



After the Fact | Strengthening Democracy in America: Making a Difference

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TRANSCRIPT

Jeffrey Rosen, president and CEO, National Constitution Center: Well, the word "constitution" and the Latin "constituere" — "to stand." So it's to stand together, it essentially means — "constituere" — "to stand," and "con" — "together." And it's a platform for deliberation. It's a place for people not to always agree, but peacefully to resolve their differences through thoughtful deliberation. And it still serves this function.

Dan LeDuc, host: Welcome to "After the Fact." For The Pew Charitable Trusts, I'm Dan LeDuc. This season we're taking a look at the state of democracy in America and we're doing it through a specific lens: Pew's own work, which seeks to help government be responsive to the people and, in the process, we hope, strengthens democracy. The occasion for this discussion is Pew's 75th anniversary this year, and so 75 is our data point for this episode. Later you'll hear from Pew's president and CEO, Sue Urahn. But we begin this episode — and this season — with a conversation about the bedrock document of American democracy, the Constitution, with Jeffrey Rosen, who you heard from just a moment ago.

Many of our listeners are going to be familiar with your journalism in *The Atlantic* and *The New Yorker* and elsewhere, but they may not know for the last decade you've also been the president and CEO of the National Constitution Center. And we should add also do a very nifty podcast called "We the People" that we should recommend to our listeners. Tell us what the center is and what you do there.

Jeffrey Rosen: So the center is the only institution in America chartered by Congress to increase awareness and understanding of the Constitution among the American people on a nonpartisan basis. And it's such an honor to lead this incredible institution. It's a beautiful museum of We the People on Independence Mall in Philadelphia across from Independence Hall, the most constitutionally significant space in America, with live theater, exhibits, rare documents, and events for learners of all ages. And then it's also this national education platform — America's educational platform for nonpartisan constitutional education.



And I want listeners to this podcast to check out constitutioncenter.org, which is our website and our main web platform, which hosts the incredible Interactive Constitution, which we launched in 2015. It's now among the most Googled constitutions in the world.

We only talk about constitutional, not political, issues. We always bring together thinkers of diverse perspectives, liberal and conservative, to explore areas of agreement and disagreement. And it's just such a meaningful, important mission to educate people about the Constitution.

Dan LeDuc: Well, we've clearly come to the right place and the right person.

And so this season we're, in our podcast, really taking a look at the state of American democracy right now and how it can be strengthened. You, of course, have been looking at the Constitution and the state of democracy throughout your professional career. So where are we on the chronology since 1787 and the state of our democracy today?

Jeffrey Rosen: Well, ever since the founding, people have been arguing that democracy is in crisis. And yet, there's a strong case that we are indeed living in James Madison's nightmare.

So for Madison, the whole Constitution is designed to avoid mobs and factions and to slow down deliberation so that people can take the long view and be guided by reason rather than passion; by the public interest rather than short-term or partisan advantage.

And think about all the structures of the Constitution that do that. There are a series of road bumps and speed blocks to prevent fast decision-making—separation of powers, checks and balances, federalism, the judicial review to strike down unconstitutional laws all designed to prevent hasty rule. And then Madison says the large size of America is going to ensure thoughtful deliberation.

Madison says, in fact, the large size of America is an advantage. When you have a representative republic, then you don't need people to know each other face-to-face. Representatives can channel the public will through thoughtful filters, and at the same time the large size will make it impossible for mobs to form. And by the time they do, they'll get tired and go home. OK. So that's the Madisonian vision.

Fast forward to today. We have far from a republic based on reason rather than passion, a world of social media where posts based on passion travel further and farther and faster than those based on reason. Madison has faith that the media will serve as a cooling effect. And he talks about the value of a kind of literati, an enlightened class of journalists, who are supposed to write thoughtful essays about democracy and about public affairs that citizens will read the way they read the Federalist Papers and will form their opinions based on reason rather than passion.



That's the Madisonian vision. Contrast that with a world of Twitter and Facebook and quick tweets and a model...

Dan LeDuc: And cable news shock shows, right?

