NATIONAL ISSUES FORUMS

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A House Divided

How Do We Get the Political System We Want?

What Would We Have to Give Up to Get It?

We are having trouble making important decisions and solving problems in the United States. Americans find it harder and harder to even talk with one another, and it's damaging in multiple ways:

- *Major problems*, such as the national debt, immigration, health care, and Social Security, get kicked down the road again and again. The US national debt rose above $21 trillion in 2018, and Social Security is dipping into reserves because it doesn't take in enough money to pay for benefits. Yet we appear unable to confront these or many other urgent problems.

- *Fewer people vote or participate in public life*. The most recent numbers show that people in 25 other developed countries, from Belgium to New Zealand, vote at higher rates than Americans, many of them much higher. There also are indications that the rate of volunteering has declined.

- *We have lost confidence in our national institutions*. A survey by the nonpartisan Pew Research Center in December 2017 found that just 18 percent of Americans said they trusted the government in Washington to do what's right "just about always" or "most of the time," a drastic decrease from even 15 years ago.

"American politics is a bicycle with a rusty chain, flat tires and no brakes," said Steve Chapman in the *Chicago Tribune*. "It's broken, and it's not taking any of us where we want to go."

Perhaps equally disturbing to many people is that far from talking in order to solve problems, we often seem instead to shout at one another. There have even been recent acts of political violence.
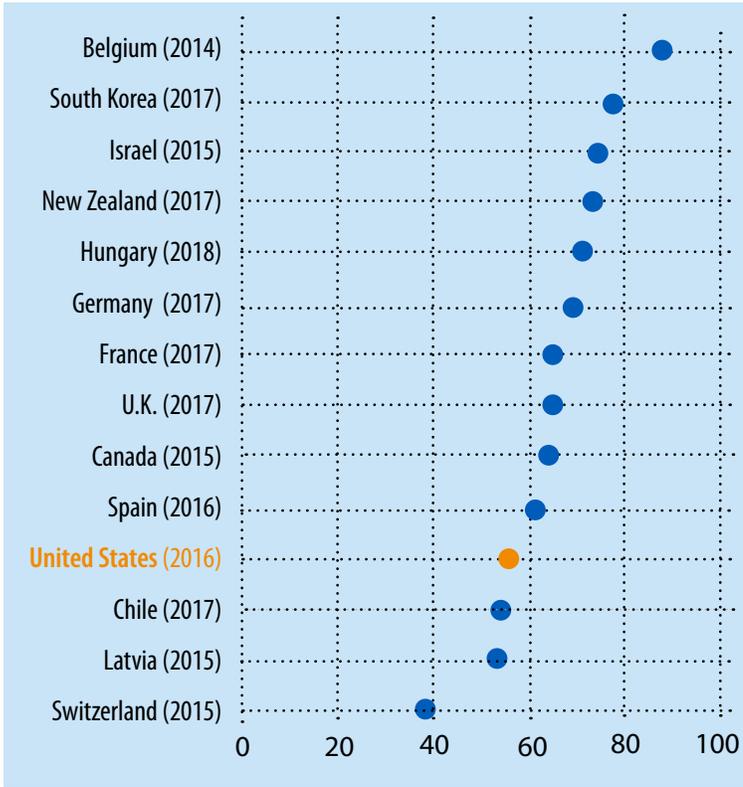
How did we get here? There are many possible reasons. The internet has unleashed a torrent of anonymous rage that has spilled over into public life. More money is flooding into political campaigns than ever. Round-the-clock cable coverage demands constant drama to fuel ratings. While people may differ over the causes, they agree on the effect: dysfunction. Six in ten Americans say "significant changes" are needed in the United States government, according to Pew Research.

What should we do to get the political system that we want? How should we begin to work together to solve our most urgent problems?

