



## POLITICAL AND SOCIAL FRAGMENTATION

A phenomenon related to, but separate from, increasingly heterogeneous population is a growing division over ideas. Political and social polarization can be overwhelming and sometimes indecipherable. For many who work to bring the people of a community together, this trend has been among the most frustrating developments in their professional lives. History tells us that politics and society often have been fractured in the past—but that’s of little comfort to those dealing with divisions today.

Researchers forecast even more radicalization of politics and segmentation of society over the next 10 years, making consensus and broadly supported initiatives more difficult to achieve. Interestingly, many ACCE leaders either don’t think that’s the case, or believe that the splintering of the country’s politics and preferences just might matter less at the regional level in the future.

Furthermore, fragmentation may someday reach the point at which traditional party allegiance may be less important than self-affiliation with wings of parties and issue-specific causes. If the lines of division fluctuate from issue to issue, and from year to year, today’s adversaries have to consider the possibility that they might be working together tomorrow.

Still, dealing with local issues like bridge improvements on a main access road into town can cause the instant creation of opposition groups focused narrowly on “the bridge.” Some oppose it if it isn’t pretty while others will support it only if the city can cede (or keep) control of the adjacent river bank. A third group could be hell bent on securing a kayak launch as part of the bid specifications. Each of these small factions must have a voice, and once they use it in a hearing, or on TV or a webcast, they become even more enamored of their positions and more vehemently

opposed to compromise. Such “*issue du jour*” segments of the population, many with genuine heartfelt sentiments and compelling statistics, will likely become more prominent and numerous over the next 10 years due to the availability of media/web exposure.

### Intensifying Separation

Meanwhile, over the next decade, the trend for people to move to places where their neighbors have similar political views is expected to intensify. This “self-gerrymandering,” which was documented in 2014 by Pew Research Center and others, reinforces already deep-seated social and political views. The real and virtual walls bordering suburban or gentrified city neighborhoods may be crumbling, but people choose to live on their own sides anyway. Or, they move to places where there is only one side. These migrations may not affect the national election map dramatically, but they can certainly reduce the number of “purple” jurisdictions in the future.

Washington Post columnist Ruth Marcus recently resurrected a ‘90s phrase—“talk to the hand”—to describe the resulting discourse, or lack thereof: “*Nothing you can say will make me listen to you. Do not even bother to try.*”

### Nowhere to Hide

Each of the divisive factors mentioned here, and many others, affect more than the policy and politics side of chamber existence. Economic development projects can

be influenced by how welcoming and “together” a community appears to corporate real estate decision makers. Talent acquisition is hindered when would-be resident engineers or doctors trained overseas dismiss your town as torn or dysfunctional. When business leaders don’t interact or even understand each other outside the chamber board room, it is difficult to secure consensus and set priorities for the chamber when the board is in session.

Yet for two centuries, chambers’ work has depended on bringing people together around common causes like growth, jobs, kids, advocacy, infrastructure, and celebration. Lack of tolerance and civility hurts not only the chamber’s mission, but its viability as a non-profit business. If a handful of members quit the chamber over a position about a bridge, it hurts, but if entire sectors of your business community pledge undying enmity, it could cripple you. When members with left-leaning tendencies can’t stand to be in the room with a chamber member who supports Hobby Lobby’s position on health insurance coverage of contraception, it hurts your organization. Or when a right-leaning member avoids chamber events because he or she might have to interact with a marijuana shop owner, the role of convener is darned hard. When your communications staff has to sanitize every story to avoid antagonizing anybody, a key part of your mission is impacted.

But even given a climate of distrust, conflict and fragmentation, chambers must do their jobs. Somehow, against all odds, most of them pull it off. A few chamber leaders are actually optimistic that a more conducive climate in which to do the work may emerge in the years ahead. In spite of the seemingly limitless segmentation of the political and social fabric, there is real hope in many chamber board rooms that the pendulum will eventually swing toward a more workable governing model and tolerant society. Why? **Fit, practice and necessity.**

### Fit

Dave Adkisson, CCE, CEO of the Kentucky Chamber, is one of the most respected and outspoken leaders in the chamber world. He believes that the current fragmented political and social landscape actually creates enormous potential for chambers of commerce to shine and grow in the coming decade.

