GIVINGDONERIGHT-S4-EP4

Eric Liu [00:00:02] Citizenship properly understood is about a combination of two things. We have this equation that we use: power plus character equals citizenship.

Grace [00:00:13] Welcome to Giving Done Right, a show with everything you need to know to make an impact with your charitable giving. I'm Grace Nicolette.

Phil [00:00:18] And I'm Phil Buchanan. Today we're really excited to welcome to the show Eric Lu, the co-founder and CEO of Citizen University, a nonprofit that seeks to build up a culture of citizenship and civic responsibility in the United States. He's the author of numerous books and was formerly, among other things, a White House speechwriter. Welcome, Eric.

Eric Liu [00:00:54] So great to be with you, Grace and Phil. Look forward to the conversation.

Grace [00:00:57] So, Eric, we wanted to have you on because you work on the front lines of democracy work, and your work is to empower citizens to make change. And we know that that's a cause that many donors really care about, especially in this U.S. election season. So this is going to be the first of two conversations we'll have this season on Giving Done Right about how donors can best support democracy and civic engagement efforts. So, Eric, to start off, please tell us a bit about yourself and how did you get into this work?

Eric Liu [00:01:26] The place that I often start is the simple fact that I'm the son of immigrants. My parents were born in mainland China, went to Taiwan during those years of civil war and revolution and war of the Japanese. And, and then separately, they each made their way to the United States. They didn't meet until they were both in New York. And I ended up being born and raised in Poughkeepsie, New York, in the Hudson Valley, which at the time was a big IBM town. And I say all that to say that one of the deep self stories that I have is being second generation and being very aware of all the ways in which mainly all I did was have the dumb luck to be born here, to be born here at a time of strong institutions, security, increasing prosperity, relative stability and the peak of American power. And it was my parents who did the heavy lifting, who made the hard choices, who had to upend their lives. And the corollary to that has been, I think, this deep imprinted sense, which wasn't so much vocalized by my parents, but it was definitely something I felt, of how was I going to make it worth it? In what ways was I going to be useful to this society, to this country, in a way that would redeem all that risk and all of that sacrifice? And I think that's a deep motivation for me to really feel like I have some sense of responsibility for making this country be all that it can be. That's the deepest answer to your question. You know, my background is partly in politics and government, partly in media, books, ideas and the intersection of those two things. I worked a lot in, you know you alluded to my White House stint, I worked in government and politics in D.C. for many years, but I've lived in Seattle, actually here in the other Washington for 24 years now. And being rooted in this place and rooted in a community where I've raised my daughter and been enmeshed in civic life in this community has taught me at least as much about citizenship and democracy as my two stints in the Clinton White House did. And so I think, you know, those have been formative experiences as well.

Grace [00:03:33] Thanks for sharing that. My parents are also similar, I think background as yours, born in China and then went to Taiwan and I'm 1.5 generation. I was born in Taiwan, but I really resonate with what you shared about the immigrant experience and feeling like so grateful. So thank you for sharing that.

Eric Liu [00:03:57] Absolutely.

Phil [00:03:57] The sense that you have that you spoke about, Eric, of responsibility is one, of course, that I think we want more people to feel. And I was thinking about this other dynamic which is a sense of powerlessness that many have. And I was thinking about this when I was reading your really terrific book, *You're More Powerful Than You Think: A Citizen's Guide to Making Change Happen*, and reflecting on the fact that we have seen a decline, for example, in rates of charitable giving in this country. You know, it was the case 20 years ago that two thirds of households gave. Now it's under half. There is cynicism about inequality, about this sort of concentration of power, about the ability to make a difference. And I guess I wonder, how do you counter that? I know this is your work, but how do we help people to recognize that their charitable contributions, their volunteering, their work, their perspective matters and that they can actually have an effect on their community?

