RICHARD: This time, we look at two recent reports about what people really think about the state of American democracy and our part in it.

ASHLEY: It turns out most of us are thoroughly fed up.

KATE: So, if you're part of this exhausted majority who may not see their views represented in what we call the "wings," kind of the more polarizing opposite ends of the political spectrum—and it's a pretty toxic fight in there—you don't have a lot of incentive to want to jump into that. That's a pretty exhausting space to be in.

RICHARD: This is Let's Find Common Ground. I'm Richard Davies.

ASHLEY: And I'm Ashley Milne-Tyte. We're about to dive into some data that will confirm a few of our suspicions about the state of our democracy and challenge others. And we're doing this through the insights of two guests.

RICHARD: John Geer is professor of political science at Vanderbilt University and manager of The Vanderbilt Project on Unity and Democracy. Kate Carney is chief of staff at More in Common, which works to address the underlying causes of polarization and aims to build a more united society.

ASHLEY: John Geer and Kate Carney, thanks so much for joining us on Let's Find Common Ground.

JOHN: Happy to be here.

KATE: Yeah, great to be here. Thank you.

RICHARD: So, John, let's start with you. Both of your organizations have been sharing some valuable insights about the state of public opinion, and it's often said in the media and elsewhere that we're really divided, in fact more so now than at any time in living memory. Based on what you know, is that true?

JOHN: If the constraint is within living memory, the answer is yes. We can see poll after poll showing huge amounts of polarization. The parties have become, to use a recent political scientist term, calcified in their partisanship. We're very much divided on key cultural issues. That division has grown over the last 30 to 40 years. If you take a longer look at American history, and you want to go back to the 19th century, yes, you'd find more polarization during the time leading up to the Civil War and then after Civil War. But right now, we're very, very divided, and not only divided but equally divided, that is that both those on the Left and those on the Right both see paths to victory.

RICHARD: Kate?

KATE: Yeah, I think our data would show that there is at least a perception that we are really divided right now. We've asked Americans words that they would use to describe our country, and the number one word chosen is "divided," 61%. The next word is "chaotic," 37%. So, again, not really positive words, and I think, to echo John, we're also more likely to see our political opponents as enemies, really, than as just Americans that we happen to maybe disagree with.

ASHLEY: John, the Vanderbilt Unity Index has been tracking Americans views not on the issues so much but on questions of trust in our political institutions. Can you share a few of the key findings with us?

JOHN: Sure. The Unity Index, which now we've updated it, and we can get it back to the early 1960s, is an effort to capture people's trust in institutions, people's trust in each other. We're also trying to capture extreme measures in opinion that is not, let's say, you disapprove of President Biden. What we really want to know is: how many people strongly disapprove? And how many people aren't conservative or liberal but are extremely conservative, extremely liberal? So we put this all together in an index and, not surprisingly, which gives me some confidence that we're measuring something real, is the amount of polarization and let's say the amount of unity has been on the decline since the 1960s, and it continues to go into decline.

Certainly, a tipping point was 1994, which makes sense. That was Contract with America, Newt Gingrich, and it continues. The low point, again, which should come as no surprise, was during the presidency of Donald Trump. We have seen a slight uptick during the time of Biden, not a huge uptick but some uptick. Also, I think it's important to note that the country has never been super unified by this measure. That is, we've always had our disagreements. But that's, of course, the stuff of politics. It's the stuff of a democracy. What a democracy is designed to do is develop a set of institutions that figure out a way to adjudicate our differences and develop policies. And so disagreement is part and parcel of democracy, and we certainly see that in the Index.

RICHARD: More in Common, the group that you work with, Kate, published research on the electorate that used the term "the exhausted majority." In what ways are many of us exhausted with politics?

KATE: Again, this term is from our report called Hidden Tribes, one of our foundational reports. In that, we collected views of over 8,000 Americans to better understand their basic values, beliefs, and ways that they're influenced by how they see the world. And that exhausted majority, we found, really makes up two-thirds of Americans. They're united not necessarily because they have centrist or similar views on issues or policy but really because, one, they're fed up with polarization in our country. They're often forgotten or not heard about in our public discourse. Many are so frustrated and exhausted that they've checked out completely, are not willing to engage in our political conversations. They're also flexible with their views and not as likely to maybe be as ideologically concrete in what they think, and they believe that we can find common ground.

