

Victor Shi:

Welcome back to you. Well, iGen Politics, formally known as Intergenerational Politics. This is a podcast and makes politics engaging and relevant for all generations. My name is Victor Shi a freshman at UCLA, the youngest elected delegate for Joe Biden, also one of the co-hosts of this podcast

Jill Wine-Banks:

And I'm Jill Wine-Banks. I met Victor when we were campaigning to be Biden delegates. I'm also an MSNBC legal analyst and the author of "The Watergate Girl." I am also known for wearing pins that have a message and today's message has to do with "The Handmaid's Tale." And this is a handmaiden, and it's very relevant to our conversation. We are very excited to be welcoming our guests today because state legislatures across the country are introducing legislation that would restrict women's reproductive rights at breakneck speed.

One report released in May this year predicted that in 2021, there would be more anti-abortion bills than any year since the landmark case of Roe vs. Wade, which was 1973, [inaudible 00:01:23] ago. This makes it all the more important for everyone from my generation, which has been debating and fighting for this issue for all those years, to Victor's generation, to pay attention to what is happening in state legislatures and in the Supreme Court. I have been fighting this battle for women's rights, not just for reproductive rights, but all women's rights, for a very long time and have often wondered where is the next generation of fighters for these rights? And at last, we have a young activist that we welcome today.

Victor Shi:

Our guest today is Paxton Smith, who surely is a rising star in the movement for a woman's right to choose. As the valedictorian of her high school with the GPA of a 104.93, which is 100 higher than mine, Paxton was selected to give her high school commencement speech. She had planned to talk about the media and how the consumption of it has changed in recent decades and how it affects her life, but decided instead, to talk about the concerning effort to restrict women's reproductive rights. We'll include this in the show notes, but you can read Paxton's powerful speech in our show notes. So thank you so much for being here with us Paxton, and congratulations on your graduation.

Paxton Smith:

Thank you. I'm glad to be here.

Jill Wine-Banks:

Thanks. And Paxton, as someone as I mentioned, who's been fighting for women's rights and for equality for all people, since I was your age, your speech was incredible. And I'd love for you to let our audience have the background. So set the stage for what it was like for you to give that speech. Were you nervous? Excited? What were you thinking?

Paxton Smith:

I was actually really dreading giving that speech. It certainly as a controversial topic, and it's scary to put your face on that, especially in such a conservative area. And I fully expected that the microphone would get cut off, and I would receive a lot of really negative messages, or I would probably burn some bridges that day when I made that speech. But ultimately the legislation in this country regarding reproductive rights has just gotten out of control. And I felt like I needed to say something about it.

Jill Wine-Banks:

So as you gave the speech looking at the faces of fellow students, at the faculty, what kind of reaction did you see?

Paxton Smith:

I actually, wasn't looking at anyone's faces. I was just trying to focus on giving the speech, but I could hear the reactions, and they were all very positive.

Jill Wine-Banks:

That's excellent. And of course, after your speech, you got mentioned by Hillary Clinton and Beto O'Rourke. They retweeted clips of your speech. How did that make you feel?

Paxton Smith:

Oh, my goodness. I was excited. I really was, that the speech was getting so much traction. And a lot of women have found voices in the traction that speech has gotten. So it excited me.

Jill Wine-Banks:

It should. You should take great pride in what you were able to do, especially in a state like Texas, where your governor is working very hard to pass anti-choice legislation. Victor?

Victor Shi:

I was just going to say, I remember after listening to your speech, like the day that you gave it, at least the video when it came out, I went on Instagram and I requested to follow you. And then like five days later, Jill and I were talking about possibly having you on the show. And it was like, your followers just skyrocketed. And I was afraid that when I DM'd you that my message wouldn't go through, because they would get lost in the DMs. But we're so glad to have this. You originally decided to talk about the media and how it's impacting your and our generation. And after those remarks were pre-approved, you then decided to switch to talk about abortion. So I guess I'm wondering, when did you decide to switch topics? Like how many days before it happened?