Eric Liu [00:05:12] So glad you asked that Phil. I think you're you know, you put your finger on a core reality right now and it's, you know, things like those declines in charitable giving or, you know, continued multi-decadal declines in volunteering and civic participation and so on so forth are merely the evidence of a deeper trend. They're not the problem. They aren't the symptoms of a problem. And the problem, as I see it, is an evaporation of faith in the idea that America can work. An evaporation of faith, in the idea that democracy can work. And there are well-founded reasons why people have lost faith, people of all backgrounds that there are as you alluded to. We've been living through this tectonic shift in American economic life where voice and wealth and clout have been concentrating in fewer and fewer hands. More and more people feel precarious about their prospects and their futures, and they get more and more cynical about notions of an American dream. That's a core reality. And I think for the community of people who are your community, who are listening to us right now, whether they are individual donors or people parts, or parts of larger charitable and philanthropic institutions, you know, are on this kind of double-edged, this double-edged position of oftentimes having the perspective to see what we're talking about here, but also being on some level, you know, evidence of the problem. More and more attention being paid to philanthropy because there are these super mega fortunes that are emerging in our time and people have stopped believing that government can solve problems and they want someone… they just want someone really rich with a lot of money to come fix it. And I think that is you know, that's not all bad. There's opportunity in that from the perspective of the community of people listening to this podcast. But Phil, your question goes to this core lack of faith, this disappearance of faith. And at Citizen University, we think of this crisis in democratic faith and civic faith as something that you cannot exhort people out of that. You can't scold and chide people to say, believe harder in America. You should believe more. I think the place that we all have to start is with an honest and respectful acknowledgment of the fact that people have lost faith and a genuine inquiry: Why? Why have you lost faith? What is it that you what promises do you feel like have been broken in your lifetime or never kept in your lifetime about what life in this society could be? And let's talk about that and let's talk about those expectations. Let's talk about the people you blame, the institutions you blame, the scapegoats, whether those are, again, fair or not. And to make an initial space without judgment, which is really hard to actually air out the naming of that pain, loss, grief, sense of betrayal that has fueled

an angry politics both on the right and the left. We focus a lot, especially this election season, on Trumpism and that kind of nationalist populism of the far right. But there is an angry populism of the left as well. There has been a disengagement of people who wouldn't identify themselves as either right or left. We can't begin to address them unless we give people space and permission, number one, to name them and talk about how they got there. And then number two, I think, you know, this goes to the part that you were alluding to of how powerless people feel, even if they can be invited into a space and hopefully not just one on one, but in community with others into a space where they can name that disillusionment, that actual literal loss of an illusion that things would work out. Then from there, like, okay, well great. I know that other people feel my pain. Now so what? You know now what's to be done? I'm still helpless and powerless. And so the second big thing that we do in our work at Citizen University is, as the title of my book says, to remind people that you're more powerful than you think, and that that requires reminding folks that citizenship is not some technocratic, bureaucratic set of things that you have to learn. Nor is it simply cast a ballot in November. That citizenship, properly understood, is about a combination of two things. We have this equation that we use: power plus character equals citizenship. To live like a citizen, to feel like you have some voice and can make an impact in changing things that you don't like. So much of our work at Citizen University is about teaching power and cultivating character.

Phil [00:10:35] Eric, can you help us to make this really tangible, though? Because one of the things that I was so impressed by in *You're More Powerful Than You Think* is the numerous examples you have of stories of people coming together and getting something done that maybe wouldn't have been imaginable. And that was so, so powerful to realize, oh yeah, actually, folks are getting things done in communities around this country all the time, even as all the realities that I asked you about and that you described are true in terms of this disillusionment, There are also, despite all that, these powerful examples, and I wonder if you could share a story or two that inspire you so that people can see what you mean when you're talking about being more powerful than you think.

Eric Liu [00:11:29] Yeah, one of the people who I always turn to is a woman named Whitney Kimball Coe, who is now a divinity student, but before that was a leading member of the community in Athens, Tennessee, a small town, rural community. And she started organizing. She started mobilizing people in this community at a time where there was a lot of anti-immigrant sentiment at a time where there was anti-Semitism, at a time where people were starting to again wanting to punish librarians and challenge local schools for stocking books about the Holocaust, for instance, that they found too disturbing or too troubling. And the way she organized to hold people together and to lift people's sights was not just to fall into the binary of our national politics and not just to say you all are bigots, you all are bad people. You all are this. What she did was draw on the fact that she had trusting, loving relationships with so many people in that community and invited them into a space where she was like, You need to stop with the talking points that you're getting from national politics and national commentators and look each other in the eye and look at each other's kids and ask each other, "What are you scared of? What are you scared of? What are you afraid of right now?" And let's have an honest conversation about that. And that is, that question is a magic key right now in everything, because people… so much of our politics is an incredibly immature acting out by a people who are unable and unwilling to face their fears and whose leaders encourage that denialism and want to exploit the fear of fear. And when you ask people in a not gotcha kind of way, what are you scared of? "Well, I'm scared of losing control of my kids because they don't talk to me anymore. And they're on their devices all the time and their friends are starting to dress differently. And they're talking about things that don't seem like they're coming from my

