

Disagree Better: A Conversation with Governor Spencer J. Cox

Moderator:

Frederick J. Ryan, Jr, Chairman of the Board of Trustees, Ronald Reagan Presidential Foundation and Institute

Speaker:

Hon. Spencer J. Cox, 18th Governor, State of Utah

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Disagree Better Video:

In America today, the very fabric of our nation is being torn apart. We've never felt more divided and we're too fixated on our differences. He's black and he's white. He grew up in the city and he's a farm boy from Utah. He's a Democrat and he's a Republican. On paper, we couldn't be more different. And yet we are both dads. We both love college basketball. We both have really stylish haircuts and we're both proud Americans. We disagree passionately on lots of issues, but we're friends and we respect each other. Politics is important, but it shouldn't define us or destroy our relationships. His name is Spencer Cox and his name is Wes Moore, and we approve this message.

Announcer:

Please welcome to the stage chairman of the Board of Trustees of the Ronald Reagan Presidential Foundation and Institute, Mr. Fred Ryan.

Fred Ryan:

Good morning everyone. Welcome to the Reagan Institute in this special event by our new center on civility and democracy. We're delighted today to be joined by Governor Cox and First Lady Abby Cox. Thank you for joining us this morning. Each year, the chair of the National Governor's Association tackles an issue they care deeply about. Ultimately, they shape that issue into the initiative that helps them define their time as NGA leader is. This year's chair, governor Cox took on a bold challenge getting Americans to get along better. The governor's disagreed. Better initiative was born from a deep concern about hyper-partisanship and polarization in our country. Governor Ko recognized the nation needs leaders to step up and model a more positive path forward, and that governors could be the frontline of this work. The NGA and organizations around the country have convened conversations, recorded ads, written op-eds, and organized debates in service of the goal of disagreeing better. So to learn more about the progress of this program and ways that we can expand it, we're delighted to have the governor with us here this morning. Please join me in welcoming the 18th governor of the state of Utah, Spencer Cox.

Thank you Governor. Welcome. Well, welcome Governor. It's great to have you here at the Institute. Although this week after reading that US News ranked your state as the best state in the country for a second year in a row. Maybe we should be out in Utah. Well,

Gov. Spencer Cox:

We will welcome you out to Utah anytime you want to come. It's a great place to visit. If you haven't been there, come and join us.

Fred Ryan:

We'll take that as an invitation.

Gov. Spencer Cox:

Indeed.

Fred Ryan:

Here at our new center on Civilian Democracy, we're working to showcase innovative programs that are helping close the divide and help find common ground among Americans. And of all the things you could do as chair of the NGA, you picked this issue. Could you share a little bit about why this was important and why disagree better it became your signature issue?

Gov. Spencer Cox:

Sure, Fred, and again, thanks for having me here. It's a true honor to be here and I'm so excited for the Center on Civility and Democracy. I think it's, it's timely, it's so necessary. So yeah, as NGA chair, we get to do an initiative and Bill McBride, the head of the NGA is here with us today. And some governors before me have had wonderful initiatives, computer science in our schools, infrastructure, just teen mental health. And we were looking at those types of initiatives at the top of our list. We were looking at healthcare reform. We looked at critical minerals and energy policy, more traditional issues. And this though had always been in the back of our minds, it became very clear that we can't solve our nation's problems if we hate each other. And we were seeing so much dysfunction in Washington DC I think that was on display yesterday, although dysfunction was replaced with a little bit of function, which was kind of nice for a change.

I want to give credit where it's due. And so we started kicking this idea, could we elevate civility? Although this is a little different, we can touch on that in a minute, but could we elevate that issue to become an issue like guns or abortion or something else that in fact, I would put it above all the other issues because again, if we truly care about doing things, and sadly there are elected officials who aren't interested in solving problems, they're doing things, they're here for performative reasons, but could we try to do something there? So I have to say this was not just a feel good, something that we made up. We reached out to experts, researchers. We've spent a lot of time with Stanford's Polarization and Social Change Lab, Dartmouth and others who have really tried to influence the work that we're doing. This is something I cared about before I was in G Chair.

