

RICHARD: With just days to go before a bitterly contested election, we speak with two members of Congress, one Republican, the other Democrat. Despite their party labels, they agree with each other more than they disagree. Both are reaching across rigid partisan divides. This is Let's Find Common Ground. I'm Richard Davies.

ASHLEY: And I'm Ashley Milne-Tyte. Democrat Abigail Spanberger is the U.S. Representative for Virginia's 7th Congressional District, and she's serving her first term. In 2018, she defeated a Republican incumbent to win the district, which includes most of the northern suburbs of Richmond.

RICHARD: Brian Fitzpatrick is a Republican member of Congress, representing Pennsylvania's 1st Congressional District, which includes all of Bucks County, a mostly suburban area north of Philadelphia. Our wide-ranging conversation begins with the long deadlock over the COVID stimulus bill.

ASHLEY: For months, Congress has been deadlocked over a COVID relief bill, which most people would agree is absolutely vital. For a long time, House Democrats and Senate Republicans were really far apart and couldn't compromise. What does this say about our politics?

ABIGAIL: Well, I think we find ourselves talking about a number. The conversation about COVID relief, everything that's being talked about in the press and in the White House, Senate, the House, it's a focus on the dollar amount that we're going to spend. And with Problem Solvers Caucus, we took a different tack and said when you're talking to 2.4 trillion or 3.4 trillion, these dollar amounts are just incomprehensible numbers. Let's talk about the programs that people actually need. So we went about coming up with a framework based on the programs that matter to the constituents that we represent. There were elements of this proposal... And the conversations to get to our framework were tremendous. It was incredibly informative, and in the end, we got a proposal that had, from a Democrat's perspective, all of our major priorities and, I would say, from a Republican's perspective, all of their major priorities. And we were able to do it by really talking program by program, what's important and what's necessary to provide the support back home to our constituents.

And for somebody like me and many members of the Problem Solvers, I don't want to vote on a bill that is everything I think we should have if it will never get signed into law. I don't want on a bill and go home and tell people, "Well, I voted for this and this and this, and you're unemployed, and your business is failing, and your kids are out of school, and everything is terrible. But I voted on a bill knowing it would never be law, and I want credit for that." For me, that's not governing. These are desperate times. How do we find the common ground that will not just get a bill in the House, and even if it's a little bipartisan, not just get a bipartisan bill in the House but get one that will go to the Senate, get a vote in the Senate, and ultimately be signed into law and deliver relief because, during this time of crisis for so many Americans, our responsibility is to

deliver that relief. And this is the exact time where 100% of zero is a heartbreaking, horrible zero for so many people across this country.

RICHARD: Brian, what are your thoughts about this?

BRIAN: If we took the same approach to our personal relationships that some members do to Congress, there wouldn't be any functional relationships in our lives. You can't live your life in any aspect like that. And that's what's heartbreaking. I just want to echo what Abigail said. Amen, Abigail. It's been so frustrating. It's frustrating to see the gridlock in a lot of areas, but with COVID, when Abigail and I go back to our districts, we see the look in people's eyes. When we go to restaurants, it's heartbreaking to see these owners on death's doorstep, literally, where their whole livelihood is about to come crumbling down. And I think the problem is—I know this is a problem—that if we had more instances of single-issue legislation, it bothers us because we feel the pain of our constituents. It's heartbreaking to see what they're going through.

The fact is that the Four Corners, as they call them, the leaders in the House and the Senate of the two caucuses, part of the problem is, when they sit down at the table, they don't personally like each other. And when that's the case, negotiations don't always go so well. We don't have that in our caucus. We like each other. We're friends. We go to each other's districts. We do something called district swaps. We sit together at the State of the Union Address. We actually care about each other and want to see each other succeed in each other's districts. And it's just a fundamentally different thing. When any mission starts off with good personal relationships, that's the key ingredient.

ASHLEY: How important is it for each of you to reach across the aisle and find common ground with the other side?

ABIGAIL: I think it's about building coalitions to make good policy. It's necessary to build coalitions and, in doing so, work across the aisle to make sure that we've got support so we can pass bills not just in the House, which is held by one party, in the Senate, but to push it over to the Senate and make sure they pass it, and ultimately get a president's signature on it.

