

A New Angle
MTPR Episode 34
Ross Douthat

Justin Angle This is A New Angle, a show about cool people doing awesome things in and around Montana's. I'm your host, Justin Angle. This show is supported by First Security Bank Blackfoot Communications and the University of Montana College of Business.

Hey, folks, welcome back, and thanks for tuning in. Today's guest is Ross Douthat, opinion columnist for the New York Times and author of several books on various topics including religion, American decadence and his experience with chronic Lyme disease.

Ross Douthat This trend, where the working class used to be on the left and now votes for populist right wing parties and the professional class used to be more on the center right and now is on the center left seems to be just sort of a feature of the world of globalization.

Ross will be joining the University of Montana community as the president's lecture series speaker on March 2nd. His talk is titled How Reaganism Became Trumpism, and we're excited today to get a preview of that talk and explore some of Ross's other areas of expertise and interest. Ross, thanks for coming on the show today.

Ross Douthat Thanks so much for having me. It's a pleasure.

Justin Angle So tell us, where did you grow up and what did your parents do?

Ross Douthat So I was born in San Francisco in 1979. But, you know, for better or worse, we moved very quickly to the northeast of the United States. And so I ended up growing up in southern Connecticut, mostly in New Haven, Connecticut, where for a variety of strange reasons, I've ended up living once again. I'm talking to you from from New Haven, and my

father was a sort of reluctant member of the legal profession. When he met my mother, she was in grad school at Berkeley in English, and he had gone to law school, but was painting houses for a living and didn't particularly want to be a lawyer. But they ended up in New Haven. He ended up becoming a personal injury lawyer. That exciting portion of the law and my mother was mostly a homemaker when I was a kid, but has now reinvented herself as an essayist. She writes a lot of pieces for the religious magazine *First Things*. And My Dad Is Retired from the law, has published a book of poetry and paints. So really, you know, they've covered all the bases.

Justin Angle Yeah, certainly a lot of influences and paths in that family. How did you kind of find your way into journalism, opinion writing? Give us the sort of potted bio of how Ross Douthat got to where he is today.

Ross Douthat So I always mostly was sure that I wanted to be a writer, so I was always doing some kind of journalism. In high school my one of my best friends was a guy named Michael Barbaro, who some listeners may know as the host of *The Daily*. The New York Times is extremely popular podcast. And he and I this was a pretty small high school. He and I ran both the official school newspaper and the anonymous underground school newspaper, and we sort of, you know, had a kind of private newspaper war between those two publications. You know, I don't know if you could get away with that in the age of the internet, but so we were we were doing journalistic stuff from from the start and I ended up going to college and running the what was then the conservative newspaper at Harvard and also being a columnist, a sort of token conservative columnist for the more liberal Harvard *Crimson*. And getting a job from that, I was an intern at the conservative magazine *National Review*. But then nobody offered me a job as senior year of college, except at the last minute the owner of the *Atlantic* decided he wanted to start —back then, the *Atlantic* was based in Boston; he was in Washington; he wanted a satellite office in D.C. —and basically called up the Harvard *Crimson* and said, I want to interview, you know, interview some of your journalists for these entry level jobs. And I had

a friend who got me one of those interviews, and from there, I basically that was how I entered professional journalism.

Justin Angle Yeah. And so you mentioned writing kind of from the conservative perspective for a long time. Talk about how your sort of political sensibility developed. I know you've written extensively about religion, and religion is a recurring theme in your columns. Talk about that influence on your on your ideology.

