

**RICHARD:** What a time to try to fix Congress.

**ASHLEY:** But that's what our guests on this episode are determined to do.

**DEREK KILMER:** Every time I go back home, it's very strange for me to have people ask me how I'm doing as though I've been diagnosed with a terminal disease just because I serve in the United States House.

**ASHLEY:** This is Let's Find Common Ground. I'm Ashley Milne-Tyte.

**RICHARD:** And I'm Richard Davies.

**ASHLEY:** Today, we hear from two members of Congress from the newly launched Fix Congress caucus.

**RICHARD:** Derek Kilmer is a Democrat from Washington, William Timmons, a Republican from South Carolina. This is their second time on our podcast.

**ASHLEY:** They first talked to us last year as members of the House Select Committee on the Modernization of Congress.

**RICHARD:** We recorded this latest interview last week right in the middle of the House budget showdown. The stakes were high. Representatives Timmons and Kilmer were in their congressional offices. The countdown to a government shutdown had begun.

**ASHLEY:** Congressmen Kilmer and Timmons, welcome back to Let's Find Common Ground.

**DEREK KILMER:** Great to be back with you.

**WILLIAM TIMMONS:** Good to be with you again.

**ASHLEY:** So the Fix Congress caucus has just launched. What is it, and why does Congress need it?

**DEREK KILMER:** Well, I think there's a recognition that Congress is often punching below its weight, and there's a sense that every American deserves a government and a legislative branch that mirrors their aspirations and that addresses their concerns and that works relentlessly towards solving the pressing challenges of our time. Our caucus is meant to serve as a vital space for members of Congress and staff and civil society groups to engage in some of those dialogues about how we improve the efficacy and integrity of the Congress. And our hope, our goal is to make the institution more capable of solving big problems for the American people.

**WILLIAM TIMMONS:** And really, it's an extension of our work for the last four years on the Select Committee for the Modernization of Congress. Obviously, we still have a Subcommittee on House Administration to continue to implement all the recommendations, the 202 recommendations we made, but they need support, and we are here to make sure that the concerns of the Select Committee are fully implement. That's our commitment. We're exploring other ways that we can continue to improve Congress, and it's a natural extension of our work on the Modernization Committee.

**RICHARD:** Can you give us an example of what it will do and whether, in any way, it will be different from the Select Committee on the Modernization of Congress.

**DEREK KILMER:** I think there's a few things that we've looked at. One is just recognition that while the Select Committee on the Modernization of Congress covered a lot of terrain, it didn't cover all the terrain. There are issues that, even as we explored them, we thought, "These are important issues that probably require more time and more attention." I'll just give you an example. We had talked about issues related to continuity of government, and, in essence, the recommendation we made is: someone ought to look more closely at that issue. That's an opportunity for the Fix Congress caucus.

**WILLIAM TIMMONS:** And whether it's money and politics, whether it's redistricting and how we go about that, whether it's ranked-choice voting, these are all ideas that the Modernization Committee discussed, and we weren't able to find agreement on. But we are also going to focus on—the number one thing I worked on during my time on the Modernization Committee was the schedule and the calendar, and unfortunately, we came up a bit short in my perspective with the calendar this Congress. So I think there's a lot of opportunity there.

Another is the Common Committee Calendar, which is still in beta testing. I think there's a huge opportunity there to de-conflict the schedule and to really give us more time to work with our colleagues in committee and hopefully have more time to work with our colleagues across the aisle just to build relationships so we trust one another so we can then work arm's-length transactions to try to find a path forward to solve some of the biggest challenges facing this country.

**RICHARD:** A lot of members of Congress are ideologues. Some are pragmatists. Do both of you think of yourselves as the latter, as just two members of Congress who really want to get something done and cut through some of the gridlock?