RICHARD: Brian, do you get anything done without compromise?

BRIAN: You don't, and Abigail, myself, and our caucus, essentially what we believe is that government ought to function the same way our personal relationships do, the same way we manage our families and our businesses, that you don't allow the perfect to be the enemy of the good. You come to the center. You build consensus. You listen more than you lecture, and the belief that we'd rather get 80% of something than 100% of nothing. That's what our caucus believes in. We're pragmatic. We're rational. We're not ideologues at all.

RICHARD: Is that view, though, widely shared in Congress?

BRIAN: It's not, unfortunately, hence our caucus only being 50 members currently: 25 Democrats, 25 Republicans. We have a 1:1 ration. So, no, there's 435 members of the House and only 50 in our caucus. So I think that speaks for itself.

ASHLEY: What about in your districts? Do you feel that being a Moderate helps you or hurts you in your own districts?

ABIGAIL: Well, it's all about pragmatism. It's about caring very, very deeply about the things that matter to me. I'm a Democrat, and I choose to be a Democrat because I really prioritize much of the things that are aligned with the Democratic Party. But I think that there is absolute strength in bringing people together around issues that I care about and issues that drive me in my day-to-day work. And I also think, as Brian said, 100% of nothing is nothing. So, when I'm trying to move the ball forward, when I'm working on things that matter like lowering the cost of prescription drugs or bringing broadband to our communities, or I think even more importantly at this very moment, talking about COVID relief, I would much rather get relief to our small businesses and to the individuals we represent that might not be a perfect package, that might not be everything I want, but it is certainly better than nothing.

So, back home in my district, I have a 10-county district. We've got a lot of small business owners. We've got a lot of unique agricultural communities. We've got everything. I love my district. We've got everything. The more that I am engaging with my colleagues across the spectrum, the better equipped I am to engage with my constituents across the spectrum.

RICHARD: That's a really interesting point. Do you feel the same way, Brian?

BRIAN: Absolutely. It's the job of a representative, and this is what the members of our caucus understand and I wish everybody in Congress understood, that when we cast a vote on the floor of the House, it's not to reflect our own personal views. We have to do the very best we can to be the collective voice of 700,000-plus people who... We are their voice. We're not supposed to be the voice of ourselves. We're supposed to be their voice. And sometimes that's hard because some of these issues are very controversial, and you're only given two options: yea and nay.

But that's where our caucus comes in. We do a lot of work behind the scenes, for example with providing an architecture for a COVID compromise. Quite frankly, if we had more members, we would actually be able to drive it ourselves, but since we are not, we are more in the advocacy mode, trying to get leaders of the chambers to buy into the fact that you're not going to get everything you want, but let's get something across the finish line.

ASHLEY: I was going to ask: how hard is it to be a Moderate in Congress right now?

ABIGAIL: Everybody likes the labels. So, I think, depending upon the issue, people cast me in different buckets. I don't necessarily classify myself as a Moderate or a Centrist or any of the titles. I think, first and foremost, I'm a pragmatist. And I'm certainly more to the Left or more to the Right on certain issues, some more than others, but at the end of the day, what I am here to do is to govern, and I want to move the ball forward. I want to move forward with legislation that could be meaningful, that can address the issue at hand. That requires being able to get enough people on board to pass a bill in the House and ensure that it can get a vote in the Senate.

I'm focused on issues like climate change. We have a crisis that we need to address, but we can't address it alone just as the Democratic Party. We have to find areas to bring partners across the spectrum, that there's really a difference between the act of governing and the act of advocating for things. Our responsibility here is to govern.

RICHARD: Let me ask you about that, Brian, climate change. That might be a tough one for you because so many Republicans are really opposed to doing much about climate change.

BRIAN: It's not tough for me. I can tell you that. I'm way out in front on this, and in fact, one of the greatest accomplishments that I've had was I introduces something called the Market Choice Act. It's a carbon tax, carbon-pricing bill. Yes, you're right, it's a very rare thing for a Republican to do, but what I wanted to do was bring together the often-disparate interest groups and lobbying groups, the environmentalists, the labor unions, and the business community. And we put a concept forward that funds infrastructure. We all know that we need infrastructure badly. The question is: how do you finance it?