I think, in your question of, what many ways are we exhausted or this group is exhausted, is just conflict, for many of us, is exhausting, and we've really defined or created this environment for politics that's defined by conflict and division, and toxic and really intense division where we hear, again, the loudest and most divisive voices, points of views are represented. So, if you're part of this exhausted majority who may not see their views represented in what we call the "wings," kind of the more polarizing opposite ends of the political spectrum—and it's a pretty toxic fight in there—you don't have a lot of incentive to want to jump into that. That's a pretty exhausting space to be in. But it's also, this division is seeping into several different aspects of our lives, which can be really, really challenging, to navigate our families, our faith communities, places of work, neighborhoods. It's not just maybe the political arena that we might have been at one point in time.

RICHARD: And this exhausted majority, about two-thirds of Americans, you say, not necessarily people in the political middle, right?

KATE: Yeah. We kind of have folks along the range of the political spectrum. Those tribes are traditional liberals, passive liberals, so folks that may not be as engaged, but if pushed, they may lean more towards

the Left; politically disengaged folks that just really aren't part of the process—that's about 26% of Americans, so a really large percentage of Americans—and then moderates, who are more on the center-right end of the spectrum.

ASHLEY: Are a lot of Americans less hopeful than they were 5, 10, 20 years ago? John, do you want to go?

JOHN: Well, it's hard to know. The reason I say it's hard to know is that the kinds of questions we're asking now and that Kate's organization's asking now, we weren't asking 10, 15 years ago because we weren't in that state of affairs. We did a national poll recently at The Unity Project where we asked people, "Do you think we have the ability to get through our tough problems? Are you optimistic about the future?" And about 60% of the respondents indicated they were optimistic.

Now, whether that's a high or a low number, I'm not sure what it is because we don't have a baseline to compare it to. But I do think that—let me put it this way. The MAGA segment of the electorate, I do think looks at politics in a very, very different kind of way, partly because they reject evidence in many cases. They are election deniers despite the fact there's no evidence for it. They think about politics in a very different kind of way than those even on the Left. Again, both sides have extreme vies, but we did a poll where we asked people, Americans, a national sample, whether they thought Joe Biden or Vladimir Putin was a better president. 52% of the MAGA identifiers think Putin's a better president than Biden.

RICHARD: Wow.

JOHN: 52%. That's just staggering. Now, that's hyperbole to some degree, but if you take the mainstream Republicans, that portion gets under 30%. So we do have this tribalism, but the MAGA-ites, as you might call them, really do think about politics differently. They're in their own media bubble. They believe things that we know empirically aren't necessarily true. How do we try to get them out of there? Because let's say you have somebody who's a conservative Republican, a Liz Cheney. Liz Cheney is not someone who's identifying with the MAGA. She might not agree with a lot of people, members of the Democrat Party, on policy issues, but they all believe in the Constitution, at least. They all believe in separation of powers. They all believe that the courts have a certain kind of role.

And that's just not true for this MAGA group, and that group really does concern me because democracy, to work, requires that we agree upon the evidence. It's kind of like a court of law. There's a body of evidence that both sides have to evaluate, and they try to put one spin on one way and put another spin on the other. But you can't just bring in things or make things up. It gets thrown out. Well, what's going on with this group is they're trying to make things up, so to speak. That's a big problem, I think.

RICHARD: But to push back a little bit, critics of the Left, the hard Left of the Democrat Party, would say, "Well, they're trying to pack the Court by increasing the number of Supreme Court justices, and they're trying to have a national takeover of elections, which have traditionally been run by states and counties across the country." Do they have a point?

JOHN: Well, those policies are certainly extreme, and I'm not necessarily going to endorse them one way or the other, but at least they're still based on a set of evidence and the operation of the Constitution. So one can quibble with what Mitch McConnell did in regards to making sure the Court had a lot of conservative justices when the opportunities arose, both blocking Merrick Garland, for example, and

then making sure that Coney Barrett got through, but that was all legitimate. That's just smart politics by McConnell. That's within the normal kind of disagreement between Democrats and Republicans.

Yeah, the Republicans got the upper hand, but if the Democrats were in the same position, I'm sure they would've done the same thing. So, instead, now they're turning to things like trying to pack the Court, but that's not unprecedented. Franklin Roosevelt tried to do it, as well. It didn't go down very well. It wasn't successful. But you try to change the rules of the game, but you try and change at least the rules of the game as it currently exists, and both sides agree, even on the Left, what those rules are.

