



FORESIGHT IS 20/20

Challenges and Opportunities in Congress' Future



Polarization 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 polarization.

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 views 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 the 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.

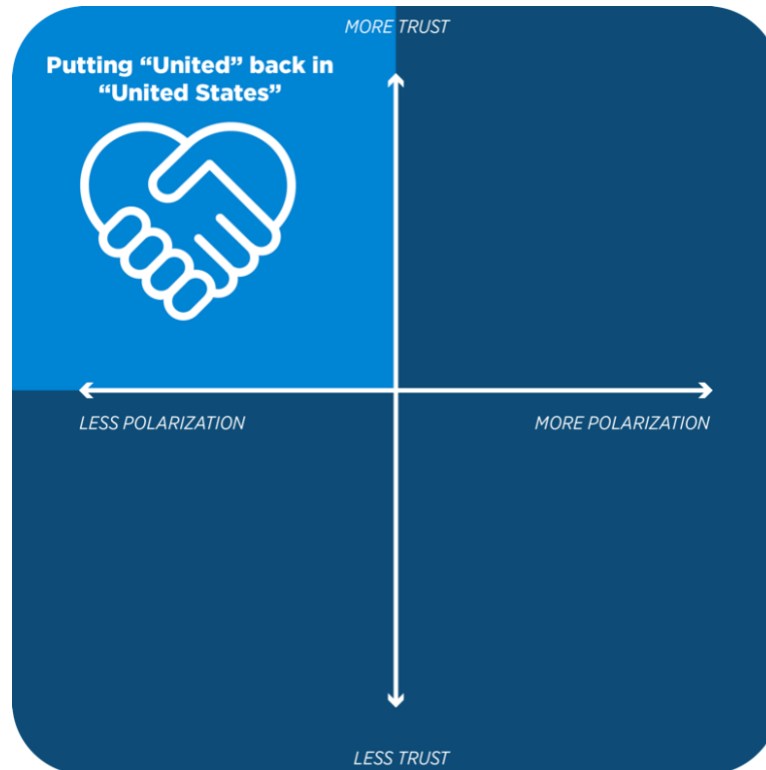
Polarization

Polarization and hyper-partisanship in Congress have affected the ability of Congress to effectively serve the public and meet challenges in an increasingly complex world. During the next several years, higher or lower levels of polarization will impact the way Congress works, the way the public engages with their representatives, the level of political participation and many other areas of public life that we can't yet foresee. Given the gridlock in Congress and an incentive structure that favors division, plus structures that favor the proliferation of echo chambers such as social media, it's plausible to assume that in 10 years we'll see even higher levels of polarization. However, a new generation of members of Congress as well as unwavering institutionalists who remain committed to putting country above party provide hope for the future. From within the institution, reforms implemented by the House Select Committee on the Modernization of Congress have been aimed at changing the incentive structure that hinders collaboration and compromise, and these measures have begun to chart the possibility of a new path for Congress.



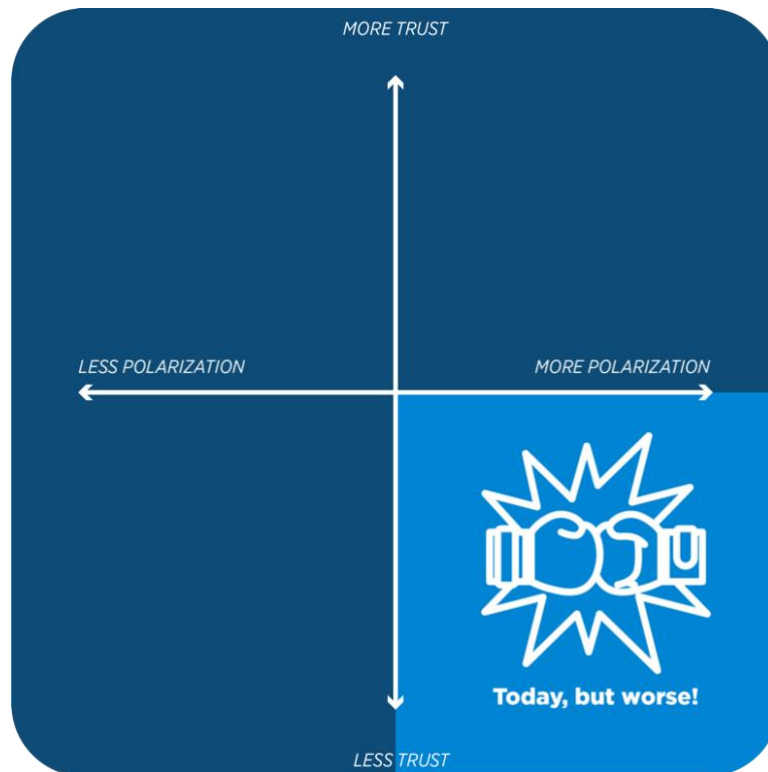
BUILD IT: TWO TRENDS AT PLAY

High Trust and Low Polarization: Putting “United” back in “United States”



In a world where institutional trust is high and polarization in society and Congress is low, government will have regained the public’s trust through better services, communication and engagement. In a positive feedback loop, the public’s higher levels of trust will be a reflection of a Congress that is responsive and effective thanks to leaders who put country above party and who champion reforms that incentivize collaboration and compromise. Most reforms suggested by entities such as the House Select Committee on the Modernization of Congress to increase transparency, accountability and foster bipartisanship will be implemented. In this world, the news media will tell stories of success, thus strengthening the public’s view that Congress works for them.

