

LFCG Episode 47

RICHARD: One year after the mayhem and riot at the U.S. Capitol, Americans are still deeply divided over what happened that day and how much former President Trump was to blame. We take a close look at America's political divide with two newspaper journalists who covered the calamitous events on that day and the varied reactions since then. This is Let's Find Common Ground. I'm Richard Davies.

ASHLEY: And I'm Ashley Milne-Tyte. A new opinion poll published days ago by The Washington Post confirms that we still have very different views of the 2020 election results. While large majorities of Democrats and Independents say there was no evidence of widespread fraud, more than 6 in 10 Republicans say there was. We also look at whether polarization is a threat to democracy.

RICHARD: Our guests are Christa Case Bryant, Congressional correspondent for The Christian Science Monitor and Story Hinckley, The Monitor's national political correspondent.

ASHLEY: Our first question is to Christa. Is America more divided now than it was a year ago?

CHRISTA: I would say we're definitely at least as polarized, if not more so, and I think part of that is because of not only what happened on January 6th but also how all of that has been portrayed by different actors. And if you look at all of the reasons that drove Trump supporters to come out that day to his rally down near the White House and then to come up to the Capitol, obviously a huge reason for that was distrust of the election results. Then other reasons that brought people out that day, which are still persisting today, are distrust of democratic institutions including Congress, including people who administer elections at the local and state levels, distrust of the media, a feeling like nobody is listening to us, and the people who are listening to us keep getting marginalized from President Trump to people who have spoken out against COVID regulations or raised questions about scientific studies or done scientific studies themselves.

There's just this feeling among Conservatives, among Trump supporters that we are not being heard and even just coming out to protest, even for all of us who were out there and didn't actually go into the Capitol or engage in any violence, we're all being labeled as domestic terrorists and not being given our First Amendment rights to protest. On the Left, there's a lot of concern, as well, about where we are as a country and why Republican lawmakers who were there and experienced those events that day have not taken a stronger stand against what happened. That's created more tensions within Congress, which is where I work.

ASHLEY: Story, would you add anything?

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STORY: Maybe I'll side with the idea that it's the same, and it just feels more evident now. The Republican and Democratic Party and politicians disagree, for example, on how widely absentee ballots should be made available. And a lot of Americans hear certain framing about that issue either on the news that they choose to listen to, whether it's FOX or MSNBC, and you can think, "Oh, of course it makes sense how this pundit is explaining the issue. Making absentee ballots more available will do this," or the inverse, "Making them less available means that."

But I think that January 6th is so different because we can understand what happened that day, or we feel like we can understand what happened that day without a pundit filter. We saw with our own eyes people wearing red MAGA hats scaling the walls of the House chamber. We don't need someone else to help us understand what that means. So the Left says, "We saw these people marching down the halls of Congress and chanting death threats to Speaker Pelosi. We heard that." That's why I think it's at least as strong, if not more so, particularly to people on the Left.

ASHLEY: Christa, I just wanted to say, you were there. This was your third day on your new beat as a congressional reporter, is that right, or bureau chief?

CHRISTA: Yes.

ASHLEY: Wow. What was that like?

CHRISTA: January 6th was my third full day on the job, and when everything built to a climax, I was inside the Senate chamber where journalists are not allowed to have access to electronic devices. So I actually didn't know how bad things were getting outside until I stepped out to get a bite of lunch, and I was going to head over to the House side. Then, within a matter of a few minutes, my editor caught me up to speed on what had been happening. Then the voice came over the PA system saying the Capitol was on lockdown. Someone ran through the press gallery yelling, "Pence has left, Pence has left!"

Then I knew it was serious, if the Vice President had been escorted off the floor. So most of the journalists who were in the press gallery were ushered back into the Senate chamber. and then, eventually, evacuated to a different part of the Capitol complex where we were held for about five hours. That gave me a lot of time to reflect on what was happening that day and also how I had covered Trump supporters in the past few years.

ASHLEY: What were you thinking?

