GOVERNANCE PROGRAM

Our nation is at risk. The traditions, institutions, and norms we rely on to solve problems are strained. Most ominous is a growing public resignation that government is incapable of dealing with the challenges we face. Congress, top political leaders, and even the American people are more and more polarized. In order to confront disillusionment and resurrect national pride, the Governance Program seeks to fix broken institutions and to nurture leaders who are willing to work together to solve problems.

The Governance Program has two major projects:

**The Democracy Project** brings together bipartisan voices to improve the ability of the U.S. government to grapple with the nation’s challenges. The project is guided by an advisory committee of top government, civic, business, military, and academic leaders—all of whom are concerned about the lack of civil discourse in the current political environment and about the rules and structures that inhibit shared progress. The project is actively working on policies and programs to strengthen and improve democratic institutions, including redistricting processes, the presidential appointments system, congressional reform, election administration, obstacles to public service, leadership, and civility in politics and the media.

**The Governors’ Council**, launched in 2011, brings pragmatic state-based perspectives to national issues. Many of today’s most complex and pressing federal challenges, from reviving the economy to controlling health care costs, are deeply entwined with states’ roles. As leaders of the laboratories of democracy, governors are on the front lines. BPC’s Governors’ Council brings together bipartisan leaders with records of tackling challenges—because federalism at its best marries the strength and resources of the federal government with the unique perspectives and capabilities of the states.
Democracy Project Accomplishments

Follow The Leader
The Democracy Project created the “On Leadership” speaker series in 2011; it is a space to explore the importance of leadership in today’s polarized political environment. One of the most significant components of improving our political system is bolstering the leadership of our nation’s most important bodies. Reforming laws and rules that guide institutions is important, but leaders shape those institutions and make reforms effective. Each event in the series examines a different facet of leadership through conversations with luminaries from various fields, including business, policy, courts, and more. In the inaugural event of the series, retiring Exelon CEO and former BPC Board of Directors Chair John W. Rowe looked back on his nearly three decades as a key voice on energy and environmental policy and shared his insights on leading a Fortune 200 company through a time of economic and regulatory uncertainty. “The American people need to have confidence that government can do its job—not all of their jobs,” said Rowe.

Talk Of The Nation
In the midst of a political climate comprising the victories of extreme candidates over moderates, a media that caters to the loudest and wildest voices in a room, by elections waged in extremist corners of the Internet, and the most partisan Congress in recent memory, Washington needs a dose of civility. In an effort to rejuvenate the discussion about what ails our system of government and what can be done to reverse course, BPC’s Democracy Project and the Aspen Institute held a four-part roundtable discussion series, “Conversations on Civility: Making our Democracy Work.” The joint series examined the breakdown of national civil discourse and how that trend is affecting political leaders. Each discussion identified opportunities for educators, business leaders, and policymaking to forge a more robust, active, and politically engaged citizenry. Guests like Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Cynthia Tucker, Governor Jack Markell (D-DE), Harvard Institute of Politics Director Trey Grayson, Pew President Andy Kohut, and NPR and ABC News commentator Cokie Roberts discussed Washington’s ethics wars, rhetoric in the media, the effects of social media on campaigning, and what all of this means for our democracy as a whole.

Lines Of Play
As we enter the 2012 election cycle, how are hotly contested debates about redistricting affecting the political landscape? In December 2011, the Democracy Project launched its newest effort, Redistricting Reform: Drawing the Maps One Rorschach Test at a Time, a series of events examining the potential effects of redistricting reforms on next year’s elections—particularly the presidential race. The redistricting program kicked off with a conversation with BPC Senior Fellow and Democracy Project co-chair Dan Glickman, The Washington Post’s Aaron Blake, Democracy Project Director John Fortier, and The Cook Political Report’s David Wasserman. “From the creation of partisan, incumbent-protected districts to the push for more nonpartisan redistricting commissions,” said co-chair Glickman of the new series, conversations “will explore the current state of play with an eye on how it affect the House, Senate, and presidential races next year.”

“We can disagree without being disagreeable.”
— Political Analyst Richard Wolffe
Media Highlights

“It is said that money is the mother’s milk of politics. I am not so naïve as to believe that we will, or should, totally eliminate campaign money from our political system. But in this case, a little less political milk will be good for all of us—and for our fiscal stability and health.”

— Democracy Project co-chair Dan Glickman, POLITICO

“We are in this period of great anxiety because of economic uncertainty … and that has people worried about their future,’ says Dan Glickman, a former Democratic congressman and Cabinet secretary affiliated with the Bipartisan Policy Center. ‘What they need is confidence building, and what I don’t think they sense from our government system is confidence building. Everything they see is division.’”

— USA Today

Looking Ahead

In 2012, the Democracy Project will:

★ Continue its “On Leadership” speaker series, including an event featuring former Senate Majority Leaders Trent Lott and Tom Daschle discussing leading the Senate in an age of polarized politics.

★ Kick start the 2012 Election Series, focusing on topics like the political effects of demographics, the lack of Democrat and Republican centrists, speechwriting and the State of the Union, and an assessment of the presidential primary system.

★ Host a variety of other events looking at congressional culture, contested elections, and obsolete laws, among other subjects.

★ Issue reports on improving the redistricting process.

