

# That's Inclusive!

## Episode 10 Transcript

### **Episode title: Taking Part in Democracy**

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Open Democracy's Olivia Zink joins Patricia to talk about the state of democracy in New Hampshire and how to be a part of it.

VB: Welcome to That's Inclusive! Where we talk about disability and what it means to live a full life, engaging in our communities.

What does that look like? And how can we work together to make our world a more inclusive place?

PVP: Democracy is to disability justice movement, what a firm foundation is to a solid building. Without thriving representative democracy that responds to its people and protects the marginalized, the disability justice movement will crumble.

PVP: Welcome to another episode of That's Inclusive! I'm your host, Pat Vincent-Piet, and I'm joined today by Olivia Zink. Olivia is the Executive Director of Open Democracy NH. She's going to update us on the state of democracy in the Granite State and what we can do to help strengthen it. Welcome Olivia.

OZ: Thanks Pat. It's great to be with you.

PVP: It's so great to have you. So to start, can you tell me more about Open Democracy and Open Democracy Action. They are two different organizations. Can you explain to me what they do and how they are different?

OZ: Sure. Open Democracy is a non-partisan, non-profit based here in Concord and our organization was founded by Granny D. who walked across the country for campaign finance. And her story is really a story of a woman who was 90 years old who said – what can I do to change how elections are funded in this

country? So she took 3,200 steps across the country. Really demonstrating that we all have power and a voice to make a difference. It doesn't matter how old you are, you are able to make a difference. And so, our organization founded on that principle, of an equal voice for all of us. We kind of work on three areas: ensuring that everyone has access to voting, working on campaign finance reform so that everybody's voice is not drowned out by big money, and fair districts so that the maps are drawn in a fair way so we all have fair representation. We do have Open Democracy Action, which is our C4, more political arm. It allows us to do some lobbying at the State House because we really want to change the hearts and minds of our Legislators so that we can have a more fair and open democracy.

PVP: Great. New Hampshire is ranked one of the hardest states in the country to vote. Can you tell me why that is?

OZ: Thanks Pat. I think there's different studies. So there is one study that ranks New Hampshire on a bunch of different criteria including: can you register to vote on-line? So many states, the majority of states, have some sort of system of on-line voter registration. So you can fill out the application, your name and address, and what party you want to register. But New Hampshire, you have to do that in person by going to your town or city clerk's office during office hours and filling out that form. We also are able to register to vote, though, on the same day of elections so you can go on election day and register to vote. But if people move, one in five people move, wouldn't it be awesome to have an ability to change those important voter registration details. And there was legislation that passed both the House and the Senate this year that would have created an on-line voter registration portal, but unfortunately it died in Committee of Conference. So more next year on the on-line voter registration portal, getting New Hampshire to be the 42<sup>nd</sup> state to have such a way to register to vote.

PVP: I went on your site and there were several bills that were introduced last session and some of them were considered anti-democratic. Did any of those bills pass or is there any issue that keeps coming up that is cause for concern to Open Democracy?

OZ: There are lots of pieces of legislation around the state of our democracy. I would say 50 or 60 bills are introduced each year. Some are advancing democracy and some are more harmful to democracy. The good news is that this year, no major bad things happened. In the year prior, though, there was a piece of legislation that has gone into effect and is in court right now, around if you register to vote without the certain documentation you need, you have seven days to provide it. And if your house burns down or if you're somebody that doesn't have a driver's license or a photo ID, you might not be able to come up with proof of documentation in seven days. I know it takes more than seven days to get a passport if you're missing your passport or proof of citizenship. If you need your original birth certificate if you were born here in Concord, New Hampshire, it's easy. You pay the fee and you get your new birth certificate. But not everybody has access to all the documents they need. And, one simple house fire or some problem with documents being misplaced, it could disenfranchise somebody.

PVP: Easily. I know I had to get my birth certificate from Dallas, Texas once and it took several months.

OZ: Yah, be proactive. Make sure you have all your documents in place. And also make sure, people who are listening, can check to make sure they're registered to vote. So if you think you're registered to vote, cause every ten years they go through the voter checklist and remove somebody who hasn't voted and so your name could come off the checklist. You can go to the Secretary of State's website and do a voter lookup—put your name and your date of birth in and verify that you're still on the voter check list. So I urge all voters to just double check that they're still on the list and at the same address and then they know they're safe to vote and to bring the proper documents you need such as your photo ID to cast your ballot on election day.

