

You Might Be Right - The Myth of Left and Right - Transcript

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.

In this episode, our hosts, former Tennessee governors Phil Bredesen and Bill Haslam, are joined by Hyrum Lewis and Verlan Lewis, brothers, professors, and authors of a new book, *The Myth of Left and Right*. They make the case that contrary to popular belief, there are no consistent philosophies behind the political spectrum of left-right and liberal conservative. Instead, the left and right are social groups united by tribal loyalty, fueling partisan hostility, and undermining our ability to engage in reasoned debate. How would a shift from unidimensional tribalism to a more multidimensional view of politics affect civic discourse and public policy?

This episode was recorded live at the Rotary Club of Chattanooga in August 2024.

Bill Haslam: Thank you very much for the kind introduction, and it's great to be back here and see a lot of familiar faces. Phil, I'm guessing you're like me. It's not your first visit to the Chattanooga Rotary.

Phil Bredesen: No, I think I've got some footprints in this room just like you.

Bill Haslam: And it's fun to see a lot of friends that have helped both of us over the years, so thank you all, and I think we're in for a fun conversation. As you mentioned, we've actually been trying to do this for a while, and we couldn't work out schedules. And we wanted to do it where it would actually be a live podcast because we both enjoy doing that and we happen to find some guests that I think are right on topic for what we want to be talking about and I think you'll be glad you got a chance to hear them as well.

Phil Bredesen: It really is great to be back in Chattanooga. I know there's cities all over the world who are trying to reinvent themselves all the time and Chattanooga is one of those cities that really has done it successfully over a couple of generations. I really admire what's been accomplished here and it's great to be here.

Bill Haslam: All right, let's meet our guests.

Phil Bredesen: Let me start out by introducing Hyrum. He's a professor of history at Brigham Young University. Previously had been at Skidmore and Stanford, written a number of articles published in internationally recognized publications. He's the author of multiple books, including *The Myth of Left and Right*, which is the book we'll be discussing today. And also a book called *There is a God: How to Respond to Atheism in the Last Days*. Hyrum studied history and philosophy at USC, University of Southern California, with a Ph.D. in 2007. Grew up in Eugene, Oregon. He currently lives in eastern Idaho with his wife and kids. He's a big sports fan,

especially the NFL and college football. So you're in the right state and welcome.

Bill Haslam: Thanks. And Verlan Lewis— and by the way, in case you were wondering, they are brothers. I'm kind of curious, does the whole brotherly competition thing keep going, like who's published the most and all that or not?

Hyrum Lewis: No, I long ago surrendered. Verlan is better-looking, smarter, everything, so I gave up.

Bill Haslam: All right. Verlan is a Stirling Professor of Constitutional Studies and associate professor of political science at Utah Valley University, where he researches, teaches, and writes. His writings appeared in a lot of publications, Wall Street Journal, The Washington Post, The Hill. I could keep going. He's well published. His first book, Ideas of Power was published back in 2019, and of course, he and Hyrum co-wrote The Myth of Left and Right, and we're going to have a fun time talking about that. He got his master's of philosophy from Cambridge and his Ph.D. in government from UVA, and he did some postdoc work at Stanford University. So, Governor Bredesen, you want to kick us off?

Phil Bredesen: Sure. I'd like to start out with a question. I don't know how many in this room may have been able to read their book, but the underlying thesis is that the difference between liberals and conservatives today is not one of ideology, it's one of tribes. And throughout their book, it gave many examples of issues which were owned by conservatives at one point, are now owned by liberals or vice versa. They've changed back and forth, which is a pretty persuasive kind of argument.

I thought we might start out by just asking you for this crowd to talk a little bit about maybe what some of those issues are, some of those things that were owned by one side of the political spectrum at one point and maybe now are owned by another, as a way of example.

Verlan Lewis: Yeah. So, I'll just first start by saying thank you to the Rotary Club here for having us. I will say our father would be really proud to see us on a Rotary stage today. He's a lifelong Rotarian. So we love the Rotary Club. And actually, I benefited from the Twin Rivers Rotary Club in Oregon helping sending me to college with a high school scholarship, so big fan of Rotary and also a fan of this podcast and what the governors are doing. So thank you.

But yeah, to your question about how the meanings of liberalism and conservatism have changed over time, there's actually no issue I can think of that at one point the liberals didn't have one issue position and the conservatives the other and flip back and forth. The meanings of liberalism and conservatism are constantly changing and that's one of the problems with the way that we think and talk about politics in terms of this left-right spectrum.

So you can go down the list whether you're talking about trade policy or tax policy or abortion policy or racial policy, but maybe one example I'll give just because we've seen it a lot in our lifetimes is many of us in this room will remember in the 1970s and '80s, it was thought that

those who were liberal were going to be less interventionist on foreign policy and those who were conservative were going to be more interventionist on foreign policy. So famously in 1972, George McGovern, who was considered a left wing and considered a liberal said that America needs to come home from its wars abroad, and the people who called themselves conservatives would criticize liberals for being isolationist, right? Well, in the 1990s, once Democrats took control of the presidency and started sending troops around the world and start doing some of this interventionist foreign policy, the positions of liberals and conservatives flipped. And you'll remember in the 1990s when those who called themselves conservatives would criticize Democrats for being interventionist on foreign policy and being too hawkish.

Of course, I still remember in the 2000 debate between Al Gore of Tennessee and George W. Bush. Bush and his campaign would criticize Gore and the Clinton administration for being interventionist on foreign policy. President Bush then Governor Bush promised to have a humble foreign policy and that the U.S. can't be the world's policeman, that was his critique of liberals and progressivism. But of course, once Republicans became president it switched again, and it became during the 2000s, the time for liberals to criticize conservatives for being interventionist and hawkish on foreign policy. And that changed again during the Obama administration, and now we have conservatives, people who call themselves conservatives, people like Donald Trump saying, "We need to stop with the foreign interventionism. We need to stop with trying to be the world's policeman." So it goes back and forth what liberal and conservative means on just about every issue you can think of.

