Gemma: Hello, I'm Gemma Ware in London,

Dan: And I'm Dan Merino in San Francisco. Welcome to The Conversation Weekly.

Dan: One thing that I found really interesting recently is the way that the entire country in the UK – from the conservative politicians in parliament all the way down to random people on the street – all turned on Liz Truss and kicked her out as prime minister because that could just never happen in the United States. You could never get such unified support against a person.

Gemma: Yeah, it was an actually remarkably unifying moment where most of the country seemed completely to turn against the prime minister in a very short space of time. We're obviously not alien to polarisation here though in the UK we've just had Brexit. It's still a very divisive issue.

Dan: Mm-hmm.

Gemma: So I wouldn’t say we are free from it, but right this moment was pretty unique in our recent political history. But you know, when we hear about politics globally, it's often couched in these terms about polarisation. Well, we're at the worst point ever.

Dan: Absolutely! And that's how it feels in the United States, like Donald Trump famously said, he could walk down Fifth Avenue in New York City, shoot somebody and barely lose any support. And there's a certain grain of truth to that. And as you say, Gemma, it feels like this is happening all over the world.

Gemma: Yeah, from Brazil to Brexit to Italy, it can feel like we're at our most polarised right now. But I actually wanted to find out if that's true. Are we at our most polarised? So I went out and found somebody who's been looking at the data to answer that question.

Jennifer McCoy: If we look worldwide, what we see is recently in the 21st century, a rising trend since about 2005 across the world, everywhere except Oceania, which is basically New Zealand and Australia. Every other region is rising in this polarisation.

Gemma: This is Jennifer McCoy, a professor of political science at Georgia State University in Atlanta, Georgia in the US. She's an expert in how countries polarise and depolarise. The data she uses for a lot of her research comes from an institute in Sweden called the Varieties of Democracy Institute, or VDEM. Every year they survey experts around the world asking them to rate their country on the degree to which society has divided into political camps that are hostile towards each other.

Jennifer: They've gone backwards in time to create this indicator going all the way back to 1900 and up to the present. Looking at this data, the world was extremely polarised during the world wars, so we're talking about
war—violent conflict—and then other countries, what we see, they can go in periods. There was a period preceding in Latin America, the arrival of military dictatorships in the 1960s and 70s, so that was extremely polarised and countries that were in independent struggles. So, post-colonialism in Africa, in Asia, those can be very polarising. So it partly varies by region.

**Gemma:** So, it's not necessarily that we're the most polarised that we've ever been, but it's increasing in most places.

**Jennifer:** Yes.

**Dan:** It's useful to actually hear the data on this, cause it certainly feels bad.

**Gemma:** Yeah, I agree. I was surprised too. I would've thought we would've been at our most polarised, and we should actually be clear what we mean here, right? This isn't about conflict between two countries, say like Russia and Ukraine, or even a global split in the way different parts of the world like the US or China might think about each other, but it's actually what's going on inside a country and inside its society, how polarised it is there. And Dan, I got thinking about this kind of internal polarisation after this episode we did a couple of weeks ago about Brazil and the situation there ahead of its election and it got me thinking about how do you get out of this situation? How do you depolarise a country that's incredibly divided? And how do you bring people back together if they're already miles and miles apart in the way they think about their own country and their own identity.

**Dan:** That's an excellent question, Gemma and an important one too, because people are always pointing to polarisation as this problem, but very few people talk about how to actually solve it other than like, be nice to your neighbour and assume they're also a human too. But it's so vague, like how do we actually fix this on a national level?

**Gemma:** Exactly! And that's what I've been looking at for this episode. What techniques might actually work to depolarise a deeply divided country? And Jennifer McCoy is actually a really great person to talk to about this because she's currently writing a book about depolarisation. And when I asked her about how she got into thinking about this idea in the first place, she said, it all began in Venezuela.

**Jennifer:** I was studying Venezuela as a researcher, as an academic. I'd written a lot about its politics, and then I also became involved with Jimmy Carter's Center for Peace, Mediation and Democracy Support that he established after his presidency. So, I was the director for the Americas program.

