



After the Fact | Beyond Polarization: Where We Are Today

Originally aired Nov. 3, 2023

Total runtime: 00:20:23

TRANSCRIPT

Dan LeDuc, host, The Pew Charitable Trusts: Welcome to “After the Fact.” For The Pew Charitable Trusts, I’m Dan LeDuc. Over the past year, we’ve been exploring how Americans are trying to find ways to build and restore a sense of community in their neighborhoods and across diverse religious groups and how Pew and other organizations are working to strengthen democracy by helping government be more responsive to the public. And in these polarized times, that led us to an important question we wanted to try to answer: How do we talk to each other when we don’t agree?

And led us to another question: Just how far apart are we? That brings us to our data point for this episode: Both Democrats and Republicans imagine that almost twice as many of their political opponents hold more extreme views than they really do. More in Common, a group who is helping people with differing views tackle shared challenges, calls this America’s “perception gap.”

So this season, we’re taking a closer look at ways to close that gap as well as bridge the real divides facing us—because our democracy depends on it.

Someone who has been exploring how polarization is affecting the U.S. and other places around the world is Peter Coleman, a professor of psychology and education at Columbia University. Peter is an expert on conflict resolution and sustainable peace. He also wrote a book on the topic called *The Way Out: How to Overcome Toxic Polarization*. We had a great conversation.

Dan LeDuc: Well, Peter Coleman, you are a social psychologist at Columbia University, and you’ve spent pretty much your professional life helping people in conflict talk to each other. That’s fascinating. How did you get into that line of work?

Peter T. Coleman, professor of psychology and education, Columbia University: I lived in a family with a lot of tension and problems, and so that was definitely part of it. I grew up in the ’60s. There were a lot of major protests and marches, so I think I grew up in a space where I was aware of something they call “macro worry.” Even as a kid, I knew that there were things happening. That’s part of it, I think. When I moved to New York City, I got a part-time job working with adolescents in the psychiatric hospital, and I started to work with a violent adolescent population that was somewhere between 12 and 28 years old, and a lot of these patients were coming in to reduce sentences for crimes that they had committed.



There was a lot of drug addiction, there was a lot of violence. It was very meaningful work for me. I had an inclination for addressing conflicts, de-escalating situations. When I went to Columbia, I found a professor, Morton Deutsch, who was an eminent theorist in conflict and peace, and I really took to his work, and then eventually got my Ph.D. there and stayed on faculty, and I'm still there today.

Dan LeDuc: You're starting, I hate to say it, sort of street level, right? Your career has gone to expand to international mediation. What are the similarities from the skills that you learned there that you're taking into your professional life now?

Peter Coleman: In conflict resolution, there are some basic skills that scale to your family, to your friends. We teach problem solving to kindergartners, sort of a pattern of problem solving. And then by third grade, they recruit mediators, you know, student mediators, and they teach them basic skills of how to bring people together and get them to be respectful and talk through problems. And those same guidelines, when you go into situations that are dangerous or very complicated, you really need to have local expertise, local understanding. But it does come down to some basic skills. Can you establish trust and rapport with people? Can you, again, provide a presence that brings down the temperature? Because there's certain things you can do physically that either make people more anxious or nervous or don't. There are basic skills that you can develop that help, whatever level you're working at.

Dan LeDuc: Can you tell us about the current nature and magnitude of polarization in the U.S.?

Peter Coleman: Well, I guess to get to the punchline, I am mindful of what American historians and political scientists are seeing, and they're seeing clear parallels between the 1850s in America just before the U.S. Civil War and today. And they're highly concerned about the sustainability of our democracy and the odds of another type of civil war, not a civil war with soldiers in uniforms standing in a field, but more about violent militant groups taking action themselves, more like terrorist cells, antigovernment groups that are organizing around the country. The major concern that I have is that level of political violence reaching a tipping point.

What's happening today is part of about a 60-year pattern. We started to see increasing political enmity and hate start to increase about the late 1970s. It continues to increase today, like obstructionism in Congress and our lack of capacity to come together and problem solve on critical issues. But also just in terms of the American population.

Americans are moving into red and blue camps, physically moving away from each other. And even in urban areas these days, you see clusters of neighborhoods that are more bright red and bright blue. We're moving away from each other physically, which means we're less in contact with day-to-day kind of relationships with people on the other side.



Dan LeDuc: I imagine this trend has a bigger impact, even on households and families.

Peter Coleman: Mixed political marriages, that's been on the decline in our country for decades now. It used to be more; now it's, I think, about 10% of marriages in the country are mixed political marriages. Couples that have different politics talk about their different politics, their children hear those, they become socialized and more tolerant to different points of view.