Hyrum Lewis: Some people think well size of government, that's got to be the essential dividing line between liberal and conservative. We get that quite a bit. Conservatives are those who believe in smaller government. Liberals are those who believe in bigger government. Now, if the presidency is with George W. Bush and Donald Trump haven't convinced us otherwise, you can look back in history. In fact, in 1932, Franklin Roosevelt ran on a platform of shrinking the size of government. He obviously didn't do it, but that was considered a more liberal thing. If you look at the definition of liberal in the 19th century as somebody who believed in free markets, low tariffs. So the meanings of these terms evolve quite substantially, and the reason for that is that there is nothing behind them. That's our claim. Some people think no, there's an essential principle and liberals have always believed this and conservatives have always believed this, and there's two sides. There's one big issue in politics, and you're either on the liberal or the conservative side of that one issue and the manifestations of those two worldviews will change. But ultimately, there's this deep philosophy there. We say that's not true.

Our thesis can be summarized in just three simple propositions, and I wish we would've said it this clearly in the book. One, there's more than one issue in politics. Two, a spectrum by definition can only model one issue. Therefore, we should not be using a political spectrum. That's our claim.

Phil Bredezen: So do you agree with all that, Bill?

Bill Haslam: If you'd have said it simple, it have been a really short book.

Let me dig a little deeper there, okay? The thesis is that you can't really say liberals believe this for this fundamental reasons, conservatives believe this for this fundamental reason? What has caused us to shift to the place where we are today then? One of the points of our podcast is, by the way, we're not non-partisan. I mean, Phil's a Democrat. I'm a Republican. We believe the things we believe for real reasons. We're not a-partisan, if you will, okay? But what we are against is this idea that if you think different than me, you're not just wrong, you're wrong for bad motives. That's where we are today is like if you're on the other side, you're not really trying to get to the best answer. You have your own personal agenda that's driving that. So how did we end up here where an incredible percentage of the country thinks violence against the other side is legitimate given the dire circumstances we're in?

Hyrum Lewis: Well, we say it's largely a function of spectral thinking. When you're thinking about politics wrong, you're going to get everything else wrong. So for instance, medicine in the 19th century, they had a four humors theory, and that's what all the smart doctors believed is that you cut people open and bleed them to help them to improve. We think the political spectrum is our 21st century version of the four humors theory because notice what this is going to do to people. It's going to say there's just one issue, and since there's just one issue, you're either on the good side or the bad side of that one issue. So if somebody considers themselves to be on the left, they're going to say, "Left wingers believe in social justice. Therefore anybody who doesn't agree with me on everything is an opponent of social justice is therefore evil." Now, if you look at the reality that there isn't just one issue, it's not just about social justice and privilege, but that there's many issues. There's abortion. There's capital punishment. There's tax rates. There's healthcare, just hundreds of issues. And you look at it that way, well, then the parties are nothing but baskets of issues. Some of them good, some of them bad. And when you look at it that way, then every person you approach is going to be a different bundle of issues, and you're going to agree with everybody on this planet about at least something which turns everybody into an ally. But what the spectrum does by reducing everything to one issue it says, "No, you're either on my team or the bad team because there's just one issue, and you're on the wrong side of that one issue."

Now, the parties have an incentive. So you say, "How did we get here?" The parties have an incentive to perpetuate the myth of left and right because if you get a letter in the mail saying, "Hey, Bill, the Republican Party stands for a bunch of random things and we hope you agree with some of them. I hope you'll donate." You're not going to donate. But if they say, "We stand for conservatism and everything our party stands for is conservative and those evil left wingers on the other side are trying to destroy the country," that's going to motivate people. So the myth of left and right is very helpful for the parties to generate loyalty, to generate passion, to raise money in these kinds of things. So there's institutional incentives pushing this myth, and you could say the same about media, right? Fox News has to say, "We're the good guys standing for the one great thing and the people who disagree with this are evil."

What do you want to add to that, Verlan?

Verlan Lewis: Yeah. So to your point, we did get here and it hasn't always been this way. So America hasn't always thought and talked about politics in terms of a left-right spectrum. In fact,

for most of American history, Americans simply didn't think and talk about politics in that way. If you go back and read the speeches and writings of George Washington or Abraham Lincoln or anyone from early American history, you'll never hear them talk about left wing this or right wing that. It just wasn't a part of vocabulary. No one thought and talked about politics in that way. Everyone understood that parties had a group, a bundle of issue positions, and you would look at the two parties and say, "Okay, I don't agree with either party on everything, but I prefer this party to the other one, and so I'm going to vote for this party because they've got more of the stuff that I like than the other party."

But starting in the 20th century, something happened. And what happened is, unfortunately, academics and journalists imported the left-right spectrum from Russia. During the Communist Revolution in Russia, the Bolsheviks started using this idea that politics could be modeled on a left-right spectrum. And as that has become more and more entrenched in our society, more and more entrenched in our thinking, now people look at politics and they say, "Oh, there's just one issue, one single line. And one party is on one side of that spectrum and one party is on the other. And so all I have to do is sign up for one side of the spectrum, and if I get that one big issue right, then I'm correct about everything and the person in the other party is wrong about everything." So that changes—

Bill Haslam: Just to be clear, the one big issue you keep talking about is am I on the left or right, not a specific issue around the deficit or pro-life or anything else.

