

**Reforming Congress Project
Sunwater Institute
Interview with Chris Stirewalt**

CHERVENAK: All right, Chris, thanks so much for joining us.

STIREWALT: My pleasure, thanks for having me.

CHERVENAK: Why don't we start off with your career, where'd you start off, give us the arc, and where you are now.

STIREWALT: I started out as a newspaper reporter in Wheeling, West Virginia when I was 17 years old, worked my way up in West Virginia news, I came to the Washington Examiner in 2007. I joined the Fox News Channel in 2010. I was with Fox News Channel as the politics editor there for more than 10 years, and then in the January of 2021, I got fired and I joined the Dispatch and I joined the American Enterprise Institute, where I am a senior fellow. I have a podcast, media podcast called Ink Stained Wretches with Nebulous Podcasts, and I'm working on a book about the media in America.

CHERVENAK: And you also did publish a book already, right, on populism?

STIREWALT: That is true. "Every Man a King: a Short, Colorful History of American Populists."

CHERVENAK: Great, so why don't you, let's start off with you just talking about, broadly speaking, what is your kind of general interest as it relates to politics generally and then if anything specific as it relates to Congress in particular?

STIREWALT: Well, I mean, we have a pretty deep misunderstanding about what Congress is for. Congress is for the peaceful allocation of scarce goods and resources and the resolution of conflicts among Americans. That's what it's there for. It's not there, it's not a dream machine, it's not there to make all of our hopes and dreams come true. It's not there to do those things.

It is primarily and substantially a conflict resolution device that in a smaller Republican system of government should resolve conflicts, should deal with these problems so that the citizens of these great United States are free to go live their lives. I often quote my late friend Charles Krauthammer, who said that politics are the wall in the moat around the city. If you get it wrong, everything dies, but the point of the city is not the wall and the moat. The point of the city is the life of the city.

And I think we have gotten our chocolate and our peanut butter here, and that the truth is Americans, my hope for Americans is that they come to see Congress as no more glamorous than the DMV but just as essential, that it is a thing that we need, it is how we resolve these questions, it is how we deal with the challenges that confront us, it's how we do it in a way

that's in keeping with our ideals about individual liberty, about democracy, about the nature of man and the power. That's what I want.

I would like, my hope is that Americans would come to see Congress as something that is not remote or removed but also valuable and worth something that is worth putting your effort into, and I don't think right now Congress is delivering on either front. I think right now we have a Congress that seems grandiose but ineffective.

CHERVENAK: So you talked here about the way people view Congress, media has a major role in shaping that view. I'd like to dig into that in a minute. Maybe first, what brought you into, what was your interest in politics? How did it start, and obviously it was early, and then what brought you from local to national politics?

STIREWALT: Well, they do keep the Capital here so if you want to cover the federal government, you do have to be in Washington. I think more than anything, I was and am drawn to two big parts of politics and political coverage. One is getting to know Americans. When I was a boy, I made my parents buy me the statistical abstract of the United States that was huge. It cost \$300 or something, it was exorbitant. But I was in love always with knowing more about my country. If you want to love America, you have to love Americans.

Political demography, elections, all of that stuff is a way to key in on to what my fellow Americans are thinking and feeling, so the public opinion research side, the polling side, has always been something that I've been drawn to. The other thing is, of course, it is romantic and interesting, and you know when you read "All the King's Men" or you read these stories, the personalities are big, the arcs are big. If you're a storyteller, this is where you're going to find a lot of good stories.

CHERVENAK: Excellent. So let's talk then about the media and in Congress in particular. So you've been in this game a long time. You've been watching Congress I'd say every day for many years. Tell me about the way that journalists view Congress, the way they track it, the way they think about it, and has that changed over time in the landscape of journalists covering the institution?

STIREWALT: Well, it's changed a lot and it's changed mostly for the worse. Twenty years ago, I think that's fair to say, Congressional coverage was niche, narrow. The publications like "Roll Call" and "The Hill" were for The Hill. They had small circulations and they were devoted to covering the kind of minutia that Congress loves, this committee, that, the other committee, the other, and this person will be appointed to the special select group, and this chief of staff is moving. So, it was very, the day-to-day coverage of Congress was almost like a trade approach, right? Congress is a business and we're covering the people who work in and around it.

The major national coverage of Congress was removed and treated the actions of Congress as something inscrutable or removed from normal experience. The old, the dowagers of old Washington coverage, everything was about secret knowledge and hidden knowledge. Well, I

know this thing that's going to happen and I heard the guy that said that this was going to happen whisper, whisper, whisper, and then it would pop up in a Bob Novak column or something and people say, Ah.

And so you had all these tea leaf readers, and I've done a decent bit of tea leaf reading in my life, but basically people who are not part of the day to day standing at one remove and saying, well here's what you know, these are the auguries here if we, we're going to, we think is going to happen. What happened starting, Twitter and Facebook or Twitter and Politico were born at about the same time, and it placed a new imperative on micro-scoops and a new imperative on getting little gets. This letter will be out tomorrow. And it was found that there was a way to monetize minute coverage of Congress and of course minute coverage outside of any context.

So as bad as it was when it was just mandarins and tea leaf readers, it's worse if there's no context at all, right, because at least the old guard, the old regime had some institutional knowledge, and while it was abstruse or hard for people to comprehend, now what we have is stories don't even last 10 minutes. You get a micro-scoop, something comes out, somebody Tweets it out, Politico runs a piece, Hill rewrites Politico's piece, bang, bang, then the legacy papers, The Post and The Times and The Journal feel obliged that they have to cover it too.

