



After the Fact | [The Value of Nonpartisanship](#)

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TRANSCRIPT

Former Indiana representative Lee Hamilton: Civility is absolutely essential for the political discourse. Without civility, you simply cannot solve problems.

Dan LeDuc, host: That's former congressman Lee Hamilton, and we'll hear more from him in a bit. In this episode of "After the Fact," we're going to talk about finding common ground—that's where civil conversations happen and problems can get solved.

[Theme music]

Often the way to find common ground is with reliable, nonpartisan data. That's what this podcast is about, and that's what The Pew Charitable Trusts is about. I'm your host, Dan LeDuc, and our data point for this episode is 70. Pew is 70 years old this year. Later we're going to talk with former congressman Hamilton—he's a Democrat—and former senator Richard Lugar—he's a Republican—about the importance of nonpartisanship and about restoring civility to our national conversation. As it happens, their combined tenure in the U.S. Congress is also 70 years. But first, a conversation with Pew's president and CEO, Rebecca Rimel. She has led the organization for nearly half of its existence.

Dan LeDuc: Well, welcome, Rebecca.

Rebecca Rimel, president and CEO, The Pew Charitable Trusts: Thank you for having me.

Dan LeDuc: So, Rebecca, what would you want to tell some of the listeners who tune in to this podcast but may not know much about Pew? What would you like them to know?

Rebecca Rimel: That it's an institution with a 70-year history. I've been fortunate enough to have served for half of that history—35 years. It's been an honor to work with members of the Pew family. But everything that they are committed to in the organization is best serving the public interest, much like your distinguished guests who are going to follow me.



Dan LeDuc: So let's talk about what Pew is. We do a lot of different things and a lot of different kinds of work. And as I say, you've been—you've said—part of this for a long time. It's an organization that's evolved. How's it evolved, and what's it done, and where are we today?

Rebecca Rimel: Curiously and wonderfully, our four donors were issue-agnostic, and geographically so, as well. So even though we continue our commitment to Philadelphia, our hometown, our work nationally and internationally really spans virtually any topic imaginable. First and foremost, we only work on issues where the facts and data are clear. Secondly, we pick topics that are somewhat ripe but often orphaned, meaning that other organizations have either not invested to date or they haven't been recognized as being important enough. And then we pick topics where we believe there's a 50 percent chance at least of moving the needle to benefit the public interest. And then we're really focused on the strategy and the content to make sure we can deliver results. So that then filters out a lot of topics.

Dan LeDuc: It does, doesn't it? Yeah.

Rebecca Rimel: And I guess the final thing I would say—any issue we pick to work on has to be non/bipartisan. Because if you're working in the policy space in particular, you need champions and advocates on both sides of the aisle.

Dan LeDuc: That's so important. And I hope we can talk more about that over the next few minutes. But before we did that, I sort of wanted to do a little historical view, because one of the first ways Pew got into public policy was working on health care for the homeless back in the '80s.

Rebecca Rimel: Well, when we launched that project in partnership with the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation—and they deserve enormous credit because they took the lead, and Drew Altman, who is now president of the Kaiser Family Foundation, was the strategist and the lead advocate on the effort—homelessness was growing. There was no health care for the homeless around the country, and very little housing. And this project provided a demonstration model in a number of cities to show that health care could be provided to the most needy—those without shelter. And the McKinney Act actually was passed as a result of this program. So our first introduction to policy work, you might say, was a rip-roaring success.

Dan LeDuc: Sure.

Rebecca Rimel: Not only did the demonstration projects work around the country, but it did lead to lasting legislation. And even today, that legislation stands, and health care is provided to homeless individuals throughout the country.



Dan LeDuc: So when Pew looks at a subject, it's looking for facts and data, where it can establish what's going on. How does that work? How does that happen?

Rebecca Rimel: Well, first of all, you have to be willing, as Jefferson said, to follow truth wherever it may take you. And I say to the staff here, we have to lead with our heads, not our hearts. We all have particular areas we're interested in or particular passions, and that's a good thing. But when it comes down to making a decision about how to use the resources left by the Pew family and the other donors who support our work now, we need, first and foremost, to look at the facts and data and have that guide our decision. You need to be able to stand behind those facts and data.

