

RICHARD: Here's what most of us are told about the American electorate: voters are incredibly divided. The red tribe thinks the blue tribe wants government to take their rights away, while the blue tribe believes the red tribe is all a bunch of Trumpers who want strongman rule and authoritarianism. Well, that's wrong, says our guest. This is Let's Find Common Ground. I'm Richard Davies.

ASHLEY: And I'm Ashley Milne-Tyte. In this episode, we get a new and quite hopeful view of voters based on a series of conversations with hundreds of Americans Right, Left, and somewhere in between.

RICHARD: The research was done by Diane Hesson, who checked in with voters on a weekly basis and built relationships with them.

ASHLEY: Diane wrote a book about her four-year listening project. It's called Our Common Ground. She came to her political project after a career as an entrepreneur and innovator in the world of market research.

RICHARD: We started our interview with Diane's take on what pollsters tell us about the views of voters.

DIANE: I thought political research was really in the Dark Ages because all political researchers do is they do focus groups and polls. And someone had called me to basically say, "Could we try something different?" And I used a methodology that my company had come up with, which essentially had us building relationships with voters on a continuous basis. And the theory behind that was that if you knew someone and they trusted you and you thought they were really listening to you, that, lo and behold, people would actually tell you the truth.

RICHARD: Diane's first research was with undecided voters. The insight she gained about that in 2016 led to her extensive listening project.

DIANE: So, starting at the end of 2016, for about four and a half years, I identified a group of 500 voters and, on a weekly basis, did research with that group. They were all ends of the political spectrum, every age, every ethnicity, and every state. And what I learned by having all those conversations with them, what I learned after 7 million pieces of data, was astounding.

RICHARD: You stayed with these people. You built relationships, right?

DIANE: Yes, and, if you're a traditional researcher, you say, "That really breaks the rules." Traditional research says you can't go back to the same respondent because it'll be biased. But the reality was that in political research, people are so afraid to tell the truth that sometimes it takes a while for people to say, "Look, we've been in conversation with each other for six months. So now, let me tell you what I really think as opposed to what I told you last April." My goal was to get people to trust me so that I could really understand what was going on in their lives, and it was illuminating.

ASHLEY: Can you think of a story or two that was particularly interesting?

DIANE: Let's take the most controversial issue we have, which is abortion. And the reason I say it's the most controversial issue is that there are more single-issue voters on abortion in this country than on any other issue. I found that talking to my voters about abortion was full of

emotion, and I had one voter in particular who was a Republican from Alabama who spent a lot of time with me trying to help me understand what it meant to be Pro-Life. About a year after I did those conversations on abortion, he wrote me an email and said, "Can you call me? I have something I want to talk about." And I called him. He basically said, "I just wanted to share with you that my 15-year-old daughter came home and told us that she was pregnant, and my family all got together, and we had a conversation, and we prayed. And this morning, she had abortion." I mean, I thought I was going to faint.

And I just said to him, "Help me understand. Help me understand." And he said, "Look, what you need to understand here is that we agonized over this. We cried. We debated. We prayed. We had conversations with each other unlike the people who are Pro-Choice, for whom this decision is easy and casual." And I thought, "Wow. What he thinks is that most women who have abortions use abortion as birth control." Someone who is Pro-Choice looked at abortion as a casual decision and that they took it lightly.

What I tried to explain to him is that most people... the data says that most people who have abortions actually see it as an excruciating decision. He had no idea. And I think it shows all of the layers of nuance that rise in anybody's point of view, especially when the issues are so close to home.

RICHARD: So is part of the problem, a big part of the problem, that voters of one side or the other totally misunderstand the views of the people they disagree with and the motives?

DIANE: Absolutely. We aren't listening to each other, and the reason we're not listening to each other is you go to the media... Look at the media business model. These companies are just trying to survive. The business model is: if it bleeds, it leads. It is just much more interesting to show a white supremacist marching through the streets of a city or to see some extreme radical liberal deciding to tear something down because it offends him or her. It's much more interesting to show that than to show something that's neutral, where people are all agreeing with each other. And after a while, the crazies are on television, and the crazies are on social media, and thus we have perceptions of the other side that are really inaccurate.

ASHLEY: What's an example of that?

