

You Might Be Right - Disagree Better - Transcript

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Jared Polis: Be curious, ask questions. It doesn't mean you're going to agree, nor does it mean that either side should feel any pressure to agree. But at the very least, you'll validate the humanity of those you disagree with.

Marianne Wanamaker: Welcome to "You Might Be Right," a place for civil conversations about tough topics, brought to you by the Baker School of Public Policy and Public Affairs at the University of Tennessee, with funding support from members of our Producer Circle. To learn more about how you can support our work, visit youmightberight.org.

Senator Baker's career was once described as a product of his unique capacity to win the confidence and trust of even those with whom he fundamentally disagreed. It's harder to find Baker's style in practice today, as disagreement has become more about scoring political points than finding areas of common ground. Could we ever go back to a time of more civil and productive disagreement?

A year-long campaign led by governors from adjacent states and opposing parties, aims to test the waters and model a different healthier way of debate. In this episode, our hosts, former Tennessee Governors Phil Bredesen and Bill Haslam, speak with Utah Governor Spencer Cox, a Republican, and Colorado Governor Jared Polis, a Democrat, about what they've learned and how we can all disagree better.

Phil Bredesen: Well Bill, this time we've got some really, really good guests, two governors. You can't get better than that.

Bill Haslam: And one Republican, one Democrat. I'm afraid they're trying to copy our shtick here.

Phil Bredesen: I know. Well, tell them to talk to me.

Bill Haslam: We'll ask them about it. Hey, I'm really looking forward to this conversation. I think the four of us, and we have the benefit of not just all four of us being governors, but over a period of time. So, one of the things I want to talk about with them is I feel like it's changed some from when you were governor to now in terms of how Republican and Democrat governors interact.

Phil Bredesen: Good. It's also nice and I think it's interesting that they've actually done a lot of the same stuff that we've been trying to do in terms of figuring out ways to work together and talking about that. And so, I really respect them. It'd be interesting to see their perspective on

this.

Bill Haslam: Let's bring them in.

Phil Bredeesen: Bill, one of our guests I want to introduce is Governor Spencer Cox. He's the Republican from Utah, elected in 2020. He previously had been the lieutenant governor from 2013 on. He's got a great background in grassroots politics. He was a city counselor, and then the mayor of Fairview, which is a small town in central Utah. He was a county commissioner, elected to the Utah House of Representatives in 2012 before becoming lieutenant governor the next year. Married his high school sweetheart, they have four children. He has a BA from Utah State University and a law degree from Washington and Lee. He is the oldest of eight children, grew up on a farm, and plays bass guitar, if you can believe. He ought to be in Nashville.

Bill Haslam: Most definitely, and it's a privilege for me to introduce Governor Jared Polis, who is the 43rd governor of Colorado, reelected in '22 by a 19 point margin, which is pretty good in our business, right? He was in the U.S. House for 10 years, sponsored Race to the Top, which we're familiar with in Tennessee. Thank you very much for doing that, Jared. And he was the only Democrat to be a member of the Libertarian House Liberty Caucus. He also is the founder of online florist Pro Flowers. He's a prominent philanthropist, he founded the New American Charter School and co-founded Academy of Urban Learning. His BA is from Princeton, he's married to Marlon Reese. He, I think is the very first governor in a same-sex marriage.

So, welcome. We're thrilled to have both of you with us. Let me just ask you, what prompted the whole Disagree Better? Phil and I are a little worried that you're coming to take our gig as a Republican and Democrat having these conversations, but what prompted you to do this?

Spencer Cox: Well, thank you gentlemen for giving us this opportunity. I feel so fortunate. This is Governor Cox, Spencer. As the chair of the National Governor's Association, we get to choose an initiative every year, and I felt so fortunate to be a part of this bipartisan organization to have such an incredible vice chair in Jared Polis, the governor of Colorado, and we were looking at some of the biggest problems to take on. Looked at healthcare, the rising cost of healthcare, looked at energy policy, things that were important to our country, and just had this realization that we couldn't solve any of the biggest problems affecting our country if we all hate each other and can't even have conversations. That's why I love what you two are doing, and so we thought maybe we could launch an initiative around that, try to remember how to disagree without hating each other, how to work on problems even though we can stay true to our principles, and hopefully look for some solutions where we can find them. Jared was so kind to jump on board with this, and that's really how we chose this idea of disagreeing better.