Dan LeDuc: And then there's a pretty prescribed way of going after it, right? You talked again about some benchmarks for success that we need to establish. You want to be able to quantify success in some fashion.

Rebecca Rimel: Oh, absolutely. Everything we do here is measurable. And what do I mean by that?

Dan LeDuc: Right.

Rebecca Rimel: It's very clear what the endgame is. A billion acres of land saved in the boreal by 2022. We'll know whether we have a billion acres or not. Food safety legislation passed. I could go on and give endless examples, but it should not be questionable or ambiguous what the end result is—a win, lose, or a draw.

Dan LeDuc: Right.

Rebecca Rimel: And I should say that all of these successes—we like to think there are more of those than disappointments—they come in partnership.

Dan LeDuc: Sure.

Rebecca Rimel: Partnership with other nonprofits, partnership with policymakers. I use the example of the enormous work we've been doing—successful work we've been doing—over the last now 12 years on corrections reform around the country. That would not have happened without enlightened and dedicated public sector leadership.

Dan LeDuc: So you know, all of those things, though, can be contentious in a debate, right? The facts and the research can change the dynamic of a debate and make it more civil. Data gives a common language for everybody to sit down around the table with.



Rebecca Rimel: It absolutely does. And we could have very differing opinions on something, and I should respect yours and hopefully you would respect mine. We could disagree. But we both should be able to look at the facts and data, the source of those, and that should inform our debate, and particularly our decisions. And that is so important if we are making decisions with the use of public resources. We're making decisions that impact people's lives. And even in the private sector, data and facts need to be made to make important decisions.

Dan LeDuc: We use data in this podcast, and tell the stories behind it in—we use it as the jumping-off point for a conversation. That's essentially what we would hope policymakers are doing. Data is the starting point for it. But beyond that, there has to be a measure of civility, I guess is the best word. That's what our friends from Indiana are going to be talking about in a little while. It's harder to have those conversations these days. The Pew Research Center, part of this operation, is talking about polarization being pretty bleak right now. How can we change that? How can data play a bigger role in easing these conversations?

Rebecca Rimel: Respect, humility, civility—these are all important sort of traits that many of us were raised with, and that were prized. And I think really that's what we're talking about, is to have in people that we respect these traits, and to recognize them and to applaud them. It seems sometimes these days we think those are signs of weakness. Compromise is not a positive term.

Dan LeDuc: Right.

Rebecca Rimel: You think about almost every decision in your personal life. It comes with usually accommodation and compromise. There's very little in this world where a winner takes all. Why would we expect it to be different in public life or public service? And so, we should always respectfully agree to disagree. There's no place for trying to make our point at someone else's expense.

Dan LeDuc: We have been called raging moderates at Pew. You take that as sort of a badge of honor.

Rebecca Rimel: Well, actually, it was the *National Journal* that gave us that label many, many years ago. I think at that point, we had two staff in Washington. And I said to myself when I read that article, “This organization will have been deemed a success if we can hold on to that label and still accomplish a great deal in the public interest.”

Dan LeDuc: We've also been pretty good over the years, whether it's in the corrections work or you mentioned food safety a moment ago, about sort of bringing people together. Not just



providing the information that gives a conversation, but actually as a convener. How did we get to be that way? We actually view it as part of the work. It's part of the mission, right?

Rebecca Rimel: Well, I think, first of all, you have to have a reputation for being fact-based, data-driven, and respectful of your interactions with individuals. If you have that reputation, then I think it's more likely that you can bring people to the table of differing viewpoints, and for them to feel that they are going to be respected, honored, and heard. If an organization doesn't have that reputation, it's not surprising that only one stripe or side is going to feel comfortable at that table. And so I think, again, it takes decades, as they say, to build these kinds of reputations and days to lose them.

Dan LeDuc: Are you an optimist about all of this? This sort of rough-and-tumble time we're in?

