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**Intelligence Squared U.S.**

**Liberals Hold the Moral High Ground**

For the Motion: Howard Dean, Melissa Harris-Perry

Against the Motion: David Brooks, Robert George

Moderator: John Donovan

<b>AUDIENCE RESULTS</b>	
<b>Before the debate:</b>	<b>After the debate:</b>
<b>47% FOR</b>	<b>43% FOR</b>
<b>21% AGAINST</b>	<b>40% AGAINST</b>
<b>32% UNDECIDED</b>	<b>17% UNDECIDED</b>

Start Time: (00:00:00)

[applause]

John Donovan:

We all know that politics so often becomes a dirty game, but there is the corrupting influence of money, there is the going negative, there are the broken promises, the selling out, the betrayal, the hypocrisy. And yet, at the same time, we have to recognize that politics also usually involves ideals. That people choose what side they're on in the faith that they are standing with the side that stands for the good, the more virtuous. The side driven by ideals whose outcomes will prove most beneficial to society. That is why you and I and all of us choose the side we're on. We think that we are standing with the righteous.

Well, we have decided tonight to test one side of that equation because we think it has the makings of a great debate. Let's go for it. Yes or no to this statement: "Liberals Hold the Moral High Ground," a debate from Intelligence Squared U.S. I'm John Donovan, and I stand between two teams of two, experts on the topic, passionate from their positions, who will argue for and against the motion, Liberals Hold the Moral High Ground.

00:01:06

As always, our debate goes in three rounds, and then our live audience here in New York votes to choose the winner, and only one side wins.

Let's get to the first round of voting. Yes, no, or undecided. Undecided is a perfectly reasonable position to be in. Now, what happens is we have you vote again after the debate. After you've heard all the arguments, we have you vote a second time, and then it's the team whose numbers that moved up the most in percentage points whom we declare the winner of the evening.

And then, you will be prompted with this new experiment we're making called "five words," working with the start of five words. We want you to tell us the five words that you associate with the word "liberals." What word comes to mind with the word "liberals?"

And later on in the evening, we will share with you the -- what words we came up with then to see what patterns might emerge. Our motion is, "Liberals Hold the Moral High Ground." Let's meet the team arguing first for the motion, starting with, ladies and gentlemen, Howard Dean.

00:02:04

[applause]

Howard, welcome. You are the former chairman of the Democratic National Committee. You are six-term governor of Vermont. Howard, this is your second time debating with us, so welcome back. It's great to have you. We want to put a question to you. We're going to actually put it to all of the panelists tonight, just in two or three sentences, for you, tell us what is America's defining virtue.

Howard Dean:

There are three. The first is hope, the second is equality, and the third is the rule of law.

John Donovan:

Thank you, Howard Dean. We got a little bit of insight to you.

[applause]

And can you tell us, please, who your partner is?

Howard Dean:

My wonderful partner is Melissa Harris-Perry.

John Donovan:

Ladies and gentlemen.

[applause]

Melissa Harris-Perry, welcome to the first time for Intelligence Squared U.S. You are the Maya Angelou presidential chair in Wake Forest University, founding director of the Anna Julia Cooper Center.

00:03:01

And the same question to you, what would you say is America's defining virtue?

Melissa Harris-Perry:

America's defining virtue is that despite entrenched racial and gender inequality, this place has been home to generations of women of color whose very lives embody the greatest aspirations the country has set out for itself.

John Donovan:

Thank you very much. Ladies and gentlemen, the team arguing for the motion.

[applause]

And now the team arguing against the motion. Please welcome David Brooks.

[applause]

David Brooks, you're an op-ed columnist for the New York Times. You have been since 2003. Like Howard Dean you have debated with us before so welcome back yet again. This is your third Intelligence Squared U.S. debate with us. So it's great to have you. And the question to you: what do you consider America's defining virtue?

David Brooks:

Well, in 2015 I wrote a book saying humility was the most important and defining virtue.

[laughter]

00:04:00

And then the 2016 election happened and I figured, "Well, that worked." That was good.

John Donovan:

Thanks, David Brooks. And please tell us who your partner is.

David Brooks:

The greatest political philosopher in the history of the world, Robby George.

John Donovan:  
Ladies and gentlemen, Robert George.

[applause]

Robert, welcome to Intelligence Squared U.S..

Robert George:  
Thank you. It's a pleasure.

John Donovan:  
You are the McCormick Professor of Jurisprudence and director of the James Madison program at Princeton. That's a university in New Jersey.

[laughter]

And Robert --

Robert George:  
Halfway down.

John Donovan:  
-- what would you say is America's defining virtue?

Robert George:  
"E Pluribus Unum. From many, one." We do not share a common religion. We do not share a common ethnicity. We're many religions. We're many races. We're many ethnicities. But from that we have become one people. Despite our many differences we're one people. We've been able to maintain civic friendship and sustain and experiment in ordered liberty that was unknown prior to the American founding.

John Donovan:  
Thank you, Robby George.

[applause]

And the team arguing against the motion. All four debaters giving us a sense of their core values.

00:05:01

Now we move on to round one. Round one are composed of opening statements from each debater in turn. Up first arguing for the motion, Liberals Hold the Moral High Ground, Melissa Harris-Perry. She is Maya Angelou Presidential Chair at Wake Forest University making her way

to the part of the floor we are calling the “Intelligence Square.”

[laughter]

Ladies and gentlemen, please welcome Melissa Harris-Perry.

[applause]

Melissa Harris-Perry:

Good evening. I want to start by saying that, obviously, it’s a bit of a difficult day to make the case that liberals hold the moral high ground.

[laughter]

It is a -- it is a week when obviously Congressman Conyers had to resign, when Senator Franken today resigned. My partner and I maybe asked if we could -- well, my partner didn’t. I maybe asked could we just change the motion to “men occupy the lower moral ground” --

[laughter]

00:06:03

-- but listen, despite those news realities we are prepared to argue that in fact liberals occupy the moral high ground.

And here’s how we plan to go about making this argument. In part, by acknowledging that in the current news cycle it is important that in this case, in all cases of this kind, individuals cannot be held as the standard for any particular ideological, policy, or partisan worldview. We will not be making a claim, therefore, that any individual conservative or liberal can be used as a bludgeon against the entire worldview. Any conservative or liberal.

00:07:04

So, showing that there is an immoral conservative, no matter what house they occupy, or that there is an immoral liberal is not in and of itself a sufficient condition. It has been true historically, and will continue to be true, that the character affiliated with liberal persons or conservative persons may be inadequate. That is not our argument. In fact, instead what we will argue is that the guiding frameworks, choices, beliefs, public policies, and historical trajectories and outcomes of liberalism with a capital L, versus conservatism with a capital C, lead us as a nation to more moral outcomes when the folks who are in charge, occupying elected office or movement leadership or positions of power, are people who understand themselves to be liberals.

00:08:12

Now, this evening, our goal is going to be to offer evidence of that. Now, obviously, this gets me to the hardest part. What do I mean when I say “moral?” Now, we will undoubtedly in the course of our conversation occasionally make use of religious parables or phrases or that sort of thing, but that is not what we are here to make an argument about.

What I want to make a claim of in my limited time remaining is that we actually share, as a nation, a civic religion that is laid out by our Framers as an aspirational morality, that is instantiated in America’s founding documents: the Declaration of Independence.

00:09:01

Now I want to be clear: this document is aspirational, but it is also audacious. The author and signatories of the Declaration of Independence in 1776 tell us that, in writing and signing this document, they are telling the world what American morality is. They’re telling us that in this moment in 1776, as they separate from old King George, that it is their responsibility to tell the world why.

And here’s what they say. “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all persons are created equal and endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights, and that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. To secure these rights, governments are instituted among persons, deriving their just powers from consent of the governed.” Can you imagine anything less self-evident on the Monticello mountain in 1776? It is an aspirational document, but a moral one for certain.

00:10:08

So, we take this as the standard of American civic morality by which both liberalism and conservatism must be judged. Human freedom, meaningful equality, the cultivation of human flourishing, and substantive popular governance. I’ll give them to you one more time: human freedom, meaningful equality, the cultivation of human flourishing, and substantive popular governance. If you claim to be moral, then, over time and on the whole, your ideological approach must demonstrate empirically that it provides for greater human freedom, meaningful equality, cultivation of human flourishing, and substantive popular governance.

00:11:02

Dr. Dean and I have no doubt that we will be able to demonstrate over the course of this evening empirically that those persons who understand themselves as Liberal, with a capital L, consistently occupy the moral high ground. Because, as Rosa Parks says, “I would like to be remembered as a person who wanted to be free, so others would also be free.” The expansion through popular governance of the moral high ground through the American founding documents. Thank you.

[applause]

John Donovan:

Thank you, Melissa Harris-Perry. And the motion again, Liberals Hold the Moral High Ground. Our next debater will be speaking against the motion. He's David Brooks, op-ed columnist for the New York Times. Ladies and gentlemen, David Brooks.

[applause]

David Brooks:

First, I want to thank St. Howard and St. Melissa for coming down from their moral high ground --

[laughter]

-- to the ground the rest of us occupy. I was always wondering how do they get down from something so lofty? Is there like a fireman's pull or an escalator? It turns out, it's amazing how they arrived. They were actually escorted down by cherubs. They just sort of floated down, people throwing Noam Chomsky essays on the floor.

00:12:17

[laughter]

Now, so I guess I thought this was a strange resolution. So, it has to do with moral behavior. Somebody has a higher moral ground than other. So, are liberals -- do they behave better than conservatives? Well, half my friends are liberals, and half are conservatives. I don't think the liberals are that much better. If you look at the data, conservative households give about 30 percent more to charity; they donate blood more; they volunteer more. Red states give about twice as much charity as blue states. So, it's not obvious to me that liberals are better.

Then you can look -- well, maybe it's about moral thinking; they just think in better moral terms. We have a guy here, right here, Jonathan Haidt who studies this for a living. And as I understand Jonathan's work -- always a dangerous thing to do to summarize in front of him -- he says liberals and conservatives think morally differently. Liberals think about more harm and care. Conservatives use that moral axis for these, a bunch of other moral axes. So, they're different ways of thinking. But one I don't think that Jonathan's work is better than the other.

