After the Fact | Crisis and Change: Conversations With Leaders —
Political Polarization

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TRANSCRIPT

Dan LeDuc, host, The Pew Charitable Trusts: The United States is experiencing a time like no other. Political polarization. Climate change. A racial reckoning. Income inequality. The global pandemic. These challenges are vying for the attention from leaders of all sectors and across the country. I'm Dan LeDuc from The Pew Charitable Trusts.

Eric Nee, host, Stanford Social Innovation Review: And I'm Eric Nee from *Stanford Social Innovation Review*. We are pleased to bring you a five-part limited series called "Crisis and Change: Conversations With Leaders." Throughout this series, we'll explore these immense challenges faced by the social sector and hear from the changemakers who are leading the way during this defining moment in our nation's history.

Dan LeDuc: Eric, I was really excited about this opportunity to partner with you and the *Stanford Social Innovation Review*. When we first started talking about this project, we knew we could put together some really compelling and important conversations with some leaders from institutions in the nonprofit sector who are really taking on these subjects in a big way.

Eric Nee: I couldn't agree more. We've been able to line up so many important leaders and be able to talk with them about their views on critical issues. It's really an important time to be doing this because society is really demanding more transparency and action from these leaders. And the leaders themselves have to really navigate these difficult and turbulent times.

Dan LeDuc: We've seen democracy really being put to the test in recent years, so we decided for the first episode we would look at the role of political polarization and how it's playing out in some of the challenges we are facing. We often use a data point on our podcast, and I'd like throw one out here, and it's this: The Pew Research Center found that 40% of both Republicans and Democrats not only disagree with people of the other party, but get this, they think that they are a threat to the well-being of the country.

Eric Nee: When I hear that number, it really alarms me. But I unfortunately think it's probably true. It certainly feels that way when you go on social media or you listen to some of the news or

you see what's going on in Congress. You really had a great conversation with Pew's president and CEO, Susan Urahn, and Sarah Rosen Wartell, president of the Urban Institute, about how we got to this polarized period, but, more importantly, how we can get out of it.

Dan LeDuc: While there is plenty of polarization, you see it in the headlines every day and in the data, but Sue and Sarah really give it some context—and in our conversation they talked about some recent bipartisan milestones that shows overcoming polarization really is possible. Here's the conversation.

Dan LeDuc: You both lead organizations that are all about fact-based, nonideological research and policymaking. Is this a lonely time for people who do what you do? Sarah, I would like to start with you. You've been leading the Urban Institute for nearly a decade now; what have you seen, and how has it changed?

Sarah Rosen Wartell, president, Urban Institute: One of the other things that I'm increasingly seeing is that we are sorting ourselves by physically where we live with people who are more like us, who think like us. I don't think people are intentionally saying, you know what, I really want to do is go live with other Republicans, or live with other Democrats, but they are trying to find communities where there are cultural affinities, and those communities are ones where then those same characteristics are things that have a lot to do with people's politics. So, we are getting different information sources. We are increasingly having different educational experiences in the communities where we live. Where we go to church. Churches are increasingly places of people who are likeminded in their politics. There are all these different dimensions in which we are associating with those who share characteristics with us. And what that means, particularly because of the media, is that we don't get any opportunity to engage with someone, except for in a kind of derisive and distanced way, who may look at an issue in a different perspective.

The New York Times recently did a feature on partisan segregation. And it told us things we already know about the extent to which we're segregated, that rural, or suburban, or urban communities have different characters, that coastal versus flyover country has different characters. But what it told me that really shocked me was that within a particular geography, people had sorted themselves by neighborhood that had particular characters. It's even when you walk the dog, when you walk into the corner store, we are being exposed to so many people who see the world just like us.

Dan LeDuc: Well, that notion of our clumping together with likeminded folks has been something that's come through in Pew Research Center findings over the last few years. Sue, you've been leading Pew for over a year now, but you have spent your entire professional life in nonpartisan research, so tell us your perspective.

Susan K. Urahn, president and CEO, The Pew Charitable Trusts: Yes, I have spent my entire career in that triangle of research, and policy, and politics, and there's always been polarization. There's always been partisan politics, for sure, but it's definitely gotten worse over time. And, certainly, the echo chamber of the media, and the jobs, and everything where you just talk to people who think the way you do has intensified it.