This issue advisory presents three options for deliberation, along with their drawbacks. Each option offers advantages as well as risks. If we regulate what people can say online, will we end up silencing voices we need to hear? Should we push politicians to compromise more often even if it means they must bend on their principles? Should we focus more power locally, or would that result in an unmanageable patchwork of conflicting rules governing many important areas of our lives?

US Voter Turnout Low Compared to Other Countries

● **% of voting-age population that voted in most recent elections**

Country	Value
Belgium (2014)	88
South Korea (2017)	77
Israel (2015)	72
New Zealand (2017)	73
Hungary (2018)	70
Germany (2017)	66
France (2017)	63
U.K. (2017)	63
Canada (2015)	62
Spain (2016)	60
United States (2016)	55
Chile (2017)	52
Latvia (2015)	52
Switzerland (2015)	38

Source: Pew Research Center, 2018

Government Seen Working Better Locally Than Nationally

Percentage of Americans with very or mostly favorable opinion

67% local government

35% federal government
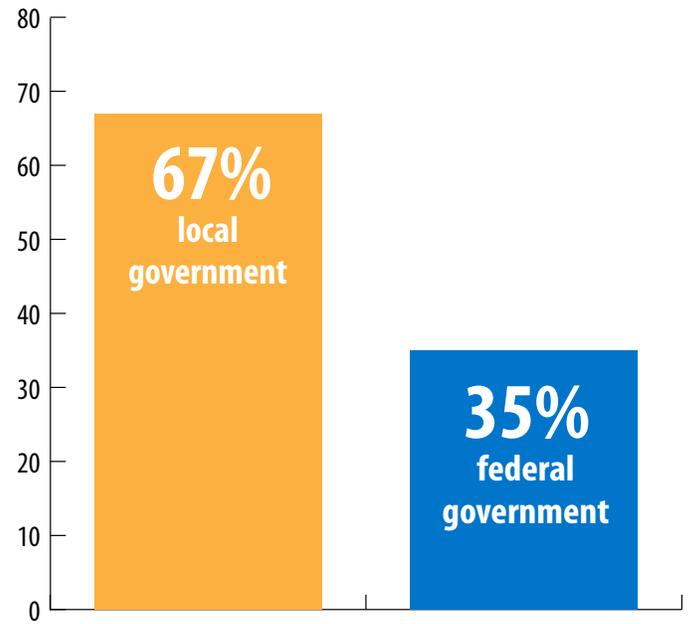
Source: Pew Research Center, 2018

