

## Episode 3

# A Less Polarized Future: Real Solutions to Heal Our Divided World

## SPEAKERS

Josh Greene, Kati Kirsch Bar-On, Isaac Rand, Yph Leikes, Jan Voelkel, Kurt Nelson, and Tim Houlihan

### Tim Houlihan 00:07

In January of 1962 the American intellectual and author James Baldwin wrote a New York Times essay in which he posed an argument for addressing racism in America. He wrote, “**Not everything that can be faced can change, but nothing can be changed until it is faced.**”

### Kurt Nelson 00:24

We start this last episode in our series on polarization with Baldwin's comments on race, because we think they apply to polarization as well. We are in a place where polarization is being discussed, but as in Baldwin's words, we are not facing it. Too often, it feels like we're simply letting it be, and that is a part of the problem.

### Tim Houlihan 00:46

We're presenting you our listeners with an ice-bucket challenge inspired by Baldwin's words. Not everything about polarization can be changed, but polarization can't be changed until we face it.

### Kurt Nelson 00:58

In other words, we have to start by being aware of the problem, understand its consequences, and in this episode, we'll discuss some ways to face it.

### Tim Houlihan 01:08

We hope that the first two episodes have expanded your thinking and your awareness about polarization, and we hope that this episode will expand it even more. And if we do our job right, help you face polarization head on. Let's begin this episode with our conversation with Jan Voelkel, a postdoc at Stanford University.

### Kurt Nelson 01:27

A postdoc means that he's completed his PhD training, but he's not a professor yet, but we are pretty certain that he's headed that way, and we are pretty sure he's going to be great because he's been doing some great research. We talked to Jan about some research that he and his co-authors did that had a very clever approach. Rather than creating an individual intervention like Sandy and Josh did in

Episode 1, Jan and his cohorts decided to ask a number of researchers for studies they've already done that they thought delivered great results, and also what ideas they'd suggest for getting a clear view of polarization.

**Tim Houlihan 02:06**

The invitation revealed roughly 200 interventions. Jan summarized the studies so they could be reviewed by his co-researchers. Together, they could determine, through the careful examination of the existing studies, which of them had the highest likelihood of success.

**Kurt Nelson 02:22**

Jan started our conversation by describing what his analysis revealed about the way people feel towards other people who are in their same party, co-partisans, as he calls them, versus our feelings about people in other parties. Let's listen.

**Jan Voelkel 02:39**

So like, that is where the data is very clear that over the last few decades. Americans haven't changed very much in terms of how they have viewed co partisans like that has been more or less like mildly positive feelings towards them, co-partisan.

**Tim Houlihan 02:53**

So if we're on the same team, I generally feel pretty good about you. It and you generally feel pretty good about me.

**Jan Voelkel 03:01**

Exactly, yes, that's the perfect way to put it. And at the same time, like, 40 years ago, I was feeling like, maybe mildly negative about an opposing partisan. However, by now, that is pretty negative. So, like, so this is like, like, we often see this on a like, so called *feeling thermometer*, where zero would mean very cold or unfavorable feeling. Yeah, 100 would mean very favorable or warm feeling. And we see that there has been a drop of like 20 to 25 points in particular since the year of 2000. So this like a fact that formalization is really driven by more intensely negative feelings towards out-partisans.

**Kurt Nelson 03:51**

So according to the research, how we feel about our own party hasn't significantly shifted over the years, but our perceptions of the other side have significantly dropped. This is why the partisanship is so much worse than it was in the past. So we asked, is there any hope for American democracy?

**Jan Voelkel 04:09**

Like, there are a lot of researchers and practitioners out there who are trying to do a lot of work on reducing affective polarization and strengthening democratic attitude. So like, this is the case in like, psychology, political science, sociology, communication, economics, all of these people have valuable things to say. And outside of the whole academic Ivory Tower, there are a lot of practitioners in like, what we have called like bridging organizations, who are working on these issues and have unique insights that like we academics don't really have.

**Tim Houlihan 04:44**

This is where Jan asked researchers to submit their best ideas through an open-source crowd sourcing process on ways to combat polarization. Because they got so many submissions, they had to narrow things down in their first study, they decided to use all US based participants, but test 25 separate conditions, or what the researchers would call interventions.

**Jan Voelkel 05:07**

And these interventions differed quite a lot. We, for example, had had one intervention that basically showed ad that was produced by the beer company Heineken, showing people with very different political beliefs, and then bringing them together by asking them to build a bar together. And then, right before they got to share the very incentive for building this bar together, which was a beer from Heineken, they confronted them with a video package showing that they had very different political beliefs.

**Kurt Nelson 05:41**

Just a fun note. Josh Green had also explored the same Heineken beer video in some of his research. Way to go, Heineken!

**Jan Voelkel 05:49**

And like Nonetheless, these pairs of people said, okay, like we have different political beliefs, but we still respect each other. It was enjoyable to do this task with you. So participants who saw a video of this, what in researcher language, we may call **positive vicarious contact**. So you observe positive contact between members of two different groups, not not them directly. But you rather see other people here having that contact that has the strongest overall treatment effect on partisan animosity we're using how close you feel towards the other side, by approximately 10%.

**Tim Houlihan 06:30**

So, just the fact of showing people the commercial where there is a positive vicarious contact, the effect of decreasing polarization was really powerful, almost 10%. This was driven by what Jan calls **sympathetic exemplars**.