Jeffrey Rosen: Absolutely. I mean, you know, enrage to engage is the new model. And it's definitely the opposite of the Madisonian model, and it also undermines the value of size because he thinks that in a big republic, news will travel slowly and citizens will read thoughtfully. Now, news travels at instant speed, and people are not reading much at all.

It's so important now for citizens to learn the discipline of seeking out balanced news from a variety of sources. We've never had access to more information. It's such a wonder of the internet that all the newspapers of the world are available at our fingertips, that we can translate them, that there are thoughtful, deep analyses of complicated bills. And anyone who takes the time to educate herself or himself about any particular policy issue has resources at home that never existed before in human history. But we do need the discipline to do it.

So this is a real challenge to the Madisonian model. And for that reason, it's fair to talk about the strong challenges to Madison's faith in a republic ruled by reason rather than passion.

Dan LeDuc: One of the things Pew strives to do in its policy work is to provide the facts and data that we like to say creates a common language for different viewpoints. We all get our viewpoints, but we all also have to operate from a set of facts that are self-evident, and that's part of what we attempt to do.

Is it harder to do nonpartisan fact-giving these days? I mean, your institution describes itself as nonpartisan. Is that a harder thing now?

Jeffrey Rosen: Yeah. It's both harder and more urgently important. Pew's work is invaluable in being a trusted source for the facts that can allow citizens to make informed decisions. And the fact that Pew is reliable, that its information is carefully reviewed by people of different perspectives, that we can have confidence in it shows its central role in democratic discourse.

What makes it harder is there's much less trust in institutions. And in today's polarized, decentralized, web-based world, even reliable facts are doubted because some folks no longer trust institutions of any kind to vet them and choose them.

That's ultimately—as I say, it makes the work of Pew and the National Constitution Center and other trusted nonpartisan institutions all the more important. But it does suggest that ultimately,



this question of public trust is going to be crucial in determining whether or not citizens pay attention to these facts when they're given the opportunity to.

Dan LeDuc: You've spoken though about how the Constitution, by almost definition of what a constitution is, is a platform to create common ground. What do you mean by that?

Jeffrey Rosen: Well, the word “constitution” and the Latin “constituere”—“to stand.” So it's to stand together, it essentially means—“constituere”—“to stand,” and “con”—“together.” And it's a platform for deliberation. It's a place for people not to always agree, but peacefully to resolve their differences through thoughtful deliberation. And it still serves this function.

And the most dramatic example of this that I can offer is a recent project that the National Constitution Center hosted called the Constitution Drafting Project. And we convened three teams of scholars—liberal, conservative, and libertarian—to draft constitutions from scratch in a state of nature.

So they all met separately, and they came back. And to everyone's surprise, the constitutions they drafted, far from throwing out the baby with the bathwater and starting from scratch, built on the existing model with some amendments. And the amendments were surprisingly similar. Several of the teams converged around common amendments.

So we decided to actually bring them together into a virtual convention. And after a week of deliberation, of just a few Zoom sessions, they surprised everyone by agreeing on five amendments to the Constitution. And I listened in on these Zoom sessions, and I felt like I was listening to modern-day founders. That's how high the level of debate was.

They were informed. They were thoughtful. They were able to compromise and identify commonalities and actually agree on five rather specific texts. I thought it was a wonderful reminder of how in America there is a consensus that although we disagree about the meaning of the basic principles of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence, we are united by the devotion to the principles themselves. And that gives me great hope as we move toward America's 250th birthday in 2026.

The founders thought the republic would collapse unless citizens were educated to know their rights, to know the history of the Constitution, to understand why it was important to defend its ideals, and to learn, most importantly, the habits of civil dialogue and deliberation, learning how to disagree without being disagreeable, learning the discipline of listening to arguments that you might disagree with before you make up your own mind, and ensuring that all viewpoints are represented before we make decisions. That's why civic education is so important. And that is why it's such an honor to work at the National Constitution Center.



Dan LeDuc: It sounds like that phrase "we the people" perhaps has never mattered more.

Jeffrey Rosen: It always matters, and it always will.