Americans Have Low Confidence in Nearly All Institutions

■ **% Great Deal/Quite a Lot**   ■ **% Some/Very little**

Institution	% Great Deal/Quite a Lot	% Some/Very little
US Congress	13	85
Social Media	9	82
Cable News	15	80
Federal Government	18	77
Media: TV, Newspapers, and Radio	22	68
Religious Leaders	25	61
Intelligence Agencies	33	60
US Supreme Court	41	57
Local police	60	39
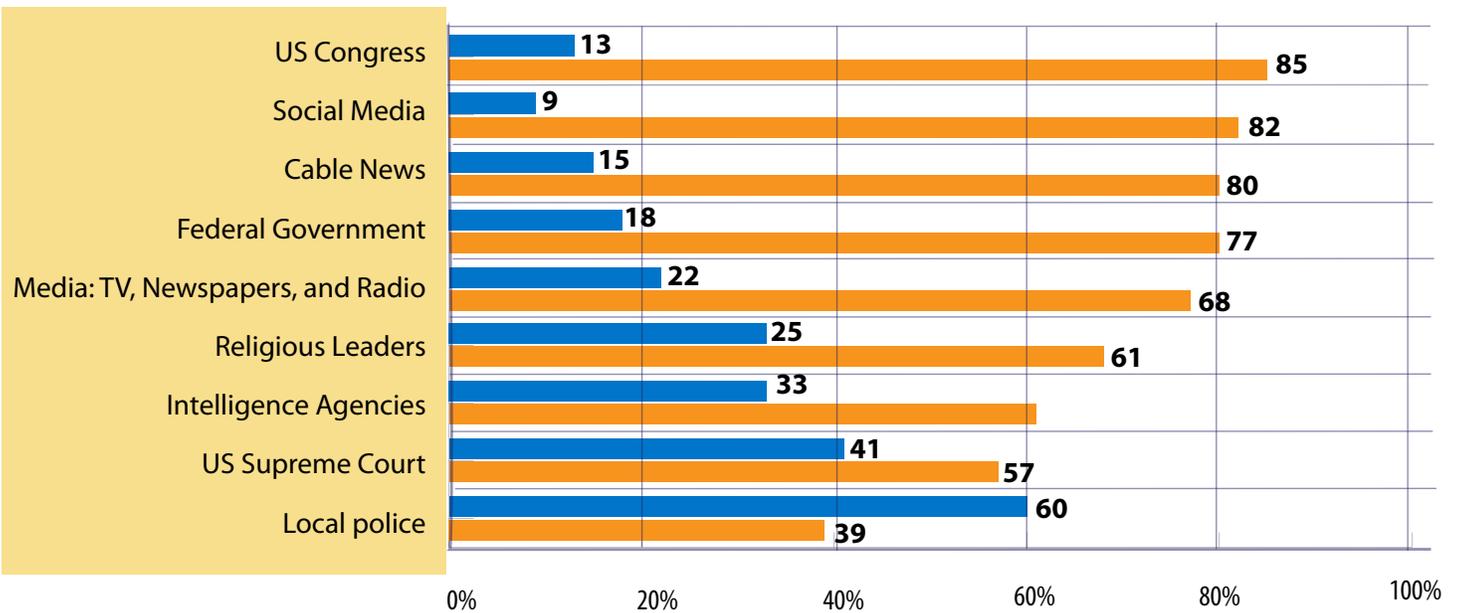
Source: The Democracy Project, democracyprojectreport.org, 2018

Option One: Reduce dangerous, toxic talk.

The problem is that the way we talk is poisoning public life. The "outrage industry" rewards people for saying and doing the most extreme things. Public figures vie for attention on TV and online. Fringe groups feel empowered to spread their hate and conspiracy theories. The lines between news, opinion, and entertainment are erased. We don't know whom to believe anymore. And if people say the "wrong thing," they are attacked because they are not "politically correct." We need to stop rewarding outrage and bring back common sense.

A Primary Drawback

But this gives media and internet decision-makers enormous power to determine what people can say about each other or about public issues. Who gets to decide what's "outrageous" and what's not?

Examples of what might be done	Some trade-offs and consequences to consider
Facebook and other social media platforms and internet service providers should kick out users who use slurs and profanity or threaten physical violence.	Internet companies could become the "language police," threatening people's right to express themselves freely.
Require all television networks to provide opposing views on controversial issues.	This reduces complex debates to "pro" and "con" voices and means that important voices may never be heard.
Make websites and television stations liable for allowing ads that make unproven or false charges about political candidates.	This gives a great deal of power to the media to control who gets to speak.
Protect freedom of speech on college campuses by protecting professors, students, and speakers who espouse unpopular or "politically incorrect" views.	Students can't learn and thrive in a disrespectful atmosphere where they feel threatened and undermined.

Cable news shows used insults and name-calling at a rate of one every one to two minutes.

—Study by Sobieraj and Berry, Tufts University

Option Two: Make fairer rules for politics and follow them.

The problem is that wealthy, powerful special interests game the political system, making it impossible to find compromise. The flood of money into campaigns and lobbying gives too much power to special interests. Political parties redraw congressional districts to their advantage, which means more partisanship in Washington. Elected officials leave Congress and join multimillion dollar lobbying firms, giving their clients access and power not available to ordinary people. It's time to correct the flaws in our system that reward such extreme partisanship and to restore the tradition of compromise that has served this nation well.

