

**Khalil Ekulona** I'm Khalil Ekulona and This is Nashville. I still can't believe it's November, honestly. But it is. And that means it's election season. In fact, our midterm election is just days away. It's been four years since Tennesseans elected Governor Bill Lee, which means his term is up. He's running for reelection against Democrat Jason Martin. In preparation for this election a few months back, the team at This is Nashville got to thinking - you know, it would be great if we had the governor candidates come on the show and answer questions from you, our community. So we started collecting those questions and set out to make that happen. Despite the persistent emails, our fearless executive producer Andrea Tudhope sent to make it happen, we only managed to get one of the candidates in on this. Later this hour, the Democratic nominee for governor, Jason Martin, will answer your questions. But first, let's talk about something else you'll find on this year's ballot. Tennesseans will vote on four constitutional amendments to tweak or change parts of the state's constitution. The ballot questions range from employment law to the line of succession to slavery in prisons. Here to discuss those amendments are WPLN reporters, Alexis Marshall, Paige Pflieger and Blake Farmer. Thanks to you all for joining us. This is great. I have all three of you in a room. That's a first. All right. So we're going to start with Amendment 1 that deals with the state's so-called right to work law and unions. Lexi, you've reported on this. Break down for us what right to work means.

**Alexis Marshall** So the right to work means that workers can't be forced to join a union. And for what it's worth, it also means that they can't be denied work for being part of a union. But essentially, in Tennessee, that means that it's up to each individual person whether they join a union if one is available at their workplace.

**Khalil Ekulona** Okay, so what would this amendment do?

**Alexis Marshall** So this amendment would take a law that's been on the books in Tennessee for about 75 years and put it into the constitution. And what that does is it makes it harder to get rid of that law if powers that be decided at some point that they wanted to do that.

**Khalil Ekulona** Okay. A lot of high profile politicians are weighing in on this one, including Governor Bill Lee. So who's backing it?

**Alexis Marshall** So in addition to Governor Bill Lee, there's a lot of support coming from business leaders and other Republicans. So the head of the Beacon Center of Tennessee, the head of Tennessee's Chamber of Commerce and the state's division of the National Federation of Independent Businesses are all on the executive committee of the Yes campaign. And then you also have a lot of high ranking Republican lawmakers throwing their support behind this amendment, including House Speaker Cameron Sexton. He says individuals should be able to decide for themselves whether they want to join a union. And for now, he says that law seems pretty secure.

**Cameron Sexton** You're not going to see the Republicans change the right to work law in the state of Tennessee. I think if you get a lot of progressives like there are in other states or in Washington, D.C., and they gain control, I think you could see a run at changing that law. But, you know, I don't think you'll see that with a Republican General Assembly and a Republican governor.

**Alexis Marshall** But he says adding this amendment to the constitution would give it extra protection. And that means that if powers ever did change in the legislature, instead of being able to simply repeal it with like simple majority votes in the legislature and the

signature of the governor, it would take years to repeal and another statewide vote to basically amend the constitution again.

**Khalil Ekulona** Okay. So we heard the voice of one of the supporters who's opposing it.

**Alexis Marshall** So some Democrats have come out against it. But from my perspective, the most vocal opposition has been from labor organizers themselves. Opponents of Amendment 1 say that right to work laws allow nonunion members to get some of the benefits without having to join or specifically pay dues. One of the people who I talked to about this was Vonda McDaniel. She is the president of the Central Labor Council and that's an umbrella group of multiple unions in the area. And she says they advocate for issues on behalf of all workers, not just union members.

**Vonda McDaniel** And when we are not resourced, our voices are not heard. And the only voices that you have are the lobbyists, the highly paid lobbyist that come from corporate contributions.

**Eric Coons** And I believe it is the desire of the opposition, the people trying to press this upon us and trying to encourage it to go into the constitution to literally break the unions. Because if a union has no money, what power do they have?

**Alexis Marshall** That second voice was Eric Coons. He's the president of Nashville Building Trades. He emphasized that union dues also help to pay for things like training programs, to help develop the pipeline of workers, especially in the building trades, and basically just build up that next generation of workers. Opponents like them also made the case that even if the amendment fails, Tennessee would remain a right to work state the same way that it has been for about 75 years.

**Khalil Ekulona** Campaign signs both for and against this have popped up all over town. Why has Amendment 1 attracted so much attention?

**Alexis Marshall** I think a lot of that has to do with like the national conversation around labor organizing. Labor unions and organizing in general has gotten really popular in the public eye recently, although it's worth noting that union membership is actually at a historic low. But you have seen, you know, Starbucks locations starting to unionize. There have been votes at Amazon facilities. We have an Amazon facility that voted to form a union. So I think that it's just getting more attention nationally. And so I think that may be why there's so much interest in this on a state level.

**Khalil Ekulona** All right. Let's move on to Amendment 2, which has attracted much less attention, but it has to do with the line of succession if the governor is ill or unable to perform his duties. Blake, what would this amendment do?