**Gemma:** This is what she was doing in 1998 when Venezuela elected Hugo Chavez as president. Six years earlier, Chavez had led a failed military coup and then spent time in prison for it. But his popularity grew and as he campaigned for the 98 elections, he promised to bring about tremendous change.

**Jennifer:** The Carter Center was invited as election observers, and we came to know Hugo Chavez and many of the players. So when they had a really severe political conflict, about three years later into his term and an attempted military coup – he asked us to mediate with his political opposition, and so we did that for two years, worked with the Organization of American States and the United Nations to try to help resolve the conflict before it would turn violent.
**Gemma:** Tensions remained very high.

**Jennifer:** It became, for example, very difficult to even find a place to bring the two sides together because even spatially and geographically, you know, different buildings, different neighbourhoods were seen as either pro-government or anti-government, and both sides didn't wanna meet in the same place. So we had to find neutral places to meet, which was difficult. And we saw the media polarised, almost two virtual realities if you watched the state owned television versus the privately owned television. We began to see people referring to those on the other side in very negative terms as well as the political leaders demonising the other side and sort of creating enemies.

**Gemma:** Through negotiations, the situation eventually calmed down, but the die had been cast.

**Jennifer:** Chavez turned out to be a very confrontational and controversial leader, and I watched that society divide and polarise and eventually democracy erode, and now I would say it's a failed democracy. And so, I was very concerned about this whole process.

**Gemma:** Jennifer began to notice similar dynamics happening in other countries.

**Jennifer:** Egypt after the Arab Spring, and with the coup against their first elected leader. Countries like Turkey and Hungary, and then even in the United States. So I started the research project diagnosing the problem, and with a group of international scholars – we found very similar dynamics across these countries on how polarisation works and how it harms democracy.

**Gemma:** Let's concentrate for a moment here on what Jennifer means when she talks about polarisation, because the term can mean different things to different people.

**Jennifer:** It’s traditionally been used in the United States to refer just to differences among political parties or citizens on issues or their ideological vision for the society. More recently, it's been used to measure what is called affective polarisation, which is basically how much do voters dislike other parties or candidates.

**Gemma:** Affective polarisation is a concept used by political psychologists to track the intensity of animosity that people feel towards those who support a different political party to them, and the bias they feel towards those who support the same party. It's often used to measure political partisanship, for example, the way Trump supporters feel about Biden supporters in the US. But it can be used in relation to political stances too. So for example, in the UK over the question of Brexit, how much people who supported remain dislike and distrust people who supported Brexit and feel more positive towards people who voted remain. But when Jennifer talks about polarisation, she's talking about it in a wider sense.

**Jennifer:** What I'm talking about in my research with my colleagues is something broader and more fundamental. It's the process of simplifying politics in a way that creates two opposing and mutually distrustful political camps. So it does this most often when some political leaders or wannabe leaders use a polarising strategy to divide people into us versus them camps. And what they do is actually minimise the crosscutting ties that a normal democracy has, where people can connect on different dimensions of identity and interest with others. And instead, the two camps end up seizing communication and interaction. They no longer feel like they can compromise, or if they compromise, it will be giving up their own values or status.
**Gemma:** OK. It's almost like the polarisation is being caused by actual decisions within political parties or strategies by say politicians or other figures who are actually seeking to polarise. That's what you mean?

**Jennifer:** Yes. Well, we have found in fact that it is often led by political leaders, political entrepreneurs, ambitious people who know that using this kind of divisive language and rhetoric and creating an enemy, identifying an enemy or scapegoat for problems is a winning electoral strategy. And we're talking mostly about democracies here or flawed democracies. So it, it's a winning strategy because if you can create outrage or anger or resentment among people – they will look to you as a way to defend them and protect them from this other side that has now been identified as an enemy threatening them. So we see this polarising strategy as very nefarious and very often used by politicians.

