

RICHARD: National politics can seem hopelessly fractured and flawed. It seems to thrive on division, with elected politicians calling each other out rather than collaborating to solve the country's problems.

ASHLEY: But one group of up-and-coming legislators is taking a different tack. The Millennial Action Project is training young leaders to bridge the partisan divide and work together to transform American politics. This is Let's Find Common Ground. I'm Ashley Milne-Tyte.

RICHARD: And I'm Richard Davies. In this episode, we meet two members of the Millennial Action Project, Connecticut state representatives Devin Carney, who's a Republican, and Democrat Jillian Gilchrest.

ASHLEY: Each of them is working to ensure their state politics are more functional than the nation's as a whole.

RICHARD: First, Devin and Jillian, welcome to Let's Find Common Ground.

JILLIAN: Thank you for having us.

DEVIN: Yeah, thank you.

RICHARD: Tell us a little bit about Millennial Action Project that both of you are members of. Could you start, Jillian?

JILLIAN: Sure. So Millennial Action Project, the goal is to bring together Millennial lawmakers from both sides of the aisle to find common ground to policy solutions and to engaging folks in the legislative process. And they also provide resources on a number of policy topics and have just been a really great connector to colleagues both in Connecticut and across the country.

DEVIN: I agree with everything Jillian said, just a wonderful opportunity not only to work alongside colleagues from Connecticut across the aisle but also to meet folks in both parties from different states that have interesting and different perspectives on issues that Connecticut faces, and we can learn from each other. So it's really about getting ideas on the table and trying to find common ground and where we can all agree and try to do as much good as possible.

ASHLEY: Well, I was going to ask you, actually, why is it important to each of you to do this, to work with people who feel differently than you, at least on some issues, because it's clearly not important to every politician, including politicians in your own generation.

JILLIAN: I think, for me, growing up, politics was so divisive, and I've seen many of my friends, my contemporaries, not even want to engage. So, as someone who is interested in using public policy for the good of the people, I want to be able to push past that partisan politics and work with folks who have differing opinions. I think we actually come to the best public policy when

we do have differing viewpoints. So, rather than it being so contentious, my hope is that we can have these sometimes difficult but important conversations to get to really good public policy.

DEVIN: For me, I'm definitely very focused on public policy, and I love hearing other people's views. I may not agree with them, but I like hearing other people's views to see where they're coming from and to try to craft policy where we can get as close to a compromise as possible. Jillian and I are both people. We have some things we agree on, some things we don't, but I don't want to let those disagreements affect how we converse or how we think of one another because it's just that's what it is. Stuff's very divisive right now, and I'm hoping that folks like Jillian and I can tone that down and get to a place where we really do focus on solutions, we do focus on common ground and recognize that we are in this together.

RICHARD: Yet, nationally, Congress is often bitterly divided, and there is this problem that some people feel, in both parties, that the opposition is evil. Do you think that, in Connecticut, it's a little bit easier for you as state representatives to work across the aisle than it would be if you were in Congress? Devin?

DEVIN: I do. We are a small state, and we have interests in our state that, regardless of whether you're a Democrat or Republican, they're important to your constituents. Certainly a lot of the manufacturing jobs, big employers that folks in my district and other districts, probably some from Jillian's district, these are places they work. So we do have that unity in making sure our state can be successful versus a federal politician who may represent, let's say, Kansas, and there's some corn policy that someone in Manhattan may not agree with. So that unites us just based solely on the fact that we're a small state, and a lot more does unite us than divide us. We all want to see Connecticut succeed.

ASHLEY: Anything to add, Jillian?

JILLIAN: Yeah. I think what's maybe unique about the structure at the state level is our committee process is kind of like a small group. And you get this opportunity to get to know folks from both sides of the aisle as you really work through a number of public policies. So, in that setting, you really get to hear different perspectives, and the politics is really taken out of the equation. For the most part, it is policy discussions. I also think, compared to the federal government, we do have media in Connecticut, but I think the national media really does play into these two sides. That's what sells headlines, whereas, yes, that happens here in Connecticut that they position us as two sides, but not as much. So many of the issues we work on, we are finding bipartisan solutions to those policy discussions.

