



After the Fact | Strengthening Democracy: Voice of the People

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TRANSCRIPT

Andrew Daniller, research associate, Pew Research Center: I think we can say that this is probably not the most divisive time since we've had a civil war in this country. But it does seem to be a lot more divisive than at any point since we started studying public opinion.

Dan LeDuc, host: Welcome to the "After the Fact." For the Pew Charitable Trusts, I'm Dan LeDuc.

Increased political polarization, shifting societal values, and growing distrust in institutions like our government. It's a perfect storm, threatening confidence in our democratic values. And that gets to our data point. A Pew Research Center survey two years ago shows that 58% of Americans are dissatisfied with the way democracy is working in the United States.

So, how do we navigate these turbulent times? We'll hear more on that a bit later. First, some numbers from two experts at the Pew Research Center, Claudia Deane and Andrew Daniller, who are measuring public opinion and helping us to understand what's on the minds of Americans today.

Welcome, Claudia and Andrew. This season we're talking about the state of American democracy, and how it can be strengthened. So, could we begin with a real broad question, which is how do you think Americans think things are going these days?

Andrew Daniller: The simple answer is they aren't terribly happy at the moment. Only about 20% of Americans tell us that they're satisfied with the direction the country's going in. Right now, a similar 20% say that the economy nationally is either doing excellently or very well.

So just in those very big-picture terms, people aren't terribly happy. And they also tell us they aren't terribly satisfied with the way democracy is working in the country today. Just about 60% of Americans in our recent international surveys tell us that they are dissatisfied with the way democracy works in the United States today. That puts us in the lower portion of the other advanced economically developed democracies that we're comparing the United States to, and it suggests that there really is some dissatisfaction underlying the public's mood right now.



Claudia Deane, executive vice president, Pew Research Center: We ask some things that are pretty basic. So, we're asking 'em how well is, how satisfied are you with the way democracy's working in your country? Andrew was pointing out that this is not unique to the United States right now. I think there are countries—Italy, Greece Spain—are also frustrated with the way their democracies are working, even the U.K. to some extent.

We try not to look too hard at Canada and the Netherlands, who are swaging it out in front. But you have to take apart that feeling of what does it mean, democracy's not working? And one thing I always want to start by clarifying is before anybody panics that we are losing our faith in democracy or like the institutions that pin it up.

That's not what we're seeing in our surveys. So, we also ask internationally how important is it to have a fair judiciary, regular elections, and open and free media, and you still get huge majorities of Americans saying, oh yeah, I want that. I want that.

Andrew Daniller: And it's bipartisan United States.

Claudia Deane: And it's bipartisan. We don't want to suggest the foundations of everything are crumbling. I think there are specific things people point to that they don't like about the way government works.

Andrew Daniller: I think we can say that this is probably not the most divisive time since we've had a civil war in this country. But it does seem to be a lot more divisive than at any point since we started studying public opinion in the way that, that we consider modern tools for studying public opinion.

Claudia Deane: In the '40s.

Andrew Daniller: The '40s and '50s. Yeah, '40s and '50s. So, dating back to World War II, roughly the postwar period. Um, and, and one of the examples that I like to use to demonstrate that is, just since 2016, we've been asking this set of questions. If you're a Republican, we ask it about Democrats. If you're a Democrat, we ask it about Republicans. Um, would you say that members of the other party are more immoral than Americans on average? Are they less intelligent than other Americans on average? Are they lazier than other Americans? On average, and since 2016, that's not a lot of time. The numbers on both sides who are willing to attribute those negative stereotypes to the other side.

They've really shot up significantly. You know, they've increased by 20, 30% on some of these measures. And like I said, it's happened on with both parties.



Dan LeDuc: And how they view and how we view each other.

Andrew Daniller: How we view each other. It's a bipartisan phenomenon there. Um, and that's a short time period to see that much public movement. On that type of question. So yeah, we're seeing each other a lot more negatively than we were just a few years ago, just a couple of presidents ago. And to me at least, that's a pretty big warning sign of the way public mood is shifting.

