



## After the Fact | Beyond Polarization: Finding a Way Forward

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### TRANSCRIPT

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**Utah Governor Spencer Cox:** This is the issue of our time. It is the single most important issue facing our country—and maybe the most important issue we’ve faced in generations.

**Dan LeDuc, host, The Pew Charitable Trusts:** Welcome to “After the Fact.” For the Pew Charitable Trusts, I’m Dan LeDuc. In this last episode of our season about polarization in the United States, we’re joined by Utah Governor Spencer Cox, who’s leading an initiative among the nation’s governors not to end disagreement but to disagree better and find ways for us to begin talking to each other again. Many Americans appear to be ready for that.

And that brings us to our data point for this episode: According to Pew Research Center, 57% of Americans believe that partisan conflicts receive too much attention these days. And that’s taking away from the things that are really affecting people and communities. Seventy-eight percent of Americans say there is too little focus on important issues facing the country.

Polarization, of course, is especially rampant in Congress. Before we get into our conversation with Gov. Cox, we’ll hear from Columbia University’s Peter Coleman. You may remember him from our first episode this season.

**Peter T. Coleman, professor of psychology and education, Columbia University:** The political divisions have gotten more and more acute. And again, there have been some tipping point moments. In the early ‘90s, Gingrich was Speaker of the House at the time and made a decision to change the congressional workweek from five days a week to three. But the consequences of it were that the relationships that had existed by families moving to the Washington area, growing up together, going to school—that kind of contact that happens more naturally when people live near each other—basically ended. And so now you see this kind of vitriol in Congress that is, to some degree, an artifact of that. But it’s not as simple as that.

**Dan LeDuc:** Congressmen who have to—somehow have to—work together from opposing parties used to see each other on the weekend at their kid’s ball games, would run into each other at the grocery store or walking on a sidewalk on Capitol Hill, and that social contact is lacking now in Washington.



**Peter Coleman:** Yeah, and that just provides a buffer. It provides a sense of the humans that you're working with are not just political actors on the other side, but they're friends and colleagues and neighbors that I need to turn to on occasion. And that kind of connection and sort of socialization has really been affected over the decades.

**Dan LeDuc:** Getting our public officials to overcome polarization is one place to start, because—as we'll hear in a moment—when elected leaders tone it down, citizens often follow their lead.

Gov. Cox is chairman of the National Governors Association and is making polarization the centerpiece of his agenda. He calls his initiative "Disagree Better."

**Dan LeDuc:** Well, Gov. Spencer Cox, thank you so much for being with us today. You are one of those political leaders who is including how you get beyond polarization as part of your agenda. How did you come to that realization that it was necessary to begin the work you've been doing?

**Gov. Spencer Cox:** Ten years ago, I was serving in the House of Representatives, and I started to get concerned about what I was seeing. I was running for governor when Trump and Biden were running against each other. My first debate with my Democratic opponent—we were the debate right before the first presidential debate. And if you remember that presidential debate—how just insane it was. And so, we were kind of a counterbalance to that. We were the lead-in on Utah news channels. We had a normal debate where we disagreed on things, but we didn't hate each other and tear each other apart.

So, there's been several moments when this was really solidifying for me. But I will tell you one of the most was—I'd become governor, and we were at an event in Washington, D.C. We had gone to the Swiss ambassador's residence, and the Swiss ambassador was giving this speech. It was a lot of, you know, trade between our countries and the history of our countries. And then he paused, and he pivoted, and suddenly I was paying rapt attention. And he talked about what he was seeing—again, from a European perspective. And he spent several paragraphs praising the United States and how we had saved the world at its darkest moments, how we'd saved Europe at its darkest moments, World War I, World War II, talked about the space race, talked about the Berlin Wall coming down. And at every turn, he knew to whom he should look for that salvation against the evil of the world. And then he said something profound. He said, "As dark clouds are forming on the horizon, we, your allies, are wondering if we can still trust you. You're so divided, you're so polarized, and at a time when we need you more than ever, we're not sure you're there. You're fighting about all these other things."