Most of what goes on television for coverage is arranged around either there's a deadline, there's a clock, we have a countdown to disaster, there's a fiscal cliff, there's something bad that's going to happen, there's a blinking red numbers that are counting down there, or dumb hearings that are not designed to produce knowledge or get results but that are instead good staging areas for people to commit sound bites in public so that those sound bites can be used to raise funds and get attention. And then the person can go on and react to a sound bite of themselves on television after they say it, so the, I will say the maturation of cable news combined with Politico and Twitter created a very superficial unconnected to realities either inside of Congress or in the way that Congress interacts with the country, and it's not been good. It has not been good.

CHERVENAK: And what about the role of party over that period of time in the news coverage? I mean obviously you're coming from a particular point of view, but it seems to me that, I would say that various media, various channels of media compared to the past are more aligned with a particular party or particular world view almost hearkening back to the early days of the Republic when magazines or the periodicals were controlled by various party members. Is it, have you seen that of evolution, or do you see it as the same as it used to be?

STIREWALT: No, I think it's quite different. The difference, of course, is we know a lot more now about who's watching or listening or reading. Market research and data provide the ability to do what was not possible to do before, which was to be profitable by micro broadcasting by targeting listeners, viewers, or readers. So when you had basically three, you know you had the big three on TV. You had a couple of newspapers, two or three newspapers, and a couple of wire services that were driving coverage of national stuff for the whole country that we should point out here.

Another big problem is that as the local media, there's been research done on this, as local media got rolled up first by Craigslist and others that destroyed their business model. If I am running a national news organization, I need national news, right? It's not good enough if the story is very important to Oklahomans because there are not enough Oklahomans. So every story has to be a national news story. Congress, that we have three branches of government that represent or govern all Americans, so there's always going to be a disproportionate amount of coverage there, but when you're trying to fill up a news hole that was left empty by the demise of so much local news coverage, what are you going to fill it up with? National politics. We could think of a few different strands here, so you have the one strand is cultural, which is as sort of a rootless post-World War II America was born and we became disconnected from the cultural moors and norms, and you know here we're talking about bowling alone, we're talking about Putnam's work, we're talking about all of this.

Well let's see, can I reach out and find one of those, probably within arm's reach here somewhere is a book that talks about this cultural disintegration. When you have cultural disintegration going on, you have these weak institutions. Politics and partisanship became simulacrum for the real institutions, so you have an increase in partisanship as people are taking energies that previously would have been disposed locally or in families or in their church mosque or synagogue or in their, in the Elks Club or whatever, so you have that energy comes in and that's a big part of that.

Another big part of it is, as I mentioned about broadcasting versus narrow casting. When I started out as a newspaper reporter in the mid-1990s, in the late 1990s, we didn't know who was reading, who wanted it, whether they didn't want it. We knew if you got some letters to the editor, the circulation went up a little bit it went down a little bit, but you didn't know. Now we know, right? We know exactly what everybody wants all the time, and if your business model is selling an audience and their eyeballs, the pressure on you to deliver that audience and those eyeballs is going to be huge.

Your advertisers know that, and you know one of the reasons that I'm very pleased to work with The Dispatcher is, a free news model just won't work. You can't have a free news model in which people are only there to be harvested. They're only there to be harvested for audience or for advertisers. That's not going to work because the incentive structures are all wrong, whether it's Fox or whether it's New York Times, whether it's whomever, the pressure is to keep those eyeballs no matter what, and what we know is that partisanship, especially partisanship supercharged by this kind of misplaced cultural attachment, when you have that as the backdrop, you're going to get coverage that flatters the in group and maligns the out group.

It's going to, things like compromise and things like partial victories and the very things that Congress runs on, the lifeblood of Congress, all of that stuff is going to be bad in a media landscape in which it is Manichean, it is right it is wrong, it is good people, it's bad people.

And then the other part of this is, we weakened parties so perniciously, so terribly, that we had a corresponding rise in partisanship. So McCain-Feingold followed by Citizens United gutted our major parties. They lost their money, they lost their resources, they lost their power to be credible enforcers, and they lost the power to be credible enforcers at a time when these other factors are taking place.

So to make matters worse, at the very moment when it would have been good to have strong parties, we replace parties with super PACs unaccountable to anyone and who don't, which don't have usually an interest in in long-term health. Compromise and accomplishment are necessary for the long-term health of the parties, and when the parties were smoke-filled and powerful and had the money and had the resources to do stuff, it was in the interest of party elders to sometimes allow deals to succeed, allow things to occur, allow stuff to happen.

Now there's no one there, not that there's no one, there is very little incentive now on the media landscape, on the cultural landscape, or on the campaign finance landscape or the party itself to compromise. It's just not there the way it was going to be, that was bound to change the way that people perceive Congress.

CHERVENAK: Yeah, and I would also think that when you weaken a group like a party that in theory could think longer term, right?

STIREWALT: Right.

CHERVENAK: It'll make them more short-term in orientation, which by itself you know is against compromise since compromise would imply that they have a longer term goal that they're maximizing, and if you—

STIREWALT: That's right.

CHERVENAK: —lost sight of that then you have to move the short term.

STIREWALT: The degradation of, so I am often asked everywhere I speak, everywhere I go, everything I do, well what about a third party? I say let me tell you, we don't need a third party, we need to we need to strengthen the two parties that we have. There's so much partisanship, people assume the parties are strong, but they are not. They're very weak.

I have never, in either of our lifetimes, there has never been two weaker major parties than these. We have basically a half a functioning party, and everybody else is terrified. They are frankly terrified, and their governance reflects people who are governing from fear.

CHERVENAK: So let's go back to the concept of journalists covering Congress. So you mentioned that they've, the journalism, if you will, about Congress has become I guess more short-term-oriented and more taken out of context. So, what about in terms of like the number of people covering Congress, has that grown, is it staying the same, maybe you see the same circles, or

are they enlarged, do they really not know what's going on, are they intentionally distorting things, what's the nature of that coverage?