**Blake Farmer** All right. So right now it's sort of surprising to me, but there is no temporary line of succession in Tennessee's constitution. I mean, the constitution says what would happen if the governor died or if the governor resigned. But it's a little different when you have the governor incapacitated for a short amount of time.

**Khalil Ekulona** So why is this coming up now?

**Blake Farmer** Well, you know, Senator Becky Massie, a Republican from Knoxville, is the one who sponsored this. It takes a couple of legislative sessions for a constitutional

amendment to be passed. And so timeliness? Well, you know, Senator Massie says it's rare that that this would get used, but that it might be needed some day and so we're going to put it into the constitution. What would happen if you're voting yes on Amendment 2, you are approving that the lieutenant governor, who is the speaker of the Senate. The speaker of the Senate in Tennessee, carries a dual title. You also are the lieutenant governor, and it would allow for a temporary basis for the lieutenant governor to become governor. And then when the governor comes back, the lieutenant governor would go back to their Senate position.

**Khalil Ekulona** All right. Next up, we've got Amendment 3. And, you know, I passed a billboard the other day just off Clarksville Pike. It said, "Y'all, slavery is still in the constitution," encouraging voters to vote yes on Amendment 3. Paige. You've reported on this one. What would a yes vote do?

**Paige Pflieger** Yes. So right now, like the billboard said, the constitution says that slavery is forever prohibited in the state except as punishment for a crime. So a yes vote on this amendment would remove that exception.

**Khalil Ekulona** Okay. This amendment really surprised some people, including me, frankly. I mean.

**Paige Pflieger** Yeah.

**Khalil Ekulona** Who didn't know that there was still an exception in the constitution about slavery after all of these years.

**Paige Pflieger** Yeah.

**Khalil Ekulona** But we aren't enslaving people right now in prisons, are we?

**Paige Pflieger** Well, okay. It's really hard to ignore Tennessee's history here. You can kind of draw a direct line connecting slavery, Jim Crow, our state's history of actually leasing out incarcerated people to different companies to work dangerous jobs like in the mines. And a lot of the laws that we had on the books that allowed those things have been phased out. But it's hard to ignore the fact that the state's prison population is disproportionately Black here in Tennessee. And the Yes on Three campaign has been arguing that there's really nothing in our constitution to prevent us from returning to that history. So if this amendment passes, there would be.

**Khalil Ekulona** So you spoke to several formerly incarcerated people about this. What did they tell you?

**Paige Pflieger** Yeah, I thought it was really important to to try and have that conversation with formerly incarcerated people for a lot of different reasons. But largely, I mean, this language is about them. This language is aimed at them. And I wanted to see what they thought. And so, you know, a lot of them told me that there is sort of an obvious moral argument. Like what message does that send to incarcerated people that they could be considered slaves in the eyes of our state constitution, which a lot of people look at as like a set of values. That's that's what the state sees as important. Many of them told me that this is just kind of one of many ways that they feel like the state considers them as lesser than or as second class citizens. Here's Terrance Akins, who spent 17 years behind bars.

**Terrance Akins** My answer is they did not fight. They did not die. They did not sacrifice so much that I can be a slave. That I can be a slave. So are we really free in America? No, we're not. The constitution has enslaved us.

**Paige Pflieger** And that's not to mention, Khalil, the fact that many of the people that I spoke to can't even vote on this amendment. And that's because hundreds of thousands of formerly incarcerated people in Tennessee can't vote because of the state's laws. So and another point that many of them made include, including Terrance Akins, was just about, you know, the jobs that they worked while they were behind bars.

**Khalil Ekulona** So what's the connection here between prison labor and this amendment?

**Paige Pflieger** Yes. So the Tennessee Department of Correction actually supports this amendment. But I found out that they did ask for one addition to the amendment, which I think really sort of like peels back the curtain on something that is a little bit more controversial and complicated at the heart of this amendment, which is about prison labor. So TDOC asks for language to be added that says that this amendment would not prevent incarcerated people from working. Tennessee doesn't force incarcerated people to do free labor, but the starting wage behind bars is \$0.17 an hour. And they can be punished for refusing to work. Here's Terrance Akins again talking about how hard it is kind of to not see the parallels there.

**Terrance Akins** Regardless of how much you want to pay or you forcing them, you are making them do something against their will. You have taken the power away from that individual and now you could do whatever you want to do with them. You can make them work on the railroad, you can make them work in the fields. You can make them do a forced labor upon them. You can make them do anything. I didn't have a choice. Like once I didn't have a job. I couldn't say, "well, when I was incarcerated I didn't want to do this." No, I was forced to do it and it was only so they in return can make more money, make a profit. It was all about the profit.

**Paige Pflieger** And a lot of the incarcerated people that I spoke to made that exact point that the state saves so much money by having the folks that live inside of these facilities take care of these facilities, doing jobs like maintenance and cleaning and cooking even. So while it's not free labor, it's not slave labor, they definitely don't get paid whether it's someone outside of the prison would get paid for that same exact work.