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CHRISTA: I think the big question for me was what the role of the media is in all this. Obviously, there's a citadel of democracy that needs to be protected, and that was what was very much in focus on January 6th. But I think there's also a figurative citadel of democracy, as Senator Rob Portman called it that night when we all came back into the Capitol. I think journalists have a role in protecting that figurative citadel of democracy. So, as I was reflecting on, "How well have I done that over the past few years? Was it wrong to try to present a more nuanced view of Trump supporters, the variety of people who supported him, the variety of reasons that drove him to support them?" And I felt like, "You know what, I did not adequately examine the strain of thinking that would lead people to storm the Capitol today."

I didn't really get into that. I was trying to counter extremist or simplistic views of who Trump supporters were, and in the process of doing that, I failed to alert people that there was a strain of thinking that was willing to engage in things like that. But I think, since January 6th, in this first year of covering Congress, I've also thought a lot about: how do we talk about what happened that day? And are we veering the other direction and saying that everybody is dangerous and not looking at some of the nuances there? So that's some of what I've been wrestling with.

I think a big challenge for me is, should I have just ignored the recommendations of my editor and the people around me and just gone out to talk to people outside? Because one of my biggest regrets is that I didn't have the opportunity to come face-to-face with the people who were there and get a sense of what brought them out that day and get a sense of the size of the crowd. Obviously, I've seen a lot of videos and seen a lot of violence and things that were horrible and should've never happened, and I believe those people should be prosecuted to the fullest extent of the law. But the videos tend to focus in on the hotspots, and what I want to also understand is what was going on around those areas. I really commend my colleagues, especially photojournalists, who made the decision to capture what was happening, capture the news when they didn't know what the risks of that might be. Some of them got in some pretty dicey situations.

RICHARD: Story, you have reported on Trump supporters in various parts of the country. Have you also wrestled with the narrative of how the story of January 6th has been told?

STORY: I think it's difficult to be in our shoes as reporters because interviewing people who were there that day and believe that Donald Trump won the election and that it was unfairly taken from him, it's really difficult to not shut them down and just give a list of facts that I've found through my non-biased, just looking for the numbers. It gets to kind of the larger philosophical question of what our role is as journalists. Is it to educate the public, or is it to accurately capture what a segment of America is thinking and feeling and then bring that back out for the masses? Which is what I tend to believe the purpose is.

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RICHARD: We should also point out that after Donald Trump won in 2016, there was a very large number of Democratic voters and supporters who thought that election was stolen and that Trump had won unfairly and that he was an illegitimate president.

STORY: Yeah. So I worry that we're entering this sphere where it's either our team wins or the election is illegitimate. I think so much of it stems from the fact that our country lives in such different bubbles. For many of the people that I interview at Trump rallies, they live in rural areas that voted for Trump by 60, 70, 80-plus percent. Their friends and family are all die-hard Republicans, and they only watch FOX News. Then we have Democratic voters in urban areas where everyone they know voted for Biden, and they watch MSNCB. When you read and listen to such different news and you interact every day with such different people, it seems as if we live on different planets, and the idea that your team could lose feels totally insane. I hear from Trump supporters all the time that say, "I don't know one person who voted for Joe Biden, and you want me to believe that he won the election?"

ASHLEY: That was the same going into the 2016 election with most of the mainstream media, right? "Of course Trump isn't going to win. Most people are voting for Hillary Clinton."

STORY: Right, exactly

CHRISTA: Yeah, I think both sides are definitely in their different bubbles. And part of that is because of how polarized the media has become.

ASHLEY: Let's talk about why there's so much mistrust in elections and especially the 2020 vote result.

CHRISTA: I think a lot of people genuinely believe that it truly was stolen, literally stolen and that, whether that was through voting machines being manipulated or ballot stuffing or whatever. I think there are a lot of other reasons, too, that maybe don't fit as well next to a hashtag. So they don't get talked about as much, but, for example, when I was doing some reporting leading up to the November 2020 election about mail-in voting, there were a lot of states that were rapidly scaling up their ability to do essentially universal mail-in voting. Anybody who wants to should be able to mail in a ballot.

