



After the Fact | How Civil Discourse Can Help the U.S. Find Common Ground

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TRANSCRIPT

Benny Martinez, host, “After the Fact” podcast: Welcome to “After the Fact.” For The Pew Charitable Trusts, I’m Benny Martinez. You’ve already heard from my fellow co-hosts, Giuliana Pence and Gabi Domenzain. While I’m the third wheel, and while I’m new to the pod, I know the job is still the same. We hope to keep the rigor, keep the curiosity, but make things a bit more human, a bit more conversational, maybe even a little lighter when the topic allows. And if we do this right, you’ll walk away informed and entertained.

All right, let’s get into it. This year, America is celebrating its semiquincentennial. Don’t worry, I checked: That means America is turning 250 years young. And since the signing of the Declaration of Independence, our nation’s made incredible progress in ways our Founding Fathers couldn’t have imagined, from the Civil Rights Movement to establishing the national parks to assisting in a worldwide effort to sequence the human genome. Prince!

And as we mark this milestone, Americans are also confronting a troubling perception about the state of our democracy. Data from the Pew Research Center shows that 8 in 10 U.S. adults say Republican and Democratic voters don’t just disagree on policies, they can’t even agree on basic facts.

But even during a time of deep polarization, some policymakers are working to reach across the aisle to get things done. Today, we’re rebroadcasting the “America at 250” forum, a conversation put together by Pew and Disagree Better, a nonpartisan nonprofit that promotes civil discourse.

Let’s listen in to the conversation NPR’s Steve Inskeep had with Governors Spencer Cox, Wes Moore, and Kevin Stitt about public trust and where we might still find some common ground.



Susan K. Urahn, president and CEO, The Pew Charitable Trusts: I am Sue Urahn, the president and CEO of The Pew Charitable Trusts. I am so delighted to welcome you all today. This year marks America's 250th anniversary, and Pew is observing this with a focus on democracy.

Now, if we look back, it's very clear that the founders of this country disagreed about many, many things, but they listened to each other and they found a way to work together. They modeled a key aspect of our democratic form of government, and that's the ability to disagree while demonstrating respect, building trust, and getting things done.

That's something we value here at Pew, and so does the team at Disagree Better, which is our co-host for today's forum. We are very pleased to welcome three political leaders with very different opinions, and despite those different opinions, they've figured out how to have productive conversations with others.

Utah Governor Spencer Cox, founder and honorary chair of the Disagree Better Initiative; Maryland Governor Wes Moore, the honorary chair of Disagree Better and vice chair of the National Governors Association; and Oklahoma Governor Kevin Stitt, the chair of the National Governors Association. These three leaders are going to tell us how they work to bridge policy divides in each of their states and share some of the lessons they've learned about working through differences in a civil and productive way.

And they're going to be joined by Steve Inskeep, journalist and host of NPR's "Morning Edition," who's going to facilitate the conversation. I want to thank our co-hosts at Disagree Better, Executive Director Marianne Viray and her team. This is an organization that invites all Americans to share their beliefs; listen to their neighbors, colleagues, and family members; and choose to practice democracy by engaging instead of retreating.

So, with that, I'm going to turn it over to Steve Inskeep to kick us off for a fabulous discussion.

Steve Inskeep, co-host, "Morning Edition": Well, good afternoon. It's really an honor to be here. It's really an honor to be with the governors. Time is a little short. There's a lot to discuss, so I want to dive right in with a burning question for each of you.

Would you all like to go to dinner together this weekend?

Question was on my mind because of recent news having to do with the NGA and the president, and it's an awkward topic, I suppose, but we're here to figure out how to



discuss those things. And maybe you can just begin, Governor Stitt, what are you doing now with the president? Who will do what, where, and when?

Kevin Stitt, governor of Oklahoma: Well, first off, thanks so much for having me. It's such an honor to be here with everybody. So I want to back up real quick. The NGA—what is the NGA? The National Governors Association was started in 1908 by Teddy Roosevelt when he was president of the United States. He was governor of New York, and he knew the importance of a state perspective.

I tell all of our secretaries in Oklahoma that no matter if it's Biden in the White House or Trump in the White House, we have to have a good relationship with our federal partners because about 40% of our dollars come from the federal government. The fact that I get a chance to lead this great organization, and as a red state Republican governor to be able to meet and hang out and know Wes Moore as a person and know how much we like each other and how much we agree on things, I think America loves to see that. And the things we disagree on, we can have honest conversations about.