Paxton Smith:

It's hard to say. I've been saying, I thought it was 10. But when I went back and did like the time math, it didn't make sense. So I would guess maybe like a week and a half before. And it really hit me that I should do it. I was sitting in the band hall, and I was trying to finish an assignment for a psychology class. And I couldn't bring myself to focus on the assignment because it kept just playing in my head over and over how upset I was by the passing of the Heartbeat Bill. And so I started writing down some of those thoughts into my Google doc, and I think it was in that moment that I realized that that was something I should talk about.

Victor Shi:

Definitely. So why was abortion, I guess, the topic that you decided to talk about? Was it because of... You mentioned that Texas legislation, was it because of that or just kind of the general concern of these rising cases in anti-abortion legislation?

Paxton Smith:

Ultimately, what led me to do it was the passing of the Heartbeat Bill.

Victor Shi:

Got it, got it. And did you consider submitting your speech for approval beforehand? Or were you determined to go into the graduation speech or graduation ceremony with that speech?

Paxton Smith:

I had thought about sending them the speech, but I didn't think that it had any chance of getting approved. And I thought that if I had sent it in and they had not approved it and I continued to get up and make that speech, they would have known where I was going, and they would have cut off the microphone immediately. So I thought that the best chance I had to make that speech would be if I went in cold,

Victor Shi:

Definitely such a courageous act, especially as you said, in such a conservative state. Did you talk about that with your parents or friends at the time? Like, what were their thoughts about you giving that speech or did they give you any advice about like how to write the speech or what you should say in it?

Paxton Smith:

I had only talked to my parents about it ahead of time. And they were of course, apprehensive about it. I'm sure it was scary for them to see their kid speaking up about something like that in an area where a lot of people would vehemently disagree with me. So I told them that I had considered the consequences. And they told me about the consequences that they might've predicted. And I told them that that was a sacrifice I was willing to make.

Victor Shi:

So you weren't concerned about the consequences that might happen after he gave the speech?

Paxton Smith:

Of course I was concerned. I was concerned, but like I said, those were consequences that I was willing to take on to say what I felt needed to be said.

Jill Wine-Banks:

When you were thinking about the consequences, what did you envision might happen?

Paxton Smith:

Well, first and foremost, I thought that the microphone would get cut off, and that I would not have the opportunity to finish speaking. I thought that I would probably lose some friends that day. I thought that I would get a lot of really nasty messages. And I feared potentially, for maybe loss of scholarships or difficulty getting employment in the future.

Jill Wine-Banks:

Has any, except for employment in the future, but have you heard from college to say that any of your scholarships might be impacted? Have you gotten any nasty emails or Tweets or postings anywhere on social media?

Paxton Smith:

I've gotten some not so nice messages from individuals, but I haven't lost any scholarships.

Jill Wine-Banks:

And that's really important. Civil disobedience carries that consequence. And you're correct in pointing out that what you have on social media may influence employment going forward, because employers do look at your social media background when they're making decisions. So you were courageous in doing what you did. Let me read one little part of what you said, because it is, it's very powerful.

You said "I have dreams, hopes and ambitions. Every girl here does. We have spent our whole lives working towards our future, and without our consent or input. Control for our futures has been stripped away from us. I am terrified that if my contraceptions fail me, that if I'm raped, then my hopes and efforts and dreams for myself will no longer be relevant. I hope you can feel how gut-wrenching it is, how dehumanizing it is to have the autonomy over your own body taken from you." So can you talk about what that means to you and how you came to write those powerful words?

Paxton Smith:

For me, I'm very much so looking forward to being a mom one day. That's something that I'm very excited about. I've spent hours deliberating my future kids' names. However, it's true. It's true. I have a list of names. However, when I become a mom, I want to know personally for myself, that that's something that I'm ready to take on. And there are certain sacrifices that I'm just not willing to make yet. And I'm not financially stable enough to take that kind of responsibility on. I'm not mentally stable enough. I'm not emotionally stable enough to take on the responsibility of having a child at this point in time. So I want to wait until that's something that I'm ready to do. And until I feel like I'm capable of balancing my career and a child to have a kid. So for me personally, that's where it came in that speech.

