

BRUCE BOND: Hello, I'm Bruce Bond, Common Ground Committee cofounder and CEO. As you listen to today's episode, please consider that producing it costs money. If you enjoy this and the other episodes of the Let's Find Common Ground podcast series, please make a donation. I'll talk more about this later in the program. Enjoy the show.

ASHLEY: Violent threats against members of Congress are up, and hate crimes have increased to the highest levels ever recorded.

RICHARD: Fear of the other side and what they want to do is being used as a tool by both Republicans and Democrats to win votes.

RACHEL KLEINFELD: But if we can get regular people to realize the other side is not bent on taking away their rights, we're much more likely to see each side upholding democratic rights and norms.

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

ASHLEY: And I'm Ashley Milne-Tyte.

RICHARD: We speak here with Rachel Kleinfeld, a fellow in the Democracy, Conflict and Governance Program at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

ASHLEY: Rachel says people talking across differences isn't enough to end polarization even if it can lower the temperature in the short-term. Instead, we need institutional change and politicians who come together to defend democratic norms.

RICHARD: Rachel grew up a long way from most of us in rural Alaska.

ASHLEY: Yeah, and she says that experience of being raised in a place with a lot of opportunity and a lot of guns helped shaped her interest in democracy and conflict. Here's our interview.

RICHARD: Let's start with the political danger of our current moment. A recent guest on our podcast, the former British politician Rory Stewart, said it seems like America could be on the brink of civil war. Is that taking things too far? What does your research tell you?

RACHEL KLEINFELD: Well, I can see why he would think that because Americans are extraordinarily polarized, we're heavily armed -- we have more guns in private hands than all of the world's militaries combined -- and we're seeing extreme levels of targeted violence. Threats against members of Congress are up about tenfold since 2016.

Local officials are being threatened. FBI hate crimes data for 2022 just came out this morning. It's up 37% over last year. That makes it the highest number since they've starting recording, and that's small business owners being killed for putting up a pride flag or neighbors killing neighbors.

So I can see why someone would think we're on the brink. I don't think we are because civil wars, at least the kind with one group facing off against another group, they depend a lot on the nature of a government. If a government is still pretty strong and pretty democratic, as the U.S. is, and law enforcement and military remain professional, you just don't see civil wars. But that doesn't mean what we face is pretty. I think what we face is a lot like what we saw in America in the early '70s or Germany in the early 1930s: a lot of violence, a lot of antisocial behavior, some clearly political and some criminal.

And it can become civil war if groups that are trying to weaken our government and infiltrate police and militaries succeed in weakening and deprofessionalizing those institutions.

ASHLEY: You write about affective polarization. Can you talk about what you mean by that, and is there another kind, as well?

RACHEL KLEINFELD: Sure. It's a pretty wonky word. Affective just means emotional. And so what we see in the data is some people think of polarization as based on policies. Do you agree or disagree on abortion or gun rights or women's place outside the home? In fact, on those issues and a lot of other really hot-button issues, Americans have a lot of agreement. Our political leaders don't. Our political leaders are very ideologically polarized, but regular Americans share a lot in common, even though they often rate them at different levels of intensity. Democrats care a lot more about gun control than Republicans do.

Affective polarization is emotional. Do you just hate the other side regardless of what they think or maybe because of what you think they think, which might be erroneous? And we're very high, in America, on affective polarization in part because people really misunderstand the other side.

RICHARD: Boy, that's really helpful to me, that definition of affective polarization, which I see bandied around a lot in writing and in podcasts like this one, that it's really just emotional polarization, that it's maybe how mad you are at the other side, right?

RACHEL KLEINFELD: That's right, and that anger can be based on policy beliefs, but what we find is that, actually, Americans vastly misunderstand what the other side believes.

RICHARD: You say that people talking to each other across differences isn't enough to end polarization. Why not?

