

But Why: A Podcast for Curious Kids

Why Can't Kids Vote?

October 9, 2020

Jane [00:00:21] This is But Why: A Podcast for Curious Kids? I'm Jane Lindholm. On this show, we take questions from kids just like you about anything. And it's our job to try to find answers. And if there aren't answers, to at least give you a better understanding and maybe encourage you to do your own research.

Jane [00:00:41] After all, there are a lot of things that are still unknown or not very well understood about the world. And you could be the person who helps the rest of us learn about them now. Or as you grow up, you may be a kid, but don't let that stop you from investigating all the things you're curious about and telling us grown ups what you learn. In the United States, where but why is based? We have a big election coming up, Election Day this year is officially on November 3rd. But more Americans than usual are voting in advance this year, sometimes in-person, at their town hall or city office and sometimes by mailing in their ballot. A ballot is the piece of paper where adults mark down who they want to vote for. People in lots of states are voting for their governors who help run the states or their Congress, people who work in Washington to help run the country. But the position that's getting the most attention is the election for who will be president of the United States for the next four years. And some of you have questions about that and about elections and voting and political parties. So we're going to tackle all of them today.

Kids [00:01:53] Why don't kids get a vote for president? Why haven't we had girl presidents before? Why Democrats call Democrats? Why Republicans call Republicans?

Jane [00:02:02] We've done other episodes about how the U.S. form of government is set up and we've done episodes about what a president is and does all day and why we have one in the United States. We will put links to those episodes in our show notes and at our web site, butwhykids.org? In case you want to go back and listen to those episodes specifically, but you've been sending us new questions. So today we're going to talk more about the presidency elections and why it's so important to vote and why you can't do that if you're a kid.

Jane [00:02:35] The U.S. has a form of government called a representative democracy. In a representative democracy, all of the eligible voters get to pick a few people who run the government. And those people make our laws or change our laws. They are supposed to represent or speak for us. Let's talk a little bit about the presidential election, which you may have been hearing about in the news, whether you live in the United States or not. Our current president, Donald Trump, has been in office for almost four years, which is what we call one term. He wants to have a second term. And if he wins, that would be his last. A president can only be elected to two terms, but he's being challenged by a lot of people. The most prominent challenger, the most popular one is a man named Joe Biden. Joe Biden used to be the Vice President when Barack Obama was the president. And Biden is hoping that he will win the presidency this year.

Jane [00:03:34] There are a lot of ways this year's election looks very different from normal years, as most of you probably know pretty well already. The global corona virus pandemic means that many of the candidates running for president and for other

government offices, like senators or governors, can't get out and shake hands and kiss babies and try to convince people to vote for them in the same way. When they do all that and try to convince people that's called campaigning. So the campaigning looks pretty different this year. Also, many states are encouraging voters to fill in their ballots and vote by mail instead of going to a specific place to what's called cast their vote to vote in person on Election Day. Lots of states have made changes to their rules to make sure more people can vote early this year.

Jane [00:04:22] And there's another thing I want to mention before I introduce our guest and get to your questions. We are putting this episode out on Friday, October 9th, as it's going out, the president, Donald Trump, has COVID 19, the Corona virus. He announced that he tested positive for COVID 19 a week earlier, and he was in the hospital for a few days. He says he's feeling much better now. But we still don't really know how this might impact his health in the long term. So there are a lot of unknowns. And if things are confusing after Election Day in November, we'll do another episode to help you understand what's happening. So feel free to send us your questions if anything is confusing to you. But for now, let's get to the questions you've already sent. We invited someone to join us who has practiced talking to young people about voting and elections.

Erin [00:05:14] Hi, I'm Erin Geiger Smith. I'm a reporter and the author of Thank You for Voting and the Thank You for Voting Young Readers, Edition.

Jane [00:05:21] We gave Erin a really big, broad question to tackle. First, a question from Milo.

Milo [00:05:27] I'm 10 years old. I live in Los Angeles, California. And my question is, how does the government work?

