



Lessons from the Road on
**HOW TO HEAL OUR
FRACTURED COUNTRY**



a project of

**COMMITTEE FOR A
RESPONSIBLE FEDERAL BUDGET**



BACKGROUND

One thing has become increasingly clear over the past years as America’s annual borrowing has increased steadily and unsustainably: we are unlikely to fix the debt until we address the underlying issues that are dividing the country and paralyzing our political system. The environment most conducive to enacting a debt deal—one that focuses on policy over politics, the long-term over the immediate, and a willingness to compromise and make hard choices—does not currently exist.

That is why the Committee for a Responsible Federal Budget started FixUS, a project to better understand the root causes of our national divisions and dysfunction, to bring attention and visibility to these problems, and to build support for necessary changes.

Key to starting this effort is understanding what people outside of the beltway “bubble” are thinking and feeling. And so, in order to do that...we hit the road.

The FixUS Nationwide Roadshow & Listening Tour

FixUS launched its Nationwide Roadshow and Listening Tour in August of 2018. We spoke with thousands of citizens across the country in 27 states with over 70 audiences:

- The Roadshow audiences and venues were wide ranging. We spoke with business, civic, educational, and community organizations across the country. Events ranged from a small Rotary Club meeting in Rockville, Maryland to a large economic forum at Stanford University in California, and everywhere in between.
- We put a premium on engaging students at campuses from Massachusetts, to Florida, to Colorado. Younger generations have increasingly lost faith in our government and economic systems, and we wanted to engage them directly in the process.
- The Roadshow benefited from a variety of presenters and speakers who traveled the country on behalf of FixUS, including policy experts, business leaders, and former policymakers from both sides of the political spectrum. They offered their insights into the political process and its shortcomings, and helped their audiences better understand our system of government.
- At many stops, the Roadshow tested the hypothesis that Americans can and want to work together to solve problems. Using the budget and national debt as an illustrative issue, we hosted several interactive exercises, using a policy simulation tool called the Debt Fixer. Working in small groups of five to 10 people,

users were asked to make choices on 90 different policy options across defense, taxes, health care, social security and other issues with the goal of putting the budget on a sustainable path.

- The Roadshow was more about listening than talking. What we heard was that people are craving more discussions—even with people with whom they disagree—and want to feel more connected in their communities. Many of them chose to become members of FixUS and have helped us to build a large and growing community of people who want to be part of the solution.

Parallel to the Roadshow, FixUS undertook other activities to examine the landscape of America’s divisions as a way of informing our path forward. This included hosting multiple conferences with thought leaders and experts on the topics of polarization and partisanship. We conducted an extensive landscape review¹, identifying more than 160 existing groups in some way focused on addressing our political divide. We began hosting a recurring breakfast meeting, with over 100 groups participating to date to share updates and strategies. Lastly, we started a partnership with Ipsos, a global market research firm, to better understand our current toxic political climate.



“I fear for the future of my children and grandchildren and that they will see the current political system is somewhat “normal” over time”.

Carol Smith
Waukesha, WI

LESSONS FROM ACROSS AMERICA: A DIVIDED, DISTRUSTFUL, AND DISCONNECTED NATION



▲ Roadshow presentation in Youngstown, OH.

The Roadshow was not a social science research project. Rather, it was meant to take the types of conversations we were having every day inside the “bubble” out across America to listen, learn, see what resonates, what doesn’t, and to test our assumptions about what we thought we knew.

To some extent, we heard what we thought we would. Americans are frustrated by the focus on fighting rather than governing in Washington. They see themselves as able to work together to solve problems – whether it be in their families, businesses, or local organizations - and expect Washington to do the same.

We also confirmed that America’s divisions are deeply entrenched, and cut across political, cultural and economic issues. Consequently, resolving them will take a sustained and concerted effort involving a broad base of people and organizations committed to working together toward long-term solutions.

¹ “FixUS Landscape Review”. <https://fixthedebt.org/fixus-landscape-review>

TOP TAKEAWAYS FROM THE ROAD:

- Americans are frustrated and exhausted with the political battle in Washington and as a result, are tuning it out
- The drivers of our divide are deep and wide ranging across multiple cultural, economic and political factors
- Americans feel a growing sense of being disconnected and are distrustful of institutions, experts and elites
- There is a vast community of Americans that feel politically homeless, yet they express hope after experiencing an alternative to our divided state of affairs
- While there is little agreement about potential solutions to our divide, given the opportunity, most Americans are willing to work together and are eager to keep the conversation going...and so we will

Lesson 1:

Americans are frustrated and exhausted with the political battle in Washington and as a result, are tuning it out

From coast to coast, and in all regions of the country, citizens were angry with what they see coming out of Washington. Whatever problems they cited as the most pressing—healthcare, immigration, jobs, national security and terrorism—they did not think Washington was sufficiently addressing these problems and getting enough done.