RICHARD: Could you give us an example?

JILLIAN: Sure. One thing is safe storage. In the state of Connecticut, safe storage for guns was a bipartisan piece of legislation where the minority leader actually was at the forefront of that effort. And, as we see at the national level oftentimes, when it comes to guns, that's not even on the table. Same thing, we just passed a very comprehensive mental health legislation for

youth here in the state of Connecticut. There was a team of legislators that came together, bipartisan, to push for changes, and I think in large part because there is a Republican member of the House who... it was her expertise. So we recognize people's backgrounds and what they bring to the table rather than dividing it by party.

ASHLEY: I'm curious as to how each of you came to be a Democrat, in your case, Jillian, and a Republican, Devin. Devin, do you want to just tell us a little bit about how you came to be a Republican?

DEVIN: Sure. I actually grew up a Democrat, but I became a Republican after I graduated college. It really was a lot more economic-based. I was looking at things in terms of job opportunities and taxes and stuff like that, and I felt that the Republicans were more in line with my views on that in Connecticut. I started getting involved in my community, which is a more moderate district, but it is... At least for the last 20 years, Republicans have been in charge in Old Saybrook, where I grew up. So it just was a natural partnership I developed with those folks. Really, in Connecticut, one of the things I like, though, is I'm able to really believe what I want to believe. I don't have a lot of pressure from my leader, for example, that I have to be in lockstep with my party. So I like that a lot, too. I still have a lot of views that are more moderate, and I'm not afraid to share them. I think one thing about being a Connecticut Republican, a lot of ways, you're able to do that because it is a more New England, sort of Rockefeller Republican type of place.

ASHLEY: Jillian?

JILLIAN: I was raised by two public schoolteachers. In our household, we were Democrat solely based on that issue. And as I got older and decided to get involved in politics, I think what drew me to the Democrat Party is a belief that government can work for the people. I have a mindset that you need to fix things from the inside out. I don't think the Democrat Party is perfect, but I love being a part of it and trying to make it stronger and better from the inside.

RICHARD: We've been talking a fair bit about finding common ground, and, Devin, you've mentioned compromise. But do you guys ever mix it up? Do you ever get into a heated discussion about something you really disagree on and is important to you?

DEVIN: Oh, yeah, without a doubt. Usually our major disagreements come regarding economic policy, sometimes public safety policy, but we've had long discussions into the night about these things, a lot of times, budgetary things. I know I've had some pretty epic back-and-forths on transportation. I'm the ranking member of the Transportation Committee, and tolls are a controversial issue in Connecticut.

RICHARD: These are highway tolls.

DEVIN: Yes, sorry, highway tolls. So I definitely have had some battles on the floor where I'd get frustrated about my colleagues on the other side of the aisle not seeing things the way we see

them. Of course, it does happen. One of the things with some of these transportation arguments that you might laugh at is when I know something is going to go long... like, this last session, we had an energy transportation bill that went probably four or five hours, I actually told my chairman on the other side of the aisle that this was coming. So, even when we're in disagreement, we work together to know what's ahead. It's never really ill-intentioned that I can see. I know there are some members on both sides that may come across that way, but for the most part, we argue and then shake hands at the end of the day even if we disagree.

JILLIAN: You might be completely on opposite sides with one issue, and then, that afternoon or the next day, you're going to be together on a completely different issue. So not holding a grudge is very important to doing this work, but for me, personally, reproductive choice, access to abortion, those are imperative issues. We don't see eye-to-eye, but that's not just a straight party line difference. There's folks in my own party who I disagree with. It's really recognizing that after a debate is done, you have to let it go because these are your colleagues and you want to and need to work with them on additional issues the very next day.

ASHLEY: Did it ever occur to either of you to be an Independent?

JILLIAN: I debated being, like, the Feminist Party, but not an Independent.

