private schools for many families was not something that was affordable, and so we see the affordability, the financial burden on families made a strategy of private schools very difficult.

Heath Brown:

Happening at the same time is this movement to allow families to opt out of public school and educating the home. Now in the 1970s, this was largely illegal. It was illegal, it was a violation of state education-

Tanya Domi:

State laws, yeah.

Heath Brown:

... and local education rules on mandatory education so that it took a movement really of progressives and also libertarians and conservatives in the 1980s to push states, all 50 states one at a time, to either make homeschooling legal. Or to design policy that would allow families to homeschool by some other mechanism, often by allowing them to declare themselves as private schools. But prior to the 1980s, this was not legal and families would face legal jeopardy if they decided to leave the public school.

Tanya Domi:

Absolutely. Yeah.

Heath Brown:

But by the 1980s, this was legal and then became a mechanism for families to opt out. Their motivations ranged from wanting to seek out a different education environment to the opportunity to teach morality. But throughout this, that the themes of white nationalism and Christian nationalism cannot be ignored. Some of the leaders were some of the leaders of these very same movements, under the intellectual leaders of the homeschooling movement were also intellectual leaders of this Christian nationalism movement.

Tanya Domi:

Right, and so also during the '80s, it can't be overlooked that Ronald Reagan came to Washington, he brought a lot of Christian evangelicals with him and put him into government. They were able to make policy at the federal level that probably enabled this to also be advanced as a construct that you can school from home.

Tanya Domi:

Then you get the infrastructure of all these right-wing think tanks in Washington Heritage Foundation focused on the family. All these right-wing groups that were also pushing it and they're inside the Beltway talking to people on the hill. What did your research reveal on that score? Because really Reagan brings a lot of people into federal government that really hadn't been before.

Heath Brown:

Yeah, you see in some of these groups, some of the advocates for homeschooling playing a part in them. Groups like the Council for National Policy, long known as the most secretive but most powerful conservative organization in Washington. At its outset, its founding had a group of leaders come together. Some of them were some of the most active proponents of homeschooling, including [inaudible 00:17:41], R.J. Rushdoony and a number of others who were advocating for homeschooling as an educational, as a pedagogical approach but as important as a political tool.

Heath Brown:

When you read some of the writings about homeschooling from this time period, it's not just about why this is a more effective way to teach writing, or this is a more effective way to teach arithmetic. When you read these conservative writers, what they talk specifically about is homeschooling as a way to prepare a generation of conservative leaders for the future. So that to homeschool is not to just more effectively educate, but it is also-

Tanya Domi:

It's to form it.

Heath Brown:

... to effectively mobilize.

Tanya Domi:

Yeah, mobilize and form, form [crosstalk 00:18:39].

Heath Brown:

And so it's those groups who care not just about homeschooling as an educational policy, but as a political tool. When you read the original magazines of the homeschooling community, magazines that were sent out to families to help them figure out so how do you teach French if you don't have a degree in French? In most places you don't need a degree in really anything to be a homeschool teacher, so they would send out these magazines to families that were in need. They needed help, it's very difficult to homeschooling and in many of the issues of these magazines, they also would say, "While you're homeschooling know that you have to remain active in politics. You have to participate. You have to..."

Tanya Domi:

You have to show up.

Heath Brown:

Yeah, you have to show up and one way to do this is to turn your homeschool into a civics project. During the fall, to teach government or politics to your kids, you can take them out and do door knocking for a candidate. You can go and volunteer on a campaign. You can turn your homeschool into a model political campaign, and so this quickly turned into homeschoolers for Bush and homeschoolers for Ted Cruz.

Tanya Domi:

Of course, I was aware of that, I was aware of that for sure on Bush.

Heath Brown:

This was organized by homeschooling organizations who recognized that there was a pedagogical benefit to providing families with a curriculum which they lacked. But also have the secondary benefits of helping sympathetic candidates get elected.

Tanya Domi:

So they actually can intern on a campaign to learn.