town, my community, my church, my family. And I'm scared of losing control." Okay. That's a place to start now. Right? And that's a place that's different from, "You bigot, you censoring, you know, retrograde neo-Nazi. Like, you know, stop doing that." Right? And now are there bigots in the world? Are there retrograde neo-Nazis? Are there people who are completely binary and hateful all around us all the time? You bet. But they are actually still the fringe. They are still not the majority. They're not even close to the plurality. Social media just amplifies their voices far more than their numbers. And what people like Whitney did in Athens and now does more deeply in her kind of pastoral education is center people back on that question: what are you afraid of right now? And I think that, again, when I talk about power plus character, that is an embodiment of power plus character that's recognizing that the power that comes in community…She didn't have positional authority. She wasn't an elected official. But what she had was trusted relationships. And that, if I may use it this way, that capital of many years of friendships, neighborships, you know, multigenerational connections to people. And she spent that capital on holding space that way. Right? And I think that is the kind of story that, it eludes a quick fix. And it's not electoral. And it probably even crosses and scrambles people's idea of party lines. But that's the stuff. That's the culture. You know, so much of our emphasis on, you know, at Citizen University is on culture. If there's one thing that I would impress upon all the listeners of this podcast and the people in your broad, great, diverse, philanthropic community, it is that culture precedes structure. We can't just pay attention to structural reform and policy reform and, you know, and the like, which, look, I cut my teeth on that stuff. I know that stuff. But it's precisely because I know that stuff that I've come to see, that culture; the norms, the values, the habits, the heart set, the mindset, the ways that we see each other or fail to see each other and determine the ways in which we think what's okay, culture is upstream of structure. It shapes the frame of the possible when it comes to structural reform and I think funders need to start paying a whole lot more attention to civic culture in the ways that we cultivate a million more Whitney Kimball Coes in our country.

Grace [00:17:45] I mean, listening to you, it strikes me right, sometimes the process part is easy because it's tangible and the culture part can be multidimensional. Nobody can get attribution if it goes well, people can get blamed if it doesn't go well. So I'm curious, especially because we're all so lonely and fractured, I mean, even what you described about Whitney, I mean, that kind of person is becoming more and more rare I think even in a post-Covid world, we have so many tense relationships with people who are different than us. I'm curious, like, what is your advice? How do we influence that culture?

Eric Liu [00:18:23] Grace, that's a profound question. I would slightly challenge the premise of the question that people like Whitney are becoming more rare. I don't think that's true. I think that is a constant. The human desire to connect, to belong, to make meaning with others, is a constant. What is changing, partly because of social media and partly because of a binary politics that rewards extremes, is the risk that people are willing to take to be that kind of person to let that part of their hearts show and to lead by example. Right? And so the quantum of a yearning to connect and to be something bigger and to appeal to our better angels, that quantum is a constant. I think. But the penalties for going there are higher today in a cancel culture, in a "this" culture, in this kind of, again, fraught politics. And so the core of your question, though, is the same. The question then is, well, how do we… how do we take that risk? How do we go there? And number one, we lead by example. We lead by an example of vulnerability, an example of non-certitude. Of expressing the ways in which I'm not so sure I'm right, but. Etc. I want to understand and dot, dot, dot. Right? And that sounds so elementary. And yet again, all the incentives in our culture right now reward righteous certitude, reward doubling down even when a part of