DIANE: If you ask most Republicans about the Democratic Party today, they will say, "Democrats are a bunch of elitist, woke socialists who want to take my hard-earned tax dollars and give them away to criminals and illegal immigrants and people who are too lazy to work and who want to take away my guns and who want to completely dismantle policing." Or if you ask most Democrats about Republicans, they will say, "They're a bunch of hypocritical, uneducated, deplorables who refuse to wear masks, sleep with their guns, deny that climate change is happening, and never met a Black person they liked." And both of these are wrong, but these stereotypes were on the ballot in our country, and they dominate our media, and they dominate our perspectives.

RICHARD: Right now, the country is reeling from a series of shooting massacres including the deaths of more than 20 children and teachers in Uvalde, Texas. From what you've learned from voters in your conversations, is there a path forward on guns, or is this just hopeless, this whole split on gun control/gun rights?

DIANE: Well, I think there's an enormous path forward on guns. The narrative in our heads is that the Right wants to walk down Main Street carrying their favorite gun and goes to a basement full of hundreds of guns in an unlocked cabinet, and the Liberals want to take away all guns and abolish them from our country. So, in the gun control chapter, I start with a story of a man named Jim, a voter from Arizona. He's an older man. He's a Republican. He's a card-carrying member of the NRA, and he told me that he got his first gun at the age of seven, a 22-caliber rifle from his grandfather. So I called him after the mass shooting in Las Vegas at the music festival in... I believe it was 2017, when 60 people were killed, and I asked him what he thought.

So, of course, the first thing he said to me was that he wanted to remind me that 99% of gun owners are not crazies. But then he surprised me. He said we need reform, that we need to get rid of bump stocks, that we need to get rid of the gun show loophole, that we need to make sure that people on the terrorist watchlist don't get the right to own a gun, and that we need to implement a mandatory waiting period for gun purchases. 80% of my voters support those changes, and there's huge common ground in this area.

Most of how you feel depends on where you live. If you've never lived in gun country, you probably want significantly more gun control. But if you live in gun country, you might live in rural America in a house that's in the middle of nowhere, but it's not all about fear. My voters who are gun owners talk about the Zen quality they feel from shooting a gun. They talk about a perfect shot in a way that I might talk about hitting a really great drive off the golf tee.

ASHLEY: Because we're told that all Trump voters oppose any form of gun control. True or false?

DIANE: Oh, false. Well, people do worry about a slippery slope. They worry that if there's a little bit of gun control, all of a sudden, the regulations will keep happening. But in general, no, most people who are gun owners believe that guns should only be in the hands of people who are trained and responsible and who are really good citizens.

ASHLEY: One of the most misunderstood groups of voters in American politics is Independent voters, and there are huge numbers of them out there. So tell us more about them.

DIANE: Sure. In the beginning when I was doing my research, most people identified as either Republican or Democrat. For the most part, the biggest shift was the movement of people away from their parties to become more independent. So, whether they identify as Independents or not, I would say that over three-quarters of Americans, based on my data, identify as moderates, and a lot of that shift is because people tell me that they are absolutely fed up with their political parties. People are trying to get by, feed their families, make sure that they're safe, and make sure that their healthcare is taken care of, and they're focused on their jobs, etc.

So they're not looking at this all of the time, but there is a general sense of exasperation that, on the Democratic side, the Democrats spent four years talking about Donald Trump and how he lies and lies and The Washington Post counting how many lies he has. And if you ask Trump supporters about that, they'll say, "Well, of course he lies, but they all lie." I mean, people are just fed up with politics. They don't like what they're seeing represented on either side.

RICHARD: Ashley and I are both journalists, whoa, and voters are deeply suspicious, in many cases, of journalists and what they're told by the media. Why is that? Why are journalists screwing up?

DIANE: When I surveyed my voters, 94% of my voters said yes to the question, "Is the media biased?" Now, if you're a journalist, you know that there's an Opinion section, and there's a Facts section in the newspaper, but readers don't say that. They don't say, "Oh, gee, I know which pages I'm reading now," and they also don't do that when they're watching television, looking at cable news, or the like. I think the other thing is that social media magnifies the radical perspective.