Conversation after conversation on the Roadshow indicated people are truly scared about the state of politics in the United States, more so than at any point in their lifetimes. One anecdote from the road illustrates just how deep these fears run: We spoke to more than 1,000 high school students at the Junior State of America Winter Congress in Virginia, and asked them whether political polarization is the top national threat that prevents us from addressing issues like the debt - a sea of hands were raised in assent. And when asked if they thought we might be on the brink of another civil war—about half raised their hands.

Many participants were frustrated with their leaders for not cooperating more in order to compromise and pass legislation. Others however did not want their lawmakers to compromise because they so vehemently disagreed with different points of view. This division reflects what we see in



“I hope that events like ours today continue to open the eyes of the younger generation since we are the upcoming leaders of our country”.

Garrett Spain
University of Arkansas - Fort Smith

the literature about polarization: some believe it simply reflects an increasingly polarized populace, while others believe polarization is alienating many citizens who do not share strong ideological views². We witnessed both sentiments.

What we did not expect was the extent to which the daily partisan warfare playing out over airwaves and social media is just plain tiresome, and as a result, people are tuning it out. During our first Roadshow stop, and in many thereafter, when we asked someone how they would describe our political culture in this country, the single most common answer was “exhausting.” People cannot keep up with all the “noise” coming from Washington, can’t make sense of what is factually right or wrong, and are becoming “numb” to the daily vitriol spewing from different sides of the political spectrum. There was an eagerness for a place where people could go to get just the “facts” about issues to develop their own opinions.

Numerous studies and data published on these topics support this finding. A recent poll found that 60 percent of Americans often see conflicting reports about the same set of facts from different sources³. Another study found that two thirds of Americans are part of an “exhausted majority” who are tired of the “us vs them mindset and eager to find common ground.”⁴

² “Turned Off or Turned On? How Polarization Affects Political Engagement”. https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/redandbluenationvolume2_chapter.pdf

³ “No One Believes Anything’: Voters Worn Out by a Fog of Political News”. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/11/18/us/polls-media-fake-news.html>

⁴ “Hidden Tribes: A Study of America’ Polarized Landscape”. https://hiddentribes.us/pdf/hidden_tribes_report.pdf



▲ The Roadshow's event at the Junior State of America conference in Virginia.

Lesson 2:

The drivers of our divide are deep and wide ranging across multiple cultural, economic and political factors

We came out of the Roadshow with a better sense of the factors that got us to this divided point in our history. While there was nothing close to a consensus, a multitude of political, economic and cultural factors came to the surface.

Many expressed anger, or even disgust with what they consider to be a corrupt political system, with tremendous concerns about the influence of money on politics — particularly with large and non-transparent amounts, as well as frustration with what they see as a rigged elections system, citing gerrymandered congressional districts and the Electoral College as large issues. Some people wanted a third or multiple parties. Others wanted stronger parties. And some wanted no parties at all.

Some of the places we visited were hard hit by the Great Recession and are still recovering. People in places such as Erie, Pennsylvania and Warren, Ohio not only talked about the economic challenges facing their city, but how they felt trapped by middle class wage stagnation and

declining social mobility, and validated the often reported view that these recovering areas feel “left behind” as a result of economic and political dysfunction, and that no one is looking out for them.

Many people alluded to a number of cultural issues ranging from immigration, to racial tensions and racism, to identity politics, to having no shared narrative about our nation's history, compounded by a declining emphasis on civic education.

As often as they mentioned these issues, they also brought up being uncomfortable discussing them in many settings where they feared they would be judged or criticized. For that reason, many people had just stopped discussing these issues at all. Hot button cultural issues were the areas in our discussions where there were the deepest divisions and emotions ran highest.

This cultural divide in our nation has been reflected in studies released in recent years, showing how people on different side of the political aisle watch different movies and TV shows, shop at different stores and favor certain brands, or follow different sports⁵.