you knows you're wrong. You know, if we can, in our communities, lead by that example of intellectual humility, emotional vulnerability and civic self-awareness, that I have only partial vision of what my community is. I have only partial vision of what I am. That's an internal, almost spiritual commitment. But that commitment is made real in the company of others. And so again, to get concrete. So one of the programs we had at Citizen University is called Civic Saturdays. And Civic Saturdays are these gatherings that are happening all around the country now that are like a civic analog to a faith gathering. It's not church, it's not synagogue or mosque, but it on purpose has that kind of structure, that kind of ritual frame and arc. And the reason is not only as we were saying earlier in the conversation, that people have lost faith in the idea of democracy. And so if you're going to restore faith, you have to invite people into a structure to do that. But it's also so that when people come together, you know, when you come to a Civic Saturday, you're greeted by strangers. And, you know, the initial time is not someone standing at the lectern speaking yet. It's people turning and talking to the people around them and talking about props that go right past small talk that are not like, what do you think about the football game or this or the weather or whatever. But it's again it's, "What are you afraid of right now? It's what's broken in your heart right now?" It's, "What is making you anxious in your community, in your neighborhood right now? And people who have never met or just met will start going there and realize pretty quickly that you can go there and realize that they are, in a lateral way, not a hierarchical way, setting an example for each other and scaling that example sideways of what it means to behave that way. And then from there there are readings of texts that are, you can think of as civic scripture, texts drawn from all throughout our history, some known, some not known, some voices that should be better known, that make us reflect for a minute on the reality that this is not new. We have been here before. We have been in times of fracture. We've been in times of a cratering sense of purpose in our country. We've been in times of division, of zero sum thinking, of incredible inequality, of fear of the other. And we can draw from our past in a way that can be a comfort. Someone will give us a sermon. We sing together songs from our different kind of civic traditions of all different kinds. And I go into detail about this because this is an example of, we have to all find ways to invite people into structures of meaning making. Civic Saturday is one form that we've taken. If you don't like that, if you think, that's not for me, fine. Create your own. Create your own structure. And that structure can be a book club. It can be a community meeting, it can be a dinner group, it can be people taking a walk together. But structures of collective activity that have intentional ritual and an intentional focus on some of these deeper ethical cultural questions of what's happening to us and what are we wanting to change in a way that we carry ourselves and live together? We don't give permission for that, and we don't have those containers anymore.

Grace [00:23:16] Basically, you are inviting people to join a community of counterculture it sounds like and I mean, one of the things that has always struck me about your work at Citizen U is this like language of faith that you use. So you've said democracy isn't a given. I think on the website it says it's an act of faith. And the Civic Saturdays, as you say, are a direct analog to faith gatherings. I mean, what you described very much does reflect sort of my experience going to church on Sundays. And there's even like an evangelical zeal for what you call the civic faith. I mean, especially when faith is often a source of polarization now, why is the metaphor of faith so salient to your work? I mean. It sounds like we're looking for alternative structures minus the bad parts of what faith can provide, right? But yeah, say more about that.

Eric Liu [00:24:07] You know. It is true that organized religion today is often the source of some of what is toxic in our politics. And let's be real. That is mainly organized religion of the hard right variety. But I think the problem there is not with faith. The problem there is

with the human heart. Look, I do believe that democracy, the miracle of governing ourselves in a mass multiracial democratic republic is a continuous, constant, never ending leap of faith. There's you know, human history tells us there's no reason why this should work, we should at any minute be turning on each other and killing each other. If you use human history as a guide, it's a leap of faith, not in the sense of, okay, I hope this works out. But rather in the sense that, okay, we are now required having, again had the done work to be born into this thing, to do all we can to make it work. And my view of faith is not, of civic faith, is not a view that is grounded in dogma, certitude or orthodoxy. True faith, I wasn't raised in any godly religion. But I am as you can tell, I'm kind of wired for belief in belonging. And I think I have transmuted a lot of that wiring toward the cynic in the sense but so many of my friends are deeply religious in a godly sense. You know, they practice their particular faith in a very active way. And I often say, whether you believe in a God or in the absence of a God, civic faith matters equally to us all. This notion of civic faith is not one rooted in dogma. It's one rooted in intellectual humility, moral humility, emotional vulnerability, a sense of curiosity.

Grace [00:27:38] Don't go anywhere. More after this break.

