

RICHARD: Growing numbers of voters are fed up with politics as usual. In a recent survey, 62% of Americans said a third party is needed, the highest number since the question was first asked nearly 20 years ago. Does the political system need reform and renewal from outside the Republican and Democratic parties?

From Common Ground Committee, our podcast is Let's Find Common Ground. I'm Richard Davies.

ASHLEY: And I'm Ashley Milne-Tyte. Today's guest is former two-term Florida congressman, David Jolly, who was a Republican and is now the leader of a third party. Last year, David Jolly was named Executive Chairman of the Serve America Movement, or SAM. He says SAM is different from the two big parties in several crucial ways.

RICHARD: David Jolly, thanks for joining us on Let's Find Common Ground.

DAVID JOLLY: Hey, it's great to be with you today.

RICHARD: David, where are you right now?

DAVID JOLLY: I'm in Florida. We have a baby due in the next week. So we're thrilled here at home, but we're not going anywhere.

ASHLEY: Wow, congratulations.

DAVID JOLLY: Thank you. Thank you. Our two-year-old went from loving the idea to hating it almost overnight.

ASHLEY: Since that was recorded, the baby was born, Theodore Wilson Jolly. Good news, and, again, congratulations. And now that interview with David Jolly. Richard, you asked the first question.

RICHARD: Our politics are dominated by two parties and have been for well over 150 years. David Jolly, make the case for a third party.

DAVID JOLLY: Well, all you have to do is look at leading countries around the world and realize that the United States is kind of alone on an island with an entrenched duopoly. Most leading nations today have multi-party democracies with three or four or five competitive parties, and the data demonstrates that voters feel better-represented. We have better and more inclusive policy outcomes. Multi-party democracies give greater voice to more people within the body politic of a country or a jurisdiction. The United States stands alone, and in large part, it's because we have allowed the two major parties to protect the duopoly themselves. The one thing that today's Republican and Democratic Party agree on is let's create the rules of the game in a way that we are the only two major participants. And anyone who has considered or been involved in either Independent candidacies or the new party movement immediately experiences the

challenges for a new party or a third party to emerge. The rules are written for Republicans and Democrats.

ASHLEY: David, you served as a Republican member of Congress, and you left the party, I think, about three years ago while Donald Trump was president. Can you see yourself going back to being a Republican?

DAVID JOLLY: Look, I became a Republican when I was 18 and registered to vote. As I look back, I will admit I was never a good enough Republican for the Republican Party as a staffer, as a local organizer, whatever it might be. I suppose you could call me moderate, Independent. I was very policy-focused. So I knew, even as a Republican, not all the best answers are on the Right. Certainly, in my opinion, not all on the Left, but we need to figure out what policies actually solve our most pressing problems.

I also had a personal concern about Donald Trump as he emerged. I gave a speech on the House floor when he was Candidate Trump and, at the time, was the only Republican member to go to the House floor and speak out against Mr. Trump's candidacy as a politician and as a person. That was a personal choice of mine. I opposed him. Other Republicans decided to support him, but it was also an inflection point for me. The party was embracing a person and a philosophy that didn't reflect my individual value set.

ASHLEY: And why not go back?

DAVID JOLLY: I will not go back because I don't trust my former colleagues that embraced what we could call Trumpism. They are not the people I thought they were. It is not the party I thought it was. So, whether Mr. Trump runs again, ever holds office again, I don't trust the party I once belonged to. That's my personal choice.

But here's the second reason I'll never go back. What I discovered in leaving the Republican Party was the freedom from being untethered from partisanship altogether. I didn't leave the Republican Party and jump into the Democratic Party. And where my value set today might be better reflected in today's Democratic Party, I fundamentally think that the parties choke off independent thought, and we don't have a big party today that allows for diversity of ideology and diversity of thought. And so I've enjoyed this celebration, this liberty of being unchained from a major party, and that's probably the most informative reason why I would never go back to the Republican Party. And it's the hesitation I have for joining the Democratic Party.

RICHARD: When you ask American voters, "Are you Democrat, Republican, or Independent?" the biggest answer by the most people is Independent.

DAVID JOLLY: That's right.