Bill Haslam: Jared, anything to add to that?

Jared Polis: Well, certainly I'm excited about "You Might Be Right" and the work you're doing. Really we're finding, and I know you found this, too, just so many folks around the country that really see the same need. And the NGA is not, nor should it be, the only effort. We've really

sought to uplift different people working in this sector of disagreeing better in the nonprofit community, universities, civil society, podcasts like yours, and I hope that the work we're doing can boost efforts like the one that you're undertaking and others.

Phil Bredeesen: I want to ask you a question. I mean, I'm the person who was I guess the earliest governor here. I was in the aughts, and—

Bill Haslam: That the 19 aughts or the 2000 aughts? I'm just curious.

Phil Bredeesen: No, it was the 18 aughts. And it seems to me that this ability to talk has just gone downhill dramatically over the last 20 or 25 years. I think of my first term in office, which would've been 2003 to 2007 or something like that, the issues were local, there was a lot of cooperation in the legislature between Democrats and Republicans to get things done. Bill, you were in the next phase of that, and today it seems like these issues have all become nationalized and it's very difficult to even have these conversations. That certainly is happening here in Tennessee. What's your experience? Why do you think that's happening in states, and do you have any ideas what's driving it?

Spencer Cox: Well, it's a great question, I think one we're all trying to figure out. We've worked with universities and researchers on this polarization issue, and I think there are a lot of things driving it. We know that we're lonelier than we've ever been before, we're losing a lot of the institutions that would bring people together and increase trust in one another. We know that religious attendance is down, other institutions, the volunteer service-oriented institutions aren't as strong as they used to be. Thinking Rotary clubs and Lions clubs, Elks lodges, things like that. The rise of social media and cable news I think has played a role. You mentioned local issues. In political science, which I studied, we always said that all politics is local. I don't believe that anymore, I believe that all politics is national. If you look at a city council race, they'll be talking about issues that have nothing to do with the city council.

And then I just heard something today, Justice Sotomayor was interviewed, and she had talked to a member of Congress and asked that question, "When did it change?" And that member of Congress said it changed when they started bringing cameras into the chambers, and everybody started performing for the cameras instead of talking to each other.

So, I think there's lots of reasons that it's changed, but ultimately it really is about getting back to spending time and actually talking to people who are different than us, of getting out of our echo chambers and having those conversations with people that disagree with us, and starting to understand that they are people of good faith, they just maybe have a different way of approaching something.

Phil Bredeesen: And Jared, I mean, just to follow up on that with you, I mean, Utah is a pretty strongly red state. Colorado is much purpler I think in a lot of ways. Do you see that happening as well in your state?

Jared Polis: Well, Colorado is a very politically diverse state. We have very conservative Congress people, very progressive Congress people, and a wide assortment of people of different persuasions call our state home. What we certainly aspire to do and try to do, and the tone that I try to set in our Colorado General Assembly, I know Governor Cox tries to set this in Utah General Assembly, is try to hear one another and work together. It doesn't mean that everybody's going to agree on every issue. You can be conservative, liberal, moderate. This initiative is not about that. It's about making sure that you value where somebody's coming from and their perspective, and you disagree in a way where you don't demean or undermine the humanity of those whom you disagree with. In today's political discourse, sadly, it's become all too common to question the patriotism, the humanity, the decency of people who just might happen to have a different opinion on a policy issue.

Bill Haslam: As I understand it, part of how the reason that you launched Disagree Better was to take on or begin trying to look at a particular issue, that being immigration reform. We've actually talked about that on an earlier show, and we both agree that there's some very practical things that could happen, if the politics could get out of the way. I'm curious what you all have learned on that particular issue, in terms of learning to disagree better, and maybe even taking the next step of trying to actually solve the problem.

