

ASHLEY: Every day on social media and cable TV, in newspapers and magazines, we're told we live in a red-versus-blue world of rigid divides. On this episode, we consider whether we're a lot less divided than that. This is Let's Find Common Ground. I'm Ashley Milne-Tyte.

RICHARD: I'm Richard Davies. When it comes to politics, most of us are neither hard left nor hard right but fall somewhere in the middle, says our podcast guest. We have a complicated mix of views from both sides of the aisle.

ASHLEY: We hear from Tony Woodlief, author of the book *I, Citizen*. He makes the case that political elites from members of Congress to pundits on cable and partisans who post on Twitter promote a false narrative about politics.

RICHARD: Tony says the national political establishment is invested in conflict and wants to weaken our ability to govern ourselves and find common ground.

ASHLEY: He says this notion of red versus blue on everything weakens our democracy. Richard, you get the first question.

RICHARD: Let's start at the beginning with a story that goes back to when you were nine. The dog gets out of the yard, and you end up reading the U.S. Constitution. This goes to the heart of what we're talking about. So tell us more.

TONY: The dog got loose, and I'm the one who got punished, I guess, because the dog's running around through the neighborhood, and this is sort of a rural part of Florida, and all of a sudden there's a dogcatcher with his little truck and the cages in the back. He's after my dog, and I don't want him to get my dog. So I'm running as fast as I can, and it's a race to see who can get to my dog because she's very friendly, and she's just excited that two different people want to meet her. And I get there first, and I wrap my arms around her, and then the guy comes up. He's not going to physically pull me off the dog. So he gets out a clipboard, and he starts asking me questions like what are my parents' names, and where do I live, how long have we lived there. And so then I see, out of the corner of my eye, this really angry, maybe a little crazy-looking red-headed woman storming up to us, and that red-headed woman is my mother. She lays into this fellow with a lot of language. It's a cross between cursing and legal language, which I didn't quite understand. I was excited. My mother rescued me. This was turning out to be a very good day. And this fellow put his clipboard away and got in his truck and drove off as fast as he could. So then we go home, and I'm thinking, "Well, we stood down the dogcatcher. Maybe we celebrate with ice cream or something." And instead, my mother turns on me and starts yelling at me that I should never give information to an agent of the State. He had no right to question us. I should understand our rights as citizens. And then she pulls open a cutlery drawer and pulls out a little pocket Constitution. I mean, what kind of woman keeps a Constitution in her silverware drawer? Well, my mother, and she sent me to my room and said, "Read it all. Don't come out until you do." So that was the first time I read the Constitution.

RICHARD: What did you start to learn about the Constitution as a result of what you did that day?

TONY: What I took from it was it was a fascinating idea for a child in a public school system where you're supposed to obey everyone, this idea that you don't have to obey without a good reason, that nobody is the boss of you, in some respects. I was right when I was three. "You're not the boss of me!" That's what all little kids say, and there's a little bit of truth to it. So, yeah,

much later, you have to think about your obligation to others in your community that are sort of the counterweight to your rights, but it was eye-opening in that regard, this notion that the government, that people in authority can't just do whatever they want.

ASHLEY: You write that, "The truth is, no matter what ideologues and talking heads claim, Americans are still bound by shared values." We want good schools for our kids. We want safe neighborhoods, steady work, basic freedoms, to be who we are, say what we like. Does this give you hope?

TONY: It does, and I try to strike that tone in the book, where I'm a political scientist by training, so I go through a lot of reliable public opinion data. Most survey data is profoundly unreliable. In fact, my one regret in the book is I wasn't meaner to pollsters in the book. But there is some reliable data out there, and I just go through it and show that, look, on almost all issues, most Americans are center right but not that far right. But they cluster towards the middle. They're not in profound disagreement, most of them. So that's the encouraging thing, but the percentage of people who are becoming -- I call them the partisan foot soldiers, the ones who are animated by party and who essentially will adjust their beliefs and convictions based on what the party leaders tell them to believe. That percentage is growing, which is troubling, because the people who lead those two tribes, all of their interest is in division. They want people to be divided. So it's encouraging that we're not that divided but frightening that we're becoming more divided.

RICHARD: Tony, you say the country is generally center right. Where do you stand politically? Does that describe your politics?

