

THE BROOKINGS INSTITUTION  
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DIVIDED POLITICS, DIVIDED NATION: HYPERCONFLICT IN THE TRUMP ERA

A BOOK DISCUSSION WITH DARRELL WEST

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## P R O C E E D I N G S

MS. TUMULTY: Well, hello everyone and thank you for being here this morning for what I think is going to be a really interesting hour. I'm Karen Tumulty. I'm a columnist with *The Washington Post* and this is Darrell West, who has just written a book about polarization, which is of course a subject we talk about quite a bit, but he takes it from a very personal perspective, and that is it's a book that is both a political science book but also a personal story. In fact we were just talking about it. I'm from a Texas, so a lot of these family dynamics I very much recognize.

So the first thing I wanted to ask you -- and we will talk for a little bit and then we would love to open it up to your questions -- but the first thing I'd like to ask you is, so you're a think tank guy, why did you decide to write such a personal book? And what did your family think about this? (Laughter)

MR. WEST: Well, I wanted to write a personal book just because in certain respects my family history dovetails with our national political climate. So the book is really a family memoir about political polarization in America.

So I grew up on a dairy farm in rural Ohio, so it was a very conservative community. But then through a fluky set of circumstances I got a Ph.D. and ended up teaching political science for 26 years at Brown University, which is a very liberal institution. And then now I'm in DC at Brookings. My immediate family is a microcosm of the national divisions in the sense that my two sisters are Christians who support President Trump, my brother and I are more liberal, not big fans of the President, and so family reunions always are very interesting. (Laughter) But I wanted to write the book just to tell the story both of the family, how we've navigated political divisions over the years. I disagree with my sisters on politics, but I respect them. And we continue to have lots of conversations about politics and religion. We've done that for 40 years.

MS. TUMULTY: And it's interesting too that Donald Trump is not a major

figure in this book. It really takes such a longer perspective in terms of how we got here. We did not just get here in November of 2016.

But it is interesting to me that when we talk about polarization, I mean so many people will try to talk about it and explain it in racial terms or in economic terms. You begin your book in church and you keep returning to church. Can you explain sort of what the cultural aspects of -- it seems like you believe that's the real Rosetta Stone.

MR. WEST: Well, it certainly is the case that Donald Trump did not cause America's current polarization. And the book is a 40-year political history from Regan through Trump. And as you go from president to president you can see the polarization ratchet up with each presidency. As we go from Reagan to George Herbert Walker Bush, to Clinton, Bush, Obama, and now Trump. And in thinking about how we got to this point, I do think the cultural and religious aspects are a big part of it because when you look at how Trump was elected and why people are so polarized these days, you know, the heartland versus the coast dichotomy is a big part of that story. The heartland has been left behind economically; a lot of people are suffering, the loss of manufacturing jobs, the decline of agriculture. You know, all of those things have been very important. People on the East Coast and the West Coast have prospered economically, but there also is a cultural divide between the heartland and the two coasts on a lot of issues, race, immigration, church and state issues, and so on.

So I do start the book with religion because that played a very important part in my life when I was growing up. In the last few years many of my high school friends have joined Facebook, and some of these are people I literally have not seen in 40 years, but through Facebook I now interact with them and we've renewed our relationship. Many of them now are deeply religious in ways I really don't remember them being from high school. So there were changes that took place in their lives during that time period. So in the book, I try and get into the economic aspects, the cultural aspects, and how religion has shaped a lot of people.

MS. TUMULTY: But there's one specific sort of argument in your family too that is based largely in religion, which that is about your brother's sexual orientation.

MR. WEST: Yes. My brother is gay. Everyone in the family gets along. You know, we regularly interact with one another, we have regular phone calls. But it's a difficult issue and it's something that I think kind of reflects changes that have taken place in America where the country as a whole has become more liberal on that issue, but not every part of America shares that view. So it's just, you know, one more source of division within America that has contributed to the current state of American politics.

MS. TUMULTY: But even between your two sisters and how they deal with your brother, could you talk a little bit about that? I mean one came to the wedding, you know.

MR. WEST: And one did not.

MS. TUMULTY: Right.

MR. WEST: But I mean I would say that it's a challenging issue within the family in the sense that both of my sisters love my brother and they socialize, they get along very well personally, but based on their religious views, it's a challenging issue for them. So that's something we've navigated for a number of years.

MS. TUMULTY: But then you arrive at Brown and you arrive at a moment that is almost like a sort of caricature of the way conservatives talk about speech issues on campus. Could you describe that and could you talk about sort of how that struck you as a Midwest boy?

