

Matt Peterson: Hi, everybody. I'm Matt Peterson, editor of The Masthead. Let's kick this off here. Thank you, everybody, for joining us today on our regular conference call series with *Atlantic* writers and editors. Today we're talking to Vann Newkirk. He is a staff writer at *The Atlantic* covering politics and policy. Hello, Vann.

Vann Newkirk: Matty, how are you doing?

Matt Peterson: Good. Vann has written quite a bit about the response to the hurricanes in Puerto Rico and elsewhere as well as the health care reform process in Congress, so we will talk about both of those things today. Before we get into it, let me just remind everybody how these calls work. I will get us started and then we'll take your questions.

If you want to ask questions, you can join our live chat over on Maestro Conference. You can do that by going to [social.maestroconference.com](http://social.maestroconference.com) and logging in. That's [social.maestroconference.com](http://social.maestroconference.com). Look for the chat window at the lower left of your screen, click on that, and look for where it says Everyone, and that's where Caroline Kitchener will be taking your questions. You can also just email them directly to Caroline at [ckitchener@theatlantic.com](mailto:ckitchener@theatlantic.com), and she will pass them over to me.

All right, let's jump in here. Vann, you are recently back from a reporting trip to Puerto Rico in the wake of the hurricane. What did you see?

Vann Newkirk: Let me start by saying one of the things that I've noticed in the coverage of Puerto Rico, of the crisis there. In order to explain this and exactly how it is on the ground to people, you have to basically bite into it. You have to take small bites, because it's really just impossible to talk about the scale of just how everyday life for every single person living in Puerto Rico is, and has been right now.

When I got there, even in the most well-heeled places ... in San Juan, the city, which is doing okay, most of their problems stem from a lack of power and water...not some of the same sort of life-threatening things that are happening on the interior, but even there you have people who are drinking contaminated water... who are contracting diseases from contaminated water, who are suffering from accidents, who can't make it to hospitals, and who are suffering from the lack of power.

You know, people who need dialysis can't get dialysis. You have nursing homes that just can't function anymore. You have a slew of hospitals around the island that just can't operate anymore, and they have to send people off to the big ship or to some makeshift military hospital.

I think what we should take away from this is this is a humanitarian disaster, not quite on the scale of maybe a Haiti after the earthquake, but similar sorts of things are happening. You have landslides. You have diseases, that will only

intensify as the mosquitoes bounce back and as they grow in number with all the standing water. You have no more vegetation in lots of places, so you don't have shade. You won't have power for the next few months for the majority of the island. People throw around the word "disaster" a lot, but this is the kind of disaster I think you would see in films. It's really, really bad.

What I wrote about was the environmental crisis, because that was the thing that I could bite off and really report out in the time that I was there. Even that, we saw people who were drinking from Superfund sites. We went to some of the Superfund sites. We saw a river that had been condemned, people couldn't drink from that river, and we saw that river basically flooding people's homes and contaminating their own drinking water. I saw roads that had completely disappeared from landslides, roads that were disappearing, and I talked to people who had never once actually run across a single FEMA or federal government employee who was doing rounds. That's I guess a sense of it. It's pretty rough, and it's over a month out now from the hurricane.

Matt Peterson: Yeah. One of the things that you've drawn out in your reporting I think is that there were these sort of pre-existing conditions, and you talked about the environmental catastrophe, these Superfund sites. One of the reasons why there's so much of a problem now is there was this underlying vulnerability before the storm hit, so tell us about that. Was Puerto Rico particularly poor off in terms of environmental contamination before these storms came in?

Vann Newkirk: Right. If you had to pick one place in the United States where you would basically, to be crass, bet on an environmental disaster happening like this, I would say there's no way you'd pick any other place other than Puerto Rico. Like most of the other islands in the Caribbean, they rely mostly on fossil fuels, almost exclusively on fossil fuels, for all their power, which means ... and they're also an island, a rather small island ... which means that when they have coal power, when they ... basically most of their power comes from diesel, so there are giant generators burning diesel fuel, so all the emissions, all the waste from all that, it basically just gets retained on the island.