You saw the ad that I did with Governor Moore that actually came from, I had done an ad back in 2020 with my democratic opponent when I was running for governor. A friend of mine had talked to me, this was the end of September. She said, I'm really worried about what's happening in our country. We had had, remember 2020 we run on the

presidential cycle. So 2020 we had had rioting across the country in the wake of George Floyd's murder. And then we were already hearing from my party that we were undermining the legitimacy of an election that hadn't even happened yet. And so she said, isn't there something you can do? And I'm like, I don't know. What can I do? But it kept me up all weekend. So I called my opponent that next week and said, Hey, I have this crazy idea.

What if we did an ad together? And he was very confused campaign ad, but I talked him through it. I said, I know you care about our country and I do too. So we did something similar to that where he said, I'm Chris Peterson and I think you should vote for me. And I said, I'm Spencer Cox and I think you should vote for me. And well, we disagree on lots of things. We both agree that we can disagree without hating each other, that we care about our country and that we'll accept the results of this election, whatever they are. That ad went viral. That was hopeful to me that there is an exhausted majority out there. Stanford then a year later tested that ad as one of 25 interventions with 30,000 people and found that it had a measurable impact in lowering the propensity towards violence and in depolarizing. And so as we were kind of kicking this idea around, we thought, well, maybe we could convince other governors to do this as well, and that that's how disagreed better was born.

Fred Ryan:

Got it. Well, if you look at the data research data, and I'm sure you have, it is disturbing to see how divided we are at this moment as a country and how difficult it is to find common ground. From your perspective, how did we get here? What brought us to this point?

Gov. Spencer Cox:

We've thought a lot about this. We've talked to researchers about this and I've kind of come to my own conclusions about how we got here. And I like to start with the breakdown of institutions. I think that's kind of where this starts. If you go back to the 1830s and you read about Alexis de Tocqueville and his visit here and the thriving of institutions that were so important to our country, especially religious institutions, but so many other volunteer organizations, we didn't rely on government to do all of these things. We had a strong civil society. If we needed a new hospital, we formed an association, built a hospital, we needed a new school, we formed an association, built a school, and there was a rootedness and a connectedness that was so important.

Professor Robert Putnam, Dr. Putnam wrote a book called *Bowling Alone*, which I'm sure most of you remember over 20 years ago, maybe 25 years ago. I forget when that came out, but it's been a long time. And to me, that was kind of the first sign of trouble that we were lonelier than ever before. The concept for those of you who have not read it behind *Bowling alone* was that more people were bowling in the United States than ever before, but there were fewer bowling leagues than ever before. So people, instead of forming these bowling leagues where you had community and thriving, people would just go bowl by themselves. And so this loneliness epidemic that he kind of found and started talking about was growing in this country. Americans had fewer friends, real friends than ever before, and we are wired for connection. And so that predated social media.

So then we layer cell phones and social media on top of that. Now you have fake connections, not real connections. I don't have any real friends, but we need tribes and so we can all hate the same people together on Facebook. So we started those tribes and then the algorithms of social media kind of took over our lives and cable news and they figured out how to get us addicted to contempt, which is a real thing. Tim Shriver, who's here with us and his organization, they talk often about this, but the outrage is as addicting as opioids, as gambling, as sugar. It hits the same receptors in our brains. And so now we're in our tribes. Algorithms are pushing us towards this cable news figured it out too, that we could get addicted to outrage and never have to have real conversations with anyone that's different than us. And so again, I think there are lots of things, but all of those things lined up. And then what happens is now you have the perfect recipe for conflict entrepreneurs in the media, but also in politics to kind of step into this void and to use fear and divisiveness to bring us together and tear us apart, if that makes sense. So bring a tribe together by defining the others and tearing us apart, and we end up with this kind of morass that we find ourselves today.

Fred Ryan:

Eric Schmit, as you've probably seen, has defined it as three pieces for certain media outlets. In order to be successful, they need revenue to get the revenue they need either viewers or clicks. And to get the viewers or clicks they need outrage. Yes, absolutely. And if the outrage goes down, the model doesn't work well. Back to disagree better. As you've had this, you've rolled this out the last few months, could you talk a little bit about the areas where you've seen the greatest success and then maybe a little about the areas where still need for more impact and maybe even how it could even be scaled further.