00:13:15

The third thing that's odd about this resolution is thinking that our moral stature is based on what we hashtag or what we vote. Now, I confess, I happen to think politics is generally a competition between partial truths. Most great issues are competing goods; security versus freedom, equality versus achievement, diversity versus cohesion. And sometimes liberals seem to me a little better. On civil rights, on feminism, liberals are a little better. I think the

conservatives, we had a pretty good 1980s. I think defeating communism was a great moral good, threatening capitalism to Asia was a moral good. I think we -- we, on some issues, we're probably a little better.

But the core truth is we need each other to balance each other out. I need you to correct for my excesses, you need me to correct from yours. And we have to do that from equal standing, not from you on high down to us down low.

00:14:02

And so, then the fourth thing -- biggest thing I found out about this resolution is that you could tell somebody is based on a label. Now, let's read the resolution carefully. This is not a resolution, "Liberalism holds the moral high ground." This is not about a philosophy. The resolution is "Liberals Hold the Moral High Ground," liberals as people. The claim of this resolution is that liberals, as people, are morally superior to Robby and me. And the rest of those who go by the label "conservatism."

In my case, that could be. I'm a pretty flawed person. But how would you know based on a label? And I fundamentally think that's a -- probably a bit of a pernicious way to think. If you think you're superior to me and you come from a moral high ground, it's pretty hard for us to have a conversation. If you think you come from a moral high ground superior to me, I can't compromise with you because to do that would be to surrender my honor.

00:15:02

If you think you're morally superior to conservatives, well, then conservatives will act with angry resentment. And a lot of people voted for Donald Trump because they thought a bunch of tenured radicals along the coast thought they were morally superior to them. And so, if you want the kind of politics we have today, think you're morally superior to the other side.

And so, what I'm saying, is the whole idea of this concept that somebody has a moral high ground, higher than the people who disagree with them, is probably a pernicious concept. It seems to me also a sign that if you think you're morally superior to a group of other people, it's a sign you're probably not.

[laughter]

When I think of the people I really admire -- I was with some ladies in Frederick, Maryland, and they teach immigrants English and then how to read. And they just radiated goodness and good cheer. And they were humble. They made you feel good. The thought of them saying, "Hey, I'm morally superior, I am on a higher moral ground than you," it never would have happened because humility and grace and gratitude was at the core of their being.

00:16:03

And so, the whole idea that one side morally pernicious, it just wouldn't have occurred to them. And so, I say if you vote for this resolution, you're voting for the idea that one side thinks they're better than the other. You're voting for a politics of value signaling and not of politics of discussion.

And then, the final thing I'd say is that we're not in 1994 anymore. Politics is no longer really about big government versus small government. That was the debate we had for a long time. We're at a different moment in political history. And what we're facing around the world is the threat of neither liberalism or conservatism, but of sort of global populism. And I've spent time with Steve Bannon. What strikes me about Bannon is that he has a coherent story to tell. He has a 50-year plan. He has a -- a set of convictions that he totally believes in. It's like being with Trotsky in 1905.

00:17:02

[laughter]

And it's kind of impressive. I don't agree with it. But what strikes me is that he's the Bolsheviks, and we're the Mensheviks. Those of us on right and left who probably disagree with Steve Bannon, we're back on our heels, we're surprised by events. We don't have a coherent story to tell. It is -- we have gone so long in defending the Democratic liberal order that conservatives and liberals both share we've forgotten how to defend it against its enemies.

And, frankly, I'm going to spend a lot of the next years trying to work with anybody I can to -- find, what is the story we jointly tell against the populists? That's the challenge of the moment. How can we realign both our sides so despite our disagreements, we actually do agree on a lot of foundation within which we have civilized debate. And if you think you're on the moral high ground, morally superior to us, we can't do that. And Steve Bannon has a divided enemy, and Steve Bannon will win. Thank you.

[applause]

John Donovan:  
Thank you, David Brooks.

00:18:02

[applause]

And a reminder of what's going on. We are halfway through the opening round of this Intelligence Squared U.S. debate. I'm John Donovan. We have four debaters, two teams of two, debating this motion: Liberals Hold the Moral High Ground. You have heard from the first two

debaters, and now onto the third. Here making his way to the "Intelligence Square," Howard Dean. He is former chairman of the Democratic National Committee. Ladies and gentlemen, Howard Dean.

[applause]

Howard Dean:

Well, David is a sophisticated writer and a sophisticated arguer, and he posed a question that is not up for debate tonight.

[laughter]

He is quite correct, if liberals take the position that we are morally superior, then we will alienate those people who we seek to elevate. We are taking the position tonight about who has the high ground. And that really is a question about to what do we aspire as Americans, what kind of nation do we want to build? It would be destructive if this were a debate that conservatives are somehow subhuman, they're inferior. They're not. They're people just like us.

00:19:11

This is not a debate about who is infallible. Liberals often spend too much money. Sometimes liberals do have -- want a government that's too big. We have solutions that often don't rely on individuals or ignore the possibility that individuals may contribute to the good of things, not relying on government solutions.

And it is also true, particularly on the coasts, that many of us who are blessed with a great education and opportunity that others may not have find ourselves being condescending to those we oppose. And those are all things we shouldn't do.

But what we cannot do in order to make peace is to cede an ounce of ground on the notion that all people are created equal, that equal opportunity is fundamental for every single American, including people of color and women in this country, and that we have principles that cannot be abrogated.

00:20:14

I'm going to argue tonight that those principles are the high ground. Now --

[applause]

-- it does not matter what we say. What we say is clever, it's sophisticated, it's funny, it's amusing. It matters what we do. And I agree with my partner Melissa that we're not talking about individuals. Roy Moore's behavior is not a demonstration that conservatives have the

low ground. But the fact that half the people in Alabama are willing to vote for him after demonstrating this behavior is of deep concerns, given that those people identify them as -- selves as conservatives.

00:21:01

And given that they are now weighing whether it is appropriate to vote for a candidate who is alleged to have molested a 14-year-old and a whole series of 16 and 17-year-olds in order to preserve some other value that they believe is important. So, they're willing to throw under the bus, 15, 16, however many women have come forward, who, I believe -- and I think people in this country should believe him. I think to impeach women in a position like this is an outrage. They are willing to throw under the bus individual women for the sake of long-term gain. I don't think you can do that. If we're going to do that with soldiers, we have to make it -- it's a terrible thing, soldiers volunteer for these jobs. People make sacrifices. People take on very difficult campaigns. People die, and it's called great -- in the interest of a greater cause.

The people who have been wronged in Alabama are not people who are soldiers. And they don't deserve to be thrown under the bus because of some conservative cause. And I would argue that the people who are making that decision are abandoning their own morals.

00:22:12

They do not have the moral high ground, because they have chosen that in the service of some ideal that they hold up, they are willing to sacrifice individuals whose lives have been badly harmed by this kind of behavior.

This tax bill is an abomination. Jesus said that "it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than it is for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of heaven." Now, did Jesus think that rich men were all terrible? No. I don't think he did. What he thought was that those people who have power -- and money is power -- have an easier time deluding themselves to believe that they are moral -- morally superior than ordinary people who have to get up and work for a living every single day.

00:23:01

The tax bill is a deed. It is not a philosophy. It is a deed that is going to affect every American. And the people who are benefiting from that tax bill are the people who already have more money than they ever will need in the rest of their lives. And the people who are harmed are children whose insurance program is going to be taken away; are graduate students hoping one day to make a better world through education who are now going to be taxed on income that they never even see because it's tuition money that they don't actually get. The victims are far greater than that. The average middle class family gets a \$60 tax cut. The average millionaire gets a \$34,000 tax cut. And guess what? The tax cut for middle class people goes away after five years. So, 75 million families will get a -- at the bottom of the economic scale will get a tax

increase as a result of this.

So, it matters not what we say. There's going to be a lot of clever people. I think we're pretty smart. It matters not what we say; it matters what we do. And what conservatives are doing to this country now is an outrage.

00:24:13

I think that Ronald Reagan did do a good thing by helping to defeat communism. I think that it does matter what we do abroad. And I have actually sided with Republicans on some issues because we do not have all the wisdom. I think charter schools are a good thing if they're good. I think we should listen to everybody and contribute. But I think the core philosophy of who we are determines who has the high ground. And I believe that's liberals.

[applause]

John Donvan:  
Thank you, Howard Dean.

[applause]

The motion again, Liberals Hold the Moral High Ground. And our final debater to argue against the motion, Robert George. He is McCormick Professor of Jurisprudence at Princeton University. Ladies and gentlemen, Robert George.

[applause]

Robert George:  
Thank you.

00:25:02

First I want to say how honored I am to be here. Thank you, Robert. Thank you, John. It's a special honor to be with Governor Dean and with my dear old colleague, Melissa Harris-Perry. And of course it's great to be a tag-team partner with my old friend David Brooks.

The speech that Governor Dean just gave the people -- the conservatives of Alabama I want to endorse. The end does not justify the means. If you try to defend your values by sacrificing other important moral principles, you lead your nation to the chaos road. But I need to point out that I made precisely the same argument to my liberal colleagues at Princeton in 1997, 1998, and 1999 when the women were being abused, when they were being trashed, when they were being cast aside. And I was told that there are values that are so important we have to look aside from Bill Clinton's behavior. So, neither side can claim the high ground on that issue.

00:26:05

[applause]

The governor and professor Harris-Perry have taken the burden of defending the proposition that liberals have the moral high ground. They don't. I wish I could say as a conservative that we conservatives have the moral high ground, but we don't. Alas, it isn't true. Neither side today has the moral high ground and that's because both sides have permitted themselves to descend into dogmatism, ideological tribalism, contempt for people who disagree with them, an unwillingness to listen and consider that they might be able to learn something from people who have a different view.

We demonize each other. We attack each other. We have become mere partisans. We look out and what do we see? We see this on both sides. Progressives are no better than conservatives. I wish conservatives were better than progressives, but, as I say, in general they're not.

00:27:06

Now, there are exceptions. There are wonderful exceptions. I chaired in 19 -- in 2016 the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom. And assisting our efforts to aid persecuted people and prisoners of conscience in places from Cuba to Iran, there were honorable progressives like Representative James McGovern, a staunch progressive from Massachusetts, and honorable conservatives like Marco Rubio with no political advantage for them on these issues here in the United States. They stood up and they stood up whether the persecuted were in socialist Cuba or were in Iran.