Dan LeDuc: Maintaining a robust democracy is always a work in progress. Despite the gloomy outlook of many Americans, there are lots of ways our government is functioning well, and issues where many folks with differing partisan bents are actually in agreement. Back to Claudia and Andrew.

Andrew Daniller: Where we do see a lot of agreement is in the agencies that people interact with a lot, and the ones that they—not all of them, not the IRS—but a lot of the agencies that people interact with the most, and the ones that have traditionally had high ratings with the public.

So that includes the Postal Service, which might be the single government agency that most Americans interact with the most frequently. The National Park Service, which people think of as, the people who are there when they go on vacation, when they see some of the country's great sites, as well as NASA. NASA continues to have very strong public support from both parties.

Dan LeDuc: And can we translate sort of faith in those sorts of government agencies into a broader ... that means government's okay. That means our democracy's OK. Is there correlation there, or is that asking too much?

Claudia Deane: I think, because we have a complex and divided government system, like you can point to different parts of it and people will have positive views of some and negative others. There are, there are plenty of parts of the federal government that people think are playing an important role, and then, you know that one of the trends we see in American public opinion is whenever you ask about local government, the views are always more positive. So, it's suggesting that when people are interacting with government, it's not as bad as they think it is.

Michael Caudell-Feagan, executive vice president and chief program officer, The Pew Charitable Trusts: Government is working in so many areas that are below the radar screen that people aren't paying as much attention to.

Dan LeDuc: That's Michael Caudell-Feagan. Michael is the executive vice president and chief program officer for The Pew Charitable Trusts. He's joined us to speak about Pew's efforts to



improve how government works. People are likely to feel democracy is working if their government is responsive to them.

Democracy of course also depends on our willingness to come together, talk to each other, and work together. Not a lot of that going on in some places these days. So I asked Michael: How do we go about solving disagreements, especially at a time like this?

Michael Caudell-Feagan: Time and time again, we see in our work that we only make progress if we have respectful dialogue, if we seek common ground, if we embrace compromise. We found that what you have to do is, you have to create the space, a safe space for open communication. You have to get participants to actively listen to different perspectives, and you have to ground the work in facts and evidence when we do so. It requires being clear about our values, seeking out thought patterns and motivation behind the other person's thinking, and seeing where compromise as possible.

Because compromise does not have to be the lowest common denominator. I've seen time and again that we can find innovative solutions and benefit all parties if we speak to our shared interests and values.

Dan LeDuc: We know from speaking with Pew Research Center experts that Americans are steadily losing confidence in long-standing institutions that help our democracy to function. How have you seen that manifest?

Michael Caudell-Feagan: We've talked about the decline in trust in American institutions, and that lack of confidence has reached one of the critical pillars of our democracy, which is our state and local court system. Now here we have roughly 30 million Americans entering the legal system each year, trying to resolve problems with housing, with financing, with their family disputes.

And Pew's working alongside leaders in the judiciary to identify needed improvements, and working together, we're helping find alternative paths so problems can be more effectively addressed outside of the courtroom. We're using new technology to streamline systems and make them more accessible. So, litigants, whether they have a lawyer with them or not, can navigate that system. So, there's progress being made.

Dan LeDuc: That's encouraging to hear. Are we making headway elsewhere?

Michael Caudell-Feagan: You can turn to broadband. We all know, especially after the pandemic, that Americans need accessible high-quality internet if they're going to fully participate in their



work and in their personal lives. Yet millions of Americans lack access, and millions more cannot afford the connections that are available to them.

So, we need to expand broadband in rural and urban communities. We can close the digital divide. And we, since at Pew, we knew that this problem, as with so many others, it starts with understanding the data. Pew's provided research that advanced understanding about how to provide reliable high-speed broadband to communities that lack coverage.

Here again, we've seen tremendous progress. Federal funds for broadband are flowing, combined with the momentum that was spurred by COVID-19 and the needs it highlighted. We've created an environment where there is both funding and political will to close the digital divide.

Dan LeDuc: And most of that has been done in a very bipartisan or nonpartisan way. It's hugely impactful and not polarizing.