MR. WEST: Well, Brown is a leading indicator of the future of America (laughter), because when you look at surveys, America is becoming more liberal, young people are more liberal. And so I taught at Brown for 26 years and over the years there were just a number of ways in which liberal politics intruded into campus life. We often had republican speakers who would come to campus, they would be shouted down, there would be a campus protest. Ray Kelly, who was a police commissioner under Mayor Bloomberg,

came to campus, he was prevented from speaking. And so we're used to conservatives doing things that the rest of America may not like. There are things that liberals did at Brown that the rest of the country didn't like as well. And I think as America moves into the future we're going to see these types of divisions come to the forefront.

I remember there was a time -- I think this was in 2006 -- where Hillary Clinton came to campus to speak, and at that time certainly people in my family view Hillary Clinton as ultra-liberal, at Brown she was viewed as not liberal enough. People started to shout her down and try and prevent her from speaking and it created a lot of controversy on campus just in terms of not respecting her right to deliver a speech. And there were a couple of students who wrote a letter to the editor justifying the effort to keep her from speaking, saying she voted for the Patriot Act, therefore she forfeited her civil rights and we were right to shout her down.

So I think the book tries to be nuanced in the sense of it talks about the fight between liberals and conservatives, but there also are fights that we're now seeing in a national democratic party between centrist democrats and the progressive wing, on the republican side there's now a fight between the traditional republicans and the new trump republicans. And I try and reflect all of that in the book, but Brown was certainly kind of an indicator of how the country may end up moving in the next few years.

MS. TUMULTY: And so we've seen -- there's so much documentation of tribalism and how the country has become more tribal, but what about -- how much of a middle is there even left?

MR. WEST: There is a middle in terms of public opinion, but it's not reflected by our politicians, because this is an era where politicians have to play to the base. I have a chart in the book where I look at members of congress 1950 up to the current period. If you go back to the 1950s half of members of congress were moderate in their views and in their voting patterns. And, you know, they voted across party lines, there were bipartisan measures of the past. Today, when you look at the numbers, the numbers are

just going straight down. There are less than 5 percent of the members of congress who are moderate in their views. And so that's kind of how America has developed over recent years. And so people are now given a choice at election time between the really conservative politician and the really liberal politician. In fact, that may end up being our choice in the 2020 presidential election.

And so that creates a lot of problems in terms of polarization in the sense that that makes people feel our system is not operating well, we can all see the gridlock, we can see the institutional dysfunction in the United States, and it makes people angry when our government is not functioning well, which then reinforces the polarization.

MS. TUMULTY: And yet Donald Trump is not conservative as we have spent most of our lives I think defining that word. A lot of his policies, noninterventionist, foreign policy, protectionist trade policy, the cultural values that he represents, you know, three times married and all that other stuff. (Laughter) So why is it, do you think, he was able to strike such a chord with people like your relatives in the Midwest?

MR. WEST: Well, on the Trump marriage issue, there always is good humor associated with polarization, and one of my friends basically talked about Trump being married three times, two of them to immigrants, and explained that it was a job no American woman wanted to take (laughter), which I thought was kind of a good indication of how we think about things. But Trump was really elected as a populist. Like I have some colleagues in our Metro Program at Brookings that did an analysis and they found that today only 15 percent of American counties generate 64 percent of the country's GDP, which basically means almost all the economic activity is the East Coast, the West Coast, and a few metropolitan areas in between. But a lot of the country is being left behind. And so that helps to explain why Trump won. He was able to appeal to people on economic grounds, but also the cultural argument that you mentioned. Certainly immigration was his big issue. There are people who are not doing well economically and they are worried about immigrants coming to America and taking their jobs.

So tribalism has fused the economic and the cultural dimension into an us versus them, and Trump recognized that and rather brilliantly, was able to exploit that and become President.

MS. TUMULTY: You know, I actually one time interviewed Trump about coming up with the slogan "Make America Great Again", and people don't realize he filed an application for a trademark on that slogan six days after the 2012 election. You can find it on the Patent and Trademark Office website. So he said that -- and, again, this is a moment when the republican party has just lost -- Mitt Romney has just lost, they are going through this now famous autopsy of how can we appeal to more Hispanics and women and young people, and Donald Trump quite literally is sitting in Trump Tower on Fifth Avenue sending in an application for the phrase "Make America Great Again". And he told me that first he thought "Make America Great" -- he went through a bunch of different slogans that day, but he said then it seemed insulting so he added "again" to it.

But there is also the -- you know, as Hillary Clinton would often say during the campaign, it raised the idea that you could somehow go backwards, that you could somehow return to something that people felt was lost. I mean is that also part of it as well? And is that -- are people unrealistic that way?

