



BRIDGING DIVIDES TO BUILD COMMUNITY



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SEPTEMBER 29-30, 2023 | FINAL REPORT

INTRODUCTION

This special Arizona Town Hall program invited a robust, respectful policy discussion about “Bridging Divides to Build Community.” The participants hope their recommendations will inspire and motivate our state’s leaders to respond to these challenges.

Arizonans find it increasingly hard to work together on the public policy issues that shape their lives. They are becoming more polarized. We find polarization in both what people think about policy issues and how they feel about people who have different opinions than theirs. This polarization has led to a decrease in cooperation, problem solving, and engagement in the political process. Alarming, polarization has led to increased violence and threats of violence that jeopardize the safety of our democratic and participatory system. Many factors contribute to this polarization, including human psychology, social and economic trends, media and social media activity, and the structure of the political system. Arizonans are not without options to slow, stop, or even reverse the downward spiral of polarization.

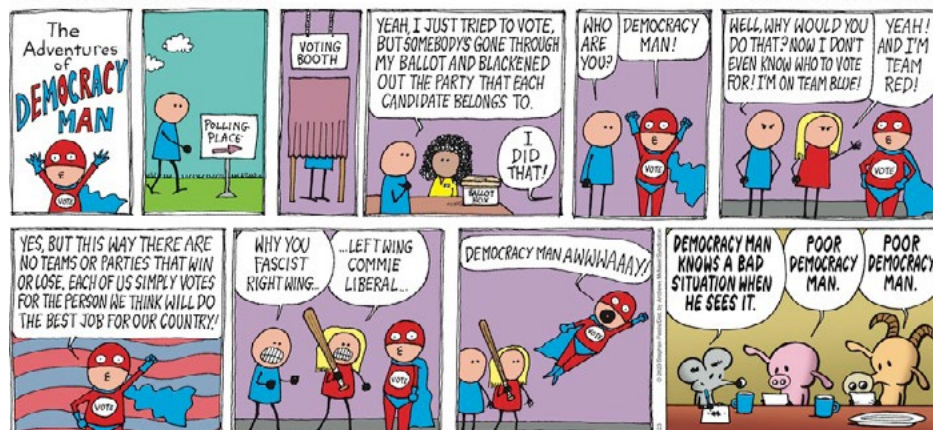
Set against this backdrop, participants from throughout Arizona spent two days discussing the topic of “Bridging Divides to Build Community.” In the end, they reached consensus on the most promising strategies Arizonans can use to rebuild the connections we need for the health of our community and our people. This report includes the results of that discussion. Though not all participants agree with each of the conclusions and recommendations, this report reflects the consensus they reached at the “Bridging Divides to Build Community” program.



GLOSSARY OF TERMS USED IN THIS REPORT

- **Civics:** Civics is the study of the rights and obligations of citizens in society.
- **Civics Education:** “In its broadest sense, civics (also known as “civic education” or “civic learning”) is the lifelong process that makes people into active, responsible, and knowledgeable members of their communities—which range from their schools and towns or neighborhoods to the whole nation and even the world. Civic learning occurs in families, in religious congregations and other associations, in political campaigns, and on news websites, among many other venues.” CivXNow, a project of iCivics, at <https://civxnow.org/our-vision/what-is-success/>.
- **Civic Engagement:** “Civic engagement describes how an active citizen participates in the life of a community in order to improve conditions for others or to help shape the community’s future.” Richard P. Adler and Judy Goggin, *What Do We Mean By “Civic Engagement?”* Journal of Transformative Education Vol. 3 No. 3, July 2005 236-253 DOI: 10.1177/1541344605276792. (The authors analyzed many other definitions before advancing this one, which has been widely used in some form.)
- **Participatory Budgeting:** “Participatory budgeting (PB) is a democratic process in which community members decide how to spend part of a public budget.” Participatory Budgeting Project, <https://www.participatorybudgeting.org/>.
- **Participatory Governance:** “Participatory governance consists of state-sanctioned institutional processes that allow citizens to exercise voice and vote, which then results in the implementation of public policies that produce some sort of changes in citizens’ lives. Citizens are engaged in public venues at a variety of times throughout the year, thus allowing them to be involved in policy formation, selection, and oversight.” Brian Wampler and Stephanie L. McNulty, *Does Participatory Governance Matter?* (Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars).
- **Polarization:** Division into two sharply distinct opposites. especially a state in which the opinions, beliefs, or interests of a group or society no longer range along a continuum but become concentrated at opposing extremes. political polarization. Merriam-Webster Dictionary, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/polarization>.
- **Political:** Of or relating to government, a government, or the conduct of government; of, relating to, or concerned with the making as distinguished from the administration of governmental policy. Merriam-Webster Dictionary, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/political>.
- **Political System:** A coordinated set of principles, laws, ideas, and procedures relating to a particular form of government, or the form of government itself: Democracy is a political system in which citizens govern themselves.
- **Politics:** Political science; the art of guiding or influencing governmental policy; the art of winning and holding control over a government. Merriam-Webster Dictionary, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/politics>.