Michael Caudell-Feagan: No, a bipartisan way at the federal level. A bipartisan way in the states. And it's brought communities together in ways that have been exceptionally powerful.

Dan LeDuc: It extends into conserving our environment as well, right? For example, it's easy to assume that there may be conflicting interests between those fishing and those working to ensure there are still fish in our future. But in truth, there's a shared goal. Multiple groups have to come together to find a path forward. Right?

Michael: It very much does. And the divide there is less ideological and more economic, the perspective that if we're protecting the environment, if we're setting aside areas for conservation, then it means that there is a loss for the fisheries industry.

If we're doing this in the marine environment, yet what we know is, actually there's a mutual benefit here if we look for it, because if we are going to have fisheries that are strong and healthy, that are giving the catch that those who are going out in their boats every day need to make a living, we have to make sure that we're managing that environment within which the fish populations grow.

And so, we can bring people together, and if we lower the temperature and we talk through these problems, there is a solution that's brought forward.

Dan LeDuc: A bright spot in the state of our democracy is rising voter turnout. The ability to hold free and fair elections is perhaps one of the most visible and tangible ways that people connect



to democracy. Michael has an update on Pew's latest efforts to help ensure elections are accessible and trustworthy.

Michael Caudell-Feagan: The central way that people engage with the democracy is through elections. And the fact is that the nation has experienced historic voter turnout in recent years that demonstrates I think the strong motivation Americans have in expressing their views in the political process. Those free and fair elections are the very foundation for our democracy. Citizens have the right to choose their leaders through a transparent electoral process where their votes are counted accurately, and their choices are respected.

Yet the dedicated local and state election officials that are responsible for running elections are really under great strain at this point in time. Their workforce is embattled. There's inadequate evidence on what works and what doesn't, and technical assistance is anemic.

So, these state and local election officials that we rely upon, they've done historic and stellar work through a pandemic and through a level of intense scrutiny that we've never seen in the past. But there's room for improvement, and that's why at Pew we've brought together several partners, including the Klarman Family Foundation, the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, the Peter G. Peterson Foundation, to really launch a nonpartisan grantmaking effort, which we call the Election Trust Initiative. And that's a long-term partnership committed to strengthening the nuts and bolts of election administration.

We want to build up the evidence, the organizations, and the systems that will help local election officials run secure, accurate, and accessible elections for years to come. There are many excellent nonpartisan organizations, researchers, experts already working in the field. So, the initiative's grants are designed to help them grow their capacity to support election administrators in every community.

Dan LeDuc: That's a tall order. Where do you start?

Michael Caudell-Feagan: Recent elections have sparked many new questions at this point around what works, what doesn't work. The initiative's first grant was to MIT's Election Data Science Lab. They're coordinating independent research across the country that will help answer these questions and the questions that will come in the future with much-needed hard data.

At the same time, policymakers and thought leaders across the ideological spectrum are putting forward a range of ideas. They're often not talking to each other. Another early grant went to the R Street Institute, which is bringing together those across the political divide with diverse perspectives to try to determine: How do we identify principles for nonpartisan election administration?



Dan LeDuc: Where might some of that common ground emerge?

Michael Caudell-Feagan: Post-election audits are designed to determine whether votes were cast accurately and counted accurately. It's an area that's drawing a lot of interest from policymakers in states across the country. But it may surprise many to know that there really are no standards for how to conduct such audits. So, the initiative is supporting efforts to examine what works, develop standards, and determine how states and localities can use those to confirm vote tallies, and increase public confidence in election results.

Dan LeDuc: Pew's latest efforts help the people running elections, too, right?

Michael Caudell-Feagan: In some states, we have up to 50% of those who have been administering elections leaving their offices. Now, it's not surprising, considering the demands that are placed on those officials and the harassment that they're subjected to. The question is, how are we going to replenish the ranks of these dedicated civil servants? How do we recruit and train a new generation of high-quality election professionals?

And so, we have other grantees who are focused directly on addressing that fundamental problem. So, it's a major undertaking. We're committed to achieving the goal that Americans deserve accessible and trustworthy elections. And we're determined to ensure that local and state election officials can deliver them for decades to come, no matter which party is in power.