MR. WEST: Well, Trump I think effectively played to this nostalgia that we can go back, that we can go back to a 1950s or 1960s era when America was very strong. And I think in certain respects his slogan also takes advantage of the anti-globalization sentiment that has emerged in recent decades. People -- certainly in the Midwest, but in other parts of America -- feel that we have paid a huge penalty through globalization, that it's destroyed manufacturing, a lot of jobs have moved first to Mexico and then to Asia. They're upset about that. And, you know, where Trump won the election was in those Midwestern industrial states, including my home state of Ohio, and he was very effective at really playing to that. So that slogan, "Make America Great Again", kind of plays to that view we're being pushed around, they're taking our jobs, the immigrants are coming across the border and

bringing crime and violence with them, and was able to fuse that into a very effective argument that helped make him President.

MS. TUMULTY: And were those sentiments you heard going home to Ohio before Trump?

MR. WEST: I've heard different echoes of that over a period of time. Certainly the economic argument. I have a number of close friends from high school who stayed in that area. And so I've corresponded on and off with them over a 40 year period. And I remember one friend was laid off like 4 different times over the 20 or 25 years after we graduated from high school. And so he was clearly on the leading edge of somebody who was struggling economically from just the broad structural changes that were taking place. Another friend worked for an agribusiness company and he emailed me once and said well, we were just taken over again. You know, there were mergers and acquisitions and I think the said he was on like his fourth or fifth company. It was the same company but it had been taken over four or five different times.

And so when these big economic changes kind of sweep through a country, through the region, and particularly in the Midwest, it's like people could see how it was hurting them, but it was hard for them to understand the villain. Like who's the bad guy here. And I think part of polarization today is liberals and conservatives have different diagnoses of what the problem is. Like we all agree there's a problem, but we diagnose the problem differently and then we have very different remedies. And so that creates or adds to this misunderstanding between liberals and conservatives and makes people angry. Like why can't you understand my point of view, like it's clear that the villain is X, but we don't have the same villain.

MS. TUMULTY: Another really interesting story I did during the 2016 campaign was I went to the Town of Parma, Ohio, just on the outskirts of Cleveland, and interviewed a couple of very ardent Trump supporters. It was Dennis Kucinich's sister and her husband. Dennis Kucinich of course being as liberal -- and this is a woman who in her



life had never voted for a republican -- you walked into her house and you saw a picture of her on the mantel with Barack Obama, there was a picture on the wall of her with Sean Penn. Okay, they weren't typical Trump voters (laughter), but I do remember talking to her and her husband and, you know they didn't seem bothered by the rhetoric, they said we know what he's trying to say. But the thing that they kept coming back to was they felt like they'd been pushed around and they felt like he wasn't going to be pushed around. Did you get that sort of sense?

MR. WEST: Very much so. I once had a conversation with my sister after Trump was elected and I asked her the question, like what do you like about Trump. And she said he thinks outside the box. And by that I think what she meant was she didn't like the status quo, either in economic terms or in cultural terms. And she felt frustrated that we've had many politicians who have claimed they're going to make things better in the United States. They haven't delivered on that, certainly in rural America. Rural America has been devastated for many decades now.

And so the frustration level reached a point where people were willing to accept somebody like Trump, who basically said, you know, this is wrong. We need to challenge all of our basic assumptions. These trade deals, they're bad for America, I'm going to renegotiate them. Immigration, that's bad for America, I'm going to get much tougher on that issue. That was very appealing to people who feel like they've been left behind and the status quo has not served them well. They understand Donald Trump's imperfections -- the marriages, the unethical behavior, and so on, but they feel like they've reached the point where they have to -- that they're willing to accept somebody like him because he will stand up and confront the conventional wisdom. Because they feel like they have done so poorly under the current situation, they're willing to think outside the box.

MS. TUMULTY: And do you feel that there are enough people like this that he can get reelected, given the fact that he's -- you know, his approval ratings are as low as any president we've seen since --

MR. WEST: There certainly are scenarios where President Trump can be reelected in 2020. And over the weekend, with the Mueller report coming out, that probably boosted the probability of his reelection because it took the Russian collusion idea off the table, at least if we are to believe the Bill Barr interpretation of the Mueller report. We still have to see the actual report itself, but that is a big help to Donald Trump.

Impeachment is probably going to be off the table for democrats now, based on how that Mueller report looks like it's going to develop. The national unemployment rate is 3.8 percent. So if we don't know anything else about the current climate, if you're talking about a very strong employment situation, very low inflation, that always predicts well to an incumbent doing well.

And, also, the Democratic Party has moved significantly to the left. We don't know who out of the 20 people who are going to be running are going to become the nominee, but there's a good chance it's going to be a pretty liberal individual. And so when you add all those things together you can certainly imagine a situation where Trump is reelected.

