

ASHLEY: Hey, it's Ashley. We would like to hear from you. What are your favorite episodes, and how can we spread the Common Ground message? Our ask for help coming up later in the show.

RICHARD: In this episode, what the voters told us in the election, insights from two reporters who covered the front lines of the campaign and spoke to large numbers of voters, election workers, and politicians from all sides. This is Let's Find Common Ground. I'm Richard Davies.

ASHLEY: I'm Ashley Milne-Tyte. Turnout in this election from both Democrats and Republicans was at a record high. Interest in politics is much greater than it was. We ask how divided the country is or isn't.

RICHARD: In this episode, we go beyond the Beltway and find out what happened in swing states.

ASHLEY: Our guests are Christa Case Bryant and Story Hinckley, both politics reporters with The Christian Science Monitor. Richard, you get the first question.

RICHARD: In his first speech as President-elect, Joe Biden talked about his hope for a nation unified, strengthened, and healed. With America so deeply divided, that's a pretty tall order, isn't it?

CHRISTA: Yes. I think it was a step in the right direction, though. Directly addressing Trump voters by saying, "I understand your disappointment," was encouraging, and especially his point about saying that our opponents are not our enemies; they are Americans, and we're all Americans, and we need to listen to each other and put aside the harsh rhetoric. I think those were all good notes to sound. I do think it's going to be a big job, maybe even a little bigger than Biden indicated in his speech on Saturday night because I would characterize a lot of Trump voters as not necessarily feeling disappointed as much as feeling like they're not totally sure that the media was right in calling it for Biden when the races were so close in a number of states.

A lot of Democrats as well as Republicans, including high Republican officials, have called out Mr. Trump and said there are not widespread irregularities. But I think there's just a need right now to really assure Americans, particularly those who voted for Trump, that we all agree that all the legal votes should be counted and any votes that were not following election laws should not be counted. And of course, we're all on the same page with that, and I assure you that that is the case.

RICHARD: But President Trump has made claims about voter fraud, especially with absentee or mail-in ballots. Story, you were at a vote count in suburban Bucks County, Pennsylvania. How easy is it for one side or the other to add to their total or commit vote fraud?

STORY: I asked that exact question to the state employee who was touring me. I said, "What would you say to somebody who thinks that this election could be rigged or stolen? What would you say to them?" And he basically walked me through all the steps that are taken to ensure that the results are counted fairly and accurately. It is impossible if not incredibly difficult to affect the vote counting, at least from what I saw in Bucks County, and Bucks County ended up being pretty pivotal to the win of Pennsylvania. It's a Philadelphia suburb.

Each candidate is allowed to have one poll observer inside of the counting room at all times, and on top of that, each party gets one person. So, essentially, there would be two Trump watchers and two Biden watchers. I saw those poll watchers walking through, at all times. There's multiple camera angles in the counting room. They walked me through all the security measures. I mean, some of the employees with the county aren't even allowed in there. The guy touring me, we had to look through the window and on the TV scanners because, at the end of the day, they don't even let the janitor in, which was incredibly obvious because the room looked very gross.

ASHLEY: Yeah, I read that in your piece, and I wondered if it was serious.

STORY: Oh, yeah. It looked pretty... I was like, "Oh, I believe you that the janitor hasn't been in there."

ASHLEY: Christa, you've written about Pennsylvania and its voting system. What do you think?

CHRISTA: There's just a confluence of factors that make Pennsylvania particularly ripe for legal challenges or concerns, at least. I'm not saying that it makes it ripe for legal victories, but I think there's a number of reasons why there's been so much attention on Pennsylvania. Of course, because it such a tightly contested state, that automatically makes it more likely to be scrutinized. So I knew that, but I still had read that rates of known voter fraud were just extremely low. I think one 0.0001% or something, in federal elections, at least. It tended to happen more, when it did happen, at the local level.

But one case that I found out about that I thought was interesting was in Philadelphia, there was a special election in 1993, so not ancient times by any means. It was a special election to fill a seat in the state legislature, and the Democrat claimed victory, took his seat, and there was a court challenge from the Republicans. And a federal judge ended up finding "massive absentee ballot fraud, deception, intimidation, harassment, and forgery" on the part of the victorious Democratic candidate who was forced to relinquish his seat to his Republican opponent. What I just quoted from was a front-page article in The New York Times. It wasn't some crazy, alt-right blogger. It was a legitimate case in which this had been found.