**Jan Voelkel 06:46**

But we can see that like these, these kind of images that show what we called sympathetic exemplars of people with different political beliefs have a lot of power in swaying people's opinion about the other side.

**Kurt Nelson 07:00**

There was one other strategy that Jan and his team found effective.

**Jan Voelkel 07:04**

The other big strategy that we found was very effective in reducing part of animosity was **building and emphasizing common cross-partisan identity**, so an identity that is shared by both Republicans and Democrats.

**Kurt Nelson 07:20**

What they found is that both Democrats and Republicans could identify with a common cross-partisan identity where they viewed themselves as part of a so called **exhausted majority** who were just tired of polarization. And more importantly, they could build an intervention that leveraged the shared identity. So the two big psychological strategies they found at work were: One: casting sympathetic, relatable exemplars of people with different political beliefs. And, Two: building common, cross-partisan identities.

**Jan Voelkel 07:52**

Think about structural condition in which people, voters in the real world, are exposed to different kinds of content repeatedly, so that we would like see effects over it and over again. You can think of this as like event in your neighborhood, or like things that you see on TV or things that you see on social media. So I think our results are best understood as informing community leaders, political leaders in terms of like, how to organize these kind of events, like what kind of content to put out. As, for example, political ads. And also for social media organizations, what kind of content is dangerous in terms of, like, creating anti democratic attitudes, in particular, in the US. So, you know, like and like each of these different levels, you can think of more structural level interventions that our team is now also working on with our partners on trying to implement that.

**Kurt Nelson 08:54**

Like, okay, Tim, let's groove on this. One thing that I thought Jan identified in his work revolves around this idea of affective polarization and the impact of negative partisan feelings. So this idea that affective polarization is about how Republicans and Democrats feel about each other emotionally, which we've talked about in the upper other episodes as well. But what I thought was interesting, was this idea of a feeling thermometer that these surveys had identified, and that they become more common. And the idea that a negative affective polarization is kind of a trend as a concerning trend in American democracy.

**Tim Houlihan 09:34**

I couldn't agree more, Kurt. We've seen this in the first two episodes, that this affective polarization is such a big deal. It's such an important part of the story, and not the issue polarization. Like we need issue polarization, we need this idea of having converging ideas and converging issues, and let's talk about those. But the how we feel about the other side, that's really not helping us.

**Kurt Nelson 10:00**

And it was interesting that it's the feelings of the other side that have changed. It's less about our feelings of our co-conspirators. So to say, right, this idea of who's on our own team, and it's more about what has changed is our feelings of the other, the other political party.

**Tim Houlihan 10:19**

Yeah, you know, I thought that Jan's work for reducing polarization actually generated some hope for me. I actually, I came away with a sense that this partisan animosity is central. It's there, and hope may be difficult to come by. But I think that there is hope there, that because they looked at a number of interventions, there's maybe better chances of scaling successful ideas. And scalability is really key

about this whole thing, right? That they've got to use these multifaceted interventions, interventions to make substantial and lasting, positive differences in the world.

**Kurt Nelson 10:58**

Yeah, there's no silver bullet. There is this idea that we can use a number of different elements to get this and the way that that happens is that community leaders, political figures and social media organizations can use these insights that they found, or that they're finding, as they're still doing this research, and they can use those insights to create interventions that address polarization at a structural level, the importance of the sustained efforts and long term strategies that they put in place will impact public opinion and reduce the anti-democratic sentiments, I think, is key, right? This idea that, hey, we can work together on this by putting all of these components at a structural level to address some of these issues.

**Tim Houlihan 11:44**

Well, what you're talking about reminds me of Muzafer Sharif's work and with the Robber's Cave Experiment, right? That this whole idea of cross partisan identities, when, when, like, pulling in some super ordinate goals like that, the higher-level goals like, there's something that's more important than just our party, that's our country. Our country is more important. And I think that that's really a cool thing.

**Kurt Nelson 12:08**

Yeah, I would, I would have to agree, it's this idea that sometimes we have to go back, right? We can go back and look at that research that that Sharif did in 1950s and we can use that today to solve some of the issues that we're facing right now. So let's turn back and to talk about Josh Green for a minute. And we first heard Josh Green from Episode 1, and he had some clever interventions that he used to help overcome polarization.

**Tim Houlihan 12:41**

Yeah. So, Josh and his colleagues began to think about the problems of polarization, and a couple things became readily apparent. First, whatever solution they developed needed to be scalable, and scalability is really easier if it's digital.

**Kurt Nelson 12:56**

The second thing was that they needed to be engaging, because all of this would be voluntary on the part of the citizens who would use it. And this meant it needed to be fun. And what is more fun than a game? Tim, what's more fun than a game?

**Tim Houlihan 13:11**

Yes, games are pretty fun. So, they developed a game with two players played in three parts with monetary rewards for answering questions correctly. But you'd only win as a team. So it was in the best interest of both people participating in the game to do well,

**Kurt Nelson 13:28**

Josh picks up on the explanation from the point that each person logged into the game without an identifier as to whether they were Republican or Democrat. Let's hear him now.