Rebecca Rimel: Oh, I am. I am because I believe America is a great country, and I believe that we always find our way through troubled times—whether it's foreign adversity or domestic adversity. And you know, the quote I love most from our founders—they had many—but it was to “tell the truth and trust the people.” And I like to think that's what we do, is to tell the truth, tell the facts, and tell the data, but to trust the people. And not just the American public, but publics around the globe. They will make wise, thoughtful, informed decisions for themselves and their family if they have good facts and data.

[Music]

Dan LeDuc: It's a challenge finding common ground these days. The gap between the political values of Democrats and Republicans is now larger than at any point in Pew Research Center surveys dating back to 1994—a continuation of a steep increase in the ideological divisions between the two parties over more than a decade.

We wanted to find some middle ground, so we traveled to Middle America. Indiana bills itself as the crossroads of the nation. Former senator Richard Lugar, a Republican, represented the Hoosier state in Washington for 36 years, and former congressman Lee Hamilton, a Democrat, represented Indiana for 34 years. They have both made significant contributions to the nation and the world in challenging times. Lugar sponsored bipartisan legislation instrumental in helping the former Soviet Union dismantle its nuclear stockpile, and Hamilton after leaving Congress served as co-chairman of the 9/11 Commission, whose bipartisan members issued a unanimous report faulting the performance of our national intelligence agencies in failing to prevent the attacks.

[Background noises]



I sat down with them on the campus of DePauw University, not far from Indianapolis.

Dan LeDuc: Well, Congressman Hamilton and Senator Lugar, thanks so much for being with us. Together, the two of you have been talking a lot about the need for increased civility in our national conversation, whether it's among voters or among your former colleagues on Capitol Hill. So what does civility mean for elected officials these days?

Former representative Lee Hamilton: Well, I think first of George Washington. When George Washington was 16 years old, he drew up a list of 101 Rules of Civil Behavior. I'll not try to say all 101 of them. But one of them said, "Treat everybody in the room with dignity and respect." That seems to me to be the definition of civility. And I think civility is essential to the democratic process. It impacts the quality and the quantity of the work product. And I look upon civility as a tool, a tool to get things done. And if you're not civil, I don't think you stand much of a chance at getting them done.

Dan LeDuc: Well, describe on a practical basis, though, what that means. You both served in Washington at a time when your colleagues might debate issues harshly, but it remained civil, for lack of a better word, right?

Former senator Richard Lugar: Yes, I can remember such times.

Dan LeDuc: They seem like a long time ago, sir.

Sen. Lugar: There was a time, at least, in which much more time was spent doing the work of Congress, for instance, in committee or on the floor. Members were in Washington for longer periods of time, in social activities. And they saw each other. There still are wonderful opportunities like this. But the facts of life are that voters apparently have demanded their congresspersons stay home. That they stay in their hometowns, not Washington. So this has abbreviated, often, the week. So you come in late Monday night, leave late Thursday night. And that is bound to make the situation not only truncated but very difficult. Not only to get anything done, but even to know who is there.

Rep. Hamilton: I think what Dick said is important. The amenities in life and in politics are important. And if you don't know who you're working with, it's easier to get mad at them. If you know them well, it's hard to get mad at them.

Dan LeDuc: Well, you both have many years of experience. What's an example of somewhere where you knew personal knowledge and personal relationships made a difference for you?



Rep. Hamilton: Well, let me point to the one everybody points to—Tip O'Neill and Ronald Reagan. Reagan the great conservative, O'Neill the great liberal, both very good politicians. Both had their point of view, which they held strongly. But the thing that impressed me about both of them was that they knew they had to reach an agreement.

Dan LeDuc: That seems lacking today, doesn't it?

Rep. Hamilton: They were very pragmatic in the end of the day. Now, they fought for what they believed in, and they thought they were right, of course. But I think they came into the room, as it were, with the feeling, we've got to reach an agreement. And they're prepared to give and take here and there. And I think the word “pragmatism” is the word that stands out to me. They are very pragmatic.

Dan LeDuc: Well, you were mentioning at the beginning of our conversation that many voters are distrustful of institutions. They're unhappy with maybe their economic situation. I guess that many of them sort of blame Washington for that. Yet we live in a democracy, where we have to come together somewhere and find ways of reaching consensus on issues in order to advance the public's work, and that's the place. So how do we make that better?

