

ASHLEY: Today's rigid divisions in Congress reflect the polarization of our democracy. A lot of important issues are decided by party line votes. Politicians increasingly run nationalized campaigns, not ones that focus on local concerns, and they often demonize the other side.

This is Let's Find Common Ground. I'm Ashley Milne-Tyte.

RICHARD: And I'm Richard Davies. In this episode, we look at ways to find common ground among lawmakers and those who work on Capitol Hill. Two experienced Washington insiders join us, and they're also good friends.

ASHLEY: Betsy Wright Hawkings served as Chief of Staff for four Republican members of Congress over 25 years and helped build bipartisan coalitions on a range of issues. She's now Managing Partner of Article One Advisors, a consulting firm that gives organizations strategic advice on how Congress functions.

RICHARD: And Tamera Luzzatto served as former Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton's Chief of Staff in the U.S. Senate from 2001 to 2009. Before that, she was on the staff of Democratic Senator Jay Rockefeller for 15 years. Today, she is Senior Vice President of Government Relations at Pew Charitable Trusts.

Ashley, first question goes to you.

ASHLEY: Is Congress today much more divided than it was two or three decades ago, do you think?

TAMERA: I would say, by almost any metric, Congress is more divided. We do know that many, many decades ago through the civil rights movement and post-Reconstruction that there was even violence on the floor of the Congress not from invaders but by members themselves. So I think we can measure that by the lack of major legislation being enacted, by a great deal of polarization, by very few things making it across the finish line called getting to the President's desk if it's in the form of legislation.

ASHLEY: Betsy?

BETSY: Congress is, by design, a representative body, and it reflects the divisions in the country as a whole. To Tamera's point, there have certainly been, at different parts in our history, other times when there were deep, deep divisions but when I think there might not have been the accelerants of partisan media, digital media in particular. That, combined with greater mobility, which might not have existed 160 years ago at the time of the Civil War, have served to enable people to isolate themselves from opposing points of view in a way that they might not have been able to at other times of deep division in our country. So that has just deepened the divide that much more.

ASHLEY: Tamera, talk a little bit more about how you see Congress today.

TAMERA: First of all, my context is having worked for two different senators over 23 years, Progressive senators, but who did not see compromise as a four-letter word, Senator Rockefeller going back to 1985 representing West Virginia, and some random person named Hillary Clinton that represented New York. I was with her as her Chief of Staff for all eight years.

Trust in government and our elected leaders started to truly decline, and that would go back, I think, to the Vietnam War and Watergate and Nixon. I mean, there have been issues and developments that have caused the public to lose faith. So, when members feel they don't have the trust, they do stupid things like vote to veto their pay increase. You don't increase your salary, then you have less means to do what senators, when I started in the Senate, did. They could afford to live in Washington. So they were one another's neighbors. Their spouses knew one another. Their kids played soccer together. I think that's one contribution, that they're just not around together.

I think another trend that has really separated members and caused distrust, actually, between members and lack of willingness to work together is how much money they have to raise and how much time they spend on fundraising. Campaigns are more expensive. They're largely conducted through television, which is expensive. I think most members, whenever they're in Washington, senators and members of the House, breakfast, lunch, evenings are spent on fundraisers. They leave the Congressional official building therefore to legally make fundraising calls. It causes them to want to be in Washington as little as possible. It gives them very little time to actually sit through a hearing and learn and spend time with one another.

RICHARD: Tamera, do you think diversity might have something to do with these rigid differences? Congress has many more women and people of color today than in the past. Once, Congress was a white boys club. Did senators and representatives in the past have more in common politically because they felt more alike?

TAMERA: I don't think so. I'd like to offer up another reason, which is since that period of time, we've had an explosion, obviously, of cable as well as social media, which especially has siloed citizens, and it's not just members. When you silo citizens, the consequence is Americans are getting their so-called news from either Rachel Maddow or Tucker Carlson. Tucker Carlson and Rachel Maddow are not making a point of having the other point of view shared.

So I think this proliferation of different spaces where people can hear a voice and a point of view that they want to hear trickles up to, I would say, more purism because they're not in a venue where they hear true debate, where they hear the other side. I happen to believe that, having worked for two Progressive senators who got an awful lot done, is that there is much more in common among Americans out there. The problem is they're filtering information and points of view through these separate silos.

RICHARD: Betsy, you have worked for Republicans. Do you have a similar view?