Jill Wine-Banks:

And I assume that you were motivated by the recent attempts at legislation in Texas that would have a dramatic impact on your rights to choose at this particular point. Was that a motivating factor?

Paxton Smith:

Yes, absolutely.

Jill Wine-Banks:

Paxton, I'm just wondering if your new leadership role has inspired any of your friends or if you're encouraging other young women to join you in this issue.

Paxton Smith:

Yes, I would say so. They're probably not joining me in the same capacity. Let me rephrase this, sorry. I would say that it has inspired some people to get involved in the issue.

Jill Wine-Banks:

And have you encouraged people, or do you think about at some point forming some kind of [inaudible 00:12:29] or movement to take on this issue to protect reproductive rights and other women's rights as well?

Paxton Smith:

It's hard to say. Right now I'm just trying to focus on taking each opportunity one at a time to help promote this message while it still has the momentum that it does. And I think that the efforts to encourage the individuals around me will come next.

Jill Wine-Banks:

I'm personally encouraging you to do that because I think you have given some critical thought to this and have a good position, and that you might be able to help. As I said in the introduction, it's been a long time that I've been wondering, where is the next generation of leaders? This issue affects you. It doesn't affect me anymore in a direct way. And so it's sort of up to your generation to take this issue on. And maybe when the show is over, I have some ideas for you that I'd love, if you can spend a few minutes, I will give you some names and contexts that I think might be helpful to you.

Paxton Smith:

Okay.

Victor Shi:

Yeah, so, I mean, you are definitely a rising star in this movement. I mean, you already are a star this movement. How about specifically like young men and men in general, what do you think their role is in this kind of larger movement to guarantee a woman's bodily autonomy?

Paxton Smith:

I think that for gentlemen who want to help in the cause, they need to be in just as informed as any woman is about the status of legislation that's passing and how that might affect people who are trying to gain access to abortions. And I think if they really want to help, they can contribute in the same way that a woman can, and that they can donate. They can reach out to start conversations with people. They can vote. They can attend rallies.

Victor Shi:

Definitely, I agree. I think education is key for men. And for young people specifically, I know our generation cares really deeply about social quality and social rights. What is the response been your speech from young people specifically?

Paxton Smith:

The response has been incredibly positive. It initially gained a lot of traction on Tik Tok. And I think that kind of says a lot right there, that that is the younger generation that was the very first to, to promote it.

Victor Shi:

And do you see like any generational divide in response at all? Or do you think that like most of the response that you've seen so far, it's like adults and young people are pretty much on the same page and support this cause.

Paxton Smith:

I think it's both adults and young people.

Victor Shi:

And so since your speech, you've had so much good attention from Hillary Clinton, better work. Has anyone in the pro-life movement reached out to you?

Paxton Smith:

Not any big names that I can think of. But I've definitely gotten messages from people who are pro-life, and they try to explain their side of the argument to me. And I'm listening. And I understand what they're trying to say. But it hasn't swayed my opinion about the topic.

Jill Wine-Banks:

So let's go back to your decision to change the topic and the consequences that you thought about. And also, how do you feel about the argument that has been made, that those who agree with the content of what you said they're going, rah, rah, it's terrific that you did it, but that there are others who are saying, you had pre-approval for one subject, and then you sort of didn't ask for pre-approval. You [inaudible 00:16:27] the topic, and that that wasn't appropriate. Do you have anything you'd like to say to them?

Paxton Smith:

I went back and forth for a long time with myself about when was the right time to say something about reproductive rights. And I thought if I go to a rally and I make the same statement that I made at graduation, the only people I'm reaching are people who already agree with me and already feel as strongly about this as I do. What I wanted to do is I wanted to reach people who either didn't care, or I wanted to reach people who didn't agree with me. And that was why I used graduation as the time and place to do that.

