

A New Angle

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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.

Hey folks, welcome back, and thanks for tuning in. Today is our February edition of Incentives and Instincts, a recurring series in which I speak with economist and friend Bryce Ward about some of the broader challenges facing our society. Bryce, what's happening today?

Bryce Ward You know, we're not having much of a winter.

Justin Angle Yeah, that trend continues.

Bryce Ward But we're here and we're going to talk about interesting and exciting things.

Justin Angle Here we are. So there is this remarkable trend occurring in the political ideology of young people in countries all over the world. Young women are becoming more progressive and young men are growing more conservative. And this has all sorts of implications for society. Bryce, let's first describe this trend. How would you summarize this divergence in ideology?

Bryce Ward The simple version is women across the globe have become more progressive. The data for men and again, young people. We're not talking about just in general.

Justin Angle Gen Z broadly.

Bryce Ward Yeah. The trends for men are more varied. Whether it's no change versus they're moving to the right. But like the point is that there is a divergence within cohort that is larger than we're used to seeing. And while there's always been gender differences, usually they were kind of moving together. Whereas what we've seen in the last few years is this — yeah, there's now a — the trends are cohort and gender are interacting. So it's in such a way that, you know, there's now a big gap in how men and

women perceive the — younger men and women perceive the world, what they think the problems are and what they think should be done about it.

Justin Angle Right. So you could say, like ideologically, there are almost two Gen Zs, the female Gen Z and the male Gen Z.

Bryce Ward Yeah, you know, and again, there's of course, heterogeneity in both camps. We're talking about averages or medians or typicals, but yes, at the average gender cohort interaction there is a gap.

Justin Angle And this reflects, you know, this is data from the United States, this data from the UK, Germany, South Korea. So these effects...

Bryce Ward Spain, Italy. You know, you can kind of go, we can take a whole trip around the globe and you'll see similar issues.

Justin Angle And so another thing to think about when talking about this is part of this is a language problem too. Like we don't quite have the right framework because yes, these findings have been conceptualized in terms of liberal and conservative, measured with various types of polling. But it's almost as if liberal and conservative aren't the

right terms. I mean, we've chosen to use progressive when talking about women, you know, because they're, and we'll get into it, but there's some illiberalism happening across both cohorts. And when I say illiberalism, I mean a kind of setting tighter parameters around the sorts of dialog and ideas that can be discussed within these communities.

Bryce Ward Yes, it's very much a canceling generation. Cancel culture has become somewhat synonymous with left leaning spaces, but it's very much true on the right as well. It's very much more common amongst the younger cohort. Right. And so the question becomes well what's going on in the younger cohort that's leading them to be intolerant of lowercase L liberalism, which has been the dominant paradigm of the West for 200 years. You know, that's a complicated question. The most intriguing explanation is, comes from a recent paper on the rise of zero sum thinking.

Justin Angle Right. We should define that.

Bryce Ward Zero sum thinking is a belief that the world that my gains come at your losses, and in particular, they're equal, right? My gain is exactly your loss. Or at least my gain is smaller than your loss. Right? So it's zero or negative sum. As opposed to

positive sum which is you know, we're both better off or, you know, I'm better off by a lot more than you're worse off. So collectively we're better off.

Justin Angle And for many years, as far as I've been affiliated with business schools, how we teach negotiations is how to conceptualize negotiations in such a way that you can achieve positive sum, because when you get into negative and or zero sum thinking, there is a winner and a loser by construction.

Bryce Ward Ends justify means, you know, all sorts of bad things start happening in a moral, ethical space, right? You know, the way that you keep things constructive is by trying to find the positive sum. Now, that's not to say that there aren't situations that are zero sum. There are zero sum situations, there are even negative sum situations. Right. But it is very easy to fall into a trap of thinking something is negative or zero sum when it's not. And that's what negotiation or difficult conversations or, you know, a lot of the stuff when we're training people, you know, how to interact with others, it's about helping you see the fact that, oh, there's a way through here that's better than the alternative. Right? This is a paper, you know, it's, you know, it's a US based paper. But they surveyed 20,000 Americans. Big sample. They gave them these games to determine their prevalence of zero sum thinking, and then they match that to their beliefs, on, you know, standard set of questions. And then very interestingly, they also

linked it to their ancestry. And so, you know, what they find is younger generations, zero sum thinking is much more prevalent than in older generations.

Justin Angle Okay.

Bryce Ward Zero sum thinking is correlated with very specific policy beliefs, neither of which code, or none of which are, you know, it's not just a simple, oh, that's progressive or conservative, right? There are zero sum ideas on both sides. And they're the ones that generate a lot of heat, particularly amongst younger cohorts.

