FixUS

Policy Advocacy in a Polarized Environment
Event Summary - December 11, 2020

Background

On December 11, 2020 FixUS co-hosted with More in Common a virtual roundtable event featuring leaders from 30+ public policy and issue advocacy organizations to discuss the deteriorating state of our democracy (See attached list of participants). The organizing premise of this session was based on three core assumptions:

- *Our political system has reached a crisis point.* Growing polarization, mounting public distrust in institutions, and paralysis and dysfunction in Washington are contributing to an unsustainable public policy environment;

- *The roots of this environment are long term in the making.* Our current tumultuous period has elevated these problems with our political system. But the roots of these problems far predate our current situation, and are the result of a multitude of political, economic, cultural, technological, and other factors that will outlive any particular change in power in Washington;

- *Public policy leaders have a role to play in improving the health of our democracy.* As a result of widespread concern over the state of our democracy, an abundance of organizations and efforts have emerged in recent years, building upon an existing community of organizations devoted to improving the health of our democracy. While this work is incredibly valuable, other traditional public policy organizations, whose core issue foci reside elsewhere, can leverage their experiences and capacities in understanding and addressing these challenges.

Our hope was that by bringing together public policy practitioners we could cultivate a deeper understanding of the nature of the problems facing our political system and their complex root causes, and begin identifying specific ways public policy leaders and organizations can start to work together and take a more active role in addressing the roots of what ails our democracy.

<u>**Key Themes & Takeaways**</u>
Several themes emerged over the course of the roundtable discussion. The following summarizes some of the key takeaways from the discussion, though are not to be interpreted as consensus points nor attributable to all attendees/their organizations.

The deterioration of norms has led to differences becoming insurmountable.
Years ago, differences between the parties ran deep but did not stand in the way of a mutual desire to address public policy challenges. More recent years have seen civility on the decline and the rise of a new "win at all costs" mentality. This mentality has led to members of each party viewing the other in virtue of their political identities alone; rational debate of ideas has fallen by the wayside and partisans view the other side as nothing more than existential threats. Those advancing policy described an environment where elected officials and their staffs are not comporting themselves as professionally or as congenially as they once did. This breakdown in professionalism has significantly harmed Congress' ability to function as an institution and advance policy agreements. Norms of comity once kept the legislative agenda moving forward but have now largely disappeared.

Digital and social media have accelerated polarization.
The deteriorating policy environment cannot be disconnected from the deleterious effects of how the media and social media accelerates polarization. Today's media and technology are especially depersonalizing. Some working to advance policy on Capitol Hill pointed out how the advent of email even prior to the rapid rise of social media led to fewer interpersonal interactions among partisans, and such interactions are critical to healthy relationship building. Additionally, media companies thrive on division and are incentivized to profit off of divisive content. Social media has a complicating effect on our discourse and inflames voices that are outside the mainstream.

Our media environment also makes it harder to determine what is true with regards to public policy challenges. There is more information readily available than ever before, but this has led to many Americans congregating into like-minded information silos. Participants decried a lack of consensus over common facts, and how misinformation is able to proliferate unchecked. Despite the importance of a shared set of facts, it was recognized this alone is not by itself sufficient for our democracy to be able to function and address policy challenges. Rather, there needs to be a restoration of trust among people with different perspectives for the shared set of facts to have any weight. Facts may inform the debate on a given topic, but it is up to Americans of diverse viewpoints to determine what to do with those facts and how to settle the debate in a satisfactory manner.

Revitalizing civic education may be part of the solution.
The decline of civic education in the United States is cause for significant concern, a point made by participants across different issue domains, including those focused on education policy. Some cited how social studies curriculum have been underfunded for decades and many educational initiatives would rather focus their efforts and monetary resources on math and science. There was frustration with this phenomenon, as participants indicated that they have been swimming

upstream against these trends for years. Participants noted, however, that while restoring civic education will not be a panacea, its lack of prioritization has had real downstream effects on citizens' abilities to meaningfully participate in government.

Additionally, social studies are fraught with controversy at all levels of education. Education experts were quick to point out that stakeholders ranging from school board members to teachers and parents are afraid to address this issue. There remain deep-seated differences of opinion on what should be taught in social studies classrooms, and as such, educators are afraid of having challenging conversations with their students. This debate over civic education is representative of a broader division in the country over what sort of national narrative Americans can all buy into as a community.

Policy conversations need to maintain an awareness of their cultural and racial implications.
There has been a practice of "staying in your lane" in the policy community, with experts and advocates traditionally working on and advocating for reforms to their particular fields of interest. Cross-disciplinary collaborations have been few and far between, and some expressed that policy experts have in some instances not been considering the broader social and political contexts of their work, including distributional impacts of the reforms they advocate. Many of the social and economic crises of 2020 had to do with very fundamental human needs like safety, health, and economic security, and there remain longstanding disparities between racial groups in each of these areas, many of which participants expressed have been exacerbated by public policy.

In addition to the above considerations, race also arose during the roundtable in discussions surrounding the divide over the American narrative. As alluded to above in the section on civic education, there is an ongoing debate about who we are as Americans and what our history means to us, and race is a topic inextricably linked to these questions. In many ways, narratives on America's past have largely consolidated into two schools of thought: "glory" and "gory." This conflict of worldviews is highly charged and pertains to deeply personal histories and characteristics, and therefore remains difficult to address in nearly any area of public life. Policy experts from many different areas recognized the centrality of these issues to nearly every area of public life.

Participating Organizations

Roundtable attendees participated from the following organizations:

Alliance for Health Policy
Alliance for Market Solutions
American Heart Association
AVAC
Bellwether Education Partners
Bipartisan Policy Center
Blue Shield of California
Campaign for Tobacco-Free Kids
Carnegie Endowment for International Peace
Centerpoint Education Solutions
Climate Nexus
Committee for a Responsible Federal Budget
Concord Coalition
Council of Chief State School Officers
DEPLOY/US
ecoAmerica
Environmental Defense Fund
FixUS
Generations United
Independent Sector
More in Common, USA
National Alliance for Public Charter Schools
National Breast Cancer Coalition
National Coalition on Health Care
National Consumers League
Resources for the Future
Seek Common Ground
Sierra Club
Tax Foundation
The Education Trust
Third Way
USA Facts
Welcoming America