I had always looked at this divisiveness as a problem for getting our domestic agenda accomplished, right? That this was making it harder for us to do what we needed to do to solve problems. I didn't realize that this was an existential global crisis.

There wasn't just one moment but several that have led me to believe that this isn't just an underlying issue for the other big things. This is the issue of our time. It is the single most important issue facing our country—and maybe the most important issue we've faced in generations.

**Dan LeDuc:** You are now chairman of the National Governors Association and have made this front and center of your tenure over the next year. I'm one of those believers in, you know, the "laboratories of democracy" are the states, as Justice Brandeis said. For a long time, political polarization was a Washington thing. And then it began filtering down to the states. The polarization you see in many state houses now came later. Is this a chance to turn the tide, and maybe, by working with your other colleagues who are governors, to sort of push back a little bit to try to stem things?

**Gov. Spencer Cox:** Yes, it is a chance to turn the tide. I'm praying we can do something to turn the tide. I don't pretend that a governor's initiative over the course of one year can change the course of American history. But I do believe that there are good people out there who believe this, who feel this.

Let me talk a little bit about governors. I was a political science grad, and the first thing we were taught in political science is that all politics is local. I no longer believe that. I believe that all politics is national. Yes, it is bleeding from Washington, D.C., into the state houses. It is now bleeding into our local races, school board races, city council races. And I believe it's a particularly dangerous time. Now, as Justice Brandeis said, states are the laboratories of democracy and, I believe, are uniquely positioned to help lead us out of this polarization. It's been said that governors are the last adults in the room when it comes to politics. We're not all adults at the room, there are a few of us at the kids' table who are aiding the division out there, but mostly governors are willing to work together in a bipartisan fashion. They are looking for ideas and not caring where those good ideas come from. Potholes aren't partisan, right? We have to make things work. We actually have to perform while members of Congress are performing.

**Dan LeDuc:** Right, I mean, governors have to balance your budget every year. You have certain stuff that you have to get done, and you're closer to most Americans' daily lives.

**Gov. Spencer Cox:** That's right. And I ask my colleagues all the time, "Are you enjoying this?" And those who have been here longer say, "You know, we used to love these jobs. Not nearly as much anymore." And all of them, even some of the most partisan, will tell you in their heart of hearts that they don't like where they are, and they wished we could go back.



**Dan LeDuc:** You got some initial visibility on this subject in your election campaign.

**[Ad audio]:** I'm Chris Peterson. And I'm Spencer Cox. We are currently in the final days of campaigning against each other to be your next governor.

**Dan LeDuc:** You and your Democratic opponent, Chris Peterson, did a couple of videos that got a lot of attention at the time. Tell us how that came about, because you basically told each other, what? You were going to be nice to each other and debate civilly?

**Gov. Spencer Cox:** So this was another one of those profound moments that led me to this initiative. As I mentioned, running in the 2020 election—I think early October timeframe—I'm at a fundraiser, and there's a friend of mine, a mayor here in Utah. And we're having this conversation about what was happening nationally, how just ugly it was and how divisive it was between Trump and Biden. It was in that moment she said to me, "Isn't there something you can do?" And I said, "No, I'm running for governor of Utah. What am I supposed to do?" And she said, "No, really? Like, can't you do something? Couldn't we do some PSAs or something just to talk about this?" And I kind of blew her off a little bit but went home, I couldn't sleep, thought a lot about it, and went back to my team and said, "Hey, I have this crazy idea. I want to call my opponent, and I want to do an ad with him." They thought I was kind of crazy. You know, I was leading in the polls. I had more money. You don't give your opponent face time, and you certainly don't try to prop them up. But I just felt it was too important. So I called him. It was an interesting conversation. You don't do that. You don't call your opponent.

**Dan LeDuc:** I bet. You actually called him yourself?

**Gov. Spencer Cox:** Yep, I just called him and said, "Hey, Chris, look, this is Spencer. I have this idea." And I could tell, at first, he was really cautious, as you would be—like, what's the catch?