The states that already had that system in place like Washington or Oregon had something like a year and a half to two years to implement that after their legislatures voted to do it. But with a pandemic, the timeline was much more compressed. It's a really big project to overhaul your election system so that mail-in balloting on that scale is possible. I think there were concerns that, in the rush to implement that, some things got overlooked.

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For example, how do you make sure that the voters on your voter rolls all still live in your state and are all still eligible to vote?

I think there was a lot of concern around how that buildup to mail-in voting happened and whether it was in line with existing state laws. Then, also, concerns about enforcement of other state laws, that signatures need to match or that you need to present voter ID either when you pick up a ballot or when you register to get an absentee ballot, that people were sort of like, "Oh, well, don't worry about that because it's a pandemic, and we just want to make sure everybody can vote." So I think they often get overlooked, and maybe it's because Republicans themselves are not making a big deal about them or not as big a deal. Maybe they feel like the real issue really is fraud, or maybe it's just harder to get people to focus on more complicated aspects like that.

STORY: I'm going to be interested in how the conversation around election integrity goes forward and changes ahead of the midterms or even in 2024 because there's an assumption that if turnout is high, Democrats win. I think that has been what has inspired a lot of Republican legislators and politicians to be more on the side of caution and restricting greater access. But I think what we've seen more recently, specifically with the Virginia governor's race, is that the assumption that turnout equals Democratic wins isn't as true anymore.

RICHARD: Yeah, because in Virginia this past November, Republican Glenn Youngkin won the election for governor in a blue-leaning state, and he did it with high turnout.

STORY: Right, and the Democrat, Terry McAuliffe, the Democrat candidate, he hit his targets numbers-wise when the results were coming in, but Youngkin ran up the tallies in Southwest Virginia, in red, rural counties over there and just had turnout that surpassed what Trump got even the year before. I'm interested, and Republicans, for sure, have seen this trend, as well, and I'm interested how that is going to shape voter access going forward because there's lower registration in a lot of Republican areas. Potentially, we're going to see in the future more Republican efforts to expand voter access. I think that could be a smart strategy for the Republican party given what we've seen recently, and the dichotomy of larger turnout benefits Democrats isn't going to be such a sure thing in the future.

ASHLEY: Story Hinckley and Christa Case Bryant. You're listening to Let's Find Common Ground. I'm Ashley.

RICHARD: I'm Richard. Time now to tell you about Common Ground Committee's YouTube channel.

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ASHLEY: Yep, you can subscribe for free, and it's an easy way to help our nonprofit succeed with just a single click.

RICHARD: Subscribe to Common Ground Committee at YouTube.com and gain access to all of our content including past public events.

ASHLEY: You'll find videos with well-known political leaders and even music videos, plus our 47 podcast episodes of Let's Find Common Ground. Now more from our interview.

Let's look at some other causes of polarization such as how political candidates are chosen. Primary elections are one example. Story?

STORY: The way our system is set up right now, candidates in a primary have an incentive to go, within a Republican primary, as far Right as possible. Candidates in a Democratic primary have an incentive to go as far Left as possible because the people who vote in primary elections are die-hard voters, either die-hard Republican voters or die-hard Democratic voters. Then, once a candidate wins a primary by either being far-Left or far-Right, they can quickly try to tack to the middle for the general, but most of the time, they don't have to because the way our political participation works right now is that they're trying to appeal to the voters who turn out, and those are often the most extreme voters. And gerrymandering, which is the way that the political districts are drawn, plays a huge role in that because that determines what constituents a candidate is trying to appeal to.

CHRISTA: Yeah, I think Story's making a really good point, that if you're in a solidly blue or solidly red area, the election is really decided in the primary, not in the general election, because most people who are Republicans will vote for the Republican candidate no matter who it is, and most people who are Dems will vote for the Democratic candidate no matter who it is. So the people who are deciding which candidate to send to the state House or send to Congress are the people who vote in the primary elections. And I think a lot of average voters think, "I'm not that into politics. I'll just wait until the general election, and then I'll weigh in," without realizing that that essentially gives them very little voice in what type of governance they're going to see in Congress.