RACHEL KLEINFELD: So, in the United States and in a couple of other countries that are really reducing their democracies, polarization has become a political strategy. It's being pushed on us from above on purpose to win votes. That's because we have very safe electoral districts in America. More than 90 percent of our congressional races are decided in the primary.

And when that happens, it becomes really useful to gin up anger from your base at the other side to get out the vote in order to win. But what that means is that it doesn't work so well to change polarization on the individual level because individual level polarization isn't driving this, and it isn't going to change it as long as this political strategy continues.

ASHLEY: Wait, so then what will? What are some strategies that might work to reduce polarization, especially if they've been shown to work somewhere else?

RACHEL KLEINFELD: Sure. The strategies that might work require me to talk a little bit about why we're in the situation we're in. Let me just bring up a very common depolarization strategy like having a whole series of dinners in a community where you bring Republicans and Democrats together to chat about their differences. Let's say that really succeeds, and you get maybe 20 percent opinion change where people think very differently than they did before, by 20 percent if you measured it.

But now it's the fall, and you have to vote, and you're in a pretty safe district, so your leaders were chosen back in the primary. So your options now are a pretty extreme left or extreme right candidate. Are you going to change your political vote based on this 20 percent change in your heart? For most people, they wouldn't, and also, even if their heart and mind changed back in the spring when they were having these discussions, they go back to their same friends, they go back to their workplace, and so on especially if they're in a rural area where there's just not many options. It's not as if they can change everything about themselves to fit this new belief. So they tend to slide back.

What we need, to get back to your question about what succeeds, we need change at an institutional level, not just individual. We need our political institutions to offer more choice with things like ranked-choice voting so that you can have two or three Republicans or two or three Democrats running against each other branded as Republican or Democrat but offering different options, and we need institutional change in our workplaces and religious places so that people have more complex identities; they're not shunted into these very narrow belief groups based on things that they don't necessarily still believe if they're changing their hearts and minds.

ASHLEY: Some of what you just described -- have some of these strategies been put into effect elsewhere? Have they worked? Do we have some actual evidence that this works?

RACHEL KLEINFELD: Absolutely. Ranked-choice voting, we've seen work in Alaska, for instance, where you have Lisa Murkowski getting elected as opposed to Sarah Palin or some more extreme Republicans. I'm from Alaska. It's a very conservative state but one that's conservative in a way that's very pro-Alaskan, and they wanted a candidate that wasn't just part of the national consensus. They got that option because ranked-choice voting allowed Republicans to run against each other.

The other strategies that we've seen on things like community resilience have been tried in many countries, including countries much worse off than America like Kenya in 2007 when they had a vast amount of political electoral violence. They brought communities together with leaders of different parts of the communities talking, so your business leaders, your religious leaders, your law enforcement leaders. And what happened was even when politicians would amp up violence or violent rhetoric, anger against the other groups, within these communities, these leaders would say, "We're not going to have that here. We're going to reduce these feelings in our own communities," and that has worked very well in many, many countries that are much further along in conflict than America.

ASHLEY: Which is great, but there's also this strategy called in-group moderation, right? Can you talk about that for a minute?

RACHEL KLEINFELD: This is when people within each group just take down the temperature, so military within military, the Right within the Right, the Left within the Left, African Americans within their constituency, and so on, particularly groups that are targeted for radicalization. We see this in-group moderation working all over the world and historically because people listen to people in their own group. When they hear more moderate voices overwhelming the more angry ones, it tells them what the norms of that group are and what it takes to be popular in that group, and it plays a big and useful role.

RICHARD: In recent years, the group that we do podcasts for, Common Ground Committee, has sponsored a number of public events that have brought together thought leaders, journalists, elected officials from different points of view for conversations across difference. How do these kinds of things

help? What kind of difference can leaders make, people who form opinions about public issues, by speaking across difference?