We also know that we have a significant problem with climate change and carbon emissions, and we also know we have great challenges in growing our economy. So we were able to get the business community, the environmental community, and the labor community on board with the Market Choice Act. It was equally bipartisan, and it brought all the interest groups together. None of them got everything they wanted, but they got 70%, 75% of what they wanted. I think that's really important because it shows that Democrats and Republicans can come together on a carbon tax and carbon price that actually exceeds the standards set forth in the Paris Climate Accord.

ABIGAIL: Just to add to what Brian was saying, Brian's proposal, Brian's bill isn't contradictory to other efforts, in fact can be complimentary. I have a bill that's also wholly bipartisan, and it's focused in the agricultural space, in terms of: how can we utilize our farmlands and our forest lands as great carbon markets, and how can we bring the strength of our agricultural communities to bear in our efforts to get to net-zero carbon emissions? So my bill, Brian's bill is not going to solve the problem in a day, but they are foundational building block pieces that we can layer, we can build a consensus around.

ASHLEY: We should note you do have a sign behind you, Abigail, saying Thank a Farmer.

ABIGAIL: It says If You Ate Today...

ASHLEY: Oh, If You Ate Today, Thank a Farmer. Let's talk about your careers for a minute. You were not in politics before you went into Congress. Abigail, you're a former CIA officer. Brian, you're a former FBI agent. How have those careers influenced how you feel about America and what's important going forward?

BRIAN: It's a public service career. The FBI, much like the CIA where Abigail worked, they're just amazing human beings. I consider it, and I know Abigail does, as well, the greatest honor of my life to serve alongside of amazing women and men doing all sorts of work that most people will never know about and are keeping them safe and protecting them every day. They don't get nearly the credit that they deserve, and I'm very proud. It was the greatest job I've ever had and ever will have. I miss the people there. I try to see them as much as I can, those that are still assigned here to D.C., but spending your life serving a cause bigger than yourself... I will tell you I worked 14 years in the FBI, never heard any political discussions whatsoever. Nobody cared what party you were registered to. We all had a common mission to try to protect and serve our nation. So it definitely carries forth in Congress because you have a certain mindset about how to serve the public and how to get things done.

ABIGAIL: I agree with everything Brian said. The common mission that drove us was the task at hand. It was the overarching mission of protecting our country and protecting people we would never meet, and we did that with colleagues who had different skill sets and brought different things to the table. We had to work together, in some cases, in these intricate puzzle pieces because of the different skill sets and the places that we were in the world. And one of the things that we frequently had at the CIA, and I did some joint work with the FBI, so at least for the agents I worked with, this was certainly the case, you would sit around the table and talk about the plans that you had, the operations that you were going to be running, and you would try and say, "Well, what could go wrong? What are you missing? What could make this better?" You would plan for the worst case because, if you're not planning for the worst case, you're just not even planning.

I think that having the ability to sit around and have people poke holes in your ideas and have people say, "Well, would this be better?" or, "Have we thought about this?" because it was what kept people safe, that's a very normal experience for some of us. So, to some degree, being able to say, "Well, I've got this idea for legislation," or, "I want to move forward with this," and when someone says, "Eh, why not this?" or, "Have you thought about this?" or where people say, "Well, that's good, but let's think this through further," it's a very natural thing.

The point that Brian made that was a very good one is the men and women of the intelligence community, law enforcement community, do their job every day, and we did our jobs every day with a belief that our work mattered, with a belief that we were serving our country and people beyond ourselves. And I was undercover for the entirety of the time that I was with the agency, and the things that I will go to my grave the most proud about in life are things that I will never be able to talk about.

RICHARD: That's such a contrast to the position you're now in as members of Congress. You've both talked about nuance and give-and-take and diversity of opinions and backgrounds. Was it a shock when you got to Congress where, so often, debates are conducted with slogans rather than with some sophisticated grasp that we may have some idea from over there and some idea from over here that we can consider.