Jill Wine-Banks:

That's such a thoughtful, good answer. And I was just wondering, because there is a case of another high school student that's at the Supreme court right now about the cheerleader. Are you familiar with that issue where the cheerleader posted on Snapchat?

Paxton Smith:

Yes.

Jill Wine-Banks:

Do you have any opinions on the right of the school to discipline a student off campus for a posting on Snapchat?

Paxton Smith:

It's hard to say because there's a lot of nuances in that. Generally, no, I don't think that that is something the school should be able to do it all. I think the only exceptions to that could be if a student made a direct threat to the school with action items attached to it

Jill Wine-Banks:

And let's circle back to something else, which was your original [inaudible 00:18:15] fascinating too. And so since I don't know what you would have said, can you just give us sort of a little highlight of what your original impression was? You were going to be talking about the media, social media, I assume, as well, and how it has impacted your life. Can you give us a little brief rundown on that?

Paxton Smith:

Yeah. So my initial speech, as you mentioned, is about content and media. So dance, Tik, Tok, television, movies, art. And I was going to talk about how much I watch it and why it is that I watched so much of it and how in taking it in, so often, sometimes it's easy for me to think that that content reflects reality and that it's normal to base your expectations off of what you see in that content. But that's not necessarily realistic. Because at the end of the day, it's just entertainment.

Jill Wine-Banks:

Okay. And social media and the media generally are issues of particular relevance and concern for you and for Victor's generation, which is pretty close to... I mean, maybe it is the same generation, actually. Do you think it's harmful than beneficial that we now have an ability for people to post whatever they think? And how do we get people to start thinking about critically, what they're receiving? Is it true or not true? Is it fact, or is it fiction? How do we get that part taken care of?

Paxton Smith:

I think it's definitely a good thing that people can post about whatever it is they want to post about. And I think it brings a lot of voices that have not had media attention in the past to light, to center stage, where they can have their opinions heard. There is an issue, however, that I think is very prevalent right now, where it's easy to think that what you see online, just because someone says it and says it confidently, means that it's true. And that's not always the case. So my advice to individuals who get their information from online, if you see a headline, don't just read the headline. Read the article. And then go read another article about it and then form an opinion.

Jill Wine-Banks:

I would add one other piece of advice. If you're reading articles online, there are often links in it. So if it says, because of course my commentary is all based on law and legal. When it says someone was indicted and it summarizes it, I don't take the summary in the newspaper. I click on the word indictment, and I read the indictment. When it says a judge ruled a certain way, I go back and I click to read the ruling. And that's the only way you know what is being reported is entirely accurate, is to go to the original source material and use your critical thinking skills, which hopefully you've gotten some in high school, and we'll get a lot more in college. So that's the only thing I would add. Very smart advice on your part, though.

Paxton Smith:

Thank you. I also think it's important too, to learn about the biases and different news sources, and to know that certain news sources have think a tendency to spin it one way versus another.

Jill Wine-Banks:

Exactly.

Victor Shi:

Definitely this is something that we talk so much on this podcast. And I loved your answer about why you chose the graduation ceremony as kind of your platform to give this speech because you wanted to reach people who disagreed with. And I think that's so rare in our kind of hyper-partisan world now. Do you watch any cable TV? And if so, what do you think of cable TV? 'Cause Jill tells me a lot that during Nixon, it was just facts. And now it seems like we can't even agree on facts on TV.

Paxton Smith:

By cable, TV, do you mean the news?

Jill Wine-Banks:

Yeah.

Paxton Smith:

Like CNN, Fox, whatnot.

Victor Shi:

Right.

Paxton Smith:

Yes, I do, generally. Usually, we have a split screen on our one TV. So there's four different news channels on the screen. Yeah, well, only one of them plays, but you can see all of them. And so usually they're all reporting at the same thing at the same time. So you can watch one perspective and then go to the other one and watch the other perspective of it. So that's definitely something that I do.

