



FORESIGHT IS 20/20

Challenges and Opportunities in Congress' Future



Demographics and Trust

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At a time when the public shows little confidence in the ability of Congress to get things done, the Foresight is 20/20 project is a starting point for new, fresh thinking approaches that can make Congress more proactive and less reactive. We believe Congress can earn back the public's trust by tackling challenges and solving problems more effectively, thus living up to its mission to serve the public. At the core of this project was the question "What will the world look like in 2032 and how will that impact the way Congress functions and how it meets constituents' needs?"



HIGH IMPACT AND HIGH UNCERTAINTY TRENDS IN CONGRESS' FUTURE

To build scenarios that help us understand how Congress may operate in 2032, we considered the intersection of two trends that will shape America's future in consequential yet still unpredictable ways: trust and changing demographics.

Trust

America is experiencing a lack of trust in major institutions. Only 4 in 10 Americans [say](#) they trust the federal government to do what is right at least some of the time. Six out of 10

Americans express strong distrust toward Congress and just [30%](#) of the public sees members of Congress favorably.

During the next several years, public trust in our federal institutions and leaders will play a significant role in how people interact with government and see its value for a healthy democracy. Based on the current state of trust in public institutions, one possible direction is further decline and erosion where distrust in government and our leaders becomes a systemic and self-reinforcing problem. This will continue to create a barrier to our government's ability to meet urgent needs and fully engage the public, which in turn will add to the public's belief that government cannot serve them.

Another possible direction, and we're seeing early beginnings of this change, is one where key stakeholders realize the grave cost of low trust and are making concerted efforts to impact its direction. If this becomes the case, our public institutions will be able to better meet public needs and enact reforms that address systemic issues. In turn, this will earn back the public's trust and shift the path we're currently on.

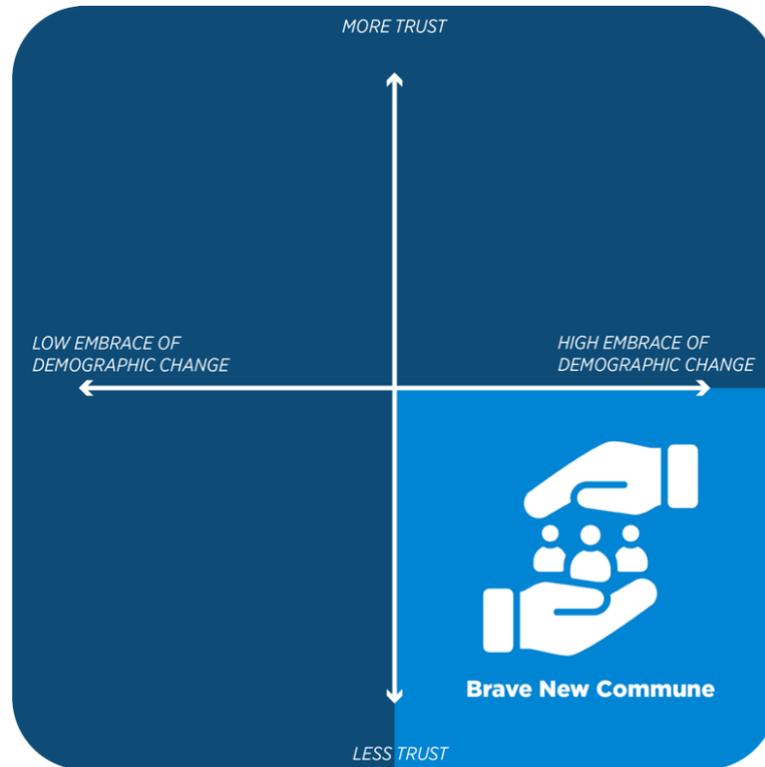
Acceptance of Changing Demographics

The country is becoming increasingly diverse – and not only in terms of race and ethnicity. In government, current segments of the workforce are aging and retiring, allowing a new generation to fill the ranks. These changes will push the executive and legislative branches to more fully understand the different backgrounds, experiences and needs of the changing country. In addition, public attitudes toward diversity and inclusion will shift, with the country becoming more or less accepting of social differences. The extent to which the public—and our leaders—embrace changing demographics and diversity will have a significant impact on political and social dynamics as well as how well Congress serves constituents. Will we see a more inclusive, accepting society in which currently underserved populations are better supported through services and by society? Or will the current structural inequities persevere, creating more divisions among the public and letting minority communities fall through the cracks? Further, will we see younger generations take up the mantle of public service, or will they become disillusioned with federal institutions and disengage entirely?