Verlan Lewis: Right, because there's hundreds of different issues. Now, what people will say when we say that there's more than one issue in politics, they say, "Well, it's true. There are hundreds of issues, but all the issues are bound together by one big issue that divides left from right." Now, what they think that is depends on who you ask. So the most common definition, the one you might see in the dictionary is people on the left are in favor of change, and people on the right are against change.

Now, that's a kind of useful definition for people who believe in the spectrum to use because it's so vague that you can make any set of issue positions sound like they're in favor of change or against change, but the reality is everyone in this room wants to change some things that they think are bad and preserve some things that they think are good. So there's no one who's totally in favor of change on everything and against change on everything. So we could go down the list, big government versus small government. Hyrum mentioned this, it's another one we get a lot. Equality versus hierarchy. There's lots of different things that people will say is the one big issue, but they just don't stand up to scrutiny.

Phil Bredezen: Bill, I was thinking when I read the book that both you and I were mayors, nonpartisan mayors, and I've often spoken in Nashville, and we've talked about the fact that it was really healthy in the sense that in Nashville, for example, the coalition you put together for a football team is totally different than the coalition you put together for a land acquisition, and in a way that wouldn't be possible if it were just is this a Democratic or Republican issue and so on. Maybe the cities in our state are just a little bit of a throwback to that era you're discussing

before things became placed on that axis.

One thing I wanted to ask you though is you can argue about whether the polarization today, how much more intense or less intense it is prior to the Civil War or something like that, but it's high. What are the conditions in society that cause this polarization, this sense of we have to think about things in this axis to be elevated in the way that they are today?

Verlan Lewis: Well, one thing that we argue in the book is that the myth of ideological polarization is driving a reality of affective polarization, so that's just a fancy word that political scientists use. They talk about affective polarization. That simply just means that the people in our two parties hate each other more than they used to. And there's pretty clear survey data on that that you go and ask people, "Do you have a favorable or unfavorable rating of Republicans or Democrats?" And the feeling that people have about their own party hasn't really changed. They still have a pretty favorable feeling about their fellow partisans, but increasing hostility towards their cross partisans, so that's what we call affective polarization. We think this is driven by a lot of factors and people have talked about a lot of the things that are going on. Social media doesn't help, right? The fact that we're increasingly online rather than having face-to-face conversations with our neighbors like all of you are doing here.

The fact that fewer and fewer people are members of organizations like Rotary, local service organizations. Fewer and fewer people are attending church. Having those kinds of real human connections and relationships I think is driving a lot of the anger and the hostility, but what we argue in the book is one of the big drivers that no one else is talking about is this myth of ideological polarization. This idea that you can place every single person or group on a single line from left to right, and once you place them on that line, everything about that person. And so we've seen this in our own lives, we see it on a macro level. You have a conversation with someone and if you say something critical about, say, the Inflation Reduction Act, well, that means you must be a conservative and you love Donald Trump, and you think the 2020 election was stolen, and you want to build a wall.

It's like no, no, no, I'm critical of this one thing, but we assume everything about this person because, if they're on that side of the spectrum, then they have to buy into the entire basket of things that goes together. So left-right thinking really makes our society much more tribal than it would otherwise be.

Now, we also talk about the book that there's tribalism is inherent in human nature. People need to belong to groups, but there's healthier tribes, and there's less healthy tribes. And I think what you all are doing here is a healthy group to be a part of, but the kind of ideological tribes that have come to dominate and really become religions for a lot of people and our society today are really, really harmful for our civil discourse.

Hyrum Lewis: And if I could just add the totalizing approach to politics that the spectrum creates, if you're thinking in terms of one issue and one side is correct about that issue, then of course, it's going to drive issue position extremism. So if I have convinced myself, which most of

my colleagues in the history profession has, it's very sad, but they've convinced themselves there's just one big issue, and you're either in favor of social justice and you're on the left, or you're an evil person and you're on the right. And therefore if something is considered left wing, then the further left I go, the more righteous I am because it means I'm more in favor of social justice. So why wouldn't I take every issue to its logical extreme? Because the more extreme it are is the more righteous it is. Now, if we look at politics as it is and not through the prism of a spectrum and disaggregate and look at individual positions, well, then you have to look at individual positions on their merits rather than where they fit on a magic imaginary line.

And when you do that, you realize things are really complex. The abortion question is a tough one, and that you're weighing the rights of an unborn child against the rights of a mother. And these are two things that have to be balanced. When you look at questions, for instance of fiscal matters, right? Question of deficits. These are hard to solve, but it makes them seem easy when you place them on a spectrum because it's about the righteous people against the wicked people. They're just one issue. And I'm on the good side of that one issue, so let's take it to an extreme. So no wonder college campuses have become so explosive with extreme rhetoric and intolerance because in their view, they're on the good side, and therefore everything they believe is good a priori. They don't have to think about it. They don't have to evaluate the evidence. They don't need to engage anyone who disagrees. Of course, we're going to cancel them because we already know they're wrong because we've chosen the correct side of the one big issue.

Bill Haslam: So let me come back. How do groups move from one side of that right issue? You use the example in the book that pretty far left people, Cesar Chavez, Bernie Sanders have been seen as opposed to immigration because of what it did to the wage rates. How do you get a whole group to move? What happens?

Hyrum Lewis: So when you say a whole group, give me an example.

Bill Haslam: Well, I'll give you a Tennessee example. Phil won every county in 2004, all 95. Eight years later, I win every county. We would both like to tell you it's because we were such strong, magnetic campaigners and great governors, et cetera, but the reality is rural people in Tennessee moved from historically being Democrat to almost totally being Republican. You cannot find a rural Democrat in our legislature, state legislature today anymore. I think I'm right about that. And 30 years ago, every rural member of the legislature. So what happens?