DEVIN: Yeah. The problem is you hear from people, "I'm an Independent. I don't like the two-party system." But what I've seen in most states with the exception of Alaska, Maine, those might be it, Independents never win. Even when they're on the ballot, they never even come close. You look at the presidential election. Trump versus Clinton was a very polarizing election, and you had Gary Johnson, who had some good ideas, I thought. What'd he get, 3% of the vote? It doesn't work. So I've thought about it to a degree, but there's just really no apparatus for it. I align myself more with the Republicans. I don't think it would be unhealthy, though, to have different parties like other countries do. A lot of people, they hold their nose and vote for somebody, and I think necessarily that's great policy, but it is what it is, and it would take a lot to change that dynamic, especially from a national perspective.

JILLIAN: I would agree that I think, down the line, it would be interesting to see if we could get to a place where there are more than two major political parties, but, to what Devin was saying, the other piece is once you're elected, you caucus with a party. In order to gain power in the building, in the legislature, in order to push the bills that are important to you and your constituency, you need to be a part of a party to get committee leadership to push the policies through the committee process. So, to be an Independent, you're really doing your constituency a disservice at this point in time.

ASHLEY: Connecticut state representatives Jillian Gilchrest and Devin Carney on Let's Find Common Ground. I'm Ashley.

RICHARD: And I'm Richard. Although he's too modest to mention it, last year Devin Carney was one of the recipients of the Millennial Action Project's Rising Star Awards. This is given to young

politicians who go above and beyond to build relationships with their colleagues across the aisle in the other party and partner with them in producing crucial pieces of legislation. Learn more about Millennial Action Project at millennialaction.org. Now, of course, before I do this, I have to look up how to spell Millennial, which is two Ls and two Ns. Right?

ASHLEY: That's right. And speaking of partnerships, we make this show for you, and we would love to hear from you on what you want from the podcast. We've got a survey up right now. You can find it at commongroundcommittee.org/podcasts. Lots of you have already responded with comments and suggestions, and we're taking all of them into consideration. Your feedback will help us make this show better. Now back to our interview with Jillian Gilchrest and Devin Carney.

RICHARD: Politicians, elected politicians especially, are held in pretty low regard by the public. What would you say to someone who went, "Politicians, you're all the same. You're all crooks. You're corrupt. You don't tell the truth"? What do you tell people?

JILLIAN: I tell them to get to know me first and that I want to hear from them. Really, to me, it's about door-knocking and letting folks know who you really are, so doing as many things as you can in the community, listening, being responsive because I think that's the only way we get past those stereotypes about how people see politicians.

DEVIN: I agree with Jillian. Being an elected official at the level I am, with 24,000 people, you do get to know them. So I rarely hear that from actual constituents. It's more other people who don't know me, and it does get frustrating because we sometimes will get lumped in with national stuff. It really isn't fair. When I door-knock, I get a little frustrated sometimes because people will say, "Democrat or Republican?" I'm like, "Well, I'm Devin Carney. I am a Republican, but I'm here to talk to you about whatever issue you have, and I am your state representative." Like Jillian said, "Get to know me." I remember getting yelled at by a guy at a town hall. I didn't know who he was, and he was like, "You make so much money. You lie." I'm like, "I make \$32,000 doing this. I don't make \$170,000 like Congress." So it's also about educating people what exactly we do, what level we do it at. Most likely, when you get to know somebody, elected official, at a more personal level, your views about them change.

ASHLEY: Let's make that clear to listeners because you both... As you said, Devin, you're not exactly raking it in. You work, right? Tell people what you both do.

JILLIAN: Yeah, this is a part-time gig, which, interestingly, even though it is considered a part-time legislature, it is full-time. When we're not in session... I know Devin is. I am. We're still responding to emails, and if folks need help with state agencies and getting services. That's the role. So it really is, throughout the year working as a state rep, I then have parlayed this... I am a mom. I have two children. Then I also teach adjunct at two local universities, and then I do contract work for a nonprofit here in the state of Connecticut.