PEARLS BEFORE SWINE



BY STEPHAN PASTIS

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ARIZONA IS POLITICALLY AND SOCIALLY POLARIZED BUT THERE IS STILL HOPE FOR AGREEMENT

Today, Arizona's elected officials often are locked in a polarized red and blue spiral, to the point of being unable to function. When our political system does not function, it is difficult to address the critical policy issues facing Arizona. As individuals we are unable to exercise our rights and fulfill the obligations of citizenship. Disagreements between the parties are not new and Arizona has always had diverse voices among our elected officials. In the past, Arizona's elected officials could have a hearty discussion about diverse policies and when the meeting was over, our elected officials would chat about life over lunch or dinner. Elected officials were there to do the work of the people. When they finished their work, they could see each other as human beings even if they disagreed on policies. Today, the mood has changed and they call each other the enemy or evil because they have different opinions. They focus on differences, not commonalities.



This polarization affects the laws and policies our elected officials introduce and adopt. Political considerations can outweigh substance. They make proposals and vote to get polarizing messages into the media rather than to find solutions. In today's polarized environment a proposal may not stand a chance even though in the past the same proposal would not have been controversial because of widespread public support. As a result, a major chasm exists between what Arizonans want and what the government does.

We also find polarization outside of politics. People sort themselves into like-minded communities both physically and digitally. They do not engage with neighbors and others with different perspectives. Personal and institutional actions cause our communities to be geographically segregated. People seem increasingly closed off and unwilling to interact in public, especially after the pandemic. More than political differences divide us, such as race, rural versus urban communities, and traditional—or tribal—and western governance systems.

We find hope in some recent examples of Arizonans coming together across the polarized divides. Arizona voters tend to focus on issues, not polarized positions. And their views are in the middle, not the extremes. As a result, Arizona voters legalized medical and recreational marijuana and allowed Dreamers to receive in-state tuition at Arizona's three state universities. These recent examples show areas of agreement still exist among Arizona's voters. They suggest the publicity and coverage surrounding polarized views may exaggerate their reach into Arizona's fabric.

COUNTLESS TRENDS AND FACTORS DRIVE POLARIZATION

Many roads lead to polarization, either by causing it, incentivizing it, or contributing to it. They are as diverse as the polarized views themselves, but a few stand out.

At bottom, polarization is a product of Arizonans' lack of engagement in the political process. That lack of engagement has its roots in Arizona's education system. Arizona has not adequately supported and funded education, especially civics, culture, and humanities education. Arizona has not fostered

the idea of lifelong learning, so Arizonans of all ages become and remain informed. When Arizonans do not understand the political process, they do not engage and participate. For effective participation, we must educate people to evaluate competing information, to be curious, inquisitive, and to be open to new ideas and concepts.