[BREAK]

Phil [00:27:51] Eric, can I challenge you a little bit in terms of there is a lot of focus among major donors right now on bridging and on the kind of fostering of connections that you're describing. But there is a way in which it can seem a little starry eyed. I mean, one of the things that I appreciate in your writing is I've heard you say that there are threats to democracy from both the left and the right, but it's lopsided. That the threats are more significant coming from the right. And I guess I have wondered, when does bridging, depending where the bridge is being built to, run the risk of sort of normalizing extremism? I mean, so that an example would be a major foundation, and I respect and like many of the people work there, but they several years ago had a session on polarization in the media and they invited Tucker Carlson. And this struck me as like deeply unwise. Right? Because you're normalizing somebody who's essentially a white nationalist. And, of course, it was entirely predictable that he would make a mockery of the whole event, which he did. You know, the reality is we have, and I'll try not to get too political here, but you know, we're a nonpartisan organization. But we have one sort of spectrum where you've got a candidate saying, I just need you to find 12,000 votes. So how do you both bridge where it's possible, but then also recognize when you actually have to fight and you have to not assume the best. Because sometimes assuming the best about folks who won't assume the best about you and only want to win at whatever cost, would get you in trouble and will make it more likely that we lose core aspects of our democracy. I hope this question makes sense…

Eric Liu [00:29:38]. I hope I have not given anyone the impression that I advocate a starry eyed, naive focus on bridging for its own sake. You're asking, how do we know when to bridge and how do we know when to fight? The answer actually begins with know thyself and know the people around you, including those you want to fight, and humanizing people. Now, humanizing a Tucker Carlson doesn't have to mean you give him a platform and a microphone and invite him to have equal time at your event. That may be unwise. That again, depending on the circumstance might, I could you know, maybe it could make sense, but that's not the point. And if you're just doing that, that can be naive. But you do have to begin by humanizing, because the dangers of authoritarianism, the dangers of dehumanizing anti-democratic culture and spirit and politics that are emerging far more, in far more disturbing and literally weaponized ways on the far right than on the hard left, are

fed by dehumanization. So the hard right benefits when people on the left also get into the habit of dehumanizing those they don't like. They're like, great, we'll take it from here. But the question of how do I know when to bridge? How do I know when to fight? Is the question that Abraham Lincoln wrestled with every day of his political career. It is the question that Martin Luther King wrestled with throughout the civil rights movement. It is the question that Ella Baker, who's far less known than Martin Luther King, but had to do far more of the on the ground organizing without acclaim and attention, had to wrestle with all the time. Ella Baker's answer was, there's no set pattern. There's no cut and paste to this. You meet people where they are, and there will be times where the person who is a white nationalist, bigot and a literal, perhaps physical threat to you or to me as a nonwhite person. There may be times when you meet that person as a person where the choice is to engage that person. And there may be times where, like, you know what? Life is short. And my job is to contain the threat that this person poses, not to spend time and energy engaging them. But I don't have a one size fits all answer to that. This is about the moral discernment and the willingness to kind of see people and see situations in that way. But yeah, it does require recognizing that it can't all be about let's hold hands and all get along. There is a fight here and you were kind of caveating your own question, I feel. And you know, by saying, look, you know, we're nonpartisan and I don't want to get too political. I am what Alexis de Tocqueville called a partizan of democracy, and a partizan of democracy is willing and has to be able to name when one of our two major parties in a two party system has been hijacked and co-opted at the national leadership level by a candidate and by people who are hostile to democracy, friendly to authoritarians at home and abroad, and at a minimum tolerant of and welcoming to white nationalists and others like that's... If you can't name that because of some false filter of both sidesism, then you're not doing democracy any favors.

Grace [00:37:59] Yeah. I wonder if part of that is it's like we only want to contribute to culture if it means that our side wins. Right? But actually what you're describing is a much bigger expansive view of what it takes. And maybe that requires letting the other side win from time to time. I want to get to this report that you co-authored. It's an important report called *Our Common Purpose: Reinventing American Democracy for the 21st Century*. And you did it in conjunction with Professor Danielle Allen from Harvard and Stephen Heintz, who leads the Rockefeller Brothers Fund, whom we'll have on the show later this season. How can donors tap what you all learned from that report to think about ways that they can support democracy?