**Khalil Ekulona** All right. The last amendment question on the ballot this year pertains to language in our constitution that bars ministers from serving in the legislature. Our resident theologian Blake Farmer reported on this one. What would a yes vote on Amendment 4 do?

**Blake Farmer** Well, it's pretty simple, really. It strikes this section of the constitution that says ministers of the Gospel cannot serve as state legislators. Simple as that.

**Khalil Ekulona** That's really interesting. So, I mean, why was that ban included in our constitution? I mean, were there concerns about the separation of church and state?

**Blake Farmer** You know, there must have been. What's really interesting in looking at this is that it goes way back. I mean, this language that is in Tennessee's constitution is really a carryover from English law. You know, and you look at the constitution of the state of

New York, and it had this very same language. So did about a dozen other states. It was basically like boilerplate language for state constitutions that say ministers of the gospel cannot serve as state lawmakers. But then in 1978 was actually a case here in Tennessee because it was still in our constitution. Somebody tried to challenge their opponent because he was a Baptist preacher. Now, it wasn't your typical kind of race. It was for this state constitutional convention. But still, it put this provision in the constitution to the test. And the U.S. Supreme Court said that, no, you can still run for office and be a professional minister. So this part of the constitution has been irrelevant. Sure. But it is still there in the constitution.

**Khalil Ekulona** Well, how many ministers or faith leaders are currently in the legislature?

**Blake Farmer** Well, there are a few that I thought were ministers. And then you look at their bio and actually doesn't say, minister, but there are at least three by my count, which include Harold Love, who is a Democrat from here in Nashville. And I mean, these are folks who, you know, their job day to day is the leader of a local congregation.

**Khalil Ekulona** So you wrote that the constitution also singles out another group, atheists, which also hasn't been enforced. But this amendment would leave that language alone. Can you explain?

**Blake Farmer** Well, let's start by hearing from a voter. I was out talking to voters and ran into Robert Harris of Lascassas That's in Rutherford County. So I was out at the polls talking to voters like him. And he actually said this amendment, Amendment 4, was kind of his reason for going to the ballot box. And he thought it was really important to remove this ban on ministers. It was the biggest thing he wanted to vote on.

**Robert Harris** I think that we could use more God in our government.

**Blake Farmer** I love that. That brought you out. Do you know the history behind that thing?

**Robert Harris** I do not, actually. I didn't realize that was a law until this amendment came up.

**Blake Farmer** Here's what I found fascinating. Next line in the constitution basically bans atheists from serving in the state legislature, which is also been found unconstitutional but is still in the constitution. What do you think about that?

**Robert Harris** I think everybody's entitled to their beliefs. And yes, if you're atheist but feel like you should serve. By all means, try.

**Blake Farmer** You know, and a lot of folks have sort of looked at this. Truly the next lines in the constitution are this ban on folks who - here's the quote from the constitution. "No person who denies the being of God or a future state of rewards and punishments shall hold any office in the civil department of this state." I mean, that's about as much of a religious test as there could be. And that's what the Supreme Court found. Just like a minister can run for office. They've also found, the U.S. Supreme Court, that an atheist is more than welcome to run for run for office in Tennessee or anywhere else in the country. These bans on atheists serving, you know, they are still in about eight different state constitutions, but it's still in our constitution. You know, it's still in the constitution of Maryland. And there was actually a concerted effort to remove it. And that's a Democratic-

led state legislature. But the sponsor withdrew it this last year because, I mean, it is still, you know, pretty tough to argue on behalf of atheists in American politics.

**Khalil Ekulona** That's WPLN's Blake Farmer, Alexis Marshall and Paige Pflieger, who reported on the constitutional amendments you'll find on this midterm ballot. We'll have a guide for you to check out at this is Nashville dot org. You can also see all of our election coverage at WPLG dot org slash election. Thank you all for your reporting and thanks for being here.

**Paige Pflieger** Thanks for having us.

**Alexis Marshall** Thank you.

**Khalil Ekulona** We have to take a short break. When we come back, the Democratic nominee for governor, Jason Martin, will join us to answer your questions and make the case for why he should be the next governor of Tennessee. We'll be right back. This is Nashville.

**Khalil Ekulona** I'm Khalil Colonna, and this is Citizen Nashville. We've talked a lot here at WPLN news about how to serve you our communities better. So a few times a month, we're bringing you segments we're calling Citizen Nashville. Our goal is to answer your questions and to hold our officials accountable. Tennessee is holding an election for governor and the election is just days away. Jason Martin is the Democratic nominee vying against incumbent Republican Bill Lee. There's also a handful of independent candidates who have thrown their hat in the ring for the past month. We've been soliciting your questions for Dr. Martin and Governor Lee at this is Nashville dot org. We invited both candidates to join us for a forum. Governor Lee declined our invitation. But joining us now is Dr. Jason Martin. Dr. Martin, thank you for being here and welcome to this is Nashville.

