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Intersections Podcast

The roots of America's divided politics
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(MUSIC)

PITA: Welcome to Intersections. We're part of the Brookings Podcast Network and I'm your host, Adrianna Pita. With us today are Darrell West, vice president and director of Governance Studies here at Brookings, and author of a new book, *Divided Politics, Divided Nation: Hyperconflict in the Trump Era*; and Camille Busette, who's a senior fellow and the director of our Initiative on Race, Prosperity, and Inclusion.

Darrell and Camille, thank you for being with us today.

WEST: Thank you.

BUSETTE: It's great to be here.

PITA: So, we are here for the occasion, Darrell, of your new book, which I just mentioned. To give a little structure for this conversation to our listeners, I'm going to start us off with sort of an overview of your book, diagnosing the problem that you're pointing, and then I really want to get us down into some ideas of solutions.

And Camille, you are here for the wonderful grounding in economic facts, to bring together the political and the economics intersections here.

So, Darrell, as you well know, in the run-up to and ever since the 2016 election the "how did we get here" think piece has become its own sort of little micro industry. But whenever, for example, the *New York Times* or *POLITICO*, when they send their reporters roving out into local diners, these things often read like sort of an anthropological dispatch. For you this is really a personal story. So, can you tell us about why you set out to write this book, why you did it now, and sort of what's the perspective that you're bringing to this?

WEST: Well, it is a personal book. It is a family memoir about political polarization in the United States.

So, I grew up on a dairy farm in rural Ohio, so it's a very conservative community. But then I taught political science for 26 years at Brown University, which is a very liberal campus. So, I've lived among both liberal and conservative tribes.

And then my immediate family is a microcosm of America's divisions in the sense that my two sisters are Christian fundamentalists and they love President Trump, and my brother and I are more

liberal and we are not big fans of the President. And so family reunions always are very interesting.

PITA: Very awkward conversations around the Thanksgiving dinner table.

WEST: Sometimes that is the case. And so, I felt that the reason I wrote the book was the intersection of the family story and the national story over polarization. I'd wanted to tell my family story for a number of years and have worked on and off on the book over that time. But I had difficulty figuring out what the overall narrative was that kind of tied the stories together.

As soon as Donald Trump was elected President and I saw the polarized reaction to him in the early parts of his presidency, it was like *voilà*, that's the narrative. Because then I was able to link the divisions within my own family over politics that, you know, everyone in my family's been aware of going back 40 years to the Reagan presidency to this national narrative over polarization, why the country has become so polarized, and what we possibly can do about it.

PITA: Right. What does -- the "hyperconflict" in your title, is that a specific terminology or is that just sort of, all right, we're past polarization now? We're now into this extra zone.

WEST: Hyperconflict is a word that I made up just to try and think about how the conflict has really intensified. You know, we're beyond normal politics. You know, in every part of American history we've had divisions between the parties, divisions across the ideological spectrum, but we seem to have entered a new phase where opponents now are viewed as enemies as opposed to just people who have a difference of opinion.

Information has gotten isolated in the sense that everybody has their own news sources and people often end up having their own facts. That makes it very difficult to actually address public policy problems because people have very different diagnoses of the problem, very different remedies. They bring different facts to bear on those issues. And then it becomes almost impossible to bargain, compromise, and negotiate those differences because people are just starting from such different points of view.

PITA: Sure. So, you pointed a very wide variety of political, cultural, and, of course, the economic factors leading into this. Big parts of that is the very disruptive economic shifts over the last 30, 40 years, loss of educational opportunities, identity politics, religious tensions, backlash against globalization, immigration. Can you walk us through some of these changes?

WEST: I mean, I think there are lots of things that are going on that have contributed to today's polarization. But certainly, the combination of economics and geography are a big part of the problem in a sense that our colleagues in the Metro Program here at Brookings did an analysis and they found that 15 percent of American counties today generate 64 percent of the country's GDP.

And so, what that means in practice is most of the economic activity in America is on the East Coast, the West Coast, and a few metropolitan areas in between. Many parts of America are not sharing in the economic prosperity. They're not seeing jobs. They don't see much of a future. Their kids are migrating to the cities. And so that creates a lot of unease among people, creates anxiety, creates anger. People don't like the status quo, and then they will turn to politicians who then have more extreme views.