But too often that is the exception. There are too few such people in either movement. The general trend is, rather, to demonize people who have a different political creed, to adopt an air of moral superiority toward other people.

And that is fraying, my friends, the bonds of civic friendship that a nation depends on when it is a nation that is not built on blood and soil, a commonality of ethnicity or religion, that has to rely on a common commitment to the proposition that all men are created equal, endowed by their Creator -- not by government -- by their Creator with certain inalienable rights.

00:28:23

But we fray, and we abuse, and we put in grave jeopardy the bonds of civic friendship when we refuse to recognize that there may be something valuable/useful in what the other side says. Both the conservatives and the progressives or liberals have had their glory moments. The liberals were in the leadership position; they were in the vanguard of the civil rights movement. Too many conservatives were on the wrong side or were off the field of battle.

But we go back just a few years earlier, and it was the progressives on the wrong side of the eugenics movement, with a few conservatives, mostly Catholic conservatives, religious conservatives, saying, “No, this is an abomination; we mustn’t go there.”

00:29:15

So, both views have had their glory moments, and both have had their moments of shame. And you know what that should tell us? Whether we’re conservatives or whether we’re liberals, it should remind us that we are human beings who are fallible. We can be wrong. We don’t know that we’re not wrong about even our most cherished, deepest-held, even identity-forming values, and we won’t know unless we’re willing to engage those on the other side as equal partners in debate, willing to learn something from them.

As David said, there are partial truths here. Both sides appeal to important moral principles. Progressives want to use the power of government to protect the weakest, the most vulnerable, from misfortune or the depredations worked against them by the powerful. That’s a good impulse. Conservatives should endorse and embrace it.

00:30:07

Conservatives care deeply about the integrity of the institutions of civil society that can be enervated and undermined by big government; they care about personal responsibility. They care about social mobility. They know that markets have lifted millions of people out of poverty across the world, in places like India, for example. They know that the market needs to be properly regulated, but they know that when government steps in to take over everything, what you get is the alliance of big government and big business that we know as crony capitalism. And the crony capitalism we have today is the work of both conservatives and liberals. No one has taken up the challenge of undoing it. And when someone does, then that person is entitled to claim the moral high ground.

00:31:01

[applause]

John Donvan:

Thank you, Robert George. And that again is our motion, Liberals Hold the Moral High Ground, and that concludes Round One of this Intelligence Squared U.S. debate. Now, we move on to Round Two. And Round Two are where the debaters address one another directly, and they take questions from me and from you, members of our live audience here in New York.

Our motion is Liberals Hold the Moral High Ground. We’ve heard Howard Dean and Melissa Harris-Perry present their argument. Melissa Harris-Perry started out by saying this is not about individuals. This is not about individuals who are immoral. Rather, it is about an

argument in favor of a set of values and precepts that lead to more moral outcomes as they are pursued. Her partner went through a list of current events, and to those who are listening in the future, we are speaking in December of 2017 --

[laughter]

-- talking about Roy Moore, a tax bill that you may remember a long time ago was up for discussion. But, basically, I would say the two of you are not presenting quite the same kind of argument, but I'm going to come back to that.

00:32:07

Your opponents on the other side -- Robert George and David Brooks -- are -- one of them argued that it is -- that they were refuting what they thought was an argument being made about people. In fact, I don't think your opponents are really -- one of your opponents is not making that argument. And Robert George rather -- then, maybe surprised the audience by not arguing that conservative ideas are morally superior, merely that nobody really has a monopoly on moral superiority.

So, it is a very tangled web we have woven here --

[laughter]

-- and I want to assert a couple of things as moderator right now to help shape this. I think, Melissa Harris-Perry, you came in with the presentation that is most on target for the kind of conversation that we want to have. We do want to hear a discussion about what David Brooks referred to as the competing goods.

David, you said that you are -- you bemoan the fact that we are a culture of value signaling as opposed to politics of discussion. We want to have the discussion. We want to look at some of these competing ideas as they work through a number of issues that are familiar to all of us.

00:33:09

I will throw some of them out there. Perhaps same-sex marriage, perhaps affirmative action, perhaps abortion; issues where we do think that there is a conflict of values. And we want to hear from the side proposing the motion why they feel that liberals hold the moral high ground and the positions they stake out, the values they stake out in these areas. I'm sorry it's taking me so long to talk through this, but I want let you know what my thinking is on this to have it proceed.

And in terms of bringing up examples from current events, not only is it going to confuse people in the future, but, you know, as soon as you said, "Roy Moore," Howard Dean, I knew somebody on the other side was going to say, "Bill Clinton."

[laughter]

So -- so that's a wash. Let -- let's try to keep it to the principles that are involved and bring it back to Melissa Harris-Perry, where you -- you talked about -- you talked about the idea of liberal precepts, supporting key aspects of the Declaration of Independence. You went through several of them.

00:34:04

I just want to pick on one of them, have you talk a little bit more about what you mean, and then hear -- have your opponents respond. It's human freedom. What does it mean to pursue human freedom?

And one other thing I want to say, is to keep things moving back and forth, I am going to be interrupting debaters once they've been talking for about a minute and a half for them to yield. And since you're going first, Melissa, I want to let everybody know that, because the last thing I'm sure you want is a man interrupting you.

[laughter]

So that's why that's going to happen. It's going to -- it's going to go all around. So the idea of human freedom, where do -- liberal examples of liberals having the moral high ground in the pursuit of policies or even in the -- how it is conceived? The floor is yours.

Melissa Harris-Perry:

Sure. I'm probably just going to reframe that. So, in -- I want to respond a bit to -- as Dr. Dean was saying. Obviously, David Brooks is a -- is brilliant is his reframing, in part by saying, "I can't even believe they came in here and said that liberals had the moral high ground," even though that was, in fact, what we were assigned to do.

00:35:01

So --

[laughter]

So I think -- so -- because it's important, right, in part because -- I did have some discomfort about it because, you know, Bill Clinton and other folks. What I am, however, going to want to respond to here is the important question around human freedom, meaningful equality, cultivation of human flourishing and substantive popular governance relative to the question of, now liberals aren't allowed to say we occupy a moral high ground, and folks cower and say, "Well, no, now we all have to talk to each other," because here's what I want to say: of course we do.

I'm a college professor. We all have to talk to each other. And in fact, engagement in the deliberative democratic process is among the most important things that we will ever do, especially around the cultivation of human flourishing and substantive popular governance.

But we have empirical evidence that, for example, when Republicans control state legislatures, especially recently, we have seen a shrinking of the capacity for popular governance because we have seen the imposition of voting rights restrictions that make it harder for people to vote.

00:36:07

We know that across 35 years of Republican presidencies, African-American unemployment went up by a net of 13.7 percentage points. And across 22 years of Democratic presidencies, it fell by 8 percentage points. I see that as being about both the cultivation of human flourishing and about meaningful equality because when people have employment, they have the capacity to cultivate their human flourishing and to move towards greater equality.

We know, from the work --

[applause]

-- of people like Larry Bartels who had -- was also our colleague at Princeton, that there are a variety of empirical markers around democratic presidencies about how the economy actually moves when you have Democrats both in the House, in the Senate, and in the presidency, as well as in state legislatures about how tax codes are used.

00:37:04

But most importantly -- and this is one, I think, that Dr. Dean will really appreciate [laughs], that Medicaid expansion, and the capacity of Medicaid expansion to fundamentally alter the life experiences of poor people in rural -- in states with high numbers of rural folks, whether they are white or black or brown, has had extraordinary consequences on the thing that we think of as life, including the life of unborn children, and the idea that it is Democrats and people who understand themselves as liberal who do that, I think means that liberals occupy a moral high ground relative to the four issues that I set out at the beginning.

John Donvan:

Melissa, let me ask you, what --

[applause]

And you had about three minutes there --

[laughter]

-- so I -- I've got to -- I want to move things on, but I want to bring it to the -- and you were getting there, I feel. What conservative values do you think are obstacles to the outcome that you were just talking about?

00:38:12

Melissa Harris-Perry:  
What conservative values?

John Donovan:  
Yes. What conservative -- what -- what aspect of --

Melissa Harris-Perry:  
I think conservative practices. I actually think conservative values are the -- I actually think conservatives also value human freedom, equality -- my argument is that these are American values. And the question is, which group actually gets us there.

I would argue, for example, that Governor George Romney of Michigan is one of the American political leaders who we ought to look to as one of the most moral leaders we've ever had, as someone whose discussion of housing and racial inequality stands as some of the documents that we ought to include as among the most moral --

John Donovan:  
Okay.

Melissa Harris-Perry:  
-- discussions.

John Donovan:  
Okay. Let me let the other --

00:39:00

Melissa Harris-Perry:  
And keep it conservative.

John Donovan:  
Would anybody like to respond to what you've heard so far? Robert George? I have a feeling you're going to agree with much of what you've heard. But, David, do you want --

David Brooks:  
Well, let me tell you why I became conservative. I was a socialist through college. I -- you can watch on PBS. I debated Milton Friedman and lost.

[laughter]

Robert George:  
Learned your lesson.

David Brooks:  
So, familiar ground all of a sudden.

[laughter]

And -- but then I became a police reporter in Chicago, and I covered the Robert Taylor Homes and the Cabrini-Greens, some of the bad neighborhoods in Chicago in the 1980s. And what I saw was well-intentioned social programs that destroyed neighborhoods. And it taught me a great truth that the world is really complicated, and we have to be very careful about how we mess with it.

And I had read a guy I hated in college named Edmund Burke, who had a phrase, "epistemological modesty." Epistemology is the study of what we can know, and modesty is modesty.

[laughter]

He said, "Be careful about thinking you can radically change the world." And I covered that wreckage. And so, I became a conservative because I basically believe that change should be incremental, gradual, and slow, and we shouldn't be arrogant in the use of power.

00:40:06

And so, when I look at those neighborhoods today, which are much better after that reform was reversed, what I see is freedom. Let's get back to freedom. There is freedom from restraint, which is fine. But there's also the freedom to do things. You had to chain yourself to the piano to have the freedom to really play. You have to have covenantal relationships in your life to have the freedom to graduate from high school, to graduate from college. And conservatives pay a lot of attention to those covenantal relationships.