Traditional and online media, entertainment, and news outlets contribute to polarization. People increasingly get their information from those sources which thrive on conflict and





show extreme views. The gray middle of common good is not as sexy. It does not sizzle, and it does not make money for those outlets. Some within and outside those industries manipulate the information, resulting in untruths, whether intentional or not.

Virtual bubbles, created by the sources listed above, also cause polarization. In those bubbles, they expose Arizonans to self-reinforcing, polarized views. Some Arizonans self-select their bubbles, such as by choosing to view only a particular news outlet or source of information. Even Arizonans who try to consult multiple sources can end up in an echo chamber bubble because algorithms and artificial intelligence tools operate invisibly behind the scenes and shape what users see. The bubbles work. People are more comfortable with sources that confirm existing beliefs. As a result, people focus on differences rather than agreements and view people who disagree as “others.”

The constant barrage of polarized messages creates an ever-present concept of “us-versus-them.” But that concept does not align with reality. Our lived experiences do not reflect the polarization depicted in the various outlets. Even so, vitriol and polarized messages drive people apart. They cause people to be less open to helping others who are not like them. They lead people to shut down or respond emotionally rather than rationally. Today, many find it challenging, if not impossible, to have conversations, find common ground, and build relationships. Too often, people discount others’ differing opinions and resort to dehumanizing language and actions. Indeed, in a polarized world, people can lose lifelong friendships and alliances because they disagree on one issue, such as who should (or indeed did) win an election.

The political process also contributes to, incentivizes, and causes polarization. By its very nature, the two-party political system is polarizing. It separates us into camps of “us” and “others.” In a polarized political environment, one issue can create a, by all appearances impenetrable, wall between the two camps. Redistricting, and more narrowly gerrymandering, adds to the challenge. Gerrymandering creates non-competitive districts in which the primary winner is the de facto general election winner. It allows a candidate to win by focusing on a small subset of the overall constituency. As a result, elected officials have little to no incentive to listen to and consider diverse points of view. Today, our politicians can no longer agree on the truth and facts. Indeed, our elected officials have drifted away from arguing about priorities, instead they argue about alternative realities. That same discord has found its way into everyday life, leaving some isolated in their own neighborhood.

WE ALL SUFFER AS A RESULT OF POLARIZATION

Polarization erodes trust and disincentivizes participation in the democratic process. We must be guardians of democracy, or we will lose it. Polarization does not just literally shut down the government, it shuts down creative community solutions. We should use our differences to find new solutions. Instead, we focus on our disagreements or accept unproductive “compromises” as better than nothing. Voters become discouraged by the lack of progress on important issues and disengage. As a result, we see an increasingly low turnout in primary elections, which encourages candidates to adopt extreme positions to be elected. Polarization also reduces the information available to voters when making decisions and exposes them to misinformation. Both results are hard to counter.

Respectful conversations have become challenging. It is increasingly hard to agree on relevant facts, rules of conduct, or shared goals. Anger and fear take over conversations. People no longer feel safe in their polarized communities. Anger and fear significantly impact everyone, especially young people. People who appear to be different often will experience both open and subtle discrimination. At best, they must make extra efforts so others feel comfortable in their presence. At worst, the polarization leads to dehumanizing members of the “other” group completely, leading to ostracism, alienation, and even violence.

Constant coverage of polarization also discourages people from speaking up and participating. People remain silent and disengaged out of fear because of how others will perceive them. They choose no action because action could cost them friends and opportunities. Polarization breaks down community ties. It encourages people to think only of themselves and not take personal responsibility for their community. We see a prime example in our public servants. Experienced government officials and workers are leaving—or are being forced out. This loss of valuable experience affects our institutions’ ability to function. Because polarization encourages direct personal and even physical attacks, people hesitate to run for elected office or take any public service role.

WE HAVE THE POWER TO REVERSE THE CYCLE

We occupy a unique and challenging place in history. Today, many Americans have attacked our core constitutional values, our institutions, and our laws. We live in a great country, but we have much room for improvement. We must take immediate action. We must empower the large silent majority to protect our state and our country.