Heath Brown:

Yeah, and so in 2000 when George W. Bush was running for office, there was a concerted organized effort to get homeschooling families to participate to volunteer. Once W. Bush won he sent out letters to these homeschooling organizations thanking them for getting so involved in his campaign, crediting them with being foot soldiers of his successful campaign.

Heath Brown:

Now, they weren't so numerous that they can be credited with winning him the election, but they became a powerful force and wing of the conservative movement over the Republican party. Now again, this isn't all homeschooling families but it was the most activated, the most mobilized. There were no homeschoolers...

Tanya Domi:

Right, and the most political.

Heath Brown:

Sure, there were many homeschooling families that voted for Bill Clinton in 1992, they just weren't organized in a way that they were homeschoolers for Clinton.

Tanya Domi:

Right, and I do recall that too. I want to ask you, one of the themes that you talk about is you talk about the sharing of public assets, public resources, a shifting around of these resources. You also describe the infrastructure that is set up in these communities to support homeschoolers perhaps with public funds, that's something I'd like to hear you talk about.

Tanya Domi:

Then also this political infrastructure that they've set up with the organization that you talk about the Home School Legal Defense Association. I'd like to hear your thoughts on how public resources may be used in support of these homeschool parents and their kids and then how does the homeschool legal and political organizations, how do they work to advance the goals of-

Heath Brown:

Sure.

Tanya Domi:

... supporting homeschooling that you write about in your book?

Heath Brown:

Traditionally, in almost every state there is nearly zero amount of money that transfers to a family that homeschools. If you opt to homeschool, you get no textbooks, you get no curriculum, you get almost nothing from the state or the locality. In fact, it has been the strategy of national organizations that represent homeschool families to resist any efforts, any policy, any law that might even provide that.

Heath Brown:

Paradoxically, the leading homeschooling interest groups have opposed school voucher programs that might be used to fund homeschooling expenses out of a fear that, once a school voucher program was opened up to homeschooling families, the next thing that would come would be regulations.

Tanya Domi:

Regulations, right.

Heath Brown:

This has been a long-term strategy, so even when Republican and conservative members of Congress have introduced bills to connect school vouchers funding programs, publicly funding programs to homeschool students, they have been rejected. Not by their logical opponents, but by those that would seem to benefit most directly.

Heath Brown:

The homeschooling advocates, many of the most conservative homeschooling families have been ideologically consistent of their lack of interest in connecting with public funding systems. But once they leave, once they educate at home, they don't leave the public conversation. One of the goals of the book is to dispel this myth that homeschooling represents a departure from the public square, so that this myth that...

Tanya Domi:

They are very much engaged in the public square.

Heath Brown:

Massively so and so the myth that I think a lot of people have had in the past is that, homeschooling families are disconnected from the world. They've dropped out That the result for kids is a lack of socialization, a lack of connection with the world. In fact, it's been quite the opposite and the reason for that has been the civil society that's formed around homeschooling has been extensive.

Heath Brown:

In doing the book, I conducted interviews with the leaders of homeschooling organizations and what I found is hundreds and hundreds of organizations in every state. Not just state organizations, but county organizations, neighborhood organizations.

Tanya Domi:

It is at the lower level.

Heath Brown:

The reason for this is that when you opt out of public schooling, you open up huge needs for support. Pedagogical needs, mentoring needs, extra curricula needs, athletic needs and out of that has formed a civil society that is as rich as many communities are lacking.

Heath Brown:

In rural parts of the country where major institutions have closed like libraries and hospitals and even schools, you can still find dozens of homeschooling organizations that are providing for families.

Heath Brown:

And so it's this paradox of what's going on that in places that you would expect to be devoid of civil society, homeschooling is embedded in these rich communities. These communities that often are doing nothing overtly political, but still are energized in a way that if a bill comes up in the State House, there is a state wide political organization that can in hours get hundreds and hundreds of families to call their local representative, show up in the State Capitol in a way that almost no other interest group can do.

