



After the Fact | What's Next for America at 250?

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TRANSCRIPT

Gabriela Domenzain, host, "After the Fact" podcast: Welcome to "After the Fact." For The Pew Charitable Trusts, I'm Gabriela Domenzain.

So, we're here at TED Democracy Philadelphia: Founding Futures Conference.

Donna Frisby-Greenwood, senior vice president, The Pew Charitable Trusts: Our nation was founded with a group talking about how they wanted to form this more perfect union, and they were talking right down the street from where we are.

Sue Urahn, president and CEO, The Pew Charitable Trusts: To do this in Philadelphia: Where else could you possibly do it?

Gabriela Domenzain: Thinkers, civic leaders, volunteers, are all coming together to think about a central question: How can we recommit to the next 250 years of our democracy?

Gabriela Domenzain: This week, the United States is turning 250. As we gather across the nation to commemorate this milestone, there's an opportunity to reflect on the American experiment, and to recommit ourselves to it.

In 2026, political polarization is one of the greatest challenges to our democracy, with 65% of Americans saying they feel exhausted when thinking about politics because of the country's deep partisan divisions.

But these problems aren't new. Political differences have been part of this country since day one. In his 1796 farewell address, George Washington himself cautioned the nation against forming political parties for fear of polarization taking root.



But it's not all bad news. Even now, there is more common ground than our politics suggests. Two-thirds of Americans agree that democracy is the best form of government, despite its flaws.

We begin today's episode with Pew CEO Sue Urahn to talk about what this anniversary means and how we can work to strengthen our democracy for the next 250 years.

Gabriela Domenzain: Thank you for being with us, Sue.

Sue Urahn: Oh, happy to.

Gabriela Domenzain: You were just at TED Democracy: Founding Futures.

Sue Urahn: Yeah.

Gabriela Domenzain: What stood out to you about that day?

Sue Urahn: The energy in the Kimmel Center was terrific. I think everybody was really excited. And for Pew to be able to partner with TED Democracy to elevate a whole series of conversations and to really allow hundreds of people to come together to listen to ideas and debate them is a good day.

Gabriela Domenzain: At the conference, you had a conversation with Cyndi Stivers, the curator of TED, about how unity doesn't have to equal agreement. What resonated most with you from that conversation?

Sue Urahn: We talked a lot about how the work that we do across all of our program areas in part is designed certainly to achieve certain objectives, but also to really demonstrate to the public that government can work and can work well in service of things that are important to the public.

Gabriela Domenzain: The United States is obviously celebrating its 250th. What about this time do you think makes it stand out from our history?

Sue Urahn: I will start with the staff here at Pew. We are based in Philadelphia, but we have a big office in Washington, D.C., and the staff are concerned, and I think it reflects a lot of what we are feeling in the country, where people are, in many cases, feeling the partisan divides very deeply.



They are worried about the future of the country. They are worried about the future of democracy. They are worried about different things, depending on where they sit on the political spectrum. But I think everybody's feeling that we are a little bit at an inflection point, and we need to reflect and think hard about where we are as a country and what we want going into the future.

Gabriela Domenzain: The term "polarization" is everywhere, right? And one of the things that I think a lot of us have done to combat polarization is to focus on what unites us.

Sue Urahn: People are never gonna agree on everything, and democracy itself, if you go back 250 years, was founded by a group of people who argued several things into the ground. They knew where they wanted to get but they disagreed vehemently on how to get there, and I think that's healthy. That's a feature, not a bug. Democracy as a system is designed to be better when we hammer out our differences via debate and productive disagreement.

So, I think the goal of trying to make partisanship less painful for people is not to stifle disagreement. That just buries it under the surface and doesn't deal with it. It's to surface it, but deal with it in a productive way, to really be able to articulate what you care about, why you care about it, and to look at the person with whom you are disagreeing, not as an enemy, but as someone who simply has a different opinion.

And you need to figure out how you can, if not find common ground, at least figure out a path forward, a series of compromises that will get you from where you are to where you need to be.

Gabriela Domenzain: And one of the things that I've heard you talk about before is we don't have a shared sense of facts.

Sue Urahn: One of the things that Pew takes very seriously is the research that we do in everything from the Pew Research Center to all of our several projects focused on policy change, is gathering enough data and evidence and information and facts to begin to create a common language almost.