⁵ “Your Politics Are Indicative of Which Sports You Like”. <https://www.businessinsider.com/politics-sports-you-like-2013-3>

“Walmart vs. Target: A Political Divide Among Shoppers”. <https://morningconsult.com/polarizing-brands-2018/>

“Partisan Divide Creates Different Americas, Separate Lives”. <https://theconversation.com/partisan-divide-creates-different-americas-separate-lives-122925>

Others cited demographic changes, our fragmented and changing media and social media environment, as well as increasing social isolation and declining influence of local civic and religious institutions.

One issue that came up regularly was the lack of shared national values. Many values that people hold dear are in tension with each other. This included things like: personal responsibility versus community; individual freedom versus national and economic security; equality of opportunity versus equality of outcomes.

One thing that was painfully clear is that there are many problems that got us to this point of such deep divisions, and there is not a silver bullet solution to solving them.

Lesson 3:

Americans feel a growing sense of being disconnected, and are distrustful of institutions, experts and elites

We observed that growing divides are leaving people feeling increasingly disconnected from their fellow Americans.

These observations dovetail with recent studies showing decreases in levels of interpersonal trust. A recent Pew study found that 71 percent of Americans felt that interpersonal confidence has worsened in the past 20

years, with almost half thinking “a major weight dragging down trust is that Americans are not as reliable as they used to be.”⁶

This personal mistrust runs parallel to increasing levels of distrust of institutions and expertise. Many felt that they are talked down to, patronized, by their leaders, elites, as well as people from other regions of the country.

Such views have been validated by numerous studies in recent years. For example, according to the recent Knight Commission on Trust, Media and Democracy, trust in government is at historically low levels, with faith in businesses, nonprofits and the media having declined significantly—only the police, military, and small businesses experience levels of trust above 50 percent⁷.

Distrust extends to policy expertise as well. Our partners at Ipsos polled Americans near the start of the Roadshow, offering dozens of terms and symbols to participants and gauging their immediate, emotional reaction. While hot button cultural issues elicited deep divides from partisans, certain terms elicited unfavorable reactions across both sides of the aisle, such as “being bipartisan” or “nonpartisan” or “public policy experts”.

Lesson 4:

There is a vast community of Americans that feel politically homeless, yet they express hope after experiencing an alternative to our divided state of affairs

Over and over throughout our Roadshow we met individuals who expressed an increasing sense of loneliness in our politics. Many people are patriotic, want to be civically engaged, but feel homeless in the toxic culture dominating our national discourse. They want to do something, but do not see any entry point to a constructive conversation.

Increasingly, neither party represents their views. This sentiment may be reflective of broader national statistics, with more voters self-identifying as Independents or unaffiliated over the last decade, and many feeling boxed out by the ideological rigidity of the two main parties and frustrated by the divisive rhetoric coming out of Washington.

But the loneliness appeared driven by something beyond simply a disconnection from the political parties. There was



▲ Roadshow presentation at the University of Michigan.

⁶ “The State of Personal Trust”. <https://www.people-press.org/2019/07/22/the-state-of-personal-trust/>

⁷ “Crisis in Democracy: Renewing Trust in America”. <https://csreports.aspeninstitute.org/Knight-Commission-TMD/2019/report>



▲ Roadshow presentation in Phoenixville, PA.

an overwhelming cynicism—a hopelessness that anything could be done to flip the script on our divisiveness, along with feelings of isolation, disconnectedness, and the loss of tight communities. In some discussions, people felt almost paralyzed.

But there were also many bright spots—some of the brightest when entrenched ideas shifted and broader understandings were achieved. A great example was the interactive policy simulations—whereby hundreds of participants were able to negotiate, compromise, make tough choices, and solve problems that Washington has failed to solve for years, and it gave participants hope that perhaps we are not as divided as the popular narratives suggest. At the conclusion of such events, countless people came up to us and would say “this is great, but how do we scale this experience for everyone?”

Relatedly, a recent national experiment dubbed “America in One Room” brought together a representative sample of the entire American electorate to discuss a range

of major public policy issues in the 2020 presidential election⁸. The experiment showed that opinions changed significantly when people were given the chance to deliberate with those with whom they disagree, and it left them feeling more hopeful for our country.

As described in a piece by the organizers of the event, after days of small group discussion, “the percentage saying the system of democracy was “working well” doubled to 60 percent from 30 percent.” The piece also cited a participant who said, “The country is not as divided as the media make it seem.”⁹

Lesson 5:

While there is little agreement about specific solutions to our divide, given the opportunity, most Americans are willing to work together and are eager to keep the conversation going...and so we will

“What can I do?” At the end of most stops on the Roadshow, this was the most common question asked.

