

RICHARD: Democrats feared and Republicans expected a red wave election. It didn't happen. Why was a result such a surprise? Who gets the credit and the blame? How could the results impact the future, and what are the prospects for finding common ground in a Congress where both the Senate and House will have such small majorities?

ASHLEY: This is a special, post-election episode of Let's Find Common Ground. I'm Ashley Milne-Tyte.

RICHARD: And I'm Richard Davies.

ASHLEY: We hear from two of America's most experienced political thinkers, Democratic consultant Bob Shrum and Republican strategist Mike Murphy.

RICHARD: Both men have decades of experience with political campaigns, and today they serve as co-directors of the Center for the Political Future, the Dornsife Center at the University of Southern California.

ASHLEY: As you'll hear, Mike Murphy and Bob Shrum are good friends. While they disagree on many policies, they agree about the need to strengthen American democracy and reform primaries and voting systems.

RICHARD: I asked Mike Murphy the first question: what are some lessons from the election?

MIKE: This was an earthquake, this election, because it was not what was expected nor was it what was historically normal. By all accounts in a high-inflation midterm, the normal pattern would be for the ruling party, the Democrats, to be really hammered. Instead, the Republicans way underperformed the expectations, and that has created a rage. Not shock and awe, it's shock and anger within the Republican Party fundamentally directed at Donald Trump. So, for the first time, you see open criticism of him.

Now, he's resilient, but we are in a new post-crack-up Republican era, and it may really curb Trump's power. Now, will populism go away? There are a lot of Trump impersonators out there. So I'm not sure they're completely the same thing, but there's no question that the wrong track in this election was not just about the economy. It was an indictment of politics in general and some of the extreme populist hard-edge politics coming out of the Republican Party. So the deck has been shuffled now, and we're going to see where it goes.

ASHLEY: Bob, in the weeks leading up to the election, some pretty dire questions were raised about what might happen. Quite recently, the presidential historian Michael Beschloss said, "We could be days away from losing our rule of law." Do you think some of those claims of democracy being under siege were a bit overdone?

BOB: Yes. Where I think there was a danger to democracy was if we had elected a whole brace of these Secretary of State candidates who were determined to see to it that only Republicans could win in those states, no matter what way voters chose to cast their ballots. I think that was the biggest danger. And then you had people like Kari Lake in Arizona, and that race is still up in the air -- the Senate race has been called -- and she's another person who, I think if Joe Biden or the Democrat carried the state in 2024, would probably refuse to sign the certification that has to be sent to the Congress to count the electoral votes.

RICHARD: Bob, you mentioned Secretaries of State. That's a job that never had much attention until the last election in the case of Georgia, where the Republican Secretary of State stood up to Trump, who was trying to change the result of the election there. Just tell us briefly, what does a Secretary of State do, and why has this job become so important and even controversial?

BOB: Well, normally it's a ministerial function. You, in most states, help run the elections. There are a whole set of rules about how to do that. You make sure the ballots are counted. You then certify or ratify the results. Brad Raffensperger, the Secretary of State in Georgia, a Conservative Republican, was true to his oath of office and absolutely refused President Trump's request to find -- what was it, 11,780 votes -- "That's all I need, one more than Biden, and I'll carry the state."

You had the rise of Secretary of State candidates who basically said, "I will cooperate with the kind of MAGA theory that somehow or other, these elections are rigged. We'll have only hand counting of ballots," although, at the same time, in a contradictory fashion, they said, "We want the election results the same night as the election." Well, if you hand count the ballots, that could never happen. Those folks, they were trying to alter the role of the Secretary of State. And I have to say, Raffensperger is not my political cup of tea, but I have enormous respect for him and for what he did in 2020.

ASHLEY: Mike, do you disagree with Bob?