RICHARD: And yet our politics are dominated by Left and Right. Certainly in the media they are. Have we marginalized Independent voters by the way we discuss politics?

DAVID JOLLY: I think by the way we discuss it and because the rules of the game prevent the emergence of a viable third party, new party Independent candidate. And Republicans are pretty much a monolithic group. You've got a tent that goes from the Right towards the Center, whether it reaches the center or not. Democrats are a relatively monolithic group from the Left towards the Center. Independents are not a monolithic group. We sometimes make the mistake of thinking, "Well, Independents must be those Moderates right in the middle." Independents can be Independent for a lot of different reasons.

And Independents may not agree on why they're all Independents, right? Some want a further Left Party, further Right party. Some want a problem-solving party. Some want no party at all. So corralling the Independents is not as easy as putting an infrastructure around Republicans or Democrats because it's not a monolithic Independent group.

ASHLEY: Okay. Last year, you were named Executive Chairman of SAM, the Serve America Movement. What is it?

DAVID JOLLY: First and foremost, I define SAM as the only big-tent political coalition out there today, truly. We invite and ask all ideologies to come to the table. And with both major political parties but even the minor parties today, the Green Party, the Libertarian Party, they approach politics as we are trained to do without thinking about it, which is on the Left/Right spectrum. What we should do is, instead of asking everybody to agree on a shared ideology, a task which we know is impossible within the human mind, why don't we ask people to, instead, coalesce around shared values, around shared principles?

RICHARD: What are those shared values, those shared principles that people are being asked to coalesce around?

DAVID JOLLY: At SAM, we talk about three or four primary shared principles, the first being problem-solving. We are a coalition of voters, some former and some current Republicans, Democrats, Independents that just want to solve gun violence in America, want to solve health care inequity or affordability, want to solve the immigration crisis at the border. But we recognize that sometimes the answers might be on the Left or Right. Sometimes there might be answers from both the Left and Right, sometimes in the middle. We're committed to solving the problems. That's a principle. The principle is problem-solving.

Then we move to a second principle that I call democracy protection, others call electoral reform. How do we get more voters involved, more candidates involved through gerrymandering reform, primary reform, campaign finance reform? And then we move to accountability and transparency and some of these value sets that we should expect of our politicians. So SAM suggests, whether you're Left, Right, or

middle, let's have a big tent coalition of ideologies, but let's coalesce around these shared principles. At SAM, we go from the Left to the Right. We welcome all ideologies.

ASHLEY: How is it working? Who is in SAM right now? Talk about that.

DAVID JOLLY: It's fascinating because it is moving politics to a different spectrum. People have to first understand it because it's not intuitive the way we come up in our politics. But the moment somebody gets it, they get it, and they're excited because, for a lot of Independents, it's what they've been looking for.

Now, what are the challenges? For any new party movement, the challenges are always resources: financial and personnel. Then we also face the laws of 50 different states. We don't have national election systems. So each state has different laws regarding ballot access and party formation, and at the end of the day, each state is different in the roadblocks they put up. It comes down to money. How can you get 80,000 signatures? Well, you could spend a couple years at your local libraries, or you hire a signature firm for half a million dollars to try and do that.

RICHARD: So, clearly, there are challenges. What was done by SAM for last year's election?

DAVID JOLLY: We ran unity tickets in New York for governor/lieutenant governor; in Connecticut, for governor/lieutenant governor. We achieved party status in New York. We're now in court trying to protect it. We are moving towards party status in California and Florida and Pennsylvania. We have activities in California, Virginia, Iowa. SAM is growing, and this is a special time to be a part of the new party movement.

RICHARD: Skeptics would say you've had very little success when it comes to actually winning elections.

DAVID JOLLY: Absolutely right. The Independent movement writ large has faced historic challenges, and we're not naive at SAM. We know what we're up against. We know what we're trying to accomplish, and from a motivational standpoint, I often say, but if we stop trying, then the two parties win and politics will never be different for my kids or anyone else's kids.