Heath Brown:

It's why one legislature in Michigan according to a news account referred to the homeschooling lobby as the scariest lobby that they confront.

Tanya Domi:

Yes, I read that.

Heath Brown:

Because of the voracity of this movement, nobody crosses the homeschooling movement at the state level. They are viewed as so powerful, so organized and so effective at lobbying with grassroots, with people showing up that there are very few, if any efforts to tighten regulations, to increase standardization, accountability, testing. All of those kinds of things are largely absent from the homeschooling world. You're hard pressed to find a state legislature who will try to change that.

Tanya Domi:

In that context, talk about the Home School Legal Defense Association, which I am assuming this is a national organization that may have local representatives.

Heath Brown:

Yes.

Tanya Domi:

How do they work and how do they work these communities with respect to legal advocacy or even political advocacy?

Heath Brown:

Yeah, so this is an organization that is founded in the early 1980s by several of the most prominent members of the conservative movement. They founded this organization on the one hand to provide legal representation to families that were deciding to homeschool in offering precarious legal environments.

Heath Brown:

When HSLDA was founded, most states had not yet accepted legalized, normalized homeschooling. One of the things they did was to provide the services of lawyers in each state that they were able to connect

to families that were in need. At the same time the HSLDA has been a very political organization and has through its advocacy in Washington advocated for homeschooling, but also made a concerted effort to connect homeschooling to other aspects of the conservative movement.

Heath Brown:

In their communications with members, they have tried to link homeschooling to an identity, to a conservative identity that is also interested in things like the Second Amendment that is also interested in resisting changes in marriage rules that has viewed homeschooling as integral to a set of the moral conservative agenda. It tried to connect those things together.

Heath Brown:

Now again, many families who homeschool have no interest in these other parts of the conservative agenda and homeschool for purely educational reason. But for those families that are connected, what they get is an argument that to homeschool is to make a political decision That political decision is connected to other political decisions that they might make about other aspects of politics. And so HSLDA has been incredibly powerful from the early 1980s up through today.

Heath Brown:

Now, more recently this organization has changed directions in some ways and has increasingly focused more on homeschooling and less so on these other aspects of the conservative movement, but that's a relatively recent phenomenon. For a long time HSLDA was powerful, feared in Washington. In some ways analogous to the NRA in how devoted the members were to the organization, and also how influential the organization was in Washington but also in State Capitols.

Heath Brown:

They've done this not with a massive budget, maybe unlike the NRA, but through effective organizing. Taking advantage of the vast civil society that's formed each one of these states, that they can connect with, provide services to and legal and political expertise that is often lacking at the local level.

Heath Brown:

This organization has been very powerful. It's leaders have moved from the organization into other powerful conservative organizations, especially it's most well known leader, Michael Farris, who is very involved in conservative politics was not a supporter of Donald Trump. In fact, was a vocal opponent of Donald Trump in 2016, but especially around the issue of conservative judges eventually came around to Donald Trump as a pretty good advocate for the conservative causes that he believed in. This organization is very important to understand how the conservative wing of the homeschooling movement has been so influential over the last 40 years.

Tanya Domi:

Yeah, it's a power center without a doubt in the conservative movement. I was really taken by a quote that you did talk about. You mentioned the Michigan Legislative Aide, but this quote specifically attributed to Kevin Williamson. I want to read it for our listeners.

Tanya Domi:

"There is exactly one authentically radical, social movement of any real significance in the United States. It is not occupy the Tea Party or the Ron Paul faction. It is homeschoolers who by the simple act of instructing their children at home pose an intellectual moral and political challenge to the government monopoly schools." That is quite a quote.

Heath Brown:

It's significant and Kevin Williamson isn't alone. You see other figures in the conservative movement look to homeschooling. I think one of the reasons is, on most of the conservative movement policy agenda, they have failed. They have ultimately the major parts of the culture wars have been lost by conservatives. Homeschooling is an exception. Homeschooling is an area where few losses have ever been felt by the conservative movement. Unlike other parts of their agenda, homeschooling is where they have succeeded again and again and again, almost never losing.