And I think we see that in the research. For example, the Pew Research Center has done some polling showing that a lot of Americans, just about over half of them, would say that talking politics with somebody with whom they disagree is really stressful and really frustrating.

So, there's not a lot of incentive to go and do that. And, also, you get this sort of demonization happening, where it's not only do you disagree with people. We have some interesting polling showing that just about 40% of both Republicans and Democrats not only disagree with people of the other party, but they think that they are a threat to the well-being of the country. So that's a real challenge when it comes to bridging that partisan divide.

Say if you look at the 17 advanced economies, the U.S. is the highest in terms of conflict around social issues. So, you've got this tremendous sorting within the country, and then it really stands out when you look at us compared to other countries.

Dan LeDuc: How did we get to that number like you talked about, Sue, a minute ago, that 40% on one side and 40% on the other actually view the other side as bad people?

Sarah Rosen Wartell: If we understood exactly how we got here, we might understand how to reverse it. I think part of our problem is that there's a lot at stake right now. Parts of our society are seeing amazing returns, from technology, from education, that are improving our standards of living exponentially.

And, yet, others aren't experiencing that at all. And these divides are not only the haves and have-nots, because within that there's a lot more complexity. And, within that, if you demonize the other side, if you demonize those who [think] populism means that somebody else has done well in society and you have not, we've had some leaders of late who have really played into that. And then against that, we have a long history in the United States of racism, and we have a long history in which people's fear of the other, which is a human emotion, has been played to in ways. So, you have this sort of phenomenon of fear of the other and a ever more richly changing demographic landscape, which is, I would argue, one of our greatest richness. That is a moment when people are feeling vulnerable, and it's easy for a demagogue to come into that and really play those forces against one another.

Sue Urahn: A lot of people way smarter than I am have spent a lot of time and energy trying to diagnose why it is that we are here and how we might get out. I would point out a couple of

things. One is that it is a global phenomenon. It's not just this country where we're seeing some of these challenges. But, also, that in the face of these ever-increasing difficulties, policy still gets made. And this is what I find the most interesting thing, five weeks after President Trump's impeachment trial, Congress passed the CARES Act, a $2.2 trillion package of COVID relief and economic relief. And it was bipartisan. Five weeks after a very challenging election in 2020, they passed another $900 billion in pandemic relief. Congress can come together. Policymakers can work, and I can give you many examples, particularly at the state and local level, where policymakers have come and worked very well together in a bipartisan way, using data very thoughtfully, to drive important policy reforms in their jurisdictions. So, it is this interesting juxtaposition of the very challenging times that we live in and all of the dialogue that goes on about that and the fact that policy does continue to get done.

Dan LeDuc: Well, let's talk about some of those good examples so that anyone listening to us today doesn't feel it's all doom and gloom. Those are the kinds of successes that keep, I would imagine, both of you coming into work every day, or at least logging on from home in this era.

Sarah Rosen Wartell: I was actually, earlier today, reading a Pew Research Center report. Whenever you see a number that says the exact same percentage of Republicans and Democrats support a policy, you read that. So, this was about veterans, and 72% of Americans of all political parties believe that we should provide supports for American veterans. There are things in which people have sort of shared perspectives.

Where we have a hard time finding alignment is particularly when we have to make trade-offs or when we have to pay for things. We're doing better at aligning to spend money to support people through crises, to finally invest in our underpinnings of our economy. But when you have to make trade-offs and look at who not only is going to win, but who might lose, that's where our political system, at the national level, is not doing so well. But I completely agree with Sue. People like the politicians that the closer they are to them, the more they are popular.

So local government is one of the places where I get the most sense of optimism from, because I think they are rolling up their sleeves. Especially the pandemic has been a case where you see mayors in blue states, purple states, red states, all sitting down and trying to solve things together and learn from one another.

Dan LeDuc: Sue, you've done so much of your work at the state level. You see it that way?

