

## **A New Angle**

### **Episode 96**

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

**Justin Angle:** Hey, folks, welcome back and thanks for tuning in. Today, I'm speaking with Celinda Lake and Ed Goeas, award winning political pollsters and strategists who came together to write A Question of Respect: Bringing Us Together in a Deeply Divided Nation.

**Celinda Lake:** There's a lot of toxic incentives right now for bad behavior for the best of the politicians.

**Justin Angle:** The book is an exploration of how America grew so divided and how we might come back together. Celinda and Ed recently visited the University of Montana to speak at the Mansfield Center, and we were fortunate to get some time with them. Ed, Celinda, thanks for coming on the show.

**Celinda Lake:** Thanks for having us.

**Ed Goeas:** Glad to be on.

**Justin Angle:** So, tell us, where did you grow up and what did your parents do? Ed let's start with you.

**Ed Goeas:** So, I grew up as what they call an Army brat. And so, my father went in the military when I was six weeks old, headed down to Fort Bliss, Texas. My entire time growing up, he was in the military. Start with the artillery, ended with air defense, nuclear missiles in Europe. He was an interesting guy in himself in that he when he was walking home after serving mass when he was a young teenager, saw the smoke coming up from Pearl Harbor. And from that day on, all he ever wanted to do is go in the military. So, he was he was a romantic about his patriotism, but it was a good upbringing.

**Justin Angle:** Celinda, Montana is your home state.

**Celinda Lake:** It is.

**Justin Angle:** Tell us, where did you grow up and where did your parents do?

**Celinda Lake:** I grew up on a ranch between Livingston and Bozeman, and they were ranchers. And then my dad became a cattle buyer and realtor.

**Justin Angle:** Okay.

**Celinda Lake:** And my mom was very much as in ranch and farm families, it was very much a team effort. And I went to Bozeman public schools from kindergarten through high school and then went out of state to college. My parents were originally from New York City. Love Montana. Adored that they had picked this as a place to live. But they said to my brother and myself, you can choose Montana, but we don't want you to default to it. So, they always said they want us to go out, see the other side of the mountain, go out of state to college, then come back if we could, and wanted to or not if we didn't.

**Justin Angle:** So, the two of you present an image that we don't often see in our current moment. Two, what appear to be, wonderful friends. Ed, you're a Republican strategist and pollster, Celinda, a Democratic strategist and pollster, yet the two of you collaborate, appear to be really good friends. How did your kind of friendship and partnership come to be?

**Celinda Lake:** So, you're right about our friendship, which is very, very deep in the book we have standing back-to-back. And for both of us, that meant we've had each other's back for our friendship. And I have no greater friend or colleague than Ed. I think our friendship has been helped by the fact that I was born and raised a Republican, became a Democrat in the same year that Ed was born and raised a Democrat, became a Republic. So that was pretty funny. And Ed always gives me that he chose the winning side. But so, we've always had a great deal of respect for people from the other party and never been polarized in that regard. We actually

first met and started collaborating in a piano bar in Hungary, in Budapest, where we were both working on elections and democracy. When we talked about the fact that there was no really good polling that showed each partisan perspective. There was a lot of bipartisan polling, but it was really mushed down. And so, we came up with this really exciting idea that continues but went on for over 30 years of writing a questionnaire together. And then each of us writing our own separate analysis and not getting to see that analysis until the night before we released the poll. And it was a real learning device because I learned a lot about how Ed would look at the same data. And I think it was very useful for reporters and a whole political community because it was a rare introduction to how that analysis gets done.

**Justin Angle:** Yeah, and that's the Battleground poll that you mentioned, that's been going on over 30 years?

**Celinda Lake:** Yeah, 32 years.

**Justin Angle:** So, Ed, your story about how the two of you connected?

**Ed Goetas:** Oh, I think it was very much that. And I think we kind of fell into the respect by saying, we didn't have to fight over what we were going to say on the data and every survey has good news and bad news for both sides. That's very often what's not told. We got to see, I got to see her talent. I will tell you, one of the things I respected most about Celinda, and I

hope this doesn't get you in trouble with the Democrats, but the Democrats very often use polling for press release.