So, if you're debating healthcare, if you're debating state budgets, no matter what it is you're debating, if you can begin with a series of facts that everybody can agree on, then you can begin to debate about where to go. But if you can't even agree on the



basic facts that describe the situation, then it's going to be very difficult to figure out how to take productive steps toward any kind of change.

Gabriela Domenzain: Is there one specific issue or piece of policy where you've seen people with very different perspectives come together to address a problem?

Sue Urahn: If I look at the work we did in sentencing and corrections, I think that was a really interesting example of people who had very different opinions. There was a group of people who sort of felt, lock 'em up. Somebody who does something wrong, and they are put in prison, great. Throw away the key; we don't care.

And then there is a group of people who are like, "No, you can't lock people up. It's cruel and unusual punishment. You should never do that." And there was the tough-on-crime, soft-on-crime debate that went on for years, and I think we were able to stimulate a different conversation by getting people to talk about: What is it costing to society, what is it costing to the state budgets when you lock people up for a very long time, and how well does it work?

And once we were able to reframe the conversation in that way, people were able to come to a very different place for different reasons. We had evangelical groups who cared a lot about things like redemption, right? They wanted to give people a second chance. You had people who only cared about budget numbers. You had people who really wanted to get effective government. All those people could agree on a different way of doing business for their own reasons. But they got there.

Gabriela Domenzain: And it takes active listening, too, right?

Sue Urahn: It absolutely does, and a willingness to listen to somebody with whom you disagree. I think that's the hardest thing I see these days is people don't wanna talk to people that they think have positions that they don't agree with. If you do that, you're never gonna make progress.

Gabriela Domenzain: This is a philosophical time, right? Birthdays, I think for everybody are philosophical times, but especially a 250th one. What gives you hope, Sue?

Sue Urahn: Oh. The people that I work with every day give me hope. And I think no matter where you live, what you do, I run into people who just care deeply about the



country, who care deeply about their colleagues, their friends, their neighbors, their family.

I see young people in my own family and in my neighborhood who are out doing things that are just mind-blowingly cool, right? Kids going to protests, holding up signs because they care about issues, right? All of that gives me hope

TED Speaker 1: I just came off the TED stage. Off the main stage.

TED Speaker 2: Being on the stage was just surreal.

TED Speaker 3: The bar is high, and you have to have all your thoughts organized.

Gabriela Domenzain: You're hearing from the speakers at the TED Democracy: Founding Futures event in June. We caught up with them moments after they left the stage to ask what big ideas they hoped would stick with the audience.

Gabriela Domenzain: Tell us what you were talking about.

TED Speaker 2: I got to speak a little bit about media literacy and democracy. Eighty-six percent of Gen Z is turning to TikTok to get their news.

It's really important that we make sure they can make informed decisions.

TED Speaker 1: I was talking about the civic and social impact of public libraries.

TED Speaker 3: One word I used in my talk was determination. There are plenty of periods where, ultimately, people were determined to not let it come apart.

TED Speaker 2: As we struggle through a lot of the division in our country today, I just feel like we need to reset the stage and be able to have disagreement. What gives me hope are sessions like these and when I speak across the country, people are starving for this.

Gabriela Domenzain: Our next guest, author Scott Shigeoka, emceed the TED event. And he believes he has found one solution to polarization: curiosity.



That idea is what inspired his recent road trip across the United States to see what curiosity actually looks like in practice. Along the way, he documented the stories of people who were willing to look beyond their assumptions to find common ground in unexpected places.

I wanna start very at the beginning. I wanna understand how somebody becomes a curiosity expert.

Scott Shigeoka, curiosity expert, speaker, and author: Yeah. Fun title, right? What is this, yeah? What is that?

Gabriela Domenzain: Where did you grow up? How did, were you always ... just tell me about yourself.

Scott Shigeoka: I grew up in Hawaii. I was born and raised there, and my curiosity really starts with my family. I was that little kid that was seeing my mom and my dad, and most of my family really, my sister included, just moving through the world by always asking people around us questions, we would always have to plan 20 to 30 extra minutes into any commute, because they're gonna talk story to someone.

And I didn't really understand it or value it until I got older, and I realized, wow, I got to, as a child, see this way of moving through the world modeled to me of generosity of spirit, and genuinely wanting to get to know the person that's in front of you, not for any reason or purpose other than to connect—so my curiosity roots start there in Hawaii. And then it really transformed when I started working at UC Berkeley's Greater Good Science Center, which is a research center that translates and popularizes the research and turns it into an accessible format.