BETSY: I do. I worked for four Republicans, all of whom represented majority Democratic districts. And what that meant was that they had to listen very well to both sides, and they also had to communicate back very well with all sides because on any given day, 50% of their constituents might not agree with their vote. But if people felt good about the process by which they got to the vote and they understood what that process was and they felt that they had been heard, then they could at least live with the outcome more often than not.

And I think members of Congress do what works. They do what gets them reelected. At the end of the day, they want to be rewarded with that vote. So they have picked up on what Tamera alluded to, which is the degrading of the respect and trust in government that has certainly existed through my lifetime, through the late 1960s, through the Vietnam era, through the Watergate era and beyond. And members of Congress, as a result, certainly the campaign industrial complex that backs them have basically run campaigns against the institution. They've run to be in an institution by degrading the institution in which they seek to serve.

So what that means is they've almost created a constituency for their own failure. So, having been elected by saying that Congress is not a worthy institution, in essence, they almost have to prove it once they get there. So there aren't these incentives to work across the aisle, and there aren't the same types of incentives to overcome the weaponized partisan information that Tamera refers to.

ASHLEY: Tamera, what do you think the chances are of finding common ground and passing legislation now Joe Biden's in office?

TAMERA: I'm very blessed to work for a nonprofit that pursues trying to create bipartisan champions for all kinds of public policy changes and reforms and solutions. It's not very easy right now, because of all the forces we've talked about, to come up with coalitions for the big problems. The big test will be: will there be an immigration reform victory? That's a set of complicated factors.

But I can tell you every day I'm part of some quiet—maybe not on the front page of the papers or the lead headline on a network or Fox or Rachel Maddow—but on a whole range of smaller advances in the public health area, criminal justice reform, conservation because there are enough members that come to work every day backed by their staffs and want to find a partner and know that they have to create what we call, in the language of Congress, enough cosponsors of a legislative proposal that can therefore win the number of votes to get to the President's desk. I believe that if members, like I believe Biden did as the candidate, tell the public what they want to work on and what they want to get done and why, they will attract members of the other party that will, in turn, feel some public pressure to join them and get something done. Not happening on the bigger issues, but it is in the art of the possible.

BETSY: Yeah. I think that, to Tamera's point, there are two tiers. On the major national issues that are significant issues for the parties, health care might be one. I would say immigration might be another. It has the potential to not be, but so far it has remained there. Members campaign, nationalized campaigns, their party positions, they're not going to find that common ground. But just below that, on issues that are important to their district—for example, flooding that affects military bases might be one or infrastructure, urban and rural internet access, might be another. And that's not going to be an issue where there's likely to be a huge national campaign.

But Tamera also said one other thing that I think is important to highlight, which is, yes, it's really important to tell the American people where you're going to stand. And I agree with Tamera in the point that she made about President Biden. I would also say it's really important to tell the American people the truth, and when you tell the American people the truth, they will tell you the right thing to do. And I think part of the challenge that we've got, and, again, I would say on both sides of the aisle, as Tamera has said, is that the partisan cable news media and digital media have really pushed information that is not based in the truth. So the American people have a really significant job to sort through what's true and what's not.

RICHARD: Is that a problem on both sides, Liberal channels and Conservative?

BETSY: Well, I think it is. I think we can all point to examples where it might have been a little asymmetrical recently, but my experience is that it is. I've been working for members who were among those very few swing districts. I have absolutely experienced campaigns that were not based in the truth leveled at my boss in the pursuit of picking up some of those swing districts. And now we're down to 16 districts that are either represented by Republicans but were won by a Democrat for President or represented by Democrats but won by a Republican for President, so really very few truly swing districts where the incentive is to tell the truth, where the incentive is to focus on the local issues, and that will supersede these national forces.

RICHARD: I just want to pause on that number for a moment. That's 16 districts out of 435 in the country. I think my number's right. That is a very small number of truly swing districts. So that statistic alone tells you why there's this siloing effect not only among consumers but also among members of Congress.

TAMERA: Yeah, it explains the pressure from the far Left and the far Right, of the role they could play in primaries, which we're seeing in spades right now. And when one is in the position of challenging, we've seen some Democratic incumbents go down from AOC defeated Joe Crowley from that far Left end. So what we're seeing, both in the far Right and far Left, where the citizens that maybe are voting for them are getting their information from a far Right or far Left media outlet or social media. That lends itself to my way or no way.