Jane [00:05:34] How does the government work? We could go really detailed and in-depth on various kinds of governments and we could look at how our country's government works here in the United States, where you and I are, or how some state governments work or even how our town government works. But broadly speaking, took to Milo's question and maybe what some other people are thinking, how is government supposed to work? What is government supposed to be doing for us?

Erin [00:06:03] It is a big question, Milo, but it's a really good one. Government is supposed to help our lives, all the things that are necessary for us as people to learn and grow and just be in the world, make those things go a little smoother and be safe. So government involves our police and firefighters and making that run its government is setting up all the systems in a way that makes the world functions and then adapting to make sure those systems keep working how they're supposed to. And if something changes, the government should be there to make things better. In a way, it's sort of like with the corona virus and what we're going through our state and local and national governments, what they sometimes did and always should have done is adapt it and think through what the problems are to try to make citizens be able to continue their lives safely. So it's about keeping us safe and then planning ahead.

Jane [00:07:11] I sometimes also think about it as a way to make decisions more streamlined or easier to make so that, you know, if we think about like let's say there's a whole bunch of us living in a place, if we are each making individual decisions, that's fine. But there are some things that we need to have a group decision on and in our country, the United States, if we're all trying to make those decisions, we're just never going to

make a decision. So we have a government that is supposed to make decisions for us with our input so that all of those things that need to be done as a group can be done more efficiently and effectively. Does that make sense to you?

Erin [00:07:52] Yes, I think that's exactly right. And the government is, of course, people. The government is part of the people who have been designated to make decisions and keep things running largely so everyone can continue with their their lives of going to school and going to work, and all of those things.

Jane [00:08:11] In the United States and in a lot of other countries, there are things called political parties and they're not teams. But you could kind of think of them like a team. So you're on part of a team and your team has certain values and ideas and thoughts about how they want the government to run. And so when you're part of that party and you run for office, it's supposed to help other people know kind of what you stand for. But one of the problems that people have right now is that these two teams, instead of working together once they're in the government, seem like they're always fighting. And if you're always fighting in a place where you're supposed to work together to make things happen, then it's really hard to make anything happen. And then all of us who voted for these people are sort of left feeling like these teams aren't working for us.

Erin [00:09:00] I think that's really true. And it's a big problem right now because political parties, in our ideal world setup certain standards or ideals that they would like to follow. But to make laws, some of those people have to agree. So we think of political parties as being one side or the other. And then they kind of find a middle ground that will work for the most people. And it is just true that right now those parties seem to be extremely divided and really far apart on where they want the world to go.

Jane [00:09:42] But wait a minute, those political parties you may have heard about the two biggest political parties or groups that control most of the government: Republicans and Democrats. Donald Trump, our current president, is a Republican. Joe Biden, the main challenger, is a Democrat. So how did those two groups get those names?

Madeleine [00:10:03] Hi, my name is Madeleine. I'm nine years old. I live in Silver Spring, Maryland. And my question is why Democrats called Democrats and why Republicans called on Republicans.

Erin [00:10:13] You know, they got their names a really long time ago. So whether their names even really still represent what it was at the time is kind of up in the air. But to start with, the idea of just two parties in general, even before Republicans and Democrats were the main parties, we for a long time been a two party, a main two party system. So even though we always have a ton of smaller parties, the way our system is setup lends itself to two parties, partially because the way we elect presidents, our two parties for a very long time that have been the main ones are the Republican Party in the Democratic Party, as Madeleine says. And they got their names from the words Democrat, or Democratic, which means a type of government that is elected by the people.

Erin [00:11:05] And for the Republicans, it's from the word republic, which really has a pretty similar definition in reality. People like to fight over it a lot. But they have pretty similar definitions. The Republican Party, the name first came in the seventeen nineties from supporters of Thomas Jefferson, and they wanted a style of government that was a democracy, but definitely democracy. But where the government had limited power, the

federal government, the U.S. government wasn't going to be in charge of everything. And then that party split and became something called the Democratic Republicans.

Jane [00:11:45] That's confusing. Super confusing.

Erin [00:11:47] I still get confused. That Democratic Republican Party became what is known as the Democratic Party. So they lost one half. And that was in about the 1840s.