Dan LeDuc: Jeffrey Rosen, thank you so much.

Jeffrey Rosen: Thank you.

Dan LeDuc: We the people, of course, is how the Constitution begins. At Pew, we operate with similar admonition: Tell the truth and trust the people. We turn now to a conversation with Pew president and CEO Sue Urahn about the organization's commitment to strengthening democracy. And we start with a little bit about her.

Dan LeDuc: So Pew is celebrating 75 years. For the last 25 years, you have been here helping lead this place. And for the last three years, you have been president and CEO. But take us back. What brought you here in the first place?

Sue Urahn, president and CEO, Pew Charitable Trusts: Well, I was working as a legislative staffer in Minnesota, and we had just come through a fairly challenging legislative session, so lots of difficult issues being debated, long hours. Just had closed down the session, I was completely exhausted, and I get a phone call from Pew, saying wouldn't you like to come out and talk about the possibility of maybe joining us to do some evaluation at The Pew Charitable Trusts?

And they said, well, it's actually, it's relatively new. We are building the airplane while we are flying it. So that was very, very appealing to me, to be able to be engaged in something that was intellectually challenging, that it was new, and to build an interesting part of a field.

Dan LeDuc: You like starting stuff.

Sue Urahn: I do. I love starting stuff.

Dan LeDuc: Yeah.

Sue Urahn: It's fun, I think, to figure out a strategy, to find a way to move something forward, to bring people along—that's great. The world, I think, also clearly needs people who will keep things going at a steady pace. That's just never been me.

Dan LeDuc: Yeah, yeah. You've also talked about coming in here first to evaluate gave you like this bedrock perspective on how you get things done in this world, in the policy world, right?



Sue Urahn: I know. No, that's—it's absolutely true. And part of the huge value of starting in the evaluation department was that my background is in education. But I started in working on environment. I didn't know a whole lot about environment.

So you had to sort of learn the strategies that the programs were developing to try to drive policy change, so that you could evaluate them, right? So it gave me a perch, if you will, to sort of step back and think about strategy almost divorced from topic or issue. It's like you look at education strategy, and environment strategy, and public policy strategies, and you begin to see that there are these really fascinating consistencies across areas. It takes much the same approach to drive change, different cast of characters, different sort of particularities in every issue, but it's not that different driving change in the environment field than it is driving change in the world of education.

Dan LeDuc: When you arrived here, we were a foundation. This is a 75-year-old institution, as you said now. And it's evolved over those past 25 years. What is Pew's mission today? And why does it matter?

Sue Urahn: Well, the shorthand for our mission is we use data to make a difference, right? And I think if you start to—if you start to peel that back a little bit, it's really quite interesting. So for example, we work with the Pew Research Center. That's a critical part of Pew and Pew's mission.

The Pew Research Center really delves into helping people understand what does the public think about different issues and how does that evolve over time in an interesting way? So it is—that's the data that they bring to the table to help, and it really does make a difference, because I don't think that as a society we can really make the change that we need to make if we don't listen to each other and understand where people are coming from.

And the Pew Research Center makes huge contributions on that front on a regular basis. But if you think about The Pew Charitable Trusts, it's quite fascinating. We use data to identify problems, to figure out places where an institution like Pew could make a difference, could begin to advance effective policies.

Dan LeDuc: That's the work that helps government work better.

Sue Urahn: Yep. I think they started measuring trust in government as I recall back in 1958. And in 1958—so that's 10 years after Pew actually came into existence—about 75%, almost 75% of the public had thought that the federal government would do the right thing some or most of the time.



It hasn't cracked 30% since 2007, right? So I think the fact that there is a declining level of trust in institutions, in government itself, in the media, in a lot of places is really problematic for democracy itself.

Dan LeDuc: Well, our colleagues at the Research Center did a survey earlier this year that showed 1 in 5 Americans are satisfied with the state of the nation right now. That's pretty low. But let me ask you, you have to make all this stuff work. You can't just walk away and wash your hands of it. What's your view of the state of democracy today?

