

RICHARD

To outsiders, Congress seems totally gridlocked. Bills get bogged down in partisan fights. Party leaders openly smear each other. We heard about the budget mess in our last podcast, but our guests today show that, if you look a little closer, you'll find a group of dedicated members of Congress working across the aisle to get things done. This is Let's Find Common Ground. I'm Richard Davies.

ASHLEY

And I'm Ashley Milne-Tyte. On this episode, we talk to two members of the Congressional Problem Solvers Caucus. This group is equally split between Democrats and Republicans who are committed to finding common ground on key issues facing the country.

RICHARD

Republican Congressman Don Bacon is a retired brigadier general in the US Air Force. He represents Nebraska's second district. Democrat Kurt Schrader is a former veterinarian. He represents Oregon's fifth district. We start with a question for Congressman Schrader.

ASHLEY

When we look at media coverage of Congress right now, it seems like we are at an absolute low point for cooperation between the two parties. How do each of you see it at the moment?

CONGRESSMAN SCHRADER

I disagree, to be honest with you. I think we have terrible leadership, and that causes folks like Don and I a lot of problems because seems to me our leadership tries to divide us on a regular basis, and they cater to the extremes of our parties. And that's not where America is, certainly not my constituents. I think both Don and I come from a background where there's equal numbers, relatively, of Democrats, Republicans, and Independents, and certainly our country's that way. The last election was very close. There was no landslide victory, no landslide victory the election before that.

This last election, frankly, Don and I stepped up, man. We did the right thing. We made sure that we represented our districts, our state, and our country, and we weren't on a party ideology deal. The infrastructure bill, that would never have occurred if it wasn't for The Problem Solvers Caucus that Don and I are members of. So we helped get that thing going after the talks between Capito and Biden fell apart, and we made sure down the final stretches that it was still bipartisan despite efforts, from particularly my side, to make it a partisan exercise. There's members working really hard to work together, and that's what our Problem Solvers Caucus is all about. We made a difference this year.

CONGRESSMAN BACON

I sure appreciate hearing Kurt's comments on this. I see some contrast, no doubt. I mean, this last election with President Trump and the impeachments, and then you had the certification, I mean, so there's a lot of anger on both sides. You can feel it, it's palpable. But yet in the midst of that, we have a group of folks who are trying to find common ground. So I would say there's some goodness in the middle of the badness you see around here in DC.

RICHARD

Kurt Schrader, you're the Democrat in this conversation, you made a pretty strong comment there just a few moments ago about the leadership and why it's not doing what it should. Are you talking about the leadership of both parties in Congress?

CONGRESSMAN SCHRADER

Yeah, I am. I'm talking about the Pelosis, the McCarthys, the Schumers, and the McConnells. Their job should be to get us to work together. Every organization I've ever... My own business, I'm a veterinarian in the real world, and my job is to make sure my team work together. Otherwise, we couldn't deliver for my consumers, for my clients, for my patients. And frankly, in my state legislature... I don't know about Nebraska, but in Oregon, the leadership would make sure that despite our differences that Don talked about, they're quite real, that at the end of the day on issues that really matter the most, the bread and butter issues to most Americans, that we got the job done.

Our leadership doesn't do that. Our leadership runs one messaging bill up the flagpole after another that has no chance to pass on the other side. I had to push to develop a prescription drug cost reduction plan through, that I got beat up for by the Far Left because it wasn't the same bill that had failed twice before. However, I worked closely with senators as well as my fellow members in Congress, our Problem Solvers group actually played a part in this product too, and we developed a prescription drug plan that's going to reduce costs for seniors dramatically. Their maximum out-of-pocket cost would be \$2,000 a year. The insulin wouldn't cost more than \$35 a year. I mean, it's pretty phenomenal stuff, and yet I got beat up because I wasn't following the party doctrine. There's ways to get stuff done. Our leadership should be doing a much better job bringing members together. They just don't do that.

CONGRESSMAN BACON

I think Kurt's on to something. The majority parties, and I'm not just picking on the current majority party, I saw it in 115th Congress, there's this culture that we're going to pass the perfect bills for our party, and we can do it because you got 218 votes-plus, but it has no chance in the sun. And it was what I observed in the 115th Congress. We passed a record number of bills out of the House, very strong Republican conservative type bills, and if you're a Republican, you're like, "Wow, this is great stuff."