MIKE: No, no, I think it's right. This is a new era where we weaponize Secretaries of State. In the old days, some of them used to run the DMV, and so they were well-hated for legitimate reasons. But now they've become the tip of the partisan's spear in some places. It's part of this new, postmodern ultra-cynicism in politics where all institutions are suspect. Elections are rigged, the media is corrupt, the news is fake, and that is an acid upon the fine clockwork of our politics and something that Bob and I, even though we all know Bob's wrong on almost every political issue -- we've disagreed for decades -- what we try to do at the Center for the Political Future at USC is to remind people you can have a real tough football game, that's good, but you don't burn the stadium down if you lose. This election appears to be a rejection of that hokum, which is a really, really good thing. That's the tide that might be turning, and that would be great for our country.

ASHLEY: Do you think that, this time, we saw a stronger role for the center, for Independents and other people who split their ballot and voted for both Republicans and Democrats?

MIKE: Well, many obituaries have been written about the ticket splitter, which was a classic feature of American politics, and it appears to be having a small, green shoot recovery here. The big trend, other than populism, has been the growth of Independent voter registration, which is people who just don't want to swear an allegiance to either party. And, in almost every state, that's been growing for the last 20 years. I think there is a comeback coming of ticket splitting, but the counterforce is strong. It's the tribalism in our parties where, "We're right. You're evil. So we can do anything to you, and you have to stick with us or you're a traitor." So that's the battleground we're now going to face, particularly in the Republican Party.

RICHARD: Voters are always described, especially around elections, as either being Ds or Rs, red or blue, and yet, there are a lot of voters who are completely dissatisfied with both parties. So, Bob, do you think that the media's kind of got it wrong or that we are fed this line that we're always divided into neat tribes whereas, for normal folks, that's not true in many cases.

BOB: We have politically been sorted into tribes to a degree that we have seldom seen before. There was a rejection of election denialism in these midterms. There was a rejection of the idea that Donald Trump should just dictate candidates who, in many cases, were buckets of bolts. I mean, they were preposterous candidates, and you were supposed to vote for them just because they had an R after their name. If you look at New Hampshire, for example, Maggie Hassan, in the Senate, could very well have been in trouble but she ended up running against Don Bolduc, who was an election denier and who spent days before the election talking about children in grammar schools being forced to use kitty litterboxes. I mean, it was nuts.

MIKE: What? That's not true? I've got to stop reading those emails from Fox News. Maggie Hassan won convincingly, not by a little but by a lot. I do believe there are many groups of voters, women in the suburbs in particular, moderate Republicans, who are tired of what their party has been giving them over the last six years. One of the things that happened here was that they deserve it. So we didn't have the normal midterm. We didn't have a blowout. We didn't have a Red Tide. We hardly had a Red Puddle.

ASHLEY: We have a primary system that often rewards the extremes, right? Do you think it's time for open primaries where Independents can vote, not just Republicans or Democrats?

MIKE: Yeah, and we have some of that in California. I've always been for it. I think Bob has, too, on the theory that you make the primary marketplace look more like the general election marketplace because you're right. When you have basically two groups, and 12% of the electorate, 12-15%, control it, it turns the general election into a magic trick, where pick any card you want, you always going to get either the Ace of Spades or the Queen of Hearts. And that's one reason so many people are frustrated with politics. They don't like their choices.

BOB: Independents were plus two for Democratic congressional candidates, according to the exit polls. That's unprecedented. It's just unbelievable that Independents would break that way.

RICHARD: So you're both in favor of open primaries allowing Independents to come in.

BOB: Absolutely.

RICHARD: What about ranked-choice voting, where voters are allowed to number the candidates by preference? Is that a good idea? What about ranked-choice voting?

MIKE: I'm inclined to like it myself. Go ahead,

BOB: Yeah, we're going to agree again.

MIKE: Yeah, we got to find something to disagree on here, but, yeah.

BOB: I think it makes --

MIKE: It's good.

BOB: It makes a lot of sense. In Alaska, I think Lisa Murkowski will be reelected. She'll be reelected because of ranked-choice voting.