**Dr. Jason Martin** Great to be here today.

**Khalil Ekulona** You know, I'd like to start by giving you a chance to introduce yourself.

**Dr. Jason Martin** Sure. My name's Jason Martin, and I'm a husband, a father of three smart girls and a critical care doctor. I've been doctoring folks here in middle Tennessee for about 20 years. And I've seen some incredible need in our community. And that's part of what brings me to politics. And I know that we can do better to take care of one another. So I'm going to run a campaign about compassion and common sense.

**Khalil Ekulona** Well, thank you very much. Dr. Jason Martin is running against incumbent Governor Bill Lee. Lee grew up in Franklin, where he worked in the family business. After graduating from Auburn University. He became the president of Lee Company in 1992 and was sworn in as Tennessee's 50th governor in 2019. Before we get to our questions in the community, I'd like to ask you, why did you decide to run for governor this election?

**Dr. Jason Martin** Really, two things. First of all, you know, I spent the majority of my career here in medicine working at Meharry Medical College, the nation's oldest historically black medical college, and serving at Nashville General Hospital. And in that capacity. I know what it's like to take care of people who are working two and three jobs, trying to make ends meet, and they still can't afford health insurance. And I've seen people struggle to make life and death decisions based on finances. And I think we can do better for folks. That's part of it. But for me, the straw that broke the camel's back was working up in

Sumter County during the COVID crisis. Being a part of the loss of more than 400 lives related to COVID, staggering amounts of loss make you want to turn your life upside down and run for governor kind of loss because the pain that we felt in those moments was never met with leadership or truth telling by Governor Lee or that radical General Assembly.

**Khalil Ekulona** What did you see there that made you make this want to make this decision?

**Dr. Jason Martin** Yeah, well, I saw a lot of loss of life that I felt like didn't need to occur. I mean, clearly, during a pandemic, there's going to be some loss of life that is not preventable. But just to see, you know, husbands and wives and fathers and sons come in and just die and in such extraordinary numbers. There was one child and she was the only English speaker in her household. And we got to be close with her because we would call her every night and tell her about her dad's condition. Her dad would come into our hospital and over several weeks he slowly deteriorated and died. And when I had to call that poor baby in the middle of the night, who is the same age, incidentally, as my oldest daughter. So I was able to really kind of live it on a different level. When I had to call that poor baby and tell her her daddy was gone, it broke me and I felt like she needed a voice and her dad needed a voice. And the people suffering the state of Tennessee need a voice.

**Khalil Ekulona** All right. Well, Axios published a story a few days ago about how Tennessee Democrats have failed to seriously compete in a gubernatorial race since Governor Phil Bredesen was reelected six years ago. The numbers are really not encouraging. So why have Democrats struggled to be competitive in statewide races here?

**Dr. Jason Martin** Yeah, you know, I can tell you why we are going to be successful. And this is not a red state. This is a nonvoting state. And so what we are doing is giving people a reason to go to the polls by focusing on issues that impact every Tennessean. We're focusing on supporting public schools because we believe that's how kids and families create opportunities. We believe in supporting better access to health care. We want to expand Medicaid so that more people have access to a health care that doesn't break the bank. We're talking about how to create prosperity across the state, not just in the city of Nashville. And that resonates especially in the rural communities.

**Khalil Ekulona** Well, let's get to some of those issues that Tennesseans are concerned with. As I mentioned, we've been soliciting questions from the community for the candidates. So let's get to it. One issue we heard about a lot was abortion, something Governor Lee has made his position pretty clear on. Here he is at a press conference back in January 2020.

**Gov. Bill Lee** What I'm hoping is that we have less abortions and ultimately no abortions in the state of Tennessee. That's what I hope for.

**Khalil Ekulona** And now Tennessee has one of the most restrictive laws in the nation, and there are no exceptions for rape or incest. Doctors who perform an abortion can make the case that the procedure was necessary to save the pregnant person's life, but they would only be able to make that argument after being charged with a Class C felony. We've received several questions for Governor Lee about whether he supports women's rights and whether he'll revisit the law to make exceptions. Here's Suzanne Adkisson.

**Suzanne Adkisson** Dear Governor Lee, how can you advocate for and oversee the implementation of a law that fails to protect women in our state? Do you understand that this law is bad not only for women, but also for doctors, for hospitals, for our medical schools and ultimately for the state of Tennessee? A woman deserves the respect and autonomy to make decisions about her own body. The trigger ban criminalizes the standard medical treatments for many pregnancy complications. Do you understand that when a woman's water breaks before the fetus is viable, you have made a life saving measures that our doctors must engage in a Class C felony? When a woman has an ectopic pregnancy, you again criminalize a doctor's actions that will save the life of the mother and possibly preserve her future fertility. This is immoral. I would like to hear you talk about your complacency in agreeing with this law and how you can justify this save the fetus at all costs attitude when women will suffer so greatly.

**Khalil Ekulona** Unfortunately, Governor Lee declined to respond to these questions and comments from his constituents. But Dr. Martin, what changes would you make to Tennessee's abortion law as it stands today?