Hyrum Lewis: Yeah, so the political scientists are misconceiving what happens. The prevailing narrative is that all these people have shifted to the right. They say, "Oh, they used to be on the left and now they've moved to the right." It's completely wrong. The reality is that the Republican Party has changed, and therefore the meaning of conservative has changed. So it's not that these people have changed their psychology, have changed their worldview, have moved from left to right, it's rather that what the Republican Party stands for is different than what it used to stand for. And as that has shifted, it has become more in line with the voters you're talking about. So rural Tennesseans, for instance, are more religious than the average American. The

Republican Party used to be the more secular party. People have a hard time believing this.

But if you go back and look in the 1920s, 1930s, religious Americans were far more likely to vote Democrat than Republicans. It's just the way it was. It was northern secular business interests that were kind of the backbone of the Republican Party. Now that started to change in 1970s with the Roe v. Wade decision and Ronald Reagan kind of embraced a religious identity. And so the Republican Party became the more religion-friendly party. And with these social issues coming online, the Republican party kind of captured those. And so again, it has nothing to do with these people moving right or left on a spectrum. It has to do with the Republican Party being a basket of many issues and many of the issues it adopted over the course of the last century started to appeal to the voters you're talking about.

Does that sound right to you, Verlan?

Verlan Lewis: Yeah, I think that's exactly right. And I think that metaphor of baskets is really useful. So sometimes we will bring this up when we're giving an interview. So imagine you go to the grocery store, and you want to buy your groceries for the week. Well, typically you just go in the store, you get your cart, you go up and down the aisles, you get what you want. You get your cereal, you get your apples, you get your milk, you get your bread, and then you go check out. Well, imagine you show up at the grocery store and the doors are closed, and they just meet you out front with two carts, a red cart and a blue cart, and each cart just has a random bundle of products in the basket. Well, that's kind of like a two-party system, and there's some good things about that.

We are actually not critical of a two-party system. There's actually a lot of benefits that come from that. But a rational person would go up to those baskets and say, "Okay, well, this has some stuff I like and stuff I don't. This basket has some stuff I like, some I don't. This has got more of the stuff I like. I'm going to choose the red basket or the blue basket because of that." What happens when people switch parties is the stuff that's in the baskets is constantly going back and forth. So the bread you like is now in the other basket or the apples that you liked are now in the other basket as the parties are constantly changing. It's not that they're moving left or right, it's just a different bundle of goods in the baskets that are being offered.

Phil Bredeesen: I want to just go back, just press a little bit on the question I originally asked. It does seem to me that the intensity of the polarization is particularly strong right now. And it leads to the question of is that simply the continued evolution of this process you claim has been going on for a century, or is there something about society today which is forcing people more to be more attuned to and wanting to join into a philosophy like that? I mean, is the decline, for example, of organized religion leaving people looking for other places to get their worldview from?

Hyrum Lewis: Yeah, you're speaking my language. My first book was about exactly that. Yeah. I mean, there's a God-shaped hole in the heart is what I believe. And when man stops worshiping God, he'll find something else to worship. And so I think secularization has largely

driven this, that people are looking for substitute religions and so ideologies and the myth of left and right has become a religion. I mean, just look at the way partisan discourse is conducted today. It's like a religious revival. There's the hallelujahs at Trump rallies and things like that. There's the whole idea of the saved and the damned. It's very religious eschatological. It has highly religious elements.

And so I think people have just taken their faith in God and put it in human idols. And whether you're a religious person or not, I think that's something that should concern us because even atheistic psychologists like, say, Jonathan Haidt, have recognized this, that we're driven to worship, and we worship something. And in the absence of a formal religious organization's structure and object of our worship, we will find secular idols to worship, and that seems to be what happening. So I think not only is the myth of left and right driving a lot of our political pathologies, but I think secularization is a major cause of it as well.

Bill Haslam: We'll talk about a case in point in this, President Trump. Typically, Republicans have believed in free trade. They believed in we need to balance the budget, so the entitlement programs, Social Security, Medicare, Medicaid, have to be addressed. There's been a pro-life platform for a long time. President Trump has taken a very different approach on all of those issues. Did he read the market and where the tribe was going or did the tribe follow him?

Verlan Lewis: Yeah, that's a good question. I think the Trump phenomenon is actually a good illustration of the problems of left-right thinking. So the subtitle of our book, the Myth of Left and Right: How the Political Spectrum Misleads and Harms America, so let's just think about how it misleads our thinking about politics for a second. So the traditional way that most people, Democrats, Republicans, if you turn on Fox News, CNN, everyone's talking about politics. What they all agree on is that Donald Trump is extremely conservative, right? Everyone says he's right-winger. He's an extreme right-winger. No matter who you ask, everyone agrees on that. Okay, so what does that mean? Does that give us useful information?

What everyone else also thinks is that in 2012 when Mitt Romney and Paul Ryan were running for president, they were also on the right side of the spectrum, but they were moderates. They weren't extreme like Donald Trump. They were just moderate conservatives. Okay, so if Trump is an extreme right-winger and Romney is moderate, so does he— As you said, Romney was moderately in favor of free trade. Does that mean Donald Trump has taken Romney's moderate free trade policies and gone to the extreme, and now he's an extreme free trader? No, just the opposite. He's turned against free trade. So does that mean he's moved to the left? Well, that's not really a useful way to think about it either.

Romney and Ryan wanted to moderately reform entitlement spending. So does that mean Trump has gone to the extreme, and he's all about cutting Social Security and cutting Medicare and cutting Medicaid? No, just the opposite. He's very much been clear that he doesn't want to reform entitlement spending.