And so, you know, the NGA is bigger than one meeting, it's bigger than one dinner at the White House. Everybody saw what happened and basically, you know, I just said, "Hey, if it's not going to include all governors, then it can't be called the National Governors Association. We're the wrong facilitator of that event."

The NGA stands together with all governors and so we're not going to facilitate something that doesn't include everybody.

Steve Inskeep: OK. So there's a meeting that includes everybody and a dinner that's off to the side somewhere. Is that how I understand?

Kevin Stitt: There's a White House dinner.

Steve Inskeep: Got it.

Kevin Stitt: And the president can invite whoever he wants. It's just not an NGA dinner.

Steve Inskeep: Understood. Governor Moore, you have the floor.

Wes Moore, governor of Maryland: One thing that I learned in the military—I joined the Army when I was 17 years old—was that you never learn anything about anybody in times of ease. That in easy times, anybody can show you anything. But if you really want to learn something about somebody, watch them when it was hard. And I just have a deep amount of respect for Kevin because I've watched him lead when it's hard.



This has been a really unfortunate turn of circumstances because we've gone decades in this country where it didn't matter who the president was and it didn't matter who the governor was, that you're all invited.

We've seen how there is—just among many other traditions that we are now seeing broken with this administration, this is now another one. But the thing I really love about this organization and its members is that in times of chaos, what we've seen from the NGA is calm. That in times of confusion, what we've seen from the NGA is collaboration.

I did not run for governor because I'm interested in being a partisan warrior. I ran for governor because I wanted to get things done for the people of my state, who I love. And that's been the message that we've seen from the NGA.

I'd second everything that Kevin just said, that this is going to be a very productive three days for the governors. We're going to debate hard ideas. We're going to coordinate. We're going to find places where we're seeing best practices all across the country. We're going to model them and adapt them and steal them and bring them for our states. And there is no person, nor one office, nor one administration that is going to disrupt that because governors are just built different, and we're going to make sure we're OK and we're going to take care of our people.

Steve Inskip: Governor Cox, you've just, in the last few minutes, arrived from Utah.

Spencer Cox, governor of Utah: I don't even know what I'm doing up here. I'm underdressed, late. I just got off a plane. My plane was delayed. We actually have snow in Utah finally, so we're excited about that. But these guys are the stars. I'm just tagging along.

Steve Inskip: But you've gone from that kind of storm in Utah to a different sort of storm.

Spencer Cox: I have indeed.

Steve Inskip: What are you thinking about this?

Spencer Cox: Well, I'll just echo everything that my very dear friend said—and I'm an institutionalist. I believe in the importance of these institutions that have been around for a long time.



Some of you are familiar with Chesterton, his story of the fence. Two people come down a road, they have this property and there's a fence there. And one person says, "We should tear this fence down. It's blocking the road." And the other person says, "Well, maybe we should find out why that fence is there first."

There's a lot of tearing fences down in our country, these institutions that have been torn down and discarded. And so again, look, whatever happens this weekend, this institution is bigger than the three of us. It's bigger than any one person, and our job is to make sure that it outlives us and that the next generation gets these institutions.

Steve Inskip: I reflected on whether even to bring up this topic this afternoon.

Spencer Cox: How long did you reflect?

Steve Inskip: Just for a minute. Just for a minute. And then I thought, no, I should bring it up because it strikes me as extremely relevant to what you're doing and what you want to talk about. So, can you talk to me about the importance of gestures, face-to-face communication, and just dealing with people on a human level when you profoundly disagree?

Governor Moore, you're nodding, so go for it.

Wes Moore: Absolutely. I think that what this country needs most right now is we need to get to know each other again. People are just way too comfortable being in their silos, in their buckets, and on their sides. I think that the military, for me, was very, very helpful where I got a chance to meet people from all over the country, from a variety of different backgrounds. And for many of the people who I was serving with, I was, you know, the first Black guy from Maryland who they ever had a chance to meet.

And that was good that we then had a chance to get to know each other. It's part of the reason that I'm a big believer in this idea of why service matters so much, that we made Maryland the first state in the country that now has a service year option for all of our high school graduates, because I want our young people to get to know each other again.

Steve Inskip: Governor Stitt, I want to follow up on something that Governor Moore put on the table. He talked about the fact that we're not facing each other, we're not seeing each other. Why do you think that is? And what do you want to do about it?