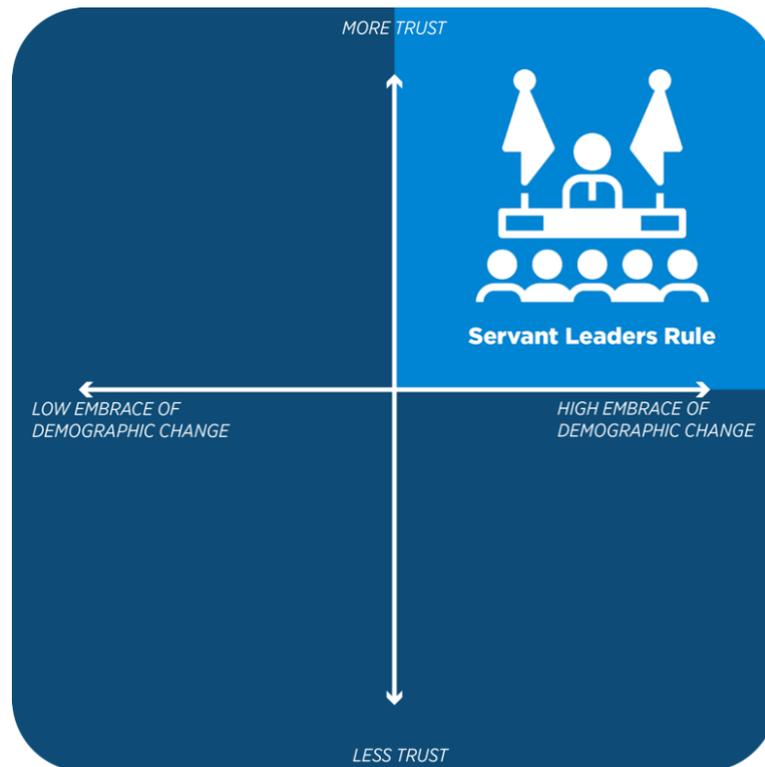
BUILD IT: TWO TRENDS AT PLAY

Low Trust and High Embrace of Demographic Change: Brave New Commune



In this world, trust in Congress and institutions in general will continue to decline, leading to a refocus on local communities and politics. Mutual aid and local service delivery will become more popular, and the country will see a resurgence of local news, with national media rife with misinformation. With communities trusting each other more deeply, there will be greater understanding and acceptance of diversity and changing demographic needs. Localities will become less segregated with expansive mass transit and greater housing options, leading to more diverse and inclusive communities.

High Trust and High Embrace of Demographic Change: Servant Leaders Rule



In this world, trust in Congress and institutions will increase. After years of declining trust, members of Congress will take steps to connect more meaningfully with constituents and reform the institution to regain the public's trust. This will result in more investment in government services for the poor and pensioners, and increased public support for building more equitable federal policies. In this world, mainstream national media will regain a strong, respected position, holding the public and private sector accountable, and entertainment and art will flourish with a more diverse and demographically representative cultural cadre. State identity will matter less than national identity, creating broader social cohesion.



LIVE IN IT: IMPLICATIONS FOR CONGRESS

Low Trust and High Embrace of Demographic Change: Brave New Commune

Opportunities: While trust in Congress, civic engagement and interest in federal service will decrease, engagement in the community will greatly increase. People will work locally to provide services for one another while gaining a greater understanding of the diversity of their towns and neighborhoods. This understanding and acceptance will mean that even though service delivery will happen at the local level, services will be more accessible for people of all backgrounds. Embracing demographic change also will mean better representation in Congress—even with its reduced role. As communities change, we will see reform of electoral districts—allowing for multiple representatives in each district, similar to proportional representation systems—giving more people a voice in each locality.