MIKE: You know, Sarah Palin's comeback was squashed by ranked-choice voting. It takes the tribalism out. It's a different incentive, and it incentivizes candidates to be non-tribal and reach out.

BOB: Yeah, and so you have Lisa Murkowski, who sometimes, by the way, for example, votes to confirm Democratic judges to the courts, sometimes votes with Democrats on other issues. And you have Mary Peltola, the Democrat in Congress who succeeded Don Young, the Republican who had been there for 50 years, and she's the same kind of reach-across-the-aisle person. Ranked-choice voting rewards that.

MIKE: I think a voting system like that could unlock the fact we're down to only a few dozen swing seats. It could take the 25 we have now to get it up to 50 or 60, which would loosen up politics in the House for more dealmaking the way it used to be. It used to be about 95 or 100 members of Congress between the most conservative Democrat and the most liberal Republican. Now it's narrowed to single digits, and ranked-choice voting could start to undo that a little bit.

RICHARD: Okay. We promised our listeners, Shrum the Democrat and Murphy the Republican, and I'm sure they tuned in expecting a verbal tussle between you two. Yet, not only have you been agreeing with each other a lot during this interview, but you're also friends, even though you worked in your past careers for opposing candidates. So tell us a little bit about that, how Murphy the Republican and Shrum the Democrat became good friends.

BOB: Well, first of all --

MIKE: I'll let Bob tell the story. I just want to interject. We tend to agree on process repair, on fixing the car. Once the car's working, we have very different ideas of what to do with the steering on policy. But, anyway, go ahead, Bob, you tell the story.

BOB: Yeah, that's what I was going to say. Look, the questions you've asked so far have been basically about: how do we protect our democracy? How do we make our democracy work? And I think we agree almost completely on what we ought to do here. I've known Mike 30 years, or more than 30 years. We ran campaigns against each other. We were for different candidates almost up and down the board, over and over again, but that doesn't mean you can't be friends.

You don't have to pick your friends by their politics. Increasingly, that's happening in America. I have never felt comfortable with that. So, when we were in the process of launching the Center for the Political Future, I called Mike, and I said, "Let's have lunch at this Mexican restaurant." I didn't tell him why, and we went there, and I said, "We think you should be the co-director of the center." And he said, well, he'd think about it for a day or two, and then he came back and said yes, and it's because we're both committed to a politics where we respect each other, and we respect the truth, where we debate from a common base of knowledge.

MIKE: Exactly. It's funny because people look at us sometimes in the modern politics like a freak show. "You're actually friends?" Well, the truth is I'm friends with plenty of Democratic consultants. It's not an odd things. It's a historically normal thing. The very fact that people find it weird is kind of an indictment of our system because we self-select. I mean, here's a fascinating statistic that I think explains a lot of the polarization of American politics. We have a little bit over 3,100 counties in the U.S., the key building block of the way we vote and our political system.

Of those 3,100 counties, Joe Biden carried about 560 of them. Trump carried the rest. Trump had 85% of the land area. Biden had 15%, but Biden had more votes because those counties tend to be bigger. And they're very different cultures in those two places. People live with people who think like they do. Biden's counties create 70% of the GDP. Trump's 85% of the land area and vast majority of the counties only create 30%. So there's this widening two Americas gulf.

I can sit in San Francisco and make a living with my brain and think, "God, those morons in Alabama with their fried food and guns, they're evil, got to do something about them." And then I can go into the Deep South where they never miss a recruiting quota for the military when there's fighting to be done in the national interest and say, "Oh, those liberal elites are trying to destroy America with their woke socialism." And everybody's very happy hating the other. That is the poison that the country's got to get beyond.

ASHLEY: Mike Murphy with Bob Shrum. This is Let's Find Common Ground from Common Ground Committee. I'm Ashley.

RICHARD: I'm Richard. We've got a special live public event, and it's coming up two days after we release this podcast.