ASHLEY: You're listening to John Geer and Kate Carney on Let's Find Common Ground. I'm Ashley.

RICHARD: I'm Richard. Reading the news is about a lot more than just getting the facts. Our friends at Christian Science Monitor believe it's their job to report every story with a sense of shared humanity, paying attention to the values that underline our shared human experience.

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RICHARD: So listen to Why We Wrote This at csmonitor.com/commonground and hear the stories behind Monitor journalism. It's a master class in news. Now back to our interview and more with Kate Carney and John Geer.

ASHLEY: Kate, what do committed liberals and committed conservatives get wrong about the other side?

KATE: We call this a perception gap, and we've asked and done research on this in a variety of different ways, but it really is the difference between what we imagine an opposing group believes and what that group actually believes. So, in other words, we ask Republicans what they think Democrats think about an issue, and then we ask Democrats what they actually think about a certain issue, and vice versa. We most recently did this around the topic of teaching U.S. history. We released a report at the end of the last year called Diffusing the History Wars.

What we found was that many Republicans underestimate Democrats' commitment and support in celebrating American achievements in an overall story of progress. What that looks like in a perception gap is 87% of Democrats don't think students should feel helpless or feel guilty or disempowered when learning about past injustices, but Republicans only thought about 46% of Democrats thought that way. So way more Democrats actually believe that than Republicans think. Conversely, Democrats very much underestimated Republicans' willingness to recognize failures in American history and the roles of actual minority groups and how they play in making our country better.

Over 90% of Republicans think we have a responsibility to learn from our past and fix our mistakes, but Democrats only thought that 30% of Republicans really thought that way. So I really think that what this shows is that, again, the more extreme polarizing sides are being presented as views as the entire party or electorate, and that is oftentimes where we feel like we're getting our information from about the views that are represented by different parties, where really it is not necessarily representative of all Republicans or all Democrats. And it makes it harder to really understand and see where maybe some common ground might actually be.

RICHARD: Speaking of common ground, John, do you think that most people are looking for examples where political leaders are working to find common ground through compromise and working together?

JOHN: I do think that. I think people want problems solved. They want our education system to be better. They want the economy to be doing even better. Obviously, it's doing well on jobs right now, but inflation seems to be certainly a problem. They want those things solved, and they realize that we need to have some compromise, and I think this country is basically, overall, slightly conservative, to the Right side of the spectrum overall, but people also want things to get done, and they don't want all the drama tied to people like Trump and others things along those lines. And at the end the day, we need to make sure we're getting the policies through.

ASHLEY: Each of you, what would you say is the most interesting finding in your research that most people are completely unaware of?

KATE: One that I really like to come back to that helps ground me, also, in all of these conversations is we found that only a third of Americans feel like they have a voice in the political conversation today, and a majority of Americans feel like both Democrats and Republicans don't listen enough to regular Americans. Ultimately, I think Americans, no matter what party you're a part of or where you come from, we have this underlying feeling and desire of wanting to feel heard and understood, and we're losing spaces to really be able to do that. Our perception gap research shows that we don't understand what the other side thinks. And so I think: how can we create spaces? How can we really make sure that Americans have spaces to feel understood by one another? Because, again, it's this unifying concept that I think we can all relate to, and it's just really much needed in our political debates today.

JOHN: Yeah. There's a series of findings, but one that I hearken back to, and it actually resonates very much with what Kate indicated—one of the things that we did at the Vanderbilt Poll is we asked people to rate their own liberal/conservative tendencies, and then we asked them to rate the assessments of our state leaders. How liberal or conservative was the governor? How liberal or conservative our senators were, and how liberal or conservative were their fellow citizens? And that was a huge gap, that is that people were much more moderate in the state of Tennessee than their perception of their fellow citizens and the perception of the state legislature. Our state legislature is very conservative.

So you have this problem that people have created their own media bubbles where, in fact, they perceive people to be far more extreme than they actually are. But then, of course, you've got this gerrymandering that's going on that's basically taking all the competition out of the political system and making a bunch of uncompetitive districts that allow people to play to the left or to the right wing, which is a real problem because democracy requires competition, and the public wants that competition. But, boy, we don't see it in our elections these days.