Victor Shi:

Well, that is something that I think a lot of Americans would benefit from, something I don't do. And I think you're definitely giving me inspiration to do that. 'Cause it's like you get every angle. I guess, what type of social media do you consume? 'Cause you mentioned the use Tik Tok and a lot of social media a lot. But what do you think are kind of like the hottest ones for young people, and what about your friends?

Paxton Smith:

Oh goodness. That's hard, because my favorite social media platform is Facebook. And that is not what most of my generation uses. Tik Tok is definitely one that a lot of people use. What was the second part of your question?

Victor Shi:

Just young people in general, what type of social media they use.

Paxton Smith:

Tik Tok. I'm not sure. I don't think, despite my age, I don't think I'm quite cut out to answer that question. I just don't know.

Victor Shi:

It's okay. One last question. You know, you obviously... I was reading your biology. And this 104.93 GPA. I mean, obviously you have the critical thinking skills and kind of the knowledge to speak about these issues. But what advice would you tell young people specifically, who do live in this social media world and who do click on those headlines, about kind of what they can do to improve critical thinking skills, and I guess talk with people with whom they disagree?

Paxton Smith:

I think it's exactly what you just said. Read past the headline and do some thinking for yourself. Don't just take everything at face value. There's a lot of journalism that comes in with bias. And they're going to twist things and try to get you to think things a certain way. And it's good to be aware of that when you see it. And open up those conversations with other people who might not always agree with you. Because sometimes they have the most insightful points of view, and you never would have seen them if you didn't talk to them first,

Jill Wine-Banks:

Before we end, I want to talk about what's your future looking like. So I understand next year you're a freshmen at University of Texas at Austin. And what's your major, what's your career plans?

Paxton Smith:

Most likely I'm going to major in music.

Jill Wine-Banks:

Instrument or vocal?

Paxton Smith:

Music production or music business.

Jill Wine-Banks:

Interesting, okay.

Paxton Smith:

Yes.

Victor Shi:

I think we have a couple of music production people on this call right now. So maybe after the call.

Speaker 4:

Yeah. Shoot me your information.

Jill Wine-Banks:

So you're not thinking about running for office. I thought with your dynamic presentation and the attention it's getting, that you might be thinking that you could have an influence on the policies that America, Texas, and more broadly. Is that something that you'd consider?

Paxton Smith:

It's certainly something that is possible. I have a lot of time to learn, and I have a lot of time to grow. So I'm not going to back myself into a corner just yet. But that could be on the table in the future.

Jill Wine-Banks:

Very smart.

Victor Shi:

If I could just say one thing, if you're on Twitter. I mean, after Twitter found out about your speech, I mean, dozens of democratic campaign managers and officials were like, if you need a campaign manager, Paxton, we'll be your campaign manager.

Paxton Smith:

I'm not on Twitter. So I did not see that.

Jill Wine-Banks:

You have to get on Twitter. It's actually a quite good place, much better than Facebook for dialogue with other people and hearing from other people. I find it a really good communications tool. And speaking of things that you may not have been aware of, I want to call to your attention, a film called "Birthright: A War Story." It is a film about the unexpected consequences of some of the abortion restrictions that have happened. And it was directed and produced by a very dear friend of mine, Civia Tamarkin, who used to be with CNN. And I think we'll try and post a link to the film on the show notes, and I will email it to you so that you have it.

And she's someone who I think might be able to help you amplify your message, and help you to either gauge other people in fighting this battle because she feels like I do, that it's time to pass the baton to your generation. And having talked to you today, I feel like we are in great hands if you will take on the challenge that these new laws are presenting and try to help protect the rights of women. So thank you for what you said. Thank you for what I know you will do in the future. And good luck to you next year in college and way beyond that as well.

Paxton Smith:

Thank you. Thank you so much.

Victor Shi:

Thank you so much for coming on, Paxton.