Race is another part of the political polarization problem in the sense that America is likely to become a majority minority country around 2044. There are people who don't like that future. They're fighting against it. Trump certainly is a manifestation of that. And so that is one of the reasons why people see the stakes of the current policies as being so important.

And then the last thing is the technology angle. Because I do think that social media aggravate tensions. They divide people. Technology encourages extremism. And so, in a lot of respects, there are things that have come together in our current period in terms of the technology, demographic changes, the economic and geographical aspects of our economy that have contributed to the polarization that we're seeing.

PITA: Camille, do you want to weigh in on some of these economic trends going on, as well?

BUSETTE: Sure. First of all, I just wanted to start off by saying that I really enjoyed the book. It was excellent. I like the sort of intimate portrait of your family. And I was really struck by the role religion played in ordering everyone's -- their perspectives and lives. And it really gave me a very clear idea of what, especially at this moment when we've had the Mueller report come out, what people in your family might have thought, some of the people in your family might have thought about the outcome of that report. So, I really appreciated that.

And what I wanted to say with respect to the trends that Darrell identifies is that I think he's absolutely correct. I mean, you have the confluence of these three major types of trends around demographics, the economic shifts, and also the technological shifts that have enabled more of an insular

kind of information pipeline for specific points of view.

I think beyond that what I think is also quite true, and it's just building upon his explanation, is that you really have two very different types of Americas. I mean, you have this America of the coasts, right, which are very, I would say, integrated with what's happening globally. And then you have people who are not part of that and for whom there is a sense of a lack of control over their lives in a sense because things are happening that are, you know, sort of beyond their control. And one of the ways in which they manage that is to really hew very closely to ideas and doctrines and themes that are familiar and somewhat comforting.

So, I think the different economic types of existences that we have here are part of the reason you get these two different kinds of America, but they're not the entire reason. Part of what I really liked about your book is that there is a sense from people who are not on the coasts that a lot of folks who are on the coasts do not really know how to work hard, are not very honest, are very privileged in a way that is very unappealing. And if you see everything that's happening in Washington with that viewpoint, you're not going to be open to certain kinds of proposals. And likewise, if you have the viewpoint -- if you're on the coast and you have the viewpoint of, you know, I'm really part of the global economy and I see things that way, you're not going to be open to other kinds of proposals.

And so, I think it's a really interesting moment that I think has been pressurized quite a bit by the fact that we have Donald Trump in the position of President now and he has a character trait and a set of actions that he follows, which tend to inflame those kinds of divisions. And so, I do think it's going to be interesting to see how things play out in 2020.

We've just turned the corner on the Mueller report and now we really are looking at 2020 with fresh eyes. And I think it'll be very interesting to see how various candidates are able to straddle those divides.

PITA: I'm wondering if either or both of you can speak a little bit to -- just a little bit of a counter narrative in terms of it is often portrayed as it's the rural, the heartland versus coastal elites. There are lots of rural and agricultural areas on the coasts and there are some of the successful cities, you know, Austin, Houston, Chicago, major cities that are in the heartland, as well. Can you both bring up some of that counter narrative and sort of how that plays into this?

WEST: I mean, I think that certainly is true. The areas that are left behind and the areas that are moving ahead do not neatly dovetail always along geographic lines or even class lines.

BUSETTE: Exactly.

WEST: So, we do have to think about how that affects polarization and how people see the situation.

BUSETTE: And maybe even how it affects voting. Right?

WEST: Yes, definitely. And certainly, with an Electoral College that's focused on the 50 states and its winner take all within each of those states, you know, that affects the way the political system operates, the way our presidents are chosen, and then, therefore, the national conversation that we have around these issues.

And I think Camille is exactly right that one of the weird things about our current period, and this really contributes to the polarization, is I think there are many people in America who feel left behind, feel like they're not doing well economically, and they worry about their future, as well as the future of their children. But people have very different villains today.

So, conservatives, their villain is big government, like that's what's stifling opportunity. That's the reason I'm not personally doing well. That's the reason my state or region is not prospering.

Liberals would agree that there are lots of being left behind, but their villain is Wall Street, banks, rich people, billionaires, income inequality, the fact that we don't have a very inclusive economy. And so, the problem today is when you have differing villains what it really means is you have very different diagnoses of the problem and then very different remedies that would apply to those areas.