Sen. Lugar: Let me offer an affirmative personal example, if I may, and that is that Ronald Reagan knew, and he finally saw the beginnings of potential for dealing with the former Soviet Union and their nuclear weapons. That there was a possibility of a treaty. And so he asked that 15 or 16 members of Congress go to Geneva, Switzerland, at the beginning of talks in 1986. The first ones with the Russians with regard to actually limiting the number of weapons that we had. As it turned out, nothing came of that particular time, but we got to know each other, those of us who were there.

I got to know Sam Nunn, who was chairman of the Armed Services Committee. We had come from very different backgrounds. He was a leader in the Democratic Party. But at stake was the fact that the Soviet Union had aimed at us 10,000 to 15,000 nuclear warheads, which would have wiped out every military installation of our country and most all of our cities and urban areas—in other words, a total devastation.

Now this, of necessity, in terms of the safety of our country, led to the Nunn-Lugar Cooperative Threat Reduction Act. And it was not unanimously observed by members of our own party. That is the Republican Party. Some said, “Why should American taxpayers be paying to take down Russian weapons and so forth?” Well, for a good reason. They were aimed at us.



And it required an appropriation bill every year for 20 years to keep the money going during several presidencies, several sets of leadership in the Congress. But I cite that as something that can occur because the safety of our country was at stake. And thank goodness, the Republicans and Democrats provided them a very large majority, kept all of this going for two decades in the midst of everything else going on in the world, which was considerable.

Dan LeDuc: Well, indeed, we're talking about issues like that—the dismantling of an atomic arsenal. So you did something similar, Congressman, in your work with the 9/11 Commission. You know, after the devastating attacks, you helped lead the effort to figure out what happened with our intelligence community. The similarities that I guess I'm getting at is, there were bipartisan efforts underway in both of those efforts. Could those happen now?

Rep. Hamilton: They were bipartisan. They were civil. And the illustration Dick gave, I think, is one of the great examples of bipartisan cooperation in the history of the country. And Dick and Sam Nunn deserve enormous credit for that. Could it be done today? Well, yes, I don't think it's impossible. What you need today is leaders who will put aside the extreme polarization and decide to work together. What can you accomplish together? Some things may not be achievable, and you have to set them aside. You can't solve every problem when you sit down, but you do look for commonalities.

Where can you reach an agreement? You could reach an agreement after some effort to reduce the level of nuclear weapons in Dick's illustration. Every public policy problem has elements like that. Things you can't decide, things you can if you bring the right mindset to the table—bipartisanship. Search for a remedy. That's the key. That's what politics is all about, searching for a remedy to a problem.

Dan LeDuc: Well, a lot of what you're talking about is providing facts to people—to the voters as well as the policy- and lawmakers. But we also in the last I would argue decade or so have seen sort of a decline in people's willingness to believe there is such a thing as a fact. The credibility of just what is truth seems to be diminished now. Do you see that?

Rep. Hamilton: Oh, sure, it's harder for people to know what the truth is. But the fact that it's become harder doesn't relieve the citizen of the obligation to try to find out the truth and to learn to evaluate sources. In the end, the process has become more difficult than 10 or 30, 40 years ago. But it's still vitally important that we get the truth, get down to what are the facts. And when Tom Kean and I ran the 9/11 Commission, it became a joke with the staff. Every time an issue would come up, we'd ask the same question. What are the facts?



And the interesting thing is, the more you can agree on the facts, the easier it becomes to agree on the recommendations. So you begin any effort to resolve controversy by asking the question, what are the facts?

Dan LeDuc: A lot of talk about civility in the political process. Some people think that we want that to lead to compromise. That's how things get done. Well, compromise isn't necessarily a bad word. But I've also heard you talk about consensus building, which seems a little different than compromise. And it seems like you can only find consensus if you can agree on facts to start with. So what advice do you have, whether it's to your former colleagues or to just the voter, about how do you re-establish this credibility of these things called facts?

Sen. Lugar: Well, let me mention, there really has to be scholarship on the part of those who are involved in public life and who are making decisions. By that, I mean people who really do understand the problems and a gamut of situations.