Erin [00:12:00] And then not long after that, with a nod to Jefferson, another political party formed and it was the Republican Party. And since I think the date is 1852, the first or second place finisher and all but one presidential race since then has been a member of the Republican or Democratic Party. So they really are extremely dominant.

Erin [00:12:23] And though third party candidates can get in some races and kind of create some upsets every once in a while, we are pretty much a nation of the Democratic and the Republican Party and have been for a very, very long time.

Jane [00:12:40] Erin, you mentioned elections. And I want to point our listeners to another episode that we've done all about elections and how government works and how elections work. And we did a whole episode called Who Invented the President as well, where we talked about what a president is and does. But just briefly, maybe you can help us understand just how do elections work?

Erin [00:13:03] So elections work basically by a process that decides which candidates are going to be on the ballot. That's a very important step. And there's all different ways that it might be decided which candidates or issues. But once you get to that, there's a ballot printed or on a computer screen.

Jane [00:13:26] And what's a ballot? A ballot just has everybody's names, right?

Erin [00:13:29] That's a great question. Yeah, a ballot is either the piece of paper or on your screen that says all the candidates who are running, which offices they're running for and then can also include questions like, should we have a new highway through this city? So it's not always people, but people or issues. And once it's decided who's going to be on the ballot, the voters have to meet all sorts of important deadlines to register to vote. They have to find out where they're going to vote, called their polling places. But once those things are settled and figured out, voters show up or vote by mail and fill out who they want to win. And then those votes are counted. And that's basically how it is. Now, the truth is it takes many, many, many people to run an election. It involves a lot of really complicated rules. But even in huge national elections like the presidential election that we're about to have, their elections are done on a local level. So it's someone very near you that's going to do all of that counting and calculating for your area. And then those results go to the state and if necessary, to, you know, the nation.

Jane [00:14:49] Did you catch that? No matter what election you're voting in, it's your friends and neighbors in your own community who are running it. I live in a really small town in Vermont. So I actually know most of the people who helped make sure the election runs smoothly. Now, if you live in a bigger town or a city, you might not recognize the faces of the people helping out. Those are sometimes called poll workers, but it's still a small group of dedicated people in your own community helping to make sure everyone can vote and have a say in who leads our states and our nation. There are all kinds of rules in place that these volunteers and town employees have to follow, and they take it very seriously.

Jane [00:15:30] When the United States became its own country, the only people who were allowed to go vote were adult white men who were wealthy enough to own their own property. Over the course of our history, changes have been made to the laws to make sure more people can vote and have a say. People who are not white, people who are not men and people who don't have a lot of money are all allowed to vote. But it is still sometimes a challenge to vote, even if you're allowed to. So the United States still has a ways to go to make sure everyone has the opportunity to have a say in who runs their government. Even though lots more people can vote now than in the 1700s, there's one group of American citizens who still can't: children.

Natalie [00:16:18] This is Natalie. I'm nine years old. I live in Raleigh, North Carolina. And my question is, why don't kids get a vote for president?

Erin [00:16:28] That's a great question, Natalie, because kids have a lot of good ideas. But as far as voting, I'll start with the legal part of things, which is that the age, the lowest age that a person can vote in the United States is 18, and that is actually in the Constitution. When the country first started. And all the way until 1971, which may sound like a really long time ago, but your parents or at least your grandparents were probably alive in 1971. So from beginning of the country to 1971, you actually had to be 21 to vote. But because people who were 18 could join the armed forces and perhaps even go to war, if that was necessary because of that reason and because 18 year olds were at that point, most of them were finishing high school, and that meant that they actually had higher education level than many of the people much older in the country because our education system had gotten so much better. So it was sort of the idea that 18 year olds are educated enough to vote. And so we should let them. And and that was a constitutional amendment that is the fastest ever amendment that went from idea to ratification or at least from the law to ratification.

Jane [00:17:49] Ratification is just a word for approved. Changes to the Constitution, have a special process. And when a change is approved, it's called ratification. OK, so kids can't vote, but how do you make sure that your needs and what you want to happen in this country can still be counted? I asked Erin to give us some advice.