**Josh Greene 13:38**

First, you do a little get to know you session. So we asked, you know, little questions about, like, you know, do you like the ocean, the nor or the mountains? And, you know, what's your favorite fruit and that kind of thing. We also ask people about their political affiliation. And then you take a quiz on your partner's information. So now everybody knows who's who politically. And then the game starts. And we start with, you know, some kind of questions like, What state is Mount Rushmore in? And you have to chat, and one person says, Oh, I think it's North Dakota. Well, I think it's South Dakota. Okay, well, I'll go with your answer. I'm not really sure. Oh, hey, we were right. Nice. So now you get to know your partner. You're playing. This seems good. We're making money. The way you make your money is you have to agree on any answer and the answer has to be right. So even if you disagree, you have to sort of say, okay, well, let's go with your answer in the second phase, what we do is, did a lot of work to figure out, what do Republicans know that Democrats don't, and vice versa that's not explicitly in any way about politics, right? So, so you ask people you know, what's the name of the family on the show Duck Dynasty,

**Tim Houlihan 14:41**

Democrats tend to know how to answer questions about the Queen's Gambit, at least more so than Republicans. However, that is reversed with the Duck Dynasty question. Republicans tended to do better on that one, but as long as one person gets the answer correct, the team makes money.

**Josh Greene 14:57**

So now you have this kind of complementarity built in and that we have it picks apart every little thing. We think that seeing that the other person knows stuff that you don't know is an even better way to sort of say, Okay, we're a team. We're really working together and cooperating. And then in the third phase is where things get more interesting. So we have questions like, what percentage of gun deaths in the US involve assault style weapons? And Democrats will say, oh, it's like 30% or 50% Republicans say, No, it's like one or 2%. And in that case, the Republicans are right. Actually, very small proportion of gun deaths, not that they're not horrible and important, but proportionally, it's small. And Democrats are surprised by that. But if you ask about rates of crime among immigrants, Republicans are likely to think that that's sky high, whereas Democrats are likely to know that immigrants to the United States commit crimes actually lower rates than native born, more incidences. So now you know what might have been kind of difficult and polarizing, as you've already been playing this game with this game with this person you've been working together and making money together with what people kind of say is, Oh, all right, well, that's, I wouldn't guess that, but okay, good. And if, and if you're in, if you went with the right answer, even if you disagree, all the better, right? You know, one of my favorite chat trailer skips on that question is one where the liberal is like, *oh, nice: you were right!* You know, we have this liberal cheering because the Republican was right about guns! How often does that happen, right? So that's the kind of magic that we're trying to bottle and automate and spread with this.

**Kurt Nelson 16:31**

Josh wanted to know how this would work in the real world, where so many people are segregating themselves into red and blue communities that don't interact with each other.

**Josh Greene 16:41**

Yeah. I mean, we want the Southern Methodist and the Unitarian, you know, teaming up. And so I think, you know what, what the game does, it doesn't change people's opinions, right? Change their identities about maybe eventually it would, but I think what it does is it just shows a the other no side has a monopoly on truth, right? **And other people, even people who would vote for someone who you just consider completely unacceptable and a threat to democracy, they can be nice and respectful to you and be and value your contribution.**

**Tim Houlihan 17:11**

For Josh and his co-researchers, they knew the game wasn't going to drastically alter the beliefs of the people playing. But what if? What if that could allow players to have some respect and maybe find some common ground for the other.

**Josh Greene 17:25**

Look, do you want to live in a democracy? Yes? I hope the answer is yes. So the way the democracy works, right? You have to win majorities to govern, right, and right now you my Cambridge, Massachusetts, buddy, you do not have anything close to a governing, governing majority, right? So you may think that you can get from, you know, 20% to 51% with Get Out the Vote. Good luck. **You're gonna have to find some kind of common ground with people, right?** And you can disagree and disagree vehemently, but if we can't find a way to treat each other with respect and have a basic level of trust. And I'm not talking about trusting politicians who may be genuinely sociopathic, right? I'm talking about the millions of people who are decent people, despite, you know, whatever the ad choices they might make or on the other side. **We have to find a way to bridge that, or we're doomed.**

**Kurt Nelson 18:23**

Okay, Tim, let's, let's groove on what Josh's study shows us here, right? I think what Josh has done here is really about, how do we get people to see the other side isn't just a bunch of bumbling idiots, right? I mean, ultimately, right, this idea of saying we have to overcome those stereotypes that we have that are so ingrained because, as we talked about with Jan at the very beginning, you know, our views of the other side have, what have shifted more over the past 20 years, and the reality is that the other side is not that bumbling idiot that we often assume them to be.

**Tim Houlihan 19:07**

Yeah, it's pretty, pretty terrific, isn't it? Well, here's the problem, though, that in the world of diminishing shared spaces where people of diverse backgrounds used to interact but don't so much anymore. It emphasizes the importance of creating opportunities for people with different political views to engage with each other positively, like to have to have connections. Like, look how cities have kind of figured this out over the millennia. You know, some segregation occurs, of course, naturally. But there's always borders between these communities and even within cities and people figure it out. They figure out how to work together. Let's kind of give it a chance.



**Kurt Nelson 19:48**

Right. And so this idea of using games to create this cooperative experience where they can break down those barriers, those borders, as you say, cross over into the other side and get to know the people on that other side is really interesting. And I love this idea of using games as a way of breaking down those barriers. Yeah, yeah.

**Tim Houlihan 20:14**

Yeah. Ultimately, the games, much like Musafer Sherif, work with the Robbers Cave. It brings people together.