**Dan:** Well, that's very disappointing, but I can't say I'm surprised. I'm all too familiar here in the United States with politicians using polarisation as a tool to build up an impenetrable base of support that just is founded on hating the other.

**Gemma:** Yeah, and it's definitely not unique to the United States, right? It's happening in Europe, it's happening in Asia, it's happening in Africa. This kind of stoking of hatred of the other group, but we should stress, it's not just about left versus right, it's actually much, much broader than that. Divisions in society can be caused by a whole range of things. You know, whether it's about identity politics and religious belief or immigration, or your views on particular social issues like abortion in the US so it isn't just I'm on the left and you're on the right and that's why we hate each other.

**Dan:** Of course, But no matter what the actual spectrum of division we're talking about here, none of it's very good for democracy, I gotta imagine.

**Gemma:** No, exactly. And Jennifer's actually come up with a term called pernicious polarisation that she's used to try and quantify just how dangerous it is for democracy.

**Jennifer:** We call it pernicious because it has pernicious consequences for democracy. And it is basically when there's been some kind of political strategy dividing a society. And what happens then is through this divisive language, demonising, people become suspicious, distrust the other side, have negative opinions about them, see the other side as dishonest or lazy or, um, traitorous to the country, disloyal to the country. So you have mutual perceptions of existential threat. If we let that group or that political group into power, or let them stay in power they are threatening my way of life, or they're threatening our national identity. And that is what leads people to say, OK, I'm willing to give up democracy in order to keep my people in no matter what. Or keep those people out. Or get them out – even if it takes undemocratic actions. So that's partly why we're seeing people continuing to vote for leaders who are actually eroding democracy. It's because they think it's very important to keep those leaders in. And keep the other side out.

**Gemma:** And what about right now? What examples could we point to of pernicious polarisation going on today?

**Jennifer:** The large, multiracial, or multicultural democracies are three of the top: US, India and Brazil.

**Gemma:** Is there a reason for that, that this is happening in multicultural places? Are multicultural places more likely to be polarised?
Jennifer: It's not necessarily the case. So the Philippines has a number of different ethnic groups. They don’t meet this measure of polarisation, even though they have had what we think is a very controversial leader. The society was actually very supportive of Duterte.

Gemma: Rodrigo Duterte was president of the Philippines from 2016 until June this year.

Jennifer: But in these three large democracies, first, they're all federal societies, and so they have state levels and kind of regional and state interest and leaders. And then you have the national level. So there's some contestation over the powers of each and how they're gonna interrelate. But also in the US I would say it's changing demographics and so people are hearing all the time, we're becoming a majority-minority country, that is whites will no longer be the majority racial group by 2040 or 2050. And when people hear that, they may feel threatened. In India, it's interesting because it's not that there's been that much demographic change, but again, it became a polarising strategy of one leader, Modi, the current leader and his party that had an ideology of Hindu nationalism, and that has been used with political rhetoric to create this conflict between Hindus and Muslims.

Dan: Well, I find this to be an interesting point here, Gemma. The fact that not all multicultural societies are by definition divided and polarised, but that when there is a tendency towards polarisation, and this happens in a multicultural society, there's kind of a feedback loop there almost. They play off of each other in a potentially dangerous way.

Gemma: Yeah, and in a multicultural society, that's where political rhetoric has a really important part to play because it's actually used by politicians, leaders to exacerbate and emphasize that difference between groups. And then you get to a point where people from one group just wanna avoid talking or interacting with people from the other identity altogether. And that's where it becomes really pernicious as Jennifer would say.

Dan: Hmm, And this idea of being bad or dangerous for democracy, that's the bigger point here, right? For democracy to work, people need to talk to each other and have faith that the other group is working in good faith. They've gotta understand the other view If they're gonna arrive at compromise.

Gemma: Exactly. That is what a functioning democracy should be about. Compromising. We're all citizens of the same place. And if we can't do that, it just creates even more polarisation. And I've actually been speaking to somebody else, a philosopher called Robert Talisse, who's really worried about that question of how dangerous this polarisation is for democracy.

