



Root Causes Perspectives: How Did We Get Here?

Everyday Americans and political insiders alike have become increasingly concerned with the dangerous levels of division, governmental dysfunction, and public distrust in our country. These trends had been intensifying for several years, and were on display in stark terms this past year in the midst of numerous domestic crises. Our country's responses to COVID-19, widespread civil unrest, and the January 6 storming of the Capitol each highlighted the seriousness of the situation.

FixUS is committed to fostering widespread dialogue around these issues so Americans of all walks of life can have a better understanding of how we got to this point and how we can move forward as a country. To help

inform this effort, in March 2021 we convened a roundtable of 30 experts to examine these topics¹. The conversation was incredibly thought provoking, with participants examining the many trends in politics, economics, culture, and technology that have contributed to our current state of polarizing division.

Given the complexity of the issues, the roundtable left us with more questions than answers. What follows is a compilation of several of these questions, each accompanied by illuminating commentary from roundtable participants. Our intent is to use these questions to spur more conversations with those interested in finding answers and a path forward for our country.

¹ Please see back of this report for a list of participants.

How do we address wicked problems in a complex dynamical system?

The two concepts that I found extremely useful in thinking about this are wicked problems and complex dynamical systems...A wicked problem is one, as I understand it, that reaches into your mind and activates your pre-existing biases and hopes and motivated reasoning, so that in a sense you know what the answer is as soon as you know the problem because it's what you've always wanted to be the answer. Wicked problems are ones that the more we have people on the left studying it and on the right studying it, the further apart we get because each side becomes increasingly confident. So political polarization, political dysfunction, and what's happening in our country is a gigantic wicked problem. And while we need people on the left and the right and libertarian to solve it, we also can't have them doing it separately because they'll just come up with their own partisan solutions....

The second concept is complex dynamical systems...We naturally think about things as a machine and "Oh well, what broke it? If you know this gear got out of whack; you know, money and politics, for example - let's fix that" and then we do that, and it doesn't work. A complex dynamical system is not a machine, it's more like the weather or a system in which there can be various parameters changing. And they might change and nothing really changes on the surface, but then all of a sudden, a tiny change happens and you get a complete reconfiguration into a different stable order. I think that is a good model for thinking about these problems that our country faces and especially about the political system. None of us have a brain big enough to be experts in all these areas, but if you put us together in the right way - like a real brain, where each neuron isn't that smart-you get a really smart brain. And so that's part of what we're trying to do here, that FixUS is trying to do, is convene the best neurons to put together to make the best brain that can figure out what the hell is happening to us and what we should do to improve this complex dynamical system in which most of us are affected by our motivated reasoning and our partisan commitments.

Jonathan Haidt, NYU



Is our politics dysfunctional because our parties have become more equally matched and competitive?



We often think of party competition in American politics as being a good thing, in that it promotes accountability and democratic responsiveness. But it has some downsides: it focuses politicians on politics over policy, and on the struggle for power, as opposed to the exercise of it. If we want to understand the reasons why American politics is driven by so much toxic partisanship, part of the reason is that we are locked in a ferocious power rivalry between two such evenly matched combatants.

Frances Lee, Princeton University

Has our political system transformed into a true two-party system from what used to be four shadow parties?

There is the strain of scholarship that is talking about the fact that we don't actually historically have two parties—we had effectively four shadow parties that were represented as two parties. And there's a significant thread that begins to insist that one of the key reasons why we have dysfunction right now is that with our constitutional structure and multiplying veto points, these two polarized parties are less capable of manipulating this constitutional structure than the four party system was before, because everybody realized they didn't represent the majority so they have to learn to work

with each other. But with the current polarized parties, each side wants to become the Stalinist party and evict the other side to Siberia. And I just wonder to what extent are views on the character of the parties conditional upon viewing these as two parties or would the same points be made if we recognize historically that the non-ideological parties of our past might have had a lot to do with the functioning or the capacity of government to function as it did better in our past than it does today.