And if we're going to get kids out of poverty, which to me is the primary issue I care about, we need Medicaid, we need more spending on earned income tax credit. That's what progressives bring to the table, even though earned income tax credit was a Milton Friedman idea. But we also need covenantal relationships and neighborhoods and civic institutions. And that's what conservatives really pay attention to and bring to the table. And it's working together that we actually have a chance of increasing social mobility, not with one having the higher ground than the other.

00:41:04

John Donovan:  
Howard Dean.

Howard Dean:  
We're -- this is going to be a lightning round. I'm going back to Moore and Clinton for a minute. The sin is different. Clinton did something that was wrong. It's not Moore I'm after, it's the people who are willing to vote for him, as Robert George just talked about.

John Donovan:  
But, Howard, that's a -- that's a question that their -- mainly of their characters opposed to the moral idea --

Howard Dean:  
They identify themselves as conservatives.

John Donovan:  
But that's -- your partner just said this is not about the people.

Howard Dean:  
I just said that myself. They -- as a group, conservatives are doing -- making this decision to vote for Roy Moore. That's number one. Number two, I disagree with David about what happened on the Cabrini-Green. It is true that it was a mess. It is also true that liberal social policies sometimes blow up. They may be well-intended and they don't work. And that's absolutely true, as true as it is with conservative social policies. But the fact is, what they did is tear down Cabrini-Green, and the murder rate in that neighborhood is now the highest in the country. They did not get better. They got different, but they did not get better.

Third, abortion and same-sex marriage. I am incredibly proud of the fact that I was the first governor in the country to sign the marriage equality bill, not -- and, I didn't have any reason to do it. It was dropped in my lap by the Supreme Court.

00:42:10

I knew nothing about nothing. I hadn't paid attention to gay rights or anything of that sort. I was convinced that no group of Americans should be denied 1781 financial rights that people who are heterosexual could have because they were allowed to get married and gay people weren't. It was just equality. That's what did that.

Abortion is a very difficult issue. This is -- there's no right or wrong here. Those who argue vigorously that abortion is murder, I have to respect that. I believe that women have rights that are equal to man. And you -- unless you give women choice over their futures, the same kind of choice that men have, then it is impossible for women to have the same rights that men do. So,

I come down on the pro-choice side. This is a very difficult argument.

I respect deeply people who make the case that abortion is murder and that it shouldn't be allowed. But I don't agree with it and I don't appreciate people like the guy from Pennsylvania who had to resign who got his mistress pregnant and then wanted her to have an abortion and is running a Right to Life. There is a ton of hypocrisy. There's plenty on the liberal side, plenty on the conservative side. I don't think abortion --

00:43:15

John Donovan:  
Okay.

Howard Dean:  
-- is a moral cause for either side.

John Donovan:  
Let's let Robby -- Robert George into the conversation.

Robert George:  
Yeah. Well, I certainly agree with my friend Melissa that there are things that government can do to help people, especially at the bottom end. And I think that there are probably ways that we could strengthen and improve even the safety net.

But I want to now reinforce a very important point David made. The fundamental work that the primordial Department of Health, Education, and Welfare is the family and institutions of civil society. So, it's little platoons as David will recall Burke calling them that play the main role in transmitting the virtues that enable people to lead successful lives and to be good contributing citizens. And what we have to do is find ways to empower those institutions of civil society. And what we have to avoid is undermining them with policies however well intentioned that do undermine personal responsibility, that create dependency.

00:44:11

Nicholas Kristof, an absolutely staunch card-carrying liberal, to his very great credit in a column a couple of years ago, talked about a visit he made to my home state, to West Virginia where I grew up. And Mr. Kristof said, "You know, it hurts me -- it's difficult for me as a liberal to admit this, but having visited central Appalachia and spent some time there now and looked at the situation, I have to admit that programs that we liberals put into place and that I supported have had the perverse effect of undermining the values and harming the very people that we sought to help." Took a lot of courage.

And that -- there's a liberal with great character willing to say that. But I think that truth has to be embraced alongside the truth that we also have responsibility for a social safety net. We

can't rely on the institutions of civil society to do everything. There is a role for government, especially in the emergency situations, especially when you do have a hurricane or a natural disaster, or anything like that that the institutions of civil society themselves are not up to handling.

00:45:17

But government should be the backstop. Government should be in the background. Its role should be in the classic language subsidiary, secondary. The primary role needs to be played by the covenantal institutions, the institutions of civil society. And it's to the strengthening of those that we should fundamentally be looking.

John Donovan:

Robert, your opponent said that he respects your position on abortion.

Robert George:

Yeah.

John Donovan:

I want to know if you would respect his position on abortion. And you wrote about Roe v. Wade a while back in 2009 that Roe v. Wade has undermined the moral authority of the law. Can you respect somebody who holds a position that you -- you're using the word "moral" in that sentence -- if it undermines the moral authority of the law. Should you respect his position? What does it mean to respect it?

Robert George:

Sure I can. And I can do that because I recognize my own fallibility and I could be wrong about the question of supporting -- whether supporting Roe versus Wade undermines the moral authority of the law.

00:46:09

So, I've written a book on the subject. I've engaged with colleagues like my colleague Peter Singer at Princeton who supports not only abortion but infanticide, who argues that the logic of the pro-choice position should also embrace infanticide. I can have a perfectly civil debate. I can even learn from him while disagreeing.

So, on this point the governor and I are in exactly the same place. We disagree on the substantive question of abortion but we agree that the other side -- people on the other side are honorable and they make arguments that need to be taken seriously. We can learn from them and we always have to be open to the possibility that they could persuade us, that we could turn out to be wrong. I've changed my mind as David has on some things over the years. I have had that experience. I had to be wrong before. If I'm -- right now.

John Donovan:

All right. Melissa Harris-Perry.

[laughter]

Melissa Harris-Perry:

I do want to -- I want to acknowledge as Professor George did at the beginning that we have been colleagues for some time. And, like, that moment right now was just part of why I have always appreciated and enjoyed -- I mean, no seriously I do think that in public space we punish people for learning. And that is -- it's a bizarre and bad thing that we do.

00:47:21

Like, the idea that if you change a position because you learn something or you change your mind and we hold it against you like, "Oh, you used to think X and now you think Y?" So, I just wanted to affirm that, first of all.

Robert George:

I think before -- interrupt just to say not only do I appreciate that comment very much. I want to build on it because I think what's happening in this moment in our policy --

John Donovan:

Can you hang on?

Robert George:

Yeah.

John Donovan:

You had a long run and Melissa hasn't had her turn for a while.

[laughter]

Melissa Harris-Perry:

Right. So, I just -- I wanted to affirm that, and at the same time, prior to the follow-up around abortion, there was a lot of, what I think, were some false choices being made around sort of the big government/small government conversation that I think probably initiated with the Cabrini-Green, Chicago, like, bad neighborhood moment that happened that just kind of kept going.

00:48:14

And I just want to just pause for a second, because I do think that some of the false choices -- and I'm going to call them false choices. Because I think it was like as though all the choices

have to be made by a bunch of wealthy, white people who don't live there who will either help --

[applause]

-- or not help or -- so let me just -- so I -- I also might be wrong here, so I'm going to stop in a moment.

But let me just suggest that one way to think about the covenantal relationship is the idea of "Nothing about us without us." And that the primary folks who are decision-makers about any public policy that primarily impacts their lives ought to be the people whose lives are being affected.

00:49:04

So, that this idea, for example, that these communities -- I mean, the immediate movement to a bad neighborhood, for those of us who grew up in these bad neighborhoods or lived in these bad neighborhoods or -- is like -- I mean, I -- the level of appalling that that sounds to me is distressing.

And so, what I want to suggest is that both conservatives and liberals, when they are people of privilege racially and economically, tend to perform that, and that is troubling. However, what we have seen from the left is that they tend to have a larger tent party that has also included lots of black and brown people who have, through the structures of governance, had more opportunities for leadership that means that more of the "Nothing about us without us" happens on the left, allowing for that to at least be challenged more frequently. Part of what I would like to -- see in conservatism is more of that --

00:50:19

John Donovan:  
I need to let the other side respond.

David Brooks:  
Yeah, so let me tell the whole story. What happened --

John Donovan:  
Can you do this really quickly?

David Brooks:  
One minute. One minute.

[laughter]

John Donovan:  
Thank you.

David Brooks:

It's a whole short story. What happened in those neighborhoods is social planners went in there and saw these wood buildings that were low and looked rickety, and they said, "We're going to get these people out of the wood buildings; we're going to put up these new brick high-rises. They'll all be better off." What they did not see is the people living in those neighborhoods had social relationships, had webs of dependencies. They'd created ways of surviving and helping each other. There was social capital there, and they tore that down, and by their own outsider, elite vision, and built up -- made them materially better and socially and spiritually poor.

00:51:00

And that was exactly what I was offended by about the liberal programs about that. It was super-materialistic, but it totally ignored social capital, human relationship, and covenantal relationship.

John Donovan:

Okay, hold on. Hold on. Hold on. I'm very frustrated so far at how this is unfolding.

[laughter]

I want to hear your ideas about fairness. I want to hear your ideas about liberty. I don't want to -- you don't have to keep being offended by each other's characterizations, and we don't need to talk about Roy Moore and Bill Clinton.

Let's just talk about fairness. What's a -- the liberal concept of what results in fairness? We can put it in terms of affirmative action, for example, as, taking David Brooks' idea, competing goods. On the one side, fairness in the context of affirmative action could mean giving a chance to underprivileged individuals to have a shot that they wouldn't get because of systemic factors in their lives, to compensate for that. That's fair. That's -- and it's a fairness that works towards outcome.

On the other side, he said it's a question of process. The process means fiddling with the selection process in such a way to weigh different factors, but it's not consistent across the board. That's a different kind of fairness. So, take on, Howard Dean --

00:52:11

Howard Dean:  
Sure.

John Donovan:

-- that notion of the liberal concept of fairness. Is it about outcomes?