Robert Talisse: My name is Robert Talisse. I'm a professor of philosophy and political science at Vanderbilt University in Nashville, Tennessee in the States.

Gemma: Robert had always been interested in how democracies can fail, but he began to focus on polarisation in 2016, when Donald Trump beat Hillary Clinton to the US presidency.

Robert: I had a conversation with a friend who was preparing for Thanksgiving dinner. Uh, and her family was being invited to her, her house for Thanksgiving dinner for the first time that she was hosting it. And she was really worried that Thanksgiving dinner would be a catastrophe because of the political divisions in her family. And, and I said to my friend, I said, look, couldn't you just send an email out to all the people who are coming that just says something like, we're getting together for Thanksgiving. The point of Thanksgiving is to,
you know, see each other after a year and reconnect with family and friends, and maybe we're just not getting together to talk about politics. So why don't you just say, we're, we're getting together for something else. And she confessed to finding the very idea, very puzzling. So the, the way I got into this was thinking that, well, wait a minute. The very idea of a social gathering that's not orchestrated or organised around political ideals, was something that was becoming increasingly alien to us. Um, and I started looking into the data and was discovering that these were robust trends that the United States was very quickly becoming a country segregated according to partisan loyalty.

**Gemma:** Robert has written about what he calls two distinct types of polarisation. The first is political polarisation.

**Robert:** So a, um, democratic society is heavily polarised in this sense of the term when the opposed coalitions or camps are so far divided along ideological lines that there's no common ground between them or the common ground between them falls out.

**Gemma:** This is dangerous for democracy because it reduces the room for compromise, but it's a second type of polarisation that Robert thinks is even more dangerous, and this is what happens within groups of people who are in the same political or ideological camp. He calls this belief polarisation.

**Robert:** Belief polarisation is a cognitive phenomenon that besets members of like-minded groups as they interact with their cohort, with their allies. Members of like-minded groups tend to adopt increasingly extreme versions of the commitments that make them a like-minded group. They become more confident in their truth. They become more dismissive of any countervailing, uh, evidence. They become less willing to listen to dissenting voices, and importantly, they become more internally conformist. That is once we become a more extreme coalition of like-minded folks, we also become more. Invested in remaining a like-minded group, which means that, uh, belief polarised coalitions become less tolerant of disagreement within the group.

**Gemma:** This could lead people to dismiss the views of their own allies.

**Robert:** Because we start seeing them as people upon whom to impose pressures to conform with the group, right? We become less willing to admit that some forms of dissent are possible among allies. And so what happens to political coalitions when there are belief polarised is they begin expelling members and they develop pretty robust, uh, litmus tests for authentic membership in the group.

**Gemma:** Robert gives a recent example of this happening to Liz Cheney. She's the daughter of former US Vice President, Dick Cheney, and a prominent Republican member of Congress.

**Robert:** She's an enthusiastic supporter legislatively of all of the Republican items that Trump ran on. Um, But remains a critic of Trump and has been labelled a RHINO – Republican in name only – ousted from a leadership position within the party, uh, and replaced by somebody who has a, a far less loyal to Trump voting record. But is willing to say that the 2020 election was stolen.

**Dan:** Liz Cheney seems like a really poignant example of this idea we've been talking about here Gemma. Just the other day actually, she announced that she's going to be campaigning for a Democrat, which is kind of crazy. From a policy, an ideological standpoint, like she's a Republican, but because she doesn't support
Trump, the rest of the Republican party, which has been drummed up in this intense fervour of supporting Trump, they have kicked her out and will not accept her.

**Gemma:** Yeah, and it's actually a really good example of what Robert's talking about here with this belief polarisation where you've got intolerance of dissent within a group that pushes people who wanna compromise or at least willing to think about compromising out of that group and makes it even more extreme and then creates even more animosity.