**Kurt Nelson 20:23**

Yeah, bridges gaps and builds a foundation for respectful dialog that is so required in a democratic society. And it's feasible, right? I mean this because it is digital, it's scalable, and it can be implemented, which is fantastic.

**Tim Houlihan 20:45**

Next up, we spoke with one of the organizers of the conference. She's a postdoc from MIT who's very serious about the importance of cross-disciplinary work.

**Kati Kirsch Bar-On 20:54**

So my name is Kati Kish Bar-On, and I'm a postdoctoral fellow at the Science Technology and Society Program, which is part of the History Anthropology and SDS department.

**Kurt Nelson 21:06**

We found the fact that she's doing her work in the history and anthropology department to be a rare combination, and for a good reason, she's studying the philosophy of science, as in how it all fits together into a coherent framework.

**Kati Kirsch Bar-On 21:20**

Theories can actually be examined through philosophical lenses, which are very typically like different from like the regular behavioral scientist lenses.

**Tim Houlihan 21:31**

Let's pick up our discussion on what Kati believes are the big questions in polarization, and what are the most important issues to address about polarization from her perspective.

**Kati Kirsch Bar-On 21:41**

How do we actually define polarization? Is it a conflict? Isn't it a disagreement? Is it something that? Is it a process? Is it something that you know? Is it state of affairs we are currently polarized, or is it something that we can look at? Okay, so polarization rose and polarization decreased, and we're currently in the process of, you know, a rising polarization in politics, okay. But the big questions, you know, have to be addressed. They have to be addressed somehow, so we can have a lot of great literature, but we also need to understand what's the motivation for studying this kind of phenomena,



and what exactly are we studying? And, you know, it can also, it should also be related to a more like, perhaps controversial question of, **do we want to decrease polarization? Is polarization a bad thing?** You know, maybe polarization is a tool to help us identify our in groups quicker and know that, okay, if we're polarized, then I know that I'm a Democrat, so I'm a polarized with anyone who's Republican. Maybe polarization is a tool to try to help society function better, because if we identify each other as in-group and out-groups, and we don't want to interact with one another, there wouldn't be no conflicts. There will be no interactions, okay? For the better and for the worst, okay. But there will be less friction in society. Maybe we want a society that has less friction, I don't know. Maybe we want a society that has more friction because more friction can contribute to the development of new ideas and so on and so forth.

**Tim Houlihan 23:18**

These are tough questions that are being asked. Maybe we might actually want a world with more polarization, because it makes it easier for us cognitively. Maybe, as Kati noted, removing friction isn't always a good thing.

**Kati Kirsch Bar-On 23:33**

And I think that to some extent, we need friction to prospect as a society. What we can also think about, how to, I don't know, control this friction. Okay, from that part onwards, we can start to build our, you know, building blocks, and better understand society, better understand human behavior, better understand individuals and collectives and systems and so on.

**Kurt Nelson 23:58**

So Kati was asking the big questions, the ones that make my head swim, but they are important. We need to understand those big questions if we really want to make a dent in this polarized world that we live in.

**Tim Houlihan 24:13**

And the big questions can lead to different ideas. Kadi went on to talk about the importance of using different perspectives as a way to answer those big questions. She postulates that maybe we need to rethink how we frame in-groups and out-groups, not as two different groups, but as a single group on a single continuum. That framing could lead to membership in any group as being more dynamic, where people can shift back and forth from being very far out group to being just a little less of an out group and maybe back again.

**Kati Kirsch Bar-On 24:48**

How about we use in-group and out-group, not as two different sides of like this one stands on this one side of the pole and the other one is on the other side. But maybe we can use them as residing again on this same continuum from before. So it doesn't necessarily mean that the people that you view as your out-group you know last year, because they have done this and that maybe they have shifted stance. Maybe if you get to know them a little bit, they will be less determined as your out-group, and they'll move towards you a little bit. They don't have to, like, get into your in-group, but they will be a little bit closer to you.

**Kurt Nelson 25:28**

So the big questions lead to big answers. The idea that if we think of polarized sides as living on a continuum, and that the continuum is dynamic and can shift, and maybe, maybe we can use that as a way to pull the two sides a bit closer together.

**Tim Houlihan 25:45**

And then she shared a great story about how her daughter moves from one group of friends to a totally different group without any effort, even when they speak different languages.

**Kati Kirsch Bar-On 25:56**

And then I asked her, Okay, but what about your after-school friends? And she was like, Oh, okay with them. I talk in Hebrew. And I was like, why? Why did you and she was like, I don't know. I just, it just seemed natural, you know? So you don't even think about things like that unless you're aware of how, how do you fit in? And I think that **the questions of how do you fit in is a question that I write is a question that follows you throughout your life.**

**Kurt Nelson 26:24**

And this is a really important observation that she just threw in at the end: We are asking ourselves who we are and redefining ourselves all the time. When we think about knowing ourselves or finding our groove, or even when it comes to polarization, we are regularly readjusting who we are.

**Tim Houlihan 26:43**

Kati wrapped up with a hopeful wish.

**Kati Kirsch Bar-On 26:46**

I want to show social scientists that philosophers can talk to them, the historians and anthropologists in SDS course, we can talk to them, and we can also engage and we can also contribute to their to their work.