Ross Douthat Yeah. So my my parents were, you know, I would say, sort of fairly conventional southern Connecticut liberals when I was growing up. One of my earliest political memories is going with my mom to cast a very lonely vote for Walter Mondale and Geraldine Ferraro and in 1984. But we had a lot of sort of eccentric interests and activities. When I was a kid, my mother had a lot of sort of allergies and sort of somewhat mysterious health problems. So we ended up spending a certain amount of time in the world of health food before Whole Foods. Basically, you know, before it was cool when it was, you know, aging hippies and huge disgusting blocks of tofu and small organic grocery stores. But then my mother also had a friend who invited her to go to these sort of essentially you'd call them Pentecostal list healing services, where she had a really strong, mystical experience that basically sort of redirected our religious life from a kind of respectable Episcopalians to a sort of weird journey through American Christianity where we were Pentecostals and evangelicals, and then ended up converting to Roman Catholicism as a family when I was like 16 or 17. So I had a real mix of influences. But the religious dimension, I think sort of inevitably, maybe not inevitably, but it did make me somewhat more culturally conservative, more skeptical of abortion, things like that. You know, and this was also the late 1990s, I think were in certain ways, a kind of intellectual high watermark for American conservatism. It felt like a lot of conservative ideas had been vindicated or partially vindicated. The Soviet Union had fallen crime rates had started to go down. There were just various ways in which conservatism looked somewhat different, shall we say.

Justin Angle Yeah.

Ross Douthat In 1998 and 1999 then and it did now. But so that was sort of the background. And then I, you know, some version of that has kind of stayed with me all through my professional life. I am, you know, I am a religious conservative of some kind who is more economically moderate or populist, you might say, than a lot of Republicans probably are.

Justin Angle So thinking a bit about that upbringing, you know, that might be a nice way to transition into kind of some of the themes of your upcoming talk here. How Reaganism became Trumpism, and is this some of that grounded in your experience of growing up in an area like southern Connecticut?

Ross Douthat I mean, my my overall perception of how Connecticut has changed politically, one, it's become just a more liberal and democratic state over the period from when I when I was a kid, when it was still plausible for it to go for Republicans in presidential elections, and now it very much is not. The other shift has been on the one hand, yes, there is a portion of super rich Connecticut that has remained Republican in a way that sort of defies some stereotypes of the American elite being hostile to Trump while the working class was favorable to him. That's always been an oversimplification, and there clearly is sort of a slice of, you know, sort of a slice of American money even on even in the Northeast that was still, if not happy, to vote for Trump at least willing to do so as an alternative to Democrats. And what's notable, if you look at Connecticut's geography, is that the places that have gotten more conservative and Republican are sort of, you know, rural working class. And even in the last election cycle, the place where Trump gained the most ground in Connecticut, as in Florida and Texas, was in Hispanic areas.

The macro level trend is one where the Republican Party has become this party of not the poor, right? Not, you know, not sort of the bottom 20 percent of America, but this range of sort of working class and middle class America, including now a bunch of recent immigrants and

including a lot of rich people who get rich outside of the professional classes. Right. So, you know, Trump had that line he was always repeating about our beautiful voters, these people who owned boats, right? And he did do sort of on the water rallies for Trump. And, you know, to generalize a little bit. A lot of those people were not people who were going to Harvard Law School and making their money in consulting or investment banking or working for Google or something. They were people who had made their money running family businesses and running car dealerships, which is real forms of wealth, right? There's there's real, real money there, but it's a different slice of wealth than the kind of Ivy League, Silicon Valley, Washington, Wall Street world, which has become more liberal and democratic. That's part of this transition of how the Republican Party has changed in the last 30 40 years.

What's notable is it tracks with trends all across the developed world. Like. In America because we're such a big and important country, we tend to be pretty parochial and we say, Oh, well, you know, we can we can trace all of these trends to specifically American histories and events. So you say, OK, the Republican Party has all the support in the South, and so we're going to talk all about the history of of race and reconstruction and civil rights in America, and all of that stuff is really important and illuminating. But the reality is that this trend where working the working class used to be on the left and now votes for populist right wing parties and the professional class used to be more on the center right and now is on the center left. You see that trend in France, you see that trend in Germany, you see that trend in Italy, you see it all over Western Europe. And it seems to be just sort of a feature of the world of globalization, in part where globalization was really good to really well-educated people with cosmopolitan values and was harder for middle to working class people, especially who worked in the industrial economy and parties of the center left the Democratic Party included became sort of the vehicles for a cosmopolitan liberalism of these winners and the Conservative Party that you know again historically represented the country club, right became in part, a vehicle for people who felt like they were losing ground under these. These new conditions, which is a really interesting, interesting trend.