DEVIN: I do financial planning and tax preparation. So it just happens that the major part of our legislative session, a lot of times, is around April 15th. So I'm working nonstop at that point. Even though it is a part-time job, it is, in a lot of ways, full time. My phone rings Saturday night. People expect... if they need help, they expect an answer. It's not something you can say, "I'm part time. I'm not going to help these people." It is full time, and you want to do a good job. These people, they put their trust in you. Even if they don't vote for you, you still are their representative. You are who they turn to when they need help.

ASHLEY: I wanted to ask you, talking about knocking on doors and people immediately saying, "Democrat or Republican?" have each of you converted, on the doorstep, somebody who has normally voted the other party? Has that happened to you?

DEVIN: For me, definitely. I'll use last election as an example. My district voted 54/45 roughly for Joe Biden, and that's about what I want. So there are people, and I think Connecticut voters are very... at least in my district, they don't just go across the party. They'll see, "Well, I like him," and I do have a lot of Democrat support for me, and unaffiliated, because they've gotten to know me. I don't know if I've ever convinced someone that wasn't going to vote for me to vote for me, but I've probably convinced people that weren't sure.

RICHARD: How about you, Jillian? I bet you convinced somebody.

JILLIAN: I have, but it's similar to what Devin was saying. When you knock on doors, for the most part, folks are so focused on the federal that when they get to know you and understand what the role is of a state representative, sometimes they're so taken aback that we've come to the door, we listen, we care, we live around the block. I've been asked so many times, "Where do you live?" I'm like, "I live right here in town. I'm one of the people. I live down the street, and I represent you at the state capitol." In having those conversations and in listening, I've also been told, "Wow, I've never had a politician say, 'I don't know,' before," because if someone asks a question and I don't know, to me, that's okay. My role then is to go back and try to get information for them and to get them the supports they need. How would I know everything? That's humanly impossible. So I think people respond well to that, and that crosses party lines.

RICHARD: Both of you have recently come back from the Millennial Action Project's Future Summit, which is a national gathering. Tell us a little about that. What is it?

DEVIN: It's basically a gathering for legislators, I believe, 45 and under from all across the country are able to go, and you learn from fellow legislators on how they've come to compromise or what they've done. You also hear from leaders from various industries about what they are doing to encourage bipartisanship and also what they're doing to help young people into the future.

JILLIAN: And knowing the role of state rep as well as we do from our own state, to get to meet our counterparts from across the country was just so powerful and really helpful. Unfortunately, what I learned about myself is I fall into the biases, too, that the national media

puts out about other states. To get to meet legislators who are doing the work in states like Arkansas or Kansas really shed a new light on how I see the work being done in those states and, now, colleagues I can reach out to to potentially work on policy going forward.

RICHARD: Even Republicans from Arkansas and Kansas?

JILLIAN: Even Republicans from Arkansas! Yes, I will own I had some biases going into that conference, and, yeah, I was pleasantly surprised and had to check myself.

RICHARD: Devin mentioned that the Millennial Action Project is for lawmakers 45 years old and younger. Are there age differences? Do you see older lawmakers as being more rigid or less creative, or perhaps the other way around, you see younger members of your own parties as being more extreme than some of the older people? Devin?

DEVIN: There's definitely different levels of expertise. I don't know necessarily in Connecticut, but there may be some levels of, "I know more than you because I'm older, I've been in the legislature longer." But I think young legislators definitely bring... we know what our generation is looking for, in a lot of ways. We know what our generation is good at. We know the issues our generation faces like student loans, maybe issues buying houses, stuff like that. So I think we can look at those issues through a different lens, plus, and I don't want to use it as a general statement, but we tend to be more technologically savvy and computer-savvy than some of our older colleagues are. So we know how to incorporate things like that into policy, especially education policy, stuff like that. So we do view things differently but based pretty much on how we grew up, when we grew up, the issues we're facing.

JILLIAN: There are extremes, also, in our generation, but I think, in terms of the legislature for folks who've been around for a long time but also in the party, for someone who's been in the Democratic Party for a very long time, there can be this sense that, "This is the way the party does it," but it doesn't have to be. I think Millennials bring a new lens, a new, fresh approach. We do recognize, as Devin was saying, what our generation wants, and we're trying to infuse that both in the party and then also at the legislature.