**Dr. Jason Martin** The governor is a radical when it comes to women's health rights. He at the State of the State address last year bragged about how Tennessee was going to have the most restrictive abortion ban in the country. And he's done it. He and the radical General Assembly have put that into place. There is no exception for the life and safety of a mother. There is no exception for a child, a child who's the victim of sexual violence. There's no exception for rape and incest. When he gets on that television screen, which he's done and says that there is an exception, referring to the affirmative defense. One of two things is true in that moment. He's either not telling you the truth or he doesn't know what he's signed. In either way, he's disqualified from being governor, in my opinion, on this issue. He's going to put people like me, critical care doctors who are trying to save the lives of our patients, to fulfill the oath that we made to take care of our patients, in jail with felony convictions. And that is not right. 80% of Tennesseans understand that he's a radical. I don't believe that the government, the heavy hand of government, should be in the doctor's office when women are making very personal decisions about their body with their providers.

**Khalil Ekulona** Now, he's done this with the support of the state legislature. If you were elected, I mean, how could you push for changes with Republicans firmly in control of the General Assembly?

**Dr. Jason Martin** Well, we think it's very important that we help chip away at the supermajority. And a large part of the effort of our campaign is on elevating down ballot races. We're going to try to get some help in the General Assembly for like minded folks also. You know, we think it's important to use the power of the executive to push back against some of these radical laws that are coming across. Look, I would be willing to use the power of the pardon to protect physicians who are fulfilling life saving care.

**Khalil Ekulona** By switching gears. We've got a question here from Joseph Nuzzo about infrastructure.

**Joseph Nuzzo** Nashville is growing daily. Our infrastructure needs to be upgraded transportation schools, outdated sewage systems and increasing our police forces. Do you have a plan to address these concerns?

**Dr. Jason Martin** Absolutely. You know, we have billions of dollars coming down from the federal government with the infrastructure bill in the next couple of years and the next governor is going to have a hand in directing that those resources. I'm committed to working with local communities across the state to make sure that, you know, roads and bridges and water systems across the state get the attention that they deserve. As we've traveled more than 50,000 miles up and down I-40 to all 95 counties, we've learned that the tie that binds when it comes to infrastructure, especially outside of the cities, is access to affordable broadband Internet. We're going to make broadband internet a priority. It's not just Facebook and YouTube, and as my oldest daughter, Lily, tells me, TikTok. It's a utility for businesses. And so we're going to make that a priority.

**Khalil Ekulona** If you're just tuning in, this is Citizen Nashville, and I'm your host, Khalil Ekulona. This hour, we're posing your questions to the Democratic nominee for governor. We invited Governor Bill Lee to join us for this forum, but he declined. Education is another hot button issue, and a handful of community members sent in questions and comments about this, including Brenda Medlin. Let's listen to a little bit of what she had to say.

**Brenda Medlin** Being a teacher or mother or both can be super rewarding, yet very challenging. Teachers are overworked, underpaid and underappreciated, and mothers are almost second class citizens to many people. The government needs to provide concrete resources that are easy to access. Governor Lee seems to be doing just the opposite. He has hypocritically tried to hijack public education in favor of watered down education infused with his white conservative religion. I would like to see him treat teachers and mothers the way he treats CEOs and sports figures and his own company.

**Khalil Ekulona** Governor Lee has made his support of charter schools pretty well known. He entered a partnership with Hillsdale College to open charter schools across our state. Then Hillsdale President Larry Arnn was caught on video making disparaging remarks about teachers. This is what he said.

**Larry Arnn** The teachers are trained in the dumbest parts of the dumbest colleges in the country, and they're taught that they're going to go and do something to those kids.

**Khalil Ekulona** Lee did not condemn those remarks. The most he did was say that the comments didn't apply to our state. Here he is at a press conference back in July.

**Gov. Bill Lee** It wasn't about Tennessee teachers or Tennessee schools as much it was about activism and education in this country. I disagree with that activism from the left, but I fully support our public schools in this state and our teachers as well. You know, my comments about teachers and about the future of this education, public education are very clear.

**Khalil Ekulona** Lee has since distanced himself from Hillsdale. He has appointed several allies to the state's Charter School Commission, which has the authority to overrule local school districts who reject charter applicants. On this topic, one listener asks, "As governor, what reforms will you implement for the charter school commission, or will you disbanded entirely?" Dr. Martin?

**Dr. Jason Martin** Yeah, I wish the governor was here with us today to defend his record on public education. But unfortunately, you know, he's been afraid to meet us one on one. He's been afraid to have a conversation about his record. He's waged a war on public education his entire time in office. He's underfunded public schools. We were in the bottom

forties in the whole nation when it comes to per pupil funding. Even with the extra money that he's putting into public education, we're still behind Alabama when it comes to per pupil funding. I know we beat him in football. I wish we could beat him on education funding as well. He's firing teachers for teaching American history as it happened. He is politicizing our school boards. None of this is about taking care of our kids. None of it is about education. It's about power and control. And look, he's sought to divest resources from public education with charter schools and with voucher programs. These are all the wrong approach. We need to support our public school teachers. We need to recognize that they are working every day to elevate our kids and elevate our communities. We need to put our money where our mouth is and fund public education appropriately in terms of robbing local school boards of control. I think that's a terrible mistake. I think that when he appoints none elected bureaucrats to come in and override a school board that has decided not to have a charter school in their community, that's the wrong approach. And that absolutely will not be tolerated in my administration.