Spencer Cox: Yeah, I am grateful for Jared and his leadership in this space as well, both when he was in Congress and as a governor. And Phil and Bill, you guys are right. The most frustrating thing about this issue is that the four of us could solve this by dinner today, if we had the opportunity to do that. There is broad consensus. I think that's one of the things that we learned, that there's broad consensus on both sides. Democrats actually really do want to secure the border, that's important to them, and most Republicans actually do want to fix legal immigration. That's something that has been needed to be accomplished for a long time. We continue to kick that can down the road. But again, for the same reasons we just mentioned, we just can't get the politics out of it and actually solve the problem. But we've had lots of conversations, and Jared could probably add some flavor to that as well.

Jared Polis: Yeah, as you said, when you scrape the surface there's a lot more agreement on immigration than disagreement, but because it's such an intensely political issue you will find people in both parties who actually don't want to solve it because they want to use it as a cudgel against the other party for political reasons. And that's very unfortunate because the American people, by and large, most of whom are not wrapped up the narrative of one party or the other, they just want to see immigration issue solved, our border secured, and they want to see common sense reforms. That can get lost in the process when you have factions in both parties that sometimes see a political benefit in maintaining the crisis.

Bill Haslam: I'm curious, what do each of you say? I'm certain there's people in each of your parties like here who actually want you to not disagree better, they want you actually to be madder at the other side because it's the other side's fault that we're in this mess. What do you say to the people in your own party who want you to be mad at the other side, not to disagree better?

Spencer Cox: Yeah, we hear that all the time, for sure. I think it comes from both sides. There's a couple versions of this. One is, "Why would you want me to engage with those people? Those people are horrible. They're trying to destroy our country." You hear that a lot. The other side is, "Well, you just want me to compromise my beliefs or my principles," and I think those are two arguments that are both two sides of the same coin. And my response is, first of all, this is not about that. As Jared eloquently said, this is not about telling you you shouldn't stand by your principles, or you need to change what you believe in. It's not that at all, but it really is about trying to actually solve some problems.

And the other thing is I've never changed my mind, and I don't think you all have either by being attacked or told you're a terrible human being. The way you actually influence people and persuade people, and I still believe in persuasion, is by treating them with dignity and respect, and they're much more likely to listen to your views when you do that.

Now look, there are conflict entrepreneurs out there in the media, politicians who have no interest in this type of work because they can use fear and divisiveness to gain clicks, or eyeballs, or votes, whatever it is. But the good news is that the data shows, polling shows that more than 70% of Americans hate what's happening in politics today. So, there is this market for something different. People are exhausted, they're tired of what they're seeing, and they're hopeful for something more.

Jared Polis: There are definitely in both sides here, and in my case Democrats who say, "How dare you even talk to them? They are trying to tell me what to do with my own body. They're telling me I can't be the gender I am." I mean, these are really visceral feelings to people. "How could you even talk to people that deny my basic humanity?" And the answer is, you know what? We're all Americans and we have to talk and listen to one another, because we all care about this country. And we have to work together because there are people of all different persuasions, just as there are elected officials of all different persuasions, and we have to find a way to work towards the common good.

Phil Bredesen: I can be just answer this question, maybe I'm being a little bit cynical, but I mean, anybody who's an actor in politics, which all four of us have been, I mean, there's always a balance between the political and the public service good of the side, and the kind of stuff you got to do to not get thrown out of office tomorrow morning. I mean, there's always some politics you have to watch. What it seems to me has happened though is, I mean, I can remember back in my early days as governor, there's some people with whom I would disagree on some issue, but who genuinely, I mean, they were willing to throw himself on the planes if they needed to, to do stuff that was good for the state and good for the public.

And the thing that seems to have changed to me is just more and more people putting more and more emphasis simply on the political side of the thing, the preservation of office and having fun fighting the other party, and doing things, and less and less on, well, okay, what am I really here for and what's in the public good? Do you agree with that? And if so, why do you think that

particular thing is happening? Because it seems to be at the root of a lot of it to me.