**Tim Houlihan 27:00**

Okay, so when we think about Kati's work and the conversation that we had with her, I think that it's good to be reminded that polarization isn't categorically a bad thing, right? It adds friction, but sometimes we need a little friction, and it may make decisions easy, but we don't always need to wrestle with all of the ideas and all of the teams and all of the terms and all of the problems.

**Kurt Nelson 27:25**

Yeah. So polarization has its uses, sometimes. The element, though, the big the big questions right is, how do we integrate the understanding of when those are positive frictions that are added in various different things, and when they become negative? And as humans, what are the barriers that we have to understand as human beings to overcome this polarization? And how do we do that?

**Tim Houlihan 27:55**

And this is something I love about behavioral science, is that behavioral science, because it arcs together all of these different disciplines, right, that it actually bridges the traditional barriers that we once thought of when it comes to integrating on understanding of who we are as human beings.

**Kurt Nelson 28:13**

This idea of who I am, right, can be seen through different lenses, and it's constantly changing in our lives. It's constantly being redefined. Why can't we use that, that aspect of our own human nature that is inherently built into who we are and how we operate in this world, how can how come we shouldn't use that as part of reducing the negative impact of polarization and seeing the other side?

**Tim Houlihan 28:47**

Before we wrap up, we wanted to share some additional comments from Yip Lelkes. He leads the polarization lab at the University of Pennsylvania, and we heard him in the first episode of the series talking about how most people don't have strong opinions on most things. We return to Yip as he shares an historical example of how polarization unfolded in the United States as a preamble to why we should have hope.

**Yph Lelkes 29:13**

So, in the 1960s Civil Rights Act was passed. The Democratic Party and the Republican Party at that time were very much a bigger tent. Yeah, there were, there were lots of conservative Democrats, especially in the South. And by and there was lots of liberal Republicans, family around here in New England. Yeah, the Civil Rights Act was passed, and you had a lot of Democrats who their main thing they cared about was the racial issue, and they switched the Republican Party. And thereafter, you see them starting to adopt the policy positions of the Republican Party. Yeah, I think some people will have a feeling that moral issues are probably the gateway drug that you're less because you're less pliable, like moral issues, like race, abortion, whatnot, once you're hooked in there, then...

**Tim Houlihan 30:13**

Then, he says, then you'll start adopting the other beliefs of the party. That ideological sorting has led to consequences such as the parties becoming more extreme, which has made it more difficult to get politics, you know, the work of our elected officials done. We are definitely living in a time with less compromise, and because of that, some really good policies are not getting enacted because each side won't accept good enough. Basically, if a policy or a potential law isn't 100% my way, it won't work. It's dead on arrival. And compromises deliver little or no benefit to the elites: either our elected officials or the media. But at the same time, Yip offers us a reason why we should be hopeful.

**Yph Lelkes 31:00**

I think, you know, **I'm not that worried about the state of democracy.** I think in 2022 what gave me some hope was all the kind of election denier open seat races lost their elections. Yeah, and that to me, and we'll see what happens in 2024, but to me that sense of signal that Republicans saw, that they went a little too far. That they you can't, that this is not a winning strategy, that you're good at alienate people, and politics is ultimately about building a coalition, and most people support democracy.

**Kurt Nelson 31:42**

So Yip gives us hope. There's still hope that we can get through all of this, that that Americans still love democracy.

**Tim Houlihan 31:54**

Yes, yes. It in some ways it's that simple, isn't it? Like it really is that simple that, you know, we have figured out as a country, through a whole bunch of hard times, how to get through things that impinge on our democracy so that democracy prevails. You know, many, though not all, of the election deniers in 2022 from the 2022 election, who were going for reelection, they didn't get reelected. So I think that they're that's kind of a good sign.

**Kurt Nelson 32:29**

I think it's a really good sign. And I think it's a really good sign that as we wrap up the three part series that we're doing, that we're leaving it on a bit of hope that there is this idea that we can go forward. We can take the interventions that we've, we've heard about, and the researchers that are doing fantastic work on this, and we can make a change. Right? So throughout the series, we heard that behaviors are difficult to change, and now that part sounds like a downer, but that's not the whole story.

**Tim Houlihan 33:21**

It's not and with all those challenges, the researchers and organizers of this conference still believe in good outcomes. There is still hope.

**Kurt Nelson 33:30**

So today's polarization might feel scary. It might seem like we are in a hole that is too big to get out of. It might even look like our democracy is close to ending, but it's not we agree with Yip. Nobody wants our democracy to shrivel up.

**Tim Houlihan 33:45**

Like Yip and all the researchers we spoke to: we are hopeful.

**Kurt Nelson 33:50**

We are hopeful for a better tomorrow, that with the insights that these researchers and others are finding, that our world can be a better place, and that we Americans, actually the entire world. can live together with respect and common understanding.

**Tim Houlihan 34:06**

Yeah, we're hopeful that if we face it, we can bring about a positive change. We can be like the Rattlers and the Eagles, who realize that they didn't have to hate each other. That they could work together for higher level goals, like preserving the system over our individual desires.

**Kurt Nelson 34:24**

And at the same time, we realize that polarization is complicated and unpleasant.

**Tim Houlihan 34:28**

But there are a few things we'd like you to consider doing.

**Kurt Nelson 34:32**

First, recognize that polarization is complex. It's more than just us versus them. There are a lot of reasons why we got to where we are, and there may even be good reasons that we have some degree of polarization, especially issue polarization. But when we consider polarization, it deserves a more nuanced question than, "Are we polarized?" And a more nuanced answer than, "Yes" or "No."