Howard Dean:

I'll do it [unintelligible]. First of all, Melissa made, I think, the most important point tonight, is that there was more opportunity on the liberal side. We are far from perfect, and it was liberal social engineers that torn down Cabrini-Green and made it worse. I mean, tore down the buildings, and that's true. The opportunity we give is first through affirmative action.

I don't think affirmative action's all that great, but I think it's a lot better than nothing because it gets people in the tent. Here's what really needs to happen. I --

John Donovan:

And why is that a good thing?

Howard Dean:

What?

John Donovan:

Why is that a good thing?

Howard Dean:

Because we are all in this together. And unless everybody has a place at the table, then America fails.

John Donovan:

Stop there. I want to take that to the other side.

[laughter]

I want to take that to the other side, and I'll come back to you.

[applause]

Robert George?

Robert George:

Classically, there are two competing conceptions of equality and --

John Donovan:

What's wrong with his conception?

00:53:01

Robert George:

-- and fairness. One is, equality of outcomes, equality of wealth, that's what the liberal tendency is toward. The other is equality of opportunity and social mobility. That's what the conservative one is for. We're both for equality, we're both for fairness. My own view, shaped largely by my experience growing up in West Virginia and watching what happened there, is that we should have our focus on equality of opportunity and the kind of economy that will generate social mobility to enable people to rise up as --

John Donovan:

Okay.

Robert George:

-- as millions of --

John Donovan:

Stop there. Melissa -- Melissa Harris-Perry.

Melissa Harris-Perry:

I just want to -- I just want to deal with empirical realities as a college professor who knows a lot about, for example, admissions, that the most aggressive affirmative action policies currently occurring in undergraduate college admissions are for men, because right now, if we went --

[applause]

No, no, no! No, we're not going to do pretend world.

Howard Dean:

She's right.

John Donovan:

No, no, we -- we --

Melissa Harris-Perry:

Not with me at the table. Right now, if we did admissions --

John Donovan:

Melissa. Melissa. Melissa, Melissa --

Melissa Harris-Perry:

-- solely -- if we did admissions solely on merit, then undergraduate freshmen classes would be 65 percent female.

00:54:06

Howard Dean:  
Correct. That is true.

Melissa Harris-Perry:  
And so, right now, if we want to have a conversation about affirmative action, we're going to talk about the fact that in order to --

John Donovan:  
No, Melissa.

Melissa Harris-Perry:  
-- have gender balance --

John Donovan:  
Melissa.

Melissa Harris-Perry:  
-- you would have to bring up -- because --

John Donovan:  
Melissa.

Melissa Harris-Perry:  
No, we're not going to do pretend world.

[applause]

John Donovan:  
Melissa.

Melissa Harris-Perry:  
Not with me at the table.

John Donovan:  
Melissa, would you --

Melissa Harris-Perry:  
We're just not --

John Donovan:  
Would you please respect this process as --

Melissa Harris-Perry:

I am totally respecting --

John Donovan:  
And so, here --

Melissa Harris-Perry:  
-- relative to [unintelligible].

John Donovan:  
Here's what -- here's what I mean by it.

Melissa Harris-Perry:  
We can't talk about race if --

John Donovan:  
I --

Melissa Harris-Perry:  
-- if actually affirmative action is for boys.

John Donovan:  
We're not at the moment debating the race. We're debating the issues that make liberals morally --

[applause]

-- gives the liberals the moral high ground.

Melissa Harris-Perry:  
But you said --

John Donovan:  
And I want to --

Melissa Harris-Perry:  
You said -- you said, "underprivileged people." And affirmative action is for boys, and they're not underprivileged.

John Donovan:  
We're not arguing the specifics of affirmative action and practice at the moment. We're arguing the concept behind them and why it's a good thing. And I want to hear from you on that because I think you have a lot to say about it.

[laughter]

As a measure of fairness is what I mean.

00:55:00

Melissa Harris-Perry:

Right. But you set out affirmative action as a thing, as though we all know what it is. And what I am suggesting is, no, we don't. What I am saying is that the most aggressive affirmative action currently in existence --

John Donovan:

Okay.

Melissa Harris-Perry:

-- is for boys.

John Donovan:

How does that make the point that liberals are morally superior -- hold the moral high ground?

Melissa Harris-Perry:

Oh, it doesn't. That's why I --

John Donovan:

Okay. Let's --

Melissa Harris-Perry:

-- have not been talking about affirmative action.

John Donovan:

Okay. So make the case that the concept, the idea behind affirmative action --

Melissa Harris-Perry:

Trying to racialize affirmative action? Because I want -- I want us to be talking about what we're talking about. So, are we talking about race-based admissions?

John Donovan:

Yes.

Melissa Harris-Perry:

Great. Alright. So, I think that race-based admissions really ought to be about the fact that there are reparations due to people because of slavery and Jim Crow. And so, instead of having --

[applause]

-- really any other conversation that's about some other thing, we should just talk about the thing we're talking about.

John Donovan:

Okay. Let me take that to the other side then. Respond to that, David Brooks.

David Brooks:

I'm a squish on this issue. You know, if somebody is discriminating, it doesn't get admissions even though they have higher test scores, higher grades, higher everything else, and they're denied, that's unfair to that person. If we have a class that's wildly unrepresentative of the country at large, then that's unfair to that school. So, these are two competing goods. And how you break it down, my own solution is more a class-based system. I think that would sweep in a lot of the people who are -- who are underprivileged of all races.

00:56:13

John Donovan:

Okay. But I -- I want to stick -- keep it at the competing goods level as opposed to your solution level. But I'm not dismissing that, and I'm also not dismissing the realities that you're talking about. I'm trying to keep this at the level of which we wanted to hear about these competing goods, why you feel they're in competition -- and in Melissa's case, and I think Howard's case -- why a race-based system is appropriate, called for and in fact represents the moral high ground. I think you -- I think you've both --

Howard Dean:

I didn't argue for a race-based system. You cut me off.

John Donovan:

Okay, go ahead.

[laughter]

Howard Dean:

I said you -- you get people in the tent, and if you have to use affirmative action or whatever reason, you do it. And then, you make sure that the people who are do -- on the admissions committee look like the student body that you want. That's the real key because we all tend to hire people like ourselves. Everybody does it without exception on race, religion, or anything else. And if you know that in advance, then you can make adjustments in your institution.

00:57:03

When I had to run the DNC, which is the most diverse party on the face of the earth, I made damn sure the people who were doing all the hiring looked like the party so that everybody

would get a shot. And the implicit bias that every single one of us has towards hiring somebody that we haven't beat -- and mistaking that for confidence is -- can be adjusted for. But you can only do that if your institution looks like the institution that you want to build in the future.

John Donovan:

I want to move on to the question of same-sex marriage where, Robby George, you have taken a position that it's morally not correct. I believe I can say that about you correctly. Your opponents obviously take a different position. Why do you think that their position, which I think they would argue represents the moral high ground -- they've already made that case -- why that's wrong, what's the -- what are the competing goods here?

Robert George:

Well, I've written two books on -- on this subject, and I can hardly compress it into a 30-minute -- 30-second statement. I'll just tell you what my view of marriage is. I do think the competing view can be defended with serious arguments. And I've engaged with people on the other side about the arguments.

00:58:06

My own personal view is that marriage is the relationship, historically and into the present, until the past 15 or 20 years, the relationship that unites a man and woman as husband and wife to be a father and mother to any children born of that union, conferring on the children the benefit of being brought up in the committed bond. The marital love of the two people whose coming together as a biological unit gave them the gift of life and conferring upon them the additional benefit of being brought up with both maternal and paternal influences in care.

Not every family will have a father and mother. Not every family will be intact. But in my view, that should be the ideal. Now, I would -- if I had time, I'd have to defend every single one of those propositions because they would all come under attack, especially from an audience where -- where we are. I mean, it's very easy to lose a debate over same-sex marriage in New York.

John Donovan:

Okay. But we don't need to be attacking your --

[laughter]

We don't need to be attacking your personal views on it. But we want to hear from your opponents why the contrary represents the moral high ground. And I take it to Melissa Harris-Perry.

00:59:06

Melissa Harris-Perry:

I would just say --

Robert George:  
I'm sorry. Go ahead.

Melissa Harris-Perry:  
-- because you want to -- you want to separate religious marriage from state marriage. And so, I think that that is a fine definition within any given religious context. And I believe that religions ought to be able to make choices about how they define marriage within the context of their faith. But that the state should have -- should not make those distinctions. And so, the state should recognize all marriages equally. It's a question of the state.

[applause]

David Brooks:  
It's -- can I?

John Donvan:  
Sure.

David Brooks:  
Can I jump in just a -- I fervently support gay marriage, but it's interesting how different the language I would use. I believe in marriage because I think it's the noblest institution in which people give self-sacrificial love to each other. And so, I support gay marriage because I think God made gay people as he made straight people. He wants all people to be within marriages if they want to be within a marriage. And so, my position always was, we shouldn't allow people to -- gay people to get married. We should sort of elbow them into it. It should be like, "Are you married yet? Are you guys getting married?"

01:00:12

[laughter]

Just because I believe in marriage.

Melissa Harris-Perry:  
David, I -- it's --

[applause]

It's funny you say that because during the time that my husband was proposing to me, I'd be like, "Oh, my gosh, why do we have to get married?" And he said, "You're such a love Republican." So --

[laughter]

Yes.

Howard Dean:

But this is --

John Donovan:

Howard Dean.

Howard Dean:

Just -- this is a point I was going to make in my closing. But this is -- this is emblematic of why I actually think we have the high ground on this side of the table. This is about fear, a change of institutions that is uncomfortable for people.

We understand -- and we have our own fears. We're human beings. I mean, we're not different than you are. But I believe this is about the future and about hope, not about fear and hoping that nothing changes. Look, not only is marriage changing, sexuality is changing. We're undergoing, right now, all this business with the sexual, you know, abuses and stuff. This has been going on for a long time. This has been going on, certainly when I was in college it was going on. I have a feeling it was going on a hell of a lot longer than that.

01:01:08

People are speaking up. Why? Because we're renegotiating gender roles in our society.

They're speaking up on campus, they're speaking up --

[applause]

-- it's happening in the [unintelligible].