If you actually look at the post World War II period, many of our presidents have ended up serving two terms. The exceptions have been Jimmy Carter, who had a bad economy, George Herbert Walker Bush, who had a recession at the end of his presidency. So if there is a recession in the next year, you know, that would change the dynamic. It would actually cut into Trump's argument that I'm a billionaire, I'm a successful businessman, I understand the economy. I actually think a recession would be the most devastating thing for him politically, not just in terms of national sentiment, but even among some of the base people who live in these hard-hit Midwestern areas. Like if there's a recession, I think that would actually cut into his base.

But the way things are developing now, you can't rule it out.

MS. TUMULTY: And so how does your family manage to remain a family? I mean how do you guys (laughter) negotiate these deep differences?

MR. WEST: Well, Arthur Brooks was on Morning Joe a couple of weeks ago promoting his new book, and he had a statistic where he said one in six Americans have now stopped speaking to a family member because of political differences. Now, I'm happy to report my family is not among that statistic. We still talk regularly, we have phone calls, we send birthday cards back and forth, we exchange Christmas presents. I was just in Ohio a couple of weeks ago, had dinner with my sisters. So for 40 years we've know that we differ on politics and differ on major policy issues, but we decided a long time ago we would still keep talking. I respect my sisters, even when I disagree with them on the issues. I understand they have different goals, different values. They've had different experiences in the last few decades than I have had. And so I think that's really the key for families.

And, in fact, since the book has come out, I found that this idea about family divisions and how you navigate a political division within a family has really resonated with people. I wrote something on the Brookings website about this a few weeks ago and I started getting emails from strangers saying, hey, it was really interesting reading about your family, let me tell you about my family. (Laughter) And then they would go on and on. And so I felt like I was starting to become a social worker in addition to being a political scientist.

So that idea of families that have differences of opinion, either over cultural issues or politics or public policy issues, is not unique to my family. I think a lot of people have had Thanksgiving dinners where there's a crazy uncle who goes off on a rant. And, of course, in my family, often times I'm the crazy uncle. (Laughter)

MS. TUMULTY: So in 2000 my parents were about -- we were about a week and a half into the Florida recount and my mother suddenly blurted out to my father that she had been keeping a deep secret from him, which is that she voted for Al Gore. And my father, then age like 72, goes up to their bedroom and pulls the blanket off of the bed and says he's not sleeping with a woman who voted for Al Gore. (Laughter) I later told that story to Al Gore in an interview and he said, I can send her a blanket. (Laughter)

So, again, it's not like this is brand new, but I do think that Trump has sort of

forced a lot of things to the surface, a lot of things out in the open. Is there any road back from polarization, from these deep divisions that we have in this country?

MR. WEST: I try and close my book on an optimistic note on this very question. Because you can't write a book about how bad polarization is and basically say we're screwed, there's nothing we can do (laughter) and everything is going to go to hell. That's not an effective formula. So what I tried to argue in the last chapter was if we want to get a handle on polarization you have to really understand the root causes. And we've talked about a number of them, but it's the loss of economic opportunity, it's the geographic disparities between the heartland and the coast that have created bad feelings in the heartland, race is certainly a part of it, and America is moving toward a majority-minority status. A lot of people don't like that, they worry about that, and they are fighting against that. The median technology angle is a big part of it. People have a tendency now to engage in what I call information segregation. Like we all live in echo chambers where we prefer news sources that reinforce our prior beliefs.

So one of the things that I do, and I certainly encourage others, is really diversify your sources of information. Like I try and read conservative, moderate, and liberal sides. I watch Fox News occasionally, because I want to understand how other people think. It's something I've always enjoyed when I talk with my sisters about politics, to just understand where they're coming from, how they get information, how they assess current events. It's been very informative first as a political science professor and now as a think tank person to kind of get points of view that are different from my own point of view.

And then the technology angle I think is also a big part of that. We haven't talked about that yet, but social media encourages extremism. There are ways in which technology has made our current polarization very different. I mean yesterday when the Mueller report came out -- so first I was listening to the various cable shows, and I actually have to say, at least in the first hour or so, all of the shows, Fox, CNN, MSNBC, they presented different points of view. They had pro Trump people and anti-Trump people on.

But then I turned to my Twitter feed and it was extremely polarized in how people were reacting. And I think this is something we really have to be careful about, how both the news media angle and the social media angle in particular can combine to really accentuate political divisions, encourage extremism, and then therefore, make polarization a lot worse than it currently is.

MS. TUMULTY: I do think though that it -- I mean my beef with social media is I think it makes big things look small and makes small things look big. And some of these arguments that go on on my Twitter feed, you have to keep reminding yourself that like most people are not on Twitter, most people are not really paying any attention to this, they're just kind of going on about their lives.