Challenges: Decreased trust in Congress and public institutions will make federal policy virtually toothless, changing the federal legislature’s role. As a whole, Congress may be more representative of the communities it represents given the increased acceptance of the country’s demographics, but will rarely pass meaningful policy. When Congress passes laws, they will be disconnected from material needs of the public. Lawmakers will focus more on casework by helping constituents find resources in their communities and by acting as mediators between different factions in their districts or states. Communities will trust their elected representatives in this role, but not Congress overall, and the institution’s power to address issues like global pandemics or recessions, and protect and provide services nationally, will be greatly reduced.

High Trust and High Embrace of Demographic Change: Servant Leaders Rule

Opportunities: With a higher acceptance of demographic changes and high trust, the ability of Congress to serve the public and respond to crises will improve. Trust in Congress will mean more financial and political support for public services, which in turn will broaden congressional authority when it comes to providing specialized care for individuals and communities. Members of Congress will feel more empowered to use legislation to increase access to and quality of services like healthcare, utilities, education and childcare. Combining this new empowerment with increased acceptance of diversity will lead to better representation of communities in Congress, bringing to light new ideas and needs of different groups. Structural support and material benefits will strengthen the connection between Congress and the public it serves, making it a more responsive and effective institution.

Challenges: Rather than higher levels of public engagement, complete trust in Congress and institutions could create complacency. The public will not feel urgency around issues like

climate change, health care or education, trusting Congress to resolve important matters but not following along closely. Congress may attempt to solve important issues, but with no advocates or citizen watchdogs holding the institution accountable. In short, there will be no feedback loop, and sustainable and effective policy will be hard to achieve. The public will rarely vote, fully trusting that their representatives have their best interest at heart. Without mainstream advocacy, vulnerable groups will fall through the cracks and not see their needs addressed.



PLAN FOR IT: RECOMMENDATIONS FOR TODAY

Whether the goal is to attain the utopia or avoid the dystopia, the scenarios cited above offer Congress and those who care about the institution the opportunity to take a more focused approach to the future. We want to emphasize that these possible and plausible scenarios aren't forecasts of what will or won't happen in Congress during the next 10 years, but rather frameworks to help us deal with high degrees of uncertainty. These frameworks can then help us examine our current state and determine what actions we can take to be better prepared for an uncertain future.

Through our research, we gathered recommendations for Congress based on the above futures. These are not novel—in fact, many of them have been recommended by the Select Committee on the Modernization of Congress.

- **Improve the employee experience in Congress: This has several benefits, including increased diversity of staff, increased retention leading to better institutional knowledge, and more effective leadership. The select committee has already recommended specific actions on this point, including:**
 - Expanding leadership, management and job training to support staff at all levels to develop their skills.
 - Creating mentorship programs for staff: Affinity groups for underrepresented identities on staff currently exist in an effort to improve the employee experience, but mentorship programs would further support staff development.
 - Reforming internships and fellowships: Extending resources to more than just permanent staff and assessing compensation for nonpermanent staff are two ways to improve intern and fellow experiences.
- **Work to rebuild trust between Congress and its constituents: This is necessary for any functioning democracy. Rebuilding trust will increase accountability, responsiveness and public investment in federal initiatives.**
- **The recommendations below are supported by findings from a [recent Partnership for Public Service and Freedman Consulting project](#):**
 - Sharing more stories of congressional 'wins'—and especially bipartisan successes.

- Creating more opportunities for constituents to engage with member of Congress, including town halls and community events.
- Applying customer experience best practices from the executive branch to Congress when conducting oversight hearings, helping constituents access resources and in other ways.

We want to thank the following college students for participating in this workshop and sharing thoughtful insights to help us build these possible futures for Congress: Andrew Pierce (The Ohio State University), Leticia Nketiah (The Ohio State University), Emily Henson (The Ohio State University), James McGee (Georgetown University), Veronica France (The Ohio State University), Shelby Rothberg (George Mason University), Irene Lewis (The Ohio State University). And a special thanks to our colleague Maddie Powder (Partnership for Public Service).