**WILLIAM TIMMONS:** I am. I view myself as a pragmatist. I say I'm an aspiring statesman. I'm going to try to find ways to work with people. If we disagree on 90 percent of the stuff, I'll work with them on 10 percent. Whoever I can work with on any issue, I want to try to move the ball forward. We've had a lot of spinning our wheels the last few decades on a lot of different issues, whether it's healthcare, Social Security, immigration. The biggest challenges that face our country are the ones that we've been virtually unable to make any progress in. So I'm going to continue to try to find solutions to the biggest problems facing this country. We have \$33 trillion in debt, and we owe it to our kids and our grandkids and our forefathers to try to be stewards of what we have been given and to leave this country off better than we found it, and it's going to take working together to do that.

**DEREK KILMER:** I think my constituents just want us to get stuff done. I think there's an exhaustion with the dysfunction. It's hard for our constituents to watch the evening news, certainly within an hour of eating, and they want us to try to make things work better. That's what I want, too. When I was deciding to run for this job back in 2012, on one hand, I found myself thinking, "Gosh, I'm not sure I want to touch that with a 10-foot pole when Congress is a mess, and I've got two little kids." And now, 11 years later, I find myself thinking, "The reason I got into it was because it was a mess, and I had two little kids, and, frankly, I didn't want their future dictated by a messed-up political system." So it's why I've invested a lot of the energy that I have in trying to improve our politics and improve the functioning of Congress.

**ASHLEY:** Speaking of challenges, one example of polarization is the current stalemate over the budget. A government shutdown seems quite likely at this point. What are your thoughts on this?

**WILLIAM TIMMONS:** I still have hope. I think there's a lot of legitimate concerns within the Republican Conference that are trying to find a path forward to address some of the policy concerns that we have while also funding the government in a sustainable manner that's responsible. I'm actually trying to push this concept of adding a commission, at least for debt, or maybe three commissions, for Social Security, for healthcare, for immigration. I think those are the three big drivers.

We keep nibbling around the edges of our problem. Again, \$33 trillion in debt, \$2 trillion deficit, and our defense budget is about to be eclipsed by our interest payments. So it's unsustainable, and we have to find the political courage to come together to address the main drivers. There's just a lot of moving pieces, and leadership is working very hard to try to find a way to keep the government funded and also address various members' legitimate concerns.

**RICHARD:** You mentioned leadership. Do you think the current leadership is more open to compromise and finding common ground than was the case during the last Congress?

**WILLIAM TIMMONS:** Because of the speaker vote and because of the manner in which we changed the House rules, it just has become very challenging. It's very challenging to get much done. People always ask me, "How do you like serving in the majority?" And I'm like, "Wait, I'm in the majority? I didn't know that." But we are trying to thread the needle. Clearly, the Senate is still held by the Democrats, and President Biden is in the White House.

So we cannot allow the perfect to be the enemy of the good, but we also cannot neglect these opportunities. We have pressure points, and we have to come together to try to find compromise and to try to find ways to address the biggest challenge facing our country, which is debt, deficit spending, Social Security. The Social Security trustees came before the Oversight Committee, which I now serve on, and they are screaming from the highest mountaintop that we have a huge problem, and we're going to go into austerity measures in seven or eight years, which is a 22 percent cut across the board for everybody receiving Social Security.

The longer we wait to address it, the harder it is. That's not going to be fixed on a Republican or a Democrat party line vote. It's not possible. We have to come together. We have to find a path forward to solve the problem. Same with healthcare, same with immigration.

**DEREK KILMER:** William just mentioned the need to solve problems in a bipartisan way, particularly on some of these big-ticket items. I think that's the challenge that you're seeing play out in the House right now. I think in part because of the way the speaker's election played out and the issues related to the potential to vacate the chair and threaten Speaker McCarthy's gavel, he's more inclined to work with members of the Freedom caucus, who, frankly, I don't know will ever vote for a spending agreement of any kind, certainly not one that can pass the Senate and be signed by Joe Biden.

So that's, I think, where we're struggling right now. All of us have had friends who were in a relationship where you wanted to say, "They're not good for you, and they're not into you." [buzzer sounding] It feels a little bit like that right now in the House where I want to tell the Speaker, as he's seeking support from people who are never going to vote for a spending agreement.