STIREWALT: The number of people covering Congress is much larger. Now it's, I won't say much larger. It's very different. So back to the local news thing. Once upon a time, your newspaper chain, or even if you were a medium market newspaper, you had to have what? Washington bureau, and you had to have coverage out of your Washington bureau, whether it was just one person or it might be two or three people, or for a big outfit, you might have a big, right, Hearst or the big newspaper chains, you have big Washington bureaus with big throwaway. Now they were focused on what did Congressman Cream Cheese do and how will it affect the good people here in the fourth district of in Sarsaparilla County, but they were covering Congress and they were producing results, or members of Congress sought to produce results to feed that hungry mob.

You know that there are going to be reporters from your home state, from your home district, they're going to be around, they're going to be present, and you're going to have to tell them what a good job you did getting that new wetland restoration project. The shift was to take those people, fire them, and then create a whole new world where newsrooms are full of, and if they go into the newsroom, where you have a lot of people who are crafting click bait out of the activities of Congress for a national audience.

So you have people who are trying to generate, and it's this Politico rule, where it's hour to hour, minute by minute, what's the story. And we've all seen the events where there's a nascent compromise or discussion happening in Washington, there's something that's going on, there's going to be a deal, there's something that's going to go on, and then what starts immediately?

Oh, and here oh lest we forget, one of the truly, truly terrible innovations of journalism in the past decade: lazy, lazy, lazy anonymous sourcing. Lazy anonymous sourcing. It is, we should be shocked, we should be offended by the ease with which publications slid right into saying anonymous source. Anonymous sourcing was something that 20 years ago even was reserved for special occasions where there was somebody who knew something but was not able to tell the truth because of some other reason.

In this case it's good enough, now it's good enough, just to say well they didn't want to, they wouldn't say it unless I let them go off the record, so I let them go off the record. Now, how is it going to work if Congress has to negotiate in public but can anonymously attack that work product in real time while it's going on? So you have, let's think about how every, let's see, after every Tuesday Senate lunch, right, who can leak the fastest, right? Which member can get out the quickest and tell their side of the story to an outlet that is going to put that out quickly, and it will be, again it's not like the old days where it said mentioned in a Bob Novak column. This is New York Times, Washington Post, Politico, this is mainstream, mainline coverage. Somebody there said this is what somebody else said. That, you cannot function where you have to negotiate in public but people can dish on you in private, no way.

CHERVENAK: Yeah, so the local coverage was another question I had for you as it relates to covering Congress because on the one side, local coverage in theory could bring some kind of accountability to a district or to a state, right, for what their Member their Senator is doing in Congress. But if the media is oriented towards a national audience, you lose that connection between the Member's activity and votes and speeches and actions compared to and reporting that back to the people that actually vote for them so, and you started off in local coverage, so is that totally gone? I mean if I'm in a district XYZ, or if I'm in Rhode Island, am I, do I have now have less insights into my Member than I used to?

STIREWALT: You do, but your Member has less interest in, so Tip O'Neill's then true, now false, all politics is local. Once upon a time, we'll, so let's, we'll take Rhode Island. Once upon a time, the Members, House and Senate from Rhode Island, had to read The Providence Journal every day, and they had to get clips from the local news every day to know, what are people talking about back home, how's it going?

Because they in Rhode Island sometimes used to elect Republicans. They used to sometimes elect Republicans and sometimes they had very popular Republicans, usually Democrats but not always. It was a politically, fairly, I wouldn't call it a competitive state, but you don't have to go that far back to get to the point to find Rhode Island with a with Republican Senator and a Republican governor. So, the change becomes when no politics is local, right, if you know that for 80 percent of the electorate, partisanship, national partisanship, is the most important question, and we're watching this as we're leaning into 2022. The question isn't who's the best member of Congress, who does the best for Rhode Island, who does whatever, you know, who ate the biggest quahog, who ate the biggest stuffy at second beach, it is, which person will hurt the Republicans, which person is the most opposed to the works and ways of Donald Trump, which person can identify most strongly with those issues because, not surprisingly, political addicts are consuming national news, not local news, that's where their interests lie, so that's what they're going to talk about.

When we had a country where there were liberal Republicans and conservative Democrats, and that interest blocks were much more regional than they were straight partisanship, and you know, this goes to Mo Fiorina's work on the great sorting in the 1990s and basically what happens when ideology and partisanship matches up too closely. And it doesn't matter now what, we have, I am frequently appalled when talking to members of Congress and their lack of knowledge. When I know more about your district than you do, that's a problem. And when I know more about the demographics of your district, that's a problem. And we have members who are not willing to do that work because what they are willing to do is go on television, they are willing to create viral social media clips, they are willing to say outrageous things and attack the other side and get all of those sweet, sweet clicks. So yes, the hollowing out of local news changed the accountability structure for the members of Congress and created a new incentive structure in which being on the national news and being hyper partisan is the shortest path to re-election.

CHERVENAK: So, what could go against that and bring back that kind of accountability to the local? I mean it was designed, the system was designed, to make the members responsive to their districts and to their states, and so we have a kind of breakdown of that system, if what you're describing is actually happening, and I think we had Yuval Levin on here earlier, and that's one of his focuses as well.

STIREWALT: He's the man.

CHERVENAK: So do you see that coming back in any way? Do you see any trends towards, you know, hope in that regard? I mean you must be at least aware of what's happening in that, you know in local news?

