

ASHLEY: With just days to go before the election, we invited a Trump supporter and a Biden backer to join us and share the reasons for why they made their choice. One aim of this episode is to help us understand each other, whatever our views or political identity.

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

RICHARD: And I'm Richard Davies. In our last episode, we spoke with two members of Congress, one Democrat, the other Republican. This time, it's two voters. Get ready for a lively, spontaneous conversation between two people of very different views.

ASHLEY: John Pudner is voting for Donald Trump. John is Executive Director of Take Back Our Republic, a nonprofit group that's a member of Bridge Alliance, an organization that aims to bridge the divides that separate us and help fix our political system. John spent three decades managing Republican political campaigns.

RICHARD: Philippa Hughes is voting for Joe Biden. She heads up Curiosity Connects Us, which designs pop-up art galleries and physical spaces that bring people together who might not normally engage in dialogue and thoughtful interaction. Philippa is the daughter of a conservative Vietnamese mother and an American dad who was a lifelong union member. We recorded this interview the day after the final Trump/Biden presidential debate.

ASHLEY: You're both from Richmond, Virginia. Is that a coincidence?

JOHN: Oh, my gosh.

PHILIPPA: Really?

ASHLEY: Yeah.

JOHN: I didn't know we both were. I knew I was.

PHILIPPA: Cool. I went to Meadowbrook High School, which is in Chesterfield, actually.

JOHN: You're kidding. I went to Benedictine.

PHILIPPA: Awesome.

JOHN: Mom still lives right by the Virginia Museum. I love Richmond.

RICHARD: So, John, you're the eldest of nine children, and you had a paper route growing up. So did I. Tell us a bit about how you grew up and how that upbringing influenced your politics.

JOHN: Well, growing up in Richmond, Virginia, the oldest of nine children, we were actually below the poverty line during my high school years. So I know a lot of people like to talk rags to riches, but it really was. The paper route was great because I did 500 newspapers, and it formed the rest of my life. We had the conservative Catholic church that I went to. Actually, Steve Madden went to it, too. Then the Jewish synagogue on the next block in my neighborhood. Then you had the first Black neighborhood. It was still kind of segregated. Then the fifth block on my route was the first big gay population in the East. Really, it was called the San Francisco of the East at that time, on Cary Street. So those were my interactions for years. It was really a very diverse group from a five-block paper route that, I think, taught me to deal with different people, communicate at least.

RICHARD: And Philippa, how about you?

PHILIPPA: This is so great, John. I actually grew up in a suburb outside of Richmond. Other than my brother, I was the only Asian kid in my school. It was very Black and white. So I actually did not have a particularly diverse upbringing, but I do think that being the only Asian kid in the school definitely informed a lot of my worldview. I've been thinking about, also, my family is quite conservative. In fact, my cousin, who also grew up a few blocks from me, is now the director of ICE. So we have a lot of conflict in how we view the world right now.

RICHARD: ICE is U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement.

PHILIPPA: Oh, and I wanted to mention one more thing. I'm sorry to interrupt, but I was born as an American citizen. My father is American. I'm half and half. My cousin actually came through the refugee program. Our family is Vietnamese, and his family was sponsored by the Catholic Church to come to Richmond. That's part of the reason why I grew up in Richmond, was because our family moved to where his family was so that our family could all be together. So the Catholic Church played a big role in our family, and in fact, that part of the family is Catholic as a result.

RICHARD: Let's ask the question that is the title of this podcast episode, which is Why I'm Voting For. John, you go first. Why are you voting for Donald Trump in this election?