So basically, when you have people that live within close proximity but don't have contact, daily, mundane, you know, in sports teams and at church or, you know, at schools. If you don't have those kinds of relationships, then the probability of conflicts turning violent gets higher and higher.

Dan LeDuc: There is a science behind how to help people have these conversations and mediate. but it all begins with the motivation. How can people get motivated in the first place to reach out and find the right person to talk to?

Peter Coleman: There is a profound sense of loneliness and alienation that many of us have, and it's, you know, we see indicators of it in all kinds of mental illness challenges, anxiety, depression, suicide ideation, all of this.

So there is a profound need oftentimes to connect with others. I taught my first class this week. I teach a class on the science of conflict resolution. And I walked in, and there were 50 students in a hot, packed room. I sat down, and we were trying to deal with the tech, and there were all these problems with the space. And they were all sitting there silently, first class, waiting for me to tell them what to do. And I said, "This is going to take a little bit to figure out. Why don't you turn to four or five people around you and introduce yourselves?" And the energy shifted immediately. They needed me to tell them that was OK. And just the warmth, the community, just changed radically. It just is tapping into that. I think most of us want that kind of connection.

But we're easily falling into "just don't say anything" or "don't go there, don't raise questions." That's not healthy for our society. We need to be able to disagree, even passionately, just not violently, or ideally, not destructively.

Dan LeDuc: And the cost of this polarization? Peter writes in his book *The Way Out* that polarization makes us less resilient and more vulnerable to stress and crises.

According to the American Psychological Association, 76% of Americans say that the future of our country is a significant source of stress in their lives.



Dan LeDuc: We've now reached a point that where something like 67% of Americans are identifying themselves as exhausted by all this, right? There is this cumulative effect that people ... Let's take the benevolent, kind view of human nature: We don't want to be in conflict.

Peter Coleman: Yeah, yeah.

Dan LeDuc: There's got to be some science behind that, right? We generally would like to get along, and we've reached a point where we're not. It's difficult sometimes to talk to neighbors.

Peter Coleman: Let me give one plug for conflict.

Dan LeDuc: Sure.

Peter Coleman: In my world, conflict is a natural, necessary thing, right? We have conflict all the time, in our decisions—should we do this or that—in our relationships, in our communities, in work. Conflict is a great source of energy and change and reform, and it's an important element, but sometimes it starts to take on a destructive life of its own, and that is a qualitatively different kind of conflict. And that's, I think, politically, a state that we're in right now. And that's an important, qualitative difference because, again, conflict ain't bad; it just is. It's necessary to learn and think and grow and build relationships and create more just arrangements in our society. But under some conditions, it goes off the rails. In times like this, where you do have some political tribes that really live, to some degree, in parallel media universes, it's not always a great idea just to say to people, "You know, you should just get together and have a cup of coffee and talk with the other side." I know Pew did a study that found the majority of both progressives and conservatives, when they had these conversations across political differences today, leave feeling more frustrated. So it's not just "get together and have a conversation." The science tells us that kind of contact does help under certain conditions where they can hear each other and listen to each other—sometimes that has to be facilitated—and where it's ongoing, where there's not just a one-off encounter.

There's a reverend up in Upstate New York that used to run a morning breakfast of red and blue Americans, and he said, "We talk every week, and we talk about issues until we get to a point where we realize that we don't really understand these issues very well." We don't have all the facts; we don't have all the information. And so when you get to a place where you recognize what you don't understand, then you can agree, so that's a critical component of it.

Dan LeDuc: Peter talked about an initiative called Starts With Us, which offers a step-by-step approach with weekly challenges to bridge divides among those with different political opinions from your own.



One challenge they pose encourages participants to look at the divides they can bridge in their own lives. Doing so involves being honest about your own thoughts on issues and within groups of people who hold similar beliefs and among those with differing views. He stressed the importance of taking a close look at your own ideas and assuming goodwill among those with different values.

Peter told me about how he applied these conflict resolution principles in his own life—and the results surprised him.

Peter Coleman: One of the weeks says, reach out to somebody you've been alienated from politically. In the context of this challenge, I decided I had to do it myself, so I thought about "who am I feeling most alienated from?" And there's a gentleman in my building here, I live in the Upper West Side of New York, and I've known him a long time. I've seen him as a father and a grandfather, and we chatted through the years on the elevator basically. A couple of years ago, he started to talk to me about politics, and the things he said, I thought he was far out of my reality, that I couldn't even—and I felt like he was just doing it to be provocative. And so I thought, I'm out. And so for about a year, I just avoided him and conversations with him. And then last summer, I thought, "I can't do this. I have to try to somehow at least live these principles that we talk about." So I email my neighbor out of the blue and said, "Any chance that you would take a walk with me, go out to the park and walk with me?" And he wrote back after a while and said, "Well, I am happy to sit down with you and talk. What's up with the walk? Why do we have to move? Are you CIA? Are you—is there going to be surveillance here?" And I think it was a genuine concern, like what is that, why would you do that, right? And I said, "There's a reason for it, trust me. If you're willing to, let's just take a walk outside in the park." And so he agreed, and we did it.