I mean, 98% of it went nowhere in the Senate because you couldn't get 60 votes. And so my takeaway is we got to start working together from the beginning. We need leadership that's going to do this, that says, "Okay, if I can get a bipartisan bill out of the House, I can get 60 votes out of the Senate," and we have to have a cultural change. We can't be demanding 100% in the majority party. We should be taking maybe 60 or 70%, but the other party's got to have a slice of this because you'll never get 60 votes in the Senate. And that's the way it was designed. The filibuster was designed to ensure that we have more consensus and more centrist policies so you don't go left or right. But the House doesn't operate with that in the mindset. We should operate with that as a foregone conclusion ahead of time from the beginning that we got to do that and not at the end.

ASHLEY

You're obviously both really passionate about working together, but 58, it's actually a fraction, isn't it, of the House? So why aren't there more of you? Why aren't there more problem solvers?

CONGRESSMAN BACON

I'll jump in on this one, maybe to start off, and flip around here a little bit. 80% to 90%, somewhere in there, it varies a little bit depending on the election, are hard Republican or they're hard Democrat. And so there's very few competitive districts now, which I think competitive districts lend itself to more folks who want to be the problem solvers, working together, because you have to. I mean, in my district, it's 37% Republican, 36% Democrat, and the balance is independent or not aligned. But if you have a hard Republican or hard Democrat district, it tends to put people more in the progressive wings of the Democrat party, or maybe the Freedom Caucus or more strident on the RSC side, or the Republican Study Committee, which is more conservative groups. But we do need to grow this 58 to 100.

The problem is, with the last redistricting that we're seeing, it's actually becoming more polarized after all the new districts we're seeing. There's been fewer competitive districts, which concerns me because it's going to be harder and harder playing consensus builders if that's the case.

CONGRESSMAN SCHRADER

Don's right. The gerrymandering that goes on to create these districts is a travesty. If the districts were more balanced, more reflective of the general populace, and we didn't pack all the Republicans in one district or pack all the Democrats in the other district... They live in an echo chamber. All they hear is from that one party. Don and I hear from everybody. We don't have an echo chamber. When I get my mail, whether it's email, hard mail, phone calls, on any given issue, I'm hearing from both sides. I got a two-thirds that like this bill, one-third that doesn't. Then it flips around on the next bill. And that keeps us thoughtful.

We can't get out in left field or right field and be effective anyway. We can pretend, we can say all these outrageous statements, make sure all you guys in the media world love us, or we could be effective. And Don and I choose to be effective. We're supposed to govern. We're not supposed to sloganize. We're not a bunch of activists in Congress. We are members of Congress. We are governors of our great country. We're the ones that make the laws, and as we're elected to do. So at some point, we got to put all this passion into effective legislation to drive the country forward. That's what we're all about.

RICHARD

And how would you rate your progress so far?

CONGRESSMAN SCHRADER

The best year I've had in the United States Congress was 2020. We saved the country. If it wasn't for the COVID relief bills that were almost universally bipartisan... By huge bipartisan margins, we passed four or five bills. We literally saved our country. The problems we're facing now are we're victims of our own success. We've kept demand up. We've encouraged a lot of people to stay in their homes. We've let small businesses survive. We did great stuff. When the country really needed us, we showed up. This infrastructure package, the bipartisan, that's huge, biggest investment ever in American infrastructure, and we've done it, to your point, in the most partisan environment ever. We can get stuff done if we work at it.

RICHARD

Still, there is a feeling that Congress could do more. Recently, New Hampshire Governor Chris Sununu, who's a Republican, said he decided not to run for the U.S. Senate. Why? Senate Republicans reportedly told him they just wanted to hold out against President Biden until the end of his term. Don Bacon says part of this unwillingness to play ball is that Joe Biden ran as a centrist but isn't governing as one.