JOHN: Yeah. I think, as angry as I get at him for saying things that I may just cost him this election, I actually think on policies, he's been pretty true to what he campaigned on, most of which I agree with, certainly not all. But this kind of populism, all the way to stopping never-ending wars and being tough on trade, those were kind of a unique view on Conservatism that appealed to me. And I think he's been kind of true to that. It wasn't the Chamber of Commerce Conservatism that seems more focused just on big business. So I think he's been true to that. The New York Times economic writer, the night of the election, said the stock market would never recover from this election. And when you watch what happened for the next few years, the stock market certainly did

well. So I think the economic policy worked. The unemployment rate was so low going into COVID. Then, socially, we didn't know what we were getting. This guy had clearly not been a social conservative most of his life, but everything from the court appointments down... So, purely on his record, as much as I wish he wouldn't say stupid things, say obnoxious things, on his record, I think he's true to what those of us who voted for him last time wanted. So he's been actually surprisingly good philosophically.

ASHLEY: Is there any one thing or one area of policy that you particularly like where he's acted, where he's borne out what he promised?

JOHN: Well, none of us thought there'd be three court appointments. I know that's as aggravating to the Left as it is encouraging to us. But to see the vetting of those appointees is probably the most encouraging thing, and I think, at times, that's what pulls Republicans back together before an election they're fighting, is they start realizing, for different reasons, they all do want the court to be more Conservative and we'd say restrained. So that's probably the biggest plus of the four years, whether or not he loses or makes a comeback here in these last two weeks.

RICHARD: And Philippa, why are you voting for Joe Biden?

PHILIPPA: I think it's kind of summed up in Joe Biden's final remarks in the debate last night, when he really underscored the idea that he's not here to represent the blue side if he wins. He's here to represent all Americans, and I thought that was so powerful. That is a populist message that I'm more drawn to. And over and over in the debate, the president kept trying to divide red from blue. That was the biggest thing for me, is that final statement of, "I am here for all Americans." I think that is so important. I think another thing that he said, he made a mistake when he was asked about the 1994 prison reform, and I thought, "Wow, what an amazing thing to be able to say is, 'I've made a mistake, and I've learned from that, and I'm going to do better.'" I thought that was very powerful for a leader. That is a quality I really look for in a leader. Then the third really big thing is his empathy. There's that video going around right now where he hugs the boy who's the son of a man who was murdered at Parkland, and it's just so spontaneous. There's no political thought to it. A boy runs up to him asking for comfort, and he gives it in the most powerful way. I thought, again, "That's what I want in a leader, somebody who cares about actual people and puts people above the market, puts people above profit."

ASHLEY: In many ways, this election is a referendum on Trump. His behavior has outraged his critics. It's delighted many of his supporters. He's struggled to condemn white Nationalist militia groups, for one thing, and he hasn't said anything critical about the QAnon conspiracy. John, how do you come down on this stuff?

JOHN: Yeah, he's also outraged some of his supporters with some things. It's not exclusive. Some of us are just mad that he's costing himself the election with some of

these things. I joked at one point I was going to change my Facebook page to say, "Pro-mask, pro-Fauci, and pro-Trump," just to make sure everyone hated me. But the taking pot shots at a guy like Fauci nonstop is bad politics. Forget everything else. Certainly, the not wearing a mask, that does have real implication. We pull our hair out sometimes. So, yeah, for a different reason, I get angry at the antics, but it's because it's going to cost him the election.

RICHARD: So there's a fundamental difference between both of you, apart from who you are voting for, and that is it seems, John, you're voting more for policy. And Philippa, you're voting at least as much for character as for anything else. Is that fair to say?

PHILIPPA: I'm putting more emphasis on the character, for sure, and I do think this is a referendum on character. But Biden does have policies that I deeply agree with. I do believe that he has a health care plan. Whether it's an awesome plan or not is yet to be seen, but the president doesn't appear to have a plan. Biden is really good on climate change. He actually has a plan on what we need to be doing. That is very exciting to me because that is a major threat to our society, to our existence right now. So there are policy reasons to support Biden as much as his character.

ASHLEY: Philippa, would you say you're excited about Biden, or are you mostly voting against Trump?