Now, so what I had to do in order to not have this blow up, because it easily could have blown up, given our different belief systems and passions, is I had to, first of all, say to myself, "What do I want to do here? What's the point of this?" Because if we just walked into a political debate immediately, it would've just gone off the rails, and we know how that plays out. What I realized is that this was an opportunity to talk to somebody, really to get a real sense of, "How do you think about this and where does this come from? Please help me understand this." So that was my M.O.

I will say, I'm a mediator, I'm a peace builder, I work in all kinds of settings—I was really nervous. An hour before, I was sick to my stomach, and it really made me anxious. He was anxious too, clearly. When I saw him, we met out in front of our building, and he said, "By the way, my wife's not feeling well. I think I'll have to probably come back sooner than I thought." I said, "Oh, no worries."



The first thing I just said is, “Who are you? Where do you come from? What’s your story? What’s your upbringing?” And it was very interesting. He talked about his children and his grandchildren. Again, I got a much fuller sense of this person than just his politics, and that was helpful. It helped me understand some of his values. Then he said, “Who are you?” So I did the same thing and told my story, and we had some common ground. We had some things that we shared, which was interesting, and I think important. And then I just said, “Can you explain to me why this approach to politics is so important to you? Help me understand.” And that’s an important question, and he did. And so, as we walked, he spoke for, I would say, 20 to 30 minutes in a very impassioned, talking-point way. What I didn’t do is challenge him or counter him or debate him. I saw no value in that. I listened, I asked clarifying questions, you know, “So you mean this, not that? Okay.” And he basically rode, I would say, a fever wave. In me just listening and not engaging in the debate—which is what he expected; that’s what he came for—eventually, what happened as we walked, is he started to come to his own doubts about his own group and some of the leaders that he was talking about: “He did this, and that wasn’t helpful.” It was a really interesting process. In some ways, without me challenging him and playing the game he was expecting, he eventually got to a place where he recognized that there were holes in the point of view, the logic. And he expressed them himself.

Dan LeDuc: What greater understanding did this give to you? How did your mind change in that conversation?

Peter Coleman: First of all, when he said, yes, he’d walk with me. Second of all, when he told me his story of who he is and where he came from and why certain values are really important to him. And then again, to be just very honest, him coming to his own points of, not confusion, but ambivalence about his politicians, their actions, their positions, was to me heartening, because we all have these, right? And, frankly, we don’t talk about them even in our own groups these days. We don’t talk about our ambivalences about our side. And so to have him do that, to me, opened me up. It really did. And my objective was not to change his mind. I felt there was no chance of that. That was not going to be a winning approach. And so my objective was to really try to understand and learn.

As we were walking—we had agreed to about an hour—at some point, we started to head back towards our building. I said, “You know, we’re heading back home, we should probably get there, your wife might need you.” And he was like, “No, we can walk a few more blocks.” So at this point, both of our anxieties had come down. Some of our illusions or our dread, our sense of the worst-case scenario had changed.

I will say that we’ve continued to talk. We met again this summer. We send each other articles. And so, did this radically change his political point of view and mine? No, but it definitely was a human experience with somebody who has very different beliefs.



Dan LeDuc: What do you think made the conversation and connection with your neighbor effective?

Peter Coleman: It's not a magic bullet, but what I just described was basically the principles from the book that what science tells us matters. If you're going to do this, do it with intention. Reflect on what you're trying to do. Do it in a way that can ideally open you both up and not shut it down immediately. So, avoiding politics oftentimes is a great place to start, just making some kind of connection, physically moving together.

Something that we're finding in research is, one of the things that helps is for people to get up and move, physically, outside, side by side. There's something about that where you actually have neurological connections, mirror neurons start to sync, you get in sync. And they find this when studying marching bands, combat troops, dance troops, that when people move together, they start to develop more of a connection, a sense of compassion and understanding, just because of the physical movement.

Peter Coleman: The postscript to this is a couple weeks later, my son, who was 27, got on the elevator with him. And they'd seen each other forever, and they had never exchanged words; he had never talked to my son. But this time, he looked at him, and he said, "Well, you're Peter's son, right?" He said, "Yeah." And he said, "Tell your father that I'm reading his book, and it's not bad." Hallelujah, right?

Dan LeDuc: We hope you'll join us next time as we continue exploring ways to bridge divides, and what the numbers say about what we can agree on.

Thanks for listening. For the Pew Charitable Trusts, I'm Dan LeDuc, and this is "After the Fact."