ASHLEY: Yes, November 17th at 3:00 Pacific Time, 6:00 Eastern. Our podcast guest, Bob Shrum, will be moderating what promises to be a very lively conversation between Democratic political icon James Carville and former Republican National Committee Chairman Reince Priebus.

RICHARD: You can attend this free event live at the University of Southern California, but space is limited, so register now. Find out details of the Finding Common Ground on the State of Our Democracy Live Event at our website, commongroundcommittee.org.

ASHLEY: And if you can't get there, you can also register online to watch it live.

RICHARD: And if you're listening to this podcast after November 17th, go to commongroundcommittee.org to find out how to watch the recording. Now back to our interview. Mike Murphy gets the next question.

ASHLEY: What are the prospects for common ground in the country? Do you think the country is any less divided after this election?

MIKE: If the politicians play it right, they could take the real lesson of the election and run with it. I was a little disappointed with President Biden's news conference. It's understandable. Bob and I have both worked for a million incumbents like Joe who, you know, "Well, thank god you finally heard about my accomplishments. Let me review them one more time. You owe me your vote for these reasons," and that's natural psychology. I've heard a lot of Republican candidates I've worked for say that, like, "Well, I'm going to go tell them what I've done. They owe me their vote."

What I think he could've done a little more with is say, "This is a vote against splintering our democracy, questioning our elections. It was a vote to return to bipartisan normalcy where we disagree every day, but we can do it agreeably." So a bit of a lost opportunity there, but I think if people read the mood of the country right after this, I think it will get better, but slowly.

BOB: I would give President Biden a little more credit than Mike. We've got to disagree on something. He did talk about bipartisanship. He did talk about his desire to work with Republicans. I think he will make that effort. I think voters would actually reward Republicans who did it, voters in general, but they're -- and this goes back to an earlier question you asked -- a lot of those folks are terrified about primaries, about the closed primary where only Republicans can vote and where Donald Trump may come after them. Maybe that will decline a little bit now. But the idea of an Orrin Hatch, for example, agreeing to work with a Ted Kennedy, I think today Hatch might look at him and say, "You know, Ted, I agree with you, but I don't think I can get away with it with my Republican primary voters back home."

RICHARD: Ashley and I wanted to ask you a little bit about the future. Both of you mentioned President Biden. At the 2024 election, he's going to be nearly 81 years old. Anybody who has watched Biden closely is seeing a man who is clearly not as energetic or maybe even as sharp as he was when he was a chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee years ago. I know the Democrats did better than people expected, but do you think there'll be pressure on Biden to step aside?

BOB: Not a lot. There are some Progressives who are saying, "Oh, we've got to have a more progressive, more left-wing candidate to win." We've tested this theory in a number of places this cycle, Mandela Barnes, for example, in Wisconsin, who lost to Ron Johnson, who was the most vulnerable Republican. I've known Joe Biden for about half a century. That ages me as well as him. He has wanted to be president for almost all of that time. He is not going to walk away if he's healthy and if he has a decent prospect of being reelected, and I don't think most sensible Democrats who might run would actually do that if Biden is running. I think Biden's principal problem is now syntax. It's because the stuttering problem of his youth has returned, and so he has to struggle sometimes to make sure he gets the right word out.

MIKE: This is another one where we disagree a little bit. I think Biden's got a story of, "Look, I'm not perfect, but every time I go to the ballot, we beat Trump. We held off the historical wave. We held on to the Senate." He's got a story now, and it's not political failure, and that's very valuable to him. The problem he has, I think, just in the world of politics is, if I were the President of the United States, and I was doing pretty well, and I had a lot of things to talk about, and I just had a political victory, and I went to bed happy, and I woke up the next day, and I suddenly had four-foot antlers coming out of my head, and I went to do the press conference about, "Wait until you hear about my new trade plan," the press are all going to say, "Yeah, what about your antlers? What the hell's going on with the antlers?"