I'm not saying at all that that means that this year's result in Pennsylvania is not right. I just think, for a Conservative voter who lives in Pennsylvania and is aware of that kind of history, and in a year when there's just been a massive spike in mail-in balloting, I just think it's that much more important to examine the claims that are being brought. And even if they are baseless, it's all the more important to examine them thoroughly and fairly and respectfully and present the known evidence. And I think that's particularly true in Pennsylvania.

RICHARD: Do you think that'll take time?

CHRISTA: Oh, for sure. Yeah.

STORY: I also think the fact that the country employees actually take offense to the idea that fraud is very prominent and easily achievable within their county... These are all poll workers who are volunteering to work overtime. They take an oath before they begin counting, and he made the point, they are government employees; they're not politicians. They've been working really hard, and they find it pretty offensive, the claim that their work is not accurate.

ASHLEY: Yeah. What do each of you think most readers or TV news viewers don't understand about their fellow Americans who vote differently?

CHRISTA: I've just seen so many comments on Facebook from liberal friends who are shocked by how much support Trump got after four years. I saw one friend, he said that eight million more people voted for Trump this time around than four years ago, and he just couldn't understand how that could possibly be after everything we've seen over the past four years. I do think that that's something to be taken seriously because, even if Mr. Biden is inaugurated without any problems in the next couple of months, that force, that dynamic will still be present.

I think that's why Mr. Biden's comment on Saturday night that we need to listen to each other is so important because, if that many people felt strongly enough about the Trump administration's track record or, probably more likely, they felt that much fear about a progressive agenda and what that might mean for America, that dynamic's not going to just automatically disappear when Mr. Trump leaves the White House with his suitcases. I think it's really important for both politicians, as well as journalists, as well as average voters to understand what the reasons were that led so many people to vote for Trump. I think they appreciated his reducing regulations, cutting taxes, willing to take a stand for America and American interests, willing to stand up to China even if it hurt them, like Midwest farmers.

STORY: To Christa's point, I do think that, unfortunately, we are as divided as someone who does not do the work that Christa and I do for a living would assume. I would love to say that that's not the case, but it is. And there is such a divide between who people think should run this country and which party people think is best equipped to run this

country. But when you really start talking to people, you realize that their underlying motives for seeking such a candidate or seeking such a party are often quite similar.

Most people have the same motivations. They want their family to be safe. They want a prosperous future for their children. They want a good-paying job and to be able to afford food for their family. So they start with these same motivations, but then they go about how to achieve them in different ways. They think that different parties or different politicians can achieve what it is that they want.

RICHARD: The largest single group of self-identified voters in the United States are Independents. Story, what about people who call themselves Independents who you met during this year of campaigning? Were they truly Independent?

STORY: Right. I also see this as an encouraging sign, is that many, many people who I meet and talk to describe themselves as Independent. They say that they vote across the aisle. But then, you learn as a journalist to really get specific, and you say, "Okay, but then who have you voted for president in the last three presidential elections?" And more often than not, people say Obama, Obama, Clinton, or McCain, Romney, Trump. But I think it's promising that so many Americans like to think of themselves as Independents.

ASHLEY: What about neighbors and neighbors? What about people you've met in the very same neighborhoods who vote differently? Are they maintaining relationships with their near neighbors, or are they falling out over this?

STORY: Yeah, I asked that question a lot, and a lot of people tell me that they've been friends with neighbors and family and other people in their town who they've always known are Republicans, and they're Democrats, or vice versa. But they say that really everything changed four years ago, and it's harder to have friendships when you know people are of a different political stripe than it was before.

CHRISTA: I think that's totally true. I found a poll that was done just a few months into Trump's presidency in which 20% of Americans said they'd already had friendships or relationships damaged over disagreements about politics. That was in a piece I recently did about two women who are both named Janet. They're sorority sisters from the University of Southern California back in the 1960s, and they've been friends ever since. Their politics have evolved in opposite directions, and it was really interesting probing what they felt had enabled their friendship to have the resilience to continue, including over the past four years as one of them supported Trump and the other is the chairwoman of her local Democratic party in New Hampshire.

The two things that stuck out to me the most were the Democrat said that she always feels motivated by curiosity more than judgment. She really wanted to understand where her friend was coming from. And while all of that probing didn't

change her own personal views, it gave her a deeper, more nuanced understanding of her friend as well as others who think like her.