ABIGAIL: Well, when I was first campaigning, I went to an event, and this gentleman said, "Okay, some yes or no questions," and fired off some yes or no questions for some policy stance. That was the first moment where I thought, "Boy, this political thing is going to be really different from all of my experience," because for all of those questions, I thought, "This is not a yes or no answer. There's nuance. There's detail. There's context and questions that I have before it's just a yes or no." And so frequently, that is absent as we are voting on bills, and there's only a yes or no. We may vote yes or we may vote no, but there's so much that goes into that vote, and there's so many of these things where, you know what, I'm a yes. I like 80% of it, and, yes, maybe 20% I wouldn't have put in this bill, but that 80% is worth it.

BRIAN: Yeah, and I would second that. One of the things that I love about our Problem Solvers Caucus, our meetings are very, very substantive. Sometimes you can't tell who the Democrats and Republicans are in that room. We check that at the door. We're very substantive, and we want to hear from people of different backgrounds and try to get to that best solution. Abigail referenced that in the CIA. That's exactly what we did in the FBI. Any time we had a time-sensitive crime problem, we would surround that table with people from completely different backgrounds because every one of us, depending on the family we grew up in, where we went to school, pain certain people may have experienced that others can't fathom, it all affects the paradigm and how we view a problem and how we view the solution to that problem. The more different perspectives you can get, the best investigative plan we were able to put together to try to get one step ahead of that criminal. And I know Abigail, she just described a similar process at the CIA. I view our Problem Solvers Caucus as the legislative version of that.

ASHLEY: This is Let's Find Common Ground. I'm Ashley.

RICHARD: And I'm Richard. Before returning to our interview, a word about our scorecard aimed at helping voters. By the way, both Abigail and Brian rank highly.

ASHLEY: How often do you say, "What's the score?"

RICHARD: "How are they doing?" as in: how is your member of Congress, senator, governor, or the presidential candidate doing to find common ground?

ASHLEY: Now there's a new way to find out, the Common Ground Scorecard. It rates elected officials and candidates for public office on what they're doing to push back against polarized politics and partisan bickering.

RICHARD: Common Ground Scorecard is free and easy to use. Search for politicians where you live by entering your zip code.

ASHLEY: Politicians who work better with those from another party get higher ratings. The results are based on facts and data.

RICHARD: Be an informed voter. Vote common ground, more progress, less division.

ASHLEY: Learn more at commongroundscorecard.org. Now back to our interview with Brian Fitzpatrick and Abigail Spanberger. He's a Republican.

RICHARD: And she's a Democrat.

ASHLEY: Both are members of the bipartisan Problem Solvers Caucus. Abigail, tell us more about it.

ABIGAIL: We get together at least once a week over, usually, very bad coffee and breakfast items, and we check in with each other. We know each other as people. We talk about what's happening in our districts, and we know what our interest areas are. There's a colleague in the Problem Solvers, I was going to introduce a bill focused on military firefighters, and because I know him, I know he's a veteran, and I know he's done other work as it relates to firefighters and as it relates to first responders. So it wasn't even a moment's thought for me to determine that this colleague would be a great potential co-lead on this bill that I wanted to make very bipartisan.

Having those types of just basic relationships, I think it helps when somebody votes a different way or when you're actually arguing over policy, it's about the policy, and you don't doubt the full person. You don't just say, "Oh, that Brian Fitzpatrick, he feels that because..." and you're just casting him as a character. I might say, "Oh, Brian and I disagree on this one thing that we're talking about right now, but we've agreed on all these other things in the past. Why don't I use this as an opportunity to say, "Hey, Brian, can you walk me through your point of view on this?"

ASHLEY: Is it hard for you to be a member of your party right now? First, Abigail, you were one of the few Democrats to vote against the stimulus bill in May. You've

compromised on immigration to the irritation of Progressives in the party. Are these tough votes?

ABIGAIL: They're not for me because I want to do something. You mentioned immigration. Immigration is an issue that is used as a cudgel. It is used as a divisive issue. We put forth good legislation in the House of Representatives that was very bipartisan addressing the need for more H-2A visas among our farm workforce because, if you're not looking at the root causes of our "immigration crisis," you can't actually address it. And we have employers here in the United States that want to hire people. We have people who want those jobs. Let's make it possible for them to do it legally. Let's make it possible for employers to be able to find those workers. Let's make it possible for workers to be able to come here legally. That's just one element. I focused on the agriculture piece, but that's a piece we can carve out and address. It passed in the House. It was overwhelmingly bipartisan. But hopefully we'll do it again in the next Congress, and it'll get a vote in the Senate.