Their landfills have been at capacity for years, and so what happens is coal ash gets built into little mountains that just become part of the landscape. Leftover hazardous waste gets dumped in the water. Puerto Rico had the worst drinking water before Hurricane Maria and Hurricane Irma in the United States. It's got some of the worst air pollution, despite having considerably fewer emissions than other states per person. Yeah, it's a confluence of lots of different kinds of environmental problems that will all be exacerbated with any type of natural disaster, and so that's where we are.

The power crisis, the debt issues, the problems with Zika, the stress on the hospitals that already existed, those pointed to disaster well before hurricane season, and people have been jumping up and down and asking for help on them for years. Frankly, the federal government, that's their job. I think what we've seen is those type of things haven't yet been done.

Matt Peterson: What hasn't been done here? The long-term fixes to things like power and debt, or what are people still waiting for?

Vann Newkirk: The debt issues, fixing the power grid is a big thing, making it so it's actually resilient and fits 21st-century standards of what people expect from the power grid. Upgrading the entire power infrastructure so it relies on some sustainable power sources. All this is basically undergirded by the debt. You can't do any of these things when Puerto Rico has a multibillion-dollar debt tag to bondholders, when every single decision is subject to a board decision, a board approval, and when there isn't really, I think, debt relief on the horizon. It can't really upgrade any of those things. It can't make the hospitals actual 21st-century hospitals without fixing the debt.

As I've been reporting on the debt crisis, this is why I'm reporting there. Anybody who's reported on this can tell you that, again, this was all pointed to, in this direction. Puerto Rico's been actually very lucky over the past few years to not be hit with the sort of normal hurricanes that it usually does get hit with. They had a lull of about 14, 15 years where they weren't hit with major hurricanes, after suffering major hurricanes each of the past years. Yeah, this is something that I think was inevitable.

Matt Peterson: I want to go back to some of the specific environmental problems that you saw. You mentioned that you drove out and saw a Superfund site. Was it your impression that the federal government, whether it's FEMA or the EPA, do they have a handle on this?

Vann Newkirk: I don't know. They officially have said that they've gone out and visited most of the sites. There are still some, I believe, that they haven't gotten to. It's hard to say whether there's a handle on anything, because it's hard to say whether, I guess, we're even at a stage where that's a discussion that can be had. Again, it's difficult to get to some of these places. The roads are not available to some of the Superfund sites. The roads have been washed out. There's no infrastructure to do the sort of cleanup that's necessary in some of them. Again, even though there are signs at some of them that say don't drink the water, people were desperate, and without access to drinking water from other sources, they go to where they can.

The EPA, I'm not quite sure exactly what they've been doing on the ground the past couple weeks. I have gotten some dispatches from Region 2, which is the region that administers them in Puerto Rico, but they are looking to shore up some of the sites. They have inspected some of the wells, but that's work that's going to have to continue not just in the next couple of weeks but over the next few years, as this slow-going redevelopment of infrastructure and reprovision of healthy and clean drinking water commences. I think it's probably too early to give them a report card, because this is a water crisis that's going to be going on for years.

Matt Peterson: Right. Right. Let's talk more about the power situation, because we've got a lot of questions from members about electricity. When you were there, how widespread or not was access to electricity?

Vann Newkirk: Oh, outside of I'd say the official buildings and the airport, pretty much nobody has power. What's ubiquitous are generators, so people have sort of temporary permanent power, as long as they can afford diesel and as long as diesel is accessible. In terms of central power grid power, I maybe stepped foot in two buildings during my entire time there that had access to that electricity grid, and those were government buildings and the airport. Yeah, even in the richest places in Puerto Rico, they're all on generator power. They're dealing with blackouts, with basically people conserving diesel and only saving their generators for nighttime use, for people to charge their phones.