**Khalil Ekulona** So you're saying you would disband the commission?

**Dr. Jason Martin** The commission would not override local school.

**Khalil Ekulona** All right. Listener Wes Duenkel wrote in with a question about public education. Here's what he shared.

**Wes Duenkel** Public educators feel under siege by this administration. New charter schools, threats to ban books, the third grade automatic reading failure law are all new attacks that are taking local control away from school districts. Activists ginned up by national narratives and lies are disrupting local school board meetings and threatening educators. How will you return confidence in public education that has been eroded by these legislative efforts?

**Dr. Jason Martin** I think it's absolutely vital that we empower local school districts to make decisions for their own communities. I think it's absolutely vital that we support public school teachers in the state of Tennessee. There's a reason that we have thousands and thousands of unfilled teacher positions in the state. It's because we don't pay them a salary commensurate with the work that they do. It's because we they find themselves under attack from this administration, whether it's, you know, having them spend their weekend cataloging their in-class libraries, which they probably paid for with their own money, so that no one's feelings are hurt or whether it's not supporting them when Larry Arnn comes to town and says that they went to the dumbest parts of the dumbest colleges in the country. That all has an impact on morale and that has an impact on our delivery of our education system. And we can do better to take care of one another.

**Khalil Ekulona** So what steps of rebuilding confidence would you take?

**Dr. Jason Martin** Well, first of all, I think we're going to work hard to get more money in the system. And secondly, we're going to appoint a teacher to the commissioner to be the commissioner of the Department of Education so that, you know, teachers will have someone that they can relate to, someone who's got classroom experience right here in the state of Tennessee.

**Khalil Ekulona** All right, Diane Lee-Smith sent in a question we posed to you earlier, Dr. Martin. Let's listen.

**Diane Lee-Smith** Dr. Martin, given the overwhelmingly Republican legislature that we have in Tennessee, how do you plan to get any increase in health care access and insurance coverage as well as education equity? Those bills passed to help Tennesseans.

**Dr. Jason Martin** Look, working with the General Assembly is going to be a challenge, but it's what we are elected to do. We're not elected to go in and play team sports, you know, with a red team and a blue team. We're elected to get things done. And so I'm going to go in and I'm going to be principled and I'm going to try to find common ground. I think one problem with our system right now is that there's not an opposing viewpoint. Governor Lee has been a rubber stamp for everything that's come across his desk. Even things he disagreed with, he allowed to become law. Like, for example, you know, he did not think that the bill to require 100% time served for certain crimes - the truth in sentencing bill - he did not think that was a good idea. He even released a statement going through all the reasons why it was a bad idea. But he let it become law without his signature because he doesn't stand for anything. He doesn't have the courage of his convictions to challenge his own party. I'm going to be that person who has the conviction to to speak the truth and speak truth to power. And that's how we're going to get some compromise and get things done.

**Khalil Ekulona** But some would say that Governor Lee was facing a veto-proof majority. This is something that the state legislature pushed through that you'll be facing if you are to be elected governor. You would be facing the same veto-proof majority, potentially, given the results of the election. How would you handle that? How would you navigate that?

**Dr. Jason Martin** Let them veto it. Stand for something. Be principled. You know, I think that right now, there's no there's no conversation. It's just all a rubber stamp. There's power in conversation. There's power in elevating issues. Our campaign has demonstrated that. You know, a lot of the issues that we have brought to light in this campaign, I don't have any political power to affect change, but bringing them to light and adding them to the conversation has compelled the governor to make changes. And so I think there's there's power in speaking the truth.

**Khalil Ekulona** We have to take a short break. When we come back, we'll continue our discussion with the Democratic nominee for Tennessee governor, Jason Martin. We're answering your questions, so stay with us. This is Nashville.

**Khalil Ekulona** I'm Khalili Ekulona, and this is Citizen Nashville. Election Day is coming up fast. Among the state charter amendments and legislative races, you'll find candidates for Tennessee governor on this ballot. Democratic nominee Jason Martin is running against incumbent Republican Governor Bill Lee. We've invited both candidates to join us for forum, but Governor Lee declined our invitation. Dr. Martin is here with us now again. Thank you for being here.

**Dr. Jason Martin** Thanks for having me.

**Khalil Ekulona** Okay. So for the past month, we've been soliciting your questions for Dr. Martin and Governor Lee at This Is Nashville dot org. Okay. so recently, a conservative media host called attention to Vanderbilt's transgender health clinic and pushed Tennessee's Republicans to oppose gender affirming surgeries for minors. It's worth noting that, though the campaign against this clinic has been significant, the actual surgeries performed by this clinic are few and far between. Now, Governor Lee and

several top Republican leaders have expressed an openness to revisiting the state's laws concerning transgender care for minors. We received a few listener questions about this issue. Dr. Martin If you were elected, how would you deal with legislation regulating transgender care that may come to you?