Dan LeDuc: So, we know that Americans are dissatisfied with the state of democracy, but we also know that they still believe in the core values of democracy. Earlier this season, we spoke with Jeffrey Rosen, who leads the National Constitution Center, did an experiment called the Constitution Drafting Project. The center brought in a progressive group, a conservative group, and a libertarian group and asked them to rewrite the Constitution.

The result? These diverse voices shared the same view: "We want what we've got." There wasn't much difference in their draft Constitutions, and the basic bedrock principles of democracy held strong. Back to Claudia and Andrew at the Pew Research Center, who saw similar sentiments expressed in the polling data.

Andrew Daniller: When you ask people, how important to the country is it that everyone's rights and freedoms are protected? You get very high majorities, very large majorities on both sides of the aisle that say, yes, that's very important for the United States.

When you ask, is it important that public officials be held accountable when they engage in misconduct? Yes. Very large majorities on both parties. When you ask, is it important that we



have a balance of power between the branches of government? Yes, absolutely. People sign on to that, and so those bedrock principles that we think of as being key components of the United States Democratic system, they still get strong ratings.

Where they don't always get as strong of the ratings is when we ask people if those things are happening in practice today. And so there are some of those areas where people feel like the government might not be doing as well as it should be, but they believe in the principles that we generally accept as common principles that hold up our democracy.

Claudia Deane: And so, when people are looking to say, is the government solving my problems? First of all, you know, they're looking at some problems that were very complex to solve. And second of all, our information in media ecosystem is changing so quickly that trying to understand where people are learning about the problems, how do they learn about what government is and isn't doing?

I think the echo chamber concept can get oversold, but do they end up mostly seeing, you know, media that comes from a left-wing perspective or right-wing perspective exclusively? Um, you know, all these things make it even more difficult for people to assess how their democracy is doing and for us to understand. So, you know, what do you guys know about what's going on? Where do you hear about it? That just gets harder and harder from a measurement perspective.

Andrew Daniller: And from the perspective of the leaders, how do they know what people are really thinking and where people are getting their information?

Dan LeDuc: The facts are a good place to start, and that's a key way that Michael Caudell-Feagan tells us Pew is making a difference.

Michael Caudell-Feagan: There are two points I think that are important to make about facts and compromise. Data, facts, and evidence, they are central to how Pew conducts its work. It's how we know what works and what doesn't work. But I know that when two people strongly disagree, facts in and of themselves aren't enough to break through, requires sharing experiences and ability to really listen, and strategic use of storytelling.

You have to understand me and my perspective, and I need to understand yours. With that and a foundation of facts, you can get to an understanding of how to move forward. I also want to be clear that resolving disagreements doesn't mean finding the lowest common denominator. It can be the means to make significant strides forward for all of us.

Dan LeDuc: Here's a final word from Claudia:



Claudia Deane: If you think of the American journey as sort of a highway, if you get people out of the lane of politics that really have positive views of each other. When we ask people how they thought about their fellow citizens. Do you think they would report if they saw something go wrong in your neighborhood? Do you think they would help someone else?

Do you think they would pay their taxes in a fair way? You got a majority saying, yeah, I, I trust other Americans to do that. So it's like this lens we all put on when we talk about it and when people fight at their Thanksgiving dinner table. But if you can get people out of that, I think there's a lot going right.

Dan LeDuc: So, in this polarized era, there can be reason for optimism. In our next episode, we'll look at some of the challenges government is taking on—and finding some solutions that make people's lives better. And, maybe, strengthening democracy in the process.

Sara Dube, director, fiscal and economic policy, The Pew Charitable Trusts: When state leaders are able to invest in programs at work and demonstrate that they're making the most of limited taxpayer dollars, they're showing that government can be effective.

Dan LeDuc: Thanks for listening. To learn more about this episode and our “Strengthening Democracy in America” season, visit pewtrusts.org/afterthefact. For The Pew Charitable Trusts, I'm Dan LeDuc and this is “After the Fact.”