Does he take Romney and Ryan's moderate conservative foreign presence internationally and

spreading democracy through the military, and he's an extremist in that way, and he's this big hawk and going to take the military? No, just the opposite. He's called for American troops to come home.

You can go down every single issue, but our framework tells us lies. It misleads us, it distorts the reality of what the candidates are actually talking about. So I think that's a good illustration of why this left-right spectrum is misleading how we're talking about politics.

Bill Haslam: I agree, but I want to follow. You did a great job of lining that out. But again, was there a sense of— The argument in the book is that there's not a big principle that divides, it's where your tribe is going, okay? Was the tribe going there and President Trump figured that out, or did the tribe follow him?

Verlan Lewis: Yeah, I think he understood what was happening, right? I mean, he said a lot of different things at campaign rallies and he saw what stuck, and he saw that there were a lot of Republicans who were increasingly frustrated with America's hawkish internationalist foreign policy, that he saw that a lot of Republicans were increasingly frustrated with America's free trade policies. Go down the line, I think he saw this happening.

Hyrum Lewis: Well, yeah. I mean, you can think of it in terms of markets, right? And that's how the party evolution happens. There's an underserved demographic, so you can go back to the 1890s. Some of you may be familiar with the name William Jennings Bryan. He saw the same thing. I mean, there was—

Bill Haslam: He was a little involved about 40 miles away from here and the Scopes trial.

Hyrum Lewis: Yes, he was at the end of his life. Very good. You know your history, Governor. Nice job. Yes.

And so in the 1890s, he saw that there was a bipartisan agreement on the gold standard, but he saw there was a huge swath of the country that wanted the silver, the free coinage of silver. And so he exploited the moment and started appealing to those voters, and I think we see something happening with Trump. Now, the thing that interests us is not just that the Democratic Party reached in and snatched that interest group, but that the meanings of what it meant to be liberal and conservative change as the interest group joined the different party. So the Democratic Party was forever changed by that moment. They started to become more economically interventionist at that point.

Phil Bredezen: The favorite thing I remember about William Jennings Bryan was what someone said about him, which is he was the Boy Orator of the Platte, which meant that he was a mile wide and an inch deep at his mouth.

You make a very persuasive argument about how these issues have morphed and changed, but I still can't help. I'm not quite there, and I still can't help—

Hyrum Lewis: You're the only one, by the way, everybody else—

Phil Bredesen: Yeah, that's right. Well, that's been my fate, unfortunately.

But I still wonder if underneath these, there's not some axis, which is maybe not as superficial as how you feel about climate change or something like that, but some axis in human, the way humans are wired, that leads people to— If what's in the grocery cart, you described changes, makes them to change over to that other cart that there are issues there. There's been so much study has gone on in the past few decades about how we are wired and in how many ways the ways we think about things are colored by that wiring. I mean, have you considered that as a possibility?

Hyrum Lewis: Yes, we have. And we addressed this in the book, but you're absolutely right. So some people misunderstand us to be saying that everybody is tribal and what people believe is entirely a function of tribe. That's not true because people do have psychological dispositions that will lead them to certain views. We don't dispute that. We're simply saying that all the different views go together. So could there be a psychological disposition that wired somebody to be more in favor of free markets and less in favor of government intervention, they were a free spirit, more individualistic, stay off my back kind of thing? Absolutely. We're just saying that that psychological disposition is totally different than the psychological disposition, which leads somebody to be against abortion.

But saying that there's just one axis in politics says, "No, they go together," you're either in favor of change, in which case you want abortion rights and want more government intervention in the economy, or you're against change, in which case you want less government intervention in the economy and more government intervention in abortion decisions.

We're simply saying there are more axes than one, and that should be common sense because it's true in every other realm of life. And when was the last time your doctor talked about the medical spectrum and when was the last time you went into your doctor and he said, "Well, let's put you here on the center-left"? You would literally run for your life if your doctor did that, right? I mean, you would know they were a quack because there isn't just one issue in medicine. There's lots. You can have more and less infection, you can have more and less cancerous cells, you can have more or less fractures. There's lots and lots of different issues in medicine, and therefore we address it one by one.

So that's what we're saying we should be doing in politics, too. So an axis, sure. An axis that says you have higher or lower fever, that's useful axis. An axis that says more or less government intervention in the economy, that's a useful axis. We're just saying there's more than one, just as there is in medicine, recreation, business or any other realm. And yet when it comes to politics, we have become obsessed with this idea that no, no, no, there's one issue and everybody is somewhere on the scale between more change and less change and everything you believe grows out of your psychological disposition towards change. We were saying there's just no evidence that that's true.

Bill Haslam: All right, so let's move into what do we do about it. I mean, you have a great point about if we could change the terminology, your doctor would never talk to you that way. Changing political terminology is really, really difficult. There's a lot of vested interests. There's a lot of folks who are, like I said, whether it be MSNBC or Fox or whoever that's making money off of driving that. What do we do? I'm a little more convinced than, say I'm a little more convinced than Phil is that you've got it right, that there's not these one fundamental difference that should drive us to the same side on the pro-life issue that it does on climate change, that does on gun control, et cetera.

Hyrum Lewis: And it's funny that Phil's not convinced because to me he's living proof, right? If I understand it, you're more believe in more fiscal— You're more of a deficit hawk, but you're also pro-choice on abortion. Am I understanding you correct, Governor?

Phil Bredeesen: That'd be correct. You obviously read Wikipedia well or something.