PHILIPPA: You know, when we came into this, he was not my choice in the primary, like many people, but he's really grown on me. I was a big Pete Buttigieg fan in the beginning, and I was excited about him. He's doing such a great job right now speaking on Fox News and really laying out the case for... He's going to be great. Anyway, yeah, Biden has really grown on me.

RICHARD: John, what about the separation of children from their parents at the southern border? Is that something that upsets you? We've recently learned that 500 of those little kids, they can't find their parents.

JOHN: Yes. No, that's a grave concern. What is the background of those children? Did they come over with parents? I don't know. But I certainly think there are, at very least, legitimate stories of children being pulled away from parents, and I'd be strongly against that. Some of the immigration has had way too hard an edge with consequences. There certainly is the other side, which I think open borders would be a disaster. So I'm certainly somewhere in the middle on immigration. Like Philippa, I actually have a good friend from college who is the ICE guy in Texas. So we both have a similar friend, and it's interesting talking to those people and just how hard a lot of them work to, "Look, we're just trying to process things here." No, that is a tough one. I do think there's a problem in reporting here that does go beyond the problems that have been caused by being over-aggressive on immigration.

RICHARD: Well, let me ask you about that, John. You're a committed Conservative. I imagine most of your family and friends are Conservatives. For the people who you know and for yourself, is the vote in the election partially a vote against the news media?

JOHN: I do think the anti-media vote for Trump is someone like the anti-Trump vote for Biden. There is a feeling that, gosh, mainstream media will no longer report both sides. We're fighting against that. It makes it a bigger battle, and Trump's kind of the symbol guy in the middle of it. But how do we not get any coverage? We just don't feel like there's a second side. There's a different network, but now we're all watching our own bubbles of news. So I think the media has some long-term thinking to do on this.

ASHLEY: Philippa, how about you? How do you view the media and how it covers politics?

PHILIPPA: I've been touting this idea of the polarization industrial complex, this idea that media, tech companies, they profit from keeping us polarized and from keeping us reading only certain things. It's really bothering me because then we start distrusting anything, any source, any media. So I think that we need to take a look at ourselves and figure out: how are we going to force a change here and change the narrative? We need to stop saying "fake news," and we need to stop looking at only our sources and only believing those sources because that only benefits them.

ASHLEY: John, what do you think about that? Because I think a lot of people wouldn't have thought about this idea of different types of media profiting from keeping us apart.

JOHN: Yes. Oh, that's so true. I remember reporters coming to me during the last presidential election saying, "My editors beat me up if my story's not about Trump." That was on both sides. That was either, "I need to be going after him or praising him. I don't get the clicks if I don't." So I thought, "Wow, what a terrible business model."

RICHARD: I think I sense a little common ground here.

JOHN: Yeah, I agree.

PHILIPPA: I think so, and actually, do you mind if we go back to the immigration question that you asked John earlier? Because I think there might be common ground there, too. I think we have a systemic problem with immigration, and we need to fix that. Obama didn't fix that. It was broken before Obama. So the fact is that we have a broken system, and nobody is fixing it, even though there is actually broad support for fixing the actual immigration system. I think, though, what bugs me about the current president is that he's now putting more emphasis on enforcement rather than fixing the immigration system. He doesn't want any more immigrants to come to our country, and in fact, he's actually been lowering the number of immigrants who are allowed to come

to our country, little by little, and now, specifically, lowering the number of refugees that can enter our country. It's so interesting to me because my cousin and his family entered our country through a major refugee program, and under our current system, I doubt my cousin could've made it into this country based on the system that we have now. I'm very frustrated by that.

RICHARD: John?