Justin Angle Yeah, and layered within that, the liberal folks and cultural elites and a lot of voters that I know tend to say, like, why is it that all those Trump supporters vote against their self-interest? And that seems to be like a common stereotype that a lot of liberals hold. Describe how that slice of the population that you described a few moments ago came to favor the positions of the Republican candidates and a candidate like Trump in particular.

Ross Douthat There's a couple of things going on there, right? Which is, one is that part of the reality that is described in that question is just a reality that liberals should know well, too, right, which is that in a society that's pretty wealthy, that isn't thank god undergoing sort of Great Depression style economic disaster, people tend to put more priority on culture and cultural values sometimes than they do on economic values. And they tend to see their interests as bound up in culture as much as in economics. Right? So the claim that, oh, you know, people in Kansas who vote for the party of tax cuts for the rich are voting against their interests. That applies in the same way to, you know, cosmopolitan liberals on the Upper West side of Manhattan. They're voting for the party that, you know, theoretically wants to raise taxes on the rich. But they see other issues as more important. And so they're OK with that. There's a version of that that's true that people are just in both political coalitions are just prioritizing of cultural interests over economic interests and that that's something that happens in rich societies generally. But the other reality is that, you know, the Republican Party changed in different ways over the last 20 or 30 years, right? So George W. Bush was a very different kind of candidate than Bob Dole had been. In 1996, George W. Bush, he tried to woo middle-class voters by promising not just tax cuts for the rich, but to spend more money on education. Right? You know, no child left behind. He ended up expanding Medicare, all of these things, right? So for a certain segment of the middle class, voting for George W. Bush wasn't clearly against their economic interests.

And then in the era of the Tea Party and Paul Ryan and Mitt Romney, the Republican Party sort of swung more in a libertarian direction was more likely to urge cutting entitlements all of these things. And as a result, a bunch of voters who had voted for George W. Bush swung

back to the Democrats. So they they did vote their economic interests. They swung away from the Republicans as the Republicans became more. Cut government, cut taxes and cut government, right? And then Trump comes along, and he just jettisoned all of that. You know, all of Paul Ryan's beautiful blueprints for reforming Medicare, right? All of that stuff that, you know, for those of us who write about policy seemed so important in 2011 2012, Trump just swept it all away. And so in various ways, it wouldn't be surprising. Like if you were, let's say, a Hispanic small business owner in South Florida. Right? You know, you're not wealthy. You're also not poor. But you, you know, you see in Trump someone who is speaking not just to your cultural concerns about, you know, whatever the progressives are getting up to at Harvard and Yale, but also, you know, someone who's delivered, pre-COVID, a pretty good economy. There are ways in which for a portion of middle and working class America Republican policies, especially once Trump jettisoned some of the, you know, let's cut Medicare stuff became more economically appealing. And again, these these voters are not the they're not poor, right? The poorest Americans are either they're unlikely to vote, but they're also still more likely to vote Democratic. The core of this new populist conservatism is this sort of range of the wage earning working class, the small business owner that is economically precarious but not, you know, not deeply dependent on government programs in the day to day until they retire, when they expect to get Medicare and Social Security will

Justin Angle be back to my conversation with Ross Douthat after this short break.

Welcome back to New Angle. I'm speaking with New York Times opinion writer Ross Douthat about the state of American politics.

Trump sort of set a lot of the unsaid things that kind of existed almost between and distinct from the traditional party platforms. And then, as he's gaining connection, is sort of a populist with these new coalitions there is this kind of rise of, you know, when you layer in the, you know, George Floyd killing and the rise of social justice and woke-ism for lack of a better term.

It seems like the left what what Trumpism has done to the to the Democratic Party is really interesting to think about, too.