So, Trump is interesting in the sense that, you know, he campaigned as a populist, and so he basically said, yeah, you're being left behind, people are ignoring you. But then he proposed a bunch of basically really conservative ideas and basically turned immigrants into the villains, global trade with China is a villain.

And I think it'll be interesting in 2020, I believe there are going to be a number of Democratic candidates who embrace part of Trump's rhetoric in the sense of you've been left behind and we need to take care of your interests, but they're going to propose very different remedies. And so, we may see liberal populism play out in the 2020 election with Democratic candidates echoing some of the themes,

but then pushing them in a very different direction.

BUSETTE: Yeah, I agree with that.

PITA: Camille, this plays a little bit into a good conversation that we had. About a year and a half ago we hosted J.D. Vance, the author of *Hillbilly Elegy*, and the Harvard professor and sociologist, William Julius Wilson, talking about a lot of these dynamics. And you wrote a follow-up shortly after that event where you talked about these competing narratives about what's to blame. Is it the structure? Is it the culture? And sort of some of those conversations around that. Can you delve into that?

BUSETTE: Sure. When we think about Trump's victory and also that particular event where I interviewed both J.D. Vance and Professor Wilson, I think they're clearly different ideas about how we've gotten to the place where we've gotten, where we do have people who are left behind and other people who are doing really well.

So, the kind of more stereotypical conservative argument is that a lot of the reason some people are left behind has to do with the actions of others, including government, that have made it very difficult for ordinary people who are hardworking to make their way forward. And of course, a more stereotypical sort of liberal view of that is, well, it's clearly, you know, the fact that there are a number of structural reasons to have been left behind having to do, first, with the way the class system organizes the economy; the way in which different types of groups are left out, racial groups, gender, lower income folks are left out of major developments; and the way in which conservative policies have acted to pull the safety net out from under folks.

And so, you have those kinds of competing narratives. But what I do think is really, really fascinating not only about Trump, but also whoever is going to be competing in 2020, and I agree 100 percent with Darrell, that now people are going to say, okay, yes, let's all agree that there are people who are doing extremely well and people who are left behind. And the diagnosis is probably going to include some really interesting policy propositions.

So, for instance, one can say, you know, Community A or Community B has been left behind and we as people who are Christians believe that shouldn't happen. And as a result, as Christians we believe that those communities really should be served well by government policy. So that's a different spin that you might start to see in 2020, which is very different from the way that might have played out earlier.

So I do agree very much with Darrell that I think it's going to be fascinating to see how Trump, whose arguments we know very, very well, will content with other kinds of candidates who are able to acknowledge the kind of pain and difficulty that his voters have felt, but are able to take that acknowledgement and propose really very different kinds of solutions.

WEST: And I think Camille raises an interesting point, especially in terms of J.D. Vance. Because it's funny, he actually grew up 30 to 40 miles from where I grew up, so he talks about life in Middletown, Ohio. Like, I know that area well because it was basically in my neighborhood.

But, you know, what he argues in his book, he really emphasizes cultural problems in these areas. And I love the book and I thought he did a great job kind of describing what was going on. And I've seen some of the cultural problems that he described play out in my hometown, as well. But when I reflect on the changes over the last several decades that have disrupted the culture, it's like I see a lot of economic structural changes as the reason. It's like the reason families have struggled, there have been divisions, and all sorts of problems in those communities is, first of all, the agricultural jobs disappeared. People couldn't make it on the farms anymore. And then the manufacturing sector completely collapsed kind of starting in the early '80s and then continuing into the current time. And so, I would place more emphasis on the economic origins of the cultural problems than probably J.D. Vance did.

After his talk, when he came to Brookings a year ago, we had dinner with him and I approached him and told him about there's one part of his book that I disagreed with. And I could see he started to tense up when I raised that. There's a point in his book where he mentions that the worst thing that happened in his life was at some point, I think during his high school years he actually moved to Preble County. And I said, J.D., that's my home county. I cannot believe you're insulting Preble County that way. And then we laughed about it.