**Justin Angle:** Okay.

**Ed Goetas:** Celinda didn't. I mean, she looked at the data and if it was good news, she focused on the good news. And if it was bad news, she focused on the bad news and she approached it from an almost a I put the term military intelligence officer. You know, here is the intelligence, and I'm going to tell you what it says, and then you can decide from there where we go from there, as opposed to trying to drive it from the very beginning. And I've developed a great deal of respect for her on that. You know, I saw in her I think some of it was the age that we were both getting involved in it. You know, people that got involved back in the early seventies in politics, first of all, those that were working for the committees and in the field, it was like cowboy time. I mean, it was the wild, wild west. And the people that were doing it were basically there for a reason. They were there because they believed in something. They wanted to make the country better. I like to think some of the kids getting into it today have that same feeling, but I sometimes question whether they do.

**Justin Angle:** Yeah. Well, we'll get into some of those dimensions, into your wonderful book here in a moment. But as a setup to that, we are living through a really interesting time politically. It's quite polarized. It's arguably dysfunctional. There's debate as to how at risk our democracy is. My sense is that the two of you feel like this is a perilous moment that we're

living through. Set the stage. What do you think the state of our democracy is at the moment?

And we'll sort of thread that into why this was the right time to write a book like this.

**Celinda Lake:** We started to do a poll called a Civility Poll, where we looked at what do Americans think about where we're at and they think we're on the verge of civil war. And that was really a shocker, that there was that level of intensity and that level of upset. And there's been a dramatic decline in trust in almost every institution, dramatic decline in trust in involvement in government, even at the local level, which is still the most trusted level. And both of us firmly, firmly believe in democracy and believe in voting and have confidence in voters. We trust the voters, or we wouldn't be able to study them every day. So, this is very, very disturbing. And what we started to look at our what are the structural components that are producing this and how do we get out of it, if we can? We have a chapter in the book called Toxic Incentives of Bad Behavior. And whether you're talking about winning a primary nomination or how people serve in office, how they raise money, how they get their districts, who participates in primaries versus generals, there's a lot of toxic incentives right now for bad behavior for the best of the politicians.

**Ed Goeas:** I would add another thing to the environment, and it's something that I've for years with the members of Congress that we've elected and try to work with them. First of all, I would say up until about 20 years, almost everyone who ran for Congress had a fairly deep sense of what they thought the role of government should be. And so, you could work all the issues around a discussion of what is the role of government and to what extent we should do

this as opposed to very often today we find ourselves just trying to keep the other side from passing something that they get credit for. And the Senate is very much geared that way these days and over the years tried to teach people basic problem solving because I saw that as a major problem. Even candidates on the Republican side that would claim I'm a businessman. I know how, you know. I see them claiming to be a businessman, but not bringing basic things that come with being a businessman, which is understanding problem solving. And so, they're going through cycle after cycle after cycle of this, that they're now dealing in large part with problems created by their solutions and not the root problem. And that is creating a real deep cynicism amongst the voters, distrust for the institutions, distrust for others that are not part of their silo. But the problem with that cynicism and we've seen it come to fruition in recent years, is the cynical voter thinking that they are being protective for themselves tend to lean in towards demagoguery that much more. And so, whether you look at the demagoguery that's going on in social media or the demagoguery that's going on cable news or the demagoguery that goes on with super PACs in campaigns or presidential candidates in the last few years, they grabbed on to the demagoguery, not necessarily knowing that they were grabbing on for a specific issue as much as they seemed to be fighting for them. And certainly, saw that as a Republican with so many people saying that Trump was speaking to them, he wasn't. He was just being Trump. But they view that demagoguery as fighting for them. And I think that was unfortunate.

**Justin Angle:** So, within that dynamic, we're also experiencing this phenomenon where it's the rewards to kind of policing within your own side are greater than the rewards to reaching

across. It's easier or there's more rewards for a Democrat to get in a fight with another Democrat than it is for a Democrat to sort of try to collaborate with a Republican and vice versa. Would you agree with that assessment? And then why do you think that's come to pass?