Eric Liu [00:38:43] So, Grace, I'm so glad you asked that question. So our common purpose was a report that was the result of a commission that Danielle Allen and Stephen Heintz and I co-chaired. It was a commission of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. 30 some people from across the country, across the ideological spectrum, different sectors. And we came up with a set of recommendations for how to fortify and reinvent our democracy. Two things that are notable about that report: Number one, this cross-partisan group was unanimous in what we put into the report in those recommendations. And number two, the theory of action that we had in that report is something that I think is really worth naming, because we talked about how in our society there's always a cycle turning and it's either going to be a virtuous cycle or a vicious cycle between our political institutions and our civic culture with civil society as kind of the mediating space between them. Right? So when our institutions are broken, non responsive, corrupt, captured, that feeds a culture that Phil was talking about, of cynicism, eye rolling, checking out, stopping participation. And when you have a culture that says, why bother, I'm powerless, I don't care. I don't need to know or learn about this stuff because the game is rigged. When you have that kind of culture, what happens? You

make your game that much more rigged. And those who've captured it take more control of the system. But if you have a virtuous cycle, it is possible to turn that cycle. When institutions become more responsive, more adaptive, and people realize suddenly, hey, they're listening. Hey, my ideas actually made their way into, either policy if the institution is government, or into my neighborhood institutions. Then that feeds a culture of participating, of showing up, of taking a sense of responsibility, of oh, I actually, I have an idea. I shouldn't keep it to myself. And Oh, I should actually share and I don't have all the ideas. I should actually listen to these people who see things differently from me. And maybe we could fix something together. And so that theory of action, I think, is one big thing that donors should take from our common purpose. But then the 31 recommendations themselves run the gamut from things that are very structural and frankly, things that won't happen overnight: Enlarge the size of the House of Representatives dramatically so that we have more responsive representation, but also so that we frankly dilute the distortions of the Electoral College. Right? You don't have to amend the Constitution and get rid of the Electoral College that way. That's a very hard path to do. But if you dramatically expanded the size of the House of Representatives, you would remove some of those distortions that you have in the Electoral College. Other structural reforms like term limits in the Supreme Court. 18 year term limits. You know, which again, is it going to happen overnight or anytime soon, but you'll notice that is now in the discourse, Right? That idea picked up some steam. But then in addition to the structural ideas, we have a whole suite of, again, culture change ideas for democratic renewal and reinvention, culture ideas that are about advancing national service and creating a common experience, where young people especially, can meet across lines of difference and focus, not any solipsistic way on themselves and the ways in which they are different, but rather on a third thing that is about building, fixing, doing something in a community. Right? And then other cultural, again, rituals like Civic Saturdays that we have at citizen universities spreading these kinds of practices that are about building trust and community and a culture of participation. Participatory budgeting in towns and communities, things like that. So that report came out a few years ago, but what's been unique and distinctive about it, you know, the American Academy, which has been around since 1780 for the first time in one of these commissions, decided to invest substantial resources into an ongoing project to help make substantial progress on these recommendations. So we have this mission that will take us up to 2026, the 250th anniversary of the creation of this country. And we've built a network of champions from all different sectors, from voting reform, from civic culture, work, from, you know, interfaith work from national service and veterans work. All these people who are organizing, meeting together, supporting each other to make progress on some of these recommendations. And the last thing I'll mention, we're just about to release a new report called *Habits of Heart and Mind* that put a lot of meat on the bones of this idea I've been speaking about today of civic culture. What do we mean by civic culture? How do we see it in the places where we live? How do we strengthen a civic culture? What rituals? What habits? What ways do we inject a new spirit of joy and possibility and imagination into the ways that we live in our communities? And what ways do we actually tap into an ecosystem of institutions, whether they are public libraries or faith communities or otherwise, to activate a civic culture change bottom up in this country? And so that, you know, that document is a playbook for, among others, funders. There's a section in there that's for funders. There's a section in there that's for educators. And there's a section in there that's really about, for everyday Americans, what can I do in my community to make the culture of my town one that's more rooted toward positive sum thinking toward contribution and showing up in service and participation, not just toward zero sum, dog-eat-dog, get what you can and screw the other person kind of culture that is, you know, so dominant in our society right now.

