

Combating Democratic Dysfunction

An Interview with Glenn Nye by Tony Wharton

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In July 2019, Kettering Foundation associate Tony Wharton spoke with Glenn Nye, a former Congressman from Virginia who became president of the Center for the Study of the Presidency and Congress (CSPC), in Washington, DC. In his work at the CSPC, Nye—who has attended National Issues Forums deliberative forums and was a panelist for the 2019 A Public Voice event—has focused on Congress's dysfunction and failure to respond to basic public concerns. In its "Political Reform Report" in January 2019, the CSPC identified four main drivers of dysfunction: gerrymandering, closed primaries, partisan echo chambers, and money in politics. The report concluded, "Despite the tremendous levels of division currently plaguing our political system, however, the situation is not hopeless. There are efforts under way to effect positive change in our politics and governance—though many efforts at the grass roots remain below the public radar—and there are numerous elected officials who wish to work within a system that promotes and rewards an effective level of bipartisan cooperation."

Wharton: How do you see the relationship between the public and the government right now?

Nye: What we discovered through our research in 2018 was that we have essentially two related problems. We have a problem with incentives in politics, and we have a crisis of public confidence. It is not surprising that when the public sees government dysfunction—and remember that we experienced the longest federal government shutdown in history at the beginning of 2019—then they are dissatisfied

with the functioning of government and have low confidence in institutions.

So we studied carefully the drivers of dysfunction, again, coming back to that incentive question. We have an incentive problem in politics. Our political system often incentivizes elected officials not to compromise on issues even when the result is an inability to do basic things like pass a sensible budget, fund government agencies on time so they don't shut down, those kinds of things.

We found that voters lose confidence in government when they see that it is basically dysfunctional. And that creates a problem for us in trying to solve any major issue. We identified four drivers and assessed how likely we were to be able to effect change in those areas. The partisan echo chamber is probably the hardest one to fix. Due to modern technology, people self-select into media consumption groups, and it's very difficult in a democracy to force people out of that. But gerrymandering is a purposeful rigging of the political system by political parties for their own gain, which can be fixed. There are rules that can be put in place to prevent that from happening. We put a lot of emphasis on that. Primary systems, similarly, there are ways to change the system to actually incentivize more compromise than less.

And then I think the issue of money in politics really connects closest to the public confidence question. When 70 percent of the American public says the system is rigged against a regular person, they're looking at a system with well-funded special interests having a lot of power to move or prevent things from moving in their government. And that is very frustrating to the average citizen, understandably.

Wharton: In those four drivers of dysfunction, do you see other openings for improvement?

Nye: On the open primary side, Maine recently instituted for congressional races a ranked choice voting system, which we think is very interesting. Basically, any time you have an

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electoral system that incentivizes candidates to communicate with a broader audience of voters, a more balanced mix of voters, you tend to incentivize them to cooperate better, once they're elected, with each other.

Again, I want to emphasize that the goal of our work is to support systems that incentivize the kind of compromise that allows the government to do the basic functions well. Our ambition is not that every issue becomes bipartisan or that there's no debate over deep-seated important issues, but rather that members of





Congress and other legislative bodies are not motivated to shut the government system down or to stick to the party line.

Wharton: When you were in office, how did you go about learning how citizens, your constituents, felt on the issues?

Nye: The challenge to being an elected representative is there are many channels for citizen input. And it's up to the legislator to analyze all that input, right? You have direct input coming into your office every day from phones, emails, letters from constituents. You have town halls or Congress on Your Corner meetings that you as a legislator host. You end up attending hundreds and hundreds of community events where you talk with people, and they tell you what they think.

You have rigorous scientific polling that you do, too. All these are inputs. But you have to learn how to determine how similar those inputs are likely to be. For example, calls that come in or letters that come into our congressional office tended to come from the same people or types of people regularly. So, it wasn't like we were getting a very broad sense of what

our public felt. It was really like a relatively narrow group of people who contacted us a lot. It was good and thoughtful input, but it was not necessarily representative of what everybody in our constituency thought.

Wharton: And how did you balance that against all the other communication you were getting from lobbyists, other members of Congress, etc.?

Nye: We always prioritized communication that was connected to our constituents. For example, if lobbyists wanted to meet with me, I took the meeting with a lobbyist if it was on an issue I knew to be critical to my district . . . or lobbyists who came with constituents from my district, so I knew that they were expressing a point of view that was organic to my district, at least to that group of people. But it's still a very targeted message, right? This is usually people who understand the legislative system well. They have the time to come visit.

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Beyond that, I went to a lot of community events. I tried to attend existing events like Civic League meetings, or American Legion meetings, groups that already existed on their own where I would come as a guest. I actually found those to be the most fruitful in terms of really com-

municating with constituents because . . . they were people who knew each other and had assembled themselves to talk about issues, and I was the guest. So I'd typically come into those and do a lot of listening. I also found that those were fruitful because people don't destroy

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their own proceedings when it's theirs specifically. They don't interrupt each other, and they're not rude. If I hosted a town hall, I got a lot of politically oriented people, and they would kind of yell at each other, and it was sometimes not a really fruitful exchange.

Wharton: There's the old line about not wanting to see two things being made, sausage and legislation. And what that often means in practice is that the things that legislators have to do in order to get a bill passed, the public doesn't always necessarily understand. I'm wondering how you dealt with that. What was your sense of how well the public understood the trade-offs that you had to make to get legislation passed?