**Celinda Lake:** There's very little reward for crossing the aisle and working together. Part of that is the decline in primary participation so that you now have 13 to 15% participating in primaries. And they tend to nominate people who are at the polls of their party. Campaigns have concentrated on mobilizing voters as opposed to persuading voters. Now, you also have a situation where the way people raise money. And one of the things that's really cool about the book is we agreed on the problems, but we provided different solutions because we didn't necessarily agree on the solutions. But we both agree that campaign finance is a big, big problem. And the incentive structure now is when Marjorie Taylor Greene very disrespectfully interrupts the president, which wasn't really tolerated on either side of the aisle. She raised a million and a half dollars in 24 hours. So that's an incredibly toxic incentive for bad behavior if you can raise that kind of money. And then the last thing we talk about in the book is people used to know each other better. Under Newt Gingrich for well-intentioned, it's Ed's theory of problem solving, Newt Gingrich said, let's get back to the districts more. Let's design a schedule. You don't move your families to D.C., you get back to the district. You stay more in touch with your constituents. Well, actually, it hasn't worked that way. And one of the ways in which it's worked is it means you don't they don't know each other. People, including our Montana congressmen, sleeping in their offices, their kids don't play on the same baseball



team. Their wives are not involved in the same or spouses involved in the same charity in the same neighborhood, coaching each other's kids, socializing, and so they don't really get to know each other. And it's a lot harder to come to common ground.

**Ed Goetas:** I want to go back to the primary problem, a little bit. When I looked at kind of the history of that in the 1980s, 1990s, you had about 35% of Republicans voting in Republican primaries and about 35% of Democrats voting Democrat primaries. In 2022, 17% of Republicans voted in the Republican primaries and 15% of Democrats. And so, you have the polarized ends that are the ones that are getting nominated. So, the center who is not participating in the primaries have no choice but to pick someone that is from the far right or the far left that they think their whole job is to fight. Fact we asked a survey question. We did it individually and then combined it of do you want a member of Congress who will stick to their values, even if it means that they don't get anything done. And we got 64% saying yes to that. We then asked, would you like someone that compromises on their values in order to get some solutions to the problems that affect you? We had 65% say yes to that. Now, Celinda often points out, that voters very often hold contradictory views, and they hate it when you point it out to them. So rather than point it out to them, we then asked to combine between the two and it ended up 68 to 30. 35, 68% said, I want you to compromise your values to find solutions. Problem is that 30% is who's voting the 15% in the two primaries. They're electing people that way to prove their worth after they're elected is to go and fight, not to go and find solutions. And I think that's a shame. And there's a lot of groups out there, Celinda's involved with some I've been involved with, some that are looking at different ways of voting, like rank order

voting. I do emphasize that don't get caught up in the solution as much as the test on whether it's working. And the test on whether it's working is if you're increasing participation on picking the actual nominees who we then pick in the general election, then you're successful.

**Justin Angle:** We'll be back to our conversation with Celinda Lake and Ed Goeas after this short break.

**Justin Angle:** Welcome back to A New Angle. I'm speaking with Democratic strategist Celinda Lake and Republican strategist Ed Goeas about their 30-year collaboration in politics.

**Justin Angle:** Back to your point about the changes in kind of the structure of how the operation runs, Congress runs under Newt Gingrich. You know, I was reading reporting about and forgive me if I can't recall the name of this caucus, but a bipartisan caucus that was committed to solving problems together.

**Ed Goeas:** Problem solvers.

**Justin Angle:** Yeah. And just the difficulty this group had in simple things like figuring out how to meet. Finding a room where they were allowed to be with a member of the other party. It seemed like just some of these structural logistical arrangements go against the sort of collaboration that the premise of this conversations that we need. How do we undo some of those basic constraints? Is that possible?

**Ed Goeas:** Again, a lot of it goes back to having a discussion about possible problems coming from the solutions, at least putting it on the calendar that you need to revisit that at some point. For example, the last campaign finance reform law, which basically took away from money going in to the party, weakened the parties nationwide, but then gave all their money to special interest groups through the super PACs. And one of the frustrating things being in campaigns today is that you're lucky if you control 25% of your message because you have your money, you have your opponent's money, you have your super PACs that are trying to help you and those that are trying to help your opponent. I like to think I've built a reputation on running a positive campaign. But there were several examples I could give you of positive campaigns that we were winning the campaign until the super PAC that was supposedly our friend came in attacking our opponent, contradicting the type of campaign we were trying to run.