STIREWALT: Well yeah, I think part of what we're seeing now and we've seen, there's legislation now that will allow local, that will allow news outlets to collectively bargain with social media platforms and Google about revenue, so that's something. But this is a, the newspaper industry in the United States got so fat and so lazy and so bad, right, that the profit margins were very high. They were making 30, 32 percent. They therefore were leveraged up to their eyeballs because owning a newspaper in 1990 in the United States was a license to print money.

You had legal ads, there were guaranteed revenue, then you had classifieds that were guaranteed, and car dealers, and here was all this money, and if you could operate the presses and get them out, you could do it, and they made a lot of money. Therefore they were totally unwilling to see the internet when it arrived. And I was there. I started my full-time work in 1998, and trust me, the internet had just shown up, and it was like oh maybe we'll let somebody have a blog or something, I don't know, but no big deal. And they didn't want to see it because it was indeed their end, right? It was the destruction of this very profitable, very safe industry. It will take us time for people to figure out what is a profitable way to cover local news.

Right now what we're seeing in newsrooms like, and I know you're looking for good news here, but when you look at places like what's going on at the Cleveland Plain Dealer, you look at what's happening to these medium-sized, formerly really impressive, newspapers, content is king, but it doesn't have to be good. So dump your expensive newsroom staffs in favor of local content aggregators to give you lists of the 25 best places to, 25 best bed and breakfasts in Northeastern Ohio instead of actually going out and covering the stuff.

How do we get back to that? Somebody's got to figure out a way to make that profitable. I don't know what exactly that is because I don't, I've never known anything about business, and that's why I'm a writer, but unless and until somebody figures out a way to make money covering local news again, it's not going to happen.

CHERVENAK: Do you think the trends are all related to this kind of, the business model challenges in the disruption of the model, or is there also kind of a change in journalists

themselves, right, in terms of their ideology, in terms of their values, I would say. It used to be the journalist was this, like a professional with a code, right, and it was a celebrated code, it was a heroic kind of figure, and you don't get that feeling as much today. There are a few there who will stick by their guns and get fired for it, but not many.

STIREWALT: It's overrated.

CHERVENAK: So the concept of journalistic integrity, is it just, is it something that has declined because of the business model, or is there more of a cultural shift in those covering Congress with all the bloggers and all those types of things?

STIREWALT: So the business model creates pressure for homogeneity and for flattering listeners, viewers, and readers. I am underway on a new book for Hachette that I won't say what it's called yet, but it's about this, right, so what happened. So you have on the one hand market forces that are telling outlets to tell their reporters to tell the people what they want. In The Washington Post in their newsroom, they've got a tote board hanging up in the newsroom that says what's clicking.

Now you don't need to be Hercule Poirot to solve the mystery of what do the bosses want. The boss just want the clicks, they want the stories that go up that chart, not the ones that go down. And you don't even have to tell people to write clicky stories if you just hang that literally over their heads and say, oh look at those stories are doing really well. And guess which stories they're going to do well. The stories that are going to do well are going to flatter one side, and in the case of The Post it'll be left, and then it will attack the right, and you can always go to The Post and find a nice, you could do this at any site, but you can always go to The Post to find a collection of stories that say, one story will say Republicans are even worse than we thought, they're more rancid, awful, blah blah blah, than they thought, and here they are getting their just desserts. Here they are suffering for the, and that's why they've loved all the COVID stuff, right?

One of the most popular clicky stories that you see on left media is, so and so question the COVID vaccine, he is now dying of COVID. And these are like rocket to the top because they scratch all of the itches. You know the, Jonathan Haidt could give us chapter and verse on why these things stimulate us so much, but they do, and you can always find those. So there is that part, but there's you are, you point to another important component, and here you can look at the experience of somebody like Bari Weiss at The New York Times. Many others who the reporters themselves form a political solidarity unit, in which groupthink is demanded, right, and that you have to cover things a certain way. And I guess I'll put it this way: the concept of American journalism that was born out of the Second World War and reached its zenith with the end of Vietnam and Watergate, which was what you're talking about. This is the prize objectivity, prize professionalism, prize all of those things, was an outlier out of American and world history.

That's not normally how it's been. Ernie Pyle wore a uniform and had censors review his copy before he was filing, and the same for Ed Moreau, well he didn't wear uniform, but you know. The reality is we, and we struggle with this, with the Baby Boomers a lot, we were on a vacation from history for a period of time in the middle of the 20th Century on a lot of this stuff, that's not how it was ever going to stay.

So the idea that the reporters at The New York Times, or I suppose this is true reporters at The Daily Caller, or this is true of anywhere, they're drawn to be there for a reason, it's not just a paycheck, and there is going to be a penalty for violating the groupthink about what you're supposed to think about those things here. The problem is, well that's all a problem, but the two work together to a pernicious end.

So when it's a good business model, if I own if I own the Chicago Tribune, if I am Colonel McCormick back in the old press lord days, yes it's got to be a Republican newspaper because I'm a Republican, I'm McCormick after all, but I don't want it to be too far because I needed to serve a pretty broad audience, right. My profitability and my power is based on being able to capture a pretty broad audience.

So if people get too far one way or the other, I'm going to instruct them to settle down. That's not there if what you're trying to do, if we think about Fox, so on a good night, how many people watched Fox prime time? Three, like on a pretty good night, three and a half million people. That's not very many people out of a country of 350 million people, but if you get them to watch every night, and you can sell them MyPillows, and you can keep them coming back, that's more than enough to make a couple billion dollars a year, and you're not going to jeopardize, the way you would jeopardize that, so if we juxtapose Colonel McCormick and Tucker Carlson, the impulse to moderate, to keep a broader audience, is not present, so the worst instincts of the reporter or the analyst or whatever are not going to be checked by the business model, I guess it's a very long way of saying, those impulses that you describe are there, they are worse, the lack of professionalism is worse.