Hyrum Lewis: That's where I send all my students. So yeah, so you're living proof that this is true, that your position on abortion doesn't have anything to do, and there's no psychological disposition underlying your life that makes you take the same position on abortion that you do — anyway. There isn't just one axis, you prove the point. So it's a little interesting that you don't agree with this there.

Phil Bredeesen: Well, no. I didn't say I didn't agree with you. I think what I say— Remember, I'm kind of a scientist at heart, and what you're always looking for is you have this chaotic system. So you're looking for the underlying rule. What's the explanation for this? I accept that the conventional, the liberalism versus conservatism, is not the explanation of that. You've convinced me of that, but that doesn't mean there isn't something going on in my wiring or the wiring of humans in general that is not driving this. So I think it's natural to try to say that's not the answer, but there still could be an answer as to why people spread out in this way.

Hyrum Lewis: Yeah. So to answer your question, Governor, maybe just really quickly then want to hear what Verlan has to say. I would say a couple of things. First of all, if you go to Alcoholics Anonymous or anything like that, the first thing they do is recognize, right? And so I think the fact that we're in this room recognizing that there isn't just one issue, that's a huge step forward for all of us, so recognition. And then the second thing is we have this vocabulary, which assumes one issue we would say move to a more rich vocabulary. So the vocabulary people are using to describe Trump is he's moved to the far right.

As Verlan pointed out, that does not tell us anything. It simply doesn't. It communicates nothing. It communicates misinformation. But if you say something like Mitt Romney was more of a Reaganite, well, that does indicate something, right? The smaller government, the more hawkish on forum policy and these kinds of things. And you talk about the baskets we can give labels to those baskets. So a new vocabulary, is it tough? Absolutely. It's very hard, but I think it's necessary, and then talking issue by issue is another thing we can do, but I've talked too

long. Verlan, please.

Verlan Lewis: No. And just to pick up, I think your earlier point, that's one of the common misunderstandings and it's our fault for not being more clear in the book, is people say, "Well, you don't think people can be philosophical." We absolutely believe people can and are philosophical, and there's reasons they bundled their issues together in certain ways. Our argument is simply it has nothing to do with left and right. That what currently flies under the banner of left and what has historically flown under the banner of left and right is not philosophical. Those things don't have to go together, even though individuals can be philosophical in the way that they bundle their issues together, and the way their principles inform their approach to politics.

And we would like for people's principles to inform the way they approach the red basket and the blue basket and decide which one they're going to support, but then keep those baskets at an arm's length and say, "Look, if the things in the two baskets switch, I might switch parties. And my basket doesn't have to have all the answers, and my party doesn't have to be right about everything." And I think that comes back to this idea from Senator Baker that you might be right. I think he probably had that view because he wasn't thinking about politics in terms of a left-right spectrum because left-right thinking is an intellectual humility killer.

Once you say that there's a left right spectrum, then you say, "All I have to do is choose the correct side and I'm right about everything and someone in the other party's wrong about everything. And I don't even need to have them open their mouth. Before they open their mouth, I know they're wrong about everything, not just a few things, absolutely everything." And so it just cuts off any open discussion, any civil conversation, any argument giving or reason giving. So how do we get there where people have more intellectual humility and say, "Well, you might be right." I think it is giving up the left-right spectrum. Now, it's hard to change vocabulary. It's hard to change something that's been entrenched increasingly over the past century, so maybe we are tilting at windmills here.

I mean, it's very much this could be a fool's errand and trying to get people to give up left-right thinking. But I do have some hope from the fact that for most of American history, we didn't think and talk about politics in this way. So if we did it for 150 years, why can't we go back and do it like we used to and just talk about the issues, be granular? Like Hyrum said, just talk about issue by issue. Instead of saying you're a right wing pro-lifer, just say, "Oh, you believe pro-life on abortion policy." Instead of saying you're a left wing environmentalist, "Oh, you're just in favor of environmental protection." We don't have to bring in these labels of left and right that mislead, that misinform, and that make our discourse more impoverished.

Phil Bredezen: So suppose for one of us, we're in the governor's office again, and we called you up and said, "Look, I'm in a state which is getting more and more polarized. Things are shifting in a lot of ways." I think one of my jobs as governor is to try to put some breaks on this and see if we can't get back to the kind of thing you're describing a little more. Both of us were nonpartisan mayors, and I think would say that many of the successes we both enjoyed were

absolutely a direct result of it being a nonpartisan kind of office. So I know you guys are academics and you're used to talking abstractly, but I want some ideas about how do we make things better. What do I do on Monday to try to see if I can't reverse this a little bit?

Hyrum Lewis: That's a softball. Go ahead, Verlan.

Verlan Lewis: Yeah. I wish I had a magic wand for you. I mean, as Hyrum said, the underlying causes are deep. If you could get people back to church on Sunday, I think that would go a long ways to people giving up on finding their religious salvation in their ideological tribe, but that's the tall order. I think these kinds of things, organizations like Rotary where there are thick community bonds where people have friendships, relationships, a sense of identity, a sense of belonging, that they don't have to have their life's meaning rise and fall on the outcome of the upcoming presidential election, and that we have to storm the streets or mob the capitol building if our side loses the election.

I just think we're at such an unhealthy place where people live their lives online and they just focus so much on national politics. We just need more and more of people getting to know your neighbor, have a face-to-face conversation, recognize that you actually have a lot in common, even if you belong to different political parties. And just because someone supports a different political party doesn't mean that they're wrong about everything because there is no left-right spectrum. There's lots of issues, not just one.