Ross Douthat Yes. Well, what's what's fascinating is that 10 to 12 years ago, again in the Tea Party era, there was a lot of political science work that emphasized how the Republican Party had sort of pulled the whole American political system off center by moving way to the right on a big range of issues. What happened with Trump was this weird combination where Trump was an extremist. He is an extremist in certain ways, in his contempt for political norms, his willingness to, you know, launch bogus accusations of voter fraud, know his insults and wild rhetoric and everything that is Trumpism right? But then on policy, he actually did, in certain ways, move the Republican Party back towards the center, especially on economic issues. And meanwhile, the Democratic Party, which, you know, while Trump was president, on the one hand, was spending tons of time talking about itself as the defender of norms. And, you know, sort of the the defender of sort of the defender of democracy, defender of American institutions on issues on ideological issues swung way to the left.

And this isn't just true on the issues that we think of as sort of the woke issues. It's also just true on economics too, right, that the we've just been through this period of intense and acrimonious democratic negotiation over the build back better bill. And in that negotiation, the position of Joe Manchin, who is now the conservative in the Democratic Party, and it sort of makes progressive groups very angry because of that mansion's position was the position of Barack Obama, right in 2010. The idea that you know you need your new spending to be paid for, you need to worry about the budget deficit, all of these things. And that's part of the the weirdness of our time, right? You have the Republican Party is more procedurally radical, more willing to, you know, say things and pick fights that, you know, seem to threaten sort of basic democratic values. But on the issues, it's a Democratic Party that's moved away from the center over this over this period. And the interaction between those two forces is part of what is obviously driving ongoing polarization in American life.

Justin Angle Well, it's funny. I think both Republicans and Democrats agree that democracy is is, you know, voting rights and democracy are under threat in some in some manifestation, but totally different mechanisms doing that threatening. You how you're writing and I've heard you speak about this is you're you're less concerned about the stability of democracy, the likelihood of civil war and other forms of political violence than other than another columnist and pundits at the moment. Talk about your, you know, talk about the state of play with our democracy right now and you know, are you more or less concerned than you were in 2020?

Ross Douthat So I mean, I always answer this by saying I am concerned about all of those issues. But I I write a column for the New York Times and I'm aware of where my readership stands and where my fellow columnists stand and where my papers editorial board stands. And relative to all three of those groups who are pretty important, the New York Times World, I am less concerned. Right. So just in a vacuum, I think American democracy is less stable than it was 20 years ago. Absolutely. I think what happened in the run up to January six was the kind of steps and things Donald Trump was willing to consider in steps we were willing to take, you know, were basically unprecedented and had real destabilizing potential.

What I am resistant to is, first, the sort of most extreme alarmism that says, you know, we're not just divided and in danger of some sort of constitutional crisis, but we're headed for some kind of like real breakup, civil war-style division. Part of my read on our situation, which could be wrong, but it is my read, is that the internet creates this zone of sort of hype and paranoia. And if you live in the politics of the internet, you feel like everything is coming apart. But that doesn't necessarily translate back into real world violence or real world disintegration to the extent that you might think if you were online all the time. And part of me wants to believe that some of the wildness of 2020 just reflected the incredibly unusual situation of going through a pandemic and having people be locked down for this long period of time with nothing but the internet to sort of interact with. And I think it drove part of the right crazy. I think it drove part of the left crazy and it gave us these sort of different manifestations of that craziness. But my hope is that as we continue to come out of the COVID era, you don't get that

kind of weird political psychological pressure on people that you had for six months to a year in 2020.