⁸ “America in One Room”. <https://cdd.stanford.edu/2019/america-in-one-room/>

⁹ “This Experiment has Some Great News for Our Democracy”. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/02/opinion/america-one-room-experiment.html>



“It’s important to have open national dialogue on possible changes that could make our democracy more fair, work more effectively and inclusively and learn about our civic responsibilities”.

Marge Carnahan
Galion, OH

But when it came to how to fix these deep root causes, there were few “ah ha” moments. Term limits came up regularly (probably the most popular solution offered); ending gerrymandering was also popular; and many participants thought there needed to be stronger restrictions surrounding money in politics — and most thought there needed to be better disclosure — but there was little optimism that the influence of money could truly be controlled. Likewise, there was a widespread sense of economic insecurity and mistrust, but nothing close to agreement about the optimal changes.

There was strong support for better civic education (though less confidence in who should build the curriculum) and most people liked the idea of some form of national service. Many participants did believe their own local governments and communities were working pretty well and wondered what we could learn from them.

Some of the single best moments in the Roadshow came when people were truly listening to those with different points of view. This listening dynamic was easiest to achieve in smaller discussions, where people expressed empathy and genuine interest in learning more and asking sincere questions.

It was much easier for people to bond around discussions about the biggest problems or challenges we face rather than specific solutions. If a discussion included topics focused on emotions or aspirations — such as caring about our children, wanting to rebuild a sense of community, concerns about technology and alienation, or wanting to keep our nation safe, a strong sense of agreement was achieved.

Humor and laughter was also incredibly helpful in improving the group dynamics, and conversations centered around families and life experiences worked much better than those centered around politics and policy.

Our single most optimistic takeaway was that once a good discussion got going people wanted to keep the conversation going. They wanted to be connected, they were willing to listen to others, and they wanted to be heard. They want to be part of rewriting the narrative of our divided state of affairs, even if they don’t know where to go, what to do, or how to start.

And that was our biggest takeaway from the Roadshow — we need to find ways to keep the conversation going about what people are concerned about, what is dividing us, and what we can do about it.



FROM ROADSHOW TO ROADMAP

Many of the lessons learned on the road were jarring, and lay bare the challenges confronting our nation. First and foremost, our experience validated our hypothesis that the divisions in our nation represent a grave and growing threat. But more importantly, most of the Americans we spoke with truly and deeply want to help heal our divisions, even if they have no unifying vision of how we've gotten to this point let alone what it will take to fix it. As we peel back the onion, our takeaways show a path forward for FixUS in 2020:

- 1. Promote a Better Understanding of the Root Causes of Divide:** FixUS will be undertaking numerous efforts, including via our partnership with Ipsos, a global market research firm, to delve deeper into the root causes of America's divisions as a prerequisite to informing and advancing change. The Roadshow made clear that we have a lot to learn about what is pulling our nation apart. FixUS will be publishing papers, convening events, and engaging citizens throughout the year, calling attention to and encouraging discussion on how we've gotten to this point so we can find a path forward that is as wide ranging and ambitious as this moment calls for.
- 2. Build & Network a Constituency:** Much of the hard work in 2020 for FixUS will focus on broadening and connecting the network of concerned citizens who

want to take part in finding a path forward. FixUS is building State Councils of citizens, experts and civic leaders to engage local communities, and to provide visible support and encouragement to efforts to heal our national divide. We are also building a group of FixUS Ambassadors, individuals committed to encouraging dialogue and educating others in their communities in an easy, accessible form that will be scalable and replicated in a variety of local settings.

- 3. Crowdsource the FixUS Roadmap:** The distrust, disconnectedness, and tuning out of many Americans necessitates that any path forward must involve deep, and meaningful citizen engagement in guiding solutions. FixUS is launching a new phase of its Roadshow, in which we will use deliberative methods, polling, local partners and the wisdom of crowds to build an agenda that can be a model for bridging our divides, and give hope that change is possible. This "roadmap" will be developed over the course of 2020 and aims to identify unifying values and principles that can be promoted to overcome political tribalism, reforms that would address our entrenched institutional polarization, and new ways for Americans to engage the policymaking process. The Roadmap will be released and promoted after the 2020 election.