Forum participants identified many promising strategies to bridge the polarizing divides and to permit collective action in support of the common good. Some strategies require preparation or legislative enactments. Even so, people can implement many effective approaches at the personal and community level and should adopt them as soon as possible. Examples of proposed strategies include civics education, system changes, unifying events, and personal action.



CIVICS EDUCATION

We need to develop practical education programs about the dangers of polarization and misinformation. Those programs should be directed to audiences of all ages, from primary school to life-long learners and teach people how to come together, build trust, and develop their skills so they can bridge the divides in their own communities.

Programs can and should include school-based efforts. Establish a mandatory civics curriculum, consider the quality of a school's civics education as a factor in a school's letter grade, and expand the existing civic seal program.

We also must direct civics education to adults. The adult focus could be through formal educational programs, such as those for professional licensing. We also could reach adults in informal contexts like storytelling and other techniques that can build interpersonal and intergenerational trust. They can build understanding among people from diverse backgrounds.

Civics education should include easy to use guidebooks and toolkits to help people apply the skills they learn in community, work, and home contexts. They should teach people how to spot and combat misinformation, and they must teach people about civic institutions and how they function.

IMPLEMENTING A PLAN FOR CIVICS EDUCATION

To implement a more robust program of civics education in Arizona it is crucial that information about the program be communicated effectively to the public. Public Service Announcements and other media, including social media, should be used to disperse this information. Such information should be published on websites, and a speakers' bureau should be established. Proponents should look at opportunities with local public channels. Earned media (or free media) like Horizon and Horizonte are also important avenues. Local foundations, including the Virginia G. Piper Charitable Trust and others, could provide substantial support for this effort.

We should all reach out to our allies and funders to advocate for how important this work is and why financial support is needed for all the items on this list and to support efforts to build collaborations.

Civic engagement and political engagement do not have to be partisan and this is how we can approach funders to support this work.

MORE ABOUT CIVICS EDUCATION

"A comprehensive civic education teaches not just civic knowledge but civic skills, civic values and dispositions, and civic behaviors in a relevant and engaging way while fostering civics and reflecting democratic ideals throughout the school climate, culture, and leadership. Students who experience this type of high-quality civic education are more likely to vote and discuss politics at home, complete college and develop employable skills, volunteer, and work on community issues, and are more confident in their ability to speak publicly and communicate with their elected representatives. Where many of us look to address the current shortcomings of our constitutional democracy through education, we may well also fuel education through democracy." CivXNow, at <https://civxnow.org/our-vision/what-is-success/>.

In a nationwide survey of 1,000 representative likely voters who were asked "What would have the MOST positive and meaningful impact on strengthening the American identity?" civics education was far and away the preferred answer regardless of political affiliation, at 57% of all respondents. The support for other measures was considerably less and more partisan, including a year of national service (36%), less money in politics (35%), easier access to voting (24%), stricter regulation of social media (19%), more participation in religious activity (18%) and ranked-choice voting (10%). CivXNow, <https://civxnow.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/CivXNow-infographic-Luntz-polling-FINAL.pdf>.