It's actually, in a city, in a place, where people are so used to having electricity and the infrastructure is so dependent on it, when you go to that place ... and I've been to San Juan and other places in Puerto Rico several times ... you go there now, and it's completely dark after dark, pretty much everywhere. There are no street lights, there's no signals. You lose cell phone signal out of the city pretty quickly. Getting out to the country is an enterprise where you really want to be back before dark because again, there are no lights. There's no traffic signals, none of the toll booths work, things like that. Yeah, there's no power, and that's what no power looks like across the whole entire territory.

Matt Peterson: As they're thinking of fixing this, here's a question from a member named Paul. Are they trying to just rebuild the grid essentially as it was, which as you say focused heavily on fossil fuels, diesel and coal? Did you get any sense that there's any interest in building a more environmentally-sustainable power system, solar, wind, whatever it is?" Are people even thinking that far ahead about how to fix the grid long-term?

Vann Newkirk: It depends on who the "people" is in this conversation. I will say it's FEMA's job basically to get the grid back up to where it was before, and it's also sort of the job of all emergency responders and the first aid folks to get the grid functioning by whatever means necessary, right? That's probably going to mean going back to the diesel. The coal plant has asked for a waiver of coal emissions rules, standards, from the EPA, and they probably will get that waiver. Yeah, actually in the near term I would wager the country will probably be even more dependent on fossil fuels than it was before.

There is considerable interest, I think, on behalf of the people of Puerto Rico, on behalf of actually some people in the government, the municipal governments and the territorial government, to look at building a more sustainable grid that's resilient in itself and also relies on a diversified power portfolio, including renewables. I talked to lots of people who were pushing their local leaders to consider this. I talked to business leaders who were moving completely in the direction of solar. I talked to people who were getting into the solar business because they saw now an opportunity. I saw people who were thinking about

creating microgrids that were based on renewables, that didn't depend on the main power grid of Puerto Rico.

I will say, while the current mood right now is still immediate relief and recovery, there is considerable interest at least on behalf of Puerto Rican citizens who want to think about a more resilient and more renewables-based power grid.

Matt Peterson: Right. I want to get through the politics of all this and back to the debt in a second, but let me ask one more question about technology. I think a lot of folks have heard this idea by Google or its parent company, Alphabet, to use balloons to create more internet access. The question is about how limited access to the outside world is still. Are you as a journalist able to get in touch with folks from outside there? Do you need to actually go there to report on the story correctly? Is the lack of phone access holding back our understanding of what's going on in Puerto Rico?

Vann Newkirk: Yeah. As a person who's written on both sides of the divide, both in Puerto Rico and here, I will say for any journalist it's impossible to capture what's happening without going there. Like you said, even now, cell phones are notoriously just not reliable. Even now, if you go down the highway you'll see basically big colonies of cars, where people have found service and just parked there and stayed there, so they can call and FaceTime and WhatsApp loved ones. Those, especially the farther you get from San Juan, those hot spots are less and less, you're less and less likely to see them.

I think you can get a reasonable view of what's happening inside the capital, maybe, if you aren't reporting from the ground, but when you're talking about the majority of the land mass in Puerto Rico, you're talking about places out in Salinas, you're talking about Guayama, places like that. There's no way you can really report without going there, without speaking to people, without driving to those places in some cases.

Yeah, the communications infrastructure is heavily damaged. People still are relying on land lines when they can, and even some of my sources now ... again, more than a month after the hurricane ... they have been off grid, they've been difficult to reach, and it's a waiting game. I often have to work on other stories while I'm waiting for a source to get back to me, and it's just a mutual understanding that, yeah, the work is slow, and people will get back when they can.

Matt Peterson: Right. Then let's go back to the debt and the politics around this. For folks who are not following this closely, where does this stand right now? I mean, you know, you've had the president getting out there and saying that this problem was partially due to Puerto Rico's own creation because it got into all this debt, and as you said, that's led to this cascading series of problems related to the power grid. Where do things stand currently nationally around Puerto Rico's debt?