Election reform is a very close brethren to the new party movement, and we are seeing success in the election reform lane when Maine went to ranked-choice voting, when Florida went to gerrymandering reform. Arizona, I believe, went to independent redistricting commissions. Alaska just had a dramatic election reform initiative pass where they have one single primary. All candidates participate. All voters vote. The top four move on to November, and then they have ranked-choice voting. In environments like that, more candidates can emerge, including those unaffiliated with the two major parties. So we are seeing success in the election reform lane.

ASHLEY: Can we talk about issues for a minute? First of all, guns, which have been very much in the news recently... Most Republicans support the NRA, the National Rifle Association, and they would oppose any licensing or restrictions on gun ownership. How do you see that debate?

DAVID JOLLY: SAM does not have a top-down platform. We allow our candidates to arrive at the policy solutions that best represent their constituencies, recognizing policies and politics are different from the Sun Belt to the Industrial Belt, East Coast to West Coast. So these are my opinions, not on behalf of a SAM platform. Guns is a tough one because I personally believe Republicans will never do anything on gun reform. You do see, at the state level, implementation of red flag laws.

RICHARD: What are red flag laws?

DAVID JOLLY: Essentially, a background check right now is a criminal conviction check. That's it, and in most states, you can have a situation where... Let's take a terrible situation of domestic violence, domestic abuse between a husband and a wife. The police are called three or four times to a residence, but the wife never agrees to press charges. The fifth time, that husband can go buy a gun and go back to the house and cause violence on his spouse because nothing has popped up in the background check because there was no criminal conviction.

It allows the police to engage. It allows for initial restrictions to be put in place on a firearm purchase, but it does provide that individual fairly quick due process should they try to suggest that any restrictions would be undue. So it's a balance, and it's largely a Republican answer to try to do something. But it gets nowhere near reducing gun violence in the United States on a scale that we should expect.

ASHLEY: Red flag laws can definitely have loopholes as the recent mass shooting at a FedEx facility in Indianapolis has shown. That happened shortly after our conversation with David.

RICHARD: Let's take another issue, which is abortion, also highly polarized, very emotional. Can you have a movement such as SAM that has pro-life and pro-choice supporters?

DAVID JOLLY: The answer is yes, and I'm laughing because this always seems to be the hardest issue that is reached for in conversations around this. But I think there's a very consensus-driven approach to the issue of women's reproductive rights, the issue of life, and the reality of where our policy could arrive at, and it goes back to recognizing that *Roe v. Wade* is the law of the land. *Roe* was actually a very consensus opinion if you look at it from a consensus perspective, and what I mean by that is this. It recognizes the fundamental right of a woman to make her own decisions regarding reproductive health.

So let's recognize that that is the law of the land. Let's also recognize, and I would encourage my friends on the Right to recognize that it was Roe that established, very firmly, a state's interest in viability. If you notionally think of the broad takeaway from Roe, that reproductive right of a woman is relatively free in the first two trimesters. Then, as we know, in the third trimester, the court says there is a state interest in the viability of the child in the third trimester.

That's a balancing test, and to my friends on the Right, I would suggest: look to Roe for having established the state's interest in viability. And to my friends on the Left, I would suggest: look to Roe for having established a woman's right to choose, but acknowledge that it also includes a balancing test of the state's interest in a viable child. I think you can look to Roe for a lot of consensus-driven policy that, today, we never really think of it as providing, but it does.

ASHLEY: I want to tease this out a bit because obviously I'm half-American, but I did not grow up in this country. So, for me, just before I came here, there was the killing of an abortion doctor. I remember seeing that on the news in the UK, thinking, "Wow. Where am I going to?" But it's a country of extremes on both sides, and it felt very different from Britain in that way. So, when I hear you talking about this, and I think of the name, Serve America Movement, I think, "That's fantastic. What a wonderful idea," but I do wonder... Somebody who is very ardently pro-life, to them, serving America would be making sure that abortion remains firmly illegal. Do you know what I mean? Are you going to bring these people in to what you say is a less ideological system?

DAVID JOLLY: It's a great question, and what I would say is we're not going to get everybody. If what informs your politics is strict, uncompromising ideology, then SAM's not the place for you. You probably do have a home in today's Democratic or Republican Party. That's why we started SAM, because so many people are frustrated with the ideological litmus tests of the two major parties, that we think it gets in the way of policymaking. You used to have pro-life Democrats and pro-choice Republicans. That doesn't exist in the parties anymore not because individuals no longer feel that way but because the two major parties have choked off that type of independent thought within their own parties.