**Dan:** OK so we've got this problem laid out. There's a few different reasons that polarisation happens and how it becomes more extreme, but talk to me about some solutions here, Gemma. How do we get people to back off this ledge, come down from this extreme animosity towards the other group? And I'm wondering, are there any countries that have actually managed to successfully reduce polarisation? Cuz I can't even fathom that from where we are right now in the States.

**Gemma:** Mm. Well, yes, there are actually, and that's what Jennifer McCoy we heard from earlier is looking at in her own research, she's been using that big data set we heard about earlier the VDEM data to study examples of countries that have managed to depo. And she actually started out by identifying 205 cases of this pernicious around the world

**Jennifer:** From that, about half actually depolarised. So we looked at those cases that depolarised and started to analyse those.

**Gemma:** For depolarisation events to count the country had to record five years where it wasn't facing extreme levels of polarisation.

**Jennifer:** We looked at the context surrounding those, and what we found very interestingly was that three quarters of those depolarizing episodes where they went down below the pernicious level happened under conditions of major systemic interruption. And by that I mean it was an independence struggle. It was the end of a civil war or an international war. It was a foreign intervention or it was a regime change, mostly from an authoritarian to a democratic type of political government.

**Gemma:** The other quarter of these depolarisation incidents occurred inside an existing political system, be that a democracy or an autocracy, for example. It's these cases that Jennifer and her colleagues are particularly interested in studying to figure out what happened and why.

**Jennifer:** So it's mostly happened over time within the mid range, the electoral democracies or the electoral autocracies. Um, and very interestingly, there are hardly any cases of the full-fledged, what we call liberal democracy, which are mostly the advanced, the wealthy western countries, that ever reached pernicious polarisation for a few years and then had to come down.

We had very few examples of that, and so the United States is one that is now at that level, has been at that level for more than five years. And hasn't come out of it. And so we're saying, OK, how can we find examples for the United States? It's very difficult because we don't have much, but we have a few.

**Gemma:** One is South Korea, which experienced high levels of polarisation in 2015 to 16 due to a political scandal surrounding President Geun-hye.
Jennifer: Who was trying to grab more power around her person, and they ended up with a large social movement, you know, grassroots protest that kind of pressured the political parties on both sides on a bipartisan basis, finally, to impeach her so they were able to resolve that one.

Gemma: Another example of an electoral democracy that brought itself back from high levels of polarisation is Bolivia, which elected its first indigenous president, Evo Morales in 2005.

Jennifer: The indigenous population who had been really marginalised in that country's history gained power through elections in the early 2000s. And it became very polarised and confrontational. They were trying to write a new constitution and they actually had the southern, the more industrial wider part of the country, uh, threaten to secede from the country. They were able to work out a compromise, uh, between like the two halves over the new constitution. So they depolarised for eight to 10 years, but now they began to repolarise again because that same president was still in power and was again concentrating power in himself. He insisted on running again for another term in 2019. He was ousted in a controversial election, and the country still remains highly polarised. So what we see is successes, but then it's a question of can they sustain it?

Gemma: Yeah. And, and that's the key question really, isn't it? How sustainable are these episodes of depolarisation? So what examples are there of places where it has been sustained?

Jennifer: Yeah. Well, what we found is only 14% of cases actually could sustain it in the long term. So, um, examples would be after World War II, countries like Norway, Finland, Belgium, they were able to depolarise and sustain it to the present. Okay, now they, they established very strong democratic institutions. They practise a form of consensus politics, and they also have, uh, well, Norway and Finland, uh, relatively homogeneous populations. And Norway of course has oil revenues as well. So,

Gemma: Hmm. that helps.

Jennifer: Yeah, it helps. And they're small countries. They're small countries. So they were able to sustain it. But think about this. Panama is a small country in Latin America, but doesn't have a lot of those advantages that the Scandinavians have. Um, yet after they had suffered through a military dictatorship, and the last dictator was General Noriega, who was actually overthrown with the US invasion. They went through a process of dialogue and reconciliation as they transitioned back to democracy in 1989, 1990, and they've maintained a stable democracy with fairly low levels of polarisation since.