Sue Urahn: Absolutely, and I think this is where we found some really fascinating examples that I find very heartening, to be honest with you. And I would look at, for example, the sentencing and corrections work that we've done for well over a decade now. Just last year in Michigan, they passed a remarkable package of bills that was focused on jail reform. And I will read you a quote

that I found, actually it was by a Republican, the Senate majority leader in Michigan, in the wake of that policy package.

And he said, "These bills are rooted in data, informed by research, and built on the consensus and compromise of a diverse group of stakeholders." So, it doesn't get any better than that, when you have a policy group that comes together. In this case, it was a task force, it was bipartisan.

We worked with that task force, and we brought them a lot of data, so they understood the scope and scale of their problem, what exactly was happening to drive the jail populations in Michigan. We modeled different policy solutions so they could make the trade-offs. They could understand when they did A, B, or C, what was the likely impact going to be. And they heard from a wide group of stakeholders, and they made a data-driven, thoughtful decision that was a compromise, came together to do something that will serve the public well. So even though some people think it was weakened down, some people think there was more in there than there should have been, at the end of the day, the public will be well served no matter how messy that process was.

Dan LeDuc: Let's get a little granular. One of the things we want to do this season in talking to leaders like yourselves is really hear from you about how you are operating in these times. Again, both of you are all about fact-based research and not being driven by ideology. Are you doing anything different in the way you go about your research at the Urban Institute because of these times?

Sarah Rosen Wartell: I think it's important to realize that institutions like ours are getting challenged for our objectivity on lots of sides. We work in a lot of social policy areas, and we are often challenged by others who are not wanting to more deeply invest in some of the social policies that our work is about. But we're also being challenged by folks who are proponents of the communities that many of these policies that we're studying serve, and they're asking very hard questions about who's at the table, who designs the question, who is helping to interpret the data, who is getting the access to the information we study.

We are really interrogating our own methodology and training scholars in how to ask hard questions about implicit bias. We're training people to look at whether or not the assumptions that we have about what is rigorous, or the right way to do research, may be based on a reference standard that doesn't include everyone, doesn't value voices.

Lived experience is a form of expertise that needs to go hand in hand with data, and so community-engaged methods is one of the things that we're really lifting up now for all of our scholars to be able to have more tools in the tool belt.

Sue Urahn: Well, I completely agree with Sarah. These are really critical steps that we are only just beginning to really dive into, and I think there's a lot more to be done there. But I would also say if you look outside, some of the things we are doing are not things we've not done in the past, but we're trying to do them more and more intentionally. So, more transparency so that people are very clear about what is our methodology, who did we talk to, how did we do this work, making that data available. More context when the data comes out so that it's harder for people to misinterpret what we say, and we're learning about that all the time as we go.

More efforts to reach out to different populations with the research that we have so that they understand it. So again, these are things we've done, but we're just doing them more and more intentionally as we just try to navigate these very choppy waters.

Sarah Rosen Wartell: So, one of the things that I think is a new phenomenon is thinking about how you communicate insights and research. Both of our organizations have been working on this for at least the last decade that I've known Sue.

When you start to think about how people learn in a world where people are highly polarized, it's not that they don't trust the information. They don't even always engage with it. So, on the one hand, we are mining research and data for evidence. On the other hand, the number of people who are going to digest a spreadsheet, or a wonky piece of information, is relatively limited.

So, you think about, as Sue said, transparency. There may be the tweet or the simple data visualization. But you've got to be able to link down through that to something that describes the methodology, to something that gives you access to the data and realize that you have a very segregated audience with different information needs.

Sue Urahn: I would say as a consumer of data during the pandemic, I was fascinated to be on Twitter and watch the scientific research on COVID being done in real time. Just absolutely astonishing, watching the data be debated by some of the leading epidemiologists in the world as they were all on Twitter, and then they would move on to something else within a period of hours. So, it is a different of an environment right now to get research out and to reach people in a thoughtful way.

Dan LeDuc: So, we're in an era in which there are what we now call "alternate facts." That's one label, and then there is flat-out misinformation that we're seeing throughout the digital space that has clearly influenced public opinion. How do you, leading institutions that are fact-based, deal with that?

Sarah Rosen Wartell: I'd like to have to defend our facts more. I think that in this polarized environment, people don't say your number's wrong, my number's right. They describe why the source is not a trustworthy source or has some preconceived bias.

