

Kelly Brownell:

Hello, everyone, and welcome to Policy 360. I'm Kelly Brownell, dean of the Sanford School of Public Policy at Duke University. For the last year or so, we've been running an interesting experiment here at Sanford. We all know the nation is polarized. The differences in our political views became quite apparent in the last election. And so we started to wonder what would happen if you take people with very different political views, people passionate about policy, but who would never really have the chance to talk to each other in their normal lives and have them not just meet, but actively work together to solve problems. If we can build relationships, we wondered, can mutual understanding or even solutions be far behind?

The project is called the North Carolina Leadership Forum. John Hood is one of the founders. He's president of the John William Pope Foundation. Leslie Winner is also a key player. She's an attorney and former executive director of the Z. Smith Reynolds Foundation. Here's a clip of the two of them talking on Policy 360 last summer.

John Hood:

You know, it's easy to say that the public is polarized, voters are polarized, North Carolinians are polarized, but what do we exactly mean by that?

Leslie Winner:

I think it's important to understand, before this, while John and I certainly knew each other, we had never actually had a conversation with each other.

Kelly Brownell:

I'd like to welcome you both back to Policy 360. Leslie and John. welcome.

John Hood:

Thank you very much.

Leslie Winner:

Thank you.

Kelly Brownell:

First, just to remind us, for those listening, who haven't listened to the previous episode, where do you put yourself on the political spectrum? Leslie, let's start with you.

Leslie Winner:

I think most people would label me progressive or liberal. I'm not progressive or liberal on every issue, but I think that's a fair label overall.

John Hood:

I am a conservative libertarian or, perhaps, a libertarian conservative.

Kelly Brownell:

Okay. Describe a typical interaction that takes place within the leadership forum. What does it look like in practice? John, let's start with you.

John Hood:

Well, what we did is select a group of leaders from across the state representing different parts of the state, different ideologies, different professions, different levels of government or private sector or nonprofit experience. We brought them together to talk about a particular topic, in this case, how we could help more North Carolinians earn enough to support their families. That's a pretty broad topic. You could imagine we got into a lot of different kinds of subjects from wage policy and business issues to education and training and apprenticeships, occupational opportunities, and whether there's licensure barriers that keep people from changing jobs and earning more money. We talked about a lot of different things but we didn't immediately dive into a policy debate.

Leslie Winner:

One of the things that we were worried about is that there would be like an explosion when we put these people in the room, and that we would be managing fights and things might get out of control. But to the contrary, everybody was quite polite and civil. We didn't have to do any kind of refereeing of fights. I think some of that is because we're from the south, and we know how to be polite. But polite can also mask telling your truth deeply and so, I think, one of our challenges was to create a space that really encouraged people to be forthcoming with their deeper reasons for believing what they did.

Kelly Brownell:

They were really been invited to do two things. One was to engage in a process that produced civil discourse, and the other was to tackle a specific issue, and that was what John mentioned around jobs and wages. Do you think one of those appealed to people more than the other?

Leslie Winner:

I think that they appeal to different people in the room differently. Some people were there, I think, around the opportunity to form these relationships and tell their story to the other side and hear the other side story. I think some people were there because they deeply cared about that specific issue of earning capacity, and I think some people were there for both reasons.

Kelly Brownell:

Interesting. Ideally, this process would turn up, as one of its outcomes, people listening to each other in a respectful way and learning from each other, and perhaps even changing their positions, at least a little, based on what they've heard. John, do you think that took place? How about if we use you as an example, as a participant? Do you feel that that happened and as you heard from others?

John Hood:

Well, I do think that it happened. We asked participants at the end of the session, at the end of the year, what kind of experience did you have? We had pretty positive responses. I think Leslie's point is quite correct that it was sometimes difficult to draw out some of the deeper disagreements. It did happen. Some people did learn from it. They said that they learned more about what other people thought. I personally learned a lot about the topic. Even though it's an area I've worked in myself a long time and I've studied a lot of the data and argued the case many times, I still learned a lot of things that I didn't

know, some specific things about wages and trends over time and the cost of living in different parts of the state that became valuable to me. I learned a lot more about what was motivating people to advocate positions I don't agree with like raising the minimum wage. I don't agree with that, but I understood better what the motivations were and what they thought about the objections that I would lodge. I knew what my objections are. I know a little bit about what the reaction to that is but now I know a lot more.

Leslie Winner:

One of the things, when we went around at the last meeting and asked people what they learned, was that several people said that they became more conscious of how they spoke, so being conscious of saying things in a way that would enable people to listen to them. Although that wasn't... we had more focus on the listening part of it, I think the skill of talking in a way that enables people to listen is also important.

I've learned a lot about the topic. I knew a little about it. I don't know that my views particularly changed, and they became much more better informed. I think, in some nuanced ways, they changed. But I certainly understand arguments and the sort of accept the validity of the concern of the arguments on the other side, particularly, on the minimum wage issue. I think that was true for many people. On both sides, particularly on that issue, people were able to perceive the depth of honest feeling that they might not have been able to perceive before.

Kelly Brownell:

I'd like to ask you both what you thought was most meaningful that came out of this enterprise?