Gov. Spencer Cox:

So the area of greatest impact has been, I think, a little surprise to all of us. Again, in this hyperpolarized world. I thought I might get laughed out of the room when I even brought up this concept with my fellow governors, and it was the exact opposite. I first presented it to the Republican governors, that's how they choose. So again, national Governor Association, bipartisan organization, one of the last bastions of real, true bipartisan work, Republicans and Democrats working together, we alternate chair and vice chair Republican and Democrat every year. So governor Jared Polis, Democrat from Colorado is my vice chair, but the Republicans choose their chair and the Democrats choose their chair. So I presented it to my Republican colleagues and was pleasantly surprised at the response, how excited they were. Even some of them who would say, I can't see this publicly, but we desperately need this and I want to help if I can, behind the scenes even better, those who are willing to help in front of the scenes.

So we've had now 20 governors that have filmed ads like the one I've done most of them with someone from the other party, a mayor from their state, someone that they respect. And so that's been great. Also, just the overwhelming response from the public. Everywhere we go, we hear this is so refreshing. We used to do this, we used to know how to do this, and they're desperate for it. We talk often about the statistics and the polling that shows how bad it is out there. I am also optimistic with the polling that shows that 70% of Americans hate our politics right now. They want something different. They're hungry for something different. There is an exhausted majority out there, and we've certainly seen that also. The third thing I would say is how many great organizations are involved in this work? If nothing else? I think our greatest

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Note: The following is the output of transcribing from an audio recording. Although the transcription is largely accurate; in some cases, it is incomplete or inaccurate due to inaudible passages or transcription errors. It is posted as an aid to understanding the proceedings at the *Disagree Better: A Conversation with Governor Spencer Cox* but should not be treated as an authoritative record.

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accomplishment will have been bringing all of those organizations together to have these conversations.

They're all out there, but they've never really gotten together to see how they could maximize their potential. And so if anything outlives me with this and my terms up in July, I hope it will be that we've helped empower these organizations that we're getting resources to these organizations that they're working together to solve this problem. Now, the hard part is kind of scaling this. We have these ads when when people see these ads, they like them. They're really inspired by them. We know that it has an impact. We know again, from Stanford's work that these can help depolarize us as a nation. Frank Lentz also did some work around this. He did a massive poll and then did some of his focus group work around this and found that it was just overwhelmingly positive. People are dying for anything like this, and yet we just don't have the resources to, we put 'em on social media in hopes people watch them.

I would love to see these running during the NBA finals, so it's kind of budget and scale that's an issue. And then just helping more people understand, see the incentive structure in our countries all misaligned. There's no incentive to do work like this. And so we're trying to help convince governors first because governors actually have to do stuff. That's why we kind of thought they're the best group to kind of work together. We do this bipartisan work anyway, but outside of that, to help people understand not just that it's a good thing to do for our country, but that it's good politics, that you can actually get elected or reelected doing this. There are some problems with the way we select candidates that makes it a little more difficult to do this, where again, the incentives are to be performative, to be allowed to be outrageous. And even though the vast majority of Americans don't want that, there's a misalignment there. And so that's a piece that we still need to figure out.

Fred Ryan:

Well, just on that point, how the political incentives, at least maybe in Congress as an example, are at odds with trying to increase civility, trying to find common ground. In fact, some of the most visible members of Congress have their visibility because of the outrageous things they do, the divisive things they do. They're placed on social media.

Gov. Spencer Cox:

I don't mean to correct you, but I would say all of the most visible members of Congress are

Fred Ryan:

That way. So how do we change the incentives? I mean, they're doing it because it works for them, maybe not for everybody, but for those who are doing it, how do we change the incentives so that doesn't work for someone who's seeking office and running for

Gov. Spencer Cox:

Congress? So again, I think there are some structural pieces that aren't necessarily part of what we are doing, but that there are other groups working on that are important from an electoral standpoint. But there are some things that I think we can all do. One is

I do think we need to take a hard look at the internet and social media in general. Just finished a book and had a great conversation with the author Frank McCourt called *Our Greatest Fight* that I highly recommend. And he has some bold ideas around completely restructuring the internet itself, the very fabric of the internet and how it works to help us so that we don't just have a few very large duopolies or monopoly like companies that are controlling all of this and controlling those algorithms that I think is really critical to this conversation. But I have to say the answer is truly all of us and at the local level deciding that we are going to make this an issue so that when you're in a town hall with a candidate and you're asking them what their position is on abortion or guns or whatever that you're asking them, what are you doing to depolarize our state or our city or our school board?