**Tim Houlihan 34:59**

So let's not shrug it off as being only this way or only that way. We've examined polarization from an economics perspective, a psychological perspective, and a philosophical perspective, and all of those lenses can be helpful when it comes to isolating the issues and developing interventions. And we're richer for being reminded that there are many unique approaches to face it.

**Kurt Nelson 35:22**

Right. Put your critical thinking cap on and ask yourself about what other aspects of polarization are people not talking about. Like, what parts of the story are being left out? How are they spinning the story so their audience comes away with a very slanted view, including the news you are listening to. We just want to remind you that you get to make up your own mind and that your views can be as complex as you want them to be.

**Tim Houlihan 35:52**

The second thing we want to remind you of is that polarization is amplified by people who benefit from it: The political elite. Ginning up polarization benefits the politicians, the media, the political insiders. It's easier for parties to differentiate to themselves when the gap between the party lines is wider.

**Kurt Nelson 36:10**

And it makes it easier to sell more advertising. Tim!

**Tim Houlihan**

Oh, how true.

**Kurt Nelson**

Yeah, the broadcast media such as Fox News and CNN need to differentiate their messages so their audiences stay glued to their screens. They work up this issue-based elements, and that way they can sell more advertising. We hope you consider the motivations of the messengers who are delivering polarized content to you no matter what reporting station that you listen to.

**Tim Houlihan 36:39**

And lastly, polarization is something that we humans have created, and for reasons that seemed perfectly appropriate at the time. It was Barry Goldwater in January of 1964 in a *New York Times* article where he wrote that he wanted to rise above the sloppy overlap of morals, values and beliefs between

the parties. There wasn't enough differentiation is in his mind. So he wrote, "I will offer a choice, not an echo."

**Kurt Nelson 37:08**

Now, Goldwater didn't win that election, but he made it clear to the voting public that they might be better off with clear lines to define the parties. And we can trace much of what we are experiencing today back to Goldwater's comment that he would offer a choice, not an echo. So, with that Groovers, we hope that this episode has offered you a choice, or at least an opportunity to know more about the challenges and some potential solutions for the polarizing pandemic that is hitting the United States. And one more thing, while the scientific community is working on large scale solutions, you can do something about polarization, too. You can simply talk to someone from across the aisle.

**Tim Houlihan 37:56**

Yeah, like you could face polarization by having a conversation that starts and ends with compassionate curiosity.

**Kurt Nelson 38:05**

Of course! Compassionate curiosity! We come back to that over and over and over!

**Tim Houlihan 38:09**

Constantly ask questions. Learn about the other side. Be curious. Listen to what other people have to say.

**Kurt Nelson 38:17**

Yeah, those other people probably aren't as different from you as you might think. Don't be defensive, don't have an argument. Just be curious about why other people feel the way they do. Ask questions and truly listen to their answers.

**Tim Houlihan**

We think you can do it.

**Kurt Nelson**

By now, your brain is better informed to have those conversations and to consider what you can do about polarization in your world.

**Tim Houlihan 38:44**

While Kurt and I are confident that just because we know what to do doesn't mean we'll do it at least consistently, we also agree that we have to start somewhere. We need to begin by understanding.

**Kurt Nelson 38:57**

Ah, Tim, the GI Joe Fallacy, that knowing isn't even half the battle.

**Tim Houlihan 39:03**

That's it. And of course, we know that knowing isn't half the battle, but it's a good start. Let's end on the words of James Baldwin that we mentioned at the beginning of this episode. He wrote, **not everything that can be faced can change, but nothing can be changed until it is faced**. Let us all begin by facing the things that we need to change.

**Kurt Nelson 39:33**

We'd like to express our very sincere gratitude to Eugen Dimant for creating and inviting us to this amazing conference. Eugen was super generous. Being at MIT with all of those scholars was really fun, and we loved getting introduced to world class researchers while they're trying to grab a lunch in the hall between sessions or just having a sidebar conversation with them.

**Tim Houlihan 39:56**

Yeah, Eugen's invitation allowed us to sit in the Lecture Hall to get ideas and then to sit in the snack room to do interviews. Kurt and I got to do what we love to do, to have one on one conversations with thoughtful and scholarly scientists on this very important topic.

**Kurt Nelson 40:12**

Yeah. So a great big thanks to Eugen for inviting us and making this happen.

**Tim Houlihan 40:17**

We also want to thank the conference's organizing team for granting us such open access to these scholars and by supporting our recording needs with a dedicated workspace. Special thanks goes to Kati Kish Bar-On and Yip Lelkes, both of whom were incredibly helpful on that front.

**Kurt Nelson 40:33**

We also want to thank our guests who took time to sit with us. It was pretty normal for them to spend an hour presenting their ideas to an audience of critical colleagues, but then they came into our snack room to sit with us and say the same thing that they just said, but into one of our microphones. We want to express our gratitude to Dave Rand and his sons, Isaac and Miles, Sandy Pentland, Josh Green, Ryan Enos and Andrea Robbett.

**Tim Houlihan 40:57**

We also want to express our Special thanks to Kwabena Donkor, Mina Cikara and Jan Voelkel for their research, their time and their contributions to this series as well. And lastly, a fond thank you to the Massachusetts Institute of Technology for providing space, food and drink for two days at the conference.