PITA: Camille, on the point you just raised about how people think about why they should care about poverty, whether it's a more argument from a Christian basis or whatever else, they usually care about people who are being left behind or whether there is broader economic reasons why you should care about people who are in poverty. You had a great line in a piece a little while ago. "The combination of poverty and inequality affects all Americans whether we're poor or not."

Can you talk about how that does affect everyone and so why people should care about it?

BUSETTE: Sure. I mean, I think our market economy is very much driven by consumer demand. And in order for the economy to do well, you have to have consumers who have money that is free to spend. If you have vast swaths of your country where people do not have extra money to spend, then it has a whole range of negative impacts on the economy more generally.

So, if we get to a point where we consistently have some significant portion of the American population really unable to afford more than the absolute necessities or even below that, where they actually require consistent government assistance, then it's very clear that at least in those places where those people live the economies are not going to be very vibrant. And so, in order to be able to pick things up you're going to need to have some pretty innovative and forward-looking local leaders, who are regional leaders who think about, you know, how do we turn straw into gold in a place where we have people who are really suffering?

So, I think it's incumbent upon everybody, even when we're thinking nationally, to think about the places that are not doing well because the places that are not doing well drive those local economies. And those local economies, if there are enough of them in a state, for instance, can really make a difference in terms of what are the employment opportunities that are open to folks? What are the educational opportunities that are open to folks? What are the opportunities for economic mobility, which we have seen has really stagnated in the U.S.?

So, I think it's important for all of us to think about, you know, who has been left behind? Why have they been left behind? And what are the potential solutions now in the 21st century economy, where we're much more driven by service sector jobs, knowledge-based jobs, and less dependent upon manufacturing and small-scale agriculture?

PITA: And a question on perspective. This is a question that I brought up in a conversation we had here on *Intersections* not too long ago with our colleagues Isabel Sawhill, her new book *The Forgotten Americans*, and outside author Andrew Yarrow, was one of the aspects that came up in both their books was that many of the people they're talking in *The Forgotten Americans*, she points out that the struggling middle class, the lower middle class, they are struggling. There are hardships, but they aren't the worst off in America. And so, we were talking about the question of perspective, about in terms of, okay, yeah, you're not doing any better than you were 20 years ago. And so that's bad and we should

worry about it, but you're also not the worst.

But there's other people who are now doing better. So, for instance, we were talking about how -- this plays into a little bit, Camille, I was thinking your work with Richard Reeves about the changing face of the middle class. So previously, a more predominantly white middle class saw themselves in perspective to black poverty or urban middle class compared itself to agricultural areas or to suburban areas. And so now for some of those people it's not that they are doing so much worse, but that the bottom has caught up with them, how you address that perspective issue of like, yes, you're doing bad, but not as bad as others. But why are you the priority?

BUSETTE: Well, you know, I think it's interesting, and, Darrell, you actually have a perspective on this in your book, so I think there are many ways to view this. So, I know that from Belle's work, she's looking at the lower middle class versus people who are poor. And those folks are saying, oh, my gosh, look, you know, with transfers, et cetera, everybody seems to have caught up to us.

I think there's another perspective that you identify, which is, you know, you're a parent and, you know, you're maybe now in your sixties and you have the benefit of a blue-collar manufacturing job at some point in your city and that job has gone away. But your children are in their twenties, thirties, and maybe even forties, but they do not have access to jobs that guarantee a middle-class lifestyle. And so, I think there's also the perspective of somebody having had that lifestyle looking at their children who are unable to attain that and, regardless of who's poor and whether you're comparing yourselves to people in urban areas or poor areas, but just comparing yourself to your kids, your kids to yourself, there's also that perspective. And I think you do a very nice job of drawing that out.

WEST: I think that is an important point in the sense that there are people who were doing well, who are no longer doing well. And how are they reacting? They're trying to find who's to blame. Like who's responsible for the fact that I'm not doing as well as my parents' generation or even as I myself might have done 10 years ago, you know, when the factory closed?

And so, they're looking for villains and Donald Trump came along and gave them villains: immigrants. Like you're doing poorly because immigrants are taking your jobs. You're doing poorly because we've had these really bad trade deals with China. And so, he's playing to the public anger, but focusing it in a very particular way.