Then, when it comes to COVID, I don't think, and this is what I told my constituents, at a time of a crisis, we can introduce a bill that we think is our perfect bill, we can push our priorities as much as we want, but when we are flying members back for a 24 to 48-hour timeframes, and it's taking five hours to take a vote because we're taking all of these precautions because of COVID, the fact that we would spend an entire voting on a bill that we knew would never deliver a dollar of relief to anyone or any business or any anything, to me, was not utilizing that time. And the American people who are out of jobs and the small business owners who are just struggling to survive, they do not have time for us to say, "These are our priorities. We're going to vote on them, and then we're going to argue about it for four months."

RICHARD: Okay, a lot of amens for both of you. We've listened to both of you agree with each other a lot. I have to ask this question as a skeptical journalist. What do you disagree with each other about?

BRIAN: I'm not aware of any. I'm sure there are, of course. Who agrees with anybody all the time? I could tell you where I agree with Abigail: helping veterans, her assistance to the farmers and the firefighters and national security and all those things. You look at all the bills that our Problem Solvers Caucus has advanced, there you have the areas where we agree. That's exactly the point. That's what we focus on. So I guess the fact that I can't tell where I disagree with Abigail is sort of the point.

ABIGAIL: I just pulled up one of those online how-often-do-they-agree websites to see how much we agree or disagree. I'm scrolling through it. There's a couple of MTRs where we've disagreed, but we vote together...

RICHARD: What are MTRs?

ABIGAIL: They're motion to recommit. They're procedural votes. But it looks as though we come together on a lot of the major vote categories.

ASHLEY: Brian, how hard is it for you to be in the party of Donald Trump, who really has done very little to reach out to those with slightly more moderate views on his own?

BRIAN: It's a simple perspective that I have. I think that both parties are broken. I really do believe that. In fact, that's why I found a home with the Problem Solvers. I don't believe that any one party has a monopoly on good ideas. I believe there are problematic individuals in both parties that say things that are not reflective of the rest of the caucus. That happens all the time. It's certainly the case in the Democrat caucus and the Republican caucus. I registered as a Republican as a kid, 18 years old, because I believed in Ronald Reagan. He was someone who inspired me personally, and that's why I'm a Republican. I'm not going to change my philosophy because somebody comes into the party and takes a different perspective.

We all love our country and our caucus, and we want to try to find ways to come together and accomplish that. By the way, I say this as a Republican. I want a healthy Democrat Party in this country, and I think Democrats want a healthy Republican Party in this country because that's where the differing ideas come. We don't want fighting. We don't want childish behavior, insults, disrespecting anybody else. But we should want at least two healthy caucuses that can challenge each other and cross-examine each other on each other's paradigms.

RICHARD: Abigail, Brian has said why he's a Republican. Why are you a Democrat?

ABIGAIL: I'm a Democrat because I believe it's the party of optimism, the party that believes that we have an opportunity and ability to create more opportunity and more growth and to ensure that each generation has a greater chance at success than the one that came before and that we, through looking through the eyes of people across the country and ensuring that everybody can live up to their fullest potential, that we can continue on our path of continued pursuit for goodness and greatness as a country and as a people. I'm sure there are people who align with the Republican Party who would agree with everything I said, and I'm sure there's people who view themselves as Democrats who might disagree with everything I just said. But that's the frame that has brought me to be a Democrat.

ASHLEY: Quick question for each of you: Brian, what do you love about your job, and what can't you stand about it?

BRIAN: I love being able to help people, especially people that are in a really dark place in their life, whether they've lost a family member to addiction or lost a child to cancer or somebody's who's really in a tough spot and they need that light at the end of the tunnel to help them get through it and being able to help them be that light by

getting them involved in a piece of legislation that might be done in the memory of their family member or their child. It gets them excited. It gives them hope in a really dark place in their lives. So that's been the greatest honor that I've had.

What do I like least about my job? Being a target of a lot of anger over social media. It can get pretty ugly, and they always tell us don't read your social media feeds. But Abigail and I are human beings. Every once in a while, we take a peek, and there's a lot of vitriol out there.