**Kurt Nelson 41:19**

With that, we hope you gather up your own thoughts on what to do about polarization, and that you use them this week as you go out and find your group.

**Kurt Nelson**

We aren't really done yet.



**Tim Houlihan 41:30**

Why not? But, and what happened to the theme music?

**Kurt Nelson 41:35**

We'll get back to that once we finish this bonus track.

**Group**

Oh!

**Tim Houlihan 41:41**

The bonus track. I love it. Okay, what's up for the bonus track?

**Kurt Nelson 41:45**

Okay, we have a very special interview that we're sharing as a bonus track that we think listeners are going to want to stick around for. Let's put it this way. Tim, this bonus track is not just the research. It is about the researchers. Plural.

**Tim Houlihan 42:00**

Agreed, Kurt. It's a pretty special experience that we hope will go down in the annals of history as being the first interview with two remarkable behavioral scientists.

**Kurt Nelson 42:16**

And who are these remarkable behavioral scientists? Well, they're Miles and Isaac Rand. They are the twin sons of Dave Rand. Now we heard from Dave in the first episode of the series, and when we were wrapping up that interview, Dave ran out into the hall and grabbed Miles and Isaacs from their mother while they were doing their own poster presentations at the conference. These boys had the wonderful and unique privilege of being children of very bright and accomplished researchers. And while Dave was quick to point out that the young boys, "did all the work," they are in an environment where they were, as they say, set up for success.

**Tim Houlihan 42:55**

Miles and Isaac wanted to know how people interpret and process fake news and who they trust for good information, and each of them created different research projects to study this phenomenon.

**Kurt Nelson 43:06**

Miles tested how partisanship impacted the way we'd feel about spending time with someone who was speaking the truth or speaking a falsehood.

**Tim Houlihan 43:15**

And Isaac tested the idea about whether or not getting information from someone who believed in God would matter when it was an in-party or an out-party. Messenger. And just to let you know, the boy's father, Dave, was in the room, guiding all of us through the conversation. You might hear his voice as well.

**Kurt Nelson 43:33**

We'll start by hearing from Miles about his paper on partisanship and how it impacts how we process true or false statements.

**Miles Rand 43:39**

I'm Miles, and I go to Haggerty and my paper is about what do people think? What do people think about fake news? And I'll study with we in our study, we have 1,143 people, and we show them a headline: It either true or false, or in in their party or out of their party.

**Kurt Nelson**

So what were you trying to understand?

**Isaac Rand 4:19**

Like, what, um, like we and then we asked them a question of, like, how nice they would, how how nice they thought the person was, and if they wanted to spend time with them. And what we found in each in both cases, the best one was the true in-party, and the baddest one and the worst one was in the out-party false. And the interesting part was the in between. So in thinking and if we thought people are being nice, it's better to have shield a true one than a false one. So we found out. So it's better to share a true out-party than a false in-party for thinking how nice they are.

**Kurt Nelson 45:18**

So if I'm wanting to look at somebody and if they're if I'm a Democrat and somebody's a Republican, I'm gonna like a Republican better if I know that they're truthful over a Democrat who is untruthful to me. Which is, it's kind of surprising, right? If we think about, well, I like the people that are like me, but if I, if I don't, if I know that they're not truthful, not gonna like them as much. Is that right? Yeah.

**Isaac Rand 45:47**

Yeah.

**Dave Rand**

But then what the most surprising part?

**Miles Rand 45:51**

But for the other question, it was one, if you wanted to spend time with it. The surprising thing is, we found the opposite thing. It's better if you want to spend time with it. It's better to share a false in-party than true out-party.

**Kurt Nelson 46:11**

What? So, Tim, did you get that people would prefer to spend time with someone who is of their same party, even when they're sharing information that is false.

**Tim Houlihan 46:20**

Wow, that is surprising. It completely shoots down the idea that we care more about truth than our party affiliations. So we wanted to know if that surprised him.

**Miles Rand 46:32**

Yes, a lot.

**Tim Houlihan 46:37**

Yeah. So let me understand. If I want to get to know somebody who is in-party, it's better for me to share something that's false.

**Miles Rand 46:46**

Yes, that's true. But, um, the thing is, it's better if you about spending time with you, with the sharer, the out-party true is worse than in-party false.

**Dave Rand 47:04**

But, which is the best overall?

**Miles Rand 47:06**

Overall, the best is in-party true.

**Dave Rand 47:08**

The best is in party true. Yeah, okay, but still, it's sort of like with for who you want to spend time with, which is more important, truth or party?

**Miles Rand**

Party.

**Dave Rand**

Right and but if for judging who is a good or bad person or how smart or whatever they are, which is more important, truth or party?

**Miles Rand**

Truth.

**Kurt Nelson 47:27**

Do you think this applies to eight-year-olds as well?

**Miles Rand**

No.

**Kurt Nelson**

No? Are eight-year-olds, they just want to spend time with their friends? and they don't care if they're like the other kids that are on the other little group? Do they care about how truthful they are?

**Miles Rand**

No, not that much.

**Kurt Nelson**

Not that much. Next, we talked with Miles's brother.

**Isaac Rand 47:51**

My name is Isaac, and I go to Haggerty.

**Kurt Nelson 47:54**

Okay, Isaac took a different turn with his experiment.