Justin Angle Okay. Let's talk about some examples here.

Bryce Ward Affirmative action. Redistribution. Immigration. So the notion that immigrants are harmful is a zero sum idea. Immigrants come here and they harm.

Justin Angle Yes. Or they take away services or whatever.

Bryce Ward We have a long history and a long history of evidence that there are positive sum opportunities. Frequently, we don't do a great job of compensating the losers because there's always going to be losers. But usually, you know, there are net

benefits to be found. And so in the economics space it's frequently easy to find a way to a positive sum negotiation compromise. Culture wars are not obvious.

Justin Angle Yeah. These cultural issues. And that's sort of why I said liberal conservative isn't necessarily the right language, at least as we sort of have understood it in the recent decades.

Bryce Ward What matters for this discussion is, is that when you're beset by zero sum thinking, you know, yeah, you end up in these very difficult fights that are very difficult to see your way to constructive solutions. And going back to then, well, maybe where's the gender in this? Well, that's just a cohort effect. Where is the interaction with gender? One of the things that's different amongst Gen Z men versus even older men is they are much more skeptical of feminism.

Justin Angle Right.

Bryce Ward Right. They are more skeptical of a variety of women's empowerment ideas. I think they view some of this as zero sum.

Justin Angle And a lot of that, I think, and it's speculated in the commentary, is that some of this can be tied to the MeToo movement. I think you and I would agree that that sort of watershed of a movement has been largely positive in the sense that it has just uncovered, such a, an awful set of behaviors across a broad sector of powerful men. Yet, you know, the sort of transgressions of those men are not created equal. And it gets, this is, this is dangerous terrain to talk about.

Bryce Ward This all goes back to the illiberalism.

Justin Angle Yes.

Bryce Ward Cancel culture by itself. And what is cancelable? That's the discussion here. In progressive spaces, the transgressions have gotten smaller and smaller. You know, it's very much getting, you know the backlash to it is because people, it's like, oh you're almost reaching thought crime. Right. If you don't use the right words, if you don't acknowledge the right injustices. I don't want to claim that that is the dominant view of liberals or progressives or Democrats. It's not. But there is a set of spaces online and in the physical world where those ideas have sway.

Justin Angle Yeah.

Bryce Ward And power and, you know, so it's not hard for me to imagine that young men looking at this, they might be getting a little bit skeptical of it. And then and this is important because Gen Z and the younger generations, they spend so much less time interacting in the physical world. They go off into gendered, frequently online spaces, which are echo chambers. And we're getting an increasing amount of literature that shows that's exactly what happens. And when I surround myself with people who are similar to me, we polarize because I keep hearing from you, and you keep hearing from me about all the bad things and all the reasons why we're right and why everybody else is stupid and wrong. And we just kind of keep going.

Justin Angle We are existing in these polarized, algorithmically-generated media ecosystems. So it can be, you know, your physical community you're selected into based on your own choices. But it can also be the choices that the media algorithms are serving us. We're not, and we've talked about this on this segment many times. We do not share a common view of reality. There are different versions of reality, and reality has always been sort of a contested thing. But now you can exist in a totally different reality, and we're starting to see that that's probably occurring along gender lines and that's contributing, it's sort of pouring gas on this fracture that we're identifying.

Bryce Ward Right, because, you know, and the anecdote, the antidote to this is, you know, we again, we have ample literature demonstrating, which is when you are forced to interact with people who have different viewpoints and ideas, it pulls you back down to reality or pulls you back into oh wait, that, that's right, yo u know. Oh, I hadn't thought about that. Oh, yeah, you're right on that. And, you know, we kind of get back into something that's more constructive and, you know, allows us to kind of find the good and the important and maybe not fall subject to stuff that's, you know, a little bit too far off the rails.

Justin Angle Yeah. And you and you and it breaks down the zero sum framework. Right. So, so you know, for the listener who, who's, who's bumping at some of the things we've proposed here, there's, there's open debate as to what the catalyzing forces are here. But what appears to be the key mechanism is this zero sum trap.

Bryce Ward Yeah. It's you know, where it's isolation plus zero sum.

Justin Angle But you fall into that and you view the world as far as winners and losers. And that view of the world calcifying has led to our men and women diverting in terms of their political ideology in the last eight years.

Bryce Ward We're talking about this because it's this new thing with men and women.

It's not to say that this is only happening with men and women, right? We've talked about the polarization of the whole host of different things, you know, already, right?

Like urban versus rural. That's the same thing. There's some differences in racial attitudes, you know. And all of these forces, to the extent that you fall into a viewpoint of zero sum. And then I reinforce that in a socially isolated ecosystem where I continue to hear why I'm right and they're wrong, and again, "they" right?