And we also do work around bridging differences. So how do we, in this moment of division and effective polarization, come together and find common ground, shared values, and really work across these differences? And so I've spent the greater part of the last 10 years really focusing on curiosity, this desire to know and understand.

Gabriela Domenzain: So to recap: You were at Berkeley, and you decide to focus on translating complicated things, like disagreement, into actionable ways for people to deal with them. What inspired that?



Scott Shigeoka: Yeah. That happened quite later in my career, and I felt such immense divisions, that our family was feeling a lot of fracturing. I would talk to other folks in my community. I was not alone in that.

Many people struggled because they didn't wanna see a certain family member who they disagreed with. We weren't talking to one another, and we are living in a time where we create stories about people who are different from us, and we don't meet them with curiosity. And it creates this separation, and I didn't know what to do.

The problem felt so big at the time, I was wanting to understand, is it bad to cancel people out of my life? What happens when I'm being curious about others but I don't feel like that's coming back towards me? I realized, wow, I'm doing all this work around translating the research, but am I actually practicing it?

And so I spent a year going across the country, living in the rural South and rural Appalachia, and that was the core thesis of my book, "Seek," which is about how do we actually practice curiosity. What does that look like in our day-to-day experiences, and what does that mean for our lives?

Gabriela Domenzain: So you did this road trip and then now you're also in the middle or at the very end of another road trip across this country. Talk to me about why road trip?

Scott Shigeoka: That first road trip was in 2019. And then this road trip, which I'm literally on right now, it's called the Curiosity Mobile. I'm driving a big, giant purple van with "curiosity" on it. It's a six-month journey across the country. Everyone always asks me when they read my book, "Seek," and they learned about the stories of a wildland firefighter in Montana that I interviewed, or a group of millennials living in convents with Catholic sisters. They were like, "I would love to watch you having these conversations." And so I always told them if I ever went on this journey again, I would travel with a film crew.

A lot of us view video content. And a lot of the times it's giving us a sense of doom, and we are literally doomscrolling through our lives. My question was: How do we move from doomscrolling to hope scrolling? How do we show people not just the problems that exist in the country, but also the people that are in our country who are working to actually address them?



There's been recent research by really incredible organizations like PolicyLink, and they've found that while most Americans want a country that includes everyone in this democracy and in this country, most Americans don't believe it's possible. And so I call that the belief gap. So how do you close a belief gap? You need to stoke the imagination of people, and you need to show them that it's already happening.

Gabriela Domenzain: And when you were on the road, you met a lot of people who inspired you. Tell me more about those stories.

Scott Shigeoka: Oh my gosh, so many come to mind. I think about this incredible librarian named Audrey who has really been at the forefront of saying, "We are not gonna pull books from the shelves." And you don't have to agree with what these books are saying, but we should give everyone the opportunity to have a free and open exchange of ideas. And that's what she says libraries are all about. We are here to give people access to information. I think it is something we need to really pay attention to, and I think that librarians are very smart people on the front lines of our democracy right now.

I also think about I just came here to D.C. from West Virginia, and I met this incredible man named Steven, who was a part of this group called Coalfield Development. But Steven and his team have been able to reclaim over the past four years this abandoned coal field, and they've turned it into a regenerative agriculture farm. And I met their cows and their pigs and their goats and they're doing something called rotational grazing. The before and after pictures are incredible. And they provide so much food for their local community and so many job opportunities for people in Mingo County.

That is the beauty of what is happening in this country. I've talked to so many people. "Have you heard of this amazing work that's happening in West Virginia?" And I'm often met with the stereotypes and the assumptions of, "Oh, West Virginia?" And it's like, how do you know anyone from West Virginia? Have you been to West Virginia? Have you spoken and shared stories with anyone from this state?

I'm so excited about this work of platforming these kinds of stories, and there's hundreds of stories like this that we've encountered all across the road.

Gabriela Domenzain: How do people feel about, especially folks that aren't used to this kind of attention or somebody like you coming in and asking all these questions?



Scott Shigeoka: I think what we're all united by is people really want to feel like they matter here and that they belong here. But certain people's voices and stories get amplified, and certain people's stories and voices don't. When you consistently feel like your reality is not being shared with the world, then, of course you're gonna react to that.

And so, I think everyone reacts by saying, "Thank you for sharing our story." I always say thank you as well. This is all about reciprocity. I get really happy when I see people watching the videos, and then they get inspired to do something in their communities.