**RICHARD:** We're hearing a buzzer. Is that because you have to go back and vote or what?

**DEREK KILMER:** No, I think that means we're done for the day.

**RICHARD:** Good, good.

**WILLIAM TIMMONS:** That's not good. That we're done for the day is not good.

**DEREK KILMER:** Yeah, it's not good. So that's the dynamic that we're dealing with. I'll just add one other thing. The Select Committee on the Modernization of Congress actually made, I think, nine different recommendations related to the budget and appropriations process. Both William and I have been pushing for the Budget Committee to give those a hearing and to look at reforms to the budget and appropriations process. They aren't going to solve the problem that we are facing right now, but I think they'd solve a lot of problems regarding the dysfunction that we've seen in the budget and appropriations process for the last several decades.

**ASHLEY:** When we spoke to both of you the first time, which was about 18 months ago, the war in Ukraine was fairly new, and you actually talked about how that had brought both sides of the aisle together. That's not so much the case anymore, is it, when it comes to feelings about the war?

**WILLIAM TIMMONS:** Not really. I think there's a lot of people on the Right, on the Far Right, that are very concerned about the southern border. I just got back from Cochise County, Arizona. The number currently is 3.4 million people have crossed the border. They're asylum seekers, but literally 3.4 million people have been allowed to stay in this country pending their appeal process for whether they will be granted asylum, and that's in the last 30 months. That's more people—Utah has 3.3 million. There's 20 states in the union that do not have more than 3.4 million people.

So it's just a huge challenge, and you're seeing it in New York City, you're seeing it in Illinois, you're seeing it here in D.C. where the liberal mayors and liberal city councils are just saying, "This isn't sustainable." So a lot of the conservatives are saying, "Why are we sending \$100 billion to Ukraine when we've got 3.4 million people illegally crossing the southern border?" The only time I've ever voted for spending in my five years in Congress was when Speaker Pelosi broke up the omnibus, and I voted to fund the military and send money to Ukraine because I'm against genocide. I will always stand against genocide. This is not complicated for me, but it is becoming increasingly opaque to see whether we will have the votes to continue to support Ukraine.

**DEREK KILMER:** I guess the only thing I would add is I think there's broad support within the Democratic caucus for supporting Ukraine and providing assistance to Ukraine in the face of what is not just a territorial threat but a threat to democracy, a threat to an ally, and the potential precedent that it sets if we walk away from one of our allies and walk away from defending democracy. That may not get a majority of the majority on board, but I do think that there is a majority of the House that is prepared to support assistance for Ukraine.

**RICHARD:** You're listening to Derek Kilmer and William Timmons on Let's Find Common Ground. I'm Richard.

**ASHLEY:** I'm Ashley, and you probably have noticed there's something different about the sound of our show this week. We have, of course, changed the music.

**RICHARD:** Yeah, we've had new music composed just for this show. We wanted something a little friendlier, perhaps, more common-groundy, less ripped from the headlines than the theme we had been using for more than three years since the start of the show. We hope you like it.

**ASHLEY:** And if you enjoy our show and want to hear more, Common Ground Committee is a nonprofit that relies on donations to keep doing its work.

**RICHARD:** We're happy to say there's a simple new way to support this podcast and everything else we do at Common Ground Committee. You can just text 53555. That's 53555. Type the letters CGC into the message box, and hit Send.

**ASHLEY:** You'll get a secure link that leads you right to Common Ground Committee's full fundraising page.

**RICHARD:** I've tried it, sent a small donation, and it took the money right away. So it works pretty well.

**ASHLEY:** Again, that number is 53555. Type CGC into the message and send. Thank you very much.

**RICHARD:** We were speaking about the budget deadlock. Is it sometimes harder to talk to those on your own side than the politicians and staff members on the other side? Is that occasionally a problem?

**DEREK KILMER:** Not really. Listen, I'm someone who has an appetite for speaking to anybody, even if they have opinions that are different than mine. I started my day this morning with a group called the Bipartisan Working Group, which meets every week for coffee and donuts and to talk about whether we can find some common ground on stuff. And it was about a half dozen Republicans and about a half dozen Democrats talking about potential shutdown and where there might be a place for the plane to land, which is not to say that there's broad agreement, but I think it's important for us to have those discussions. One of the recommendations that the Select Committee was to create more physical space for that type of interaction. I actually do think that's important. The institution is not structured to allow for even just space for Democrats and Republicans to talk to each other.