Then, for the California Janet, she said that what enables her to talk about this dispassionately and not get too overheated about all of it is that she is a Christian, like her friend Janet in New Hampshire, but she really feels that God is in control, and ultimately it doesn't matter who is in the White House. Everything is going to be okay because providence is taking care of things. So that enabled her to be able to discuss everything that's happening on a political level but feel like what really ensures the stability and security of the country was something much more indelible.

RICHARD: Story, your thoughts on this?

STORY: I think, unfortunately, so much of our politics today has become a zero-sum game where you feel like if you agree with someone of a different political party on just one specific issue, then you're ceding ground on all other issues. I think some of that is an unfortunate and sad side effect of today's cancel culture, woke culture that you think the Republicans... You agree more with their tax idea and how they tax citizens and what they think about the economy, that now that there's an idea that if you want to support that party, then you're ceding ground on issues of race and sexism. It's like the cancel culture exists within political issues.

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

RICHARD: And I'm Richard. We'd like to hear from you. Your ratings and reviews on Apple Podcasts, Spotify, or wherever you get your podcasts really help us to spread the word about Let's Find Common Ground.

ASHLEY: Okay, Richard, I'd like to hear from you. What would be the review you'd leave on the show?

RICHARD: I would talk about the guests. We've had some remarkable people on Let's Find Common Ground, for instance Paul Light of New York University who spoke about shared national sacrifice and then, on another episode with Ilyasah Shabazz and Dr. Brian Williams, who discussed their personal experience and views of racism.

ASHLEY: Yeah, a couple of my favorite episodes, one was with these guys called Jordan and Chris, and they met at Yale Law School, and they have very different politics. They drove across the country searching for common ground. And then, we did this show with an interracial couple who spoke really candidly about what it's like to be in that union. One of the most surprising things to me was when I asked them who was most disapproving, who in the street could they tell was most disapproving of their union, and the answer that the husband gave really surprised me.

RICHARD: You'll have to listen to find out what it was. What would you like to hear more of or less of? Tell us in your podcast reviews or send us an email. What is the email address, Ashley?

ASHLEY: Podcast@commongroundcommittee.org.

RICHARD: Now more from Story Hinckley and Christa Case Bryant. My friends tease me for being a perennial optimist. So I'm going to ask you a glass-half-full rather than a glass-half-empty question, which is: without President Trump being the biggest issue in politics, is that an opportunity for more common ground politics? Do you think that people might be able to come together a little bit more now than in the past?

STORY: I don't think we know yet. I think a lot determines on what the future of the Republican party looks like and what Trump decides to do post-presidency. I don't know. I think we'll see. I'm curious about that, as well.

CHRISTA: I think, for some people, he was and is a very polarizing figure to the point where, even if they supported Conservative policies in general, it was very difficult for them to bring themselves to vote for him. But I also think, as many people have said, he, in a way, is a symptom of something, not the driving force of it. I think, even if you could extricate Mr. Trump from American politics tomorrow, there would be still be a very enduring effect of his presidency and his rhetoric. And the fact is I don't think you can extract him. He will still have his Twitter account.

He might get shut down a little bit more now if he's not president, but I think there was something about him and his approach and his ideas that captured the imagination of a lot of people, a lot of people who were very frustrated that Washington didn't seem to be working in their interest, that Congress wasn't getting things done. And he emboldened a part of human nature that is not the most productive part of human nature, and it's going to take some time to overcome the effects of that and to roll it back. Hopefully we can, and I think that's something that Conservatives need to take upon themselves, but also Liberals because it's going to be a takes-two-to-tango sort of situation.

ASHLEY: Going to one specific issue, the opioid epidemic has been a tragedy for a lot of parts of this country and especially in rural areas. Does this crisis, do you think, does it present a chance for real cooperation between Democrats and Republicans?

CHRISTA: Yes, definitely, and I think we've already seen that. One of the people I interviewed for a story about Biden's potential to unite the country was Mayor Steve Williams from the city of Huntington, West Virginia. Huntington has become infamous in not only American but international media as an epicenter of the opioid epidemic. But Mayor Williams and his city council and the first responders in Huntington have done a tremendous job of pulling together as a community and just really making the most of their resources, which are quite modest, and also working with the federal

government to get additional funding and grant support. He has worked effectively with both the Obama administration and the Trump administration, and now Huntington has become a national model for dealing with the opioid epidemic. He's gotten a lot of attention for what he's done.