Phil [00:44:26] You've touched on young people a number of times and you've touched on institutions that matter in building civic culture. I want to make sure we talk about schools. So by the time this podcast is out, CEP will have a report out from an initiative that formed a number of years ago called Youth Truth that was designed to help foundations and school leaders hear from young people in schools about their experience on the theory that we can only then really know how it's going, right, if we understand how young people are experiencing school. And we've surveyed now 3 million young people. But we added some questions last year to our survey to try to get at a sense of civic engagement among young people. And the results were pretty sobering. So fewer than half of high school students we surveyed reported learning necessary civic skills in schools. Fewer than a third felt like they'd been empowered to create positive change in their communities. Only 53%, and it was only just a bit higher among seniors, said voting is important. And across our data we saw that it was students with parents with advanced degrees who felt most civically prepared, which is concerning, obviously, when it comes to the tendency of power to concentrate, which you often discuss in your writing. So before we end this conversation, I'd love to have you say, how do we do a better job of preparing our young people for civic life? There's been so much philanthropy focused on ed reform, often looking at test scores and preparedness for careers. But I wonder if we haven't paid nearly enough attention to this element of what happens in our schools.

Eric Liu [00:46:08] Young people are a case in point for the idea that you can't scold your way to a stronger democracy and a healthier civic culture. You've got to meet people where they are and invite them into forms of practice that reveal to them what is possible. And so one of our core programs at Citizen University is called the Youth Collaboratory. And every year we have several cohorts of rising sophomores and juniors in high schools or people who are that age from across the United States. And we implement that equation that I spoke of earlier in the conversation: power plus character equals citizenship. And the way we implement that is we give them deep instruction on the idea and the meaning and the concrete tangibles of power. The way you make civics meaningful to people is not make it abstract, not make it theoretical, but make it about a thing that any young person is highly attuned to, both in relation to their elders and in relation to their peers. They're highly attuned to power and power dynamics and power maps and who's in and who's out and who's got and who's not got. And that's a subject that is intrinsically interesting to young people. And unpacking in a way that most young people, just like most older people, when you ask them about who decides things in our society, they'll answer with the same answer, which is They. I can't believe They are making me do this. I can't believe They decided that. And in our Youth Collaboratory program, we break down that They into a lot of different intersecting ways because that's what it is in a society like ours. And so educating on power is one part. And every young person who goes through that program develops a youth power project in their community or at their school where they're trying to put these ideas into practice. You know, I've used that word practice many times in this conversation. This is… you learn by doing and you do by doing. I think the practice of democratic self-government is so much the practice of power in ways small and large and coupling then, that practice of power again, with the cultivation of civic character, with deep reflection on what are my values? Where do they come from? What do I believe and why do I know my own mind? Am I just saying stuff because either I got it from the elders in my family or in my community or my peers and peer pressure or I've actually thought about these things, you know, have I thought about the trade offs? We have a different program called Citizen Redefine, where all we work with are educators and adults and mentors and coaches who then form up their own circles of young people for a process of ethical formation that culminates in a rite of

passage like a civic confirmation. But, you know, whether you're talking about focusing on the adult educator or on the young person themselves, the emphasis is the same: invitation into power and character. You know, I think in all of my exhortation about, hey, funders start paying more attention to civic culture, not just to policy and structure and elections, I want that to be more than an exhortation. I want it to be an invitation. We actually are organizing different briefings and gatherings and convenings, some with funders, some that are only funders, some that mix funders with practitioners on these questions. And we want this to be a mutual learning journey. And so I think that invitation is one that I would also extend to everybody in the CEP universe.

Grace [00:50:58] Eric, this has been such a rich conversation. You've given us a lot to think about and we're just so appreciative. Thank you so much for joining us today.

Phil Really appreciate it.

Eric Liu Thank you both. This has been awesome. Really appreciate having the time to have this conversation.

Phil: There are a ton of resources about effective giving on The Center for Effective Philanthropy's website, cep.org, as well as givingdoneright.org, where you'll find all of our episodes and show notes.

Grace: You can also send us a note at gdrpodcast@cep.org.

Phil: We want to thank our sponsors who've made this season possible: the Fidelity Charitable Catalyst Fund, Fetzer Institute, the Walton Family Foundation, the John Templeton Foundation, Stupski Foundation, Colorado Health Foundation, and Archstone Foundation. If you liked the show, please leave us a review on Apple Podcasts… or invite a friend to listen.

Grace: Giving Done Right is a production of the Center for Effective Philanthropy. It's hosted by me, Grace Nicolette, and Phil Buchanan. It's produced by Rococo Punch. Our original podcast artwork is by Jay Kustka. Special thanks to our colleagues Sarah Martin, Molly Heidemann, Chloe Heskett, Naomi Rafal, and Sae Darling for their marketing, research, writing, and logistical support.