TONY: It depends on the issue. I didn't come up with this. There's actually a doctor at Johns Hopkins, Marty Makary, who talks about the alt-middle. These are the folks who... it's not that they're just right down the center. They want somewhere between left and right in terms of tax policy and everything, but they want a piece from each side. They want a synergy of those pieces. So you get a mix of great compassion for the downtrodden with very, very little patience for foolishness or bad behavior. So, for me, I am a democrat with a small D. I'm registered Independent. For me, the most important thing is to get authority into communities because then people have to figure out how to get along as neighbors. So I don't know where that is in terms of a political tribe. I just believe as much authority as possible should be in communities. You should make the rules as closely as possible to the people who have to live under those rules. My friends on the left, my sympathetic friends on the right, that's my message to both of them, is if you believe in democracy and if you believe in the founding, well, this is it. Most authority was in communities. That's what the founders intended. That's what Localists and Progressives, New Progressives say they want. So it depends on what cocktail party I'm at. I can get along with both sides.

ASHLEY: You say that political elites including journalists like us, pundits, politicians, they make us think that we're more divided than we truly are. What are they telling us about ourselves and America that's wrong?

TONY: Well, there's a narrative, and there's some great work on this by political scientists. They look at media coverage, and they've shown over the past 10, 12 years, you've had this -- you can call it a polarization beat, which is... the narrative is red America versus blue America, deeply divided, can't stand each other, don't want to live near each other, don't want their kids to marry each other. All those claims are based on very poor readings of very poorly done surveys. But once that narrative took hold, if you're a Washington Post writer, and it's a political season,

and you need to write something about polarization, well, you can't go to your editor and say, "Hey, I looked into it, and it turns out most people don't even care about politics that much. They don't even talk about politics that much." That's not the story. So you find your man in the street, and there's some interesting studies that show, unsurprisingly, the man in the street on almost any topic is chosen because he or she has a pretty divergent view. It makes it interesting. So there's a lot of incentive to continue with this story of polarization, and it doesn't help that people in my own profession perpetuate it and otherwise reliable polling entities. Pew Research Center is notorious for this. If you want to see article after article claiming that Americans are deeply divided, red versus blue, you go to Pew Research Center. And all they really discovered is that the parties sorted meaning that, in the past, if you were Pro-Choice, you could still have reasons to vote Republican. If you were pro-gun, you could have a lot of reasons to vote Democrat back in the '80s, even the '90s. But the parties sorted so completely on all issues that people who tend to be a little conservative inevitably went over to the Republicans, and people who tend to be even a little bit liberal went to the Democrats.

RICHARD: So the parties have sorted, and as a result, we've sorted in terms of our voting preferences perhaps, but our fundamental views, you are saying, have not altered that much.

TONY: That's right, and so the rub is because the people who determine the slate of choices for both major parties in the U.S., they are the most extreme on Left and Right. These people are very far Right and Left, temperamentally, as well. They're the ones who decide the issue positions of the party. Then you've got most Americans, who are more in the middle, and most Americans don't want to choose between an uncompassionate wall coupled with throwing people who've lived in America their entire lives out of the country because they don't have the right paperwork... They don't like that as a choice. They also don't like a completely unmanned border with greater COVID testing for citizens than for non-citizens. But those are the two choices they're given by their parties, and we see that all the way down the list of issues, that most Americans would choose some from each party, but they don't get that choice. They get an extreme this way or an extreme that way, and most of them just hold their noses on election day and choose the lesser of two evils.

ASHLEY: You alluded to pollsters briefly a couple of minutes ago, but could you talk a little bit about how you feel, what their role is in this cleaving apart?

TONY: The biggest problem with surveys today is something called nonresponse bias. Very simply, simply understood, it's this. Most normal people do not pick up their cell phone when they don't recognize the phone number, and they sure don't, if they accidentally click on it to answer, they don't want to take a survey from a robot. So the data you get from those kinds of surveys, these are not normal. It doesn't mean they're bad people, but they're not the average person because the average person's too busy, too uninterested to take a survey from a robot about politics. So you end up with answers from people who care so much about politics that they're willing to answer the phone when they don't know who's calling and then sit through a survey because it's about politics and they have some strong views.

RICHARD: Abortion is a very hot topic right now with the Supreme Court ruling coming up, and opinion polls are fascinating on this when you dig deep, and that is the views of American people on abortion actually haven't changed that much in the last 25, 30 years. Most people have a nuanced view. They're not in favor of either unrestricted abortion rights or an absolute prohibition. The great majority of American people land somewhere in the middle, which kind of illustrates your point because it doesn't tell a very good story, and yet the narrative in the media,

whether it's Liberal media or Conservative media is we are really polarized on this and most people feel very strongly one way or the other.

