

Can I talk to you about preschool for all? ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

I've had a lot of conversations with people about childcare in the past 11 months. Some of these conversations have been a consequence of the pandemic. Every parent in the world has had to reconcile the realities of daily life with the realities of COVID, and in America, the situation is ruled by the inconsistency, inequity, and messiness that characterizes just about everything we do. My texts with other mothers have become lifelines — gallows humor undergirded by genuine despair.

But over the summer, many of my conversations about childcare had a concrete goal, and the people I spoke to were not dear friends but strangers. Last year, I moved to Multnomah County, Oregon, where many people had been working for years on a plan to bring improved early-childhood education to the voters. Shortly before the pandemic started, I began volunteering with a coalition to get universal preschool and higher wages for teachers on the ballot. By the time COVID summer was in full swing, I was accosting strangers (from a distance of six feet) to sign a petition in order to do so.

It was easy for me to believe in the measure. My two kids would be long past preschool age by the time it went into effect, but accommodating the costs of childcare had shaped the trajectory of my family's life. And it was obvious that our system of early-childhood education and care — which are the same thing, even though we often talk about them like they are separate — was broken. Volunteering was both a creative outlet (in the absence of freelance work and in the absence of childcare), and something that felt even more urgent given the many governmental failures on which the pandemic had cast light.

A laborious collective process gave me an eye-opening experience of how many people are required to wrangle an idea into policy. The final result was Measure 26-214, Preschool for All, widely believed to be the most progressive preschool plan to ever come before American voters: (non-compulsory) preschool that would eventually be free for every 3- and 4-year-old; a rollout that started with kids who needed it most, planned with significant input from families of color and other groups who have often been left out of policy conversations; and a huge bump in wages for teachers. And all paid for by a modest marginal tax on the highest 8 percent of incomes.

A progressive policy is perhaps more likely to pass here in the Portland metro area than it might be in some other places, but a measure like Preschool for All was by no means a sure thing. The main Oregon newspaper had recommended voting "No," because the amount of money the measure raised would dwarf the (paltry, offensive) amounts set aside for existing preschool programs for low-income kids, which to the editorial board was a signifier of waste in the new program.

There's not much you can do about people who will reject any tax they see, and there are a lot of those people in Oregon — one man I reached through phone-banking, for example, told me he resented funding public school for his neighbor's kids. And then there were the people who are as familiar to me, in their way, as a room remembered from childhood: elderly white women with wry, gently authoritarian voices who told me without malice that they believed children should be at home with their mothers. I could almost picture their faces over the phone.

I knew that these people would not vote for this measure. But then a friend asked whether I was a member of a huge Facebook group for local moms. "Can you come?" she texted. "They're turning against Preschool for All!" I waited in agony for the moderator to approve my request to join, and went on the offensive in other groups.

Like many other mothers, I have a love-hate relationship with online Mom communities and know to expect robust differences of opinion therein. Even so, seeing some of the objections to Preschool for All in these groups — raised by women who also have young children and who also know the costs and tradeoffs and unfairness involved in our nation's family policies — I began to feel defeated about the ballot measure. I stopped believing wholeheartedly that it could win.

I saw comments from people dissatisfied with the implementation or mistrustful of the government. The program would take too long — perhaps until 2030 — to be universal. It would cost too much. Suddenly, I was defending policy positions I'd only recently learned about, even though I knew that many people with experience and expertise of all kinds had developed the framework. I wielded phrases like "existing mixed-delivery model" in what I hoped was a soothing manner. I explained what a marginal income tax is when one woman inaccurately claimed a household earning \$620,000 a year would pay \$20,000 a year in taxes (it's more like \$8,600 — also, come on). I concluded my comments with "Have a good day!" when, in truth, I was seething.

I thought about myself: If I hadn't been a volunteer, how would the plan look to me? Yes, it would require a lot of time and money to set it all up. It seemed like America had started wars with less effort than it would take to deploy this one regional preschool program. I knew there was fine print; I could see how some preschool providers might feel daunted by it. I wondered whether I, too, would have tried to "just ask questions" and nickel-and-dime my way out of supporting something that was so desperately needed. Why do moms eat shit and like it?, I lamented, unjustly, with other mom volunteers.

Perhaps there are also large, ideologically sprawling Facebook groups for dads, but I do not know of any (one dad working on the campaign seeded his own thread on Nextdoor to lure voters). Once, when I was gathering signatures in a park, a pair of dads (apparently friends out with their respective daughters) inquired about the income-tax threshold — after doing some silent math, one signed and the other didn't (rich dad; less-rich dad). This made me laugh rather than seethe; dads as a category have long benefitted from our collective lower expectations.

By the time Election Day rolled around, I had thoroughly demoralized myself with my brief online outreach to fellow moms. I got tipsy before dinner and brooded through bedtime. So that night, when it was revealed that 64 percent of voters had said "Yes" to Preschool for All, I stared at my phone and sobbed in stunned delight.

The national conversation about discord among people on the left has been fierce and volatile since that day. But it's hard to convey just how enormous and diverse the coalition of people who made this happen in Multnomah County was. The negotiations between the various groups working on the preschool problem were long and complex, but they happened. And somehow — rather than being diluted into the weak sauce that so often emerges from a compromise — the measure that ended up on the ballot was made stronger through these debates. Among volunteers I knew, there were gentle grandparents who celebrated Biden's candidacy and people who exchanged guillotine memes and may not have voted for a presidential candidate at all. People came together because they agreed that family life in America could be better and more equitable than it is. In the end, a majority of voters agreed. If it can happen once, it can happen again.

Region: United States ^[3]

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