Overview

“Democracy is not merely a form of government. It is primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience. It is essentially an attitude of respect and reverence towards fellow men.”

- B. R. Ambedkar, Indian social reformer

By most accounts, polarization and mistrust are threatening our democracy. A June 2019 Pew Research poll found that a large majority of respondents (85%) believe the tone and nature of political debate in the United States has become more negative in recent years – as well as less respectful, less fact-based and less substantive. Another study by the group More in Common, in partnership with YouGov, which released their findings the same month, explored perceptions that Americans hold of opposing political views. One striking finding is that Democrats and Republicans believe that almost twice as many people on the other side hold extreme views than really do. A 2016 USC study found that political polarization was at its worst since the Civil War. One can only imagine what the data would show three years later. Finally, a 2016 study published in the Annals of American Association of Geographers found that the political divide extends to geography. It appears that Americans are increasingly sorting themselves or “self-segregating” based on politics. One summary of the study put it this way “one the one hand, like-minded people cluster together or with other like-minded people, and on the other, such clustering together makes people more like-minded.”

Americans are increasingly losing faith in our institutions. In a 2018 report by Gallup and the Knight Foundation, 94% of Republicans have lost some trust in the media; 75% of independents and 42% of Democrats say the same thing. Overall, nearly 7 in 10 adults report a loss of faith in the news. Pew Research Center found in 1958 that nearly three quarters of Americans trusted the federal government to do the right thing almost-always or most of the time. In 2017, that number had dropped to 18 percent. This distrust is especially troubling when it comes to college students. The 2018 Survey of America’s College Students conducted on behalf of The Panetta Institute for Public Policy found confidence in most government institutions remarkably low. Just 33% of students have a great deal or quite a bit of confidence in the court system, 24% in the federal government, 22% in Congress, and 20% in the presidency. Evidence of polarization, perception, and mistrust even extends to higher education.
as a 2017 survey showed that Democrats viewed higher education positively by 72 percent to 19 percent, while 58 percent of Republicans judged its effects to be negative.

While the news seems dire, it is important to note that the data is showing that citizens are losing faith in the institutions and practices of democracy but not the principles and tenets of democracy. Further, these feelings of distrust and polarization do not mean that citizens do not want their leaders to work together to solve public problems. In fact, a 2017 Gallup poll found that 54% of Americans want political leaders in Washington to compromise to get things done. This percentage is far greater than the 18% who would prefer that leaders stick to their beliefs even if little gets done. The remaining 28% fall somewhere in between. Further, even though there is evidence that political party alignment influences decisions about where people live, the 2019 Pew poll mentioned previously still found that members of both parties generally view their own local communities as places that are open to a wide range of viewpoints. Large and nearly identical shares in both parties say their local community is at least somewhat open to a wide range of opinions and viewpoints (75% of Democrats, 74% of Republicans).

These glimmers of hope seem to indicate that it is not too late to bring people together across the divide to find common ground for action. America has always been an “aspirational” democracy with its promises of fair representation, equality, liberty, and justice. It has always been an ideal rather than a reality. All progress that it has made towards these American ideals and principles has always been gained by people working and struggling together to form a more perfect union. We have to be constantly vigilant in our efforts to root out and resist the hate and animosity that can divide and destroy us. One thing we know as Americans is that our union is tenuous and has the capacity to devolve into chaos and even civil war.

So how do we stem the tide of division and help develop, nurture, expand, and implement the habits of democracy?...through knowledge and practice. We believe that the colleges and universities in the NC Campus Compact network with their place-based focus, deep community-campus partnerships, and social capital have the potential to bring their communities together across the divides to engage in challenging and necessary dialogue and deliberation on the public issues facing their campuses and local communities and beyond.

This year’s Civic Engagement Institute is intended to provide participants with two immersive experiences with different dialogue and deliberation models. Our intention is for campuses teams to design a plan for how to carry forth and implement these methods locally.