**Celinda Lake:** And there's no coordination on it. And you don't have the kind of internal controls. It's so difficult to run for office now. And thanks to Democrats, Independents and Republicans who do it, these are public servants. Absolutely. And they get a much better, much more fluent, affluent lives doing something else. But that said, when they're running their own message and they should have control over their own message. You have a spouse who will say, honey, that's not you. I don't want you on there like that. Or a candidate who will say, I don't want to be like that. That's not me. I don't want my kids to see me like that. And you have none of those controls. And so, it leads to much more negative campaigning, much

harsher campaigning, which then increases cynicism, which then increases polarization. So, we're in a real death spiral.

**Ed Goetas:** We kind of highlight three major areas in the book. One is social media. One is super PACs and campaign finance. And we do have different opinions on that. And one is...

**Celinda Lake:** Cable news.

**Ed Goetas:** Cable news. And clearly, if you look at both cable news and what they're doing and you look at the social media and what they're doing with algorithms, all they're doing is taking these people, feeding them more of the information that goes along the lines they're already thinking and create silos out there that are becoming increasingly hard to bust people out of.

**Celinda Lake:** We're really concerned about the impact of social media. That's influencing cable news as well. Reporters who get on cable news and speakers on cable news are judged less by the audience that they have on the cable news than they are by the clicks they get afterwards.

**Justin Angle:** Sure, like using cable news to create a spot that they can then push out on their Twitter or their Instagram or whatever.

**Celinda Lake:** Exactly. And it's very polarizing.

**Justin Angle:** It warps the whole process.

**Celinda Lake:** And then the algorithms continue that warping. And the public is really upset that they can't find multiple sources of information. They can't find independent sources of information.

**Justin Angle:** So, in our remaining time, I'd love to kind of press a little bit more on some of the solutions you propose. We're living through a time where it's hard to get anything done right. I mean, hard enough to solve a problem, let alone be able to reflect on the solution you constructed. What are some ideas that you think actually stand a chance of coming to pass that can happen at the state level or at the at the federal level in Congress, whatever.

**Ed Goeas:** Unlike Celinda, I retired at the end of the year from my firm, and I'm going to spend the next two years working on the civility issue. Maybe we can start highlighting some leaders and encouraging them to become leaders that light the way for the youth. On how to make these changes and to make that a major emphasis for them. And then bring the youth into it because, you know, I think we may have I hate to put it this way, we may have one more presidential race of two old guys running, but I no longer say we need a younger candidate because younger could be 65. I think time is going to come here where we're going to find a candidate running for president who is charismatic, who is younger, who is a good bridge to the different generations, and hopefully have an emphasis on civility and respect and dealing

with it that way. And I think if we get that candidate, we may begin to move it. We have to do some things in social media to make that better. We certainly have to start putting the pressure on the cable news networks to stop what they're doing. And I think we've seen CNN respond to that a little bit. And then we certainly have to do something about campaign finance.

**Celinda Lake:** I think that there are other there are both informal and formal structures that have to change. So, I'm very interested in some of the informal structures. There's an organization, the Bipartisan Policy Group, which is organizing kind of fellowships, if you will, where they send a member from a red district into a member's district for a week in a blue district and vice versa. And I think that's very eye opening. And they, you know, see that there's lots more common ground, see why people hold certain views. One of the policies we've worked a lot about and it came out of working Montana, the issue area that the inner cities of America and the rural areas of America most agree on is expanding access to broadband. There should be a very strong bipartisan coalition on that issue and see where that's a partisan issue.

**Ed Goetas:** And I would just add with the Bipartisan Policy Center, is that what I've seen and the exposure in seeing some of these members is it's almost going back to the old days where they're developing real friendships. So even if they don't totally agree with each other, they're at least working to get to that common ground where they can move forward with solutions.