Erin [00:18:12] Kids making sure that they're grown ups, whether it's their parents or aunts and uncles or cousins, anyone, you know, that's over 18, encouraging them to vote and asking them to help you understand it better is a great idea. You can think what issues are important to you. It may it might be that you care a lot about animals and and want to protect the forests that they live in.

Erin [00:18:38] Or it might be that, you know, you need to think about elections, too, as very local. If you think your school needs better playground equipment, that is something that the school board might be involved in. So if you think about what issues you care about and then ask a grown-up to help you learn about it, that's really great. You can also, if you have grown ups who are already politically involved, you can join them in helping other people to vote in might be writing postcards or in most elections, you go knock door to door. That's something that's not happening as much this time. But there are so many ways for young people to get involved.

Jane [00:19:21] I'll also say there's a kind of a quirky piece of of rule and law in some states. So like Vermont, where But Why is made, we had a young person who was 13, run for governor a few years ago, and he made quite a big splash. A lot of people got to hear

him debate because even though he wasn't old enough to vote, there was no rule in this state that set the age limit for when somebody could run for governor. So, you know, there are ways to get your voice heard, even if you can't yet vote.

Erin [00:19:52] Yeah. And if you want to set your sights a little below governor, always participating in your school government is a great way to understand the whole process better and to get better at working with others.

Jane [00:20:09] So just because you can't vote for president doesn't mean your voice can't be heard and you can have an influence on your family members who are voting. I read a news story recently about a man who says he decided to change who he was voting for after a conversation with his grandchildren. More of your election questions as we continue.

Jane [00:20:31] This is But Why: a Podcast for Curious Kids from Vermont Public Radio. I'm the host, Jane Lindholm. Today, we're answering questions about voting and elections, as the U.S. inches closer to a once every four years presidential election. The two main candidates this time around, President Donald Trump and former Vice President Joe Biden, are both men, which doesn't sit well with all of you.

[00:20:57] Hi, my name is Aspen. I live in Redwood City, California, and I'm eight years old. And my question is, why haven't we had girl presidents before?

Kinley [00:21:06] Hello, my name is Kinley, I'm six and a half year old. And I'm from Florida. And my question is, why has no girl ever been president?

Jane [00:21:18] Here's what our guest for this episode, Erin Geiger Smith, has to say about that.

Erin [00:21:22] I want to know the same thing. And the answer is there's no good reason. There is there are plenty of reasons why we haven't had one. There's no good reason why we haven't had one. But thinking about representation and starting with voting. So in the United States, women can vote nationwide and all the states until 1920. So this year, we're celebrating the 100th anniversary of womens' right to vote being acknowledged. It's always important to point out that even though women had the right to vote, there were many women of color who couldn't exercise their right, who were kept from voting all the way until 1965.

Jane [00:22:08] And some in states still today, especially people of color and others in some communities, really struggle to exercise their right to vote.

Erin [00:22:15] Yes, we still have many, many barriers to voting in this country that that make it harder for people to vote. And most of those barriers affect black and brown people more than others. So that's always a very important thing to keep in mind. But so women couldn't have didn't have the right to vote for a very long time. And when you don't have the right to vote, it's kind of hard to get elected to many offices, is the truth. There was a woman who ran for president even before, her was Victoria Woodhull, even before she had the right to vote, which is pretty impressive, like your Vermont governor candidate. She didn't get very far. But the point is to note that she was she what she did, in fact, give it a try. But most of the time, our presidents come from other places in the government. So they've been a senator or they've been in the House of Representatives or maybe they've been a mayor.

Erin [00:23:13] And we just for a long time haven't had enough women in those offices who's who could keep rising in the ranks to president. The good news is, is that right now there are more women in Congress than at any other time. So I think that that will change soon. More women are running for office, and that's really important, too, even if you run and don't win running helps contribute to the idea that women can and should be in office. Of course, in this election, we do have a woman who is a vice presidential candidate, and that's the third time that has happened. And so if Joe Biden and Kamala Harris were to win, we would have a woman in the vice presidency, which is as close as it gets to being president and then who knows? So the point is that sometimes people have had a hard time wrapping their minds around that a woman should be president. But that was just a problem in the thinking and not a problem with women being able to do the job. Many other big, strong, powerful nations have women leaders, so the United States is just kind of behind in that.