What are you going to do to bring people together to solve problems? Asking that as a question. And then our hope is we're trying to change the permission structure again to let people know that you can talk about this, to give them the actual language. Again, Tim, I'll keep shouting you out if that's okay, but that's something you're working on to give people the language to do this and then to show that the backlash isn't what you think it's going to be. Every one of the governors who's done an ad like this, they were pretty nervous when those ads were released. Like, what's going to happen? Am I going to get all this backlash? And very little, I mean, it's 10 to one. The positivity, what they hear is, this is so refreshing. Thank you for doing this. And then that again, then gives them permission to do it again. And our hope is that it will give people who see this, who would never run for office thinking, oh, I could do this. That interests me, and we can get some different candidates maybe running for office again, because the incentive structure now just brings out the people who thrive in that type of environment.

Fred Ryan:

Right. Well, it's talking about some of the challenges at this very moment. Here we are into a presidential campaign, six months more to go. That's probably going to be a pretty negative campaign. We're also looking at what's happening on college campuses. And then I think one thing that several people in this room have spent a lot of time on is the looming threat of ai, disinformation and misinformation coming at scale. Are there things we can do is, I should say, when we launched our program here, people simultaneously said, this is the best time to launch a program like this, but it's also the worst time because they're headwinds. Are there things you could suggest that people could do during this period, particularly where we're going to face these challenges?

Gov. Spencer Cox:

Yeah, there's so many things we can do, and I'm glad you brought that up. I mean, there's no question that this is going to be just an awful six months, and so let's just all buckle in for that. All right? But I'm an optimistic person. Our nation has seen terrible things before and we've gotten through those things, and I do believe that pendulum swing, and I think that brush fire starts and spread in ways that we can't imagine. And so it is incumbent on every person, every single one of us, to find ways to bridge divides and to be builders, architects instead of arsonists, right? So are very, I'm glad you brought up AI because it's about to get so much worse if we think the algorithms are bad. Now, the power of AI to tear us apart is incredible. So what can we do? So there are things that the experts tell us are really important. One is to spend time face-to-face with people who are different than us. And I get criticism for disagree better. One of the criticisms I get

mostly on the right is you just want us to go along to get along. You won't stand true to your principles, your rhino, you don't believe in anything. You just want to hang out with Democrats. And we were very, they're not all bad.

We were very purposeful to say this is not just another civility initiative, that this is not a kindness initiative. We need more civility and we need more kindness. We chose the word disagree on purpose. We want people to stay true to their principles and their values, to be passionate about the things you believe in, not asking you to compromise on anything. So that's the first part On the left, the attacks I get are generally why would I engage with those people? Those people are irrational. Those people don't want me to exist or whatever it is. And I think that is screaming at each other is dangerous, not talking to each other at all is more dangerous, and that will never lead to a solution and make our country a better place. And so we have to have real conversations with people who are different than us.

And what we find out when we do that, and I could give countless examples, is that we're not as different as we thought we were. So that's one. Number two is we need to stop defining ourselves by our political identities. When I was growing up in my congregation in my town, I did not know who the Republicans and Democrats were. That was so far down the list of how we defined ourselves. That ad I did with Governor Moore is a great example of how to do this. Again, we're dads we're I'm an, an NBA fan. I'm an American, I'm a Republican or a Democrat was so far down the list. And so finding shared identities is really important. Service is a big one.

When we serve our communities and give back, the experts tell us that's a great way to depolarize Republicans and Democrats working together in their communities. There's a bond that forms when we sacrifice and give back to make a place better. And so I think that's another really, really important one. And the last one I would say is something that comes from John Adams. He talks about political virtues, and we don't often talk about virtue these days, but he had a quote. He talked about the political virtues of patience, moderation and humility, patience, moderation and humility. Without those things, we are all ravenous beasts of prey. He understood that kind of this natural man, the natural human instincts are divisive. We're brutish and short all those things, but if we can practice humility, patience, and moderation, then we aren't having a speech of prey. Now, it seems almost comical to talk about humility or patience in politics, but judge learned at hand, one of my favorite quotes, he was talking about the spirit of liberty.