★ Make recommendations for improving the functioning of the House of Representatives.
Governors’ Council Accomplishments

Eyes Of The Storm

“Nobody’s going to come and rescue us—we’re five hours away if they left right now—we’ve got to take care of ourselves,” recalled former Hawaii Governor Linda Lingle as she described her conversations with local leaders after a tsunami warning was issued for her state. “And I think that’s a good policy whether or not you’re on the mainland.” From record-breaking floods, wildfires, and tornadoes to oil spills, terrorist threats, and even a massive Phish concert, state governments frequently confront and respond to natural and man-made disasters. The Governors’ Council hosted a 2011 breakfast discussion—“On the Ground: State Leadership in Times of Crisis”—with five members of the council, moderated by author and journalist Kathleen Koch. The council examined the challenge of managing very diverse disaster scenarios, discussed the importance of strong leadership and communication in times of crisis, and debated the federal government’s response to disaster preparedness as Congress and the administration considered steep spending cuts. The Governors’ Council grew out of BPC’s desire for more insight from elected leaders outside the Beltway. To that end, former Governors Lingle, Jim Douglas, Phil Bredesen, Mike Rounds, and Ted Strickland discussed the importance of having excellent emergency preparedness—long before the first storm cloud, earthquake warning, or dust devil comes along. “Competency transcends political parties,” said Governor Rounds of handling emergencies. 

“It isn’t a non-partisan policy center; it’s truly bipartisan. We want to get the best ideas from both parties and from all parties.”

— Former Senate Majority Leader Tom Daschle
Media Highlights

“These governors are problem solvers. They have a proven track record of working across the aisle to achieve results,’ said BPC President Jason Grumet. ‘We intend to look to the states for innovative ideas and solutions that can help build a consensus for federal action.’ Recognizing that governors around the country are on the frontlines of many of the nation’s foremost challenges, including health care cost and quality issues, an aging transportation system, and evolving terrorist threats, the BPC is forming a Governors’ Council to gain insights and advice from governors who have recently left office.”

— ProgressOhio.org

Looking Ahead

In 2012, the Governors’ Council will:

★ Examine targeted issues through a handful of short reports and regional events that explore federal-state dynamics, identify state best practices that might be adopted by other states or at the federal level, make recommendations, and set goals.

★ Develop specific recommendations for improving the Medicaid waiver process.

“The governors, floods and fires recently struck full force around the country, and terrorism continues to be a threat, despite a weakened al-Qaida. What’s a governor to do? During emergencies, state leaders should aim to be transparent, on scene and know their local counterparts ahead of disasters, a panel of former governors concluded Thursday at the Bipartisan Policy Center in Washington. Governors often play the role of trusted megaphone. With so many sources of information clamoring for attention in modern society, the public tends to trust the government for news in an emergency.”

— Lydia Mulvany, McClatchy Newspapers
On January 8, 2011, in Tucson, Arizona, a gunman shot Representative Gabrielle Giffords—as well as members of her staff and the public. Many saw the vitriol in national political rhetoric as a contributing factor to the tragedy. Then as now, the nation was caught in the grip of deep polarization and heated partisanship. But for a moment, the shouting stopped and reasoned voices came to the fore.

“We hope this will not be a moment for finger-pointing, but rather a time of renewed focus on political discourse,” wrote Democracy Project co-chairs Dan Glickman and Dirk Kempthorne in a statement at the time. “Our nation needs solutions, not Republican solutions or Democratic solutions, but the best possible solutions. The debates that divide the parties will continue, as they should, but Americans and our politicians must find civil ways to disagree.” Though many in government, media, and the public backslid into their respective—stridently red or blue—corners, the crisis in Tucson struck a chord, opening a door to dialogue. And the Democracy Project jumped into action.

The project worked with groups across Washington to discuss improving civic health. In order to bring those conversations outside the Beltway, it seemed fitting to start in Arizona. Working with the newly created, Tucson-based National Center for Civil Discourse, the project sponsored the keynote panel at the 66th Annual National Conference on Citizenship at the Walter Cronkite School of Journalism at Arizona State University. Panelist, former Senator and BPC Senior Fellow Bob Bennett described past congressional floor debates as a “real exchange of ideas” with “a collegiality that’s gone now.” He ascribed this partly to leaders not meeting “offline”—when the day was over and the cameras gone—to hammer out solutions.

This event and other Democracy Project efforts did not go unnoticed. The project is now receiving major funding to increase the responsiveness of democracy in the U.S.

“There is a growing recognition,” says John Fortier, Democracy Project director, “that even in a climate of strongly held views, the institutions around them need to work.” Political differences and competing philosophies are essential ingredients in a democracy; they should be taken seriously, not used as platforms for invective. After all, the solutions to common problems require common ground.
In Washington, D.C., policy experts, advocates, lawyers, lobbyists, and legislators all converge to focus on the work of government—hopefully to create solutions to the problems confronting the United States. Unfortunately, the culture of the Beltway can come to seem like an echo chamber, distanced from the voices and regions that national government is meant to serve. With governors around the country at the forefront of some of the greatest challenges facing the United States—such as health care, domestic terrorism, the economy, and infrastructure—BPC saw great value in bringing state executives into a broader dialogue.

Former Governor of Hawaii Linda Lingle immediately appreciated the significance of the council: “All too often laws are enacted at the federal level without considering the impact they will have on people, businesses, and communities in the various states; governors are uniquely positioned to provide this important perspective.”

For Lingle, taking on the Medicaid waiver initiatives as part of the council allowed her to make an impact on national health care policy when she and other council members met with Health and Human Services Secretary Kathleen Sebelius. “Collectively, we were able to cause the policy types we interacted with to see things in a more complete fashion after taking into account the impact on the states,” she says. “There are important differences between the role of a mayor or governor and the role of a congressman. State and local leaders have a direct responsibility to get things done in their communities and can serve as examples of how to work in a bipartisan way.”

Of course, the Governors’ Council also had an effect on Lingle herself: “Being out of office enabled governors from both parties to relate more easily to one another as colleagues rather than adversaries.”

Ultimately, Lingle says, the Governors’ Council reminded a lot of folks in the capital about an important reality. “Passing a law may seem difficult,” she says. “But usually it’s the implementation where the real work takes place.”