THE FIXUS MISSION

FixUS is a project of the Committee for a Responsible Federal Budget that believes America’s political divisions and dysfunction are putting our nation at risk by preventing us from dealing with a range of critical threats and challenges. The divisions are reaching a point where we are losing trust and faith in our politicians, our institutions, and each other. FixUS believes that healing our divides is critically necessary in preparing our nation to face the defining challenges of the 21st century. Through a number of efforts and partnerships, we seek to better understand the political, economic and cultural root causes of our divisions, to bring attention and visibility to these issues, to build support for necessary changes, and ultimately, to help regain the sense of shared aspirations, values, and a belief that there is more that unites us than divides us.

Our Theory of Change

Sustainable public policy solutions to the challenges our nation faces will remain elusive until the nation comes together to address the underlying root causes of hyper-partisanship and public distrust. Because the roots of our nation’s divisions are complex, integrated, and long-term in the making, we must confront these causes broadly and holistically in order to bring about real and lasting

change. A large, diverse, and networked constituency is required to work together to heal our divisions, and because of the declining trust and exhaustion of many with our political process, deep and meaningful citizen engagement will be required to guide necessary changes.

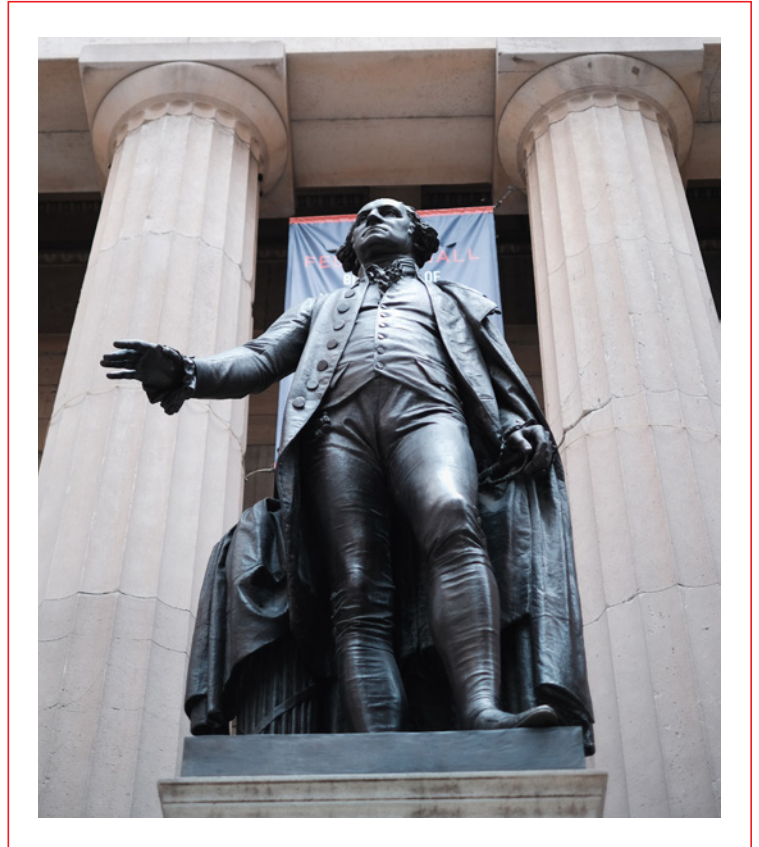
Our Plan

1. We are promoting a better understanding of the root causes of our divides by conducting research, engaging citizens via our Listening Tour & Roadshow, and bringing together experts from a variety of fields to develop a fuller understanding of how we got here.
2. We are developing the FixUS Roadmap—a bottom up, citizen-guided agenda to heal our divisions through policy, institutional and civic reforms that address the underlying political, economic and cultural roots of our divide.
3. We are building and mobilizing a diverse constituency—united in shared concern over the divided state of our country—who will help bring attention to these issues in their communities and connect citizens, business leaders, elected officials, policy experts, and civic organizations.

THE COMMITTEE FOR A RESPONSIBLE FEDERAL BUDGET

The Committee for a Responsible Federal Budget is a nonpartisan, non-profit organization committed to educating the public on issues with significant fiscal policy impact. Our bipartisan leadership comprises some of the nation's leading budget experts, including many past heads of the House and Senate Budget Committees, the Congressional Budget Office, the Office of Management and Budget, the Government Accountability Office, and the Federal Reserve Board.

The Committee houses Fix the Debt, a nonpartisan organization that educates Americans about rising national debt and how it will affect all of us. Fix the Debt mobilizes Americans from all backgrounds to urge policymakers to work together on a grand bargain of bipartisan government spending and tax reforms to put the debt on a sustainable path.



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