TONY: Richard, that's well-stated. A great example, venerable polling organization, Gallup, one of the things they like to do is to ask people, "Are you Pro-Choice or Pro-Life?" University of Michigan does something similar when they ask people, "Hey, you say you're an Independent voter. Which party do you lean to?" and they don't give you a choice to say neither. You have to pick one, right? And then they feed that back in and say, "Aha! See? Most people are Democrat or Republican leaning." So Gallup says, unsurprisingly, "Well, half of America's Pro-Choice, half of America's Pro-Life." Well, when you dig into that data, you find that, when you give people a choice, half of Americans don't want to choose a label. There's some great research out of the University of Notre Dame where they did focus groups and interviews with a few hundred people across the country, and they find exactly what you just said. It's highly nuanced, and most Americans don't take a strongly moral position on abortion. They take a pragmatic and, I would say, compassionate position which is, "We want to live in a country where nobody has to contemplate this as a choice. So what do we do about that?"

RICHARD: We're speaking with Tony Woodlief, author of *I, Citizen*. I'm Richard.

ASHLEY: I'm Ashley. Let's Find Common Ground is produced by Common Ground Committee. Our next online public event is called Finding Common Ground on Election Reform, and it's happening on June 7th.

RICHARD: The panelists are Donna Brazile, former Chair of the Democratic National Committee, and Michael Steele, who's ex-Chairman of the Republican National Committee. The moderator is Jacqueline Adams. It'll be a lively, invigorating evening.

ASHLEY: Common Ground Committee public forums are high-profile discussions that show how areas of mutual interest or agreement become evident when participants move away from talking points to thoughtful dialogue.

RICHARD: This public online conversation is going to be held on June 7th at 7:30 p.m. Eastern Time. Register and learn more at [commongroundcommittee.org](http://commongroundcommittee.org). Now more from our interview with Tony Woodlief.

ASHLEY: We've been focusing on democracy and the political class and, as you said, just making everything kind of worse for the rest of us and dividing us. But what about the threat from those who called the 2020 election a fraud, who staged a riot or insurrection, whatever you want to call it, on January 6th. Aren't they also a threat to democracy?

TONY: Oh, yeah. Yeah. They're the epitome of what I call the partisan foot soldier because the people animating this kind of thing, on the Left and the Right, when you have political violence and agitation of mobs, the folks who are driving that narrative, they're not the ones who go out there and get arrested, right? It's just the regular folks who have bought all this stuff who show up with a brick in their hands or a prybar. So it's incredibly dangerous. They're a very small sliver of America, but their number is growing, and the investment that their leaders make in getting them to hate the other side, that just keeps escalating. It used to be that you could just really not like the other side and say they're terribly misguided and you don't want to talk to them at a cocktail party. Now the language, it really just invites a violent response to your opponents, and of course that's inherently dangerous.

RICHARD: Do you think the threat on the Left is as bad as the threat on the Right? Because at the moment, the leading Republican, Donald Trump, is still denying the results of that election whereas, on the Left, yes, there are examples of violence but not led by the leader of the party.

TONY: I think that's a great point. If you have someone who's viewed as politically legitimate and has the attention of millions of people, they have a larger pool to draw on. Even if there's not many crazy fish in the pool, if you fish in a wide enough pool, you can still get a big bundle of them together in one place and tell them what to do. In terms of whether there's an inherently greater instability, let's say, on the Right than on the Left, my answer would be no because, remember, back in 2000, the shoe was on the other foot. It was Democrats saying the election was stolen. Both sides have done this because it excuses their own failings. They offer terrible candidates that don't appeal to people, and it comes down to the slimmest margin and error and irregularities, all those things matter so much more when you can't find a candidate that will appeal to more than 50.1% of the voting public. So, instead of admitting that neither party is generating appealing candidates that want to represent the entirety of an electorate, they claim fraud. So it's dangerous either way, and then the way they're both... the gamesmanship to change the rules of how elections are done not with an eye to shoring up democracy but to making sure you get that little edge you need to win just makes the problem more pervasive.

RICHARD: Okay, let's pivot to solutions. Make the case, Tony, for how we can change the narrative and govern ourselves better and dial back on this threat to democracy that we now have.

TONY: I didn't want to do the magic wand thing that authors will do in these kinds of books, like Congress should reform itself and everybody should love his brother more. So I begin with the thing you have the most control over, which is your own part, and I suggest that you love your neighbor. I talk a little bit about what that is and how it's a process, right? It's not a matter of suddenly having a feeling because that's not possible. But love is action like getting to know your neighbors, starting a neighborhood group or joining one, that kind of thing. The purpose of that is to inoculate us against ideology because if we have a broad enough community -- I hate that word, network -- but community around us, odds are, if we're doing it right, we're going to know people with different beliefs, religious, political, cultural attitudes. And that helps us see the humanity in them, which is an inoculation against the rhetoric from the two parties which seeks to dehumanize people. So that's the first step, is what can you do to generate a community inoculation?

ASHLEY: Okay, those are the personal steps we can take locally. What about politics?