Lawrence Lessig, Harvard University



Are changing issue dimensions and internally divided parties a factor in understanding polarization?

I'd like to offer something that's really off the beaten path in the literature on polarization: the idea that new issue dimensions have been introduced, from race to social issues in the Reagan era, to now free trade recently, to the introduction to the knowledge economy—a variety of issues have been introduced, and I argue preferences on all these issues are correlated with population density. But as new issues have been introduced, people have sorted into the parties on those dimensions... As we introduce additional issue dimensions in a two-party system, we are making the parties increasingly heterogeneous. So as Trump

introduces free trade as an issue and union Democrats start voting for Republicans, the Republican Party did not become more homogeneous—it became more heterogeneous. When a lot of people who were opposed to abortion rights became Republicans in the 80s, it made the party more heterogeneous, not more homogeneous. And so if we're going to understand polarization in the US, we have to understand how the parties are simultaneously viewing the out party as increasingly hostile and distinct, but at the same time, becoming increasingly heterogeneous and divided internally.

Jonathan Rodden, Stanford University

In addressing money in politics, do certain reforms run the risk of exacerbating polarization?

I have become concerned from what I've studied over the last several years that basing public financing on matching small donor contributions will further fuel polarization and make governing all the more difficult. Much of what we already know about the dynamics of the Internet and social media also apply to fundraising through these means. If

you look at the members of Congress who raised the highest percentages of their funds from small donors you'll see a list of the poles of each party, and if we match that money six to one, we risk throwing further accelerants on the fires of polarization that already burn so intensely.

Rick Pildes, New York University

Is our political system a core driver of the situation, or is it an accelerant compared to more fundamental sociocultural factors?

The basic structure of our electoral system of first-past-the-post hasn't changed since our founding, even though we have democratized it with reforms like direct election of senators and party primary elections. But we've gone from being non-polarized through most of the last century to being destructively polarized today, so obviously something else is going on. I think the deep drivers are in other areas

such as social factors, social change, economic inequality, and the mess that is social media. However, when you lay the polarizing social and economic factors on top of it, our current configuration of political institutions is making things dramatically worse.

Larry Diamond, Stanford University



How can we better understand the complexities of group identity and its impact on our eroding civic culture?



In spite of significant division in the United States, I believe Americans share a civic ethos or culture or animating spirit, but it's being eroded by our political culture. Across race and ethnicity, religion, gender, and class, we have an ethos that is aspirational, innovative, and creative, and

its part of our national story: the waves of immigrants who have come to America seeking and working toward a better way of life. The formerly enslaved who participated in political life and were voting, and opening bank accounts, shortly after the Civil War; actions rooted in hope and a vision for the future. The innovation that has led to scientific discovery, like putting a man on the moon and all that happened before and after. Even the concept of the American Dream, whether people call it that or not, crisscrosses our differences. But I believe that civic ethos is struggling to survive our political culture, which was built on a hierarchy of human value and has shaped our laws and our economy, our education system, our political institutions, and our cultural memory: the very stories we tell ourselves about ourselves. The story of America is the expansion of freedom. We know that story and we have benefitted from it, but our political culture continues to divide, to choke progress, and attack our binding civic ethos.

Melody Barnes, University of Virginia



We've shifted from a politics that was defined by a left and right that split on economic ideology in the 20th century to one more defined by cultural identity issues, and that is something that is not good for democratic politics because those cultural attachments are much more

fixed and harder to negotiate than, let's say, should the tax rate go up or down. I do think that what kicked this off was the Southern Realignment when the Democratic Party embraced the civil rights movement in the 1960s. White southerners began exiting the Democratic Party. The left in the United States began to change its definition of inequality to not be related to a broad group, like the proletariat or the working class or trade unionists, which had been its home during much of the 20th century, but in terms of specific narrower identity groups, so African Americans or women or female African Americans or disabled people, the LGBT community and so forth. And so there was a kind of fragmentation in the understanding, based on a perfectly reasonable observation that people are shaped by the groups that they are put in, particularly marginalized people who have a lived experience that they share with one another. As this went on, I think that over time you got a big backlash on the part of white Americans. The two parties began to sort themselves by race to a much greater extent than previously, and a lot of white Americans began to see themselves in those same identity terms, particularly if you're economically disadvantaged, as victims of a system that was being manipulated by elites and that led to the rise of these identity loyalties displacing not just economic ideology but economic rationality.