Rep. Hamilton: Well, I don't believe you can move forward in resolving any problem without trying to reach a compromise and build consensus. My view is that building consensus is the most important political attribute. You must have it, or you cannot move forward on the problems in front of us.

Dan LeDuc: And civility's role in that is essential.

Rep. Hamilton: Civility is absolutely essential for the political discourse. Without civility, you simply cannot solve problems. It becomes almost impossible to solve problems if the people around the table are hostile to one another. You have to go into the room. You sit down with everybody. You figure out what their views are. You figure out the views that you cannot accept. They figure out the views for me that they cannot accept. You put those aside, and you keep talking through the problem. And it takes a long time until you find common ground. There's no mystery to it. It's just downright hard work.

Dan LeDuc: Could each of you recall a moment when you were pretty down about whatever objective you were trying to get through and maybe felt things weren't going to happen, that the consensus couldn't be found, a late night that kept you up?

Rep. Hamilton: Well, look. I can remember driving across the 14th Street Bridge late at night, saying to myself 50 times, "We're never going to reach an agreement."

Dan LeDuc: Over the years.



Rep. Hamilton: Over the years, and you just—what do you do? You go back the next day and start all over again. The key here is you've got to persevere. You've got to press on. And you're going to run into barriers. Nothing gets done of any worth without overcoming barriers. This is a big, complicated country, and it's hard to get these consensus agreements. You cannot be defeated by barriers. You've got to press on.

Dan LeDuc: Anything ever keep you up at night, Senator?

Sen. Lugar: Of course.

Rep. Hamilton: Probably me on some things.

Dan LeDuc: I bet you there were a couple of times when that might have been the case. What kept you going, sir?

Sen. Lugar: Well, I really enjoyed what I was doing. I felt that it was the most worthwhile way I could spend my time and my life. I felt honored to have the opportunity, and I wanted to take full advantage of that while I had those years to serve and to initiate new ideas, to work with others. I really thoroughly enjoyed the situation, whatever might have been the arguments or days of some defeat and discouragement. And I think that's important. People really have to love the job, have to really want to devote themselves thoroughly to it. Sometimes it comes at the expense of their families, expense of other aspects of life that they would like to be involved in. But that's the focal point, and it ought to remain that way.

Dan LeDuc: Advice for young people who might want to emulate the types of careers that you have? Or do you see young people trying to emulate you?

Rep. Hamilton: Well, I find young people less interested in serving in politics, political office, than I did decades ago. In other words, their mood is similar to the national mood we talked about. But there are also a lot of bright spots. I think you want to look for people who have the attitude Dick was describing, and that's what the future of the country depends on. If citizens do not step up now, if citizens do not make clear, "We don't like excessive partisanship. We don't like government that doesn't work. What we want you to do is solve the problem in front of us and move this country forward." So you've got to look for the bright spots.

Sen. Lugar: I think, too, there is likely to be more interest on the part of students and young people if people like Lee and myself keep talking about it, keep meeting with them. Trying to indicate, really, how exciting it can be, how important it was in our lives. What the adventures are. This is not apparent to many of the student groups with whom I have met. There's no



reason it should be apparent. They haven't had the experience. They have not talked to anybody who ever did. But once they catch the gleam, then that's different. And the conversation then maybe progresses.

Rep. Hamilton: The sheer challenge of public service is what attracts you. It's exciting. You're dealing with big problems. You're trying to make progress. How do you make the country work? The sheer challenge, what other profession gives you that kind of a challenge? I don't think there are any.

Dan LeDuc: Gentlemen, thank you. Thank you for your time with us today and for your service to our nation.

Sen. Lugar: Thank you for your questions.

Rep. Hamilton: Thank you.

[Music]

Dan LeDuc: Our thanks to the staff at DePauw for making us feel so welcome on campus. And our thanks to you for listening. We hope you like what you have been hearing here. Let us know on Twitter at [PewTrusts](#) or leave us a review on Apple Podcasts or wherever you listen. For The Pew Charitable Trusts, I'm Dan LeDuc, and this is "[After the Fact.](#)"

[Theme music]