The media scholar Andre Muir coined the phrase "post journalism," which I like quite a lot, and this is journalism after the fall, where we say, well you know, some truths are just objective truths and we don't need to print the other side of that. We don't need to talk about the other point of view here. As a matter of fact younger reporters now very often use the phrase "both-sidesism" to say, well I don't want to, that's both-sidesism, and it's like, well yeah, because you've got to have both sides, like it's not your job to say who's right and who's wrong. But in the new sort of post-journalistic era, those impulses among a new generation of reporters dovetail with the economic model of their employers, and that's a compound error.

CHERVENAK: So basically the journalists, or at least the new journalists today coming up, are more wedded to one point of view or a set of values that they're imputing on what they're covering versus a dedicated outcome of objective coverage, is that what you mean?

STIREWALT: I think that there were, I think media, I think the bias in the press before was every bit as bad in terms of who the individuals were and what their, how strongly they felt about, like Bernstein did not like Richard Nixon. He was not like, I wonder, is Nixon good, is Nixon bad, how do I feel about Cambodia campaign? I would say the difference now is, it's not about being wedded, for these for a lot of these folks, it's not about being wedded to one party or another, or an ideological view, but the very narrow, right, like to find a narrow issue that you can really get in on and grind, and if you can just find—

So I was having a discussion today, somebody talking about Catholic integralism on the right and its consequences for blah, blah, blah, blah, and I said, you're talking about 10,000 people, you're talking about nobody, right? There's no one there, but online, and a big part of this is we saw this play out with the coverage of the 2020 Democratic primaries, very online journalists believe that the future of the party and what was going to happen in 2020 was Bernie Sanders and Democratic socialism has arrived.

Now yes, that matched up with a lot of those reporters' experience coming from large, liberal, northeastern cities and going to very liberal colleges, so they were primed no doubt to believe that, but they also lived in an echo chamber, where all of their other very online friends were talking about these very online things.

No one, I mean not no one, I said it, a handful of people said it, it's like well, why wouldn't the popular former vice president win the nomination, seems like that's who would probably win the nomination, seems to make sense. No, no, no, no. Biden's too moderate, it's got to be a woman, it's got to be a person of color. And it didn't because those reporters were not in touch with what voters were doing, they were in touch with each other living in their little terrarium on Twitter.

CHERVENAK: Yeah, so it's a, in a way it's the loss of the mass market, right?

STIREWALT: Yep, it's a big part of it.

CHERVENAK: You're not selling to a mass market, you're selling to niche markets.

STIREWALT: That's right.

CHERVENAK: And that seems to be the key thing that's changed the reporting. So let's move on to a subject that's obviously related to this, which is this concept of transparency in Congress and, you know, I've talked to previous guests about this question, and a lot of Members themselves say you know, there's, in a way, there's too much transparency, and that creates a situation where compromise can't happen because whenever it's transparent you've got a, there's a, there's speechifying to their niche audiences or what have you, and so you can't get real work done when the cameras are on, and so there needs to be some of those back rooms at least between parties, to get compromised going. What's your perspective on the whole concept of transparency in Congress and in its role in some of the things we discussed?

STIREWALT: I love Brian Lamb, a sweet, good man, with, of good intent, and the project of C-SPAN, on which I have very happily appeared on many occasions in my life, has been a failure. Putting Congress on TV has not made Congress more accountable, it has not made Congress better, it has made it worse. I understand, I believe in openness, and I believe in transparency, but I believe in accountability more than even those things.

Accountability is the best. Accountability is where the American system of government truly shines because what I'm supposed to do is give you my vote and then come back in two years and see if you did a good enough job that I should send you back. So look, you want to cover the, you want to have cameras on the House and Senate floor? I guess so, nobody's going to listen to those speeches, probably nobody's going to listen to those speeches no matter what.

But to put cameras in those committee rooms is crazy. It's crazy. How could you ever, what's the only committee that works? What is the only committee that works? Senate Intel. Why? There's no cameras because you can't get any points for acting like an asshole on television. It's just not, there's no benefit to be obtained, and when you take that out you lose a lot of that, so I understand, you know the Supreme Court right now is, well we had COVID, we were, you know, on camera for COVID, and maybe we'll keep doing that and do all that stuff, and I just say look at what it did to Congress.

Look at, you know if you read Steve Kornacki's book "The Red and the Blue," he has a wonderful history about this stuff where he talks about Gingrich and the one-minute speeches. It was like, we got a camera, there's somebody out there, people don't want to use this, we'll use it, we'll use this platform. Congress, you know, those were the days people were so worried about the Franking Privilege, but the real Franking Privilege was right there on the on the House floor.

These hearings, it is no wonder that Americans have low confidence in Congress because the times when we see the most of Congress is very often the worst behavior of all. You can watch a Republican or a Democrat go through an entire hearing, I remember one with Bill Barr that stands out in my mind, but there are many that stand out, where even the side that is in favor of, that is aligned with the witness, doesn't even ask good questions of the witness. What they do is just give little speeches in support of the witness. They don't say, hey why don't you just fill us in, tell us what you're thinking here, we want to know all about it. They don't do that, they say well I'm just here to tell you you're doing a great job, and I support you, and the President, and the administration of my own party, and I am really angry at those people over there who are asking you questions.

And then instead of asking good questions on the other side, you know what they do? They speechify to create those clips. You know, all they want, and that's not true because there are good ones, but what most of them want is what? To be re-elected. What most of them want is to be re-elected. Our founders' moral imagination and understanding of human nature exceeds most who have ever lived in human history. They're on par with Shakespeare, they're on par,

the great philosophers of all time about what are people like, and what is the human nature and what is human morality inclining us toward.