Francis Fukuyama, Stanford University

Has changing family life and structure contributed to the cultural and economic problems we face?

When we talk about the things that divide us today, one thing that doesn't get enough attention is that among the most important cultural transformations that we have seen over the past 50 or 60 years in the United States and in the western world more broadly is the changing family life and family structure. And this change has not happened democratically. While it began among elites in terms of setting the standards and changing the norms, we now find ourselves in a situation where the upper third of the American population is behaving culturally pretty much the way it did in the 50s and 60s. People who have college degrees tend to get married; 91%

of women who have a college degree do not have their first child until they're married. Among high school dropouts, by contrast, 67% of high school dropouts will have their first baby before they're married; many will never get married. And this bifurcation of American society, I think, accounts for many of the problems that we have. I think it's implicated in the rise of deaths of despair. I think it's implicated in the rise of income inequality, because we know that married-couple families tend to accumulate wealth far better. We know how difficult it is for single mothers to make ends meet and how many of them live in poverty.

Mona Charen, *The Bulwark*



What is the relationship among economics, culture, and politics in creating our current moment?

I have become more and more convinced that the interconnection between economic inequality and cultural issues is really important and that these topics shouldn't be pulled apart. They're often treated as competing explanations. For example, there was this discussion in the 2016 election about the role of economic anxiety versus cultural anxiety and racial anxiety. It turns out, I think my interpretation of the data is, if you want to look at proximate causes of why individual voters voted the way they did, then the cultural identity explanations work really well. But if you want to ask the question, "Why did these pre-existing divisions come to a political head at the time they did?" I think economic factors are very important."

Nolan McCarty, Princeton University

We can't really change the culture; that's really hard and I don't think we know how to do it. Furthermore, people are very dug in on cultural issues if you're talking about abortion, guns, race, religion and immigration, and so forth. These divides are not easy to compromise on, whereas economics at least has the advantage that you can find a middle ground. So even if I conclude economics is not the primary driver, it is at least something we need to focus on because it's a policy lever that's easier to control or manipulate than is culture.

Belle Sawhill, Brookings Institution

Income inequality and wealth inequality and family inequality and educational inequality and geographical inequality and cultural inequality—they're all getting more and more clustered. We're seeing more of these advantages clustered in some groups than others, and what that means is that the distinction between a cultural class and an economic class may become less important than some people thought that it was. And so part of our goal, I think, is to "decluster disadvantage", a term from Jonathan Wolff, because I think people look at the way in which advantages are piling up one on top of the other for those at the top and less so for those below and that's one way in which the different kinds of inequality overlap.

Richard Reeves, Brookings Institution

One of the more shocking things is that our two major systems, our political system (democracy) and our economic system (capitalism), are both in crisis and we have not felt that before in our lifetimes. In years past, it was rarely called into question that these systems would be in place going forward; now there seems to be real questions by some as to their durability. One of the reasons is because the central premises of both of them aren't being honored. The political premise of "one person, one vote" and total equality in our political system, even if not in our economic system, isn't working where people feel equally represented. And in terms of economics, the central premises of finding a balance between efficiency and fairness and creating a meritocracy are also not holding true. So as a result, there's just this massive loss of trust in our systems and our leaders, and it trickles down into distrust of each other. And it's shown by the low levels of support by younger people, in particular, for both democracy and capitalism. When I think about economics and how we got here, there are just so many mistakes that we've made. We've essentially squandered these huge potential gains from both globalization and technology by allowing all the gains to be consolidated in such small areas, and all the disruptions to fall on so many people in such a quick kind of brutal way...Our failure thus far to update our social contract for all the tectonic changes in our economy has led to a massive undermining of people's trust in government. We give in the budget \$6 to a senior for every \$1 we give to children at a time when the next generation is going to face the hardest environment in terms of competition that I think we've ever imagined.