ASHLEY: Voter fraud is a big issue for a lot of people in this country, and experts say it shouldn't be and that there are few proven cases. So why the disconnect? What's going on?

DIANE: You know, Ashley, that's my favorite issue. My data says that about one half of the people who voted for Donald Trump believe that he lost the election, and the other half believe that there was significant fraud and that Trump probably won. Okay. So here's the thing. Let's assume that we believe that it was not a fraudulent election. There are two things you can do. One is you can throw facts and data at people. Well, actually, I don't know how you say that, 51 out of 52 court cases were thrown out related to this. Here's an article, here's a video, here's a book. I don't know where you're coming from. That's one thing we can do. The other thing you can do on voter fraud, and in fact on every other issue, is to say, "Wow, that's really interesting. Tell me more."

When you say that to someone, it's extraordinary what happens. You learn a lot that you didn't know before. There's a chance that that person will eventually say to you, "Okay, so you listened to me. Tell me what your point of view is." The biggest issue that people who believe there is fraud have is mail-in ballots. It's not, "Oh, I love Donald Trump. Therefore, anything he says, I believe." Mail-in ballots is the big issue and particularly a mail-in ballot in which you don't have to prove that you are the person whose name is officially on the ballot. People believe that's subject to fraud.

Number two, lots of people under the age of 35 believe that maybe the last election wasn't fraudulent, but there is the potential for fraud because why, in the year 2022, are we sitting around with a ballot and a black magic marker filling in little holes when we have the internet and we have the blockchain and lots of security. We learned that people feel disrespected. When they say they believe there was fraud and that there is the potential at least for massive fraud in voting, they get laughed at, and they get talked at, but no one takes it to heart.

So, for instance, when the Democrats thought that there was Russian interference in the 2016 election, what did we do? We created a commission. We put a famous legal mind on it with lots of others. We spent \$35 million. We took a year. We created a big book about what was going on with Russian interference. There's no bipartisan election commission with some prestigious person at the head. There's no research going on. There's no report. So people feel that it's imbalanced. A lot of these people have just experienced the potential for fraud. Their children moved out 10 years ago, and they're still getting ballots for their child in the state of Virginia when the child has moved to California. I mean, people believe that there are issues with our voting system across the board. So, digging in and really listening hard helps us understand that there's so much nuance to what we think is a set of extreme arguments.

ASHLEY: We're speaking with Diane Hessian, author of *Our Common Ground: Insights from Four Years of Listening to American Voters*. I'm Ashley.

RICHARD: I'm Richard. *Let's Find Common Ground* is a production of Common Ground Committee.

ASHLEY: Tell us what you think of our podcast. There's a brand new way to do it. Take our Listener Survey. It's a really helpful way to give us feedback and give suggestions on the show. Just go to [commongroundcommittee.org/podcasts](http://commongroundcommittee.org/podcasts), and you'll find a link near the top of that page.

RICHARD: Also on the website is the new blog by Common Ground Committee's cofounders, Bruce Bond and Erik Olsen. It's called *Stop the Posturing and Do the Hard Work*. The blog is about practical ways to reduce gun violence.

ASHLEY: Read it at [commongroundcommittee.org](http://commongroundcommittee.org).

RICHARD: Now more from our interview with Diane Hessian.

ASHLEY: A few weeks ago, we had a conversation with an author called Tony Woodlief, who made some of the points that you're making, as well, and he said the polling is often poorly done, and he's also quite critical of focus groups. What's your take?

DIANE: I listened to that podcast. I thought he was great. And my view is different in that I don't believe that the polls are the source of the problem. I believe that the polls support the problem. I think the problem is more in the media because we profit from telling the stories about the crazies and then having that amplified by social media, we begin to hear the stories so much that we think that everyone on the other side is absolutely insane. I talked to people for four and a half years. Among these 500 voters, I would say that about 20 of them were pretty crazy, pretty radical. But that means that 480 out of the 500 were regular, everyday Americans.

Let's make sure we understand the data. 78% of Americans are living paycheck-to-paycheck. They're just trying to get by. These people are focused on feeding their family, keeping their jobs. They're making very, very difficult tradeoffs. Their dog gets sick. They need to give the dog away because they can't afford to pay a veterinarian. I could give you a million examples of what's going on. But here, some extreme view, and they just feel that government is not serving them.