And the one thing that they did not really anticipate was that we would have one branch of government that would intentionally devolve its own power, that we would have one branch of government that said, we don't want to do it. We don't want to declare war, we don't want to levy taxes, we don't want to do this stuff. We don't want the power because what we want to do is come back. We just want to come back. We want to come back again and again and again.

When I see these shell-backed members who have been in Congress since the earth cooled, and they're still there, well I'm, you know I don't want to go on a limb with them, it's like, you're 80 years old, man, if you aren't going to go out on a limb now, when are you limb going? And these hearings put on a spectacle for the country in which the correct response to these people— now, there are good ones from time to time, but mostly it would create a feeling of contempt among people looking at the, among regular Americans looking at this, and say, this is ridiculous, and why are they acting this way?

CHERVENAK: So it sounds like you can accept the floor being transparent, but committees you think should be closed.

STIREWALT: At a minimum, get the cameras out of the committee room. We can talk about the floor, but the committee room, there's just no good that is going to come out of that. We have a Congressional record, you want to keep the record, you want to, great. But having those cameras there for those imbeciles to go mug into and try to get reelected is no good.

CHERVENAK: What about the concept of the transparency around the data for Congress. You know, this is another area where there are a number of people who are pushing for Congress to make more and more data transparent to the public, votes, committee votes, all the amendments, every hearing transcript, all these types of things. Does that follow the same logic in your mind? Should those things, should those committees be closed and should the floor be open, or is there some framework we should look at transparency as it relates to Congress that would serve the journalists and the people well but also create that privacy necessary to do real compromise and real work?

STIREWALT: Well, I think as the recent infrastructure gang has demonstrated, there's plenty of ways that if you want to work, you can go if you really wanted to go outside, color outside the lines. But until we restore the committee system as supreme, until we say this is a Congress of committees and we're going to work through those committees, that's how it's supposed to go. That's how you get, we have the working groups, they're right there. We're just not using them because the leadership disempowers the committees, they don't want powerful committees, they don't want those committees to do those things because they could do something problematic.

Every day Mitch McConnell, Chuck Schumer, Kevin McCarthy, and Nancy Pelosi think about one thing, what do they think about? Midterms. Got to get through those midterms. Got to get through those midterms. And if you have powerful committee chairmen and chairwomen, what are they going to do? They're going to do stuff that will screw up your plan for midterms. Now of course your plan for midterms might be terrible, who knows, but they don't want those variables present, and if we don't—

Look, transparency and all of that stuff is good. Any work product of the Congress should be made available for review, there should be no, you know, Congress is not a place for, Congress, there should be secrets in Congress, obviously as they relate to national security, you're always going to have some of that, but it's all right to have secret deals and go talk, somebody goes in their hideaway and talk to somebody else about this and we're going to do that, that's all fine. But all the official work of Congress should be readily available. It should be more than readily. We don't have a library in Congress for nothing.

CHERVENAK: And I think one of the things that I've talked about with previous guests is this idea that today really the only private area is in those leadership offices, right? They're not made public. The conversations happening inside the chair, the Speaker's office, or what have you, and so that's where a lot of the compromise has to move. That's where the power has to move, out of the camera, and you know I guess journalists also have probably a tough time getting in there, I would guess, at least at least universally.

STIREWALT: Well, but what do we do? We loiter around outside and wait for people to come out. Oh, Senator, what'd you say? I don't want to say too much. They scurry down the hall, chasing them down to the subway, and you know a little of that is fine, but there needs to be, we have to decentralize power in Congress so that these committees are powerful and they're meaningful, and it's not to say they're not at all and that there aren't chairman who don't take their work seriously and who do the stuff, but that should be—

Because members are so focused on getting reelected, they themselves are willing to cut off their own power and hand it over to the leadership because they want to be kept safe, they want to be protected, they want the resources, and by the way, that also comes with resources, so not only do you get the protection of some other person is running the playbook and you don't have to worry about it, but you get resources and you get money and you get support when the guy comes in primary issue. But we can't have a Congress that is made up of four people. Four people is not enough for Congress.

CHERVENAK: All right, well let's move on to the subject of your book, which is populism. Now you mainly focus on the presidential—

STIREWALT: Oh, we got, what about what about good old Huey Long, the kingfish. There's a guy who turned, he was a trailblazer. He used the radio, and he used the radio from his perch in the

Senate to become a powerful figure that had he not been assassinated could have posed a credible threat to Franklin Roosevelt 1936. So yeah, populism and Congress go way back.

CHERVENAK: Yeah, so can you talk about that, obviously you have a definition of populism and how is it played out in Congress?

STIREWALT: So, populism is grievance. Populism is the belief that because of who you are or where you are, you have been maligned, you have been stolen from, you have been screwed over, by somebody, someone else somewhere else. Most the populism on the American left has tended to be economic, most of the populism on the American right has tended to be cultural.

Bernie Sanders and Donald Trump come from the same, it's the same kind of energy, but Sanders is a classic manifestation of the economic populism of the left, Donald Trump is a perfect embodiment of the cultural populism of the right. And populism comes with the language, if I am an avenging angel for my people, right, if I got elected, so I would be from the first district of West Virginia, and there's a plenty of poor people who live in the first district of West Virginia, and I came here and I said that I am a burning sword for these people who have been screwed over by all of you, remember Trump's, his inaugural address and he points back at the assembled people, you people did this, you were the ones, he points to them, it's like well let's go have a nice lunch and talk about your plans for infrastructure, geez Louise.