JOHN: It's from two ends I see the immigration problem Conservatives have now. I hate to quote Mitt Romney now in Conservative circles, but he had a great comment when I was running his campaign out in Wyoming. He said, "When we get one of the brightest people in the universe to show up at MIT, the first thing they do is sign a huge stack of papers saying that when they finish benefiting from our education and coming out as the most brilliant, whatever, engineer in the world, that they promise they will immediately leave the country and not stay here." He's like, "Why are we chasing that immigrant out?" So you have that at the one end, like, "Why?" And then at the other end, I also ran politics for the Farmers Federation in a state, one of the most Conservative groups out there. But for them, that's the issue they completely part with other Conservatives. I mean, you can go to farmers, they're Conservative on almost everything, but they're like, "Guys, no, we cannot hire Americans to," as was the Saturday Night Live skit, "pick their own strawberries." It just doesn't work, so the need for immigration. If everyone in the family were having nine children like I did, we probably wouldn't have any immigrants because every child would be full. We're at the exact opposite extreme. So this is a natural course that has to happen, take away all ideology, just to replenish the people we have and have normal growth in the country. So Conservatives are stuck in a spot on immigration. I know it appeals to some, but it really is a problem.

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

ASHLEY: And I'm Ashley. Common Ground Committee published this podcast, and they've come up with something new. It's Common Ground Scorecard, which rates elected officials on how they reach out to find common ground. Each presidential candidate, senator, member of Congress, and governor gets a rating. Find out more at commongroundscorecard.org.

RICHARD: Now back to our interview with John and Philippa. We've been talking about the media. If you want to find news and opinion from Left, Right, and Center, I've found that a good source is allsides.com, another member of the organization Bridge Alliance. At All Sides, you can easily see how the coverage of one story varies from different news outlets.

PHILIPPA: I subscribe to that, and there's another one called The Flip Side. I subscribe to all of those because I do think we should see all the sides. But it is really hard to really absorb all those different perspectives. You have to be so conscious.

RICHARD: So, John, your group, Take Back Our Republic, is a member of Bridge Alliance, which is dominated, really, by very well-meaning, civic-minded Liberals, to a large extent. How do you go about seeking common ground, or at least working with people you don't agree with sometimes?

JOHN: Yeah, and actually I was originally on the board of Bridge Alliance, really enjoyed doing that for a couple years. And the nice thing was they were always respectful. There were some times there was some talk of putting something out, I said, "Boy, I think this will really be viewed as an attack on Conservatives," and they were always very open on that. Not to get in an in-depth conversation, but just having that sensitivity that they really wanted to hear, "Is there something just in the language?" If we disagree on an issue, but if it's just that we're using the wrong word that's driving people away, that can happen, too, when you don't realize there's common ground because someone used a word. Campaign finance reform, the term, turns off most Conservatives. "Drain the swamp," turns off most Progressives. I would argue that, in a lot of cases, they're talking about the same issue.

ASHLEY: Yeah, Philippa, in the last several years, you've actually hosted dinners bringing together people from different sides of the aisle politically. What spurred you to do that, and how has that been going?

PHILIPPA: It's been going great. What spurred me to do it is the November 2016 election. I was so frustrated and outraged, frankly, about the result that I felt like I just had to do something. I'd been reading all the books and articles up until then to try to understand what had happened, but I was still very shocked. So my solution was to invite Trump voters over to my house for dinner and just make dinner and talk, well, argue. But I just kept doing it over and over because I realized, kind of going back to our media conversation, that no matter what you read and hear, listening to actual people talk is so different. It's unfiltered, and you get to ask your own questions rather than having a journalist ask the question that you might not have asked. Hearing it directly from their mouths was a very powerful experience for me. So I wanted to share that experience with other people who were curious about why this happened and, "Who are these people?" Because we are in our bubbles, and most of us hang out with people just like ourselves. So I feel like, when people say, "I hate Liberals," or, "I hate Conservatives," "I hate Democrats," or, "I hate Republicans," they probably haven't really actually sat down and talked to any Republicans when they say stuff like that. In fact, I know they haven't. So that's what motivated me. We've got to actually talk to real people.

ASHLEY: And what did you learn?