I think in 2020 we'll see Democrats playing to that anger, but then blaming other villains. But that will probably accentuate the polarization. I think there's actually a very good chance we may elect the most progressive President that we've had in a long time in 2002 just as a reaction against Donald Trump. But that's not going to solve polarization. If anything, it may aggravate it because then you'll have a liberal populist kind of pushing the country in a very different direction than what we've had over the last few decades.

BUSETTE: You know, I do think that whoever emerges from the Democratic field, as well as Donald Trump, those two individuals are really going to have to contend with the fact that we have a large portion of the American population which is downwardly mobile. We have a large portion that's also poor, but we have a downwardly mobile portion of the population. And we also have a segment of the population that has done extremely well since the latest Great Recession. Straddling those kinds of constituencies and trying to put together a set of policy proposals that can appeal to all of those folks is really going to be a herculean task.

And I think for better or for worse, what Donald Trump has done is said, you know, I don't care about the people who are doing really well and I don't care about the people who are poor. I just care about the downwardly mobile. We're focusing on them and identifying a couple of villains.

It'll be interesting to see what Democrats do as a result of basically having these three different kinds of constituencies.

PITA: So that's the $10,000 question. We're so politically polarized there might be ideas that can help with solutions. How do you get to a point where people will listen to solutions when we're already in a land of facts and alternative facts, right? How do you start broaching the polarization to fix the polarization?

WEST: I mean, I tried to end my book on an optimistic note in the sense you can't write a book about polarization and say how terrible it is and then conclude there's nothing we can do about it. Like that would not be a satisfactory outcome.

So, I think to address polarization we really have to get into the root causes, many of which we have talked about. So certainly, the downwardly mobile people economically, that is a big problem. So, coming up with policies that are more inclusive, that help the middle class, that address the lack of

economic opportunity that many people feel right now, addressing the geographic disparities between the heartland and the two coasts is absolutely vital. Right now, we seem to be moving in the wrong direction there.

Like if you look at venture capital investment today, three-quarters of it is going to three states: New York, California, and Massachusetts. So, if anything, the geographic disparities may get wider before they get reduced. So, we need some type of geographic strategy that involves investing more in the heartland.

I was actually hopeful when Amazon announced a year ago that they wanted a second headquarters, that they would choose a Midwestern state just to make a statement that those are the areas that need help and Amazon could come in and provide lots of jobs and help to promote economic opportunity. And instead, what did Amazon do? It picked places in Washington, D.C., and New York City, probably the worst thing from a geographic standpoint that we could have wanted to do.

The technology problem is a big issue in polarization, so somehow, we have to get a handle on social media and how it does today seem to be encouraging extremism and dividing people and aggravating polarization. That's a hard problem to solve, but that has to be part of what we do.

And then the last thing I'd propose, and this is kind of a radical way to end the book, but I suggest something that I call "Take a liberal or a conservative to lunch." That if you're a liberal, find a conservative and just go to lunch and try and understand that person's perspective. Because today, people have really grown isolated from other points of view. Like I try and read liberal, moderate, and conservative sites, sometimes I watch Fox News just to see how they are portraying the issue. Most people aren't doing that anymore. I mean, I have colleagues at Brookings and the same thing was true at Brown where they say, well, I don't know anybody who voted for Bush or I don't know anybody who voted for Trump. And I tell them I know hundreds of people who did that.

And I regularly have talked with my sisters whose politics are very different from mine. I don't agree with them, but I respect their views. I think that it helps to inform my perspective to talk to people who have other points of view.

So, I don't think this is a situation where there's a top-down solution that could be imposed that's going to solve polarization. I think it's a bottom-up issue where people have to change the way they're

getting information, the way they're interacting with other people. Like we're all kind of segmenting into our own class, our own income strata, our own educational level, our own racial groups, and this is not healthy for American democracy in the long run.

BUSETTE: So, I would agree with that completely. I also think with respect to the forthcoming political season we're very sort of logical, Darrell and I. And I think it's true that the information sources need to change, that we need to reach out to people who are not like us and begin to see them as human beings, et cetera. And I think that's very important.

I don't think most people are going to do that. And I don't think most people are in a position to do that, largely because they surround themselves with people like themselves, right, I mean, whoever you are.