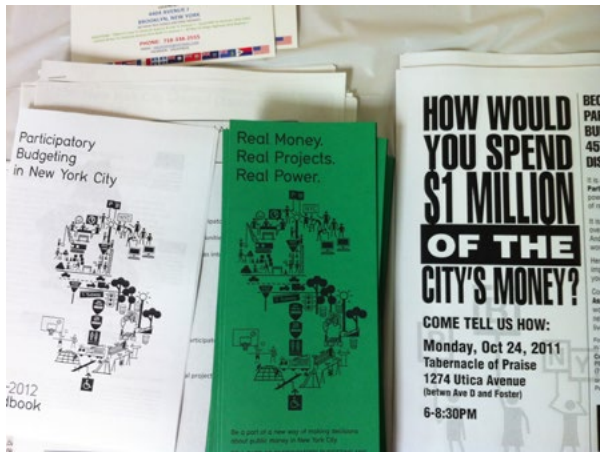


Image by Daniel Latorre

MORE ABOUT PARTICIPATORY BUDGETING

“Participatory budgeting (PB) is a democratic process in which community members decide how to spend part of a public budget. It gives people real power over real money. PB started in Porto Alegre, Brazil, in 1989, as an anti-poverty measure that **helped reduce child mortality by nearly 20%**. Since then, PB has spread to over 7,000 cities around the world, and has been used to decide budgets from states, counties, cities, housing authorities, schools, and other institutions. The New York Times calls PB ‘revolutionary civics in action’—it deepens democracy, builds stronger communities, and creates a more equitable distribution of public resources.” Participatory Budgeting Project, <https://www.participatorybudgeting.org/about-pb/-what-is-pb>.

“Enhancing civic participation by finding new ways to engage people in political processes is, therefore, central to restoring trust in the system. The reform that does this more directly than perhaps any other is participatory budgeting (PB), which allows city residents to collectively determine how a portion of their local government’s budget is spent.” Zachary Roth, *Making Participatory Budgeting Work: Experiences on the Front Lines*, Brennan Center for Justice, August 23, 2022. <https://www.brennancenter.org/>.

Funding is needed to fund a public education campaign, and to develop guidebooks and toolkits. But we should not delay action until funding is available. Instead, we should use existing and other resources being developed by groups such as Arizona Town Hall, Maricopa Community Colleges, organizations that provide civic education for women and entrepreneurs of Mexican origin, and others. These materials should be dispersed as broadly as possible. They will help empower groups and individuals to engage with broader and more diverse groups.

Those responsible for implementing this plan will include many existing groups as well as individuals who can publish and disperse these materials. It may also include educational institutions.

The Arizona Community Foundation may be a source for funding. Consulates, Catholic charities, and others who work with immigrants may have funding, as might other foundations such as Vitalyst Health Foundation.

The Arizona Town Hall and Maricopa Community Colleges toolkits should be initially available within the next several months. However, efforts will need to continue and go beyond just providing toolkits. We recommend the following specific actions and strategies.

1. Bring diverse people together of all ages creating intergenerational opportunities that build trust and action.
2. Create a list or resource bank of existing opportunities in which people may participate. Engage with events that bring diverse people together (including immigrants). Bring guidebooks, toolkits and other resources to these events or use them to support these events as appropriate.
3. Partner with existing groups who are already working in this space and work with groups and organizations that are already engaged with and working with communities. These groups might include diverse immigration status, age, physical abilities, geographic areas, social, political, and other traits.
4. Establish a civics academy for all ages (including adults).
5. Take actions to infuse civics education in schools, such as:
 - a. Partner with charter schools, private schools, the Arizona School Boards Association (ASBA), and Arizona School Administrators to explore these items.

- b. Promote the establishment of mandatory and uniform civics curriculum.
 - c. Require a Seal of Civics Literacy.
 - d. The civics curriculum should add value into school letter grades.
6. Combat misinformation. We all have a personal responsibility to create awareness within our circles—asking people about the source of their information and helping to fill a vacuum of information with education about how to determine the facts.
 7. Explain and educate about civic institutions (like libraries) that help create a common language and combat misinformation.
 8. Provide opportunities for people to visit civic institutions so they can gain a more accurate understanding of these institutions (including elections offices).
 9. Work with those we are trying to reach (such as youth) to create media pieces and other resources that work best for them. Short form content on social media may work best for youth and it may be helpful to have a centralized location for youth to come together to accomplish this.