RICHARD: And Mayor Williams is a Democrat in a very red, Republican county, right?

CHRISTA: Yes, it's a very red county, and I think a lot of that is because, as Mayor Williams said, "Once the election is over, we need to replace the D or the R after our name and put an A, Steve Williams for American." That's what we're here... He pointed out that all elected officials, right down to the local level, take an oath to support the Constitution of the United States. And he said, "The United States, let's just focus on United."

RICHARD: Looking back at the long campaign, which started in Iowa back at the beginning of the year with the caucuses, what surprised both of you about what you saw and heard during the election season?

STORY: If you're a political nerd or junkie like I am, Iowa in January is really cool. This year, we had particularly a lot of candidates, but I was in Iowa for a couple weeks, and there were days where I would see three different presidential candidates in one day. There'll be one candidate in someone's house with 15 people. Also, I was so surprised about the caucus, just how it works. It's bananas. Everyone goes into a room. You sort yourself into different corners of the room, depending on which candidate you support, and then you try to yell at other people in other corners to come join your group because you don't have enough people to be a viable candidate. It's just really amazing to watch. I didn't think we had anything like that in our democratic system.

RICHARD: Christa, other surprises from this election year?

CHRISTA: I think people are not making a big deal about it right now because Biden has been declared the victor, but I think obviously there is a big discrepancy between what the polls predicted would happen and what actually did happen. I felt, all along, that the polls were not matching up with what I was hearing and what I was feeling. One reason for that was there was one piece that I read, and then I kept asking people who I was interviewing about this, and the piece that I had read... It was a very well-educated Conservative voter who said... And I say that because it also sounded conspiratorial like somebody who didn't read the news or read some crazy website or something.

But this individual said that, "No way would I ever participate in a poll by phone, even if it's supposedly anonymous because I am so worried about my name getting on a list as a Trump voter, that I could lose my job or my livelihood or my clients or whatever. I just don't know where that list would end up, where that database would end up, and

I'm not willing to participate in a poll." I started asking more voters about that, and almost everybody confirmed, "Oh, absolutely, no way am I going to tell anybody who calls that I support Trump." That was why I was skeptical that the polls were more right this time, even though I know that pollsters have worked really hard to correct some of the things that were correctable about the 2016 polls.

ASHLEY: Story, anything else that sticks out to you about this campaign?

STORY: Well, I was just going to say the same thing. When my Democratic friends and family members would say, "Oh, my goodness. It's going to be a blowout," I was, "No, it's not." I talked to Trump voters at MAGA rallies across the country, and they love the president more than ever.

ASHLEY: The people you've met on your travels, do you think many of them want to understand their neighbors and friends who think and vote differently from them, or do they prefer to see them as Other? Is that just easier to continue in those silos?

STORY: I do find a general curiosity. I think voters on both sides ask me, "What have you been hearing and seeing across the country?" And whether that is they just want a gauge of how well or how poorly their party or their candidate is doing... Maybe that's it, but I also think there is a general curiosity to better understand the pulse of where the country is on issues and on different candidates because so many of us, instead of reading, watch cable news. And we watch one channel of cable news that really just reaffirms what we already think about things. So I think that there is this innate curiosity about where other people are politically.

CHRISTA: I think people are frustrated that they don't understand, but I think there's a lot of fear and a lot of anger on both sides that are making it difficult for them to have those conversations with people, and that's something we have in common, that we both have a lot of fear about the other side. That's why it is so important for whoever is leading the country to try to address those fears and to try to assuage them. A political scientist who I interviewed the other day was saying that when you get violence in the streets, it tends to be not because people are miserable but because their expectations were so different from what ended up happening.

So I think that a leader just acknowledging, "Hey, I hear where you're coming from. I understand there are some honest, right desires behind that. I am listening to that. I am looking for ways to address it. We might not agree on the best policy prescriptions, but I acknowledge what you're saying. I honor the desire behind it, and I am here to represent you in the best possible way I can." There so much you can say without giving up any ground on your policy priorities that could help assuage those fears and lower the temperature. So I really hope that Mr. Biden can do that, and I think that, if the Republicans end up preserving their majority in the Senate, that could provide an opportunity for both sides to just take a deep breath while we make very, very modest progress on any actual policy issues.

RICHARD: Is it fair to say that there was a red wave and a blue wave, that both sides really turned out a lot more voters this time?