RACHEL KLEINFELD: I'm thrilled to hear you're doing that because there's really good evidence that the best thing leaders can do is call out their own side for breaking democratic rules of the road. So bridging difference is useful, and talking to the other side is useful, especially if they're talking in ways that normalize being kind or being just plain democratic, the kind of thing that John McCain did in the question-and-answer session when he was running for president. One of the questioners said, "Isn't Barack Obama a Muslim?" and so on, and McCain said, "No, he's Christian, and here's his background."

That sort of normalization of pro-democratic action by leaders really matters, but the best thing they can do is call out their own side for breaking the democratic rules of the road just as Biden just did, separating Democrats from the far-left rallies that were happening over the course of the last week about Israel and Palestine, or Mitt Romney's done, calling out fellow Republicans for supporting extremism. That sort of moderation within one's own side matters just as much, if not more, than simply bridging difference. But in general, it's hard to overstate how important politicians are to upholding norms and how important elites are.

RICHARD: You mentioned norms, which also was one of the themes of a very recent podcast we did with Richard Haass, who used to head up the Council on Foreign Relations. He talked about that and said that upholding norms is vital for a strong democracy. Do you agree?

RACHEL KLEINFELD: Absolutely, and particularly in America. America's democracy is extremely old, and what that makes up think is that it will always be around. It's kind of like the mom and the dad, and you're the kids, and you think it's always going to be there and be strong. But the problem with being so old is that a lot of things that we think are legislated are actually just normative. A lot of things that we think are laws are just people being used to behaving in a certain way, the way that George Washington stepped down after two terms, and a lot of people thought that that was a rule, but it wasn't. And when FDR stuck around for four, they decided to make it a law. We're now seeing the need to make a lot of things laws that had just been norms, including how we pick our president, which did just get into law with the Electoral Count Act change. But an awful lot of things are just norms because we're a very old democracy that didn't think to write those laws. So, as our polarization reduces those norms, there's no substitute for upholding them again.

RICHARD: Do you have any examples of how politicians of different points of view have come together and modeled good behavior, and this has actually made a difference?

RACHEL KLEINFELD: We're seeing an effort at this with Governor Cox of Utah, who's just beautifully taking all of the research and wrapping it together in a year-long effort as the head of the National Governors Association to try to get governors of different parties to come together on video, usually little advertisements, and talk about how they disagree on a lot of things, but they agree on the rules of the game and how you do a democracy and so on. Lots of evidence suggesting that that is very likely to work.

We've also seen evidence that when politicians can come together to keep out non-democratic parties or individuals, that plays a big role. We saw that in the 1930s when a number of countries became fascist in Europe, but the UK, for instance, didn't, and the UK had a fascist party, but the regular parties

just said, "No, we're not going to partner with you," in the same way that, in Germany, the regular, mainstream parties have not been partnering, more recently, with AfD, the extreme-right party.

Now, that cordon sanitaire has probably already been passed in America, and it's starting to fall apart in places like Germany as the edge party gets more power, but we know that that works as long as it can stand up. So, for right now, Governor Cox's effort, probably the best thing we've got, and I wish it would be replicated at many more levels of government.

ASHLEY: And we're hoping to speak to him later this month or next month on this show.

RACHEL KLEINFELD: Terrific.

ASHLEY: When pushing back against polarization, you've written that interventions should aim to reduce feelings of threat, not just feelings of dislike. Can you elaborate on that? What do you mean by that?

RACHEL KLEINFELD: Sure. The scholarly world got really taken with this idea of affective emotional polarization a few years ago, and we started measuring it, and all sorts of people started worrying about it, "Oh, we hate each other, and that's why we're seeing more violence, that's why we're seeing more democratic backsliding, and all sorts of things." But it turns out that, first of all, a lot of countries in Europe seem to hate each other just as much, but they're not seeing this kind of democratic backsliding. And if you look at the people who claim to really, really dislike the other party, that's not necessarily correlated -- it doesn't relate very well to our political violence or to anti-democratic norms.