And there's identity here. Right. Strong identity. Right. It's not just oh, let's break down the notions of gender identity, like we're all the same, and you know, it's like, well it's no we're going to rebuild gender as an identity. And let's talk about all the reasons why, you know, women are different than men and why, you know, if I'm a woman, women are better than men or if I'm a man, why men are supposed to be better than women, you know. And you know, these things then just echo around and you just, you know, and then when I come and ask you about your views, you tell the surveyer, oh, I think this, right.

You know, we're just kind of moving farther away from each other when it's not clear that any of this is based in reality. I mean, there's the reality of the problems that, you know, that MeToo is addressing or that discussions of racism are addressing or, you

know, whatever. You know, when we're talking about a lot of the things that underpin the culture, there are real problems. A lot of the framing of this is zero sum. Right.

Well, the only way to rectify this injustice or this past injustice is to take from you and give to them. While you can find ways to frame that in positive sum ways, because I do believe that sometimes redistribution can generate positive sum outcome, if we're not talking about it in those terms, if we're not, you know, making sure, you know, and again, part of the rise in zero sum thinking in part is just a general rise in negativity, that we see, in the world.

But part of it is because we have a lot of, well, the development of a media ecosystem that is much more robust than existed, you know, 70 years ago. And then increased competition within that media system means that there is always demand for the cost. Right? You can find the greatest story in the world, and there will be an article written by some entrepreneurial journalist, finding the people who were harmed. So we are aware of every single thing that goes wrong. You know, like, I recently gave an interview right here on Montana Public Radio about the fact that average hourly wages in Montana increased by 10% last year.

Justin Angle Which on its face seems like a great thing.

Bryce Ward That seems like a great thing. However, if you really want to think about it right, I can go find all sorts of people who are the losers. Well, the cost of this went up because those wages went up. So now, you know, and so the fact that I can do this off the top of my head, I can tell you with any positive story, like the three angles of negativity, is because I've seen those articles so many times, right? That, you know, and I know and you know, it has become in the past decade in particular, it is an absolutely refined, tried and true media strategy of: That seems good. It must be bad.

Justin Angle Yeah, that sort of contrarian framing. And then it's used as a playbook on cable news often. Good thing happens on the other side. Let's paint the the downside of it. Who are the losers?

Bryce Ward It's absolutely a successful media strategy. So we marinate in this negativity. And again, because of increased tribalism in my tribe. And therefore everything is always bad. I'm always on the lookout for bad. And as a human I'm already primed that way, it appears. So we end up in this world where, if I am not tethered to reality, and this again, it is not surprising to me that this is happening to the youngest generation, right? The rest of us grew up in a world where we had to interact with each other. The American Time Use Survey, one of the categories, big categories of time used, is time spent caring for or helping others outside your household.

Justin Angle Yep.

Bryce Ward So for the average person, you look at the frequency of any time that they reported doing this, it works out to kind of, you know, once a week, you know, the average American 20 years ago was reporting that they were doing something, you know, giving a ride to a friend, you know, helping their mom, you know, out of the house, whatever it was. Right. By 2022 that was down to barely just over once a week. Right. So, you know, it's like a 40% decline, right? If I look at young men, 15 to 25 year old men, the decline is 70%. Young women aren't as bad. But like young people, the declines are bigger in general for both. You know, and we hear a lot about, oh, how young people are, you know, because I've got to go to college or volunteering and, you know, no.

Justin Angle They're not doing it.

Bryce Ward Participation in school activities, school sports, volunteering time. It's all down massively. Right. So we're not socializing, you know, and they're not spending that time hanging out with friends. They're not spending time in structured environments, you know, exposing themselves to others in their community. They're

not helping other people, you know, outside their household. Right? They're just living in an isolated, frequently virtual online existence. And I think that's we're seeing some of the adverse effects of that in different perceptions of reality. Because, again, a grounding in reality, it requires exposure to a diversity of people in a diversity of situations over a long period of time.

Justin Angle So let's sort of turn our attention to the possible implications of all this. One might be hearing this and thinking, well, you know, men had this coming. They were dominant in the social hierarchy for far too long. And now that women are getting some power and approaching equality on a variety of dimensions, it just appears that men can't deal with it. And maybe that's part of it.

Bryce Ward I mean, that's been around forever, though.

Justin Angle Well, it has.

Bryce Ward I certainly heard that. Like, you know, when I was a young man growing up, like, you know, that women are entering the workforce in massive levels. You know, there was this notion that women were taking jobs and, you know, so like that zero

sum notion isn't new. It's the reaction to it. The divergence in reaction to it is what's different.