RICHARD: We just had a mention of gerrymandering. Congressional district maps are being drawn for this year. Could they make things even more partisan?

STORY: I think what's happening this year with redistricting is so interesting because of the pandemic. It was really just a crazy situation, and the fact that, in March of 2020, we had the COVID-19 pandemic changing the way our entire world operates at the same time that the U.S. government was trying to conclude a once-in-a-decade project where they try to count every single American in the country to determine how these districts should be drawn

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because every U.S. House district has to have the same amount of people. So it was just the biggest tangled nightmare that U.S. census employees could dream of. So, because of that, there's been a huge delay in the data, therefore a huge delay in the maps.

The primaries are coming up. They start in March and April and May, and for a lot of these states, we don't have U.S. House maps for the primaries that are coming up in a few months. So, if I want to run for my local office, I don't know exactly what that office is. I don't know what district I'm going to be in and can run in. That's really going to make primaries, I think, even more of an insular thing than they have been before because you don't have as much time.

ASHLEY: What about social media and tech algorithms? Are they a cause of polarization?

CHRISTA: When you look at, what are the reasons that the people running in primaries and voting in primaries are more partisan? I do think Big Tech plays a part in that, and social media plays a part in that because, to Story's point earlier about how we're living in bubbles, a lot of the infrastructure of those bubbles is on social media. And the way that we know algorithms feed you, they try to feed you what they know you like to click on. So that tends to reinforce the views that you already have. Misinformation can be really destructive in a lot of ways, but at the same time, if a private company decides that they're going to become the arbiter of truth, that just raises a whole lot of questions about: how do you do that? And how do you know that you are purveying the truth or enforcing it on your platforms? There's a lot of pressure from Democrats and Republicans in different directions on Big Tech right now to either step up their enforcement against misinformation or to back off and let these be bigger forums for debate. I think that's a really important question to be decided in the next 5 or 10 years.

RICHARD: January 6th is one anniversary. The other anniversary is it was right around the same time that the first people were lining up to get their vaccines. And in the past 12 months, vaccines have been a subject of intense polarization in many places. People who support Democrats are much more likely to be vaccinated than Republicans. What's going on with this aspect of polarization, Story?

STORY: I wish I had an answer for you, but this is something that I have a hard time understanding because I ask Republican voters who are anti-vaccine, I ask them about this in a genuine quest to understand because, on the one hand, they say that former President Trump doesn't get enough credit for Operation Warp Speed and his administration's efforts to create a vaccine in record-breaking time, an impressive feat. Why doesn't Trump get the credit for this? The media just doesn't want to give him the credit for this. But at the same time, they're refusing to take this vaccine themselves.

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RICHARD: Vaccine hesitancy may be hard to understand, but what about Conservative views of vaccine mandates and restrictions on businesses.

STORY: I understand why a lot of Conservatives opposed the lockdowns in 2020. I did a bunch of reporting on this, and I covered a bunch of Open Virginia rallies or Open Michigan rallies. And it makes sense that a Conservative would disagree with this idea on just an ideological level because they believe in individualism, capitalism, a free market society. So the idea that a government could suddenly tell you as a small business owner that you're not allowed to open your own small business and you can't do X, Y, and Z on your own property and then have these rules have such dire economic consequences, it just makes sense to me how that would disagree with their Conservative principles. But I don't understand why vaccines have been roped into this broader partisanship that the lockdowns had because the vaccines seem like a vessel out of that situation.

ASHLEY: Christa?

CHRISTA: In order to consider the validity of a mandate and whether... it's really a tradeoff between individual liberties and the public good. If vaccines are for the public good, I think it would be logical that you need to make the argument about: to what extent are they protecting the public good? I think that there are a number of studies that Conservatives have gravitated toward and highlighted that call into question whether vaccines are more effective at just helping the individual who takes them, or is it really preventing that individual from spreading the virus to other people? And one issue is that public health officials, in their desire to end the pandemic, have felt that getting everybody vaccinated as quickly as possible is our number one best way to get there.