ABIGAIL: I think the best part of the job, and Brian touched on this, is just being able to have entree into people's lives, to be invited into people's experiences, the very, very bad and the very, very good, and to know that when people are telling you a story of something that may have impacted them, that you might be a part of ensuring that the next family has that same opportunity or ensuring that the next family avoids that same heartache. That's really, really amazing, to hear if it's people or if it's communities like a particular county or a group of people that we represent saying, "This is a problem." Well, okay, this is a problem. Let me dig into it. Let me learn about this issue, and let's figure out if there's a place for legislating to address this challenge. That's a pretty spectacular opportunity to have.

RICHARD: And what do you hate about your job?

ABIGAIL: I'm going to copy Brian on this one, too. Social media, it's a wonderful thing for sharing, but it really is amazing just how once you reduce things to a certain number of characters these days, you can just be so simplified in how everything is bad or everything is good. People in my own party are mad because I said something a particular way or mad about something, and I'll say, "Well, what votes are you actually displeased with?" And then it's, "Eh." Then folks on the other side of the aisle, I mean, you're kind of always like a ping-pong, which I keep telling myself that means you're doing something right, but certainly... I have small children.

So, actually comically, I suppose, my husband sent me a photo this afternoon. The kids were doing an art project, and they had a YouTube tutorial for the art project they were working on. And he snapped a picture right as one of the particularly ridiculous attack ads against me came up. So my six-year-old and my nine-year-old are there doing a painting project for a Halloween decoration, and it's, "Abigail Spanberger, she's terrible, terrible, terrible." That's just... It's unfortunate because it erodes at some of the trust that exists within Congress, and it makes it harder to do all the other stuff that we've talked about for the past 40 minutes.

RICHARD: Do both of you agree that there are issues that are being politicized that really shouldn't be?

BRIAN: Yeah, how about all of them? Any issues that get politicized shouldn't be. Again, this is, I'm sure, what frustrates Abigail as much as it frustrates me. The

people that come here for the right reasons and with a good perspective on the job want to fix things. That's it. We don't want to not fix a problem so that they can campaign on it. When we don't fix immigration, people are suffering because of that. It may be great to run campaign ads on, but my goodness, when there are people here, dreamers for example—Abigail and I both voted for the Dream Act—how can we not fix that? It's beyond the pale for me that so many of these things can't get fixed.

Any time politics enters the fray and we say, "Well, it's an election year. We're not going to act," Abigail and I are elected for two years, not one. Senators are elected for six years, not five, and the presidents are elected for four years, not three. We have to do our job up until the end, and politicking and gridlock is unacceptable. You can probably tell I've been venting on this point a lot, and I know Abigail feels the same way. When we go back home, anybody with a heart and a soul that goes back and hears these stories is heartbroken. You are heartbroken because these are individuals who have built up businesses. Their families are dependent upon them. It's a huge ripple effect. And the fact that both parties, by the way, are playing games rather than actually fixing the problem is very, very frustrating.

ABIGAIL: Bravo, Brian. I think he pretty much covered it. When things as basic as voting or the post office or information that should be keeping our country safe coming in from our intelligence and law enforcement communities, when that is used as a political tool, that becomes very dangerous very quickly. And it's something that we really need to reject and rebuke and address into the future.

RICHARD: Thanks very much for joining us on Let's Find Common Ground.

ABIGAIL: Thank you for having us.

BRIAN: Thanks for your time.

ASHLEY: Yeah, thank you so much.

RICHARD: Democratic Member of Congress, Abigail Spanberger, and Republican Brian Fitzpatrick. You know, I was really struck by the answer to your question, Ashley, and their careers in intelligence and law enforcement.

ASHLEY: Yeah, one of the most interesting things Abigail said, I thought, is that she will go to her grave being the most proud of some things that she'll never be able to talk about.

RICHARD: Moving and fascinating. Our podcast, Let's Find Common Ground, is a production of Common Ground Committee.

ASHLEY: Our team includes Erik Olsen, Bruce Bond, Donna Vislocky, and Mary Anglade.

RICHARD: Editing and production by Miranda Shafer. Thanks for listening.