Heath Brown:

If you look at state laws, you almost never see a law become more restrictive and that's not the case in most other areas including charter schooling, which we now associate with much of the school choice environment. But charter school laws which have been supported in many cases by Democrats and sometimes even progressives-

Tanya Domi:

Oh for sure.

Heath Brown:

... sometimes become more restrictive, sometimes become less restrictive, we see movement back and forth. Homeschooling is not like that at all. It stood out so Kevin Williamson is one, but I could read you another quote from an even better known conservative activist and that's Paul Weyrich who's-

Tanya Domi:

Oh yes.

Heath Brown:

... one of the founders of the conservative movement.

Tanya Domi:

Absolutely.

Heath Brown:

In the late 1990s, he grew so dispirited at the losses of the conservative movement of the major organizations closing down because of their inability to manage themselves and the scandals that have happened. He writes this letter to conservatives, a very famous letter at the time. It was called The Letter to Conservatives he writes in 1999.

Heath Brown:

He writes about all these failings and his argument is, that this active engagement with politics hasn't worked. He argues for separation as the right direction for the conservative movement. He writes and I'll quote, he says, "What I mean by separation is for example what the homeschoolers have done." He said, "Faced with the public school systems that no longer educate, but instead conditioned students with the attitudes demanded by the political correctness, they have succeeded. They have separated themselves from public schools and have created new institutions, new schools in their homes."

Heath Brown:

And so Weyrich, who's such an influential figure and such an important person in the 1970s and 1980s helped create the Heritage Foundation is so central. He looks to homeschooling as the way forward, as a manifestation of opting out, as a form of separation. A decade or so later when the Tea Party emerges and figures like Ron Paul are calling for people to pursue this libertarian vision of protecting the home with your own firearm, not trusting local police forces to opt out of all sorts of things, homeschooling is in some ways foreshadowing that.

Heath Brown:

Weyrich sees this by about a decade. By the time Kevin Williamson comes around and is starting to see the Tea Party forming, he too recognizes it is this other lesser known but still very organized and effective form of separation and opting out that has been going on for decades.

Heath Brown:

And so it shows up in all sorts of places that you might not expect and is in some ways a leader of the Tea Party movement. Many of the same ideas are expressed in the Tea Party movement and we see them continuing in some ways with the militia movements and these other kinds of separators movements that come up in later years.

Tanya Domi:

This has been going on for several decades, and of course, Obama preceded Trump. I mean when you get to the end of your book, you have a really strong conclusion section. You talk about the implications for the conservative movement and perhaps where they would go and this is pivoting off of what Trump delivered in his four years, that's where you start.

Tanya Domi:

Can you talk about that? I know you well, Heath, but I did not know that you wrote your dissertation on charter schools. That's really fascinating. That's another conversation, but now having really immersed yourself in the charter school movement and now this approach that you use on Homeschooling the Right, where do you see this going? Before you answer that, I'd like to hear your thoughts about what Trump did.

Tanya Domi:

Did he help deepen? Did he advance this further? I mean are things put into a place where it'd be really difficult to deconstruct homeschooling? I think politically, just my political hat is that, this will be very difficult to address politically. As you lay out they have been very, very successful.

Heath Brown:

Yeah, so the Trump campaign was fascinating in so many ways in 2016. One of them was this head of the most powerful homeschooling organization, Michael Farris, comes out in opposition to Donald Trump. He says that Donald Trump was not somebody that we would have fought for. That his argument is that, Christian conservatives have been involved in politics fighting for candidates since the 1970s and Donald Trump is not their candidate, is not someone they should support.

Heath Brown:

He came out and at this point he was now running a different organization, but he was still prominent part of this movement. He comes out against Donald Trump in 2016, but one of the first things that Donald Trump does when he's ultimately elected in 2016 is, appoint the most friendly secretary of education for this movement that one can imagine, Betsy DeVos.