TONY: The political path is we have to retake our legislatures. Our legislatures have failed to oversee our government. In Congress, it's a glaring failure, self-inflicted and self-serving where they shirk their responsibility. So you end up with a metastasizing set of agencies that do not function democratically. But you see the same danger at the state level. I talk a little bit in the book about what you can do, if you have an interest, to kind of scale up that ladder to having an effect on state politics and ultimately on national politics.

ASHLEY: Just going back to the personal for a minute and loving your neighbor, Tony says he and his wife are good friends with a couple nearby that's far to the left of them politically. One night, they were having this couple over for dinner.

TONY: And I've warned my older teenagers, "Look, you know they're coming over. Don't do anything to be obnoxious because they also know that this family is fairly liberal, and by fairly, I mean really, really liberal. My oldest son is a United States Marine. He was home on leave, and he had just gotten a new semiautomatic rifle. We're with this very liberal couple at our dinner table, and here comes my knucklehead marine, walking right past with this horrifying looking weapon, and our friends just sit there and pretend like it didn't happen. Not long after that, my other knucklehead teenager walks by with a MAGA beach hat on. I don't know where he got this hat. He didn't buy the hat, but I know he thought it would be funny to wear it through the dining room while this couple's there. So I felt like we ought to apologize, but then the wife asks, "Well, I think I'm going to get a gun. What do you think I ought to get?" So we ended up talking about gun ownership, but they're just a lovely couple. To me, it's an example of identity. For both of us, even though we're very animated about politics -- I mean, I wrote a book about politics -- other identities matter more to us than that, and we feel completely safe with one another, in fact, reliant. Our families rely on one another. That's what you want. We'll never be at war even though we vote differently.

ASHLEY: Do you hope that we can turn the tide and tell a more accurate narrative about who we are as a nation in this country?

TONY: Yes, I do. People are tired. They are, I think, sad. You see this rise in people who say, "I'm not even in a party anymore. I'm an independent." That's been going up and up. In North Carolina now, where I live, it's the largest block of voters who are unaffiliated. So you've got this disaffection with the parties that's very clear, and politicians, a political class who have come to believe that the way to build your political base is to create rage at someone, and that's the path of the demagogue. But there's ample opportunity for plain-spoken, serious, well-meaning people to just speak the truth to their fellow citizens. They've got to break through a media barrier because the data is clear that the media give much more attention to the looney tunes who want to flame each other on Twitter, and they've got to break through the money barrier because the primary donors, two parties, are the most extreme class of people in America. But it's not impossible, especially with local politics. So, yeah, I'm very hopeful. But we've got to have more action from more people beginning with that inoculation and getting back into community because otherwise we abandon the field to the partisans.

RICHARD: We've had a very polite and civilized and calm conversation, and, yes, I am a guilty member of the media. I want to fire you up. Make the case for why the political class that you really don't like has it wrong about America and is trying to divide us way more than we're really divided, especially on a town or neighborhood level.

TONY: My brief against the political class is, first of all, they're fundamentally unprincipled. No matter what they say about democracy or the Constitution, we see it every term, they are happy to elevate as many decisions into the undemocratic realm as possible as long as they have a guarantee they're going to win. So, "Let's get enough of our people on the court, and then we'll make everything a court decision." Or, "Let's get our guy in the White House, and then we can make everything an executive brand decision." And they are unwilling to trust the American people because, deep down, they don't trust them, and I don't think they like them very much, and they certainly don't know many of them. This is true of Republicans who are in Congress and who are leading the Republican Party, and certainly Democrats, as well. So they talk a good game about democracy and liberty and the Constitution, but you don't see that. You don't see regular people getting a choice about anything from whether a cell phone tower goes up in your neighborhood or whether you can keep pornography out of your local library or whether my

son, a Marine, is going to get sent to some godforsaken desert. We don't even vote on these things anymore, and that's on purpose. You have a Congress that shirks its responsibilities at every turn so that for every law it manages to pass, federal agencies make 28 rules of full force of law. You have courts that step in left and right because Congress won't do its job, and this is by design because both sides recognize that if they put what they want to a vote of the American people, they wouldn't get what they want. They would not, and they know it. So they use the other side and its deep threat to democracy as the excuse to govern from courts and agencies, and that's why their fights over the presidency are so bitter because that's where the spoils are, is all those agencies that you get to control. They are un-American, they are undemocratic, and they're destructive.

ASHLEY: Tony Woodlief speaking with us on Let's Find Common Ground.

RICHARD: His book is I, Citizen. Learn more at [tonywoodlief.com](http://tonywoodlief.com). That's Woodlief, I-E-F.

ASHLEY: And our website is [commongroundcommittee.org](http://commongroundcommittee.org). I'm Ashley.

RICHARD: I'm Richard. Thanks for joining us.

ANNOUNCER: This podcast is part of The Democracy Group.