Kevin Stitt: The reason we do these types of events is because we think it's important that everybody sees us getting along, us meeting each other, and us talking about these issues.

I did a TED Talk with Matt Meyer, the governor of Delaware, and I said on there, there's people watching this that hate me because I have an R by my name, and there's people that hate him because he has a D by his name. But really, like what Governor Moore said, when you actually meet someone, you break bread with them, you get to know their families, you know that they care about Maryland, they care about their states, they care about these issues. We care about the freedoms—we're Americans first. And I just think that's so, so important. We go to something called "baby governor school," OK, when we're first elected.

Steve Inskip: They also have basic training there.

Kevin Stitt: They do, yes. And we literally share best practices. I come from the business world, so I'd never run for office before. When I took over, we had no money in savings. We had teacher walkouts, billion-dollar budget deficits, and so I got an idea from Governor Haslam in Tennessee. He had a COO, a chief operating officer, and he ran his state like a business. And so that really resonated with me. I would have never gotten that without the National Governors Association.

The Connecticut governor, he connected with me and wanted to know how come Oklahoma has cheaper electricity costs than we do in Connecticut. And so then we get a chance to talk about natural gas and pipelines. We understand the need for a reliable, affordable grid. And so by making those connections with the Northeast governors, now we're seeing some broad agreement on permitting reform. So those are all relationships that we build through this organization that I think people don't see behind the scenes.

Steve Inskip: Governor Cox, you said something about tearing fences down, which is a metaphor that I'm going to remember. I appreciate that. Tell me about a fence—by which, I assume you mean an institution in America that people are pulling down—that you wish they wouldn't.

Spencer Cox: Oh, wow. All of them. I mean that sincerely.

When Alexis de Tocqueville came here in 1830, he saw something very unique here. He saw that we cared about each other and we built these institutions to solve our problems. Unlike what he saw in France, government wasn't solving all of the problems. We formed these associations to do so many of those things.



And these were community-based associations. A lot of them were religious for sure, but there were other organizations as well, other institutions where people came together, formed bonds to give back and hold each other accountable and make us better people. We're lonelier than we've ever been and so I always worry if we don't have healthy tribes—these institutions that we've lost because we thought maybe we didn't need them today—what kind of tribes do we have?

And we're forming the wrong tribes, right? Social media, the performative piece of governing—that's not helpful or healthy to any of us. And so those are the things that I worry about for the sake of our country. We have to get back to building those again.

And that happens at the community level. Where we make the biggest difference is in our neighborhoods. It's getting to know that neighbor, seeing who's struggling. It's serving. This service stuff that Wes is doing is so important. If I could change one thing in our country right now, it would be to have national mandatory service. The countries where they do this, it makes a difference. I know we have some friends in the audience that are working on this. We're following Wes' lead—again, this is the beauty of the National Governors Association. We steal each other's ideas.

Utah leads the nation in service. We're proud of that. And somehow Wes beat us to a gap-year service, and so we're playing catch up—Governor Moore, I should be more respectful.

But again, if you tell kids, "Don't change the world, change your neighborhood. Go serve and give back." The irony of all of that is that that's actually how you do change the world. And that's the only way we're going to change this country, is rebuilding those local institutions where we get to know each other personally. We get off social media, we get away from cable news, and we change the world closest to us.

Steve Inskeep: You mentioned social media, which makes me think about incentives—the incentives with which people participate in society and in politics. And it would be very easy to make an argument that the incentives are all wrong. The incentives are wrong on social media. The incentives are wrong for political activity. The incentives are wrong at that connection between politics and media. The money goes away from everything that you would like to encourage, it seems to me.

What do you want to do about that? Any of you. How would you change the incentives? What is within your power to change the incentives?

Wes Moore: When I look at people as to why they've chosen a life of service, there is no doubt that Governor Stitt and Governor Cox—this is a sacrifice for them, right? They



both had to give up very successful opportunities to do this work. Public service is not selfish, at least it shouldn't be. It's selfless. People should not want to enter into this world because you are looking to build a financial legacy for your family. That's not why good people do this.

They do this because they do want to leave their world, their ecosystem, just a little bit better than what they had received. You don't want to have it where people who choose the world of service need to take a vow of poverty. Nor do you want to have it to where you're not democratizing it because only certain people can do it.

But I do think there is something about making sure that people understand that public service, even if it's not an occupation, it needs to be a way of life. It needs to be the way you think about the world.