**Maya MacGuineas,
Committee for a Responsible Federal Budget**



How is social media transforming society and exacerbating our polarization, distrust, and lack of truth?

The metaphor that we use when we think about this is that this is equivalent to kind of putting a brain implant in a society in the same way if you imagine a loved one getting a brain implant and you watch their personality change. What we're seeing is this slow moving personality change of an entire civilization, but also affecting different cultures differently. And the only way that they can "fix it" or adjust it is by making live changes to that brain implant...We talked about the importance of disagreeing constructively. If that's a critical element, I think social media is the antagonist to that possibility. Twitter and Facebook are not designed for constructive disagreement.

Tristan Harris, Center for Humane Technology

There are two crises happening at the same time. There is the crisis of truth or people's beliefs. Then there is the crisis in meta beliefs, or beliefs about others' beliefs. The higher the perception gap, the more likely you are to view the other side as bigoted and hateful, and activate moral distrust. Unless we solve that second layer of the beliefs about beliefs, and perceptions of what the other side is, we cannot possibly solve the first crisis, the crisis of truth.

Aza Raskin, Center for Humane Technology



How do we counter the appeal and rise of conspiracy theories?



It's very hard to give up a conspiracy theory once you have bought into it, because you have invested so much time. These conspiracy theories have huge casts, literally casts of hundreds or thousands and subplots and vocabularies and terminology, and once you have mastered this, you've made a tremendous investment, and that makes it even harder to detach from these kinds of divisive influences.

David Courtwright, University of North Florida

What is the role of mediating institutions in understanding and addressing our divisions?

Disintermediation is the common theme of detachment of people from institutions and intermediaries, which used to provide all kinds of services and do that less now. In politics, you see the loss of the power of the political class that did a lot of the air traffic control, the sorting, the vetting, the figuring out how to govern, how to build coalitions—they're often spectators now. In the culture, we see the withdrawal from organized religion, the increase of detachment from institutions, and that leads people to overburden politics with a lot of the search for meaning that they would otherwise be finding in other social attachments. In society, you see the reduction

of social mixing which might increase the resentment associated with feeling isolated. And the Internet, of course. The notion that you would get truth if you just created a platform where you put everyone on without intermediation was always nonsense—it was predictably a complete failure. You need pro-social institutions and norms and guidelines to make a large network like that work and the challenge will be building them. So when I think about all of these issues, I try to think about applying re-intermediation. How do we do that in a lot of different spheres to create pro-social incentives?

Jonathan Rauch, Brookings Institution

Are we as a country actually not disagreeing with each other enough?



It's easy to think about this moment as being driven by the parties disagreeing too much and the public disagreeing too much. But I think actually we're disagreeing far too little and we've got two big camps that have each withdrawn into themselves to talk about the other. Each party is mostly withdrawn and is speaking about a caricature of the other party. So that a lot of what we need now are ways of reengaging with each other about outside questions—questions that confront our society about which we can disagree constructively. I think that that's a big idea that can help us think about the small ideas and can help us think about what we are actually trying to achieve when reforming Congress. What are we actually trying to make possible by changing electoral systems? What actually is missing in the culture? And I think it may be, at least in part, that what is missing, in all these areas, are ways of actually disagreeing with each other that can matter and that can somehow be directed to a problem we're all trying to get at.

Yuval Levin, American Enterprise Institute

How can we achieve consensus and agreement when our differences are not trivial?