ASHLEY: Do you have a sense of how much your constituents care about you finding common ground?

JILLIAN: I think that would be across the board, too. On a large part, the majority of my constituency would be happy to hear that these efforts are underway and we're looking to work together because I think they're sick of the divide, too, that we face in this country. There are others who, like a diehard liberal Democrat couldn't care less, and there's folks who are diehard Republican who, doesn't matter what I say or do, they're not going to appreciate that I'm their elected official.

RICHARD: Yet we're portrayed to be a nation that is almost impossibly divided, or at least bitterly divided. Is that portrayal wrong? Do you think that people who you meet are more likely to be looking at you as a person rather than just as a Democrat or a Republican?

DEVIN: I think most people look at me as a person. I do represent a small amount of people, and I do hear from people, "There's too much disagreement." A lot of it is portrayed by the media that way. Jillian talked about this earlier, but it's all federal stuff. You get a lot of people who watch, whether it be FOX News or MSNBC, all day long, and they just kind of get into this mindset. I don't think that's good, and I think COVID, to be honest, has had a lot to do with it because people have been isolated for a long time. So, once they're getting out and talking to people, hopefully things will get better. But for the most part, for me, yeah, I get those people that are saying, "I'm never going to vote for you because you're the same party as Trump," for example, and then I'll get some people who say, "I'm never going to vote for you because you don't support Trump 100%." But for the most part, it is somewhere in the middle. I would say 95% is somewhere in the middle. They may disagree on a policy. I respect that. If somebody won't vote for me because of the way I view a specific policy, fine, and I've been trying to encourage people to read the issues, look more into why I voted the way I did or what was actually in the bill versus the one-minute headline that's on Facebook.

ASHLEY: When you meet younger politicians, aspiring politicians, say, in their 20s or even younger, do you have a sense of whether they, too, are interested in finding common ground, or do they feel differently?

JILLIAN: Again, it really does depend on the person, but for those that I've been meeting, yeah, that often actually is the drumbeat. They're sick of the divide and just the nastiness. I think people want to get back to a place of civil discourse, and how do we actually discuss the issues and not go after one another?

DEVIN: In the Connecticut legislature and in my party over the eight years I've been there, I've definitely noticed a lot of the younger legislators do have a desire to communicate with folks on the other side of the aisle. You're going to have a handful that don't want to, but I do think we do get along. That's definitely a big takeaway. We really do get along for the most part.

RICHARD: That's great. Thank you very much.

ASHLEY: Yeah, thank you so much for coming on.

JILLIAN: Thank you for having us.

DEVIN: Yeah, thank you so much.

RICHARD: Devin Carney and Jillian Gilchrest. Ashley, I was a bit surprised by two things in this interview that we've just heard. One is how much Jillian and Devin agreed with each other, even though they're members of opposing parties, and then also why. It turns out, and I guess

this should've been obvious, that a big part of their common ground has to do with geography. They both love Connecticut, the state where they serve and I also live.

ASHLEY: Yeah, and if there's something that struck me, it would be realizing that this is a part-time job for them, that it pays \$32,000 a year, but essentially, it's full time, and you're never off the clock. And also realizing how many prejudices members of the public have about politicians when they associate them strictly with their party and how both Devin and Jillian have to say, "I'm a person trying to solve your problems. Just get to know me first before you make up your mind about me because of the letter that comes after my name."

RICHARD: Yeah. Don't judge us by the R or the D that come after us, the Republican or Democrat. Another thing, they live among the people they serve, their constituents, and don't spend a lot of time hundreds of miles away, as members of Congress do in Washington. Speaking of our online community, it's commongroundcommittee.org, and when you go to the website, you find the Listener's Survey that we mentioned. Please fill it out. It's at commongroundcommittee.org/podcasts. I'm Richard Davies.

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

ANNOUNCER: This podcast is part of The Democracy Group.