A Primary Drawback

But this may do too much to limit the ability of Americans to fight for their principles and give too much power to those who don't seem to care enough to vote and participate. This option focuses on compromise and changing the rules, but doesn't our system need more fundamental changes?

Examples of what might be done	Some trade-offs and consequences to consider
Remove the burdensome registration and scheduling barriers that make voting difficult for so many Americans. Too many people are being shut out.	This makes voting more like a choice than the duty it is. These requirements protect us against voter fraud and manipulation.
Revise the 1965 Voting Rights Act to forbid new laws or requirements that could make it harder for minorities or poor people to vote.	Limiting requirements like showing a photo ID could leave the voting system vulnerable to manipulation or fraud.
Establish nonpartisan commissions to draw congressional districts based on population patterns so politicians don't design them to favor their own party.	In some legislative districts minority groups would lose power.
Strictly limit how much outside groups and individuals can contribute to candidates and PACs, even by constitutional amendment if necessary.	This would limit the ability of all kinds of groups and donors to participate, including those fighting for causes and candidates we ourselves support.

Spending on the 2018 midterm elections was the highest on record, estimated at $5.2 billion, 35 percent more than in 2014.

— Center for Responsive Politics

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Option Three: Take control and make decisions closer to home.

The problem is that our most important decisions are being made too far away from home. And when national government is embroiled in political infighting, problems go unsolved. It's time to put decision-making back in the hands of people who live and work closely together, share goals and values, and can act quickly. Communities across the nation, frustrated by inaction in Washington, already are moving to address problems they're familiar with at the ground level.

A Primary Drawback

But this will result in different protections and standards across the country and produce a patchwork of rules on major national challenges like infrastructure, environmental protection, and immigration. We are one country. Don't we need a united approach to urgent problems, not a piecemeal one?

Examples of what might be done	Some trade-offs and consequences to consider
Dramatically reduce cumbersome federal regulations on the environment, energy, and transportation. Local residents have a much better understanding of what their communities need.	We will never get improvements in the environment, energy, and transportation with individual states going every which way.
Give states money without restrictions for major federal programs such as Medicaid and education so states can adapt them to fit their own needs.	Basics such as food, shelter, high-quality education, and essential health care should be available to all Americans, no matter where they live. This would turn these decisions over to local politicians.
Local governments should rely much more on community groups, organizations, and churches to address issues like crime, health, and welfare.	Vulnerable Americans could suffer in communities that do not have the resources or willingness to take on these problems.
Return full control and funding of K-12 public education to local communities and the states so residents can determine what's best for their own children.	Federal grants help schools with low-income students, and some communities may have to raise property taxes to close the gap.

South Carolina receives $7.87 back from Washington for every $1 its citizens pay in federal tax. Delaware and 13 other states get back less than $1 for each $1 they spend in federal taxes.

—The Atlantic

About This Issue Advisory

Many Americans are deeply disturbed by the state of American politics today. Trust in our national institutions and in the media has plummeted. Fewer citizens bother to vote or participate in public life. And action on pressing issues is repeatedly kicked down the road. Perhaps most disturbing is that we find it harder and harder to even talk to each other.

This advisory is designed to help people deliberate together about how we should approach this issue. In productive deliberation, people examine different options for addressing a difficult public problem, weighing various actions against the things they hold deeply valuable. The framework outlined in this issue advisory encompasses three such options and provides an alternative means of moving forward in order to avoid the polarizing rhetoric so common today.

Each option is based on a shared concern and poses a distinct strategy for addressing the problem. Equally important, each option presents the drawbacks inherent in each action.

☐ One effective way to hold a forum

1. **Introduce the issue.**

2. **Ask people to describe how the issue has affected them or their families.**

3. **Consider each option, allowing equal time for each. Explore what is attractive about each option and whether the drawbacks are acceptable.**

4. **Review the conversation as a group. What areas of common ground were apparent? Just as important: What tensions and trade-offs were most difficult?**

Kettering Foundation