I think that as part of the solution we're going to have to think harder about what might be called *modus vivendi* politics—how we can figure out how to live together, despite the differences that are anything but trivial. And there's a very old fashioned word that reflects the necessity of *modus vivendi* politics and that word is “compromise.”

Which is very difficult when the compromise you favor, you know, is framed not as between more and less, or you get something and I get something, as between good and evil and right and wrong.

William Galston, Brookings Institution

What is unique about the challenges in the United States versus trends across the globe?

I would encourage us to think about what is unique to the United States and then what is unique to politics here. The decline of centrist parties around the world is a phenomenon that needs to be grappled with, so we need to identify which factors are unique to the US political system...And how much of what we're talking about is about political dysfunction versus distrust in the elite institutions generally, like universities, the Church, the media, banks, corporations, and others.

Nate Persily, Stanford University

By looking at what's happening in other societies, we may understand a little bit more about what's happening here. With the end of the Cold War, there was a switch from politics of economic ideology to politics of identity and politics of culture...so as we think about these causes, we might want to widen our scope a little bit beyond the US.

Joseph Nye, Harvard University



In this moment, how do we engage those yearning for something different?

I keep going back to the description of the majority of Americans as an “exhausted majority.” And in that term, in that phrase, I think the really operative word is “exhausted.” That what’s happening is that people who are discontent with the status quo, are not so much stepping up as checking out... And so it seems to me that you have this majority of people who are alienated and you have all these polls that say, for example, that they’d be open to third party. But they have no energy—it’s just exhaustion. And it strikes me that that’s the core challenge and I don’t know how to provide that energy. I feel like that energy is going to come through inspiration, rather than frustration or anger. I think that’s our core challenge is that there’s a critical mass of people who feel that there is a problem, and their response is to step away from the problem rather than to step into it.

David French, The Dispatch

The Commission on the Practice of Democratic Citizenship at the American Academy of Arts and Sciences held almost 50 listening sessions around the country with very diverse groups of Americans...There’s a deep love of country and a deep hunger for a system in which they have a place. But they’re just completely turned off by it, they’re disgusted by it, and so the demand for the specifics is not coming. So part of our job is stimulating demand in various ways, because we won’t get the change without the push from the bottom up.

Stephen Heintz, Rockefeller Brothers Fund

Elected leaders are held accountable by a “demand culture:” citizens demanding that their government delivers services, programs, and basic needs that directly and positively impact the daily lives of families and communities. This intersection and constant negotiation between citizens and their leaders inspires healthier democratic societies. Our problem as practitioners of reform is that we are attempting to enact major changes to our democratic system. However, the demand for these reforms comes from too small a segment of the population. Consequently, it’s not a requirement for office seekers and elected officials to put vital democratic reform issues at the center of their platforms or governing agendas. Reformers must now present our ideas and actions in fresh, immediate, and compelling ways...so that citizens are newly equipped and prepared to reverse this power dynamic and bring the democracy reform agenda to scale.

Kahlil Byrd, Invest America Fund

Our theory of action here is that to engage the folks, it has to be about something that’s meaningful to them. We have to start at a local level, a state level, a big state level and try to do this from the ground up. Our Texas state legislature meets only 140 days every two years, with most Texans wishing they met two days every hundred and forty years. So not having a legislative policymaking body constantly weighing in frankly is an advantage to creating civic demand external to government and developing a model that’s potentially exportable to other states.

Margaret Spellings, Texas 2036



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FixUS is a group of Americans united in shared concern over the divided state of our country. We believe that healing our divisions is our highest national priority and is essential to preparing our nation to face the defining challenges of the 21st century.

FixUS is housed within the Committee for Responsible Federal Budget, a nonpartisan organization which has and will continue to be a leading voice on fiscal policy issues in Washington, DC. FixUS arose as a project of the Committee because it has become increasingly clear that we are unlikely to fix the debt, or any other issue, until we address the underlying problems that are dividing the country and paralyzing our political system.



COMMITTEE FOR A
RESPONSIBLE FEDERAL BUDGET