Gemma: It seems though, that the more common example is a cycle.

Jennifer: Yes.

Gemma: Of polarisation, depolarisation, and then polarisation again. Is that kind of what your data is showing?

Jennifer: Definitely. We're definitely seeing it as cyclical, or at least that countries are experiencing fairly high levels of polarisation for a long time, so we call that managed. So I'll give you an example of that. France, France, um, after World War II restarted its democracy, but it suffered just like many countries. In 1968 was a peak year, the student movement, you know, riots and protest. Division. So it experienced very high polarisation in that year, but they were able through a political agreement to, uh, manage it, to bring it down
below the pernicious levels fairly quickly. But they've been living with fairly high divides over immigration, over who is a rightful citizen over the notion of secular politics in that society. So they're managing fairly high polarisation, but I would say susceptible to moving back up into the pernicious level.

**Gemma:** From what you've been saying, there are clearly multiple paths out of polarisation and it kind of really depends on the size of the country. Its institutions, how ready people are to compromise, I guess, in some situations. But have you been able to identify any wider trends in what makes depolarisation successful, particularly when it happens inside a democracy?

**Jennifer:** Yes. Um, we think we've identified two fundamental conditions that will help and what countries need to be looking at today. So one is that the countries that sustained for decades, what they often did was revisit what I would call the basic social contract between governments and citizens. That is how economic resources should be distributed, what level of support is considered minimally necessary for every citizen to maintain a decent standard of living. How to have an inclusive society respecting the rights of, of all groups, even groups that had been shunned, like the indigenous in Canada, or there's a small group in Finland or in, uh, Sweden, the Sami. So, but the second condition is very crucially, they have to learn how to adapt to changing circumstances. And this, I think is perhaps the hardest thing. Those circumstances might be demographic change, might be through immigration or different birth rates of various religious or ethnic groups in society.

Those changing circumstances may also be global factors like globalisation and technological change. The automation of many jobs leaves many people out. They've gotta find new types of employment. This is the kind of thing that countries and political systems need to be able to adapt to in order to sustain depolarisation and keep their democracies resilient.

**Gemma:** There is no one size fits all solution then. Each country will need to diagnose the factors that are driving polarisation in its own society.

**Jennifer:** If it's just a single leader that's really creating this and you know, inventing divisive agenda and enemies, you might be able to do it. But when it extends into the society, even removing that leader is not gonna be a solution because the society is now distrustful and polarised. So in the United States, I would say the institutional arrangements, especially the way we elect our representatives is a crucial factor that we need to address and change. Uh, that may not be the case in other countries. And we've got to look at what are the grievances in the society? Is it economic? Is it cultural? Values? What is it? And trying to address those grievances. Um, it's going to be looking at the role of media and who controls it. So in countries that have already backslid in democracies, one of the first things that Democratic eroders do is try to get control of the media and either make it all state owned or have their friends, their cronies, uh, buy out commercial private media. So we need also, I think, new business models for media and for social media.

**Dan:** What Jennifer is saying here makes a lot of sense now that I hear it. Of course, we're never gonna be able in the US or Brazil or really polarised places all agree on the same things, but I'd like to hope that we can take it down a notch and at least work together and have. Functional democracies is a basic starting point,

**Gemma:** Right? This is the idea of managing polarisation. Um, and it's actually something that Robert Talisse was talking to me about too. He was pretty dubious about whether it's possible to get rid of polarisation altogether, but he does think it's possible to manage it.
**Robert:** We can't eliminate polarisation because the kinds of activities we are required to engage in sometimes as democratic citizens: coalition building, right? Getting together with political allies to talk about strategies for advancing justice as we see it. Talking with people with whom we agree about political policies. These are activities that sort of central to democracy. They're also the kinds of activities that expose us to belief polarisation. So that's why we, we can't eliminate it. Belief polarisation is the byproduct of responsible democratic citizenship.

**Gemma:** Robert thinks that responsibility for trying to manage the problem lies with citizens, not with politicians themselves, because they're often too invested in actually fueling the polarisation because it can be a winning electoral strategy. So what can people, citizens do? Two things says Robert.