CONGRESSMAN BACON

There are things that we can do if, I think, the executive decided to be a little more centrist in his things. This last year, though, my sense of it was, it was, "Hey, we got a chance to do reconciliation. We could get some overreaching bills," and that was hard for most Republicans to be a part of. Thankfully, the infrastructure bill was an exception, and I think it's an example of what we can do when we're working together. And there's other areas that we could do this with.

I think the infrastructure bill, unfortunately, Kurt said that his leadership tried to make it more partisan. Well, so did ours, and there was no need for it. President Trump wanted an even bigger bill, and we've been wanting infrastructure for about two decades. This should

have been an easy one, and it was still hard, but it was an example of what we can do when we're working together.

ASHLEY

I was going to ask you about the infrastructure bill and what went into that, what went on behind the scenes to get that done.

CONGRESSMAN BACON

It was sausage making, and I hate to say that because my name's Bacon. I'll tell you, it was fun working this out. I felt, when President Trump came out and said he wanted infrastructure, the Problem Solvers had already started, "Hey, this is something we can do," but there was three or four other priorities from the previous president. So it just didn't get there, and it got too nasty between him and Speaker Pelosi, I believe. There was some dynamics there. But after the election, the Problem Solvers didn't say, "Okay, we're done." We got more serious, and there was a subset that really put a lot of time into it, and we came up with about an 80% solution... I'd say 90% solution. That's when the senators said, "Hey, we would like to take it because we got to get 60 votes in the Senate."

I think we had six Republicans, six Democrat senators. We sort of took this on, and then we would meet with them once a week, once every two weeks, where we'd go back and forth. And, really, the senators took our 80% solution and they finished it off, and they got a very good bipartisan vote out of the Senate. It could have even been better, but there were already some partisan clouds coming in on this thing. But when you have Leader McConnell voting for it, my good friend, one of my best friends Deb Fischer, voting for it, Senator Grassley, that's a pretty good bipartisan bill. And then it came back to us, and for some reason then, both leaderships tried to ground this thing out.

And I got to tell you, it was the Problem Solvers. I've got to give Josh Gottheimer credit here for insisting that it get de-linked from the Build Back Better Bill. And that's what Pelosi and a lot of the Progressives wanted, to link them together, which that means it was going to be a partisan bill. On the other hand, our guys, our leadership just didn't want to give the victory, but it shouldn't have been seen that way. This was a victory for the country.

CONGRESSMAN SCHRADER

I, too, was overjoyed and really pleased when I saw the Senate vote. It was pretty dramatic. McConnell voted for the thing. And I thought, "All right, we're done, we're good." It comes over to the House, and Pelosi sits on it. And I'm going, "What's going on here?" And it was all this, the Far Left didn't have faith enough in the rest of their social agenda that it could pass on its own. So they wanted to link it to our bipartisan infrastructure bill. And that was not the deal we made with Don Bacon. The Democrats at the Problem Solvers group made a deal with our Republicans at Problem Solvers group, this is separate bill. We did good work

here. To Don's point, we helped birth it, and Senate made it its own, the president adopted it. It was a huge priority, a huge priority for the country, and we were adamant we were going to keep the faith with our Republican colleagues and the American people and keep this as a standalone, excellent bipartisan infrastructure bill.

RICHARD

The best known members of Congress are often the hardliners. There's the gang of four in the House, on the left, Bernie Sanders, and then on the right, we hear a lot from Josh Hawley and from Ted Cruz and from other hard Right members. Is there any frustration that the media is always about clashes and controversies and doesn't cover the center, doesn't cover the areas of agreement, the friendships that you have?

CONGRESSMAN BACON

One of my colleagues recently said there's show horses and there's workhorses. And a lot of the show horses are on TV. They get a lot of coverage. A lot of people say we want you to be like this person or that person. I'll say that person, they didn't get a single bill passed in this Congress, or I mean, didn't have much influence on any legislation. They may be have a lot of influence on TV, whether it's MSNBC or FOX, whatever. But in the end, we're here to be legislators, and we need more workhorse mentality, and the media doesn't glue to that. But in the long run, good policy is good politics.