So something is going on in there that's not just about dislike. And one of the things the scholarship seems to suggest is that it's not just that we don't like the other side. It's that we're afraid the other side is going to end democracy. So we think, "Oh, if they're going to end democracy, if we're afraid that they're going to take away our basic rights, and we'll have one vote once, we better do that first to shore up democracy." But each side's idea of what shoring up democracy means looks pretty different. So it basically is allowing each side to get away with further reducing our democratic norms in the name of upholding democracy like believing that the election was fake, and so now that's changed the way we do voting counts or what have you.

So reducing this sense of threat so that each side doesn't think the other side wants to reduce democracy -- if you look at the polling on regular American Republicans and regular American Democrats, there's a lot of support for democracy. Where we're seeing the problem is on some politicians and some very extreme parts of, particularly, the Right. But if we can get regular people to realize the other side is not bent on taking away their rights, we're much more likely to see each side upholding democratic rights and norms.

RICHARD: And yet, using fear as a tactic is exactly what politicians do in current campaigns to attract supporters. What would be a less polarizing way to win support, perhaps by being positive, for instance?

RACHEL KLEINFELD: Wouldn't that be nice? In fact, there's really good evidence that being positive is better than being negative. The Dartmouth Institute, their Polarization Research Lab has a series of research suggesting that negative campaigns just don't actually attract more voters.

RICHARD: Really? You better tell that to a lot of leaders of Congress.

RACHEL KLEINFELD: Well, here's the issue. They don't work, but the political consultants like them, and the political consultants get a lot of money off attack ads and so on because they make their money on campaign ads, and what works is actually going door-to-door, which is not where political consultants make their money. What we've seen since 2000, actually, is that it used to be you would win an election by going to your side, your partisan side in the primary, and then attacking back to the center and the general to get the most votes and the most persuadable voters.

But since about the year 2000, George W. Bush's election, there have not been enough persuadable voters to make that a useful tactic. So, instead, campaigns have worked on just getting out the vote. If they can get their side out, everything is about turnout, and that's on both sides. So to get turnout, one of the easy ways is to build up intensity. You build up people's emotional feelings that this election matters. People think that negative campaign ads build up intensity, and they might among some voters but certainly not among all voters, and they can backfire against the person doing them. But as I said, it's the political consultants making money from this, and the political consultants really like it when politicians do campaign ads because that's how they make their money.

ASHLEY: You're listening to Rachel Kleinfeld on Let's Find Common Ground. I'm Ashley.

RICHARD: I'm Richard. And now, a word from one of our founders.

BRUCE BOND: Hi, Bruce Bond here again. Common Ground Committee is a nonpartisan, citizen-led nonprofit dedicated to fostering more progress and less division in politics. We produce this podcast series. As a listener, you know that we feature interviews with citizens and leaders who have done the hard work of finding common ground, but we are much more than our podcast. We produce a very cool tool for voters called the Common Ground Scorecard that rates politicians on their willingness to work across the aisle. We host free events that feature national figures with different political leanings such as John Kerry and Condoleezza Rice who come together on public stages to find common ground on the most important issues.

In 2022, we were able to hold four events on college campuses across the country. We added to the Common Ground Scorecard those in 2022 who challenged incumbents for public office, and we produced 25 episodes of Let's Find Common Ground. We inspire and give people hope through our podcasts and events by demonstrating what productive political discourse looks like and proving that common ground can be found. And through the scorecard, we help you hold your officials accountable for doing just that.

All of this programming depends on donations from people like you. Right now, we need your help to raise \$25,000 so that we can continue producing our podcast series and expand its reach. Can we count on you for a \$50 donation? Any amount is appreciated, and if you can, please make it a recurring gift. To donate, just text in caps the initials CGC to the number 53555. Again, text CGC to the number 53555. Thank you so much for your support and for listening to this message. Now, back to Richard and Ashley.

ASHLEY: You sort of referred to this briefly a moment ago, but you said that a lot of European countries are suffering from polarization as well, at about the same level that the United States is, but their democracies aren't suffering as much. Why is that?