**Robert:** One is I think that we have to reclaim and forge social spaces in our everyday lives that are not constructed around partisan identity. So in the States, just to give you some examples, the chances that the person behind you online at Starbucks in the morning to buy coffee is a conservative voter are extremely low. Right. Coffee shops skew right? The Dunkin Donuts is where, uh, the conservative voters buy their coffee, by the way. Now, that's not itself a problem, but what it means is that our social lives are segregated according to partisan allegiance. I think we need to break that. I think that we need to find things to do together where we're not holding our tongues, but we're engaging in things together where we recognize that the point of the engagement is not political solidarity. It's something else. Uh, I gave talks about this stuff, you know, when uh, a book I wrote called Overdoing Democracy came out and people would say like, What kind of thing is that? I'd say, I don't know, like volunteer to pick up litter from the park.

And the response, uh, I got in one such a talk, uh, from a non-academic was picking up litter is a liberal thing to do. And I said, you know, you're probably but that shows how, you know, how everything is simply embedded. Yeah, yeah. So we need to figure out things to do together where politics is not suppressed, but simply beside the point.

**Gemma:** The second idea Robert has might seem to contradict this, but it's about doing the work on your own.

**Robert:** The idea that politics sometimes requires a kind of quiet reflection, thinking outside of the presence of your allies and your foes, um, that opportunities for a kind of solitary reflection on politics have dwindled in the United States. We're constantly inundated with messages from allies or foes alike, from trolls or from people who are saying, you know, retweet if you agree. Um, you know, democracy requires an active participating citizenry. I would not deny that. But democracy also needs citizens to be reflective. To be thoughtful. I think that the idea that democracy sometimes looks like a person sitting alone in a library and, you know, reading a book that might not be about American politics, might be about politics in India, might be about, you know, reading Homer, you know, reading something that's about politics but is removed from the context of the here and now, that that itself is an important activity of citizenship for the here and now.

**Gemma:** So it's both being kind of with others and finding a communal space that isn't political, but also spending time by yourself and doing that individual work and educating yourself and thinking.

**Robert:** That's exactly right. Good democratic citizenship requires that we sometimes do non-political things with others, but it also requires that we sometimes do political things all by ourselves.
**Gemma:** So Dan, how do you feel now after listening to these solutions? Has it left you hopeful that there's a chance to depolarise a country like yours, like the US?

**Dan:** Yes and no. Right. On the one hand, it's awesome to hear that there are these ways that work, but on the other hand, it's like people actually gotta do 'em, and that's not necessarily a given.

**Gemma:** Yeah, and the alternative is what Jennifer was talking about, which really struck me, was that, you know, the most common way of depolarisation happening in one of these countries she's studying is a revolution, a conflict, a war, but actually inside a democracy, we don't want that to happen. We don't wanna have violence, we wanna find another solution.

**Dan:** And I guess there's a hopeful and somewhat cheesy point to end on here is that the solution lies within the people and the population, right? It is in actions taken by the people to prevent the leaders who are trying to manipulate polarisation for power and personal gain. It's like, don't let them do that. We can solve this problem ourselves, and that's kind of hopeful.

**Gemma:** That's it for this week, thanks to Naomi Schalit at The Conversation in the US who’s been very busy covering the US midterm elections, but has been a great help with this episode.

**Dan:** You can find us on Twitter @TC_audio on instagram @theconversation.com or email us. If you like what we do, please support the podcast and the conversation more broadly. Just go to donate.theconversation.com.

**Gemma:** This episode of The Conversation Weekly was produced by Mend Mariwany and Katie Flood. Sound design was by Eloise Stevens and our theme music is by Neeta Sarl. Stephen Khan is our global executive editor. Alice Mason runs our social media and Soraya Nandy does our transcripts. I'm Gemma Ware, the show's executive producer.

**Dan:** And I'm Dan Merino. Thanks so much for listening, everyone.