Heath Brown:

Much more so than any secretary of education for George W. Bush, for George. H. W. Bush, for any president previously, Betsy DeVos is knowledgeable about homeschooling, sympathetic to homeschooling. Also, sympathetic to the voucher movement, to charter schools and also surprising...

Tanya Domi:

She was a real power player in Michigan, so it's no mistaking that Michigan sent her. I mean she comes from Michigan that there emerges a leader on this movement.

Heath Brown:

Sure, absolutely and so she steps into office despite the fact that homeschooling movement was I think tapered on Donald Trump. She was an enormous win for the movement, but the politics of homeschooling Washington has always been to resist anything at the federal level. That, what the homeschooling movement has always wanted was just to never mention the homeschooling movement. Any bill that even possibly touches on homeschooling in any possible way is rejected.

Heath Brown:

Betsy DeVos comes into office and slowly we start to see a one possibility for federal efforts, and that is around getting tax deductions for homeschooling expenses. That's viewed as a possibility as not opening the door to regulations, because it's not actual public funding like vouchers would be, but would be a way to underwrite the cost of...

Tanya Domi:

To tax credits?

Heath Brown:

Yeah, exactly. Some sort of tax...

Tanya Domi:

To tax credits, yes.

Heath Brown:

And so we see that start to emerge and a couple of bills appear, which really don't have any hope of going anywhere until the pandemic hits, which has in many ways accelerated at the national level. But more importantly at the state level efforts to provide families ways to access funding, either through tax schemes or public funding to underwrite the expenses of education.

Tanya Domi:

At home. Yeah.

Heath Brown:

At home through paying for distance learning, through paying for virtual tutoring, through paying for homeschooling expenses, that has accelerated over the last 12 months as larger and larger as the constituency for this has grown. The fact that nearly every parent can probably describe themselves as a homeschool parent in some way now. Things that had seemed not possible at all 12 months ago, all of a sudden seem like real possibilities.

Heath Brown:

We see lots of bills emerging in state legislatures to provide access to either public funding or some sort of tax system, tax scheme that would allow the expenses associated with homeschooling to be written off. Betsy DeVos is doing all those things before the pandemic and the pandemic has in some ways accelerated this. Yet at the same time what I found is that support, that is electoral support from homeschooling parents for Donald Trump went down considerably between 2016 and 2020.

Heath Brown:

I found this because there is a question in one of the national studies of elections, one of the large sample surveys that's done every four years includes a questioning about homeschooling. In the past, about 62% of homeschool parents indicated that they supported the Republican candidate. That includes John McCain, Mitt Romney and Donald Trump in 2016. About almost the identical percentage, 61 or 62%.

Heath Brown:

What I found in 2020 based on pre-election survey data, on either early voting or intent to vote was that about four percentage points fewer homeschooling parents supported Donald Trump in 2020 than in previous elections. In addition...

Tanya Domi:

That's a pretty big drop, four points.

Heath Brown:

It's a pretty big drop and that drop does not come among conservative homeschool parents. That drop comes mainly among moderate.

Tanya Domi:

Moderate.

Heath Brown:

Politically moderate homeschool parents. Parents...

Tanya Domi:

Maybe independence as well, right?

Heath Brown:

It could be independence as well. What I found was that the probability of a politically moderate homeschool parent supporting Trump in 2016 compared to 2020, dropped enormously. The reason for that, I think the changing politics of homeschooling that is who homeschools, but also a great change in the composition. What I think this suggests for the future is a moderation of the politics of homeschooling.

Tanya Domi:

Oh interesting. Interesting.

Heath Brown:

That my suspicion is that, homeschooling families are going to much more closely resemble the families who decide to charter school or private school or to do conventional public schools. That their conservative wing is going to still be there, but the other parts of this community are going to change. That includes a much more racially and ethnically and economically diverse group of homeschooling parents than in the past. In the past homeschooling was largely white-

Tanya Domi:

White.