"There's nothing going on here. I just—I'm really worried about our country. And I think you are too." And he said, "Well, let me talk to my people, and I'll get back to you." And to his credit, at the end of the conversation, he said, "You know what? I don't need to talk to anybody. Like, this is the right thing to do. And I'm all in."

**Dan LeDuc:** Here's the ad.

**[Ad audio]:** There are some things we both agree on. We can debate issues without degrading each other's character. We can disagree without hating each other. And win or lose, in Utah, we work together. So, let's show the country a better way. My name is Chris Peterson. And I'm Spencer Cox. And we approve this message.



**Gov. Spencer Cox:** The response was unbelievable—far exceeded any of our wildest imaginations. Millions of hits on social media. News stations contacted us all over the country, all over the world. Everybody just reached out to us and wanted to hear more.

Unbeknownst to us, a professor at the University of Utah submitted that ad to a big experiment that was happening at the policy lab at Stanford University. They selected 25 of these interventions, as they call them. Ours was one that was selected. And they found that it had a strong depolarizing effect, especially towards feelings of violence towards the other side in those experiments. And it was that experiment that Stanford did that has informed our work with the National Governors Association. We have about a dozen governors who are filming ads together, talking about how they can disagree without hating each other, all because of that really interesting experience.

**Dan LeDuc:** I read about the Stanford study. And can you articulate a little bit more about what they found made it effective? What was it about what you said, how you acted, that made it work?

**Gov. Spencer Cox:** There's a couple of things that are really important. They find when people that have political authority, high-ranking officials, when they show up together, which doesn't happen very often, but when they show up together and talk about and model how to do this the right way, it changes the way we think about the other side.

One of the things that we found out from studies: We think we're this far apart. We're actually not. We're actually narrowly apart. What they found and why our ad mattered is what they call "affect polarization." It's not how far apart you really are—it's how far apart you think you are. This was fascinating to me. But that is particularly dangerous. Here's the key to that: If you think that the other side is willing to violate democratic norms to get their way, then you are much more willing to justify your side violating democratic norms to get what you want.

When we appeared in that ad together talking about democratic norms together, what they found was that "Oh, apparently the other side isn't as bad as I thought. They really don't want to destroy our country and destroy our democracy." That has a powerful impact on people. Now, that's the good news. The bad news is it's fairly short-lived. And so, we have to find ways to saturate the market with these positive messages.

**Dan LeDuc:** How do you and other governors—and, frankly, other political leaders who have a responsibility in all of this—keep it going?

**Gov. Spencer Cox:** Ultimately, it's going to be the citizens of our great country who start demanding this. And I encourage citizens all the time, when you're in a town hall, ask the person how they feel about polarization and what they're doing to help depolarize. Again,



the same way you would ask about their position on abortion or their position on gun rights. We need to make this an issue for everybody.

I don't always get it right. I get it wrong often. But I can tell you, it's a little dangerous—I'm also heading into an election season, and being the guy who's out here preaching disagree better and depolarization, I have a microscope on me, right? Every time I screw up, I hear about it.

**Dan LeDuc:** I bet, yeah. You have created a higher standard for yourself.

**Gov. Spencer Cox:** I have, yeah. And I have to live with that, and I'm grateful for it. I want people to hold me accountable, and sometimes I mess up, and I need to apologize.

I will tell you, also, I'm trying to figure out how to get this into the culture. I believe that politics is downstream of culture. We need people to talk about this more often. If we truly believe that our democratic republic is at risk, and I do, then this should be the number one conversation and the number one issue. I hope it won't be that way for long. And as much as I would like to convince my fellow politicians that they should do this because it's the right thing and it's good for our country—for altruistic purposes they should join me—I'm trying to convince them that it's good politics. I think that's how you get change is if people feel like they can win doing this, then you'll see more people do it. And I think there is an army of people that would love to run for office that are really talented that won't, because it's so awful out there. But my hope is they can look at what we're doing and say, "You know what? I could do that. I could run on a positive message. I could offer an alternative. I could add something that's not being offered in the market." And I hope that voters would reward them.