Jane [00:24:35] Erin mentioned Kamala Harris. Kamala Harris is what's called the running mate of the Democrat, Joe Biden. A running mate is kind of like a partner. They get elected together as a team. The running mate of Donald Trump is the current vice president, Mike Pence. Kamala Harris is just the third woman to be on a major party's ticket as a vice presidential candidate. We've never had a woman vice president or a woman president. And Kamala Harris is also the first African-American vice presidential candidate and the first Indian American vice presidential candidate that's ever been the nominee for the Democrats or Republicans. So if she and Joe Biden win, it will be a historic moment.

Jane [00:25:19] Now, there are a lot of things we could talk about when it comes to elections, but let's leave it there for now. And again, if you have other questions about this election that you want us to talk about after November 3rd, don't hesitate to have your adult help you record them and send them our way. You can do it with a free voice app that comes on an adult's mobile phone. Just include your first name, your town, and what your question is, as well as how old you are, and then have your adult send it to questions@butwhykids.org.

Jane [00:25:50] Before we let Erin go, I asked her to talk a little bit about one other thing, because things are a little different this year with the coronavirus pandemic. And some people are worried that something could go wrong with the election or that some of the votes won't get counted. Now, people who work to make sure elections are fair say that's not a real concern. There's no evidence that the election won't be fair. But a lot of people are talking about it. So I asked Erin to talk about it a little bit, too.

Erin [00:26:19] If grown ups do what they need to do to vote and follow all the rules, their vote will count. And that's something that people are really worried about this time. But I think it's just important to realize that our systems are set up to handle these big elections. And even though things may be done a little differently this time, there might be some hiccups. That's really true. There might be some hiccups. All of the election officials are working really hard to make sure everything goes smoothly. And, you know, sometimes there's been a lot of talk this time about people messing with the results or stealing ballots or all those sorts of things. And I think it's really important to understand that that is really, really rare. It might happen that someone messes with a few ballots in a way that they shouldn't, but they get caught usually and they get in big, big, big trouble. It's something you don't, the kind of trouble you really don't want to be in. And it just doesn't have any huge impact on the election results because we have so many people voting.

Jane [00:27:36] And a lot of people are worried in particular this year, because so many more people are voting by mail instead of going to a place where they vote in person. But as you said, Erin, there's very little evidence of what we call widespread or lots of problems with voting, even when people are voting by mail and mailing it to their town clerk or to their city officials.

Erin [00:27:59] Yes, that's exactly right. And I think, I'm actually not worried about voter fraud with vote by mail at all. I'm really not. I am worried about people making sure they follow the directions specifically. That's really important and that we give our election workers enough time to count everything. So there are big issues to think about, but widespread voter fraud just isn't one of them. And if you fill out your grown ups, fill out their vote by mail ballots correctly, make sure it gets in on time and the earlier you do it. Sometimes they even let you fix a mistake, which is a big thing. People don't know about, but it's very important. So it's kind of an interesting and exciting thing that we're having this big vote by mail movement. And my hope is actually in elections, the next one and the next one of the next one, we can get better and better at it, as many states who already use vote by mail have. So it's a real opportunity, actually, for by the time that kids today are voting, we'll have the system all figured out even better than it is now.

Jane [00:29:12] That was Erin Geiger Smith. She's the author of Thank You for Voting, which is also available in a Young Readers edition. If you want to learn more about politics and elections again, check out two other But Why episodes: Who Invented the President and Who Makes the Laws? But Why is produced by Melody Bodette and me, Jane Lindholm at Vermont Public Radio. Our theme music is by Luke Reynolds. We'll be back in two weeks with an all new episode.

Jane [00:29:41] Until then, stay curious!