RACHEL KLEINFELD: I mentioned that America has a very old democracy, and one issue with that is that when we work on democratization in other countries -- I've done election monitoring in a whole series of

other countries -- we don't build democracies that look like ours because what has been found is that winner-take-all elections where you win 50 percent of the vote plus one vote, and you get the whole district, those are very given to political violence. And what we've learned is that presidential systems are very given to gridlock and actual coups and so on because when the president and legislature are different parties, you have a natural separation of powers but also some natural fighting that takes place that can just muck everything up.

Most countries in Europe have proportional representation in which you elect a party, and then based on the percentage of that party's vote, they get a series of leaders. So, if the party gets 31 percent of the vote versus 30 percent of the vote, maybe they get one more leader, but they don't get a whole country worth of leaders in the way that we do when you win a presidency. That means there's really not a lot of incentive to suppress the vote or to use violence to suppress a vote because that extra small percentage doesn't make nearly as big a difference in those systems.

They also have, in Europe, better efforts at social cohesion. So, when Germany and the UK started to have terrorist attacks and see far right and Islamist violence in their countries, they launched these huge efforts to support communities and do the kind of community resilience that I talked about as happening in America, these business leaders and faith leaders and so on sitting down in their communities to try to tamp down violence, but the government supported it at scale. It wasn't just small groups trying to do it on a shoestring as is happening here in America.

RICHARD: That said, most European countries are much smaller than even many states in the United States, and America has always been very diverse not just racially but also religiously and culturally and ethnically diverse. Isn't it much more difficult to bring Americans together than it would be, say, in European countries where the vast majority of people have perhaps more in common?

RACHEL KLEINFELD: It is and it isn't. America is vastly more heterogenous. We have so much more diversity. We have so much more difference of opinion. The spectrum is very wide, but in fact, when you only have one or two groups, it's much more easy for one majority group to kind of suppress one smaller minority group. So you have different but big problems in countries like that.

When you have so much diversity, there's more ability to come together around an idea because America's founded on an idea, not on a bloodline. So these countries like France and Germany particularly that are founded on Frenchness or Germanness have had a lot of trouble integrating the Turks or people from Northern Africa or what have you that have different ethnic and religious heritage because there's such a dominant what it means to be French or what it means to be German. America is much more broad, and so, yes, it's harder to bring all of us together. On the other hand, we are founded on an idea, and it's an idea that anyone can buy into, and if they move here, many of them have chosen to do so. So it's easier and harder.

ASHLEY: A lot of people of different political persuasions are worried about the state of U.S. democracy. Is there any particular democratic group that is less attached to the idea of American democracy than everybody else?

RACHEL KLEINFELD: People think of extreme partisans as being less attached. They think of a line, and if you're extremely right or extremely left, you're probably also more polarized, more violent, more against democracy, and you want your side to win. That is completely untrue. What we see is actually that

partisans want their side to win, but the ones that have been partisan for a while are very attached to democracy.

The problem is in a group in the middle that are often mischaracterized as moderate because they tend to vote for both parties, and they tend to support policies that are associated with both parties like economic distribution but also the idea of socially conservative American identity that's really about native-born Christian white people. This group used to be a swing voter group. They moved into the Republican party as MAGA voters, Make America Great Again Trump voters, but their history is as swing voters, and they seem to be particularly unattached to the democratic process, particularly supportive of authoritarianism.

Another way you can cut it is Garen Wintemute, a researcher who's looked at gun violence, has shown that gun owners in general are just as against political violence as anyone else. But a specific subset of gun owners who bought guns in the 2022 surge choose to carry their guns at all times. That group are much more supportive of political violence, and they're claiming to be willing to carry it out themselves.

RICHARD: The 2022 surge? Could you explain that?