**Dr. Jason Martin** Look, this is part of a continued attack on a marginalized community in the state of Tennessee. And I think it's wrong. I think, again, consistent with what I've said previously, big government Bill Lee needs to stay out of the doctor's office, especially when families and children are making decisions for themselves. I think the reason this is coming up right now is politically motivated. It's because they're losing on it on public education. They're losing on access to health care more broadly across the state. People in the state of Tennessee are upset about lack of access to broadband internet. And so they're bringing up these issues to try to get the base fired up. I think this is absolutely wrong. And yet it's consistent with their persistent attacks on marginalized communities. We're talking about a group of individuals that has a higher than average rate of depression, higher than average rate of suicide, and now we're making it okay to attack them publicly. That is not all right. And it's not going to stand when I'm governor.

**Khalil Ekulona** More broadly, listener Nancy asks, quote, What is your stance on LGBTQIA+ rights, including protections for jobs, anti-discrimination, generally, and health services?

**Dr. Jason Martin** Look, I think that we need to have equity in the state of Tennessee for all groups, including our LGBTQ+ neighbors. And again, the governor has this attack on marginalized communities in the state of Tennessee. And it's not right. And so I think that everyone in this state, regardless of the color of your skin, how much money you have in the bank, your ZIP code, who you choose to love or what your native tongue is, this should be the land of opportunity for you.

**Khalil Ekulona** Let's talk about guns. Your opponent signed a permit last carry bill into law last year and over the summer after a deadly mass shooting in Uvalde, Texas, that killed 19 elementary school children and two teachers, he reinforced that he does not support restricting firearms. Dr. Martin, what steps, if any, would you take to regulate gun ownership in our state?

**Dr. Jason Martin** I grew up in Mobile, Alabama, hunting on the weekends with my grandfather and my father. We had long guns in the house. I absolutely support the Second Amendment. I absolutely support your right and my right to have a firearm to protect myself, my family and my property. But Governor Bill Lee is a radical on guns. Permitless carry needs to go away. When he signed permitless carry into law, he rolled back decades long practice in this state of having a basic background check and a basic safety check if you're going to have a firearm around my family and yours in a concealed way in public. And putting that law into place was the wrong thing to do. I'm not the only one who feels that way, by the way. The TBI opposed permitless carry, the Police Chiefs Association, Sheriffs Association, business leaders, faith leaders. But he went and did it anyway at the Baretta factory because he's a radical and he's wrong for our communities. He's not fit to be governor.

**Khalil Ekulona** On this topic. One community member who asked to remain anonymous wrote in with this. "Why should the General Assembly be allowed to continue entrance screenings to prevent guns in legislative buildings, the Tennessee State Capitol, the House and Senate chambers to protect themselves when Tennesseans like me have no

protection against anyone who wishes to carry a gun wherever and whenever they wish to?" That's really more of a comment than a question. But public safety is on a lot of minds. And crime has become a national talking point for Republicans running this election cycle. What would you like to say to voters like this one who wrote in with that question who fear gun violence when they step out in public?

**Dr. Jason Martin** I really appreciate that comment. I mean, Governor Bill Lee's Tennessee is a really dangerous place. Violent crime has increased double digits under his watch. And I think that, one, we need smarter gun laws. As I mentioned, we need to get rid of permitless carry. But two, we need to do something about the roots of crime. And I think we need to deal with poverty in this state. The governor is so proud of this big pile of money that he's accumulated. Your money, your tax revenue. You know, he does run government like a business. And he's accumulated accumulated a lot of wealth for the government and for himself. But he doesn't use that wealth for the for the power of good. And so I think we need to invest in public education, better access to health care. We need to use the TANF funds, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, funds more wisely so that we can elevate communities and give people options and opportunities. And hopefully that would lead to a reduction in crime.

**Khalil Ekulona** If you're just tuning in, this is Citizen Nashville, and I'm your host, Kahlil Ekulona. This hour, we're posing your questions to the Democratic nominee for governor, Jason Martin. His opponent, incumbent Bill Lee, declined his invitation to join us for this forum, which is something a few folks wrote in about. We got this message from Debbie.

**Debbie** Why was Governor Bill Lee afraid to debate Jason Martin? It makes him look like an arrogant coward. He doesn't even have the decency to acknowledge he has an opponent.

**Khalil Ekulona** I do want to ask you about this, Dr. Martin. Governor Lee has not only declined to debate you, but by and large, as Debbie said, he's really refused to acknowledge you as his opponent at all. Have you spoken to Governor Lee at all during this campaign?

**Dr. Jason Martin** I have not spoken to Governor Lee at all during this campaign. Look, I think it's disrespectful that he's not willing to come to the table and have a discussion about his record. Not to me personally, but to the people of Tennessee. I think the people of Tennessee deserve a conversation about his record. He had the courage to debate Karl Dean at least three times when he was running for governor the first time around. But he doesn't have the courage to do so now. And I think that tells you everything you need to know about the man. I think it tells you everything you need to know about his lack of leadership. He doesn't have the courage to come to the table and defend himself.