Vann Newkirk:

I'm not quite sure exactly what things are going to look like. The recent aid package that went through the House, it does ... you know, they offer relief funds, it's the one that will give them relief funds, but there isn't a whole lot earmarked specifically for Puerto Rico. There's a joint fund for states that have experienced hurricanes, so that's for Texas, Florida and Puerto Rico and the Virgin islands, but what's specifically earmarked for Puerto Rico is actually another \$2 billion worth of a loan. They will have to be paying interest on that loan. It may be a low-interest loan, but that'll be added to their debt. When you have debt that's the problem, that is the genesis of a lot of these infrastructure issues, a lot of the inability to develop Puerto Rico in a way that's sustainable, that is only expected to be worse.

Again, that's sort of along the lines of the rhetoric that's come out of Washington, of Trump one day saying or at least I guess maybe alluding to him maybe canceling Puerto Rico's debt, and then the next saying, "It's basically your responsibility to fix your problem." That mindset, that doctrine, has been the doctrine under which Puerto Rico's been governed by the federal government for the last century, and it doesn't seem like it's going to change, even with this.

What's probably going to happen is they'll take on more debt. They will not be able to make some of the more long-term sustainable infrastructure changes that they need to in order to survive more hurricanes. In an age of global warming, in an age of climate change, those hurricanes will become more and more prevalent. While this should be, I think, a time to awaken the American public as to the relationship between Puerto Rico and the federal government, I don't know that that's the case.

I don't know that the problems with that relationship will be fixed, that the debt will be addressed in a frugal way for infrastructure development for the people, and as long as politicians like Trump continue to rely on this really colonial view of Puerto Rican people, who are just subject to different rules than the people in the United States ... he didn't come down, I believe, on the citizens of Houston in the same way ... yeah, the same problems are going to continue.

Matt Peterson:

Yeah, can you separate out politics from infrastructure and logistical problems here, or are these things the same problem? We had a question from a member named Cade who was asking, How much of this is a failure of leadership? Are our politics around the issue slowing us down, or is it actually just sort of bottlenecking around airfields and things like that, logistical problems? It sounds like what you're saying is that the infrastructure is bad in part because of the history of the way the island has been governed, right?

Vann Newkirk:

Well, it's a bit of both. I will say there is plenty of criticism on the island of local leaders, of Governor Rossello, of municipal mayors, of the actual people running the power company, PREPA. They have historically had terrible collection practices. Their business practices have always been subject to audit and have been criticized pretty roundly, and also just sort of have infrastructure decisions

that have been made well independent of federal decisions, so like all those landfill sitings, all the coal ash things, where they were sited and who they affect.

There's been lots of criticism within Puerto Rico of Puerto Rican leaders, but with that said, I don't think there's a whole lot of space for transformative leadership, especially not on infrastructure. I keep saying infrastructure because it's the thing, and it's the thing that is most affected by federal oversight. Trump had Infrastructure Week, but federal dollars going to infrastructure, federal grants, and also the rules that govern what that infrastructure can and can't do to people, those are federal mostly.

Yeah, I will say the federal relationship is one of the things that hamstrings Puerto Rico's ability to overcome some short-scale problems, some problems with immediate leadership.

Matt Peterson: I want to go to health care in a second, but let me ask one or two follow-ups about Puerto Rico here. Let's talk about infrastructure. Let me ask the cynical question that I think of when you start talking about infrastructure, because you mentioned Trump's Infrastructure Week. This was supposed to be an easy legislative win for the Republicans when they took over, was passing some big national infrastructure bill, and of course that hasn't happened. You know, is there realistically any chance of massive investment in Puerto Rican infrastructure on the scale that they need it, or are they pretty much on their own here?

Vann Newkirk: I don't see that happening. I think the aid package, again, its form as a loan, and the complete absence of Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands, to an extent, from those major infrastructure package conversations, yeah, I don't think that's a likely thing, at least from the federal government. Now, I think you may have some investment from the private sector. As far as I know, those conversations about Google and Tesla providing communications and power, those have been more conversations than actual practice, and I haven't received comment from Tesla about any concrete plans they have in Puerto Rico. Even if it's not at the level of Google and Tesla, there are plenty of smaller-scale businesses that I do think intend to invest in sustainable infrastructure, on rebuilding. Yeah, they're out there working now. They see an opportunity, and that's what they're doing.