Spencer Cox: Yeah Phil, I think that that is true. I think that, again, it's interesting. I don't know that the politicians have changed that much as much as the people that are attracted to this work maybe. If you want to be a performer and you want to have social media clicks, you can do that in Congress now, for sure. I do think it's a little different in the states. There is some of that for sure in Utah, but the vast majority are still the builders, the architects instead of the arsonists. But there definitely are more arsonists out there as there are more platforms, and we give them that kind of platform to perform. But I do still believe that most people, at least most of the people I interact with, I'm sure it's the same in Colorado, really are trying to do the right thing.

You do have to pay attention to politics and that you can't ignore it. But I think at the end of the day, most people – and I will also tell you, that's part of what Disagree Better is about. It's not just trying to convince politicians that this is the good thing and they should do it because it's the right thing for our country and our constitution, but that it's also the right thing to do politically. That there are a lot of people who will reward this type of behavior because they're tired of the divisiveness, and I still believe that that's true, and we're hoping to show that that's true.

Bill Haslam: Do you all have an example of an issue that you all have disagreed on, that maybe you figured out here's how we can disagree better? You're both NGA chairs. I'll throw in a note. Phil talked about governors cooperating. In my experience, the NGA experience deteriorated some between Republicans and Democrats when after the Affordable Care Act was passed, and then a couple years later the Supreme Court ruled that each state could decide whether they were going to expand Medicaid coverage or not. That for me, NGA changed after that. It got a lot more polarized around that issue of implementation of Affordable Care Act, and the decision to expand or not. I'm curious if there's a issue that you all might see differently, but that you've learned how to disagree better on personally.

Spencer Cox: Well first of all, you'll be happy to know that I think in large part, because of time, the healthcare, Obamacare, Affordable Care Act, whatever you call it, that has become a less toxic discussion, a more constructive discussion. You do see more Republican states just looking at the economics and deciding on their own whether they want to expand Medicaid, or launch their own exchange. There's obviously a national exchange. These are still issues that people weigh the pros and cons of, but I think enough time has gone by where it's no longer the divisive national issue that the buzzwords once were.

We're trying to forge a path forward on NGA to be relevant on all the issues of the day. Again, building consensus between governors is generally easier than building consensus between the parties in Congress. At their core, and you've experienced this, governors are problem solvers. There's no Democratic or Republican way to fix a pothole, and whether that's applied to immigration and border security, whether it's applied to our input that we agreed on, for instance, on the Farm Bill, which may or may not be moving soon, we have a number of working groups. And overall, again, it's different discussion. The theme of Disagree Better is different

than the theme of finding common ground and compromise, but they're sisters and they're related, and absolutely I think as a whole governors are productive in working together towards common sense agreement and solutions on a number of different issues of the day.

Phil Bredezen: Both Bill and I have been mayors before we were governor, and I see both of you have got a history in more local politics before becoming governor. One of the things that seems to be happening is the further and further you get from actual feet on the ground with real people and real problems, the more abstract and the more open to that kind of polarization and acting out has become. Do you see that in your own experiences? Does that distance from just being tied to you actually have to do something Monday morning if there's crime in the streets in your city? Do you see that happening in your own experiences?

Spencer Cox: Sure. I think there's definitely a division there. I think because as Jared mentioned too, there's a little bit of a division between legislating an executive where you're implementing, you have to solve problems, you have to do things versus maybe a Congress where you can be a little more performative. I can say I had always wished that every legislator had served on a city council as a mayor in some way, just because it does change your view. This is not an episode of the West Wing, it's real life, and everything that you do has a real cost and a way to implement, and just understanding how it impacts people.

I think that interacting with people is really important. When you go to the grocery store or the post office and you hear from your neighbors, that changes you. And so, I do think that government closest to the people is always better. But as Jared said, I do love working with governors who understand that we have to wake up and get stuff done, and red state or blue state.

We had a great meeting on housing affordability and attainability. Every state is struggling with this. Jared led, at our last NGA meetings two weeks ago, he led a discussion with all the governors that were there about what they're doing in their states, and remarked afterwards that, if you had just listened to that session, you would not have been able to tell who was a Republican and who was a Democrat in that room, because we're just all trying to figure this out and find solutions.