So, what I think is actually going to happen here is that it's going to take somebody very, very charismatic to be able to change voters' points of views. And we've had a number of folks throw their hats in the ring for the Democratic nomination and, you know, they sort of range with respect to their level of charisma. But I do think that whoever emerges there, that person, in order to win, will have to be extremely charismatic. And I think it's the charisma that will draw people out to that candidate and maybe have those voters think about different kinds of solutions.

So, I think it's going to be very, unfortunately, personally driven as opposed to driven by policy and policy choices. I think that's probably where we're headed, largely because the opponent is Donald Trump and Donald Trump is also extremely charismatic and has a way of generating a level of energy and excitement that whoever is his opponent will also have to do to be successful. So, I think that's going to happen.

The other thing that I wanted to mention, and it comes up a little bit in Darrell's book, is we do have a very hyperpolarized polity, but I think one of the sorts of negative reemergence that has occurred over the last couple of years is that of white supremacists. And that is actually very concerning. And I think that's an indication, also, of just how hyperpartisan and how fragmented in a sense our political scene is, so much so that people now feel comfortable not being constrained by the conventions that we've had over the last couple of decades, and now are feeling very free to espouse those kinds of neo-Nazi and white supremacists points of view.

So, I actually think there is a portion of the electorate, so those folks, who will probably never be brought back into the fold. And it's going to be interesting to see how both Donald Trump and whoever opposes him on the Democratic side are able to deal with that particular strand of American politics.

PITA: When we talk about some of the economic solutions to helping to address geographic disparities there are some policies that work well for a really broad cross section of the populace, like maybe the Earned Income Tax Credit. But there are some that do need to be, whether it's geographically targeted, like the solutions for rural areas are different than a solution to people who live in kind of a more urban area; or they might be targeted at specific populations based on historical and current racial discrimination.

Can you talk a little bit about both what are some of the most effective broad-based ones, but also when then you do look at the specifically targeted solutions, how you help sell those to enough people to get that solution enacted? How do you get legislator who don't represent that population, whether it's vote for a bill or whether it's something that passes through an agency, whatever it is?

BUSETTE: So, generally speaking, the policies that are most effective in the sense that they target the largest number of people and they have the greatest impact in lifting people from struggling circumstances to something that's closer to thriving, are clearly those that are part of government policy. Right? Because the government touches everybody. And so that's why when people are thinking about these kinds of policies, they're typically thinking about how do we overhaul the tax system, tax reforms? What are the various ways in which social benefits, healthcare, as well as other kinds of benefits can be tweaked or adjusted to help families who are struggling? And so, Belle Sawhill clearly is sort of in the forefront at Brookings in terms of recommending some of those larger, broader-based policies.

We also have our colleagues in the Metropolitan Policy Program who have for years been really talking about do you have a more geographically focused sense of economic renovation policies or economic development policies? And I think one of the things that they've learned there is that what is really effective in those kinds of policies are the buy-in you get from a broad range of community actors, stakeholders. So, you do have to have buy-in from the business community or you won't get much help, you know, from the educational community, so community colleges, for instance, the educational community as well as the philanthropic and nonprofit side of things.

And so, I think our folks in Metro have been very effective at talking to local politicians about creating the atmosphere in which you really are sort of both embracing innovation but doing it in such a way that it is appealing to that kind of broad range of local stakeholders.

That said, it's pretty clear, and I just wanted to link with Darrell's point about the Amazon selection of their HQ-2, it's pretty clear that there are some areas of the country that are simply not part of the technology revolution and really not part of that digital age in a very robust way. And so I think it's going to be really important for local economies to figure out how do they retool their educational systems and their training systems in such a way that they can start to take advantage of that part of the economy, whether they do that with a lot of people are remote working for a lot of these companies or they're able to do it in a way that attaches them to like the healthcare industry, which is also very digital, and other kinds of industries that could be a little bit more locally based.

So, I think the most important takeaway is that, you know, manufacturing jobs are not coming back and the kinds of jobs that now are available require a different skill set than people may have had earlier. And so local leaders really need to figure out how they can hook into the digital economy in order to make those gains sustained and broad-based.

PITA: Darrell, you also talked about some political solutions. There's going to need to be some fundamental reforms to place the system, our political system, on a less conflictual and more stable footing. Can you talk a little bit about what some of that might look like?

WEST: I mean, one idea I mention in the book, and I have colleagues E.J. Dionne and Bill Galston who have worked on this, is universal voting or mandatory voting, which Australia has. There are about a dozen countries around the world that does this.