Matt Peterson: Right. Right, okay. Well, now let's cheer ourselves up by talking about health care. I'm sure this will be much more constructive. You've covered health care for a long time, particularly over this past several months as this debate has wound through Congress. Let me just start here. Are we going to keep talking about health care in the United States throughout the rest of this first Trump Congressional term for the next year, or is this issue dead for the moment?

Vann Newkirk: Oh, one thing I always caution people, as long as President Trump is president, as long as Mitch McConnell is the majority leader and as long as Republicans control the House, this will always be on the table, and we may not always see it

coming either. Basically the only thing that's stopped the last couple bills, it hasn't been Democrats who are disagreeing, it's Republicans. If Republicans ever feel the need urgently enough to get something passed, they will do it. Yeah, I always like to temper people, sort of their proclamations that the fight is over, all the stress people have been doing, all the protesting, all the coverage, that it's over.

I temper that with just how quickly this last round of the bill, the last one that came up, it came out of nowhere. It wasn't on the radar. They had already said the Senate bill that went through to the final vote on the floor, that it was dead and that was it, and then a couple weeks later out of nowhere there came another plan. That's always a possibility, and I guess fortunate enough for me, the person covering this, we'll always have things to cover. Yeah, I don't think that's going away, especially in a time where Republicans increasingly need to have legislative wins. Yeah, so it's there.

Matt Peterson: As you're looking out at the policy landscape, are there particular proposals or ideas that you think deserve more attention or that are likely to jump up over the next couple of months?

Vann Newkirk: Well, on the Republican side, I still think the most likely thing to happen ... there's three things that are happening here. There's one which is a bipartisan effort to basically stabilize the existing system. That's a much smaller package. It looks like it would pass in Congress with some slim margin, but President Trump does not like it. He doesn't want anything that's going to actually stabilize Obamacare and keep it from collapsing, so that one looks pretty dead.

On the Republican side I think what's probably going to emerge, if it ever comes back, is something similar to the last round, which was Graham-Cassidy, something that purportedly offers more flexibility to states, that doesn't strip away some of the provisions of Obamacare, but also simultaneously dramatically defunds them to the point of not existing in some cases. That looks like the basic Republican framework. It looks like the thing that is most likely to get the most Republican votes. They still really have to find a way to move the edge cases of Collins, Murkowski, maybe Heller and McCain. Those still are the people that are holding it up, and I still haven't seen any proposal get all four on board yet.

On the other side are people who are looking to maybe build on Obamacare and maybe looking toward single-payer. There's some stuff moving out of Brian Schatz, who is looking at basically a Medicaid buy-in. That's on the liberal, progressive, Democratic side...I think it's a proposal that's going to get some more traction moving forward. Not quite Medicare for all, but something that looks more like a public option. I think the public option may be what the Democrats can compromise on going into the next election cycle.

Matt Peterson: Right. Talking about the Republicans for a second, do you think that the president faces the same kind of pressure or political incentives to just act in



some way that Congressional Republicans do? Tell me if you disagree with this, but the conventional wisdom is that Mitch McConnell and the Republicans, having run on repeal-and-replace for seven years, now just have to do it or else they'll get voted out of office or they'll get primaried or whatever it is. Does the president, does Donald Trump, face that same logic?

Vann Newkirk:

Well, thanks to gerrymandering and a bunch of other different things like voting laws, life as a Republican in Congress is much safer than life as a Republican in the White House. Trump does have much greater time pressure to move his agenda forward, to say he has these wins, so he's going to go into re-election mode over the next year. After the 2018 midterms, we're really going to start looking at how the Democratic field's going to shape up. As the incumbent, he's their punching bag, so he's going to need to look at this thing and say, "I did this," even though if what he does is going to strip millions of people of their health care, at least he can say he fulfilled a promise.