MR. WEST: This is true. And there have been focus groups of people in some of the early caucus and primary states, they're not talking about impeachment, they're not talking about the Mueller report. It's like they're focused on healthcare, they're focused on economic bread and butter issues, some people are focused on immigration. So that is a cultural issue that engages people. But, you know, sometimes we get caught up in this DC world, where you're right, small things get magnified into things that are made to be big, even though they're actually not big from the standpoint of people outside of Washington, DC.

So we just have to be careful how technology can corrupt our civic conversation that we're having with one another and we certainly saw aspects of that in 2016. It's probably going to be a lot worse in 2020 because the one thing about the Russians, they trained everybody else how to push particular points of view. And I think in 2020 it's not just going to be the Russians that we have to worry about, it's going to be ourselves, because we all like to spread news that is sympathetic to our own point of view, and technology makes it very easy for people to do that.

MS. TUMULTY: Well, thank you. I think we'd really like to sort of open it up to your questions. Do we have a microphone, or should we just call on people?

MR. WEST: Yeah, there are microphones.

MS. TUMULTY: Here we go. Why don't you do the calling on?

MR. WEST: Yeah, there's a microphone coming up. And if you can just give us your name and organization.

MR. CHECCO: Larry Checco, Senior Advisor to Serve USA. You said something very interesting in the beginning, Darrell, about re-meeting old friends in high school and realizing that they've become more religious than you remember them to be.

I was thinking about the word faith the other day, and the word faith to me means a belief in something without any hard evidence. If we are becoming more religious as a country and people transfer their faith from not only their religion to politics, there's no bridge because it's called a leap of faith. Either you make that leap or you don't. And it's hard to make a rational to somebody who is a faithful person, in politics in religion, and use reason. Do you think that's part of the polarization problem?

MR. WEST: I do think that's part of our current polarization, but it's also a part of the current tribalism that afflicts the United States. And that's not just a religion versus a more secular approach to how people should live their lives, but there is now a conservative orthodoxy, there's also a liberal orthodoxy, and sometimes there's a lack of rationality on both sides. You know, when I was growing up there were things that I thought were crazy. But I also have to say when I was at Brown I would hear things from our students who were very liberal that I thought were crazy as well and not based on the facts.

And so I think the idea of faith moving from religion into other aspects is important. And, if anything, as the country has become more secular in general, people still have this thirst for meaning in life. And some people have suggested that tribal affiliation has become a way to provide meaning for people. You know, in a modern and postmodern world, we still need some grounding, we still need some principles, and tribalism has kind of moved in to fill that vacuum, and then that contributes to the polarization that we're all worried about.

There's a microphone coming up from behind you.

QUESTIONER: I think I have a funny question. How serious is the quote, like Sarah Sanders, that god chose Trump to become president? I don't believe that, but she said so. (Laughter)

MR. WEST: I have heard statements like that from high school friends that I've had an active email exchange with a number over the years, and after Trump was elected --

MS. TUMULTY: And by the way, is that how they explain Obama?

MR. WEST: No. (Laughter)

MS. TUMULTY: Oh.

MR. WEST: But I've had email exchanges with folks, and I remember getting an email from one individual who lives in my hometown and she basically made the argument that god uses bad people for good purposes, and specifically applied that to Trump. And I think what she meant by that was she is a prolife individual and she appreciated the fact that President Trump is putting prolife people on the Supreme Court. That that kind of helped her overlook other aspects of Trump that she might not have liked. But she saw him as basically moving the country in a direction that she personally supported.

So the Sarah Sanders argument is kind of an extension of that kind of reasoning, but there are people who are supporting the President because he is reflecting the values that they hold. They see it in the Supreme Court, they see it in various policy decisions, his very strongly pro-Israel stance certainly resonates with fundamentalist Christians. So I think there are lots of ways in which that type of reasoning has played out in this presidency.

Over here there's a gentleman with a question. There's a microphone coming up from behind you.

QUESTIONER: Hi. My name is Jack Krupanski, unaffiliated, but I did some

writing in this area online.

My question is the media, what is their role? Have they made things a lot worse, a lot better, or are they neutral? Just what are they?

MR. WEST: Okay. Now, I'm going to exclude Karen from (laughter) from my answer to this question, because she's done a great job. She's won major journalism awards, she's writing a great biography of Nancy Reagan, which is coming out next year, which I would recommend to all of you.

But the media in general is a big part of the problem for all the reasons that I mentioned earlier. The coverage is more than what I remember when I was growing up. I grew up in the Walter Cronkite, and so there were like three channels. And the channels tended not to be that different from one another in the way that they covered things. And of course today, in a world of narrowcasting and even microcasting -- you know, to be successful in the news media you have to have a niche. And so often times the niches reflect political niches that are out there. And so the coverage, which used to be more consistent between ABC, NBC, and CBS, now when you include Fox, MSNBC, and CNN, there are much greater differences in terms of what they emphasize, who they present arguments and so on.