So that's where ideology—you could argue facts and truth but ideology turns into sort of religion and these extremes of the political spectrum, I think, tend to be more

religious and more purist about what they insist on from New Green Deal... not making any comment about that, but you could list a bunch of examples from the far Left.

ASHLEY: Our guests are Betsy Hawkings and Tamera Luzzato. Betsy served as Chief of Staff for four Republicans in Congress. Tamera was Hillary Rodham Clinton's Chief of Staff when she served as Senator from New York from 2001 to 2009.

RICHARD: This is Let's Find Common Ground. I'm Richard.

ASHLEY: I'm Ashley.

RICHARD: More in a minute. But first, some good news about our podcast. We've just joined The Democracy Group, a network of more than a dozen podcasts focusing on democracy reform. Find out more at democracygroup.org.

ASHLEY: And if you want to listen to more of our podcast, here's another website to remember: commongroundcommittee.org/podcasts, or you can go to where you listen to this show and look for more. This is our 25th episode. We have several on the theme of Depolarizing America.

RICHARD: And this is one. Now back to our interview with Tamera and Betsy.

ASHLEY: Just getting back to Congress as it is today, do you think new members of Congress are different than more experienced Democrats and Republicans in how they view politics? Do you think they're more ideological or possibly more interested in common ground?

TAMERA: I think the pressures that we've talked about are probably increasing the odds that they will be more ideological and more dogmatic. However, we have had... The wave of Democrats that got elected in '18 that included those women, those women include a group of military, CIA members that come out of the different branches of the defense forces, Navy, Army, etc. They are moderate Democratic women that are in the trenches to try to find solutions, and they are themselves dealing with the pressures from the other end of the party.

RICHARD: Recently, we spoke to one of them, Abigail Spanberger, formerly of the CIA.

TAMERA: And she is a new member, and probably your Abigail Spanbergers that got elected in this last round—not a lot of them. Democrats did much more poorly down ballot that obviously the presidential race came out. But I don't think you can generalize. I think we have ways that explain certain types of new members. There are still people running that really want to do a good job and want to get things done and judge themselves that way.

BETSY: And I think, by the way, I would say that staff, from the perspective of a staff, staff are also very important. The average staff member is only on the Hill for less than

four years now and only in a position for less than two, which, when you think about it, that's less than one House member's term.

RICHARD: I was going to ask you about staff. Behind every member of Congress and every senator, there are often many staff members. You two come from different parties: Tamera, lifelong Democrat; Betsy, Republican. Is it unusual today to have a friendship like yours among staff members from different parties?

BETSY: I don't think it's unheard of, and I see staff seek it out. Tamera was—I'll speak on your behalf, Tamera—helped organize the Senate chiefs of staff bipartisan group when she was a Senate chief and has continued that work at Pew and then organized a similar House group in the last five years, where on a bipartisan basis, House chiefs of staff get together for purely social, just relationship building.

There's another group that I helped organize, which is women chiefs on a bipartisan basis. And I will tell you that the first meeting of that group, we had 10 women chiefs, five from each side of the aisle. Only two of them knew each other. One Democrat and one Republican knew each other, and they had gathered these other women. And these were women who had been on the Hill 10 years or more. None of them had met each other ever before except for those two, the one Republican and one Democrat, and five minutes in, I was just standing back watching the conversation happen because they had a lot of common experience, and they were really eager to build on it.

Since then, I'm aware of many examples—I'm sure Tamera could tell many stories, as well—where the relationships built in those environments have actually helped things get done on the floor, in committee, back in their districts. So I think, when given the opportunity, there is a good, solid group of staff and members who will take that opportunity.

ASHLEY: Talking of women, because you raised this, Betsy, it reminds me, I've read quite a bit about, supposedly, female politicians on each side being better at bipartisanship than men are. Do you think there's any truth to that?

TAMERA: It's absolutely the case. Having been Hillary Clinton's Chief of Staff for eight years, when Senator Barbara Mikulski was the czarina of the women in the Senate, she was able to get the women senators—that increased in number, happily, in my time in the Senate, significantly—I believe they were far more prone to make the time to spend time together, to get to know one another. If I recall, Hillary Clinton organized a baby shower when then Senator of Texas, Kay Bailey Hutchinson, adopted a child, and all the women senators held her a shower. Another example is that Cheri Bustos has been elected to the House in Illinois in a very red district, and just got reelected. I think she might be in her fourth term. She has told me it's just far easier to get the women together. They want to get to know one another. I think, instinctively they find themselves more comfortable becoming one another's support system and support group.