And it's a great way to refill those reservoirs of hope and optimism that you feel are depleted. I'm guilty of it too, but I find that my anxiety and my fear levels go down dramatically when I'm actually able to participate and do something alongside of the people who I'm meeting on the road.

Gabriela Domenzain: I was really taken aback by one of the statistics that you cite in your book, that 1 out of 10 people in the United States say that they do not have a good friend. And that makes me curious about the relationship between loneliness and curiosity, happiness and curiosity, compassion and curiosity. Talk to me a little bit about the relationship between these things.

Scott Shigeoka: I think that one of the beautiful things about curiosity is you're really on this pursuit of wanting to understand the person that is in front of you, but without any agenda. And I think what people forget is that it's not just a gift that you're giving to the person that you're being curious about, but it's also a gift you're giving to yourself. That work of really seeing the people that are around you makes you feel so much more connected to the people that are around you, especially when you're doing it from a place that's really authentic and genuine.

I would just say if you're feeling alone, and you're feeling isolated right now, and it feels scary or hard to connect with people in a meaningful way, try to see curiosity as this muscle that you can exercise. You don't have to start really big at first. You can just start in really small ways, like saying hi to a neighbor that you see oftentimes and just checking in with them. And I always talk about curiosity being on a spectrum from shallow to deep. And deep curiosity is where the transformation really lives.

Gabriela Domenzain: I wanted to talk about the 250th. This celebration of this country, and at the same time you're doing this road trip. What's the symbolism of doing it at such a historic moment?



Scott Shigeoka: I'm just so excited about this opportunity to provide a space for people to be reminded that you have all the wisdom and all of the capacity inside of yourself to be a part of creating change wherever you live.

And there are so many wonderful people, even if they have different ideologies than you, who often want the same things you do, and we're just wrestling with it and trying to figure it out together, and we can actually learn from each other's differences. There is a strength in our differences. We don't wanna erase that or flatten that.

Gabriela Domenzain: Tell me about some of the other stops that have piqued your curiosity.

Scott Shigeoka: Oh, my gosh, so many. I think about what's happening in western North Carolina. I met three roommates who created a mutual aid effort called Be Loved Asheville. They were a part of witnessing and helping out in the aftermath of Hurricane Helene, which devastated western North Carolina and other places in the region. This is a time when you had to know your neighbors to be able to rely and support one another. And these three roommates organized thousands of volunteers, not just from the region, but from all across the country to help with supplies, to create opportunities for healing and therapy, but they've also helped rebuild hundreds of homes.

In partnership with many community organizations, and people, brought this region so much healing and life. They were even telling me a story of a farmer that came from out of state and knew how to do this reverse osmosis technology with water, which allowed all the schools to get back up and running. Such a beautiful story.

And it's not just these "I'm gonna change the world"-type stories that matter. It's also the stories and the spaces that feel really benign. I met Kathy Nakagawa, who runs Baseline Flowers in Phoenix, Arizona, and she told me the story of her parents being incarcerated in the camps because they were Japanese descent. And obviously I am Japanese, so I was very connected to and interested in that story.

Gabriela Domenzain: During World War II, the U.S. government forcibly incarcerated about 120,000 Japanese Americans in internment camps across the country. The Roosevelt administration claimed the policy was necessary for national security after the attack on Pearl Harbor, but fear ultimately drove the decision as there was no evidence that Japanese Americans posed a security threat.



Scott Shigeoka: We found a way as flower farmers, a group of Japanese American families, how to grow flowers in the harsh conditions of the desert. And we figured out a way for this beauty to blossom.

It's so important for us to understand our history and remind ourselves it's not just in books and in podcasts, but it can be in the story of the florist that you go to pick up flowers for your daughter's graduation. And they might have so much to share about the history of the place you live in.

These are people you might not ever hear from. We have so much to learn from them, because it's not just a small group of people that founded this country. We are all co-founders of this country. We are all collectively building this country as we go, in our own neighborhoods, in our own families, and also at a larger scale. This opportunity provides us a reminder of that. We are all a part of this country. What can we each do in our communities to build towards that better future?

Gabriela Domenzain: Thanks for listening. If you enjoyed the episode, drop us a line or leave us a review. You can also visit pew.org/afterthefact to learn more. And of course, be sure to follow us wherever you get your podcasts. For The Pew Charitable Trusts, I'm Gabriela Domenzain, and this is "After the Fact."