PVP: That's a great idea. During the pandemic, they were allowing everyone to vote absentee. But that has gone. That's no longer the case, correct?

OZ: Correct. I just want to be clear. Only the Covid 19 pandemic rules, there were special rules that were passed in 2020, only those have gone away. But

there are still abilities, especially for people with a disability, to cast an absentee ballot. So if you do have a physical disability, if you're going to be out of town, there are still four valid excuses that you can request an absentee ballot. You fill out the form, you want to make sure you do that in plenty of time ahead of an election but you're still able to cast your absentee ballot if you need to vote safely from home.

PVP: That's good to remember that you can vote absentee if you fit one of those four excuses.

OZ: And disability is one of those excuses. And that still is valid in law even though the Covid excuse was actually the disability excuse, we all checked disability who wanted an absentee ballot due to the fear of the pandemic.

PVP: Was Open Democracy, and correct me if I'm wrong, was Open Democracy at one point trying to advocate for more absentee ballots without an excuse? Was Open Democracy advocating for that and what happened to that?

OZ: There has been many attempts to have no excuse absentee ballots. Actually, Kathy Rogers, who is a former Concord State Rep, was prime sponsor of that legislation for many years. There has been efforts to expand who is eligible for an absentee ballot. So if somebody is not disabled but might have an illness, like a chronic illness or some other way that they can't make it to the polls—I'll just talk for my Dad. Before my Dad passed away, he was wheelchair bound but he was a proud man. He said 'No. I'm not disabled. I'm still able'. Cause he wasn't technically, even though he had, you know, he was 80, and not in the same physical shape when he was younger, didn't really feel like those rules applied to him. Because he had to sign a sworn affidavit that says he was disabled and he didn't feel like that was proper for him. I think that many people who have an illness might feel that same way. And so having expanded ways for people to participate in our democracy is something we've looked at – if people can safely vote in person, then go to the polls. But if there are some valid reasons why some people can't make it on election day –

PVP: Right. And I really found that being forced to disclose a disability is problematic. You shouldn't have to declare. You should just be able to vote safely without giving an excuse as to why.

OZ: Right. And I think that New Hampshire has come a long way for people with sight disabilities to be able to cast a ballot safely and securely. I think we're on our third generation of One For All equipment that can be used to help people who might not see; who might be blind or deaf or not physically able. And I think that we need to look at everybody's ability—I mean, so many people come to the polls and say, it's printed, I can't read it. Do you have reading glasses? Being able to vote from home, where you can vote at your own pace. But, the One For All equipment we have in New Hampshire is only used for state and federal elections. Only in Concord, Exeter and one other community do they use them for municipal elections. Everybody who might need to use the One For All equipment if they are a blind voter or a deaf voter, somebody who needs assistance. That equipment should be available for all elections, not just the federal elections. So New Hampshire could do more to expand our ability to ensure that people have access to the ballot. And I think there has been more upgrades, the third generation of this, so each year the Secretary of State and election workers have been working to improve access. And I still think we have some work to do to improve access. Especially making sure that this great equipment is available for all elections.

PVP: I had no idea that it wasn't available for municipal elections. It seems that it must be a violation, if not the American with Disabilities Act, some sort of voting rights law.

OZ: The reason Concord has it available for municipal elections is because there was a lawsuit and now Concord uses that equipment. And Exeter proactively implemented that in their community—I think there's a blind community in Exeter that was really proactive to make sure that people who can vote safely in Exeter. But most communities at town elections, do not have those One For All equipment.

PVP: I did not know that. I had One For All training. I'll have to look it up, but I think it was the Association for the Blind that put on the training, so that you could learn ahead of time how to use it. But that seems like a very big oversight. I wanted to talk with you about the ODA scorecard I saw on line that you guys have. I thought that was an incredible idea. I'm wondering if any disability organizations want to do something similar, to talk—talk a little bit about the ODA scorecard.

OZ: Well, thanks for talking about--How do we get to the State House? How do we make sure our voices are heard? And How do we know how our Representatives vote on certain things that matter to us? And I think that this is important for an open and transparent government for all of us. Honestly, New Hampshire doesn't do a very good job in- yes, you can go to the GenCourt website, yes you can look up your State Rep and yes, you can see which bills they supported or opposed. But, it's actually not very user friendly. And, so what we have tried to do on the democracy bills that are important to our organization, is really pull that data off of the General Court website and break it down so that the average voter can sort of see clearly that their Representative either voted in favor of this legislation or opposed to this legislation and really give them a score. Because it's really hard to understand – sometimes a yeh vote, it's not the simplest thing for the average voter to navigate that state website. To understand when bills are being heard, and it's something that we all need to learn so that we get better at practicing democracy. And, it's something that Open Democracy loves to teach, is how we can learn these skills. Actually, later this afternoon we're doing a training on how to look up your State Rep and how to see how they voted on bills that are important to you. It's important for us to understand that. Because, it's not just about voting. It's about knowing the information you need to know in order to cast the ballot.