So you could feel very, very strongly about transgender rights, but if you have someone who's literally unable to pay their bills, and they get to the point where they feel that the most important focus of government is on giving rights to a group of people when they have never met one of them. They just start feeling that there's an enormous disconnect between what they're trying to do with their lives and who government is serving.

ASHLEY: That's something that struck me, is that what many of your voters do have in common with... one area of common ground is that they are very disappointed in politicians, and they don't think politicians are serving them. Absolutely. The easiest question to ask is: Do you feel the government is acting in your best interest? Are you upset about the divisiveness in our country? 95% of Americans hate the divisiveness, which is why the work that you're doing is so important. And there are just lots of other issues. Are you happy with your political party? 80%

of my database said, "I'm very unhappy with my political party." There is tremendous common ground on those opinions, and, by the way, the large proportion of Republicans answer yes to the question, "Should government help people who are experiencing trauma and difficulty in their lives?" Most Republicans say absolutely to that. What they object to is the notion that we're going to help those people forever unconditionally.

RICHARD: You spent more than four years in these conversations, often extended conversations with voters, Diane. What's the biggest surprise for you?

DIANE: That's a good question. From the beginning, I learned that if I just asked questions and had a hypothesis about the answer that I would be surprised, I mean, almost every week. I didn't just survey people or do polls. Sometimes I would do a true/false test. Everybody's favorite exercise was I'd do Mad Libs, like fill in the blanks. I had people sending me videos of what was going on in their neighborhood. I had people interviewing their family and their neighbors. So I think people participated a lot because they really felt heard. People would write me and say, "Diane, I'm really, really enjoying this because you're the only person who listens to me. My wife doesn't listen to me. My boss doesn't listen to me. My kids don't listen to me. But you do. So whatever you want to know, whatever you want me to figure out here, let me know."

So I'm not sure there was one surprise other than the fact that we actually have a lot that we could potentially agree on and that there are many reasons why our elected officials are just not going to jump all over that. I mean, look at the people who are moderates in Congress. Right now, those people are having a really difficult time. They're not running for office again, right? They're being told by their parties, "We don't support you anymore," etc.

It's very, very difficult to be the voice of the people, and yet a lot of those people who are moderates who are having a difficult time, no matter whether they're Republicans or Democrats, if they actually ran for office in a general election in the United States, I really believe that they could even get the majority of the vote. That's how sick people are of their parties. So I think that's surprising. That's surprising. My fellow Americans are, in general, not crazy.

RICHARD: You must be a remarkably charming person. How did you get people to tell you things that they didn't tell their husbands or their wives or their families?

DIANE: Well, that's the fun thing about being a researcher because my goal wasn't to change anyone's mind. My goal was to do what you just said. So it's how I basically set the research up. So, for instance, before I admitted someone onto my panel, I did a half-hour interview with each person. But I really wanted to understand them, and that I wasn't going to judge them, and I wasn't going to laugh at them, and I wasn't going to try to change their mind. And then all I had to do as this project went along was to live up to those ground rules. So I think it's just unbelievable what people will do for anyone, whether you're charming or not, if they feel that you're really trying to understand. And sometimes it takes a while.

I had a voter once, a woman in Florida, who wrote me an email and said, "I'm wondering if I can talk to you on the phone for about five minutes. I have some bad news." I was worried that she was sick. I called her, and she said to me, "Look, I've been a part of your panel now for about a year," and she was whispering to me. She said, "I just want you to know that I told you that I voted for Hillary Clinton, but I didn't. I voted for Donald Trump." And she said, "Here's the thing. My husband doesn't know, and if he finds out about this, I literally think he'll leave me." Then we talked a little bit about it and why she was afraid to tell me, etc. So it's not like day one she told

me everything that was going on, but over time, she had the courage to let me know that something she had told me way before actually wasn't the case.

ASHLEY: We're going to pivot now and look at one of the possible ways out of our political mess and misunderstandings, which is business, the business community. In recent decades, we've seen a decline in trust of most public institutions, and in many cases, businesses are actually the exception. How could the business sector help encourage understanding and work to reduce this rigid polarization, do you think?