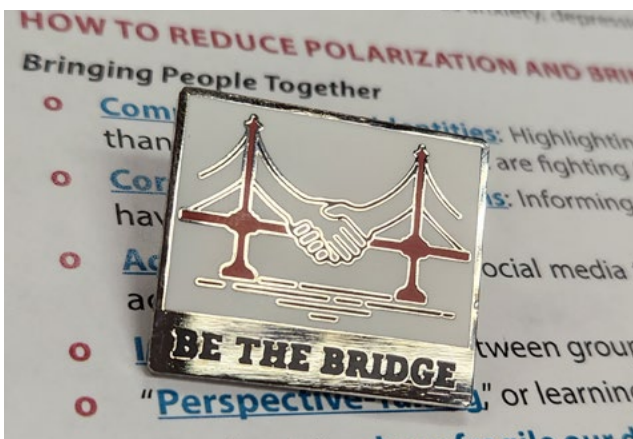
SYSTEM CHANGES

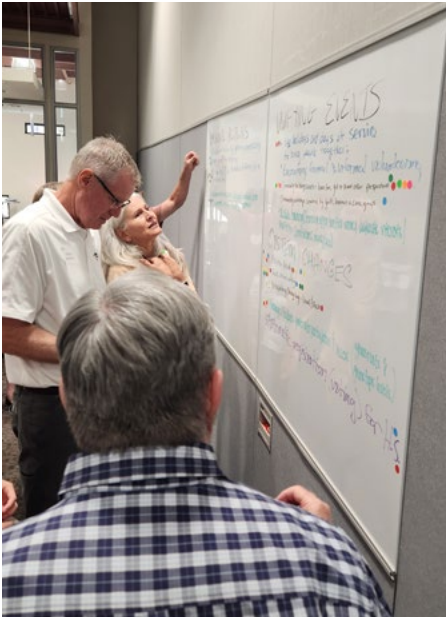
Just as government and electoral systems can encourage polarization, they can promote the search for common ground across divides. Our political system was founded on innovation, and it can be modified by the citizenry. Systemic changes can encourage and facilitate greater voter participation and access. They can create incentives to propose policies that meet the needs and interests of a broad group. Examples include measures that ensure access to voting and greater voter participation, such as adopting rank choice voting and/or open primaries, automatically registering voters, providing transportation to polls (particularly in rural areas such as the Navajo Nation), supporting mail-in voting, designating election day as a holiday, and adopting participatory budgeting.



COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS

Community organizations such as civic groups, professional organizations, and veteran services organizations are essential partners in combating polarization and dysfunction. Their members are ideal audiences for the delivery and dissemination of civic education efforts, as well as to host policy discussions. Community partnerships will build collaboration and establish coalitions around policy positions with broad and diverse support.





UNIFYING EVENTS

Unifying events, such as community gatherings, also provide important opportunities to build trust and understanding between people who otherwise are separated by polarizing factors. These gatherings can include educational opportunities, such as workshops, problem-solving exercises, town halls, and volunteering and service opportunities. Holidays and celebrations, which often bring people together, can be springboards for those discussions. If we bring diverse people together in a safe setting, they can learn about and from each other. They can work together to achieve a common agenda. Unifying events can and will restore the bonds of trust and community—bonds we need for a functioning democracy.

We recommend the following specific actions:

1. Use holidays and days of service to bring people together.
2. Encourage formal and informal volunteering.
3. Hold community-building events at which people can have fun, get to know one another better, and be exposed to different perspectives on issues.
4. Governments, business, and civic groups should hold community workshops.
5. Mandated trainings or other learning opportunities among disparate interests to be held at workplaces and institutions where people are already gathered for other reasons.

PERSONAL ACTION

Personal action is the easiest and most efficient way to reduce polarization. Each person has the power to affect change at the group and systemic level. Effective personal actions include practicing patience, compassion, and humility. People should ask about and listen to other's stories and seek their wisdom. We each can create opportunities for people to listen to and learn from each other.

Each of us must commit to authentic and accurate interactions with others. We must actively combat misinformation and share what we have learned about polarization and misinformation. Unlike collective or institutional efforts that may take more time to implement, personal action can and should begin now.

We recommend the following specific actions:

1. Practice authenticity, patience, compassion, and humility, and ask for wisdom.
2. Utilize available tools now to begin making change at the grassroots level.
3. Facilitate opportunities for listening and collaboration, such as World Cafes, citizen assemblies, and similar gatherings in governments, institutions, and our personal lives.



SPECIAL THANKS



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