Leslie Winner:

Well, I think that we are in a time of significant political polarization that is counterproductive, and that the most meaningful thing was that we did successfully entice or invite these very different people into the room. They came, and they became humans to each other. They might have walked into the room thinking that person over there is evil and must have some horns in his briefcase but that the process turned all of us into human beings who had values that were on a spectrum, not bipolar, and that these values, more often than not, were shared values that were weighted differently. It's not that I had a different set of values than the conservative person across the table had, I just put more weight on one of the values and he put more weight on the other value.

Kelly Brownell:

John, what do you think was most meaningful about this?,

John Hood:

I guess I'll say something more about the external experience rather than the internal experience. When the news came out that the North Carolina Leadership Forum was being created and was operating, I had a lot of people... and Leslie did too... approach me and say, "First of all, I love this idea. I'm so glad you're doing this," which reinforced, I think, in our minds that we were right to perceive an insatiable public demand for this kind of thing. People, no matter what their political views are, they think there's something broken in politics in the political discourse, and they want some leaders to step forward and do something about it. You can see it in the polling. Even people who are pretty disaffected about politics still want to see members of Congress and the President work together or members of the

legislature and the governor work together, be able to get along better. In addition to that, a number of the people who came up to me and asked about it asked to be involved. It isn't just that they were glad that someone, in theory, was working on this. There were lots of people who would like to be involved in it. Again, a good sign for the future.

Kelly Brownell:

Well, I think I know the answer to this question given what you have both said, but let me ask it anyway. Do you think that this is replicable in other places, potentially? Do you think it's worth continuing the process here in North Carolina? In other words, was it a success?

John Hood:

I think it was a success. I don't think it was an A+ effort, but at least a good solid B, B+ for our first effort. That's pretty good. I think that the effort itself, the North Carolina Leadership Forum itself can and will continue, and we'll iterate and get a little bit better at doing what we're doing but I also think there will be spin off. There have already been groups that have been inspired by or informed by our experience to some extent and, as we go forward, we may be more conscious, more intentional about, for example, seeing if some local groups can replicate a version in a community. That would be a logical place to go would be to find a particular institution or association or community who wants to do something similar at a local level.

Leslie Winner:

I agree that we're about at B+, which isn't bad for what I think is first draft. There wasn't any playbook for this. We were pretty much inventing it as we went. I think we need to get that A, that is we need to do it again and learn from this, and get our A, and then we can write the playbook that somebody else can replicate. I honestly think that academia has something to offer us. I'm interested in questions like what one of your groups is doing about, how do we ask questions that make people more likely to disclose information and less likely to be defensive? There are sociologists, anthropologists, psychologists, communication specialists who, I think, have something to teach us about how to do a better job at bringing people out more deeply. I'd like to learn from them and figure out how to incorporate that.

Kelly Brownell:

John, what would you do to bring it up to another level?

John Hood:

If we're working on the problem of civil discourse, I think, we get an A for civil. We didn't quite get an A for discourse. We simply didn't go deeply enough into some of the disagreements. I think we can do that. Going in, we were sort of fearful that we wouldn't get the civil part right. I think we did, and we can learn from that. Everybody can learn from how do you put people in a room who are quite different and get to a civil place. Well, we can have something to say about that. What we need to be able to say is we've got deeply into some of the things that divide us. We got a fair amount into it; we didn't get all the way to the bottom of the well.

Kelly Brownell:

So you both think that there could come a time after, perhaps, some more integration of people in academics, broadening the base of people who come to the leadership forum, testing it out with different topics on the like, that there could be a playbook on the process of creating civil discourse.

Leslie Winner:

That's right. Sanford could be the center for teaching the facilitators how to go out and have these groups successfully in the country. We were focused mostly on North Carolina but we can't make a dent in the political environment by bringing in 35 people a year. We're going to have to figure out how to take it to a bigger scale, if we're going to actually have an impact on the political environment.

John Hood:

I agree with that. As we proceed and as we include people who are not looking back over a career in public life and ruminating about it but people who are right in the early stages of it, we're going to be more challenged because they are living in a world of polarization. We're going to be taking on some more difficult kinds of groups of people, and I'm excited about that. I think we can do it.

Kelly Brownell:

Well, it's a very optimistic note to end on. I want to thank you both.

From my point of view, it seemed to me the North Carolina Leadership Forum was a big success. Just the fact that people were willing to take part was success in and of itself. But then the fact that you were able to create the civil discourse and make some progress on a substantive issue is really wonderful. Hopefully, as it gets fine tuned and it goes forward, hopefully with your participation, I think this could go to new levels and become something that becomes a signature enterprise for the school and the university, and hopefully could help out with politics in North Carolina and beyond.

I want to thank you both very much for being willing to undertake this experiment with us and congratulations for making it a successful one. Thanks for joining us today.

John Hood:

Thank you.

Leslie Winner:

Thank you for being our host.

Kelly Brownell:

Leslie Winner is an attorney and former executive director of the Z. Smith Reynolds Foundation. John Hood is president of the John William Pope Foundation. Both are at the Sanford School to participate in the Kenan Institute for Ethics practitioners and residents effort. They are meeting with students and faculty across campus all this week as well as doing their own research.

Special thanks to our colleagues at POLIS, Duke's Center for Political Leadership, Innovation, and Service, for conceiving of the North Carolina Leadership Forum and to the Duke Policy Bridge Program.

Until next time, I'm Kelly Brownell.