Low Trust and High Polarization: Today, but worse!



In a world where institutional trust is low and polarization in society and Congress is high, government will be unable to break free from a mistrust loop that will continue to hinder its ability to reform itself and regain the public's confidence. Efforts by key stakeholders to address distrust will not be robust enough or receive the kind of support they need from leaders in government, media and civil society. The narrative that government and, more specifically, Congress, is broken, corrupt and ineffective will prevail. Us-versus-them behavior will be rewarded in Congress and leaders will have little or no incentive to work with people with whom they disagree. In this world, the news media will continue to cover gridlock and conflict. These stories will reinforce the public's perception that Congress doesn't work for them and thus isn't worthy of their trust.



LIVE IN IT: IMPLICATIONS FOR CONGRESS

High Trust and Low Polarization: Putting “United” back in “United States”

Opportunities: In this future, we will see higher levels of cooperation, consensus and compromise. Higher levels of trust among members of Congress won’t eliminate disagreement, but instead lead to productive conflict that ultimately yields legislation that serves our diverse nation. Higher levels of trust will encourage Congress to think about policymaking and constituent engagement in more nuanced ways. Reform will be possible because incentives to collaborate will be undergirded by a shared purpose—to serve the public—and reinforced by mutual trust. The public will be engaged through higher voting rates and constituent engagement.

Challenges: In this world, high trust and low polarization will reduce the public’s motivation to hold Congress accountable. The public will fall asleep at the wheel and stop paying attention to what Congress is doing by assuming everything is going well. This distraction may lead to a Congress that’s more patriarchal and where efficient government has the potential to be a more tyrannical government that gets things done without regard for the public’s feedback. If the absence of polarization is taken for granted, dissent might be unwelcomed and groups with legitimate concerns will end up sidelined.

Low Trust and High Polarization: Today, but worse!

Opportunities: In a low trust, high polarization world, reform will be an important goal for many civil society and good government organizations. These groups may have increased incentives to hold Congress accountable and to engage the public to demand change. In Congress, new coalitions between strange bedfellows could form as a way to circumvent gridlock, which may lead to new, creative solutions to complex challenges. Stories of success that show leaders who break out of the mold of us-versus-them politics will become powerful tools for reform and engagement.

Challenges: In this low trust, high polarization dystopia, division and conflict among those in power as well as those who they represent will be the norm. While those who perpetuate an us-versus-them culture in Congress and beyond will be rewarded by that behavior through re-election, we’ll see a world where marginalized communities bear the brunt of a broken system. Hate crimes may become more common as “the otherization” of those who are different makes it easier to attack each other. An us-versus-them narrative will draw the public into consuming information that further confirm their biases, which will strengthen and spread echo chambers and perpetuate misinformation. Political participation will be further eroded as the public will see

no point in trying to engage with an institution that they perceive as broken, corrupt and that doesn't reflect them. Legislating in Congress using traditional coalitions and mechanisms will become nearly impossible, and as crises emerge, the institution may be left unable to make decisions to protect and help the public.



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 what could lie ahead. These are not novel—in fact, many of the proposals have been recommended by the Select Committee on the Modernization of Congress. Others come from research by the Partnership for Public Service with the goal of rebuilding the public's trust in government and fostering a narrative of hope and change for Congress.

- **Make Congress more accessible and understandable to the public¹**
 - Launch a new system that allows the American people to easily track how amendments change legislation and the impact of proposed legislation to current law.
 - Make it easier to understand who is lobbying Congress and what they're lobbying for.
 - Create one-click access to see how members of Congress vote in committees.
- **Encourage civility and bipartisanship in Congress²**
 - Create a bipartisan members-only space in the Capitol to encourage more collaboration across party lines.
 - Institute biennial bipartisan retreats for members and their families at the start of each Congress.
 - Update committee policies to increase bipartisan learning opportunities for staff.
 - Establish bipartisan committee staff briefings and agenda-setting retreats to encourage better policy making and collaboration among members.
- **Champion a trust-building narrative**

¹ <https://modernizecongress.house.gov/116th-recommendations>

² <https://modernizecongress.house.gov/116th-recommendations>

- Focus on narratives that highlight leaders in Congress who are dedicated public servants, who put the people first and not political parties, powerful interests, or their own careers.
- Share stories that show how members and staff are there to serve everyone.
- Promote instances of members working together to solve problems instead of trying to score political points.
- Bring the public into the narrative by highlighting the role it can play in supporting honest, responsible people who want to make Congress work for everyone.
- Champion a narrative that makes constituents part of the solution not just by supporting a member of Congress, but by identifying where change can occur.

We want to thank the following individuals for participating in this workshop and sharing thoughtful insights to help us build these possible futures for Congress: Casey Berkovitz, Jason Pye (Due Process), Mario Beovides (NALEO), Marcela Mulholland, Kate Kizer, Katie Bryan (Partnership for Public Service), Lauren Hogrewe, Craig Swaisgood (Maximus), Mike Murphy (Committee for a Responsible Federal Budget, FixUS), Elizabeth Beavers, Pam Campos (Working Families Party), Lucas Cabral (NALEO), Robin Champ (Federal Foresight Community of Interest), and Eric Popiel (Federal Foresight Community of Interest).