Jared Polis: And I think there is a healthier democracy, and we do disagree better generally speaking, at the local level and at the state level than nationally right now. But as Governor Cox said, a lot of this national illness has unfortunately trickled down to local politics, and you do find people, for instance, running for local school board, rather than on improving results for kids or improving schools to say, "I'm running to get rid of three books from the library that nobody ever checked out, or nobody knew were there until I started talking about them." I mean, and that comes from a national discourse. It's not because actually anybody there is concerned about these books. And sometimes they win and sometimes they lose, depending on the electorate.

But what we're trying to foster again, is vibrance remains vibrant at the local and state level, not perfect. And Governor Cox and I would be the first ones to say we're not perfect. We also are in

this political system and we always strive to do better, but there's always times that we fall short. And I think that comes at all levels. But I think the biggest thing that we need to do is change the discourse of the country at the national level so that truly there is greater respect for us all as Americans, because truly we are all in this together and we succeed or fail as a nation.

Bill Haslam: So, let's make it as local as we can. Bring it back, you're giving advice to somebody that they're getting ready to have relatives in for a holiday, or they're meeting their old high school class at the local diner and they know politics is going to come up, and it's going to get heated really quick. What advice do you give all of us as individuals about how we learn to disagree better on the most local level you can get?

Spencer Cox: Well, Governor Polis and I actually filmed an ad together around the dinner table where we talk about this, about disagreeing better around the dinner table, whether you're with your MAGA uncle or your woke niece, and how to have a conversation with both of them. And again, the data, the researchers who look at depolarization and figuring this out, it's truly just conflict resolution. But there are some basic things that we recommend. One is to be curious, just to want to learn more about the other people. We call it the magic question or the magic request, is just tell me more about why you feel that way. And that gives you a chance to cool down, it shows that you're interested in the other person. It allows them to explain the reason behind what they believe. You'll usually find that it is in good faith, whatever it is that they believe in, that they're not just as crazy as maybe you thought they were, but there's a real truth behind what their belief system is. And then they're much more likely to give you an opportunity to share your beliefs as well. And at the end of the day, what Governor Polis said, that this idea that we're all Americans, or we're all Utahans or Coloradans, we're members of a family, that's more important.

The last thing I just have to say is this. One of the big things coming out of this work is an understanding of using other identities to bring us together. When I was growing up, I didn't know who the Republicans and Democrats were in my town or my congregation. That was something you found out way down the list. We were moms or dads, we were Utahans, we were Utah Jazz fans or Denver Nuggets fans, or whatever. We would talk about all these other things and eventually you'd find out if someone was Republican or Democrat. This idea that we lead with that, that that's our most important identity is really, really dangerous. So, I always encourage people to try to find the other person's identity that matches yours, and talk about that. We're both music fans, we're sports fans, we're Americans. Those identities are really important and can help diffuse some of those situations.

Jared Polis: So it's really be curious, ask questions. It doesn't mean you're going to agree, nor does it mean that either side should feel any pressure to agree. But at the very least, you'll validate the humanity of those you disagree with, they'll validate your humanity, and both sides will walk away happier rather than angrier, that at least they were heard. And that anger just creates a spiral of worse feelings and more disagreement that threatens our republic.

Phil Bredesen: While we're on this subject of openness and communication, the podcast we're

doing is named after or styled after Howard Baker's admonition, just "always remember that the other fellow might be right." To bring it to a personal level, I'd like to ask the two of you if you have an experience in your own life where some fairly strongly held belief that you have about something was altered by being open and simply listening to somebody who had a different point of view? Have you ever changed your mind in this circumstance?

Spencer Cox: Yeah, that's a great question. I have changed my mind in lots of different circumstances on different bills. I can remember an issue where it was an election issue when I was first in the legislature, and I came in as a freshman pretty hot. And I had watched a lot of Fox News and I knew everything, and came in and had a disagreement, a pretty strong one on an election issue with a member of the minority party. And we had a conversation afterwards, and sat down and started talking, and realized that I'd grown up in a small town in a rural area, she'd grown up in a big city. She was Latina. So we had very, very different backgrounds, and we actually sat down and talked about it. I realized that we wanted the same thing. At the end of the day, we were trying to do the same thing. We just had these wildly different background experiences, and she helped to actually change my mind on that issue. And it was a revelation to me, and changed the way that I've approached politics and governed ever since.