**RICHARD:** You mean more meeting rooms or just places where people can talk?

**DEREK KILMER:** Literally, having space somewhere near the House floor where Democrats and Republicans can sit down and talk to each other not in the view of the C-SPAN cameras. That doesn't really exist. And in most democracies around the world, you wouldn't have Brian Fitzpatrick and Marjorie Taylor Greene in the same party. But we're in a two-party system here, and so those conversations within a party can get messy. And I'm sure, based on what I read that leaks from the Republican Conference, they are messy. Certainly, when we were in the majority, when we had Kurt Schrader and the squad in the same caucus, there were debates and disagreements, but that's not necessarily unhealthy unless it's negatively affecting the American people. I worry that a shutdown is going to negatively impact the American people.

**ASHLEY:** What you just alluded to leads into my next questions, which is: what are some other ways to get more cooperation in Congress outside of the Fix Congress caucus? Do you both have suggestions of other things that you all could be doing?

**DEREK KILMER:** Oftentimes, you see cooperation and bipartisanship around discrete issues. I just met with the American Cancer Society. I'm one of the co-chairs of the Cancer caucus. We have two Democratic chairs, two Republican chairs, and you know what we agree on? Everything related to trying to cure cancer and to treat cancer. Every member, every leader of that caucus is all-in. There are other sort of substantive policy-oriented caucuses that exist around specific policy issues where you can find that agreement.

Part of that challenge, as William just said, is, though, there are some big pieces regarding our long-term fiscal health, regarding immigration, regarding healthcare that have simply been very, very partisan as long as I've been in Congress, as long as Williams's been in Congress, and even before. I think those are areas where we've just got to create more space for dialogue in hopes that there are areas where we might be able to find some common ground.

**RICHARD:** How can technology be used to get things done and make progress in Congress? There's been so much talk about the potentially negative impacts of artificial intelligence, but I would imagine that there could be some help for your goals provided by technology.

**WILLIAM TIMMONS:** I'm on Oversight, and we had a hearing recently, and we had a thought leader on AI describe it in a way that I hadn't really considered before, and it's the amalgamation of statistics to provide predictive modeling, and essentially, if you can get enough information, and then you can use it to provide assistance in decision-making, it can really be productive. It can also be destructive. But I think we can use AI, we can use technology to increase our effectiveness by understanding a dataset more, and if you can find a way to better agree upon the facts, that's a huge deal. We have a lot of arguments about facts and about what my truth is, what somebody else's truth is, and I think technology can overcome that. And just implementing best practices in technology, trying to use AI and algorithms to create better solutions to the problems that are facing our country, these are all ways that we can use technology to help move the ball forward.

**DEREK KILMER:** Earlier, William mentioned schedule and calendar, as well. Every college and university, every high school in America has figured out technology to de-conflict the class calendar. We have not figured out how to use technology to de-conflict the committee calendar. It's one of our recommendations and one of the things that I think Congress needs to work on.

What does that have to do with bipartisanship? Well, the place that these discussions are supposed to happen is in committee. But the problem is members are in three, four committees at the same time, which means, for most members, committee becomes the place where you jump in for five minutes, give your five-minute spiel for social media, and then run to your next committee to do the same thing, not to hear others perspectives, not to actually defend your perspective, but just to give your five-minute speech. I actually think the use of technology to solve for our schedule and calendar challenges would help drive bipartisanship and help drive better problem-solving by the U.S. House.

**ASHLEY:** Has the congressional leadership expressed support for your efforts, for what you're doing together?

**WILLIAM TIMMONS:** Well, we wouldn't be able to even start this entire endeavor without Nancy Pelosi instituting the Modernization Committee, and she did it for one year, then another one. Then she gave us two more. That's huge. And Speaker McCarthy has been very helpful all along the way. Every time Kilmer and I had some serious challenges ahead, I said, "I need to get back to you on that because I got

to go make sure I'm not get crossed with McCarthy," and same thing went for him. So they have been involved every step of the way, and the calendar recommendations that we made kind of fell flat, but I think that's a work in progress.