And when we think in America about the spirit of liberty, we think about, I don't know, an eagle with a machine gun, a truck with an American flag, whatever. He said that the spirit of liberty is that spirit which is not too short is right. Spirit of liberty is that spirit which seeks to understand the minds of other men and women. That's very powerful to me. This idea that I'm going to listen and I'm going to listen to learn, not listen to debate, and then hopefully you'll give, we tell people to ask this question when you're in a high conflict situation, just to ask, tell me more about why you feel that way that shows your interest in the other person, shows a humility, a willingness to listen to understand. It gives me an opportunity to cool down. I like to fight first. That's always my instinct. And then it gives the other person a chance to actually think about why they believe what they believe. And sometimes I have to ask the question multiple times, but eventually

you will find some common ground and maybe a common solution, maybe not, and that's okay. But if you can attack ideas instead of people, those are little things, but little things add up over time and will make us all better in whatever sphere of influence we have.

Fred Ryan:

We're going to go to questions the audience, just a second. But I wanted to just to point out, when you walked in, the first image you saw, like everyone here on the wall was a photo of Ronald Reagan and Tip O'Neill, and two people who couldn't be more ideologically different. Ronald Reagan, a conservative governor from the West Tip O'Neill, liberal Democrat speaker from the East. And they didn't agree very much on the issues, but they did not let it get to the point where disagreement on issues meant you couldn't feel that they were a good person. And somehow we've evolved. If someone has a different view on you, they're a bad person and they are out to destroy the country and take away everything that you believe in. I guess my question is, it took us a while to get in this process, but how do we start to break that theory? That's because someone might have an idea that you think is really bad, they're not a bad

Gov. Spencer Cox:

Person. Yeah, I think that's where getting proximate matters. Brian Stevenson, author of a book called Just Mercy, that I recommend to everyone. That was his big aha moment. A black attorney in Alabama representing death row inmates and kind of talking about the racial issues that were there and some of the prison guards that he had to deal with who humiliated him in terrible ways and how hard it was to get proximate to those people, those people. But when he did, it changed everything and it is just harder to hate up close. And so that's what Ronald Reagan and Tip O'Neill did. One of the things I lament most about what happens in Congress, when I talked to members of Congress who served in the eighties and nineties and even into the early two thousands, they would go to dinner together, they would do things together, they would have events together, and that stopped happening.

There are reasons for that. One, people started running elections, accusing members of Congress of never been in their district, so they're spending too much time in Washington dc. So it was just get there and get home as quickly as possible. But then this animosity started to grow and those relationships fell apart. But Ronald Reagan and Tip, that's the example I use all the time. It is the best example of how this is supposed to work. And it can work, but it takes time and it takes investment and it's hard. It's really hard work, but it's worthwhile work. And as a country, we've become addicted to pleasure instead of happiness. And pleasure is a false substitute for happiness. And again, it's those dopamine hits in our brain. Pleasure is addicting. That's why. And we see it in all kinds of forms. Addiction to social media, addiction to drugs, addiction to gambling, addiction to sugar, all of those things are supplanting or replacing true happiness.

We are wired for connection. There's a different chemical that gets released that hits those same receptors that isn't dopamine. It's serotonin. And serotonin is fulfillment. Serotonin does not lead to addiction. It leads to a sense of fulfillment and accomplishment. And what we know is we get that chemical and that happiness from

human connection face-to-face, connection in person, connection, even with people who are different than us, we get dopamine from social media and those hits. So Tip O'Neill and Ronald Reagan had it right when Ronald Reagan was shot and was lying in the hospital, tip O'Neill showed up, knelt by his bedside, held his hand, and prayed for him. And that's America. That's who we are, a pluralistic society. Our nation was founded in profound disagreement with institutions that knew that we were going to have a whole bunch of different people. This idea, a nation founded on an idea, not on a religious people or a racial people. It was founded on this idea that all of us are created equal and that we are giving these God-given rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. And government was designed to protect us from those things. And we set up institutions so no one could get too powerful so that we would have to find ways to work together. And it's the only way our nation can survive is our willingness to be Ronald Reagan and Tip O'Neill.

Fred Ryan:

Well, just on this point of members of Congress, we've been talking about who infrequently engage with the other party, but governors, at least, if you could tell us governors do engage with the other party, and why does it work for governors but not for members of Congress?

Gov. Spencer Cox:

Well, again, I think I mentioned how the incentive structures are all messed up, and they are, they're still an incentive that's different for governors than the members of Congress. And that is that we have to do stuff. We like to say that potholes aren't partisan, and one of the geniuses, I believe, lemme just throw this out there, I know this will sound a little political, and I don't mean to, it's not meant that way. I believe that this is more factual. One of the brilliant pieces of our country was this idea of federalism, that the states would be coequal partners. I think one of the big mistakes we've made as a country, and I'm going to be a little critical of the left first, but trust me I'll get to the right, is that if we feel like something is right, the entire country should be doing it.