Nye: I mean, I think the public understood the trade-offs. But the challenge is that politicians don't spend much time communicating trade-offs. So, you're starting the conversation from the point of view of a politician. You're trying to put things bluntly in very simple terms because you want to communicate quickly to a

lot of people. The challenge is really it's not so much that members of the public don't understand the trade-offs; it's just that you have a challenge with bandwidth, meaning to get someone's attention requires a level of trust and interest in your work.

I think politicians often format their communication with the assumption that you have very little attention from any particular constituent. So, you're going to have to get across your point in 30 seconds or less. And so, then, that requires simplification. There's always this push and pull between trying to say your message and say how you feel on an issue or what question you want to solve in a very short period of time. If you're using mass communication, everything's going to be short.

That's also another reason I liked the Civic League interaction because there you could have a conversation. They expected to spend an hour in that room because they were convening themselves regularly to do this, and you had time to get to the nuance of issues. And I think that revealed to me that they did understand trade-offs pretty well, the same kind of trade-offs



that they all experienced in their day-to-day lives, balancing their home checkbooks.

Wharton: You've attended some deliberative forums. What did you make of that experience?

Nye: I thought it was excellent for a number of reasons. One, it was not organized by a legislator. So, people who came to the deliberative forum had made the decision to meet with each other, whether or not they all knew each other, but they made the decision to meet with each other and deliberate on a challenging issue. And I attended essentially as a guest. I like the fact that they had preparatory material that presented issues realistically, including trade-offs, which I think is very important.

As I said before, typically politicians don't communicate trade-offs, unfortunately. But the issue forum includes all the realistic challenges that you have to take into account. And that's also where I realized that I think voters *do* have a good understanding. It wasn't difficult to get people to understand that there are trade-offs to any decision. They get that intuitively from their day-to-day lives.

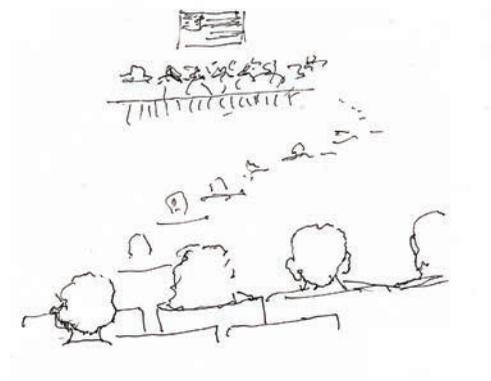
They just needed to apply that understanding to a set of political issues that they may typically have heard communicated in very simplistic terms, which aren't really realistic. And even when they didn't come to a definitive conclusion, they recognized the challenges of the issue and raised important points of view on them, which were useful to me.

Wharton: One thing that sometimes happens when you have deliberative forums where a legislator is involved is that legislators, because of the massive information that they're dealing with and because of the technical nature of many of the problems that they're grappling with, they

are very likely to see things in somewhat technical terms. And frequently, ordinary citizens don't want to necessarily talk about them that way. They want to talk about their larger concerns. Do you think deliberative forums help bridge that gap? How do you see that working?

Nye: I do. And I think, again, the preparatory guides are helpful because they already express the issues in language that is approachable. And they do that in a rigorously tested way, so they know that it's something that most voters will be able to relate to in terms of the language. Sometimes it can be really challenging, actually, as a legislator to remember to do that.

As a legislator, you spend a lot of your day in hearings and you're thinking about the technical level of an issue. And that doesn't always come across very well to someone who doesn't spend all of their day focusing on that one issue. They may intuitively understand the value of the issue, the importance of the trade-off, and the relevance to their lives. They don't have the exposure to it at the level that a legislator would to speak in those terms. But you're really not that far apart as long as you can find some kind of language bridge.



Wharton: Looking at that question a little differently, Is it helpful to a legislator to see what their constituents, after they've wrestled with the trade-offs, consider politically permissible? In other words, when they reach a point where they can say, "Oh, I can see how that would be a possibility" or "I can see how that would work," and think about an issue perhaps in ways they hadn't before, how is that helpful for a legislator?

Nye: I think it's very helpful because the legislator's always going to be concerned with how other people are going to see his or her response to an issue. To put it more bluntly, legislators spend a lot of energy trying to assess how their voters are going to respond to the way they frame an issue, the way they use language around an issue. So, having exposure to a group of people in a deliberative forum who have already gone through that process is very helpful.

Wharton: Based on your experience in Congress and what you've learned since that time, what do you think is the best way at this point to open up new avenues of engagement between citizens and their representatives?

Nye: I think the first thing that should be done is to take some steps to increase public trust. And then we need to have legislators be

more available than they tend to be, which is always a time challenge. But the first part of that, the public trust part, is something that we're trying to work on here at the center.

Among our measures for dealing with that are proposing ways to change the electoral system and the rules around fund-raising and what lobbyists can and can't do to signal to the public that we understand their frustration with the system and we're prepared to make some change to it, more than just rhetorical, that we're actually advocating some legislative changes to address those.

There's not one silver bullet that you could use and it would fix all this. The public is going to need to see some improvement in the basic cooperation and function of the federal government. But I do think it's psychologically valuable to show people that we're serious about reforming the way that the government approaches who has influence over it, in a way that connects average people to the system more than connected people. I think that's a good way to start building trust again.

Glenn Nye is the president and CEO of the Center for the Study of the Presidency and Congress. He is a former member of Congress from Virginia's Second District.