RACHEL KLEINFELD: No, the 2020 surge. So, in 2020, America saw a huge growth in people buying guns, especially first-time gun owners, so people buying guns for the first time. There had never been another year like it in terms of vast numbers of gun-buying. Some of that probably had to do with politics, and some of that probably had to do with the pandemic, but the group of people who bought guns in 2020 look very different than the people who owned guns before. That group who bought guns for the first time in 2020 seem to be motivated a lot by fear, a sense of self-defense, a sense that the government might be coming after them or might be imploding, and the ones from that group who carry their guns on them at all times, which is possible in a whole lot of states -- there is no concealed carry laws, and it's very easy to carry guns -- this group is much more willing to not just justify political violence but say that they'll do it themselves.

ASHLEY: Also, just quickly, Rachel, what about age groups? Is there any difference when it comes to that demographic with regard to whether you think it's a great idea to live in a democracy or not?

RACHEL KLEINFELD: Yeah. Older Americans are much more likely to be polarized than any other group. That's part of the problem with all the blame on social media is that they don't use as much social media as they watch TV and radio, and they're much more polarized. But they're also quite attached to democracy on the whole. The group that we see real worries about their attachment to democracy is actually younger Americans. These younger Americans are not necessarily extremely polarized. They don't necessarily hate the other side, but they just feel really hopeless.

They feel like this system is not working. It's not delivering for them. They're not seeing it work in other countries. If you're a young American, you've seen America basically lose two wars, not be able to handle our economy. You saw a huge recession in 2008 that probably affected your parents' lives, and then you saw a pandemic that we performed worse in than many, many other countries. So it's not surprising that young people are pretty disillusioned with democracy as a system, and of course, they weren't alive when the totalitarian systems of the Soviet Union and so on were most strong. They don't know just how bad it can get, but what they see, they don't like.

RICHARD: We want to ask you a couple of personal questions about how you got so interested in the research that you do. You were raised in a log cabin on a dirt road in Fairbanks, Alaska. Tell us more. Does that have anything to do with your interest?

RACHEL KLEINFELD: Sure. I'll correct. In Alaska, it's only a "cabin" if you don't have an indoor toilet. We did have indoor toilets, so it's a log house in Alaska, but the rest is all true. I think I grew up in a very, very education-oriented family in a place that provided a lot of room for opportunity. There's not a lot of places and times in the world where a little Jewish girl in a pretty rural place could aspire to the things I aspired to. So I really value America, and I want it to work, and I'm also quite aware of what happens when democracies don't work.

When I was 16, I went off to Russia for various reasons, but Russia was falling apart at the time. It was 1992, and I saw really up close and personal what happens when a country falls completely apart into, basically, anarchy, what happens to the people there. That really set me in a space where I was interested in this, and I felt like I could do something about it.

But I also was raised around a lot of guns. My family had guns. My neighbors all had guns. I had guns pulled on me many times as a child. So I think it gave me a certain comfort level around dealing with violence that let me work on these issues of democracy and violence in a way that a lot of other people weren't willing to.

ASHLEY: Hang on. You had guns pulled on you as a child?

RACHEL KLEINFELD: Our neighbors were all heavily armed and often drunk. They would sometimes shoot across the road or think I was a moose or not like it if I was selling -- I'm Jewish, but I went to a Catholic school, and we would sell magazine subscriptions to raise money for the school. And if you passed a No Trespassing sign, they would shoot in the air to tell you that was a bad idea. Yeah, there were a whole series of times when I was at a rifle end as a kid.

RICHARD: But you survived.

RACHEL KLEINFELD: Threats and justification for violence are not the same as attacks, and it's one of the things I learned in a very personal way. These are different things, and you have to treat them differently.

RICHARD: Thank you very much.

RACHEL KLEINFELD: Thank you, Richard. It's been a real pleasure talking with both of you.

ASHLEY: Rachel Kleinfeld on Let's Find Common Ground. And we couldn't bring you this podcast without the team at Common Ground Committee.

RICHARD: And the team members are Bruce Bond, Erik Olsen, Donna Vislocky, Mary Anglade, Hannah Weston, and Britney Chapman, and thanks, as always, to our producer, Miranda Shafer. I'm Richard Davies.

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

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