CONGRESSMAN SCHRADER

Well, I'll be a little blunter. The media is the problem. Media's terrible. Social media is horrible. It undermines the fabric of democracy, and present company excepted, Richard, but I am very disappointed in how the media showcases these extreme people for ratings and to get people to view your side. I get it. It's America. Do whatever you want, but there are the workhorses that Don talks about, like he and I. That's fine, cover all these other people. We're going to try our best to get the job done. And America... the outset of the show here was about how divisive we are. Well, it really isn't that way.

We could be better, but you showcase all the divisiveness. You don't talk about the stuff that we agree on. You don't talk about all the veterans bills that constantly get nearly 400 votes a piece or more every time they come up, or the Energy and Commerce Committee that we're on, where it's almost always bipartisan stuff, on the drug addiction front, you name it. But you guys never cover that. You never cover that. The media, with all due respect, huge problem for Congress.

ASHLEY

Congressman Kurt Schrader and Don Bacon on Let's Find Common Ground. A couple of minutes ago, we heard the name Josh Gottheimer. He is co-chair of the Problem Solvers

Caucus. Other leading members we'll hear mentioned include Tom Reed and Brian Fitzpatrick. Our interview continues in a minute. I'm Ashley.

RICHARD

I'm Richard. We have a special episode of Let's Find Common Ground coming up. It's being released next week to mark Black History Month.

ASHLEY

The theme of this year's celebration is Black Health and Wellness. We'll discuss that and other themes and include special moments from past podcasts and public events from Common Ground Committee.

RICHARD

Race represents both a challenge and an opportunity in finding common ground. We're calling our upcoming episode special for good reason.

ASHLEY

Now, back to our interview with Republican Representative Don Bacon and Democrat Kurt Schrader.

RICHARD

You've talked about the infrastructure bill that was passed with a great deal of help from Problem Solvers Caucus. How important is your caucus in getting things done in Congress, and are there prospects for more progress this year?

CONGRESSMAN BACON

I think we're the hope of the future, Richard. I think we're the blueprint of how this is supposed to work. If you want to get 60 votes in the Senate on a hard bill, you better have a blueprint like Problem Solvers for getting it out of the House so you have a good mix of Republican and Democrat support. If you're going to pass something on a party line vote out of the House, it's dead on arrival in the Senate, bottom line.

CONGRESSMAN SCHRADER

Our caucus's value is sometimes when on major, as well as not so major legislation, but particularly major legislation where their leadership is having trouble getting consensus from both sides of the aisle, but it's an important piece of legislation, whether it's dealing with the border issues, the southern border issues... we played a huge role as Problem Solvers in that about three, four years ago... whether it's an infrastructure bill. When things start to fall apart, a lot of times Problem Solvers Caucus, because we talk to each other, because we break bread every week, we're the only place in Washington, DC where members of Congress from both parties sit down on a regular basis and talk to another about these types of issues.

We have work groups on these big issues of the day that Don alluded to, for instance, on the transportation piece. We have one on prescription drugs. We have lots of different work groups. So we're poised and ready to jump in. And that sets the sweet spot for the Problem Solvers Caucus. When things look the bleakest, we can step in and sometimes bring a little sunshine.

CONGRESSMAN BACON

There's a new development, too, that I'd like to just update. This year, we started working with the senators that are in the same mindset, 12 of them in particular. And this is really good because you get the synergy now of like-minded senators and what they're willing to do. And that really has made us even better, I believe. So this is, I think, the next step forward if you want to have government that's working and getting things done.

ASHLEY

Well, alluding to difficult things for a minute, within Problem Solvers, is there a concern about potential political violence, either in the upcoming mid-terms or the 2024 presidential election? Is that something you talk about?

CONGRESSMAN BACON

I haven't much with the Problem Solvers. I mean, I am concerned about the... 2016, the legitimacy of the election was brought in question, a lot of charges of, was Trump colluding with the Russians. I think Mueller laid 95% of that to rest. Now we have 2020, it even got worse with the delegitimizing elections, and now we're... Even this last press conference with President Biden, there was a little bit of, will 2022 be legitimate or not? This is not good. This undermines our great country. Respecting election results is critical, and peaceful transition of power is probably the reason we are that bright shining city on a hill.

I think we've, as representatives, got to do better, and I think our American people got to do better here. We have the greatest country in the world, and we've got to pass it on to our kids and grandkids, but this delegitimizing elections undermines that.