If I get elected on the basis of going to war with our enemies domestically, and I'm going to fight them at every turn, I cannot then turn around and say, oh but on this one thing, on this new deal for prescription drugs, it's totally good and I'm working with them on this one, but just this one. So populism, since it is about grievance, does not create a lot of space for cooperation with the evil ones who are doing this to you, and it involves a lot of, you know, whether it was Teddy Roosevelt or Pat Buchanan or Donald Trump or Bernie Sanders for that matter, the message is very often that we're very close to the edge, right? That disaster is lurking, at any moment we could be destroyed, we could be destroyed from within, and if you create that idea, then how could you say—

You know I always felt bad for John Boehner, who was a guy who liked to legislate. He wanted to do stuff, he wanted to be a real Speaker of the House, and he found himself trapped in a world where it would not be good for anyone, whether it was Barack Obama or what he called the Chucklehead Conference in his own, the Chucklehead Caucus, in his own conference, wouldn't be good for anybody, to be seen working with him. If you're the Speaker of the House and it's bad for everyone except for just a handful of folks to be seen as working with you, that tells you that we're not picking our Speakers the right way, that some something is badly broken here.

CHERVENAK: And so this populism, it seems that it would be hard to take root on a local level like the district, right? So when you're talking about Congress, you could see it sort of in a national context, but how does it play out locally?

STIREWALT: Well, if the most important question in every primary—

CHERVENAK: So, it works itself through the hardcore primary voters?

STIREWALT: If the most important question in every primary is, do you stand with me, do you stand with President Jones in our fight to defeat the menace of whatever, if that's the first most important question, then you're not going to— Of course you're right that if you were choosing among local worthies, if you said, well who is the most qualified, well it would be hard to get that kind of populism in place, but if the first question is do you stand here at the battle of Armageddon with President Trump or with Bernie Sanders or whomever, if that becomes the litmus test, that's what you'll get.

CHERVENAK: So, I guess that moves on to a little bit of the election side, which typically we don't cover here, but I mean it would seem that primary reform might be a way to reduce that influence?

STIREWALT: There is no more needed reform in the United States today than changing the primary election system. It is a disaster, it has obviously failed. In 1968, the Democratic nominee for president got zero, won zero primaries. Primaries are new and in the post-68, post-Watergate reforms, they were promised that more direct democracy would bring greater satisfaction, would bring more transparency, would bring more accountability, would bring all of these good things, and it did not, because when you have an election, we have primary elections where the 20 percent of the electorate that is the most radical, most engaged, most intense, comes out to do battle with itself over which will be the fringiest fringe that can get in, this is bad.

When you come when you have weak parties, when you have super PACs, when you have social media low barriers to entry, when you have all the problems we talked about at the beginning, our primary system is a menace because it rewards all of the wrong stuff. The idea, so let's look at it this way. So, Rob Portman, that guy was born to be in the U.S. Senate. That dude was born, he's got the hair, he talks like a Senator. When he was 10 years old, people probably called him Senator. Rob Portman did not run for re-election in Ohio. Why? Because you know what would have happened. Primary would have been hideous, been awful, it would have been terrible, and it wouldn't have been over substantive issues. It would have been over what? Was he loyal enough to Donald Trump? How much was he like Trump? Was he Trumpy enough? Was he whatever? That's a system that causes people like Rob Portman and Pat Toomey to say no, I can't do it.

Something is wrong. I would of course prefer if parties would just choose their own freaking nominees and leave us out of it. I don't know why the state governments have to be involved in helping parties, private entities, choose their own nominees. I would wish they would, everyone would go back to a convention system and do it from the precinct, to the county, to the district, to the state, to the national and do it that way, but I know that's not likely to come

back any time soon, so rank choice voting, I think, in primaries could produce a healthier Congress.

I'm not sold by any stretch on ranked choice voting in general elections, but I think for primaries to create an incentive to be peaceable, to seek comity with your fellow candidates because you want to be people's second and third choices, I think that has real merit, so if I could fix Congress, if I wanted to fix Congress, I would 100 percent start with primary election reform.

CHERVENAK: Excellent. So I think it's time for us to move on to our questions that I ask all of our guests, if you're ready for this phase.

STIREWALT: Lightning round.

CHERVENAK: That's it. First question is, what do you think Congressional representation should mean?

STIREWALT: I think Congressional representation in the Senate should mean that you represent the interests of your state, and in the House means that you represent the interests of your district as you see them. As you see them. So I don't know where that puts me on the delegate versus representative.

CHERVENAK: That makes you a pure Burkean.

STIREWALT: Very often, very often I end up in over with Edmund, but yeah, I think where Americans are not taking advantage of our beautiful system, one of the key ways that they're not, we elect these people for two years. Let them go do it and then we'll check back later.

CHERVENAK: So I'll make the question a little bit more complicated since you had such a ready answer. So how about the future generations of that state, or that district? Does the current representative have a duty towards the future?

STIREWALT: Yeah. The current representative has a district to, you know Madison talks about what we owe posterity, and posterity doesn't, you know, one of the problems with excessive spending, for example, is that you're borrowing money on behalf of people who have no vote, and a little humility surrounding what are we going to do now versus what do I owe my grandchildren and great-grandchildren.

One of the problems in a country that's lost its courage and that is, has become deeply insecure about itself, we need we need to be thinking about what will America look like, what will be great about America in 100 years for our great grandchildren. We need to be thinking in those terms, not as we are now, just survival from one two-year election cycle to another.

CHERVENAK: Great. So you do believe that a representation includes the future generations of that—

STIREWALT: For posterity, of course, absolutely.

CHERVENAK: Right. Next one is about time allocation. You look at the way Members and Senators spend their time, what would your, as an observer for so long, what would you say is the best allocation of their time in the DC versus district, oversight versus legislation, how much time would you allow them to do campaigning, this type of thing?