DIANE: Well, your data is true, Ashley. Most people trust businesses more than they do government and more than news organizations. So business does have a huge opportunity. It's just no longer an option for businesses to hide on the sidelines on all issues. This is the time when businesses feel obligated to have some sense of social responsibility because their customers and partners want them to, because their employees want them to, and because, in many cases, they're the last bastion of where we really have trust.

I've spoken to a lot of businesses and a lot of corporate boards about my work, and when they call me, the need tends to be there is real tension in the company and sometimes even on a management team. In one publicly held company I was with recently, there were two senior executives who refused to speak to each other. And think about this. Remember, in the summer of 2019, Google literally issued a policy banning employees from engaging in political debate at work, and the following year, Goodyear got involved in this big controversy when it banned employees from wearing political attire, and then the governor of Ohio comes out with a statement that employees should express themselves freely. These problems are enormous distractions. They erode productivity, and they're expensive.

ASHLEY: So how should corporations deal with divides among their workforce?

DIANE: You cannot say, "Let's all just get along," because people have perceived that they've already tried, and it's been painful. So companies need to train their employees in civil discourse and how to do that. Instead of saying, "Let's not talk politics at work," it's helping people through the awkwardness of those conversations. It's a great thing for companies to do. I think coming out against the divide, it's almost like Mom and apple pie at this point.

RICHARD: You talked to a lot of corporate leaders. Are they way more concerned about polarization and a fractured workplace than they used to be?

DIANE: Absolutely. Now, I will say that I have a lot of data on voters. I have not done a research study on CEOs. So of course I have bias in my sample because the executives who call me and who want to talk about division are very, very worried about it. They're worried about the impact of division on their corporate cultures. They're worried about the impact of division on their ability to retain their most important employees, their most important customers and partners. And they're worried about it in general as just a distraction and a loss of productivity. So, for those people, absolutely, but then those executives are also American citizens, and like the rest of us, they're absolutely distraught about what they believe is happening in our country and why there is just such an enormous divide, and they want to know more.

RICHARD: You have some personal ideas for people who want to bridge divides in their own lives. What's been the response to what you wrote about that?

DIANE: I will tell you that I have thousands of emails from people who have said to me, "Okay, so I read the last chapter of your book, and I tried sitting down with my sister-in-law and just saying, 'Okay, I want to understand. Tell me more about how you feel about gun control.'" And they say, "It worked. It's amazing." We cannot expect our government leaders, who are trying to keep their jobs, to fix this problem because they're trying to run businesses, and they know that the extremes get the airtime.

We have to do it as American citizens. We have to have this belief that it's worth trying one more time to understand and to maybe even be surprised about how much we really do have in common with each other. And the reason I think it's good for businesses to do that is it's hard to say, "Okay, let's have everybody in my house do that." Okay, it worked in my house, but we have 350 million other Americans who really need to do the work. You can do your neighborhood or your city, but if businesses begin to figure out how they can help their employees with civil discourse, you can scale that, and Americans can kind of take back their country and what we really stand for by doing that. It's a great opportunity for business to help with the cause of creating common ground.

RICHARD: And is that good for business?

DIANE: Is it good for business? Oh, I think it's critical for business. What businesses need is a group of employees that want to work together, that feel that they can have open conversations with each other. They're trying to increase productivity. They're trying to be the place where anybody feels that they can belong. So we must turn down the heat. If we don't turn down the heat, it's a huge productivity problem for businesses because people sit around saying, "I don't really know whether this is the kind of company I want to work in," or, "Gee, I like working for this company, but I don't really like my fellow employees." We've got a brain drain now. We've got the Great Resignation. You're trying to hold on to employees. People feeling that it's tense to go to work is an enormous problem for companies. So, yes, I think it's worth their doing it, and when I see other companies doing this, it's not a five-day training program to teach people to say, "Tell me more," and to engage in conversation. It really isn't. I know that it works. I see it all the time, and I think we really do believe that those conversations are still possible.

ASHLEY: Diane Hessian on Let's Find Common Ground.

RICHARD: There's a link to her book and research at our website.

ASHLEY: Also, listen to more of our podcast episodes at [commongroundcommittee.org/podcasts](http://commongroundcommittee.org/podcasts), and please fill in our listener survey. I'm Ashley Milne-Tyte.

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

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