CONGRESSMAN SCHRADER

I totally, totally agree with Don. When January 6th occurred, we don't agree all the time, and there was concern about members of our caucus that were not inclined to validate the electoral count, and rather than yell at one another, rather than threaten one another, Josh and Tom and Brian decided to have a conversation. And we talked about it. We talked about why different members said, "Here's why I feel I'm upset with you." And the other member would say, "Well, here's why I voted the way I did." And it was a tough conversation, but it was a good conversation. It was an ethical conversation.

Out of that, I'm not sure we changed each other's minds on anything, but we at least listened to one another, and I'd like to say maybe respected the other person's point of view, didn't agree with it, maybe, but respected that he's a fellow American, he represents 700,000 Americans, or she, and, okay, let's move forward. This is ultimately, as Don said, a great country. If we start undermining the electoral process, we're in big, big trouble.

ASHLEY

Is there any generational difference that you've noticed between those in Congress who are willing to work together, such as Problem Solvers, and those who aren't? Or is it across the board?

CONGRESSMAN SCHRADER

That's a good question. Some of the newer members, I think, are more radicalized on the Left and the Right, but I don't think it's a generational thing. Look at Bernie Sanders, and then you've got Ocasio-Cortez. They both are similar in their philosophies, and there's a little bit of difference generationally between them. So I don't think so. I think it gets more to the way these districts are constructed, and the fact that they're less and less competitive, to Don's earlier comments. And, as a result, there's these echo chambers where activist groups instill disagreement. Sometimes they're reconcilable disagreements.

CONGRESSMAN BACON

I don't think it's generational either. I agree with Kurt. I've seen consensus builders that are more senior and consensus builders that are more younger, and the opposite as well. I've seen good, bad, and ugly young. I've seen good, bad, and ugly old. I hope I'm on the good side.

RICHARD

The caucus, the Problem Solvers Caucus, represents just a fraction of the House. Are both of you hoping to grow its size?

CONGRESSMAN SCHRADER

Absolutely, absolutely. And actually, there are a lot of folks who agree with us but are afraid to speak out because they're afraid of the far left or the far right. I think there's an appetite among most members of Congress, the vast majority of members on the Republican side and on the Democratic side, to work together and get stuff done. And most of the issues we agree on. We disagree maybe on methods to get there, but that is the mold of the Problem Solvers Caucus, let's sit down and talk about that and see if we can bridge those procedural differences to get to what we really want at the end of the day.

So yeah, we hope to grow it. I think as we make more and more of an impact like we did this past year and the year before that, there's going to be more interest, but we want people that are truly problem solvers. We don't want people in there that are going to say, "Yeah, I'm a

problem solver," and then not endorse bills, not work with us, not stand in there when the fight gets pretty tough. So we want to make sure it's an effective group.

CONGRESSMAN BACON

I hope we will grow, but the less competitive districts come out of this redistricting, probably as a influence that will make that harder. But on the other hand, if the voters demand a country that's going to get things done and they want to have more centrist policies, then the voters have a choice here, and they can put in people that will campaign and make those promises.

I'll just say that the thing with the infrastructure bill, in one way it was a refining moment for me. I mean, I had set up against their leadership. I took a lot of heat. So it was refining in that way, but it was also defining because, in the end, I knew this was a good bill. I leaned into it. I was in every media. I went to all these town halls. I was doing everything, talking about this bill, and I think weathered the storm. And I think this is really strengthening for the future, whatever I'm working on, because right makes might. And I feel like we were on the right side of this, and in the end, we're going to win because it was the right thing to do.

ASHLEY

Congressman Don Bacon and Kurt Schrader on Let's Find Common Ground. You can find out more about the work of the Problem Solvers Caucus at problemsolverscaucus.house.gov.

RICHARD

You can also go back and listen to an episode we did in 2020 with two other Problem Solvers. Episode 15 was with Representatives Brian Fitzpatrick and Abigail Spanberger. Find it at commongroundcommittee.org or wherever you get your podcasts. I'm Richard Davies.

ASHLEY

And I'm Ashley Milne-Tyte. Thanks for listening.

ANNOUNCER

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