And so it's very hard, with the age thing, it's out there. It's huge, and the stutter, however you explain it, and I'm sympathetic to Biden in that -- I used to have a big speech impediment, so, believe me, I'm extremely sympathetic to him -- the way we cover politics now, people will not stop talking about the damn antlers, and that gets in the way of all the good stuff. Now, I don't think it wipes them out, but it is a thing, no doubt.

ASHLEY: This is a question about a different type of future. Something I've heard a lot in the last few days is that Trump's popularity may ebb. If it does, though, I've heard that Trumpism will abide, but what is Trumpism without Trump?

MIKE: Well, that's a great question. On one hand, you have the Trump cult of personality, "I'm the tough guy. I fired Gilbert Gottfried on national TV, so I'm a can-do businessman," the whole myth of Trump the Strongman. That's hard to replicate. That pop culture fame is hard to replicate. On the other hand, the kind of yahoo-ism of... it's tribalism. "Here's our group, here's the other group. The other group is bad."

"They're cheating, they're stealing your jobs, they're tunneling in from Mexico," because Trump likes to add icing to his cake of racism. That posture has imitators now.

Now, the good thing is the -- DeSantis does kind of a light-beer version of it. Hawley, the senator from Missouri, is trying to totally be Trump. There are imitators out there. Now, the good news, to the extent any of this is good news, is the imitators are cynics. They're impersonating Trump because they think that's how they get elected. And if the Trump formula starts to rot like old lettuce, they're going to change. I'll take a cynic over a madman anytime, though not with any great delight. I think that new Populist Republican Party, which you never hear about fiscal conservatism. It's all cultural resentment grievance issues. That has grown some roots in the party now, and it'll be a while to de-weed them.

BOB: I agree with that. I think Trumpism will survive even if Trump fades. Ron DeSantis, who Mike just mentioned, the governor of Florida, I think would be a very likely Republican nominee. Look, the Democrats went through something like this -- it was politically unwise, not morally corrupt, as I think a lot of this is -- in the 1980s. And finally, Bill Clinton came along and said, "We have to have a somewhat different kind of Democratic Party, not give up the basic values, but we have to sort of adapt it to the times we live in." If Trump runs and loses again in 2024, there'll be some rethinking in the Republican Party. If a Trumpist runs and loses, I think there'll be some rethinking, but it may take several cycles to get this out of the bloodstream of the GOP if we, in fact, ever do.

RICHARD: As you've mentioned, independence played a key role in the election, and leading up to the vote, ticket splitters, moderates, Independents, they didn't receive a lot of coverage from the media. That's one trend that came out of the vote, but what are others worth noting? Bob?

BOB: I think it's all the way back to 1934 to get a midterm election in a president's first term where the other party didn't capture any state legislative body that it didn't already have. That's unprecedented, and it tells you that there was something going on out there. There was a resistance to this proclamation of a Red Wave, of Trump picking candidates, of the overturning of Roe v. Wade. I think it was a genuine popular uprising. There's the old line that, "Dogs don't like the dog food." Well, it turned out the voters didn't like a lot of what they were being fed by the Republican Party.

Biden should've been the dominant issue. Dissatisfaction should've been the dominant feeling, but Trump made sure that he was center stage, and McConnell made sure that you got a Supreme Court that overturned Roe v. Wade unlike, by the way, Ronald Reagan who, in 1982 when he was appointing Sandra Day O'Connor, told his people that they could not ask her a question about her position on Roe v. Wade; that would be improper. I think he was actually being quite shrewd and understood he did not want to go into the 1984 election with a Supreme Court that looked like it was going to overturn Roe v. Wade.