Justin Angle Exactly. And whatever the mechanism, the numbers that you're reporting are real. I mean, the statistic out of the UK is compelling. You know, 6 in 10 women in the UK are going to college and it's down to 4 in 10 men. And it's similar here. And we're seeing downstream consequences of that. Women entering the workforce are having a hard time finding a comparable mate in social status. Marriage rates are declining. Childbirth rates are declining. Society is, I mean, you could argue fracturing in many ways, and we've built a system around a certain amount of growth. You know, both in terms of population and the economy. Now, we can debate whether or not that's the right way to build a society. But let's set that aside for a whole nother episode. Anyway, this is going, this was potentially has grave effects. If men are sort of selecting out of education, selecting out of some of the civic institutions and norms that have guided society for a long time, this is going to have grave effects in terms of how our society operates.

Bryce Ward You know, and again, one of the fundamental differences about younger generations, the younger generations is just how little they date, how little sex they have. You know, they're just not connecting with each other. Part of this is just the fact

that it's become harder and harder to find status. We've created, you know, along with income inequality, which we've talked a lot about, we've also created a lot of status inequality. Right. We've kind of removed some of the traditional pathways to status in a small town. Like, you know, if you went back into when we were in high school, like, for good or bad, if you were a high school athlete, there was status. It is not clear to me that there is the same level of status associated with any activity, in schools anymore.

Justin Angle So you're suggesting that's a that's a reason why folks are potentially opting out of some of these activities?

Bryce Ward Yeah. People are driven by status. It is a social part of human experience. There is potentially some zero sum aspects to it because it moves with attention. And attention is something that, you know, I can increase. If I increase the population size, I can create some more grants or status or whatever it is. But a lot of what we've done in a networked world with superstar effects is not only does that concentrate income in the hands of a few people, it concentrates status in the hands of a few people. Right? Like it's your influencers now online or whatever it is. Well, they get lots of status, whereas the typical person online has relatively limited status, right? Because we've globalized status, right? Like now people are seeking the uber golden ticket of status.

Justin Angle Sure.

Bryce Ward I think we've actually reduced the, maybe reduced status overall. But if nothing else, we've reduced the availability of status in a lot of places. And I think that just leaves people adrift, right? You know, it's like, well, what am I supposed to do, right? Like, what am I supposed to do to make myself feel like I'm an important, contributing part of this group? And how do I demonstrate that if I'm a man to a female, or if I'm a female to a man? Right. What is it that I'm using to demonstrate? You know, the online, you know, joke is that women are only interested in men who are over six feet tall. Right. That's what's now status. Right. Like, you know, it's like if you're not six feet tall you're out. Right. You know and of course, there's only so many people that are six feet tall.

Justin Angle Yeah. You don't have a lot of control over it.

Bryce Ward You know, you don't have any control over it. But, you know, I mean, there's just we have this issue of what am I doing to get into the world and get meaningful feedback from my community that I can feel good about, right? And then go into the world, you know, puffed out, head high because I'm a contributor. And I can show then other people around me that I'm a contributor, and they will be like, wow,

you are a contributor. And because I'm a contributor, that means that I will have friends and I will have a girlfriend or boyfriend or, you know, I will get married. And, you know, I'm just not sure how that operates given the ecosystem that we've created.

Justin Angle We tugged on a lot of threads in this conversation. To summarize, like we're seeing this effect, we don't know why it's happening, but it's happening and it's happening in more than just the United States. And it will have and is already probably having consequences for the order of our society. And it, in my view, has huge potential to be quite disruptive. So we'll be talking about this more in the coming months.

So as we close a couple of notes for the audience. We need to say a farewell to our production assistant, Ella Hall. She's been running our social media and producing our promos and has overall been a wonderful member of the team. She's off to a great opportunity with the Northern Rockies Fire Science Network. Maddie Jordan, a first year master's student in environmental journalism, is coming on board to take those responsibilities. So, so long, Ella. Best of luck and welcome to Maddie. And the second update is we just launched a new website. So go over to anewanglepodcast.com. Check it out. There you'll find the opportunity to subscribe and even support the show directly. In the coming months, we'll be rolling out subscriber only content and other

bonuses. So if you want to have those benefits and want to support the show and what we do here, have a look at the subscription options.

Anyway, Bryce, as always, thanks. I look forward to continuing our conversation about this and other stuff that's on our mind. So thanks for being here yet again.

Bryce Ward Hey, happy to be here. No shortage of things to talk about.

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. 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, Maddie Jordan is our production assistant. VTO Jeff Ament and John Wicks made our music and Jeff Meese is our master of all things sound. Thanks a lot and see you next time.