So if we want to deal with polarization, we do have to worry about the media angle, and we have to think about are there ways that we can encourage the news media to do a better job of covering the issues. I think the 2020 election is going to be a real test. The mainstream media loved to elevate punditry over analysis of public policy, but yet the policy stakes in the 2020 election are really high. Like we all are going to need help to navigate the issue differences across the candidates.

MS. TUMULTY: If I can just pushback on that a bit, though, because the internet giveth and the internet taketh. But it does give us an opportunity to really go in depth on policy questions, and also to explore them and present them. Data journalism is just a bursting field. You can present things video. I would argue that we are doing that and



that's not the stuff people read. We can measure what it is that people are clicking on, that people are sharing.

I was on a panel the other day with the Washington Bureau Chief for the *New York Times* and somebody said why aren't you covering the deficit, and she said it was the lead story of the newspaper just the other day. So I would argue there's actually better and more in depth coverage of the issues, and given to you on a platter however you want to consume it -- and again, we're not talking cable TV here, but it's there, it's just the appetite that people say they want to read is not there.

MR. WEST: Yeah. I mean certainly the data journalism I applaud. As someone who works in a think tank, like we try and be fact based in how we analyze the issues, but a lot of this is not coming through to the general public. So we just need to worry about that.

So question here on the aisle.

MR. ROTHBERG: My name is Lewis Rothberg. Can you speak a little bit about tribalism arising outside of the United States, particularly like say in Europe? And how, if it is similar to what is in the U.S. or how it's different from that which is in the U.S.?

MR. WEST: That's a great question because a lot of the things we're talking about here, both in terms of polarization and tribalism, are not unique to the United States. As you suggest, they're popping up in a lot of countries around the world and is certainly a major challenge in a number of European countries that have seen the emergence of populist politicians very similar to President Trump, in Hungary, in Poland, Italy is perhaps the most recent country to move in that direction.

So that does tell us this is not just an American phenomena, it's happening in many places around the world, which tells me that although there are some things in the United States that might be aggravating this, there are probably broader structural, economic, and cultural forces at play just associated with a world that's undergoing great change.

So a couple of years ago I wrote a book entitled "Megachange" and I argued that what is unusual about our current time period is just the rise of large scale transformation of a lot of different things taking place simultaneously. Domestic politics, geopolitical alignments around the world and changes in those alliances, climate change, and people's worries about the environment, technology change, which is kind of disrupting every sector. Change on a broad scale of that sort makes people nervous, it makes them anxious, and it becomes easier when people are feeling anxious, whether it's the United States, Italy, or any other country, for politicians to come along and play on those fears and play on the anger that comes out of that.

So I think the fact that this is happening way beyond the United States means this is a global issue and it's something we have to keep a close eye on.

Right next to him. There's a microphone coming up for you.

QUESTIONER: How would you address the fact that instead of discussing issues, when somebody disagrees with you you're automatically a racist, you're an Islamophobe? There's no acceptance of the other person's position. So instead of arguing the issue, you're called names and people back off because they don't want to be called names.

MR. WEST: I think this is a big problem today. I actually talk about this a little bit in my last chapter, that today we tend to view opponents as enemies, we tend to view them as bad people, we question their motives. And when you're questioning motives and labeling adversaries as bad people, you cannot have civil discussions or compromise, bargaining, and negotiation. And so one of the radical ideas I present at the very end of my book is an idea that I call "take a liberal or a conservative to lunch". (Laughter) Meaning that if you're a liberal, find a conservative and go to lunch with that person and try and understand the perspective of that individual. Even though you're going to disagree, there's a chance that lunch may fail, that you may not gain an appreciation of somebody else's point of view, but we've kind of lost that tendency.

There's been public opinion data showing that most people's friends come from their same point of view. Like we're all associated with like-minded people. And this then kind of reinforces a lack of understanding about people who have other points of view. It's easy to then characterize an opponent in a very negative way. And if we don't figure out some way to get beyond that, the thing could get a lot worse and really spiral out of control.

Right here in the front row.

QUESTIONER: Yeah, following on that point -- my name is David Sachs -- what would you say about the large number of small admittedly organizations that are trying to organize just that, dialogues and conversations across the political divide?

I was just a Better Angels workshop in Arlington on Saturday that had seven reds and seven blues be very civil to one another for an entire day and talk about love at the end of the day. And specifically for Brookings, would you consider pairing with a conservative think tank to hold such conversations?

MR. WEST: Boy, you're really getting down to the nitty gritty now.