MIKE: I think a couple things we learned was that the presumption -- this was what we call a wrong-track election. Most people say things are going the wrong track -- was no longer purely economic. If it was, the Repubs would've had their Red Wave. This time it was a disgust with the offerings, as Bob said, frustration with the creepy, Trumpy Populism. Another thing we learned is that the era of the pro-business moderate Democrat, a species that has been in danger for a while, is coming back. Spanberger winning in Virginia in that district showed that her cross-party appeal worked. The same thing in New Hampshire, one, the Chris Pappas -- you can go down the list. There's general election support for moderate, pro-business Democrats who kind of walk away from some of the loudest orthodoxy coming out of the House Progressives.

ASHLEY: What's ahead for the Republican Party?

MIKE: It's looking like it could be the beginning of a reformation, but we'll see. And it's going to go either Trump again or there's going to be a civil war in the party, and it'll be interesting, if not Trump, what it lands on for the great moment in American politics where we always find out who we are, which is presidential elections with big primaries. And it looks like we're heading to one, on the Democrat side if Biden decides not to run, and there's definitely, I think, turbulence coming on the Republican side, and that'll be good for the country.

So, even though I'm a Conservative, and I'm not wild about some of the people who've gotten elected on the D side, I am delighted that now the third great Republican ballot box failure is clearly owned by Donald Trump because I'm a raving -- as you probably can tell -- anti-Trump Republican. So I want to have that civil war, and it's now started in the party.

RICHARD: We'll finish with a common-ground-y question because we're Let's Find Common Ground. What do you think? What are the prospects after this election for a less rigidly divided form of politics? Are there green shoots when it comes to finding common ground in America?

BOB: There should be. The message of this election is that that's what voters would like. But if Kevin McCarthy has like a two or three-seat margin in holding the House, he's got a choice of going one of two ways. One way he could go is to try to reach out, get some Democrats, find some common ground, as you suggest. That would be good for the country.

I think it's more likely the so-called House Freedom Caucus will hold him hostage. You won't have one Speaker of the House if you have a margin or two or three in terms of controlling it. You'll have like 219 or 220 because any one or two people who defect can prevent you from passing legislation. So he may give in, and actually we may go through at least a brief period where things get more fraught. But there are people in the Freedom Caucus who say, "We won't vote to raise the debt limit. We ought to hold this hostage," which, by the way, could crash the economy and shut down the government, demanding that there be changes in entitlements like Social Security and Medicare.

Now, wiser heads like Mitch McConnell and even Kevin McCarthy, I think, understand that having tried that with Newt Gingrich in the 1990s, it's a really, really bad idea politically. But it's going to be tough given the math to avoid having that kind of problem, but maybe after you go through that, you'll get to a kind of saner place where people are able to find some common ground.

MIKE: I agree on that. Speaker-to-be McCarthy is in real trouble, too, in the caucus. Freedom Caucus is telling him, "In order to get our votes to be Speaker, we have to have an ejector button to fire you any time we want on a simple vote." He can't agree to that. So it may not be McCarthy.

The one bit of green shoots we can look at right now, it's highly likely in the lame duck session, they will pass the Electoral College Reform Act, which patches a lot of the very dangerous 1859's holes in the electoral college counting. That is the most unknown yet vital piece of legislation of the last few years, and there's now Republican support for it, 10 votes, led by McConnell. So it's highly likely that's going to get done, and that's really important. It's a little thing in the popular mind but a huge thing in the mechanical way we pick a president in the future, and it's an insurance policy against trouble. So I'll take that win.

RICHARD: Mike Murphy and Bob Shrum on a special edition of Let's Find Common Ground.

ASHLEY: We'll stay topical with our next podcast, too. We'll get some tips on how to have a more agreeable Thanksgiving with relatives or friends who have very different political views than your own.

RICHARD: And speaking of current events, don't forget to register for Finding Common Ground on the State of Our Democracy, a live event this Thursday, November 17th.

ASHLEY: Find out more about our live events and podcasts at commongroundcommittee.org. I'm Ashley Milne-Tyte.

RICHARD: I'm Richard Davies, and thanks for listening.

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