John Donovan:

Okay, let me -- let me take -- let me take that back to Robert George because, again, what I think Howard Dean saying is that the moral superiority of the liberal position on this one comes from their flexibility, their nimbleness, their keeping up in a dynamic way with the way that the world is changing. As opposed to, I suppose, he's implying holding onto tradition and things being always the way they were, there's -- a lot of superiority comes from the dynamic relationship of the --

Robert George:

Yeah. My argument has never been an argument from tradition. If you read my books, you'll find that there's no appeal to tradition or anything like that. It's not an argument from fear.

We have to face the question -- even my dear friend David has to face the question -- what is marriage? We can't get around that question. We can't have an assumption that marriage is

just a form of sexual romantic companionship or domestic partnership and is not what I've described it as being.

01:02:07

We actually have to have a substantive argument about that. If you -- if you presuppose the conclusion, if you build it into your premises, sure enough you're going to get that conclusion. But it's the premises that are what -- what is in debate, what actually is marriage.

On the sexual revolution more generally, on what's going on now, now maybe people think you can exonerate the sexual revolution. You may think that Hugh Hefner or Alfred Kinsey and their so-called work had nothing to do with what we have witnessed today. But if so, I'd ask you to keep an open mind

John Donovan:

Melissa, do you want finish on this point?

Melissa Harris-Perry:

Oh, I don't think so.

John Donovan:

Okay.

[laughter]

We had you at the beginning of the debate --

[laughter]

Melissa Harris-Perry:

No, not that one.

John Donovan:

We had you at the beginning of the debate fill out a form telling us the five words you associate with the word liberal. We are curious to see what the results are now. Those who voted for the motion that Liberals Hold the Moral High Ground chose the words "kind, diverse, accepting, charitable, community."

01:03:17

Those who don't think liberals hold the moral high ground chose the words "unrealistic, intolerant, condescending, snowflake --

Melissa Harris-Perry:

Snowflake! Yes, of course.

John Donovan:  
-- and uninformed.”

[laughter]

Male Speaker:  
You know what -- you know what’s awful is that they’re both right.

[laughter]

Melissa Harris-Perry:  
You damn snowflakes! [laughs]

John Donovan:  
And the middle column is the word -- the words that showed up on -- from both sides most often. So interestingly both sides had some say in believing that liberals are associated with the words “fair, open, progressive, caring” with very big letters which means it was the most heavily weighted word used by both sides, and finally “equality.”

01:04:02

So, now that we know these few things about you from your answers from these questions I’d like to go to your questions for the remainder of this portion of the debate. If you raise your hand I’ll call on you. If you could tell us your name we would appreciate it. Right down here. Yeah.

Female Speaker:  
Hi. My name is Melody. For the people supporting the against side, when I look at this motion I incorporate the word “currently,” as in liberals currently occupy the moral high ground. It’s just hard for me not to do that. You make several great arguments, you know, that incorporate the history of conservatism and the history of liberalism. If you’re looking at today’s group of conservatives in Washington, D.C., versus today’s group of liberals in Washington, D.C., do you still argue against the motion?

Robert George:  
Oh, you bet I do.

[applause]

John Donovan:  
Robert George.

01:05:01

Robert George:

You bet. The heroes on either side are rare. The people who have exhibited cowardice. Oh, they'll eventually when the politics is forcing them into the right -- doing the right thing, they'll do it. But on both sides there are very few people of courage. There are very few people of honesty, very few people of integrity.

I mentioned in my opening remarks a couple. Jim McGovern on the progressive side from Massachusetts. Marco Rubio with whom I worked along with Representative McGovern trying to help victims of persecution abroad, prisoners of conscience. I could mention Ben Sasse, someone I have great respect for on the conservative side. But there's a lot of corruption seeping into both parties. And that corruption is integrated into the kind of ideological partisanship that now marks the parties.

David Brooks:

I would like to add one thing --

John Donovan:

Sure thing.

David Brooks:

-- which is that, you know, both Robby and I are extremely critical of Donald Trump, extremely critical, we probably are, of Judge Moore. And what -- so this issue is complicated by the fact that over the past 18 months a Republican party has been hijacked by a reactionary party. And reactionary is not conservative.

01:06:08

And that the people I grew up with --

[applause]

-- who read National Review, read the Weekly Standard commentary, William F. Buckley, Edmund Burke were appalled -- were appalled. And so, it's complicated by that fact. And if you want me to be harshly critical of the people who are voting for Roy Moore, I think they're betraying their faith in order to try to save it. And they're trying to use means justify the ends philosophy.

John Donovan:

I want to let the other side --

David Brooks:

So, it's appalling.

John Donovan:

-- this one. Ms. Harris-Perry.

David Brooks:

But I just say that doesn't -- that doesn't vitiate against the basic concept of conservative human beings or conservative philosophy.

Melissa Harris-Perry:

I both appreciate and believe that you are appalled by what is happening. I also think that the party is culpable. And that there cannot be simultaneously decades of argument that government is so evil and ought to be drowned in a bathtub and cannot -- should not be professionalized, that only outsiders should be elected to Washington, that we cannot trust media, that we -- and then when the outcome of it exists, that folks wash their hands of it.

01:07:35

These are -- the drawing of the districts so that they are small, and folks are -- this party is captured in part because of choices that were made by folks who I think, looking down the road, could have seen -- I'm not saying the two of you [laughs].

You were not personally responsible, but if folks who are good people do not take responsibility for the ways in which this happened, then -- it's not acceptable to just say, "Oh, man, that's not us," any more than it is for liberals to do that when really horrifying things happen in the Democratic Party. And so, I'm sorry, Republicans don't get to wash their hands of this Republican Party.

01:08:26

[applause]

Robert George:

I just don't think it can be handled in that kind of a simplistic way. I -- he didn't get my vote. I warned that he was morally unfit to be president. I refused to meet with him when he was courting conservatives, and the -- let's face the fact that he carried counties and regions and states that Barack Obama carried.

This wasn't Trump running as some sort of anti-government libertarian. He was running with a whole new idea, claiming that he represented forgotten people who really did -- in Michigan and in Ohio and in Pennsylvania and in West Virginia and all through Appalachia and elsewhere -- feel as though they had been left behind. They had been forgotten by progressives -- some of them voted for Obama, remember -- by progressives, as well as by conservatives.

01:09:26

It was the establishment of both parties that Trump ran against, and if there is responsibility and liability, it rests with both parties and with both ideological movements.

John Donovan:

Sir?

Jon Haidt:

My name is Jon Haidt from New York University .

[applause]

Robert George:

Rock star status.

Jon Haidt:

So, the word "liberal" is in the title of the resolution, and we talk about liberal democracy, we talk about liberal arts universities. One of the most shocking and horrifying things this year for many of us has been the explosion of illiberalism on both sides.

01:10:02

People on each side are so focused on -- on the left, people are so focused on actual Nazis and white supremacists, and people on the right are so focused on illiberalism on campus, and people want to shout down speakers and tell people what they can say and what they can wear.

So, I was wondering if, on both sides, you could talk about how your side is liberal in the more classical sense, or connects to the liberal tradition, and if you could sort of clearly mark what's the element of your side that is illiberal and that you might or might not want to distance yourself from.

John Donovan:

Howard Dean, you want to take -- or Melissa, do you want to --

Howard Dean:

That is a fascinating and very difficult question. In fact --

[laughter]

-- neo-Nazis exist, and they were -- organized the riot in Charlotte that caused a death. So, the question is, how do you stand up against that? Are there people who get shouted down who shouldn't? Yes. Are there people who get shouted down who should? Yes.

If you are Milo Yiannopoulos, or you are Ann Coulter, and your only reason for going on campus is to insult people, identify every undocumented person so they get kicked out of school, there is no academic value for that whatsoever. I do not think that the First Amendment requires Berkeley to spend \$1 million in security so a provocateur can come and say whatever they want.

01:11:16

And this was handled very well, but the first time, Middlebury handled it terribly. Charles Murray should not have been shouted down. The second time, James O'Keefe came; the university wouldn't permit him to come; he lied about how he was going to get there. He rented a hall, a few people came, and there was no incident. Because who wants to listen to a felon talk about nonsense and provoke people?

So, this is a -- it's really a tough argument. Of course, we support the First Amendment, but a lot of the -- there's a fair amount of posturing going on around free speech and illiberalism. It's a tough row to hoe.

John Donovan:

Okay --

Howard Dean:

We need the First Amendment, but it is not absolute.

John Donovan:

Okay, so your answer to that question is in some cases you think that the left may be illiberal in the issues of who gets to speak and who gets to --

01:12:02

Howard Dean:

I think that's true sometimes.

John Donovan:

The other side --

Howard Dean:

It's certainly true when I was in college in the '60s.

John Donovan:

Okay.

Howard Dean:

That's for damn sure. Worse then than it is now.

John Donovan:

The other -- your opponents, what do you -- in answer to your question, what evidence of illiberalism in the classic sense --

David Brooks:

Well, I'd just say the conservative case -- we have a sense of history, a sense of gratitude toward the inheritance of history. And there's a great conservative philosopher Michael Oakeshott who said that we're in the -- we are the lucky inheritors of a grand conversation. And all the books that we read in college were part of that conversation. And some of those people were pretty wacky. Nietzsche -- would Nietzsche be able to speak on campus? I really doubt it. But he's genius. Karl Marx, I don't agree with him. He is a genius.

And so, preserving that grand conversation and protecting and passing it along to this next generation is essential conservative value because we're aware of --

John Donovan:

But the question from Mr. Hay was what is the evidence on your side of an illiberal activity or manifestation? Robert George.

Robert George:

I'll tell you what the danger is for those of us on the conservative side. It's what goes by the label, the "alt-right," a movement that seeks to replace -- at least in its more extreme manifestations -- seeks to replace the old-fashioned American conservatism which was really a form of liberalism.

01:13:12

It was an old-fashioned Madisonian, Tocquevillian liberalism that cared about limited government, civil society, *E. Pluribus Unum*, to replace that with ethno-nationalism, with the blood and soil conservatism of old Europe. And people like David and myself are fighting as hard as we possibly can about that.