I think that's a huge mistake. And here's the problem. That used to be a right left argument. Now my team has decided the same thing, that whatever we believe is the right way to do something, we're going to get as much power as we can and force it on the rest of the country. I think our country would look very different if we allowed the laboratories of democracy to work, because I've seen it, I've seen it with governors. We steal ideas from each other all the time, and we don't care where the idea comes from if it's a good idea. Housing is a great example. We had a round table on housing with the governors. And so one of my favorite things, this was in February, the price of housing and how expensive it is right now. And I went back and I looked and I said to you guys, if somebody just came in from another country right now, had no idea who any of us were, or if someone from our country came into the room have no idea who were, they would not be able to tell who were the Republicans and who were the Democrats in that room because we were trying to solve a problem.

And so that's, I think, very, very unique and still a little bit different. Now that doesn't, Franklin said that governors were the last adults in the room when it comes to politics now, I think that's mostly true. I think there are some governors at the kids table, but

mostly because as an executive we're trying to solve problems. It makes a real difference, and I would just encourage us to allow more of that to happen. I think abortion's a good example. If you look at what happened in Europe with abortion laws, they kind of over time found a stasis of abortions are legal up to 12 to 15 weeks kind of in that range. But when we kind of force it on the entire country, it led to so much hostility. And now we've taken that away and you see just this kind of crazy range because we never really dealt with it. And it's okay that California and Utah are different. That's a good thing. It really is. And we'll learn from each other and when things get too far out of whack in one place, their citizens will demand if somebody else is more successful, if Utah keeps getting ranked number one in US News and World Report, I will just say 70 different categories, over a thousand data points ranking all 50 states and Utah came out, number one, people will come and ask what's Utah doing? And they'll steal from us.

Fred Ryan:

Why don't we go to a couple questions from the floor? Yes, I think we've got a microphone. Mikey.

Peter Semler:

My question is to Governor Cox, and as your role as the National Governors Association chairman, the governors, the local governors of Ukraine are now copying you and your model for economic development, especially the governor elected regional council chair, Tiana Rova Luko, who has your same role as the head of all the municipal elected officials. How are you going to do that? Because they want to copy your model, bringing businesses when you travel and doing the economic development and having their own EDC. And this is something that Zelensky wants to do is take the power from the federal government to the regions, like our federal government doesn't do any development basically, but you guys do, and you're the top state in the country, so you're probably the best person for them to talk to.

Gov. Spencer Cox:

We've actually had conversations with, in fact, I was not on the trip, but Utah was the first state to take our economic team to over Kyiv since the invasion. And our Senate president was there and met with President Zelensky to have those very conversations. So we are very involved with what's happening in Ukraine and deeply troubled at the terror that continues to happen there. Very grateful that we finally got some funding to Ukraine and grateful to Speaker Johnson for allowing that vote to go forward. I think Ronald Reagan would've approved. And so we will continue to work with our Ukrainian counterparts to help them develop that. And that's exactly right. That's what they're trying to do is to get that regional economic development moving. Thank you. Thank you. Thanks. Yeah. Question over there.

Victoria Virasingh:

Good morning, I'm Victoria VEing from the Noble Reach Foundation. Thank you for all the work that you're doing. I'm curious to know what the perception has been like on college campuses as you've brought the discussion to different campuses.

Gov. Spencer Cox:

Yeah, so we kind of tried to focus on some different areas. One, youth and families, and we'll have more to say. We're convening in Nashville in a couple of days, and we'll be talking about that, working with CEOs whose Slack channels are blowing up and really struggling with conflict resolution, of course, elected officials. But the fourth area was on our college campuses. And so we've been working with, again, different groups. Some of you may be familiar with Braver Angels. Braver Angels has an amazing campus debate model. And so we've taken that campus debate model to several college campuses and held debates, participated in these debates with college students. It's a little different than the traditional debate. It's not just two people up on stage arguing with each other. Everyone in the audience is part of the debate and everyone gets an opportunity who wants to come up and share their views.