ASHLEY: You're listening to Let's Find Common Ground. Our guest is David Jolly. Coming up, we learn more about SAM and David's personal story. I'm Ashley.

RICHARD: I'm Richard. By listening to this podcast, you've taken the first step to joining our community to push back against rigid polarization and find common ground.

ASHLEY: A second step is to sign up for our regular newsletter. It's very simple, takes about 10 seconds on the website, commongroundcommittee.org.

RICHARD: While there, also view our five-minute video and learn more. Cofounder Bruce Bond narrates.

BRUCE BOND: Bringing light not heat to public discourse, that's our motto. Light is a sense of hope that says we may have challenges that are difficult, but there is a way through them. We just need to shine the light on that path.

ASHLEY: Learn more about our public events and this podcast at commongroundcommittee.org. Now more of our interview with David Jolly.

RICHARD: Can you have SAM Democrats and SAM Republicans?

DAVID JOLLY: It's a great question, and the answer is yes, and we do today. In New York, we became a party. So you could actually register as a SAM Party member. That is our path in Florida, Texas, a few other states. But in the vast majority of states, SAM is a coalition. It's a committee. It's an organizing group, whatever it might be. And in those states, SAM has endorsed Republican and Democrat candidates.

Each state's a little different, but I'll give you an example in Connecticut. Connecticut basically provided a survey, a pledge card, if you will, to the candidates running for the Connecticut State Legislature. Several candidates participated in it. The SAM Connecticut Committee had endorsement interviews, ultimately endorsed candidates, Republicans and Democrats, for office, and now there's a SAM Caucus in the Connecticut State Legislature.

In the state of New York, they have what's called fusion voting where you can run on multiple lines as a candidate. You can run as a Republican, as a SAM candidate, as a Conservative candidate if those parties each nominate you. You can appear in two or three different lines.

ASHLEY: Can we talk about your political journey for a minute? You've been a lobbyist, and they're often thought of as sort of the attack dogs of the political system. Have your political views evolved over the years?

DAVID JOLLY: Oh, certainly. Look, I think there's a fascinating question in politics that's boiled down to this: is it okay to change your mind? And I will tell you some politicians and some voters would say no, it's not, that if you ran on this issue 10 years ago based on this position, you're not allowed to change your mind. Others, and the approach I took is yes, it is, and hopefully politicians are revisiting issues and learning more and understanding more, and maybe they are evolving and changing their minds.

RICHARD: There you are in the Sunshine State. David, I would be remiss if I didn't ask you: are you planning to run for governor as an Independent?

DAVID JOLLY: It is something I am seriously considering. Our incumbent governor is up in 2022. He will face a hard question whether he's willing to serve all four years because it's well known that he'll likely pursue a White House bid in 2024. People think of Florida as a purple state, 50/50 based on our elections. It generally is, but

Republicans have had a stranglehold on actually winning those 50/50 elections. Democrats in Florida haven't won the governor's mansion in 28 years.

The case I've made is, if we really want a change in direction in our policies in Florida, we probably need a change in our politics. If we think there's an opportunity to run a viable campaign as an Independent and win the governorship, then I'll do it. If we don't think there's a viable lane, then we probably won't, and we'll probably work towards doing it in another cycle, work towards election reforms in Florida that allow more voters to participate and more candidates to compete on a level platform.

ASHLEY: Charlie Crist was a Republican who became an Independent, and he's now a Democratic member of Congress for your old district. He said it's a tough slog being an Independent, and he found that he had greater political power by joining a party.

DAVID JOLLY: Yeah. What I would say is Charlie approached his change in parties from a very different viewpoint than I did. Charlie changed parties to continue to run for office. Charlie was a governor who wanted to run for Senate and realized he was going to lose the Republican primary to Marco Rubio. He was down 15 points or so. So Charlie left the party because he was losing the primary but he really wanted to run for Senate. So he became an Independent, and then he lost as an Independent. And then he decided he needed to run statewide again, and he couldn't do it as an Independent. So he became a Democrat.