PHILIPPA: The biggest thing I learned was, "Oh, these are not these horrible avatars who are ogres who want to destroy America. These are people who are just trying to live their lives and support their families and go to their job every day and go to church.

These are "normal" people. I'm doing air quotes for people who can't see me doing air quotes. I mean, of course I knew that at some gut level. But it's so important to actually have the experience, and it's really weird because I think I grew up in a much different world than I live in right now. So I realize I knew all of that before. I just forgot because I got brainwashed in my liberal bubble. I don't listen to extreme Liberal media anymore because I saw myself getting brainwashed. This pandemic has been a bummer in many ways, but one of them is I'm not able to travel around the country with my project and talk to people right now. I do it on Zoom a little bit now, but I'm worried that I'm getting back into my little bubble again. So I'm very conscious of trying to make sure I poke holes in that bubble as much as possible.

RICHARD: Philippa, what's your project?

PHILIPPA: Oh, it's called Looking for America. What we do is we curate art shows all across the country in different communities with local artists, answering the question: what does it mean to be American? So, when we answer that question, it does give us common ground. It helps to see more common ground, to see what our shared experience is as being Americans, and to see our differences, which I think is important to know that we're different in many ways. But, at the end of the day, we're humans, and we're Americans. Then I organize very large dinners around that question, as well, after they've experienced the art. The art becomes a sort of framing device and a way to spark the conversation.

RICHARD: And you make red and blue food, right?

PHILIPPA: Well, when I made dinner at my house, I would try to make red and blue foods. That was really fun. I always ended with a blueberry and cherry crisp that would mush into a purple goo at the end. That's how we would end our conversation.

ASHLEY: That's Philippa's way of bringing people together. John, why do you believe building coalitions is so important? What brought you to this place where you like to talk to people who feel differently?

JOHN: Well, interestingly, even running partisan campaigns for 25 years, for most of that time, you used to always get together with the opposing staff after the election and have a beer and make fun of your own candidate, things you couldn't say until the election was over. That was a nicer time, and I just noticed the last several years, it was getting more to, "We're going to try to get our opponent's staff thrown in jail for some violation." I mean, it just took this nasty turn, even at the campaign level. So it just seemed like... The old example, for older people like me, of course, is the Tip O'Neill and Ronald Reagan going out and having a beer after fighting it out. It probably doesn't mean anything for your younger listeners.

RICHARD: Yeah, Tip O'Neill was the Democratic House Speaker, and of course, Ronald Reagan, at that time, was considered to be a very Conservative president.

JOHN: Absolutely. As Philippa alluded to, though, just getting that these are real people. I thought one of the best pieces written in 2016 during the campaign was by Benjy Sarlin at MSNBC. He went to a Trump rally and walked around the whole rally, just talking to people about why they were there. His piece was fascinating. He said, "No one mentioned immigration. No one mentioned building a wall. All they talked about was, 'I'm sick of all the deals being cut in D.C. I think he's finally tough enough to stop it.'" So, again, maybe getting to that, where even if you hate Trump and view him as a boorish... You can add as many adjectives as you want. Some of these attacks on his people, in general, yeah, there's a bad element, certainly, but it's almost like the people who view every protestor in the racial riots as someone who's throwing things through windows of stores. Obviously, that's a small percentage. Most are there for justice. So just the stereotyping of supporters has been troublesome to me. Direct it at the candidate who said the things you're angry about, but don't put every value on every supporter. I think that's unfair.

RICHARD: We're in a pretty rough time right now when it comes to rigid divides and people saying mean things about the other side. Are you hopeful, Philippa, that finding common ground will be a growing movement?

PHILIPPA: I'm really hopeful. I've been traveling around the country talking to people everywhere, and my anecdotal experience is that people are exhausted. They're sick and tired of polarization, and they want to talk to each other. So I do feel hopeful across the political spectrum. When real people are in the same room, they want to talk to each other.