We pick a controversial topic and then we let the students come up and argue their position. There are some ground rules about you address the chair instead of a person. You are respectful to the person. It is really cool to see how this works. And the response has been overwhelmingly positive. And when I say overwhelmingly, I mean a hundred percent approval rating for the people who participate in this, unlike anything I've seen, what we hear is, this is so refreshing. I didn't know we could do this. So while I was so animated and excited, I also left deeply troubled and depressed about what's not happening in our college campuses. Because when I went to college, I studied political science and this is what we did almost every class. It was deep and heated debate and energizing. And then we would talk about it afterwards and we would go to dinner and hang out and never once thought, I can't be friends with that person because we're on the other side of an issue.

And what we're seeing on too many college campuses is one on many college campuses, there's so little viewpoint diversity that there's not much debate going because of that. Number two, when there is debate, people feel so uncomfortable or unsafe that they disengage very quickly. And so it's a learned skill and they don't know how to do it. I will say one other very interesting things. There's been some studies done that have found that people who participated in organized debate in high school or college are much less polarized than the rest of the country. Because to do so, you have to understand the other side of an argument. And when you understand the other side of an argument, you realize that they're not just evil people or stupid people, that they just see the world a different way and that there is a rationale behind it, even if you disagree with it.

And that makes you much more tolerant of diverse viewpoints. Sadly, again, now, not every college campus and not everywhere on college campuses, but by and large, we've just completely lost that. And so again, speaking of scale, I wish there was a way, and there are groups doing this, and there are college campuses that are recommitting to this. I do think the pendulum is swinging. I'm really happy to see that towards viewpoint diversity, towards removing the cancel culture and allowing unpopular voices to be heard, defending the First Amendment, even if you hate what the person is saying. And then getting back to figuring out how to have true debate without hate.

Fred Ryan:

Another question.

Adam Jackman:

Thank you for being here. Really appreciate all your efforts. Governor Cox, I work on the House Select Committee on the CCP. We do a lot of bipartisan work, and something that I think is very important to what you said here today is sort of the collective action problem of the Plural List Project. From my perspective on the committee, once we have the members in a room on both sides of the aisle, a lot of good things can get done. But as you said, it's the scale, it's the finances, the budget. What do you see as the most pertinent solution to that budget and scale problem from your perspective? Is it through realigning the incentives through the electoral process? Is it just truly getting donors in a room to back a lot of these efforts? Is it more just giving people the language? What is the primary way we can solve that problem?

Gov. Spencer Cox:

Yeah, that's a great question and I wish I had a better answer. Certainly a couple billionaires, if there are any in the room, stepping forward and just saying, this is our life's work. I think we could make a difference that way. I do think we always see that politics is downstream of culture. And so one of the things I've been wrestling with is how do we get this into culture right now? Politicians are part of culture, and so certainly governors speaking about this. Again, this is not, the science says this can make a difference. I've been trying to figure out how to get pop culture and then large corporations advertising budgets involved in this. So lemme go back to the Stanford, the polarization study. So they had 25 interventions, so ours was one of the 25 interventions that got tested. Our video, the most successful video was a Heineken ad.

Some of you may have seen it. It kind of went viral. Basically what Heineken did was they would put two people in a room and they had to build a bar, not like a bar, but they had to build a bar. It was kind of an IKEA furniture project. And these two strangers would build this bar together and then the executives would come and say, Hey, you did it. Congratulations. Now you get a choice. You can have a beer together, a Heineken, or you can leave the room, but before you choose that, we're going to show you a video. And they'd interviewed all these people beforehand and talked to them about their political views, and they were people kind of extremists on both sides. One example was a person who was actually transgender and another person who hated everything related to transgenderism. They put 'em in a room together, they build this bar together, and then they come in and say, you have to watch this first.

And there's this really awkward kind of awful moment when they realized they just spent an hour doing this project with someone that they hated, but they didn't know they hated them until just after this. And then they said, you get to choose. And man, there's this moment when they choose to stay. And if you have a soul or a heart, it will make you cry. It's really powerful. I encourage you to go watch it. I think Heineken consoled a lot of beer because they made people feel something I would love. And we've made this pitch, I would love corporate America to say corporate America wants to stay away from politics, right? Michael Jordan famously said, Republicans buy shoes too. So he never wanted say something, he's right. But turn that around. This is not getting involved in politics. It's about bringing America to together and helping them feel something.