Sue Urahn: It's a really hard question, right? I think we continue to do what we do. We put out data that is as solid as we can make it. We make it as accessible as we can make it, and I think we acknowledge that there will always be some people that we cannot reach with that data, that will simply disagree and so fundamentally that they won't listen, they won't look, they won't take it in. So, we try to focus on those folks who are willing to have a conversation, to look at the data. I think you see that, folks have seen that, in the vaccine hesitancy conversations.

Dan LeDuc: I want to go back to something Sarah mentioned a moment ago about transparency in how you do research and the very notion of who's asking the questions, who's creating the questions, who are the researchers. That gets often back to the notion of diversity, equity, and inclusion, which is also one of the more visible crosscurrents in society over the last two years with the racial reckoning we've been through.

Sarah Rosen Wartell: I think moments like all of us having the shared experience of watching George Floyd's murder over and over and over again are galvanized, but they don't galvanize something that was not already in the ecosystem. And it's time to contend with the fact that our lived experience, even in organizations that purport to share values of diversity, equity, and inclusion—our lived experience in those institutions, and in the broader society, is filled day in and day out with microaggressions and experiences of inequality. And, so, I think this was inevitable. I think it found its moment and its opportunity, and the learning that has happened has been profound and hugely valuable, even if deeply uncomfortable many times.

Sue Urahn: I will tell you I took on the job of CEO about 18 months ago. So, for me, the job has been pandemic and racial reckoning. That has been a lot of, "How do you steer an institution through these incredibly seismic forces that the world is dealing with right now?" and it has been kind of a remarkable experience.

Dan LeDuc: Do you feel any sort of responsibility for helping bridge the political divide, not just present data, but do you feel any responsibility for the bridging, or the solving, or the mending?

Sue Urahn: I feel a great responsibility to hold on to the nonpartisan approach to the work. I think often there is pressure to just take a stand, become part of one of those organizations that is on one side or the other, and I certainly hear that in some cases from younger staff. But I believe that there is an incredibly important role that nonpartisan research organizations play in the broader ebb and flow of policy. And without us, I think the policy system would be a much less rich place and arguably that policy that got made would be a lot less effective. People would

not have data that they trusted, and the data would not influence the policy, I don't think, in the way that we are able to do it.

Sarah Rosen Wartell: We have a little bit different history and a little bit different traditions. What we have are individual experts and scholars. And we are very content to have a scholar A look at the question in one way, be transparent about their methods and their approach, and reach a conclusion, and expert B reach a different one, or because they've asked a different question of the data. And we want each to listen to one another's challenges and questions, but we don't have to agree.

We do, however, have values and objectives for society that we are trying to pursue. We want a world where inequities are minimized. We want a world where prosperity is more broadly shared. We want to see a world where economic opportunity and mobility is characterized for all.

And, so, we are spending a lot of time wrestling with how you can have values, you can have a value of anti-racism, and yet also have intellectual diversity, how you can be comfortable with people reaching different conclusions. One of the things I remind people at Urban sometimes, and these aren't always comfortable conversations, is that it was not that long ago that the kind of work we do today around structural racism was not a dominant thought, and we invested in it here even though it wasn't.

And if we had not, today, then we wouldn't have the strength we have in doing data analytics on racial equity. And that's the kind of place I feel responsibility to preserve, a place in our society for that kind of discourse that is challenging but can be around shared values.

Dan LeDuc: Well, Sarah Rosen Wartell of the Urban Institute and Sue Urahn of the Pew Charitable Trusts, thank you. What a great conversation.

Sarah Rosen Wartell: It was an honor to be with you. Thanks so much.

Sue Urahn: Yeah, likewise Sarah, thank you, and it's been a real pleasure.

Dan LeDuc: For more information about this series, visit pewtrusts.org/afterthefact or ssir.org. And we hope you'll tune in for more conversations with leaders in our series, "Crisis and Change."

You can find them on your preferred streaming platforms under the "After the Fact" podcast or the "Inside Social Innovation" podcast from *Stanford Social Innovation Review*. For The Pew Charitable Trusts, I'm Dan LeDuc.