**Dan LeDuc:** I gotta ask you, when you're at an NGA dinner, and the doors close, and the waiters leave, and it's just the 50 of you around the table, what kind of reaction do you really get from your fellow governors to this? Do they think you're crazy? Do they think you're doing something they wish they could do but don't have, maybe, the wherewithal to do it?

**Gov. Spencer Cox:** In the quiet moments, I will tell you that I've yet to have anybody tell me that this is a bad idea. They all say we need more of this.

I want people to disagree and disagree profoundly. Our nation was founded on profound disagreement. We should debate. We should stand true to our principles, but we can attack ideas and not people. We can find solutions and disagree without tearing people down. The contempt is what I'm trying to get rid of.



And they are tired of the contempt, because they feel it every day. Look, I mean, look at any posts by a governor on social media. Look at the replies in there. The way we're treating each other is just awful. And we can't sustain it. And so, we have to figure this out together, and we can. We can. I know we can.

**Dan LeDuc:** There are, in any policy debate, going to be winners and losers. How do you engage folks who are left behind?

**Gov. Spencer Cox:** Some people think that "disagree better" means they get to win all the time. There are winners and losers. If you do this the right way, it doesn't have to always be a zero-sum game. And we have some great examples in Utah, where we've worked together on immigration, we've worked together on LGBTQ rights, where we found pathways where everybody won. Nobody got everything they wanted, but people did win. So, I do think one of the mistakes we make is that everything's a zero-sum game.

Interesting study out of Harvard recently, that polled all across the country, on which states think in a zero-sum fashion and which don't. Utah led the nation in non-zero-sum thinking, which I'm very proud of, and that's the idea that it's more of a prosperity or abundance versus scarcity mentality.

**Dan LeDuc:** Earlier this year, Gov. Cox signed Utah's state budget, which included \$20 million for wildlife crossings. With bipartisan support in the state legislature, this appropriation aims to make roadways safer for drivers and animals by reducing collisions between vehicles and wildlife. He told us about how leaders from both parties worked together on this important issue for their state.

**Gov. Spencer Cox:** We have lots of wildlife—we're a beautiful state—but lots of wildlife getting hit by cars, lots of problems there. So we figured out a way to work together to build these bridges. We do a lot of bridge-building work. Again, I'm talking about depolarization and building bridges between Republicans and Democrats, but these are literal bridges to give animals safe passage over some of our highways and byways, and they've been incredibly successful. We even set up trail cameras and share videos of moms and babies, little animals crossing. And it's been really positive to see that work happening.

**Dan LeDuc:** Have you seen people being able to bridge divides in ways that lead you to be optimistic?

**Gov. Spencer Cox:** Yeah, I've had so many stories of people over the past few weeks who have come to me and said, "This is changing my life." One in particular that I loved—a man said he had not talked to his father about politics for over three years. It was too divisive. And yet they were able to get in a car together. They spent three hours together. They



talked about politics because they learned to listen to each other and not hate each other. That gives me hope.

**Dan LeDuc:** Political polarization can be overwhelming. Polling shows most Americans are exhausted by politics today. But what's the alternative? More jousting that pushes us further apart? Or maybe it's trying something new. Here's Gov. Cox with a final word on how to do that.

**Gov. Spencer Cox:** The first step in troubling times like this is to get to know people who are different than you. Be curious. Don't have contempt. Treat others with respect. We don't see a lot of moderation, humility, and patience in our politics today. But I do think that, at our core, we value humility.

Every one of us has to make a decision for ourselves, and that is, am I willing to be part of the solution instead of part of the problem? Can we attack ideas instead of the person and the character of the person? Giving people grace, giving people an opportunity to change. And if you actually want to win some political battles, disagree better is the best way to do that.

**Dan LeDuc:** Thanks for listening this season—now, maybe try listening to someone you disagree with. For more resources on how to foster better dialogue, check out our website [www.pewtrusts.org/afterthefact](http://www.pewtrusts.org/afterthefact).

And let us know what you thought about this season by writing to us at [podcasts@pewtrusts.org](mailto:podcasts@pewtrusts.org).

We'll be back with a new season in 2024. For The Pew Charitable Trusts, I'm Dan LeDuc, and this is "After the Fact."