I think the challenge for those on the Governor and Melissa's side is that where progressives have control of institutions as in academia, where there are very few people like David and myself, it is not going well for the cause of old-fashioned liberalism, the cause that the governor, I'm sure, and Melissa shares with David and me. They -- speech is being shut down. People are being frozen out. There is a lack of viewpoint diversity that cannot simply be the fruit of the explanations that are often offered: conservatives are too dumb to be professors, conservatives don't go into academia because they love money, so they go into banking instead. That can't account for it.

01:14:12

There's a historic prejudice there. There is a -- there are problems that have to be overcome. And now they're manifesting themselves in an unwillingness to let people be heard. There's a kind of dogmatism. It was exactly that ideological partisanship that dogmatism, that refusal to listen --

John Donovan:

Are you saying that -- you're saying that's a flaw of the left?

Robert George:

Well, yeah, I mean, the institutions that are controlled --

John Donovan:

Okay. But you still haven't answered Jonathan -- John's question. But I want to hear Melissa respond to --

Melissa Harris-Perry:

Well, no, no. --He did.

Robert George:

I thought I had.

Melissa Harris-Perry:

He said, "the alt-right." Well, so Professor George, I am literally talking --

Robert George:

That was -- the challenge for us is the alt right.

Melissa Harris-Perry:

-- [unintelligible] ask? We're --

Robert George:

The challenge for the other side is, in institutions that the other side controls, illiberalism is flourishing.

Melissa Harris-Perry:

Oh --

John Donovan:

I want Melissa's response to that because you're --

Melissa Harris-Perry:

Yeah, because --

John Donovan:

You're a professor and --

Melissa Harris-Perry:

Yeah, well, professors like talked about this -- I mean, we -- the question that you leveled was the thing that we were speaking about before we walked out, which is, don't you hate that it's capital L as opposed to little l so that we could just spend all night talking about liberalism with a little l.

01:15:07

In October, I hosted a conference with the Eudaimonia Institute at Wake Forest University called Rethinking Community, in which we had invited Professor George, who just wasn't available. But on precisely this question. It is a Koch brothers funded institute, the institute where I am the director is not Koch brothers funded.

[laughter]

On precisely this question, because the alt-right problem on the right is the illiberal and the concern -- and I'm not sure that it's illiberal, but I worry when my students are concerned about their capacity to deal with what they call safe-base [spelled phonetically] problem.

For me, as I say to my students, I want their soul and their spirit to be safe, but not their brains. I want the brains to be never safe. I want their brains to be very unsafe. I want their brains to melt and run out their ears --

[laughter]

-- because they've been challenged by ideas that are uncomfortable to them. And as long as we are keeping their souls and spirits safe, no need to keep your brain safe because your brain should be very unsafe in democracy, right? That's part of the --

01:16:10

Robert George:

Okay.

Melissa Harris-Perry:

-- values

Robert George:

Amen.

[applause]

John Donovan:

There is somebody who's been coming to our debates for -- one after the other after the other, and he's raised his hands numerous times, and I haven't ever called on him. And one time he said, "Here's what I would have asked," and I said, "That's a damn good question. And I'm going to try to get to you next time." So it's your turn, front row, second seat. The only thing I know is your age, 12 years old.

Male Speaker:

And here we go.

John Donovan:

Make it good.

[laughter]

Male Speaker:

So, hello. My name is Ishan [spelled phonetically] and -- and I have a question for you. So, over the years, there have been many social aid programs for lower income households and lower income neighborhoods across America. But many studies show that they don't work, or they keep lower income families in lower income households like welfare programs, social safety net, or refusal to implement school choice in many states and cities across the country. So, how do you feel about this?

01:17:11

John Donovan:

I'll let all sides take that. That's a pretty good question.

[applause]

Howard or Melissa, who -- Howard?

Howard Dean:

You know, I -- this is -- this is where I agree with the opposite side. Pure liberalism all the time doesn't work anymore than pure conservatism all the time. I'm a proponent of charter schools. I'm not a proponent of for-profit schools. And I'm not a proponent of for choice -- of school choice. I'm against school choice because I think it'll lead to the re-segregation of America. I'm against for-profits because they turn -- they do a terrible job, usually worse than the public schools. But I'm very much for excellent nonprofit charter schools like Trump and -- [laughs] "Trump."

[laughter]

Like -- how did that came out? I must have been thinking of Betsy DeVos. Like KIPP-- like KIPP

and excellent schools. And why? Because I went to my son's school at TFA and those kids were illiterate 40 years after the Civil Rights' movement, and everybody lied to them. Republicans lied, Democrats lied, black school board members lied, white school board members lied. Everybody lied. There was no equality of opportunity without making sure that kids get a different education.

01:18:13

And I think charters have succeeded in Newark -- good charters are succeeding in Newark. The aspiration and the excellence in grading has gone up. There's some of them that are succeeding in New York and some aren't. So, there are good ideas on the right and the left, and both sides make mistakes. This is not an argument about either side being perfect. This is an argument about right now, who has the high ground. And I think we do.

John Donovan:  
Other side?

Robert George:  
Well, apart from --

John Donovan:  
Robert.

Robert George:  
Apart from the final sentence that's the governor had, I only disagree with what he said right there on the question of school choice. I'm for it, and I'm for it precisely because I think it would be a great advantage to the least well-off people, including many minority people who are deprived opportunities that people who have more money have to send their children to truly excellent schools. So, I would want to see school choice expanded.

But Ishan, in response to your broader question, I think it's very important for conservatives -- and I detect a kind of hint of conservatism in your question --

01:19:09

[laughter]

I think it's very important for us --

Melissa Harris-Perry:  
Well, you're going to Princeton now, kid.

Robert George:  
Yeah. I like that!

[applause]

My card.

[applause]

Melissa Harris-Perry:  
Good job, sir.

Robert George:

I think it's -- it's very important to remember my point about not being dogmatic, not being dogmatic. The social safety net really is necessary. There are some things that civil society cannot do, and government needs to be there, especially when there are emergencies, especially where people are going to fall through the cracks, and there aren't institutions of civil society there to rescue them.

But, wherever we can do, by private initiative, what needs to be done, we shouldn't resort to the public sector for that. We shouldn't grow the government, because that will freeze out freedom, and that will enervate that will -- that will damage the institutions of civil society that really are, as I said earlier, the primordial Department of Health, Education, and Welfare.

01:20:12

So, yeah, let's promote civil society, let's promote private initiative. But also remember that there has to be a safety net.

John Donovan:  
Kid, good question.

Melissa Harris-Perry:  
Can I just say --

[applause]

John Donovan:  
Yeah.

Melissa Harris-Perry:  
So in many ways I agree with you that targeted programs that have an association with poverty in and of themselves tend to be really problematic in our country in part because we also tend to associate poverty with race. And there is a great deal of racism in our country.

So, here is one of the ways to get around that. One, one of the things that liberals tend to do

that raises all boats that isn't about programming is do things like, for example, raise the minimum wage. When you raise the minimum wage people work and they earn more and in earning a living wage and having healthcare for example then it's not a program. It's the capacity for people to earn a living wage and provide healthcare for their families and their communities that doesn't require a program, for example.

01:21:04

It also -- Democrats and liberals tend to do things like step in and ensure that banks are not redlining and failing to loan in appropriate ways to women and to families with children and to folks who are African-American or to people who don't have certain kinds of documentation. And all of those things ensure that in fact people can actually buy homes. And in those communities where they buy homes also for example providing tax incentives so that in those communities where people are buying homes that there are now tax incentives to also have a grocery store and a gas station.

So, sometimes we think of like liberalism as just being about programs. And I would think that that is far too limiting. Part of what we're talking about when we're talking about liberalism is also fairness for all communities that isn't just about letting the market operate. Because what we know is that the market tends to operate in ways that benefits folks, right, who also have these historic privileges.

01:22:01

David Brooks:

Can I just -- since everyone else got a thing?

[applause]

John Donvan:

Sure.

David Brooks:

This is one minute. Just this is why the moral high ground language is so pernicious. The minimum wage is not a moral high ground issue. A \$30 minimum wage would be too high. \$5 is too low. Finding the right balance there, that's not a moral issue. That's a programmatic issue.

School choice. I was really in favor of school choice 'till saw the studies. I'm a little less impressed by it now. That's not a moral issue. If you make that a moral issue, then I lock in. I'm more in favor of charter schools because I think the results there are much better. We over-moralize our politics.

[applause]

And if you use that moral high ground language then you reduce the rationality of the whole system.

John Donovan:

I think we have time for one more question. Sir?

Male Speaker:

Hi, my name is Uri [phonetic]. Something that hasn't come up tonight at all is foreign policy or America's role towards the rest of the world. I was wondering on each side what's something that defines your side's approach to this issue and why that's superior to the other side?

John Donovan:

Thank you. That's a great question. I'm glad you brought it into the conversation. Let me take it first to the side arguing against the motion. Robert George?

01:23:08

Robert George:

I don't think that there is one thing that defines the conservative or the liberal view on foreign policy. Now individual politicians, Donald Trump, Hillary Clinton, have their particular views about foreign policy for better or for -- or for worse.

But what we really need in foreign policy is a broad consensus across the parties which we had during the Cold War. And that served us very well during the Cold War. Now, we face a different set of challenges. Things are not nearly as simple. They were terrible in the Cold War. We wouldn't want to go back to that. But we have a more complex set of challenges today. And I think we all need to be working to try to find that consensus that reasonable people of good will can join in across the ideological spectrum and across the parties. There is no conservative foreign policy or liberal foreign policy just as such.

John Donovan:

Is that -- do you agree with that, the other side?

Howard Dean:

For the most part yes, but. I do a lot of work in foreign policy. We worked very well with our Republican counterparts, probably the last place in Washington where Democrats and Republicans do see eye to eye most of the time. The big difference is this, in general -- and, boy, have Democrats screwed up. The Vietnam War was on us for the most part. Iraq, the second Iraq war, was on the Republicans for the most part. So, I agree.

01:24:23

We're all -- I think there is a substantive difference. I think Democrats tend to require better

records on human rights from those people we help than the Republicans do. I think the Republicans in general are less interested in human rights and more interested in practical -- willing to leave that out of the equation. I think America always has to stand up for human rights. We are not perfect, but if you don't aspire to a higher level of achievement and humanity you never get there.

John Donovan:

David Brooks, is that a fair characterization that liberals are more focused on human rights and pursue it?