(Laughter) But there's an easy answer to that last question, which is yes, because we actually do partner with other organizations that may have other points of view. So, for example, right now we are working with the Cato Institute on some issue forums where we bring together liberals, moderates, conservatives, libertarians, whatever, to have a discussion of the issues. So we very much applaud organizations, such as Better Angels, that are trying to bring people together. I applaud interfaith organizations that are trying to bridge religious differences that exist in our country. I think we need to do a much better job on bridging economic differences, because we're kind of segregating into different classes. You know, there are gated communities and rich people are able to send their kids to elite private schools. There are all sorts of ways in which we're creating these divisions among ourselves, socially, economically, and politically, and then we worry about the polarization that comes out of that.

So anything that Brookings can do, or other organizations, I applaud those

efforts because this is not going to be a top down problem that gets solved. It's going to require all of us, on a one to one basis, organizations working hard to really address this.

Right here.

QUESTIONER: You described a lot of the problems with our society. I want to ask you a question about focusing on the biggest one, which is the economic and the inequality across the population. I mean that is persistent and growing. The thing about these polarization divides in elections and what will happen in the next election, I mean within just a few ten thousands of people to decide at the last election, and probably unless democrats self-destruct, like they did in '72, it will be the same in 2020. But the big persistent one is inequality, and this is not new.

Historically we've had technological revolutions, industrial revolution and all, but the answer there was as things changed people in the long run economically improved over a broad spectrum. When the farms disappeared from 30 percent in the '20s to 3 percent now, or less, there were other jobs that were even better. And as we go to globalization and technology there doesn't appear to be other jobs that are better. Unemployment is down, but it's probably in the service sector that is not paying as well.

And it seems to me what the think tanks have to address is where are -- how are you going to address this inequality? It's probably not going to be just tax policy. Already the majority of our personal income tax comes from the rich as far as gross dollars.

And so where is that discussion going? Where are the better jobs, so to speak? I mean the politicians talk about it, but I don't see any real economic plan for it.

MR. WEST: I mean I do think income inequality is a problem -- and, Karen, if you want to jump in in a moment as well. I'm particularly attuned to this because I very much came from a working-class background having grown up on a dairy farm in a rural area, but yet I was able to get a good education at a fairly modest price, I was able to buy a home in the early 1980s, which then helped me accumulate wealth. So there are all sorts of things that allowed me to do well that has been much more difficult for my nieces and

nephews, for people of the current generation, the millennials. Like everything is harder for them. Home ownership is harder, getting a good education at an inexpensive price is much harder, finding the first job, just because of changes in business models. So there's just a lot of things going on.

A few years ago I wrote a book called "Billionaires" and I actually compiled data on income inequality. And so if you look at the last 100 years of income that the top 1 percent has garnered in America -- like if you go back to the 1920s, the top 1 percent got about 20 percent of the income and it stayed pretty high. But then after World War II, through tax policy, help on education, new investments in education, investments in infrastructure, we actually lowered income inequality such that by 1976 this was the low point of income inequality in America. The top 1 percent had only 8 percent of the national income. And of course, since then, it's gone back up and now the top 1 percent get over 20 percent of the income.

And what I hadn't realized until I saw those charts, was I graduated from college in 1976 -- I graduated at the most opportune time from an economic standpoint. Economic opportunity was greatest in the 1976 than at any point before that time or certainly any point thereafter. So I had always thought that I had done well because I worked hard and took advantage of opportunities, and then I realized, you know, that was not the case. (Laughter) That I happened to have the good fortune to graduate at a time where you get a good education at an inexpensive price.

MS. TUMULTY: You know, until sort of our politics became what it became -- just even as recently as 2015, 2014, there was a lot of talk about a movement called reformed conservatism. And a big part of the emphasis -- and it was thinkers like Yuval Levin who would talk about fourth quartile of income, you know, people who make between 20 percent and 40 percent of the typical household income in this country. And it does seem like they were the -- you know, there aren't social safety net programs for them, the educational system doesn't seem like it's really geared to their needs and finding them good

-- I mean if you're at 60 or 70 percent the chances are you probably can find a college, but just the kind of training. And I do think there are just whole segments of our population that are feeling sort of left out of smart thinking. And that also gave rise to a lot of what we've seen in our politics.

MR. WEST: And as digital technology comes in and disrupts more and more sectors -- we're doing a lot of work on that at Brookings now -- that problem could become a lot more intense. So I do expect Trumpism to outlast Trump. But even if Trump happens to lose in 2020, Trumpism is still going to be out there, meaning people who feel left behind, who feel anxious about a variety of different changes taking place in America -- technology is probably going to make a lot of those issues worse. Like Trump defined the economic problem as lost manufacturing jobs and bad trade deals. It's actually a lot bigger and deeper than that, and as technology disrupts industries we're going to see probably even more anxiety over the next 20 years.

Right here.

QUESTIONER: So which of the problems you've talked about would you and your sisters agree on? Not the solution, but the problem? Is there agreement on what the problem is that the country faces that might provide a basis on which to have a conversation?