STORY: Yeah, I think you see that in the numbers, for sure.

CHRISTA: I think that definitely speaks to the turnout, and I think that's a thing to be really grateful for no matter where we are in the political spectrum. The more we have people engaging in our democratic processes and institutions, I think that can only strengthen America.

STORY: I wrote a story on this on Election Day. On Election Day, I was in central, rural Pennsylvania, and I drove around from polling place to polling place. And I'd just park my car and sit on the hood of my car and catch people as they were walking out of the polling and ask them what they were feeling and thinking, and then, if they felt comfortable, have them tell me who they voted for.

I spoke to so many voters who voted for the first time, and I think that that... Granted, I spoke to a lot of people who voted for the first time for President Trump, and the lead of that story was, "This woman does not look like who you think of when you think of a first-time voter." She had a gray, Paula Deen-style blowout. She was like, "It just felt important to me, and it has never felt important to me before." Whatever side you're on, having more people participate in our democracy is a good thing, and I think that's a huge bright spot to come out of this election.

CHRISTA: Also, I saw a great tweet that was like, "Four years ago, my relatives were like, 'What's the electoral college?' And now they're like, 'Oh, Pennsylvania's worth this number,'" basically just showing how much more attuned people are and, really, how much their civic knowledge has increased since the last time around. I think that's great.

RICHARD: We asked you what surprised you the most during your long months of coverage and meeting or speaking to many, many voters and also elected officials. Anything funny or just sweet that happened during this long year?

CHRISTA: There was an event I went to in central New Hampshire with Pete Buttigieg, who I'd seen quite a bit. I'd followed him to quite a number of campaign spots in Iowa, and he is incredibly polished, as I'm sure you know from seeing him on TV. Just every single question he gets, he has an answer almost immediately. It's incredibly articulate. There's no ums or ahs. There's no starting a new sentence abruptly. Everything just sounds great. So I was at this event in New Hampshire, and he saw someone's hand raised during the Q&A part, and he said, "I'm going to come back to you. You'll be my last question, okay?" And then, when he got back to his last question, he called on this person, who turned out to be, I think, an eight-year-old girl who stood up on her

chair so that she could see him and he could see her, and asked him, in such a sincere way, basically what he thought about abortion.

It seemed like she probably didn't think it was a great idea, and it was just... That's one of the most polarizing issues in our country, and I've heard from so many Trump voters who don't like Trump, don't like a lot of what he's done, but they feel so strongly about that issue. They feel like it really is about life and death, and so they're going to support him just because of that. So it can be so difficult for adults to talk about it, but the way this little girl brought it up, it was the only time that I saw... It was like the politician face went away for a minute, and he just was quiet. I think the first thing he said was, "Wow, I wish I was thinking about questions like that when I was your age." But you could tell it was taking him a moment to think about how to respond. And there's just something in the sincerity of this little girl that I thought, "We could use so much more of that in American politics," because that was the one moment where I felt like I really saw Pete Buttigieg, the man, and not just the politician.

ASHLEY: Thank you so much for doing this, both of you.

CHRISTA: Thank you for having us.

STORY: Of course, thanks for having us.

RICHARD: It was fun, yeah. This was really great. It'll be a fun show and really interesting. Thank you for sharing your insights and experience. Christa Case Bryant and Story Hinckley from The Christian Science Monitor.

ASHLEY: I found that discussion so interesting. I didn't know anything really detailed about what it's like to be at the Iowa Caucuses. So I really loved getting stories, bird's-eye view into what that's like.

RICHARD: What was really interesting for me was I covered the Iowa Caucuses in 1984, way back, 36 years ago, and Story's description of them, exactly the same as what I witnessed back in the '80s.

ASHLEY: Really? So nothing's changed.

RICHARD: No, it really doesn't sound like it changed. Then there was another story about poll workers and just how they took offense to people who were questioning the work they do.

ASHLEY: Yeah, I think it's so easy for those of us who are on the outside and who have never worked at the polls or haven't covered it in the way that these two reporters, that being taken inside the building to the level of the messy room that the janitor wasn't allowed in was so interesting.

RICHARD: It's Let's Find Common Ground. Our show is a production of Common Ground Committee.

ASHLEY: Production and mixing by Miranda Shafer. Our team also includes Erik Olsen, Donna Vislocky, Olivia Adams, Mary Anglade, and Jonathan Wells.

RICHARD: Thanks for listening, and give us a review.