Hyrum Lewis: And maybe, I mean, one of the things political leaders do, and that you two did very well as governors is you're not just political leaders. It's not just the have control of the state's budget and the state's militia and all these kinds of things, but that you can model things, and we elect our leaders for better or worse, as models. And so people in positions of influence can model what we're talking about, just if the governor today could say, "I refuse to any more use the terms left and right, liberal, conservative." If somebody comes up to me personally and says, "You're a liberal or conservative," I say, "You are presuming there's only one issue in politics. I reject your presumption, change your question." Well, what do you think on abortion? And then I'll tell them, but I'm not going to let them tell me that there's only one issue and I have to pick a side of one issue. So I think there's some modeling that can be done by people in positions of authority.

There's also something that I think is a great idea, adversarial collaboration, maybe we'll get into that a little more when it comes to scholarship. But in day-to-day conversation, I would say laying some ground rules for political discourse. So getting rid of spectral talking, that would help. And also using something they called the Turing Test. You probably know this from physics, but it's the idea of being able to state somebody else's position as strongly as they can, even if you disagree with it.

Because I think if you can't do that, you're not justified in holding the views you do. So if somebody is pro-life, and they can't make the pro-choice argument as strong as a pro-choice or themselves could, they're not justified to bring pro-life and vice versa. So having that as kind of

a rule debate, state your opponent's case as well as they could state it before stating yours, I think that would be very, very healthy in improving understanding. Again, it would be granular. We wouldn't be talking about an imaginary line. We would be talking about actual issues, and we would be doing so in such a way in which there was understanding and depth.

Bill Haslam: How do you teach your students? I'm curious each of you about the complexity of decisions. I think you talk about complexity a little bit in your book. And one of the things that has struck me is while I was in office, two of the most— I have to be careful now I'm going back to spectrum terms, but people who would've been seen as the most conservative people in legislature became county mayors. And all of a sudden, the world looked really different because they had to balance the budget. They had to raise taxes. They had to make those decisions that would've classified them as you're either in the mushy middle or you've gone left. How do you teach your students about complexity of decisions?

Hyrum Lewis: Let me start off here then.

Verlan Lewis: Yeah, go for it.

Hyrum Lewis: Yeah. I like to use analogies. I think students and people can gravitate well to analogies. So one analogy I've used to teach my students about complexity is I say to them, what would you do if a sociologist came into a high school and said, "Every high school is either a jock or a nerd, and they're somewhere on the jock nerd spectrum." And then you have jocks who are good-looking and athletic and dumb, and then there's nerds who are ugly and unathletic and smart, and you're somewhere on a magic line between these two sides. And they would say, "Well, that's ridiculous because those three things don't go together. It's possible to be good-looking and smart." You're a good example of this, Governor.

Bill Haslam: I noticed you left the athletic part out.

Hyrum Lewis: You were the one who's saying didn't make the football team. But anyway, they would say, these things obviously don't go together. You have to disaggregate them. You have to look. And furthermore, it's even more complicated than that because intelligence is multifaceted. Somebody could have a lot of street smarts and maybe not be good, not book smarts. You could be good at math but maybe not as good at verbal. So there's different kind of intelligence.

There's different kinds of athleticism. Who's the better athlete, Tom Brady or Mike Tyson? And it's an unanswerable question, right? I mean, Mike Tyson couldn't do the athleticism Tom Brady does. Tom Brady couldn't box like Mike Tyson, right? So there's different kinds of athleticism. So using that analogy has helped my students understand that as an analogy for politics. So we're talking about things in left and right, but that's as silly as talking about everybody's somewhere on the jock-nerd spectrum. It's much more complicated than that. So analogical thinking, introducing analogies can help make things understandable and help break down bad paradigms.

Verlan Lewis: Yeah, that's good.

Phil Bredeesen: Since—

Bill Haslam: My brother never agrees with me that way.

Phil Bredeesen: Yeah, I saw myself very clearly on that spectrum you just described. You wrote this book a bit ago and had obviously continued thinking about this. Where's that thinking taking you going forward? What's the next frontier for you guys in looking at this issue?

Verlan Lewis: To me, there's lots of things that I care about. So as you mentioned in my introduction, a professor of constitutional studies at a Center for Constitutional Studies at Utah Valley University. So what I'm really interested in and passionate about right now is promoting constitutional literacy, both at my university and the country more broadly, because I am concerned about where we are at as a country. I mentioned earlier, I think the left-right spectrum makes it difficult to have conversations with people. I think it makes it difficult to have conversations at Thanksgiving dinner, but I think it's also on a macro level, making it really difficult for our country to stay together because of the way that we demonize through this tribal unidimensional spectrum. So I'm really concerned about that.

And what I'm trying to promote is a greater commitment to things like the rule of law, like separation of powers, federalism, individual rights, and popular sovereignty. These constitutional pillars that are going to, I think, allow us to stay together as a country and have the freedoms and the prosperities that we've enjoyed for hundreds of years in this country. So I'm really concerned about where we're headed. And right now, I mean, there's lots of things I think that we can do to promote those things, but right now, I'm still spending a lot of time talking about the myth of left and right because I think it's one of the greatest threats.

When people start adopting left-right thinking they pretty soon give up on a commitment to the rule of law. Well, it's okay if my side violates the rule of law because the means justify the ends. They pretty soon give up on federalism. Well, it's okay if we concentrate power in the national government as long as it's my side that has the power in the national government. They give up on separation of powers. It's okay if we concentrate power in the presidency as long as it's my guy that is the president.

And we're so willing to undermine constitutional protections of freedom and individual rights because we say the means justify the ends. And pretty soon as we do more and more of that, we have more and more power concentrated in Washington, D.C., and more and more power concentrated in the White House, in particular. And both sides have decided that it's simply an arms race and they just want a dictator. They just want their own dictator and I just think it's a really dangerous place that we're at in this country. So I'm going to, I think, keep talking about the myth of left and right and constitutional literacy.