Steve Inskeep: Governor Stitt, what are you thinking about? I mean, you must feel the pull of people that maybe have motives that you wouldn't find to be the absolute highest from time to time.

Kevin Stitt: Our Founding Fathers never thought politics was going to be like a profession, climb the ladder. They thought it would be service and it would be a sacrifice. And so I think why a lot of people hate politicians is because they can just see right through them.

They see they're trying to benefit themselves, or they're trying to benefit their friends, or they're trying to get rich. And we have to elect people of integrity. And I always say it this way: The money is always on the yes side. And what I mean by that is the legislators never come up with these bills.

This industry comes to them and hires a lobbyist and says, "Here, write this." And then, "Go introduce this." Well, I always tell people, the taxpayers don't get together and go hire a lobbyist to say, "Vote no." And so I look at my job as always thinking about the taxpayer. I believe in limited government, lower taxes.

We need to believe in this free market. And if you take risks and if you build something of value, you should be rewarded for it. There's no such thing as equal outcomes. We want opportunities for the next generation—that's called the American Dream. Eighty-one percent of the people in the country believe that we live in the greatest country in the world. And this is the greatest form of government that's ever been created.

And at the same time, 72% of the people are saying that we're as divided as we've ever been. It's guys like Wes Moore and Governor Cox that can lead us and can talk about



these things and can bring us together. Because truly, when the governors sit down, we care about education. We care about infrastructure. We care about our economies. We care about health care.

Let me and Governors Moore and Cox, and we'll get this thing fixed in about a day and a half.

Wes Moore: Yeah, that's right.

Steve Inskip: Can I just briefly, before I move on, you said you're in favor of equal opportunity, not equal outcomes, which some people would cast as a dividing line between the parties.

Governor Moore, you nodded when he said that. You would phrase it about the same, it sounds to me.

Wes Moore: Because I think he's right. I don't think that everyone should end up in the same spot, but I do think everyone deserves a fair shot. If you ask a group of people, and you say, "What are your hopes and your dreams and your aspirations?" I can guarantee if you asked 50 people that question, you might get 55 answers. Right? And that's OK. I actually think that's one of the beautiful things about this country, that this country is the greatest experiment in world history.

Steve Inskip: We found out in recent years that the president was mainly restrained by norms. You might keep office holders in office, even if they weren't your party. You might continue policies that you didn't like because a previous Congress passed them, and it's the law. You might continue a policy just because it's good continuity and people are depending on it. You might not prosecute your political opponents.

And when we think about a better society and disagreeing better, how important do you think restraint is in governing—not going all the way that you conceivably could go? I'll let you start, Governor Stitt.

Kevin Stitt: It's a very important question, and I think that's why our Founding Fathers believed in federalism, right? And if it wasn't specifically given to the federal government, it belongs to the states or the people, is what our Constitution says.

And I've heard Governor Cox say this very well, that the reason everybody's so frustrated is because Oklahoma doesn't want to be California, right? California doesn't want to be Oklahoma. Minnesota doesn't want to be Texas. And so that's OK. We understand that.



Our Founding Fathers knew that South Carolina was different than New York. They understood the fact that we need the power at the state level, and it's this idea of 50 laboratories of democracy where we can compete with one another. When we have this powerful of a federal government, it should be frightening for everyone.

Steve Inskeep: I'll go right across—Governor Moore.

Wes Moore: I think that's absolutely right, and I think the other piece is, too, is it is why checks and balances matter so much. I am not the boss of my legislature, nor are they my boss. The job of the judiciary is not to make laws. Their job is to interpret and then enforce.

I think there's a reason that the Founding Fathers actually built the system as is. Is it at times frustrating? Oh yeah. I'm in some frustrating moments right now, and it's one of the things that makes our system so durable. And so I think that we should not have to rely on individual restraint. We should not have to rely on a person's strength being their own morality. That's why we actually have systems that should be supported, that should be protected, and should also be respected.

Steve Inskeep: Do we in the public maybe not get that as well as you would like? The public maybe doesn't understand that you can't accomplish everything that they would like you to just because you got elected?

Wes Moore: Oh, absolutely. I mean, I can't tell you the number of times my mom wants to call me about trash pickup. I'm like, "Mom, Mom, I don't do trash pickup, Mom." I mean, people feel a way because they expect for you to be able to do everything and address everything. That's where people have to understand: This is why partnerships actually do matter because individually we are restrained, but if you choose to move in partnership with the other elements, then there really is nothing that you won't be able to get done and accomplish.