The deconfliction tool for committees actually has—it's currently in beta, and committee chairmen are using it to inform decisions, and it is actually somewhat in use. I think it will get better and better, and then once that deconfliction tool is fully implemented, it will facilitate increased workdays and a five-day work week, which is what I've been pushing for for the whole time because when you're up here for two full workdays a week, you just can't get much done. Everything has to get slammed into those two days, and you're just running around. We need more thoughtful deliberation and less speechification in your five minutes.

**DEREK KILMER:** I thought that was a good sign, as William mentioned, that Speaker Pelosi was very supportive of establishing the committee and then extending its life. One of the last recommendations we made was to create a new subcommittee under House Administration to focus on implementation of some of the recommendations made by the Modernization Committee. That happened. Credit to the majority that they stood that committee up, that it's a bipartisan committee, and that we're working on implementation. Our view was that while that subcommittee's focused on implementation, this Fix Congress caucus is going to be able to dig in on some additional issues, engage some of the civil society organizations that are really invested in trying to make Congress work better.

**RICHARD:** We're speaking with both of you at a time of high dysfunction and also really bitter partisan divide. Are both of you hopeful that things can improve, that we're at a low watermark right now for Congress?

**WILLIAM TIMMONS:** I think pressure makes diamonds, and we're creating additional pressure, and hopefully we'll get some productive resolution out of this. But there's a lot of work to do between now and that coming to fruition, but I'm really working on including these commissions in the continued resolution or whatever the vehicle is because I think that we got to remove the politics from the biggest challenges, the biggest drivers of our debt, and the commission model, which is very similar to the select committees model, would really overcome some of those.

**RICHARD:** To be clear, you favor the establishment of commissions to try and fix problems with Social Security, with immigration, with the debt and deficit?

**WILLIAM TIMMONS:** Correct. The last time we touched Social Security was in 1981, the Greenspan Commission. They made a number of changes, and it pushed its life decades longer. And healthcare, we spend triple the average developed country, and we have some of the worst results out there. Then, with immigration, I don't know how many times we can fail. It's been decades and decades where we refuse to actually address these challenges. I think those are the three biggest challenges, and those are the three biggest solutions to resolving our debt. So I'm pushing for a novel way to thread the needle to find a solution that isn't procedurally blocked by very few people because the perfect can't always be the enemy of the good, and we need to find a bipartisan solution to these challenges because there will never be a party line vote to fix them.

**DEREK KILMER:** The reality is the American people want us to be successful in reforming Congress. Every time I go back home, it's very strange for me to have people ask me how I'm doing as though I've been diagnosed with a terminal disease just because I serve in the United States House. You get a sense of

that because of some of the dysfunction that we've all seen play out, not just today and not just in this Congress, but in modern history.

Every time a podcast like yours elevates the work that we're trying to do, every time there is a push by our constituents, that's what gives me hope. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks said there's a difference between optimism and hope. He said, "Optimism is a passive virtue. It's the belief that things will get better." He said, "Hope is an active virtue. It's the belief that together, we can make things better." I like that because it understands that we have a sense of agency. William and I are not just passive observers of what's happening in Congress. We've actively got our oars in the water, and guess what, so do a lot of Americans trying to make things better. So that's going to be what gives me hope, and that's going to be our continued push here with the Fix Congress caucus.

**RICHARD:** Thank you very much, both of you.

**DEREK KILMER:** Thank you.

**WILLIAM TIMMONS:** Great to be with you. Thank you.

**ASHLEY:** Congressmen William Timmons and Derek Kilmer on Let's Find Common Ground. And if you have feedback, and we would love to hear from you, you can always reach us by email at [podcast@commongroundcommittee.org](mailto:podcast@commongroundcommittee.org). I'm Ashley Milne-Tyte.

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

**ANNOUNCER:** This podcast is part of The Democracy Group.