**Khalil Ekulona** Well, what would you like to say to your opponent?

**Dr. Jason Martin** I'd like to say to him, you know, Governor Lee, respectfully, we need leadership, not political gamesmanship. We need to put the lives and safety and prosperity of the people of Tennessee ahead of your own political ambitions, ahead of your own party affiliations.

**Khalil Ekulona** Last week, we had an episode about disability benefits. Our guest, Rachel Kestner, who lives with cerebral palsy, had this question.

**Rachel Kestner** I would like to know from each of the candidates, all right. Intend to make Tennessee more accessible for the disabled community so that we may fully participate in the community at large.

**Khalil Ekulona** Dr. Martin?

**Dr. Jason Martin** Yeah. You know, I think the you know, we have a role to play as a state government in making sure that we are following federal disability laws to make sure that our spaces are accessible. And, you know, I'd be committed to making sure that happens as broadly as possible in the state of Tennessee.

**Khalil Ekulona** One listener raised concerns about the opioid epidemic here in Tennessee, something Governor Lee addressed in his state of the state back in January.

**Gov. Bill Lee** Regarding health care, it's no secret that the opioid and opioid epidemic has ravaged many of our communities all across Tennessee and continues to do so. Therefore, we are increasing our investment to support addiction recovery through mobile units and improved walk in care from one end of the state to the other.

**Khalil Ekulona** Dr. Martin, what would you do to help curb overdoses here in our state?

**Dr. Jason Martin** We absolutely have to support law enforcement. THP is working every day to interrupt the drug trade in the state of Tennessee and we need to stand with them and make sure they have the resources they need to fulfill their jobs successfully. We also need to expand Medicaid. States that have expanded Medicaid have decreased opioid deaths. And this is because people have access to health care, which is able to provide them with options and alternatives. I also think we need to legalize cannabis in the state of Tennessee and, stick with me on this one, cannabis for medical use but also cannabis for adult use. In states that have expanded use of cannabis legally, opioid deaths go down and I think it's because they're getting a safe product that is not tainted on the street and also because they don't have to seek illegal alternatives.

**Khalil Ekulona** What about investment in programs that help people with substance use issues?

**Dr. Jason Martin** Absolutely. And again, this comes back to access to health care more broadly. This is where Medicaid expansion can help. Right now, we have about 800,000 uninsured Tennesseans in this state. We could decrease that number by half if our governor and our General Assembly had the courage to accept \$1,000,000,000 a year, billion with a B, that we are turning our backs on. We could use that money to help provide addiction services. We could use that money to push back on being number one in the nation per capita when it comes to medical bankruptcies and in-hospital closures.

**Khalil Ekulona** In your mind, what are the most important issues facing Tennesseans today?

**Dr. Jason Martin** You know, it's difficult to assign a number one to these, but I think among these is a woman's right to decide what she does with her own body. Access to a great public education and access to health care that doesn't break the bank. Those are the central issues in the state of Tennessee.

**Khalil Ekulona** As governor, how would you tackle them?

**Dr. Jason Martin** That's a great, great question. So, first of all, we absolutely have to elevate these issues in public discourse. And I'm proud of our campaign for having done that already. And we also need to get some help in the General Assembly to move these issues legislatively through the General Assembly. And we're working hard to elevate down ballot races. But look, I think we need to fully fund education. And I don't think every problem deserves a dollar. But this one needs a lot. We need to accept the Medicaid expansion from the federal government and decrease the number of uninsured people in the state by half. And we need to use our infrastructure money wisely to create prosperity across Tennessee.

**Khalil Ekulona** So how do you plan to show up for our communities after the election cycle, whether you're elected or not?

**Dr. Jason Martin** I'm going to show up for our communities as governor the same way I'm showing up as candidate. You know, Governor Lee has not been out there talking to people. He's not been out there taking questions. You know, he's got a last minute bus tour thrown together next week right before the election. I've been traveling this state for the last 20 months. I've been to all 95 counties many multiple times, including the rural communities, which need light and attention, just like the cities. I have met with thousands of Tennesseans where they are, listening, finding out what the issues are, and that's why we're going to win this election because I'm paying attention to the people I'm going to be chosen to serve. And that's how I'm going to leave as governor as well.

**Khalil Ekulona** That is Dr. Jason Martin. He is the Democratic nominee for governor vying for the seat against Republican Governor Bill Lee. Thank you for joining us today. And hey, before I let you go, I've got one last question for me. Back in 2018, Taylor Swift backed Democrats Phil Bredesen and Jim Cooper when they ran for the Senate and House in that midterm election. Where's your celebrity endorser?

**Dr. Jason Martin** Listen, we are proud of our endorsements. We would love to have Taylor Swift get involved with this campaign. Taylor, if you can hear us, hit us up.

**Khalil Ekulona** Jason Martin, again, thanks for being here.

**Dr. Jason Martin** Thank you.