Sue Urahn: You know, I think it's—I hope it's not as dire as perhaps it is sometimes painted. We have found here that there are still plenty of issues where you can go up on the Hill or go to the state houses around the country and find well-meaning, thoughtful, productive members of the legislature or of Congress willing to work together across the aisle to craft bipartisan solutions to the problems that the public really needs to have solved in a thoughtful way. It happens every day.

Dan LeDuc: So let's dive into that a little bit more, because that's the nuts and bolts of what this institution does, right? What's the role of data in helping inform the citizenry? And how do you use that to actually bring people together?

Sue Urahn: Well, data—data does a lot of things, right? Data will, for example, give people a common language. If you can agree on the facts, you can begin to talk about what that means for potential solutions and how you might drive them forward.

In every policy problem and every policy opportunity that you might want to tackle, there are always a huge number of different constituencies—people who may want the problem solved but for all different kinds of reasons. One of the core competencies that Pew brings to the table is the ability to bring those different views, different perspectives, different constituencies together and help them find a path forward to really craft a thoughtful solution.

Dan LeDuc: How do you bring those sort of disparate players together? I mean, how do those conversations happen? And I mean, how do you point them in the right direction? That's hard.

Sue Urahn: You start with data, right? So you start with the research and what the research says, and can we get everybody to agree on the facts? So that is a really critical first step.

Beyond that, I think the most important thing that we often do is listen to the different constituencies, listen to why they care about the issue, listen to the challenges that they face, depending on which direction different solutions play out, and try to find that common ground



that we try to help, not just sort of find the common ground, but actually create common ground, so that folks can find a way to move together.

Dan LeDuc: This institution has been evolving since 1948. How would you describe that evolution?

Sue Urahn: Well, I would start with the fact that one of the great gifts the founders of this institution gave us was the flexibility to respond to the issues of the day. The knowledge that what they were facing in 1948 wasn't necessarily what we would be facing in 2023. So we've had the flexibility over the years to identify issues and techniques and opportunities and move them forward in thoughtful ways. That's been a huge advantage that this institution has.

In terms of how I would characterize the evolution, I think—we have a core set of values that drive our work, that have been reasonably, I think, consistent in many cases over the 75 years that we have been working. Things like humility, things like impact, things like inclusion, how do we—and inclusion is what gets you to that common ground, right? Those don't change.

We may apply them differently. We may understand how they play out in different ways, but those values are consistent. The issues change, the constituencies change, the policy environment changes, the opportunities change, the challenges change. But the values remain the same. So for us, it's how do you balance—how do you sort of figure out what to hold on to that is consistent over time and what you can sort of let evolve, and really shift, and be as nimble as you can in that policy environment.

Dan LeDuc: Society is so fragmented right now politically. How does nonpartisanship still work and why does it seem important?

Sue Urahn: Well, it's critically important for us, because we lead with the facts. And if you lead with partisan affiliation, often people—often it's about what you believe or what you feel, not what the facts say. So for us being nonpartisan allows us to focus on the fact that we are bringing data to the table to identify solutions, to sort of bring people together, to create a common language, and to drive change forward.

Dan LeDuc: We're here at 75 years, so there's this instinct to look back. But let me get you to close by looking forward a little bit. What do you see Pew looking like in the next few years, the type of work it might do, and the impact you hope it can have?

Sue Urahn: Well, I hope we hold on to—if I think about the next 10 to 15, 10 to 20 years—I hope we hold on to the drive that we have to be relevant, to be impactful, and to never lose the values



that we have carried with us for so many decades. To keep our eye on the prize of having an impact but doing so with data.

Dan LeDuc: Sue, thanks so much.

Sue Urahn: You are very welcome, Dan. Thank you.

Dan LeDuc: Thanks for listening and stay tuned for our next episode with experts from the Pew Research Center as they talk about how Americans feel about the future of the country.

Claudia Deane, executive vice president, Pew Research Center: When we are thinking about how democracy is doing, we're really just wanting to know how people are experiencing their life as citizens in America. So we're asking their views about various levels of the government. I think, you know, 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.

Dan LeDuc: 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.”