Hyrum Lewis: Let me maybe a little more optimistic. I do see some signs of hope on the horizon. The fact that you guys have invited us here and that we're talking about this. The political spectrum in America is exactly 100 years old, and that's a good age to die. So we want the political spectrum to die now. We've lived under its tyranny for a hundred years, and it's time to move on. And I see signs that that's happening. I see more and more people saying, "Left-wing— Actually, I don't even know what that means anymore." And I'm like, "Oh, good, you're waking up." I have people all the time come up to me and say, "If the Republican Party has moved to the extreme right." And I say, "Really? Donald Trump extreme—" Yes, so far to the right.

Is small government right wing or left wing? Well, that's right wing. Well, the Congressional budget office says then that Donald Trump has moved the Republican Party unambiguously to the extreme left then. And they say, "Huh, well, that's only one issue. There's lots of issues." And I say, "Ding, ding, ding, ding." You have just been enlightened. Congratulations. And I have those conversations all the time, and I do see young people especially just thinking that this way of thinking is not doing it for them. So I think there is some hope. I think we are outgrowing this paradigm.

Bill Haslam: I am struck by your answer about the constitution. There's a lot of folks in my party who run on being constitutional conservatives, but if you read the Constitution and understand how it was written, the subtext, wherever you want to call it, is all about compromise. It was big states versus small states, federal approach versus states rights, on and on. And so it was all set up to be checks and balances. And yet to do that, you have to have this back and forth, which we don't have. And so the reason that the executive branch, judicial branches have gained power is we don't want to do the hard work that involves negotiating and compromising to solve problems, so let the court decide it or let the president write a decree and that's how we'll do it. So I think both of you all are on the right path.

All right, we have a question that we ask all of our guests, so we'll ask it to both of you. Mr. Ferris said in his introduction, Howard Baker had the saying you might be right, came with this idea. Always remember that the other side might be right. Can you think of a time in each of your, whether it be your academic views or a way that you saw the world that you realized now maybe I didn't exactly get that right.

Verlan Lewis: Yeah, I'm happy to start. I mean, maybe this is a little bit of a cheat answer, but I will say I still remember where I was standing. I was having a conversation back in 2006 with my brother Hyrum here, and I believed in the left-right spectrum. I thought that was a useful and accurate way to describe our politics. And we were having a conversation about politics, and he pointed out to me that the left-right spectrum is actually misleading and harmful for the way we— And I just couldn't stop thinking about that ever since. So for the past 18 years, I've been thinking about that insight that there really is more than one issue in politics and thinking in terms of the left-right spectrum is misleading and harmful. And so I've been thinking about it so much that decided to write a book with him. So I definitely changed my mind on that, and I'm glad I did. The other fellow was right.

Hyrum Lewis: I'll take it.

So I was being optimistic a moment ago. Let me be pessimistic. I changed my mind on something that was rather huge, as huge as it gets. I am something of a libertarian in my politics. And I used to be what you might call libertarian progressive, the kind of Matt Ridley type of people. These libertarians who say there's something built into our free market system. It's a system that's self-correcting, a system of knowledge as Hayek taught us. And these things mean that as long as you have a generally market system, increased wealth and increased technology are almost inevitable. Now, I haven't changed my mind about that. I think that's still true, and I think the free market system does give us more wealth and more technology. What I have changed my mind on is that that does not constitute progress.

Further investigation and reading more and more thinkers who have criticisms of the market economy had led me to believe, not so much the market economy is bad or wrong, but that what the market economy delivers does not constitute the good life. So do we have more wealth today than we did 50 years ago? Without question. This is mathematically true. Do we have more technology? Yes, without question. So more wealth and technology, are we happier? The answer is no. The evidence on that is abundantly clear. The suicide rate is way up. Deaths of despair are way up. Depression, anxiety, way up. Self-reported happiness way down.

And so what I've had to change my paradigm on is that wealth and technology do not constitute the good life. How can that happen? I mean, wealth and technology, they by definition give us what we want, and don't we humans want to be happy? This is where Aristotle comes in. He taught us that there's a difference between hedonia and eudaimonia. Hedonia is pleasure, for lack of a better word. Eudaimonia is joy, long-term happiness. What we humans are using – at least we Americans, I should say – what we Americans are using our wealth and technology to do is to buy more and more hedonia at the expense of eudaimonia and it's making our society worse off, so that was something that has been very sobering for me to change my mind on.

Bill Haslam: Well said. Thank you both. We're incredibly grateful that you had come and spend time with us, but I'm even more grateful for the book. It's caused me to stop and think and this whole idea of doing away with spectrum thinking I think has a lot of benefit for us.

Phil Bredeesen: I too have enjoyed it. Let me just say, I think, the book is not a long one. It's dense and so on. I'm sure you fellas are much too reticent to promote it yourselves, but let me promote it for you and just say it really is something that's worthwhile to pick up and take a look at. There's a lot of very specific examples that I think are quite persuasive that the way we think about politics today really needs some fresh thoughts. So thank you for your work on this and thank you for being here today.

Bill Haslam: The book is called *The Myth of Left and Right* and I would echo Governor Bredeesen. I also want to, again, thank Chattanooga for having us. I also want to recognize Marianne Wanamaker, who is the very first and very best dean of the Baker School at the

University of Tennessee. Marianne, thank you. And Josh Dunn, who is a new member of our team, the team at UT, and Josh is the first executive director of the Institute for American Civics, which we actually think can help this idea of introducing to college students and them helping spread what's it look like to understand American civics and the difference that can make. So thank you. We're grateful to have you as well.

Thank you all very much for having us today.

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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