Justin Angle Yeah, I certainly appreciate that perspective and kind of I'm hopeful that's the way it plays out. I do feel like the media incentives in place don't they're not inclined to amplify your view of the world here. They're inclined to kind of inflame people and pull us further apart. And you talk a little bit about the media environment right now we're living

Ross Douthat through in sort of what you might call the liberal media, there is a little amplification of my views because every time I write something saying this, it's true, attacked by everybody and people invite me on their podcast to tell me why I'm wrong. So, you know, I think I I went on CNN after I rode one of these, you know, we're not headed for a civil war pieces and anderson Cooper said, Well, it's really good to have you on as a contrarian voice, Ross. And so, you know, I mean, I get I get I get my ideas out there. I think that the challenge, though, is that there is this sort of fundamental dynamic where the internet has made the media environment, much more ruthlessly competitive, much more nationalized, so local journalism and mid-sized newspapers and so on that have this local or regional focus are less important. So there's just this really strong premium on having your audience be scared that you know, things are all about to fall apart. And look, we've lived through a global pandemic. I'm sitting here talking to you. My Twitter feed is reporting people saying, you know, Putin has made the decision to invade Ukraine, right? Like this is a highly relative to 1997. This is a really unstable period. Donald Trump is really unstable, destabilizing. The media is not making this up, right? There are genuine things to be seriously concerned about, but the pressure is all the the commercial pressure, and let's be honest, is all to always hype that. It is hard psychologically to break out of that cycle of mutual escalation, in part because of the media incentives for everyone.

Justin Angle On a lighter note, I think I mean, you write about a lot of serious topics, important topics, thoughtful topics you come across as very serious guy. Or what do you do for fun? What puts a smile on your face?

Ross Douthat There's no such thing as fun in this business, my friend. I mean, we have four kids. Yeah, OK. Our age 11, nine, six and almost two. And honestly, the most fun that I've had throughout the pandemic, and I mean, this totally sincerely, is that we just started started when we were everyone was in quarantine and it couldn't go anywhere indoors. But you know, we have a minivan. Bundle The kids into the minivan. They're strapped in so they can't assault each other. You get yourself a nice, a nice cafe latte like a good northeastern liberal, presumably in Montana, people would drink something stronger. And you drive around and we don't have the insane natural beauty that you have out in the west on the East Coast. But we have a lot of really nice state parks. A lot of nice, you know, woods and streams and beaches and so on, and Sunday afternoon drive walking around outside for a couple of hours, letting the kids blow off steam, having a tiny bit of adult time in the front seat with your with your wife, maybe taking her to an antique store. That is for better or worse than on some bike riding is a big part of what I've done for fun in the pandemic. I mean, I also I write movie reviews for National Review. I consume a lot of pop culture and read a lot of fantasy novels and so on. But in terms of stuff that I think about from the last couple of years, it's those drives around Connecticut with with the family to get out of the house and get out into reality that are really important. There's this expression that people use in the very online world of touch of grass. Have you ever heard that expression?

Justin Angle Vaguely. Tell us about it.

Ross Douthat Yeah, we just I think it just means that, you know, we all live in these virtual worlds more and more, and it's really important to literally touch grass. Maybe touch a basin, you know, depending on which part of the country you're in. But getting getting out of your

screen and getting out into the world, I think is just a really important feature of seeing the world clearly and not just through the prism of your iPhone.

Justin Angle Absolutely. Well, hopefully when you're here in Montana, you'll have an opportunity to do at least a little bit of that. Again, Ross's talk will be in person at seven p.m. on Thursday, March 2nd in the Denison Theater at the University of Montana. For tickets visit www.umt.edu/president. Ross, it's been fantastic learning more about you and your work today. I think you'll find an intriguing and engaged audience here in Montana. And yeah, we're looking forward to having you on campus. Thanks for being here today

Ross Douthat and I'm looking forward to coming. Thanks so much for having me.

Justin Angle Thanks for listening to A New Angle. We really appreciate it. And we're coming to you from Studio 49, a generous gift from University of Montana alums Michelle and Loren Hansen. A New Angle is presented by first security bank Blackfoot Communications and the University of Montana College of Business, with additional support from consolidated electrical distributors, Drum Coffee and Montana Public Radio.

Aj Williams is our producer. VOT, Jeff Amentt and John Wicks made our music. Editing by Nick Mott and Jeff Meese is our master of all things sound. Thanks a lot. See you next time.