David Brooks:

No. I -- you know, I was a so-called neoconservative. That's what we cared about. We wanted to defeat the Soviet Union to preserve the human rights of the Soviet Union. We went into Iraq because we thought it would help for democracy around the world. And we overstepped in that case. But it was all -- it was a human rights-based democracy and freedom-based foreign policy that Ronald Reagan stood for.

01:25:11

Robert George:

The case for Soviet Jews was really led by conservatives. There were Democratic conservatives like Scoop Jackson as well as Republican ones. Now, the question of persecution of Christians abroad and what we're going to do about persecution of Christians in the Middle East tends to be led by conservatives. Now, there are liberals, and I'm really glad that there are as well, but I don't think we can go with Governor Dean on this one. I think that conservatives and liberals both have pluses and minuses on this one.

John Donovan:

Melissa Harris-Perry, to finish this thought? You'll pass?

Melissa Harris-Perry:

No, I gave that one to Howard Dean.

John Donovan:

To Howard? Well, given that Howard took it and that we're out of time, that concludes Round Two of this Intelligence Squared U.S. debate.

[applause]

The motion is Liberals Hold the Moral High Ground. And now, we move on to Round Three. Round Three is made up of closing statements by each debater in turn. They will once again return to the "Intelligence Square" over there. First speaking, making his closing statement in favor of the motion, Howard Dean, former chairman of the Democratic National Committee, on the motion. Ladies and gentlemen, Howard Dean.

01:26:12

[applause]

Howard Dean:

So, this has been a great debate, and I think the most important part of the debate actually is -- has been made by my opponents, even though I think they lose, which is -- they happened to make it first -- which is, in fact, we are all human beings, and we are both human beings that care about each other, that can talk to each other as we have tonight, that actually listen to each other.

The core question is, which values are important? I'm going to argue as I have before, that the core difference between liberals and conservatives is that we look forward, we have hope, we are not clinging to the past, and we are not fearful. We are sometimes inadequate. We sometimes make mistakes, as the opposition has pointed out, and we have made big mistakes. And we're not -- we don't always have the moral high ground. But I think, certainly at this time in our history, it's what you do, not what you say, and politicians say anything, whatever is convenient.

01:27:11

But the fact is, on the record, what is going on in the Republican Party is not the high ground. It is not. Some day -- hey, I was born as a Republican. I came over to the dark side, as these guys could say, because I wanted a party that wanted something better for the future. I wanted a party where we could allow into the mainstream of American life those who had been denied it, and it wasn't just people of color when I was growing up. It was people who were gay, people who couldn't succeed in the economic -- it was a very clubby little society. We've gotten much better. We have gotten much better as a nation.

I went to school with two African-Americans. I had never been to school with an African-American before in college; they had never been to school with a white person before. That was the year that Bobby Kennedy was killed; Martin Luther King was killed; the Chicago convention blew up; and 99 cities were burned down.

01:28:06

If you had told us that we were going to have a black president 40 years later, we'd have told you you were crazy. Forty years later, the United States of America elected Barack Obama president. That is the great thing about America, that people do have opportunity that nobody ever thought they would have. That's what we believe on our side of the table.

John Donvan:

Thank you, Howard Dean.

[applause]

The motion is Liberals Hold the Moral High Ground, and here to make his closing statement against the motion, and making his way to the "Intelligence Square," David Brooks, op-ed columnist for the *New York Times*. Ladies and gentlemen, David Brooks.

[applause]

David Brooks:

I, too, have enjoyed the night. I'm reminded of the moment I was watching Governor Dean run for president, and he was at the highwater mark in New Hampshire, and I was sitting with Al Franken that day.

01:29:00

[laughter]

And he got into a fistfight in the back of the rally. I don't know why I mention that, but it's harmonic conversion.

[laughter]

So, they've made the case that they're better -- that liberal outcomes are better. That's fine. We believe conservative outcomes are better. But I'm stuck on the resolution. The resolution is not about who has better outcomes. The resolution is about liberals, a group, hold the moral high ground, and that's been the big difference in this debate. Robby and I don't think we have the moral high ground. We think we're equal. And further, I think -- or at least I think the idea of claiming the moral high ground is a pernicious and dangerous act that hurts the country.

So, if a guy --

[applause] --

-- if there was ever a guy who could have held the moral high ground, it was Abraham Lincoln. 1865, he's just finished the Civil War to end slavery against people who wanted to preserve it. He gave a second inaugural. He could have said, "Woo-hoo! I won." He didn't do that, because he knew how pernicious that claim of moral high ground would be.

01:30:04

He said, "American slavery was not a Southern problem, it was an American problem." He said, "The scourge of the war fell on all of us equally." He said, "We are all --" he gave us that we're all equal, we all sinned, and we're all coming together. The key words in that speech were "all,"

“we,” “won.” Nobody expected this.

So, my final plea to you is reject the idea that one party or another has a moral high ground. And the second is, vote for equality, that conservatives and liberals are equal, that we have liberal -- equal intentions, equal dreams, equal hopes, maybe some equal fears. But basically we are equal. And if we start off from equality, then we can just have a better country.

[applause]

John Donovan:

Thank you, David Brooks. The motion again, Liberals Hold the Moral High Ground. And here making her closing statement in support of the motion, Melissa Harris-Perry, Maya Angelou Presidential Chair at Wake Forest University. Ladies and gentlemen, Melissa Harris-Perry.

01:31:05

[applause]

Melissa Harris-Perry:

Thank you for bringing us to Lincoln. Whenever I am in Washington, D.C., I run; and I run to the -- to Lincoln Memorial because I do find it a place of humility to be reminded that we can, at any point, be rend apart, that we do have to do the work of holding together this extraordinary nation.

Let me suggest that it does not fall on all of us equally. And the question is not about the South or the North. It is about my great-great-grandmother who was sold on a street corner in Richmond. When I think about myself as an empirical social scientist, that the work that I always do is, “But the data say, but the data say, but the data say.” But I actually went to seminary. I was raised Unitarian Universalist because I am the daughter of a white woman of Mormon pioneer stock and an African-American man who was raised in the Jim Crow South. So I couldn’t be anything but a Unitarian Universalist.

01:32:14

[laughter]

So I went to seminary because I needed an answer that empirics could not show me, and that is how my great-great-grandmother could have experienced only intergenerational chattel bondage for herself, expect that only intergenerational chattel bondage for her children, and yet somehow known that she was human and that at the end of enslavement, my people ran for office. It did not fall on all of us equally.

And so, there is a moral high ground, and it was occupied by the people who were on the bottom. And there is a group in this country who gives those people the most voice. Vote for

the motion because there is a space that says, “Nothing about us without us.” And that exists in this country on the left. Thank you.

01:33:15

[applause]

John Donovan:

Thank you, Melissa Harris-Perry. And one more time, the motion is, Liberals Hold the Moral High Ground. And here to make his closing statement against the motion, Robert George, McCormick professor of jurisprudence at Princeton University. Ladies and gentlemen, Robert George.

[applause]

Robert George:

Both great political movements, both major political parties have had their glory moments, and they’ve had their moments of shame. The Civil Rights movement was a glory movement. Glory day for the progressives. The eugenics movement was a shame moment for the progressives.

Even the Republicans and Democrats, Republicans have a great history on the issue of race, one that they would do well to reclaim. It’s good that Democrats have repudiated their history on race, including great progressive leaders. Perhaps the greatest, most famous progressive at all, Woodrow Wilson, who re-segregated the work force, the federal work force in Washington, D.C.

01:34:18

So, I think that should teach us the lesson of humility. We should not be too quick to claim the moral high ground, especially in circumstances where both movements and both parties are descending into dogmatism and ideological partisanship and tribalism.

I’m in my 33rd wonderful year of teaching at Princeton University, and I’ve had many wonderful experiences. But the very best thing that I’ve done, the most fulfilling thing for me, the thing I am most grateful for is the work I do teaching, together with my friend and ideological opponent, Cornel West. Cornel and I teach courses together; we lecture together, both on campus and off campus, because we have different points of view, not despite the fact we have different points of view.

01:35:08

We do it because we learn from each other, and we’ve learned so much from each other about how important it is to engage each other, and not to adopt an air of moral superiority, that we want to share that, and we want to model that for our students and for people around the

country.

As David said at the beginning, if you claim the moral high ground that's a pretty good indication that you don't do it -- you don't have it. And one of the things Cornel and I avoid, because we know it's not true, is to claim that one or the other of us has the moral high ground. The same is true for liberals and conservatives.

[applause]

John Donovan:

Thank you, Robert George. And that concludes our closing statements, where the motion is Liberals Hold the Moral High Ground. I just want to say this debate brought a memory back to me. When I was about 12 years old, about the age of the young man who asked the question, there used to be a television show called "Candid Camera," and they would prank people while they were secretly filmed doing embarrassing things.

01:36:08

And one that always stood out in my mind was that they set up -- they rigged a bathroom medicine cabinet so that it was full of ping-pong balls. And nosy people would come in and open the thing, and they were launched. The ping-pong balls were just flailing all over the place. And I just found this not just hilarious, but riveting also.

And tonight, in this debate, I kind of felt that I'd opened the medicine cabinet, and the ping-pong balls were flying all over me. But that said, I found it fascinating, and I found it riveting. And I thought that the way these debaters did show their respect for each other, and the many, many reveals of common ground between them, was stupendous and really goes to the point and the goal of the thing that we're trying to accomplish here. So, I want to thank you all for the way you all conducted yourselves tonight.

[applause]

Melissa Harris-Perry:

Well, you should [inaudible] [laughs].

John Donovan:

And now it's time to see what side you feel has argued the best. Remember it's the team whose numbers changed the most between the first and the second votes that determine our winner.

01:37:06

On the motion Liberals Hold the Moral High Ground, before the vote in polling the live audience 48 percent agreed with the motion, 22 percent were against, 30 percent were undecided. In the second vote, the team arguing for the motion, their first vote was 48 percent, their second

vote 43 percent. They lost five percentage points. The team arguing against, their first vote was 22 percent, their second vote 39 percent. They polled up. That makes them our winner. Our congratulations to them.

[applause]

And thank you from me, John Donovan, and Intelligence Squared U.S. We'll see you next time.

[applause]

[end of transcript]