ASHLEY: John, what do you think?

JOHN: I think people need to see that everything isn't in lockstep. You're either with the Left on everything or you're with the Right with everything because that's where we are. So many groups are just feeding off that. That's how they do their fundraising, etc. So the more groups that can look for some sense of finding common ground, the better. I think we just need homes for people. One of my favorite interns... We've had some great Conservative interns, but we had one from Yale who showed up in blue hair, Elizabeth Warren, everything else. Loved her, Rita Wang, and I said, "Why do you want to come intern for us?" She said, "I just want to understand how Southern Conservatives think." That was six weeks of her just absorbing it, no false pretense, no pretending she was Conservative. We just need more people willing to do that, and hopefully we realize these are real people. As Philippa's found around her dinner table, these are real people. They aren't the stereotypes the media's showing you of the other side.

RICHARD: It reminds me of my daughter who, in 2004, when George W. Bush was president, decided to go off to school in Texas. We're from the Northeast. And I said, "Kate, why?" And one reason she gave was, "I've never met a Republican. I want to

find out what they're all about as part of my education." Both of you come from families where there are lively discussions, no doubt, because you don't all agree on politics and other matters, as well. So, John, first, how do you talk to those members of your family who you love but you very strongly disagree with?

JOHN: We have great conversations, and we always close with, "Family is more important than politics." We enjoy a lively and usually very friendly... It's usually not very pointed, etc., but just to get along, and it's people first. I did have one brother who didn't talk to me for four months after Trump wins, but then we're completely buddy again. So only one had a negative reaction to actual election night. But other than that, it's been very friendly and mainly joking. As we argue about serious issues, we joke and laugh.

PHILIPPA: I find it very difficult to have political conversations with my family. We argue a lot, and we end up sort of having to stop the conversation and change the subject. It hasn't been as friendly in my family environment. So I was thinking, "Wow, I can have a conversation like this all day long with John Pudner and my friend, Joe Wilson, in northwest Arkansas, who could not be more different from me. But we can just joke around, and we eat barbecue together. It's so fun, and we laugh. But when it comes to my family, I haven't figured out how to have that kind of conversation. So I'm sure there's other family dynamics going on. I've been thinking about... People often ask me, "What do I do at Thanksgiving?" And it's really hard because, when I set up my dinners and my conversations, I definitely have rules and guidelines. It's really hard to set rules and guidelines with your family around Thanksgiving. It's weird, actually. It's a weird feeling to do that, but I think if you just keep practicing over and over outside of your family, then it becomes easier to do it when you're actually sitting around the dinner table.

JOHN: The one tactic I've done is I've actually blocked. When things have really gotten heated with one of my brothers, I've actually, without telling them, blocked them from my phone just so I won't respond to them. I don't tell them I block them. I don't tell them when I unblock them three days later. I just, "Okay, this is getting nasty. I'm going to be too tempted to respond." That sounds like a nasty tactic, but it's really not. We're getting too hot, and we're going to do some personal damage to our relationship if I don't end this conversation for three days.

PHILIPPA: And I think it's on us, you and me, John, to do that because I've been practicing a lot longer than my family member. So I do take responsibility for dialing it down when it does heat up.

RICHARD: Thank you very much.

ASHLEY: Yeah, thank you so much for joining us.

PHILIPPA: Thank you.

JOHN: Thank you.

RICHARD: Trump supporter John Pudner and Biden backer Philippa Hughes—some good advice from both of them on how to get along a little bit better during Thanksgiving, whether that's in person or via Zoom.

ASHLEY: This is Episode 16 of Let's Find Common Ground. Listen to other episodes. We've got some great interviews. Subscribe wherever you get your podcasts.

RICHARD: More information at commongroundcommittee.org/podcasts. I'm Richard Davies.

ASHLEY: I'm Ashley Milne-Tyte. Thanks for listening.