PVP: Is this in-person training you're doing?

OZ: It's a Zoom training we're doing this afternoon. But happy to share links. If groups want to know how to look that stuff up, happy to figure out how to make that more accessible. I once did a training at a local library and somebody said to me, "I can call my State Rep at home?" I said "Yes you can! They don't have an

office. Don't call their office number because there's no one there to answer it. You need to call your State Reps at home. In order for us all to participate in democracy, we have to learn the skills in order to participate as active citizens. I love to sort of think about it as, we all practice when we're on a sports team, to get better at things. We're practicing democracy and learning these skills collectively.

PVP: One thing I loved about the ODA scorecard is-- so I read plenty of legislation and I often times end up having to read it several times before I understand what the legislation is about. But the scorecard on the website, puts it in plain language. So we understand not only what the bill is proposing but how it might harm or benefit democracy.

OZ: Yah, legislation is written in legalese, right, that's what it's there for. But, we need to break down those legalese barriers so that regular, everyday voters can understand these things.

PVP: Right. It would be nice if we could, and I know that this is dreaming big, but if we could get at the legislators to write their bills in plain language, everyone could understand it. I especially like with this scorecard that it's color coded. It's really easy to read. Having it in the digital format is very helpful for people who may have processing issues. So I really appreciate that you guys did that. So, I wanted to get an idea of how hopeful are you – you said that we've made a lot of strides in democracy here in New Hampshire. So, looking forward, do you continue to be hopeful that we will continue, that New Hampshire will become more democratic or are there things that give you pause?

OZ: So, I always think of democracy with a little 'd'. I am very hopeful. I have faith and confidence that our election procedures in New Hampshire are fair and we can do better. And we can make improvements to make our elections stronger and safer. We do see more and more money influencing elections every year. And, there has been a campaign finance sub-committee which is a bipartisan group of legislators working together this year like I've never seen to try to introduce legislation next year to make our elections more transparent. So voters know who's spending money to influence elections. So, I do think that—to

answer your question, I am hopeful. But I also think that my hope comes with an appeal for your audience to practice democracy, too. Because, hope only comes when the people are demanding the changes we need in the legislature. And if we continue to allow big outside money, un-transparent ideas to come behind closed doors, then we're not going to have a strong democracy. But if citizens come together, they make the demands for fair and transparent government, I think New Hampshire can really have a strong, functioning democracy. But democracy is under attack. There are forces that do not want us to have a strong democracy. They want a few individuals to have control. Some of the data I've looked at over the last ten elections, there's twelve individuals—six Republicans and six Democrats—who spend 60% of the dollars to influence elections. And they like to have that power. They like to have the influence that they have. And I think that it's going to take all of us, all parties to come together and say, we demand transparency. We demand accountability. And we want to know and we want to be involved and participating and active in our democracy.

PVP: Twelve individuals within the state or nation?

OZ: The nation. I can qualify that – twelve white men.

PVP: I really appreciated you coming on. Unless there's something else you want to share. OK. Thank you for coming. We will link to your website in the show notes so that if anybody wants to learn more about Open Democracy or how they can get involved in strengthening the democracy here in New Hampshire. Please look up Open Democracy NH.

OZ: And I just want to final note call, the podcast is about an inclusive democracy, right? Inclusion of all of us. And I think that we all have a role in our democracy. We all have talents and skills that we can offer to make change. As one of our Founders said, "Democracy is something we do". And, we all have to do it together. So thank you, Pat, for having me. And, thank you to the listeners. I hope we can practice democracy together.

PVP: Great Olivia. Thanks again.



VB: Thank you for joining us today. I'm Vanessa Blais and this was a production of the New Hampshire Council on Developmental Disabilities produced by Isadora Rodriguez, Legendre, and Vanessa Blais with many thanks to Josh Hardy and rest of the crew here at Concord TV.

We love to have guests with differing perspectives. These are personal, and do not necessarily represent those of the DD Council.