Trump seems to be under much more pressure to do this. I think the Senate actually seems to me to be generally okay with waiting on Obamacare, because I think the sneaky thing is people like it. Obamacare has been polling better and better over the months and months as it's been implemented. People like having insurance, imagine that, and people ... as it becomes the status quo, people tend to pull towards the status quo, regardless of what it is. Trump, as a person who campaigned almost exclusively on undoing these constituent pieces of the Obama legacy, that's what he has to do in order to basically have any sort of legacy as a president.

Senators, not so much, and they are much more beholden to the polling, which is of the people, which more and more say, even Republicans voters, more and more want to keep pieces of Obamacare in place. Yeah, it does set up, I think, their ... President Trump and Republicans in both houses of the Congress are set up more and more to clash with each other, especially as 2018 rolls around, as people up for re-election are going to basically have to hold off on moving any sort of controversial bill forward that may be political fodder against them. Yeah, Trump, his clock is much shorter than other people's.

Matt Peterson:

Right. I want to talk about the other side too, about Democrats' proposals. I admit that when you talk about things like Medicare for all or single-payer, I tend to tune these stories out because I think, well, you know, the Democrats barely got Obamacare passed, how plausible is it really for them to talk about a further progressive change? Do you think ... am I being too cynical about this? Should people be paying close attention to folks like Brian Schatz you mentioned, the senator who's looking at a similar type of proposal here?

Vann Newkirk:

Yes, I do. I think it's actually one of the failures of media and how we direct people's attention that we haven't been covering some sort of ... in between big health policy laws, the development of those laws. I will actually cite, in the failure of Republican health policy laws over the past year, the biggest reason for that failure is because there was absolutely no serious movement

whatsoever from Republicans from 2010 to 2016 on building real health policy platforms that weren't just "Repeal Obamacare."

They had something like 50 attempts to repeal Obamacare, but almost no attempts to actually build any health infrastructure, to outline a coherent health policy philosophy, a platform, any policy they thought was good that might offset some of the losses of getting rid of Obamacare. They did none of that, and over the course of that, they built no expertise. They had no health policy legislative assistants who knew what they were doing, they had no language to rely on that, no white papers. They had no think-tank papers that were coming out that outlined consistent positions.

When it came time for Republicans to write a law, they wrote a law that, when it first came out of the House, had so many inconsistencies that it was just unworkable, and there were inconsistencies and flaws in that policy that I saw, as a person sitting down and reading the policy for the first time. When you have just a complete lack of development ... because policy is developed.

You know, policy doesn't just emerge out of the ether. You have to do years, often, of work, of stakeholder analysis, of fine-tuning the specifics of very arcane pieces of the law that nobody cares about, and building chunks of the law from that, and that's how usually policy is developed. That's how Obamacare was developed, that's how we got the Social Security Act, that's how Medicare and Medicaid were developed. It took those programs decades to come to fruition, and Republicans did nothing like that.

I think on the other side, when you're looking for an alternative to Obamacare that's increasing coverage, that is looking towards going to a more universal system, that's probably going to take just as long. It's going to take these small bills that get churned and voted down immediately, but they get churned through the legislative process. They get more and more people on them. They get more and more input. They get research. They have legislative aides who become more and more versed in the policy specifics. Then, maybe one day when they have an opportunity, that's when they push forward what they've developed, and that is how the American policymaking process works.

Matt Peterson:

Right. How does the needle get moved here? As a journalist who's watching these things and watching them over the long term, what do you watch out for? You mentioned, for instance, Republicans need to find a way to flip the three or four Senators at the margins who have been voting down these proposals. Obviously if one of those changed, that would be a big deal, but what are the kinds of things like that that you are paying attention to that you think might lead to an actual significant policy change over the long run?

Vann Newkirk:

I don't know. I think what most people are looking for is 2018, the midterm. There's I think a lot of attention to the Alabama Senate race. If Democrats can win that one, it would definitely change the balance of power in the Senate and make it much more difficult to propose workable health policies that all or many

Republicans are going to vote for. You're looking at ... that seems to me to be the biggest deal right now, is that race, but I'm sure other things will develop over the next year or so. In terms of in-house, on-the-floor politics, I haven't seen much in the way there yet.