Steve Inskeep: Governor Cox?

Spencer Cox: Well, I've loved having this civic education here because this is the stuff, guys, and this is what we're celebrating 250 years of, and Americans don't understand this like they should. But the founders totally saw this, you guys. They saw today, they knew exactly that this was going to happen and that we would have presidents who would try to act like kings. It is frustrating if you've run a business—I would wake up with a good idea, and by noon that good idea was implemented. I wake up with good ideas now, and if I'm lucky, like two years from now, some version of my idea may or may not get through, right?



We had a king and we decided we didn't like that and the founders understood that we are flawed. And that power corrupts absolutely. So they divided power every which way they could. They divided it between the federal government and the states. And they gave most of the power to the states because they knew that the only way a deeply pluralistic and divided different group of states—colonies at the time—would be able to survive is if we didn't force a one-size-fits-all government onto them.

But here's the flaw, if I can say—and it's not their flaw. They believed that everyone would be selfish and they decided we don't want a strong president. We're going to give the power to Congress because it's going to be really hard to get stuff done there.

But what they didn't anticipate was that we would have one branch of government that did not jealously guard their power, that willingly just gave it away and it's completely dysfunctional. They did not foresee that piece of today. So what has happened? Well, the presidents say if Congress isn't going to act, people need something done, so I'm going to do what I want to do. And that's bad because every four years, it means that if you elect Kamala Harris, the country's going to be just like California. And if Donald Trump wins, the whole country's going to be just like Florida. It was not supposed to be that way. So what happens? The other institutions are holding.

I sued President Biden 63 times because he was just doing stuff that he did not have the authority to do, and we won the vast majority of those cases. Wes Moore has probably sued Donald Trump 63 times at least. And if you look, they're winning most of those cases because presidents aren't supposed to do this stuff. But in the meantime, in the meantime, it is up to the states to hold the line.

Steve Inskeep: We've gone way, way over, but I'm going to give you two governors, if you want a last word, go for it.

Kevin Stitt: It's an honor to serve your state as governor. I'm seven years in, and it's the honor of your life to be a fourth-generation Oklahoman. And I think about my granddad who had an eighth-grade education, and now his son is governor. Only in America can we do this. And the fact that right now, because we are so polarized, if we can inspire and teach and share what we're seeing and what we're experiencing and the friendships we have across the aisle, I think that's healthy for America to see.

We appreciate Governor Cox's Disagree Better, and all the people that are pushing this idea that, hey, we can have disagreements. In business, I always want people around me arguing with me and pushing me because that's where the best ideas come from, right?



But there's bigger issues we need to focus on, and I think governors can lead the way.

Steve Inskip: The very last word goes to Governor Moore.

Wes Moore: Tonight's conversation is why I love being a governor, because we don't get bonus points for just railing against the system. Either you're producing for your people or you're not. That's our grade.

The last word I will say though is that I do know that for a lot of people, this is a very challenging and a very dark time. That's why initiatives like Disagree Better become so important. And I also know that's why knowing our history becomes so important. That just like the United States is going through its 250th year this year, so is the state of Maryland. We want our entire state to know all of our history, flaws and all, and there's a reason for it. It's because if you know your history, you have a context of the moment that we are in right now, and it doesn't feel as dark.

Our state is the home of Harriet Tubman and of Frederick Douglass. The Mason-Dixon line runs through the state of Maryland. The bloodiest battles of the Civil War were not fought in Alabama or Mississippi—they were fought in Maryland, and Antietam was the bloodiest battle of our Civil War. Yes, this is a challenging time, but I think about what a hypothetical conversation would be between me and General Harriet Tubman, about how difficult my day was. And I think about what her response would be when I tell her about how difficult we've got it.

There are two things that have gotten us through difficult times in our nation's history: it's been God's grace and moral leadership. And I think the hope and the prayer that we all have is that in this moment, that's exactly what's going to guide us through this time too, and that we'll be OK.

Benny Martinez: Thanks again for listening, and if you're interested in learning more about how to disagree better—see what I did there—be sure to listen back to our four-episode series "Beyond Polarization in American Politics" from November 2023. And of course, make sure you're subscribed to "After the Fact" wherever you get your podcasts. I'm Benny Martinez, and this is "After the Fact" from The Pew Charitable Trusts. Until next time.