I left the Republican Party for very different reasons, not to run for office but to better reflect the values that I wanted to associate with in politics. If I never run for office again, I'm glad I left the Republican Party, and I enjoy being an Independent for reasons of personal choice, not political ambition.

RICHARD: That begs the question, a profound question for many people in the political system, especially after the assault on the Capitol on January 6th, should politicians lead or should they follow?

DAVID JOLLY: I get chills hearing that question because I feel like I lived that during my time in Congress as a Republican. I lived it on policy issues trying to lead the party and Republican voters to better solutions on tough issues than of campaign finance reform, of... Marriage equality, at the time, was a big debate. I tried to lead us in the right direction on climate science, on gun reform, and I tried to say, "Look, you can embrace basic Conservative ideological principles, theories, while still solving these issues and getting to a better way forward for all of us."

I thought my job was to use my place in Congress to lead. Very few people do that because it's a risky place to be out front. And honestly, the lessons of politics will teach us you don't want to be too far out front. Then, from a value standpoint, when the party saw the emergence of Trump, I believe that conflicted with so much of what we stood for that I tried to lead in that area, as well. Honestly, it doesn't work in politics to be a leader, and the followers, I think most of them are lazy. Most are risk-averse. Most

don't care about the opportunity they have to actually change the direction of the country.

For those who are thoughtful about it, what they would tell you... And some of this is reflected in, believe or not, Lindsey Graham's comments about his loss to Donald Trump. We've all followed the evolution of Lindsey Graham. I know Lindsey. There was a moment of honesty in Lindsey Graham when he said this about his transformation. He said, "I ran against everything Trump isn't," and we all know the bad things he said about Trump, "but the voters chose Trump, and they beat me. And they beat me bad, and they told me, Lindsey Graham, that I was wrong, and they didn't like the way I wanted to go." So Lindsey said, "My job, then, was to respond to voters and do what they wanted me to do." It's a great question you ask, and I think one that everybody comes down with a little different answer on.

RICHARD: Final question, what about this political moment? Especially since January 6th and the assault on the Capitol, is it more tribal, more rigidly partisan than any time in living memory, and is that part of the case for a third party, for an independent movement?

DAVID JOLLY: Yeah. Look, I would say since the era of mass media, of social media platforms where we can get our news how we want it given to us, but also with the emergence of big data and the ability to protect political coalitions through gerrymandering and other targeting of voters, we are on a trajectory of getting more partisan. It will get more tribal. It will get more partisan because the tools will be there to ensure that.

However, for a large part of the country, they are finding less and less of a home in these tribes. At SAM, we've seen a dramatic acceleration since January 6th of people interested in the new party movement. Our traffic online and giving and engagement is up 10,000% year over year, probably a few thousand percent month over month. We're continuing that trend.

I do think, eventually, we will see an emergence of an alternative party, an alternative coalition. I believe that's going to be SAM. It may be a well-financed Independent candidate who creates a movement behind them, but enough voters are looking for an alternative. And both of today's major parties are missing an incredible opportunity, and that opportunity is to expand your tent just across the middle of the spectrum to bring in a lot of disaffected voters that, today, don't find a home. I don't believe the two major parties can see that. I don't believe they will do that, and it's why I think a party like SAM could be very successful over the next decade.

ASHLEY: David Jolly, making the case for a third party and major reform of our political system.

RICHARD: That's our show, Episode 29. Let's Find Common Ground is a production of Common Ground Committee. I'm Richard Davies.

ASHLEY: And I'm Ashley Milne-Tyte. We're members of The Democracy Group podcast network, and here's word about a sister show. It's called Democracy in Danger from the University of Virginia's Deliberative Democracy Lab.

RICHARD: Yeah, the show includes conversations with thinkers who look at ways to defend democracy from attacks by autocratic leaders who use populist appeals. Find out more about Democracy in Danger and other interesting episodes at democracygroup.org.

ASHLEY: Thanks for listening to our show. Our sound designer is Miranda Shafer. We produce new episodes every two weeks.

ANNOUNCER: This podcast is part of The Democracy Group.