Jared Polis: And again, it doesn't mean by disagreeing better that anybody has to or should change their opinion. That might happen in the natural course of things, it might not, but it does elevate the discourse and center the humanity of people as well as the patriotism of people, whatever their own political opinions are. But of course, by listening and learning it hopefully leads to two things. One could be you might realize you were wrong or they might realize they were wrong. It also can lead to compromise, which is what our system was built on, where I believe this, you believe that. Let's find a third way that incorporates some of what I believe and some of what you believe, and actually get it done rather than both scream that we want our thing and nothing else, and then nobody's happy because nothing gets done.

Spencer Cox: Jared and I fight about who has the best snow all the time, and—

Jared Polis: It's obviously Colorado.

Spencer Cox: I'm pretty sure I'm never going to convince him, even though science has proven that the snow is better in Utah. But that's okay, we all have our faults.

Jared Polis: It's snowing right here in Colorado now. Has it hit Utah already, this winter storm?

Spencer Cox: It has, it moved through here yesterday. Yep.

Bill Haslam: That was going to be my final question is if I wanted to go snow skiing, where should I go? So, it sounds like you've already had that argument.

Spencer Cox: You know what? Here's the example I used. So, while we're never going to agree on whether Utah or Colorado is the best skiing, we absolutely can both agree that youth

sports, and participation in skiing, and helping to boost the industry, and making sure that kids from disadvantaged backgrounds have access to winter sports are wonderful things we should focus on, outdoor recreation. And our message to people that are not fortunate enough to be Coloradans or Utahans is come to Colorado and Utah, enjoy the outdoors, get outdoors and have a good time, whether it's winter sports, hiking, fishing, rafting, and of course Colorado and Utah are both two great places to do it.

Jared Polis: Yeah, we can both agree that we live in an amazing country. It's some of the best places, the most beautiful places in the country. So come, take a week and ski a couple days in Vail, and then come to Park City and ski a couple days there.

Bill Haslam: We both agree that you both have great places to visit, but you'd probably be better off just to come back home and live in Tennessee. So, thanks for joining us. You're great to give us time, and we've learned a lot from being with you.

Phil Bredeesen: We really appreciate it, thanks.

Jared Polis: Thank you both.

Phil Bredeesen: Thank you.

Spencer Cox: Thanks guys.

Bill Haslam: Thank you all.

Phil Bredeesen: That was a good conversation.

Bill Haslam: It was. And again, it reminded me that these are two people who probably disagree on several issues, but they agree that – I loved what the way Governor Cox said, "how's it working now? How is, just yelling back at the other side, how's that doing in terms of solving problems?" And the answer's not very well.

Phil Bredeesen: Well, if what you're interested in is keeping your narrow base happy and getting reelected, it works fine for that. But hopefully that's not what most people get into these offices for.

Bill Haslam: Yeah. And interestingly, both of them have been elected and reelected by wide, comfortable margins, so the people who think politically you can't survive if you actually recognize that the other side might have some good arguments, that just doesn't bear out.

Phil Bredeesen: But I think what Howard Baker had in mind was not only just disagree respectfully, but the other fellow might be right. That you have an opportunity also to change your opinion on some of these things. And people are not going to do that on some of these. Nobody's going to change their view of abortion because somebody sat down and talked to

them at the dinner table. But, boy, there's so many issues where I think we both had the experience, just you sit and start listening, and saying, "I may have just gone down the wrong fork in the road on this one."

Bill Haslam: It's one of the advantages of getting a little older and being able to look back at making more than one mistake.

Phil Bredesen: Yes, many more than one, in my case.

Bill Haslam: Thanks. I appreciate you being a part of this conversation, and I look forward to many more.

Phil Bredesen: Anytime.

Marianne Wanamaker: Thanks for listening to "You Might Be Right." Be sure to follow on Apple Podcasts, Spotify, or wherever you listen to your favorite shows. And please help spread the word by sharing, rating and reviewing the show.

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