**Celinda Lake:** And then the second thing I think we need is we do need to get social media under control. And the way that we have a monopoly structure there, I mean, there's strong bipartisan agreement in breaking up the monopoly structures and having some accountability, having more transparency on these algorithms. And I think the youth will push this because it is their first language. They are so savvy about this. And then we have to as voters and as consumers of information, we're going to have to insist on changes. A couple of the students that we've been working with have said, you know, that they stop themselves from liking something that they would have liked before, but they didn't want to promote the division and the polarization and don't want to also participate in the division but find more common ground. If we turn off the shows and the cable news when it doesn't present both points of view, then we have a real say. And if we vote for candidates or run a positive campaigns instead of negative campaigns, we have a real impact.

**Justin Angle:** You two have been observing this system for decades. You've been participating in it. Ed, you mentioned you've retired from running campaigns. But what role do strategists and pollsters like you play in, you know, making choices about what candidates you work for, shaping the message? I know you said there's limitations on how much of that message you can actually control coming out of the candidate. But what role do strategists like you play in getting us to this moment, but also that the solutions moving ahead?

**Celinda Lake:** I think the consulting class is really a very retro class and I am part of it, but I don't think we're going to see real leadership from the consulting class. It's conservative, not in

an ideological sense, but it's profit driven. It has very old notions. Ed has a favorite quote of mine where he will argue sometimes with the rest of the consultants who say negative works, negative works. And Ed goes, yeah, positive does too. It would be nice to try it for a change, right? So, but you can't even if you're one lone voice at the table, you can't get that to happen. So, I don't think the changes are going to come from the consulting class for the most part. But I think the candidates and their families, and their supporters are sick to death of this downward spiral, and they are making big sacrifices to be in office. And they, you know, are as upset by some of the things that some of the members do. And then I think we have to promote better journalism. And I think we talked today about the terrible loss of Chuck Johnson, our one of our really noble reporters in Montana.

**Justin Angle:** That's right.

**Celinda Lake:** Who asked very tough questions. I have been questioned by Chuck Johnson on both sides of the aisle and always sought to present fair and honest assessments and real information to voters. And he's a real hero of mine.

**Ed Goeas:** I still think we could make it better. And I again, I think we need leaders to show the way. And one of the things I say about my career is that I was blessed with working with some great people. All along the years that kind of kept me on that path of being a nice guy. As opposed to believing I had to be a real jerk in order to win campaigns. And that's a message that I'm going to leave, I think, this year as I leave the firm, that you don't have to be that way.



You don't have to be Donald Trump consultant. You know, I think we do in our politics too much focus on what we're against instead of what we're for. And I think that's unfortunate for our country because we're not percolating our candidate's ideas with what they're for and what they want to do with people which they had 30 years ago. Yeah, but they don't seem to have as much today as am I going to fight that fight and show that I'm sticking with the values to win that primary. I'm more positive we can make that by having people that kind of stand up at the end of their careers and say, look, this is the way I got here, and if you respect me and what I got here, this is a way that you can look at doing.

**Celinda Lake:** And I think that we have to have a system. My first political job in Washington was with our Congressman, Pat Williams. And when I first went into his office, I was getting the briefing. He said, I want you to understand that I'm engaged in a 25-year conversation with the voters of Montana about investing in education and hardrock mining. And that has stuck with me. We need more leaders who go back to their voters and don't trick them with social media and 30 second campaign ads but engage in an ongoing dialog. Part of the reason they don't do that is because they're so busy raising money and they tend to raise the money from people outside their districts. So, one way or the other, we have to get campaign finance reform so that more people can say, I'm going to explain to you what I'm thinking. I want to hear your reaction to it. I want to make this work for all of us.

**Justin Angle:** Wonderful. Well, the book is A Question of Respect: Bringing Us Together in a Deeply Divided Nation. Celinda, Ed, it's wonderful to hear your perspectives on the moment

we're in and some of the solutions that might move us forward. But it's also wonderful to see two folks with very different political perspectives working together to advance our society. So, thank you for that work and thank you for being here at the University of Montana today.

**Celinda Lake:** Thank you for your work.

**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 UM Alums, Michele and Loren Hansen.

**Justin Angle:** 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. Keely Larson is our producer. VTO, Jeff Amentt and John Wicks made our music. Editing by Nick Mott, Social Media by Aj Williams, and Jeff Meese is our master of All Things Sound. Thanks a lot, and see you next time.