RICHARD: How can voters make their voices heard on issues they care about?

BETSY: So, when we're thinking about how people can make a difference, I think the district office is the place to start not just for constituents, but I also think for members. There's a lot of really good work that builds trust that happens in the district and state offices of members of Congress and senators. And particularly during COVID times, members have been stuck outside the Beltway, and while it hasn't helped their relationship building with one another, it has brought some renewed attention to what happens out in the district offices. And I think we could build on that to good effect.

RICHARD: Speaking of recent changes, do you think that the utterly shocking events of January 6th, the assault on the Capitol is perhaps something that might spark more genuine concern about the need for common ground? Tamera?

TAMERA: I wish so. I will share, and I think Betsy and I have talked about this, what I would hope the outcome of the 6th would be would be a true bipartisan commission that would be modeled after the 9/11 Commission that would come up with recommendations related to security, the intelligence system for passing on threats, maybe related to the voting system. But I'm afraid that those events, I think, they raised suspicion of other sides.

We had some very, very, very strident members that questioned the electoral count, and I think staff, probably, who felt united in how threatened they were. But I'd like to be hopeful that I don't think that's going to be an outcome. I think that a very objective commission that would be, again, modeled after 9/11 could contribute to such outcomes.

BETSY: No, that's right. And Tamera being Senator Clinton's Chief of Staff during September 11th and the aftermath, I having been Congressman Shays Chief of Staff where we lost 81 constituents from the southwest corner of Connecticut...

RICHARD: Did you just say that Congressman Shays was a Republican?

BETSY: Yes, yes. He is still, actually. And so we worked, both Senator Clinton and Congressman Shays, in different ways worked to support the efforts of those men and women who were on the commission and who were so dedicated to getting it right and to keeping it bipartisan.

ASHLEY: Tamera, as we wrap up, is there anything else you'd like to say about bipartisanship and finding common ground?

TAMERA: I think I would just say that I would encourage everyone, and certainly this common ground organization is doing this, to applaud and praise and highlight and tell the stories of when bipartisanship takes place. I think there is too much despair that the media will not cover in my days when Ted Kennedy partnered with Orrin Hatch, a

very Conservative senator, Kennedy being a very Liberal senator, to bring about universal coverage for poor children. Again, the headlines aren't full of those examples, but we need more people to tell the stories of when people are working together. And members need to tell their own stories. I think they do themselves a real disservice to not even brag about getting something done because they worked with somebody else.

RICHARD: I have a final question, and that is: you are both passionate about democracy and about the role of Congress. Are you hopeful that things will be better in the near or longer-term future?

BETSY: I am hopeful. I don't think I could've stayed in this city for as long as I have and not be hopeful because otherwise, it would just be... The short answer is, yes, I'm hopeful. And one of the other things that makes me hopeful—and this has been true over the 30-plus years that I've been on the Hill or working near the Hill—every day, you meet another dynamic, smart person who has come to Washington to try to make the world a better place. There is an almost-never-ending stream of those people. There are times when I've been less hopeful and more hopeful.

I will say I think the President is setting a really important example in this regard. I might not agree with him on every issue, but I absolutely am grateful for his servant's heart, and I think that he is working hard to build an administration of younger leaders that will be able to carry that servant leadership forward and will try to set an example on both sides of the aisle. And I see people on both sides of the aisle coming to this city to try to make the world a better place.

RICHARD: Tamera?

TAMERA: Yes. I certainly have, as Hillary once said, plenty of scars to prove my despair over losses or failed attempts. But to go back to one of your questions about what came out of the 6th, I have to believe that has inspired some people to try harder to bring people together and to unify. Certainly that was Biden's theme, and I think he's having some influence. So I couldn't get up if I weren't helpful. Hopeful. I think I'm helpful. But my professional life is all about trying to create bipartisan coalitions, and I see many examples. So I know it's in the art of the possible. It's just getting more people to specialize in that art and that science.

ASHLEY: Tamera and Betsy, thank you so much for doing this.

BETSY: Thank you.

TAMERA: Pleasure. Nice to see both of you, all of you.

RICHARD: Tamera Luzzatto and Betsy Hawkings.

ASHLEY: This is Let's Find Common Ground. Our podcast is produced for Common Ground Committee. I'm Ashley Milne-Tyte.

RICHARD: And I'm Richard Davies. Thanks for listening.

ANNOUNCER: This podcast is part of The Democracy Group.