STIREWALT: Well, I'm a believer, I do want a Congressional dorm. I do want a dormitory. I don't need them to be here more. I don't need them to be here a larger, I don't want them to be here a larger number of days just because of the traffic, but I think that the days that they're here should be consecutive, and they should be with each other, and they should be with their families, they should be here. This business where they fly in, fly out, is no good because they're here, and then Thursday they pump the jet fumes into the building, everybody makes a break for it, and then they're gone, and then they come back, they go home, they tell everybody at home how terrible Washington is, and then they come back to Washington and they tell everybody how great it is to be back with the good people of Wolf Snout County and oh how they wish they were there, but I guess I'll be with you terrible turds for a while as we do this awful work.

You know, there's a, hating Congress is very American, right? Hating on Congress, I'm a big Will Rogers fan, hating on Congress, very Mark Twain, it's just, it's a thing, I love it, it's great. But it's supposed to be a little tongue-in-cheek, right? It's supposed to be a little, and it won't work if the Members themselves say that Congress is also terrible, and that they hate being in Congress and that the work is terrible.

Now I don't blame them for hating it. Everybody who I know who serves in Congress who I like kind of hates it, and I don't blame them because the work has turned into a pretty miserable thing, and you don't get to be that creative, and you don't get to try stuff, and you are, it is hierarchical and unpleasant, and I get it. But I think we need to get these people to, when they come in town to be in session, I have no idea about oversight versus legislate. I want more legislating time if the legislation is good, less legislating time if legislation is bad.

I don't know how they should do, they should divide that up however they want, but in terms of how they are and where they are, longer stretches here instead of this back and forth peripatetic thing I think would encourage better outcomes.

CHERVENAK: So you like a two week on, one week off, or a three week on, one week off kind of person?

STIREWALT: Yep, do it. Do something substantive. You know there's a reason state legislatures that work meet for an intense period of time for six or eight weeks in the beginning of the year, they go do their stuff and then they have a budget session and then they leave. And I'm not saying that that will work for the United States Congress. It has oversight duties to engage in

and other things that it has to do, but I would say trying to have intense periods of work followed by time away would be way better.

CHERVENAK: Right. Next question is, we've already kind of covered it slightly, but how should debate, deliberation, or dialogue occur or be structured in Congress?

STIREWALT: On the committee level, with a real emphasis on letting committee work do its thing and creating incentives for people to want to be committee chairmen and chairwomen to, that that's really a good thing to want to have, and that those people will be incentivized to think long term.

CHERVENAK: And what should the role of the floor be, then, if a lot of stuff, the nitty-gritty, is happening in the committee, then what happens on the floor? Are there still speeches, are there still—

STIREWALT: There's still speeches because, well also they're going to never going to pass the chance to talk about the dedication of the new Guamanian post office, or whatever it is and God bless them, but the floor is where you have the big fight, right? That's the big debate, that that should be a thing. In the Senate sometimes now very seldom you'll have a floor debate where it feels consequential, but wouldn't it be great if you had that in the House and that you had the feeling that there was like, hey something, some minds might be changed here. The committee sent this legislation out, and it's got the backing of the committee, but we don't know if it has the votes.

One of the things that leaders don't want to do now, and I understand why they don't want to do it, I get it, but you know, you don't know it's going to succeed until you try. Put it on the floor, see what's going to happen, let them debate it, let him knock it around for a while. What's the worst thing that could happen? And so I would I would say more committee control overall, but a freer floor for debate, and good TV.

CHERVENAK: Next question is what fundamental institutional improvement should Congress make within 50 years, and we can't use the primary, since that's outside of Congress's direct control.

STIREWALT: The House of Representatives should be increased in size by 50 percent.

CHERVENAK: 50 percent? So, I've heard making the, I've heard proposals for an increase so that it keeps the smallest state allocation the same as everyone else, but you're saying a much larger expansion.

STIREWALT: Big. Go big. We need a much bigger, look, I'm sure I could be convinced that there's a good indexed way that I'm, we don't want the original one because that would have a Congress of like, I forget what it would be if we had passed the original amendment, but we, and we don't need a Congress of 3,000 people, but the idea that you can represent the

interests of a million people, 900,000 people, spread out over large [geographic], no way. There's no way you can do it.

And what we've done is turn the House into a demi-Senate. Each of these guys feels too important, each of them feels too individually powerful. They're cosseted by too-big staffs, the staffs are too big, they have, oh we're saying Congressman, it's like Congressman, what? Come on, you know, you're a sophomore Congressman with no power, from nowhere in the world, the county commissioner from the county where you live is more powerful politically than you are, bud, but they're driven around and they have big lapel pins, and they're very important, they do all that stuff. I think we ought to take a little air out of their balloons. I think we ought to make their votes less valuable individually so that maybe they will use them better. I think even more than term limits, I would say increase the size of the House.

CHERVENAK: Great, so next one is what book or article most shaped your thinking with respect to Congressional reform?

STIREWALT: Well on that subject, Lyman Stone, my AEI colleague, has good, good research on expanding the House, but I'll say that in terms of Congressional reform, the book that most shaped my thinking, I'll go Robert Penn Warren's "All the King's Men."

CHERVENAK: Right. Last question is simple. What's your plan over the long term, obviously you're doing work today, AEI and your journalism work continues. What's in the works? The book?

STIREWALT: This book, what we're going to fix, as soon as I get the American media fixed with my upcoming book, then I'll come help you fix Congress.

CHERVENAK: Fantastic. Well, Chris, thanks so much for joining us. Much appreciated.

STIREWALT: My pleasure. I'm glad you're doing the work you're doing, and I look forward to hanging out. When you get an event together, count me in.

CHERVENAK: I will. Thank you very much.

STIREWALT: Okay, thank you. Have a great day.

CHERVENAK: You too.