Matt Peterson: Yeah. We have a question here from Samford, who's asking about block grants, which is this idea included in Graham-Cassidy that you essentially take the whole federal program and you give all that money to the states and let them run it more or less as they see fit, with a lot of flexibility. How likely is it that some kind of solution like that actually gets enacted? You mentioned that you thought this idea is going to come back. Is that a plausible way for this policy to go in the future?

Vann Newkirk: I still think that would be the most likely way. If Republicans do actually get around to repealing Obamacare, that's the most likely way it'll come. It seems to me that the objections of Collins and Murkowski especially are related to basically how underfunded their states would be under a blanket repeal. Now, block grants can be much more fine-tuned and adjusted in a way that ... people called these a bribe when applied to Alaska in the last go-round, but yeah, they can basically be used in the reasonably short term to offset some of the more damaging effects of losing coverage, of losing a whole lot of money immediately. They can be ratcheted down. They do offer more flexibility.

Now, the thing with block grants is, though, that none of the block grants you see, none of the block grant proposals that you see, are actually offering the same amount of money to the states. They're vehicles for cutting funding to the states under the aegis, under the rhetoric, of making them more efficient, of lowering spending, but at the end of the day what they all have in common that they're going to basically reduce the state's ability to cover people, and that's the bottom line.

Matt Peterson: Right. Let's jump into one more big policy area, which is voter fraud, here before we go. You've done a fair bit about the Trump administration's Voter Fraud Commission, which I think is a story that has escaped a lot of folks' attention amid all the big headlines about all sorts of different things. Can you just remind us where this commission started and then tell us what it's actually doing now?

Vann Newkirk: Okay. When President Trump came into office, interestingly, he decided to basically put out the idea that up to three million people, mostly immigrants, mostly non-citizens, had voted illegally in the election. Now, that claim has not been verified by anyone, and I have actually reported on where it came from and the fact that it's been debunked, but they used that as the reasoning for creating a Voter Fraud Commission, run by Kansas Secretary of State Kris Kobach. Now, Kobach comes into the conversation here because he's basically the brain trust for this movement by President Trump, by the White House, by Republicans, sort of on this populist wave to dramatically alter the way people vote.

Kobach was the only secretary of state in the country with the ability to actually prosecute voter fraud cases, and he's done it, and has returned something like I think a grand total of eight cases, eight cases of just double-voting, not the more malevolent in-person fraud that people talk about, out of hundreds of prosecutions, and so that's what we're talking about here. That Voter Fraud Commission is people who have been in that brain trust for decades, who have been looking for ways to basically make voting more difficult, to reduce what they see as voter fraud, that's never been proven to be a widespread problem.

On the other side, people are looking at what they're going to do, say like implementing voter ID, say like requiring people to disclose immigration status, requiring people to have certain forms of even more standardized ID, requiring rollbacks on things that make voting easier like early voting, like mail-in ballots. They're saying those are actually sort of a Trojan horse to suppress votes as opposed to increasing the integrity of the ballot.

That commission has now met twice. They've met a significant amount of pushback, and they'll also face about a dozen lawsuits from people who are alleging they are actually a voter suppression effort. We'll see, as the next commission meeting comes around, as they develop a specific set of guidelines that they send to President Trump and to the states, and as they develop the database, which lots of people think also is going to be a tool of voter suppression. I'm looking at that commission over the next couple months. I think there are going to be some significant developments as we head around to February and March.

Matt Peterson: All right. Well, we'll have to come back to you then and see how it goes. In the meantime, I feel like we should clone you, because you're covering so many different huge areas that are of such big importance to all of us. Thank you very much for jumping in here and taking the time to talk to us.

Vann Newkirk: Oh, no, thank you.

Matt Peterson: All right, guys. We will leave it here. Come back next week when we are talking to Lenika Cruz about the return of the television show "Stranger Things," among other things, a nice change of pace for us, so we will talk to you next week. All right, everybody. Take care. Bye.