The problem that I see in the United States, and this is something that I think really aggravates polarization, is we have elections that are typically low-turnout elections. Like in a presidential level, it might be 60 percent turnout. In an off-year congressional election, it might be 35 to 45 percent turnout. In some local elections, city council or school board elections, it might be 10, 15, or 20 percent. The problem when you have low-turnout elections is it encourages politicians to play to the base. So, Democrats are playing to liberal constituencies. Republicans are playing to conservatives. And so, it makes extremism more possible because of the low turnout.

In universal voting most of the countries that have that have voter turnout 90 to 95 percent or even higher. If you have a really high turnout, politicians can no longer play to the base. Like much of the public is still pretty moderate and centrist in its political orientations. And so that's an idea that's kind of a system-wide reform that I think actually would make a difference. Like if there's one institutional change that we would make, like if we moved to universal voting, I think that would actually have a big impact on reducing polarization.

PITA: Like most bang for the buck solution.

WEST: Yes, absolutely.

PITA: Okay.

BUSETTE: You know, I think that's really of interesting. And as you recall, we had Stacy Abrams here last month and she talked a little bit about her campaign for governor. One of the things that she had mentioned is rather than focusing on trying to attract people who are already voters was really trying to bring in new people into the system. And I think most people would agree that she was very successful in trying to recruit new voters.

And it's interesting that her policy proposals remained somewhere between center left and left. She sorts of represented herself as, okay, this is the way I am. But she still was able to attract a number of folks who had not been voters before. So, I do think it would be very interesting and I do think that was an interesting phenomenon.

I do think it would be really interesting to see if we could get something like universal voting because I think the kinds of politicians that you would have would be very different from the ones you would have now.

PITA: My reaction to that had been about there is a fight between we need more people voting versus, no, we don't, we want to limit voting. How big of a crimp does that put into trying to achieve something like this?

WEST: Well, I'm definitely on the side of I want more people voting.

PITA: Right.

WEST: I just think in a democracy that is good in and of itself. There actually isn't a lot of evidence to support the idea that people who don't vote are less intelligent, less rational, rely less on

facts. I mean, that often is cited like, you know, you don't want informed people voting, but that's really not the situation. People don't vote because they're cynical about politics. They think their vote does not matter, it's not going to affect politicians. Republicans and Democrats are the same. You know, they're all in it for themselves. Like that's the number one reason why people don't vote. It's not lacks knowledge or lack of information.

PITA: Since we're running short on time here, I think I'm going to ask for a final is how you do -- again, dealing with this question of we're so polarized, people are really cynical about politics, how can they possibly make a difference. What are some of the ways of fighting that cynicism or despair about how bad everything already is?

WEST: I mean, the good news is if you look historically there's a lot of reasons for optimism. Like this is not the first time in American history we've been deeply divided and deeply polarized. Of course, the Civil War was the most extreme case of kind of a system breakdown and armed conflict, but the 1790s, the 1890s, and then the 1990s and thereafter were all periods of extreme polarization, hyperpartisanship, and just lots of divisions.

When you look historically, those periods tend not to last that long because they're really not sustainable. Like you can't have system-wide breakdowns. You can't have governments that cannot function. It's not good for the economy, it's not good for national security.

So typically, something has happened in which sometimes one side wins and so that resolves the polarization. Sometimes there's an economic depression, what we had in the 1930s, and that brought in new leaders and they adopted new policy solutions. Sometimes war intervenes and people unite against a common foreign enemy.

So, I don't believe polarization is just going to continue indefinitely. When you look historically, typically something will happen that reduces the polarization because you can't really sustain that on a long-term basis.

PITA: All right. Well, I'm going to recommend to our readers that they check out your book, Divided Politics, Divided Nation: Hyperconflict in the Trump Era.

Darrel and Camille, thank you so much for being here and explaining this.

WEST: Thank you.

BUSETTE: Our pleasure, thank you.

PITA: Thanks for listening. You can find more episodes of Intersections and the rest of the Brookings Podcast Network on Apple or Google Podcasts, on Spotify, CastBox, Stitcher, or your other favorite podcast app. And don’t forget to follow us on Twitter @policypodcasts for news and updates.