RICHARD: John, do you think that our democracy is as under threat as some people say it is? Has it been severely weakened?

JOHN: I don't know about severely. I think it certainly has been weakened. I mean, the fact that, still, a big hunk of Republicans do not think that Joe Biden won the presidency is a problem. There's a legitimacy issue here that worries me. I mean, the country's in better shape now than it was a couple years back. I think that's true. Obviously, the 2024 election will tell us a lot. I remain, overall, optimistic because the American public has shown good judgment, and some of Kate's data underscores that.

People are exhausted. I buy that. People want to get problems solved. That makes sense. And if you think back over the course, the American public has basically chosen pretty wisely. So I think we'll get out of this problem. And if people want to think about how bad politics were, read up about the stuff that was going on during Ulysses Grant's presidency in the South. It was just absolutely horrible. And we're not facing that kind of situation.

So, overall, I'm optimistic, but we are in a more weakened position than we had been because what Donald Trump did was he - there'd been basically a playing field that both parties agreed on. Sometimes you were very much Left, sometimes to the Right, sometimes in the middle. Donald Trump didn't want to play on that field and upset the apple cart in some ways. And there's about 20% of Americans who seem to be still under his spell, so to speak, mostly concentrated in the Republican party, and we'll see how that plays out. The Republicans themselves, you talk about polarization among the country, the Republicans themselves are polarized.

RICHARD: From one another.

JOHN: From one another because they have this loyalty to Trump, but a lot of Republicans—if you're Mitch McConnell, you could've been majority leader for four more years if Donald Trump had been reasonable at all. But because of the way he played things, the Democrats got Senate seats that they shouldn't have gotten. That's got to be frustrating to what I might call mainline Republicans.

ASHLEY: Kate, do you have some hope for our future?

KATE: Yes, I think, ultimately, I am very optimistic. I think it is really important, though, to recognize that there are really powerful influences that have a lot of incentives to stoke our division that we need to address and need to be aware of. But our research shows, and I firmly believe that the pieces are all in place, that we don't have to choose this perception of division that we've been given. Our perception gaps show that we are not as divided as we necessarily think that we are.

There are true divisions that are always going to be there, as John said. It's part of who we are as a country. It's part of our identity. But how can we really better understand where we might have more similarities than not and lean on those to help constructively navigate our challenges? And the majority of Americans don't want this type of politics. Again, they're exhausted, and they're frustrated, and they're tired. So this is something that we don't want as a country.

So, again, those pieces are there, and just to leave us all on a positive note, last year, we asked Americans if they believe we have more in common than what divides us, and 72% of Americans believe we have more in common than what divides us. So I think the American people haven't given up hope, and, again, I think it's about choosing what country that we want for ourselves and not feeling like we have to accept this perceived world that's being shaped by these forces, again, that have a really good incentive to emphasize our division.

RICHARD: Kate Carney, John Geer, thanks very much for joining us on Let's Find Common Ground.

JOHN: Thank you. Appreciate it.

ASHLEY: Right at the start of our interview, John Geer said not only is the nation more divided than it was but that, quote, "The parties have become calcified in their partisanship." That is an interesting phrase.

RICHARD: And the next election may not change anything. Just days ago, President Biden announced he's running for reelection, and if Biden wins, he'll be 82 years old when he begins his second term. His main Republican opponent, at least for the moment, is Donald Trump, who will be in his late 70s. So we could well have a rematch of 2020. Never before would the country be faced with the choice between two such elderly candidates.

ASHLEY: The polling we just discussed also appears to show that Americans are much more divided in party political terms than they are on policies. In the words of Kate Carney, "People are exhausted."

RICHARD: So perhaps there's a little bit of hope that comes in that finding, a thirst or a hunger for finding common ground and seeking renewal in our political system.

ASHLEY: In every podcast, we aim to find common ground, and we often share stories of people and politicians who found it. Let's Find Common Ground is brought to you by Common Ground Committee.

RICHARD: And our team includes Bruce Bond, Erik Olsen, Donna Vislocky, Mary Anglade, and Britney Chapman. Thanks also to our producer on the show, Miranda Shaffer.

ASHLEY: I'm Ashley Milne-Tyte.

RICHARD: And I'm Richard Davies. Thank you for listening.

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