**Isaac Rand 47:59**

I was gonna share a different one about how, about how politics and belief in God affect trust.

**Kurt Nelson 48:09**

Okay, so this sounds really interesting. So what did you do in your experiment?

**Isaac Rand 48:14**

Well, we showed them a randomized description of a person, and then we told them about a person, and we randomized what name they are, how old they are, what pet they had, and what job and if they had it if they believed in God or if they didn't believe in God, or if they were Republican, or if there was a Democrat. Why we asked them about the name, age, pet and job, is so they don't know. And then we asked him three questions about how much they trusted the person.

**Kurt Nelson 49:04**

Okay. And what did you find? What, what were the results of your study?

**Isaac Rand 49:10**

So we found that overall, the people that didn't believe in God, for the Republicans, got trusted less. But for the Democrats, them that that were in, that were Democrats, that were in the party, got trusted the same as if they believed in God or they didn't believe in God.

**Kurt Nelson 49:36**

Okay, so let me understand this. So, if I am a Republican, I am going to believe as somebody more if they believe in God, whether or not they're out-party or in-party, but if they're a Democrat, it doesn't really matter. It's about the same.

**Isaac Rand**

Yeah.

**Kurt Nelson**

So was that surprising to you?

**Isaac Rand 49:54**

Yes, that was surprising to me.

**Kurt Nelson 49:57**

What was surprising about it?

**Isaac Rand 50:00**

It seemed really surprising that that it was, he's almost the exact same for the people who didn't believe in God when I first saw it.

**Tim Houlihan 50:12**

So you were you were surprised. And what do you think about how this applies to eight-year-olds? Does it matter?

**Isaac Rand 50:21**

No, I don't think even, I don't think any y'all even know about politics.

**Dave Rand 50:29**

And one other question: Why do you think people trust the people that believe in God more than the people that don't believe in God in general?

**Isaac Rand 50:37**

I think because they think like, God is maybe like looking over them and seeing everything they do so they want to be better.

**Tim Houlihan 50:48**

That's fantastic, that that's terrific. We are so grateful to both of you. Isaac and Miles, wow. This is just so cool that you have done this, that you've learned this, and that you're sharing this with Kurt and me, and we're going to share it with 1,000s and 1,000s of people all over the world who listen to our podcast. So, thank you.

**Dave Rand**

What do you say?

**Isaac Rand 51:14**

You're welcome.

**Miles Rand 51:16**

Welcome.

**Tim Houlihan 51:24**

So when we think about Miles and Isaac, they're amazing eight year olds, right?

**Kurt Nelson**

Oh, my gosh!

**Tim Houlihan**

They're really quite remarkable young boys. But first, let me just say about miles research, this is mind blowing **the out party true is worse than the in party false**. Like I'm having that mind explosion with that and like it's that we're so wired to be loyal to our own group, to our own tribe, to our own party, that it is actually better to deal with the falsehoods and accept the falsehoods of our own party than it is to say no, you guys are wrong.

**Kurt Nelson 52:04**

And this was research that was thought up and done by an eight year old, Tim. This is crazy when you think about this, but we need to be very careful. What I think you know Miles research points to is, **what are the falsehoods that we're believing just because of the tribe or group or political organization that we are a member of**, right? Because that affiliation drives this idea that I had much rather prefer to hear a falsehood or to believe a falsehood within my own party, than to actually face the truth from somebody who's not a part of that part.

**Tim Houlihan 52:46**

Yeah, yeah. Maybe that, maybe this is sort of like the Solomon Asch thing, where we tend to go along with, you know what the group says that, that if the group, if the group says, or some authority figure says, Well, this is what's true, we're like, yeah, maybe it's not really true, but I'm just gonna go along with it.

**Kurt Nelson 53:03**

That line doesn't look like it's the longest one to me, but everybody else says it is, so therefore it must be right? And that's just gonna, yeah, that's that is what this is. To a certain degree, there's a part of that. Isaac's research was also really interesting. This idea that belief in God matters more to Republicans than it does to Democrats when it comes to trusting that person.

**Tim Houlihan 53:28**

Yeah, and I thought that this is really interesting, because if we think about democracy as, in some ways, sort of being similar to or tantamount to, a meritocracy, where basically people are supposed to get ahead because of their ideas, that the best idea gets voted on and becomes more popular. We can see a built in bias for half the population, that Republicans are going to have a harder time even with true information, if they believe that the messenger does not believe in God.

**Kurt Nelson 53:56**

Yeah. So Isaac's research, I think, really points out that there's a big problem when we have half of the population who you know looks at trust as based upon your belief in God or not, regardless of the truth around that you know information. Whether or not you believe in God does not matter how good your

recipe is for salmon on the grill. This idea that there and yet there's gonna be harder. Oh, I don't know. You don't believe in God. How can you have a good recipe on this? How can I trust that it's going to be good from you?

**Tim Houlihan 54:34**

And with that, I think we are the first behavioral science podcast in the entire universe to have two eight-year-old twin scientists explain the research to the world.

**Kurt Nelson 54:47**

And that was just so much fun! We see great things in their future. And you Groovers can say that you heard them here first you.

**Tim Houlihan 55:02**

Yeah, okay with that, Groovers, thanks so much for listening. Thanks for listening to our bonus episode.

**Kurt Nelson 55:06**

And we hope that you use these inspiring comments from these eight-year-olds to go out this week and find your groove.