Heath Brown:

... and affluent and often Christian, that's changing and part of that change will then lead to other changes in the political composition of this movement. I think if I revisit this book in 10 years, it would be a book about a much more heterogeneous community of homeschoolers than in the past.

Tanya Domi:

I think the last sentence in your book in the conclusion was, if you were writing an [inaudible 00:45:39] I would put this in the first sentence, but this is a book and so I want to share it. I'm going to paraphrase the preceding sentence, but you're discussing how students get involved. They don't necessarily have to join a Tea Party group or oppose same sex marriage and abortion for strong connections to form between these or overlapping conservative movements.

Tanya Domi:

This was the most revealing finding of your research Heath. "The design of conservative freedom policies like homeschooling purposefully hides many of the outcomes from researchers and public officials alike. The obfuscation reduces the likelihood of strict public oversight and creates the parallel politics that is critical to the outcome of these policies. Though many misunderstood this fact, large parts of the homeschooling movement never saw retreat from the public square as the central goal. Rather, the point was always to change what happens in the public square." Very, very powerful.

Heath Brown:

Yeah, this was a very difficult book to write and most homeschool advocates would be pleased with that. The way in which most writing about public policy happens is through large data collection because the outcomes, the people participating-

Tanya Domi:

Big data, yes.

Heath Brown:

... in Medicare and Medicaid and public schools, we know so much about the intricacies of nearly every public school in the country. You know the educational preparation of teachers. You know the outcomes for students. We know so much about what goes on in public schools because it's required by law. It's a part of our understanding of the publicness of public schools.

Heath Brown:

Homeschooling laws have been purposefully written to limit data collection, to limit accountability so that we don't know very much about these schools when it comes down to it. We don't know whether the typical homeschooling teacher has a four-year degree, has a background in the subjects that they teach.

Heath Brown:

We know a little bit about homeschooling outcomes and what we know suggests that great worries about outcomes like college attendance shouldn't be such a worry, but at the end of the day we know very little. They have been purposefully shielded it to being part of the policy design-

Tanya Domi:

It's a calculation. It's a calculation.

Heath Brown:

... and that makes accountability very hard. It makes the job of researchers very hard and that has all been written into the DNA of these policies. This makes it hard to reach a judgment about whether homeschooling in educational terms is good or bad, effective or ineffective. We don't know the answer to that question, which is why it's not the question that I try to answer in the book.

Heath Brown:

The question I answer that a bit in the book is about the politics of homeschooling. If I try to answer that other question, that important question, about the effectiveness of homeschooling, I would be unable to answer it in a rigorous way. It's a very important question-

Tanya Domi:

It is.

Heath Brown:

... that is very, very, very difficult to answer and that's exactly what the advocates for homeschooling have designed into state and local laws.

Tanya Domi:

Well, having strategically read your book as a graduate student would read it, I would recommend professor Brown that you send this, a copy of this book to the president, the vice president, to Susan Rice who's running a Domestic Policy Council. To the new secretary of education and my former colleague from Columbia, Susan Goldberg, who's now the title nine officer and does outreach at the Department of Education. You should send copies to all those people, they should read this book.

Tanya Domi:

It's very important. You've done a great service in producing this research in an accessible way and I want to congratulate you.

Heath Brown:

Yeah, thank you so much. Maybe we could just hope that they listen to the podcast, because if that aghast group listens to the podcast, we'll be one step further in informing them about this, but I think it's very...

Tanya Domi:

I will send it to Susan and Goldberg. Thank you for coming on to Thought Project again Heath, you are one of our favorite regular guests.

Heath Brown:

Well, I'm also a regular listener, so thank you and thank you for hosting this. It's my great pleasure to join.

Tanya Domi:

Thanks for tuning into the Thought Project and thanks to our guest, professor Heath Brown of John Jay College and the Graduate Center CUNY.

Tanya Domi:

The Thought Project is brought to you with production, engineering, and technical assistance by Kevin Wolfe of CUNY TV. I'm Tanya Domi, tune in next week.