I talked with one constituent who had lobbied his senator to get rid of the mandates, and he said all of the flip-flopping and the lack of transparency on the part of people like Dr. Fauci had really made him distrust anything that public health officials were saying, including the idea that the vaccine is safe and effective. I think that's another thing. There's been concerns about side-effects of the vaccine, and that's just dismissed as conspiracy thinking. That may be another reason, that Republicans tend to live in more rural areas. So they're not seeing as many people as if you live in an urban area and you're taking a public bus all the time. I think a lot of it has to do with just feeling like public health officials aren't being as honest and transparent. So there's now a lack of trust, and I think that'll take a while to remedy.

STORY: I think that public health officials, in handling of the pandemic, they haven't left a lot of room, a lot of daylight for nuance, and I can understand why not. They have, in an objective to maybe get a majority of Americans vaccinated, they just decide that it's easier to stick with one message. And I think what a lot of Conservative voters and politicians and people would like is maybe a little bit more humility from these leaders. I remember early on

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in the pandemic, when I was in Washington, in D.C., I was required to run outside with a mask on, which we now know you don't need to do. But I just think that what a lot of people would like is a little bit more humility in them. "We did think that we needed this at first. We were wrong. We don't. We're also trying to learn."

ASHLEY: Public health officials tend to speak in a rather academic way. It's a way that not every listener is going to relate to.

CHRISTA: I don't think it's just about being academic, though. I feel like it's not being willing to say what we don't know or to say that we were wrong.

RICHARD: What gives you hope that perhaps we can find more common ground, not agree but find common ground to help reduce polarization?

CHRISTA: One thing that gives me hope is that we, as individual citizens, have a role in curbing polarization if we want to, everything from how broadly do we search the news for different viewpoints, for viewpoints that are unlike ours? Are we looking to the news just to validate our own viewpoints or to test them and see, are there any holes in our arguments? Could we learn something more that would enable us to strengthen our viewpoints and make them more robust? Are we willing to be challenged about our own views and find that invigorating, or do we find it infuriating? And how can we try to have more conversations, more interactions in our individual lives that broaden our viewpoints?

I think there are a lot of choices that each individual member of a country can make every single day that can affect the level of polarization in the country. So the idea that it really starts with each one of us, to me, is really empowering because then it's not waiting for some huge institution to change or for a culture to change. It's about what we're doing and thinking each day.

STORY: I would say that I think it's really encouraging that people are participating in this democracy. If you're voting, it means that you care. In 2020, we had the largest increase in voters between two presidential elections. So we had 17 million more people vote in 2020 than we did in 2016. In the Virginia governor's race in November, it was an all-time record turnout. So people are voting, which I think is really encouraging, and I think that Americans of all political stripes should be encouraged by that idea because I think that that's a signal of a healthy democracy, and also the fact that a lot of people are getting involved in politics in a way that they haven't before.

We've seen school board elections become a hot topic of debate across the country and inspire a lot of nasty rhetoric, but at the same time, a lot of the school districts are seeing a record number of candidates. So people are running for these positions which they

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previously hadn't paid any attention to. Same with secretaries of state. Granted, they've been in the news for not-so-great reasons, but people are paying attention to this administrative role that they probably hadn't been in the past. So I'm really encouraged when we see people running for positions, lower level, local positions, administrative positions, and then when we see high voter turnout, both of which we have seen recently.

ASHLEY: Thank you. Thank you, both, for coming on Let's Find Common Ground again.

STORY: Thank you for having us.

RICHARD: Thank you.

ASHLEY: Story Hinckley and Christa Case Bryant of The Christian Science Monitor on Let's Find Common Ground.

RICHARD: Our podcasts are produced for Common Ground Committee. Find out more at commongroundcommittee.org.

ASHLEY: And on our YouTube channel. I'm Ashley Milne-Tyte.

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

ANNOUNCER: This podcast is part of The Democracy Group.