So I always had this great idea for an ad where two vehicles pull up in front of two houses, they're moving in, you've got a big truck kind of coal rolling down the road. You've got an electric vehicle pulling up on the other side. You've got bumper stickers that match. Two families get out with their kids and they kind of side eye each other as they walk into their new houses. One puts up a MAGA flag and one puts up a pride flag, and then you see the kids secretly talking in the backyard and they come out at night and replace both flags with an American flag. And then you see the families, the dads walk out and they eat McDonald's together in the backyard. I don't know, whatever it is, but something again, that gets this into the culture to give permission again to us to talk about, we've been talking to the largest talent agency in the world, trying to get celebrities to come to our NGA meetings to have these conversations. I do think there is something about giving people permission. Again, what they say when they see these videos is, oh my gosh, thank you. This is what I want. I didn't know how to articulate it. I didn't know this is what I wanted, but this is what I wanted. So I don't think we can leave it up to the politicians to fix this one. I don't. I really think it's up to the rest of us.

Fred Ryan:

We're just about out of time. But I do have the sense that you're proud that Utah has been picked two years in a row as number one. Could you tell us a little bit about are they disagreeing better in Utah or what's behind

Gov. Spencer Cox:

That? So look, Utah's very unique in lots of ways, and the researchers will tell you this too. While we have an amazing economy and we've been by most metrics, the best economy in the nation over the past 10 years, top three in any ranking, we're proud of that. But there is something different and something unique that scholars have come literally weekly, we get calls or visits from scholars from Harvard, Yale, other places all over the country, coming to figure out what's different about Utah. Now, I want to say we are trending the way of the rest of the country. So lemme just add that, but we're just further behind. So what they tell me is there's a couple things. We lead the nation in service every year. We lead the nation in charitable giving. Every year. Those institutions, again, Alexis de Tocqueville when he was here, talked about the importance of those institutions.

We have more of those in Utah. I can't talk about Utah without talking about the religious piece. Obviously, although the LDS church is only about half of the population now, we have other amazing religious leaders in this state. And religion plays a very prominent role being an institution where people find connection with people who are different than those. So back to bowling alone, where every week when something goes wrong, you have another safety net, not just the government. You have neighbors and fellow congregants and others. We still have very robust institutions outside of that volunteer organizations that do this type of work. And I believe that does make Utah different. One of the two of the rankings I'm most proud of, we lead the nation in social capital. And again, I think that's a result of some of this. Social capital is so social capital and upward mobility, those two things go together.

So if you're born in poverty in Utah, you're less likely to stay in poverty than any other state in the nation. So that upward mobility, the American dream still alive and well. The

last piece that I'm really proud of is that we lead the nation in non-zero sum thinking. So this kind of scarcity mentality, zero sum thinking that if you win, then I'm losing. If I win, then you lose. It's doggy dog. It's, it's us against the world that's very dangerous. So the abundance mentality that if you win, that's good for all of us. That still happens in Utah and something that I think matters. I think because of that, WalletHub ranked us as the happiest state in the nation last year in their survey work. And again, happiness versus pleasure. As I mentioned before, that happiness comes because of those connections. Government isn't good. It wasn't designed to fill that gap. Government can't connect us, really, or bring us together. It can provide a safety net for sure, but we need strong civic institutions.

We are seeing more people leave our churches in Utah, just like everywhere else, the fastest growing faith in America are the nuns, the NONE Ss. And that worries me because, not because I think everybody has to be religious. I'm not saying that at all, but when you leave those institutions, what are you replacing them with? And we don't have a good answer for that in our country right now. We're not replacing them with bowling leagues. I can tell you that we're replacing them with Facebook hate or whatever, Twitter X. So I think the experts will tell you that's why Utah is doing better. But I'm also deeply worried about it. I speak about it often because it's not in our NA, it's not inherent. There's nothing that says we will be able to keep that. We have to be intentional about it. We have to speak about it.

We have to build our own communities. I believe in rootedness, wherever you are, that's the answer. We need to stop telling kids to go out and change the world. It's making them anxious. They're not going to do it, and it's just not good for them or for us. What we need to tell kids to do is to change their neighborhood, to invest, to go volunteer, to get to know your neighbors, and to help them out to go to the local food bank, whatever it is. That's how we fix all of this. It really is in our local families, our neighborhoods, and our congregations.

Fred Ryan:

Well, governor, thank you for your great leadership in this area, and thank you for joining us today.

Gov. Spencer Cox:

Thank you.

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