MR. WEST: Loss of economic opportunity. I mean that is where I and my family and many of my high school friends I think would be in agreement because -- and especially it's true in rural America, but it's true in many Midwestern states as well, it's just people today do not have the opportunities that I had 30 and 40 years ago. Now, we all have different remedies on how to solve that problem, but I think that is a bedrock source of agreement. And if I were advising either Trump or democrats in 2020, I would tell them like this is what you need to be focusing on. Like what are your remedies to improve economic opportunity in America? Like we have to have a more inclusive economy because if we don't polarization is going to get worse.

QUESTIONER: Back to the future with James Carville, right?

MR. WEST: It's still the economy, stupid I think in a lot of respects.

Right here on the aisle.

QUESTIONER: Could you tell me which of Trump's policies, trade policy, tax policy, economic opportunity policy, which of those address the needs of forgotten Americans? (Laughter) Because I'm at a loss to understand the disconnect between what he says and the people that are suffering in America.

MR. WEST: I mean I think this is where President Trump lost a major opportunity very early in his presidency. Like if he had actually listened to his own rhetoric on the campaign trail and delivered on them policy wise, through some of the meant that you're talking about, I think people actually would have been a lot more open to him than has turned out to be the case. Because I think Trump was exactly right in talking about the Americans who are being left behind. But we need policy solutions that actually address that. And I have not seen that from the administration to this point in terms of their economic policies, their tax policies, or other things that they have done. But, you know, that creates an opportunity for democrats to try and address that.

So I do think it actually might be a blessing for democrats that the Mueller report seems to have taken the collusion issue off the table, because they now may end up back on economic issues and bread and butter issues and issues of healthcare. Like those are the things ordinary Americans really care about.

MS. TUMULTY: I will give him one, criminal justice reform.

MR. WEST: Yeah. That's a good one, yeah.

In the very back row.

QUESTIONER: My name is Enjo Metshue and I'm a professor at a law school here in DC. First, I want to thank you both for the insightful and illuminating discussion.

My question is what do you say to people who look at the current political

situation in our country and argue that it was inevitable, that it was a part of a legacy of a politics of backlash, which is to say that whenever there is any semblance of racial progress, whether symbolic or otherwise, there is inevitably a pendulum swing in the other direction. So we look at civil war, post-civil war and the reconstruction amendments, and from there how Jim Crowe began to take root, and then we go all the way to the mid-20th century with the civil rights movement, and then we see the law and order rhetoric start to take form with Nixon and George Wallace, and then from there we begin to lay the groundwork for mass incarceration. Fast forward to 2008, the first black president is elected and then the election afterwards we see Make America Great Again really begin to flourish.

And so my question is just your thoughts on that.

Thank you.

MR. WEST: I think it's no accident that we got Donald Trump after Barack Obama, because I do believe the backlash argument is true. And, in fact, in the book, if you look at the last 40 years, we often choose the opposite type of whoever the president is. So kind of after Reagan and Bush we got Clinton, who was a different generation, different policies than what came before him. Then we got Bush, who was very different from Clinton, then we got Obama, who was very different from Bush, and then now Trump who is very different from Obama. And if you follow that theory through, we have to think, okay, what's the opposite type of Donald Trump, because that's probably -- assuming Trump doesn't get reelected for a good economy, you know, that would be the next stage of that. And the opposite type could be a nicer politician. So there are some democrats out there running on -- like, you know, Corey Booker saying we need to come together and restore civility. The opposite type also could be a progressive populist, somebody who takes Trump's populist rhetoric but applies it through progressive remedies.

So I do think there is some truth to that backlash argument.

I think we have time for just one more question. There's a gentleman in the front row.



QUESTIONER: Thank you very much. My name is (inaudible). Okay. My question is about digital technology to get the direct democracy. Let's create a new direct democracy technology, give everybody a chance to make decisions directly from their computer or devices in a safe way, like biometric face recognition, and everything else.

In this new direct democratic world do you think this polarization we are talking about, is it going to be better or what kind of solution can you imagine?

Thank you.

MR. WEST: I mean I would like to think that technology, which has created a number of problems for us today, could eventually become part of the solution, and technology does provide a means to empower ordinary people, involve them in decision making, but in areas where we've had direct democracy so far, like referenda in California, it's easy for money to corrupt direct democracy and technology -- there's no guarantee that technology will kind of usher in this utopia of direct democracy that allows ordinary people to make decisions for themselves.

So I think right now we are a long way from that type of scenario, but we'll see how things unfold.

Karen, I want to thank you very much for moderating this.

MS. TUMULTY: I want to thank you. This was terrific.

MR. WEST: Thank you. (Applause)

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