Chambers have the potential to employ their considerable consensus-building experience and position of trust to provide workable alternatives to fringe dogma and out-of-hand dismissal of compromise. The chamber acts as the convener of those who

can find solutions, resources and political will. Articulating shared values, rather than divisive talking points, will be needed more than ever in the coming decade. Chambers can play this role. It has become increasingly difficult for others to convene meaningful gatherings focused on problem solving, crisis resolution or celebration of success. Chambers can do that and must persevere in that convener role even when it may seem unappreciated. Why chambers?

First, the diverse composition of chamber memberships and extensive partner relationships make the convener role inevitable, whether you choose it or not. Second, the two-part purpose of a chamber (*success for all employers today and prosperity of the community tomorrow*) makes its goals appear less self-serving than most special interests. Third, the range and diversity of voices within the chamber, from CEOs, to non-profits, to mom-and-pop business owners, creates a preview of the larger community’s debate.

### Making It Work

In the rising body of knowledge around “collective impact” theory, chambers can envision what the future might look like for advancing meaningful public policy change. If a public policy “sane middle” arises, it will likely spring from business leaders and other influential individuals, rather than from government officials, excepting the most courageous, of course. Local chambers have nurtured avenues for understanding and negotiation on major priorities for generations. That role will be more important over the next 10 years. But chambers cannot abdicate this responsibility just because the current climate seems so combative and unproductive.

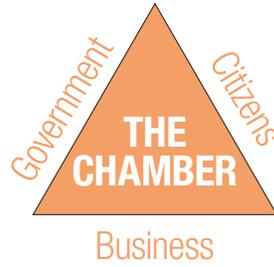
Importantly, the positions your organization takes today will affect the perceptions of it tomorrow. What is the larger context of a hell-no position you might take in response to a criminal justice, regulatory or tax issue floated by a county executive? Will your potential to be a convener, or your appeal to next-gen members, be affected? This is not to say don’t act; it is to say that chambers must consider the frame in which their position is portrayed.

Because of the with-me-or-against-me mentality in much of our politics, this job will be difficult, but chambers are in many cases the only organizations that can step forward. Chambers occupy that place in the middle of the business-citizen-government triangle. ▷

# Political and Social Fragmentation

HORIZON INITIATIVE: CHAMBERS 2025

In many communities, local and metro chambers are the only entities that can connect the three sides of the business-citizen-government triangle because they are the only organizations with *prosperous future* as their primary goal. Due to increased competition among locales, that position in the center of the triangle will be absolutely critical.



The truth is, business leaders, conscientious politicians and influential citizens don't want to wait for the community college to fail (financially or educationally) before someone fixes it. They don't want to wait for the Defense Department to run out of money for off-base military housing. They are agitated about government inefficiency and wrong-headed spending. With a few no-growth exceptions, they share a desire for growth of their towns, regions, states, provinces and nations. Because they are suited to the task—they fit the role—chambers will be a critical part of progress that occurs at any level of government over the next decade.

## Practice and Necessity

While political discourse will remain strained for the foreseeable future, policy decisions will soon become unavoidable. Through handling a string of predictable, now-inevitable, fiscal and policy crises over the next 10 years, Americans and their representatives will find ways to cobble together solutions, working together again. It seems farfetched, but we will. Too many critical issues facing our country will take us to the brink, and force us to find ways to compromise, even if those grand and small bargains are based on self-interest, rather than national interests. Urgency and actual (rather than potential) public service-related disasters will bring policy makers at all levels to the table for negotiation and action. It still won't be pretty, but complete gridlock on must-do issues won't continue indefinitely.

Chamber leaders are not naïve. They know that long-time adversaries won't suddenly join hands and sing each other's praises. Legislative leaders and administrations of differing parties at all levels won't like working together, but they will learn how. We already see this playing out at the local level. When the pipes actually break, bickering county legislative leaders eventually sit down and create a plan to fund the sewer repairs. At the federal level, strategists are finally recognizing as the new Congress is seated that there is a political price to pay when they fail to govern. This price will become more evident as the dangers caused by gridlock accumulate.

The changes and crises coming toward us in the coming decade may divide us further, but the opposite is also possible. A top-five city in an overwhelmingly red state might elect an openly gay mayor (oh wait, that already happened). Members of union households in a northern state might actually vote to limit public pension programs (been there, done that).

A city that declared bankruptcy will find its way to solvency without scores of people dying in the streets (done half a dozen times since 2002).

It is within the battle for solutions and the desperate craving for leadership that chambers will find opportunity. They will embody "sane middle" pragmatism and reason over dogma. They will help cut through the noise of extremist politics as they have for hundreds of years. Chambers will take the high road, and build coalitions to support the right things for their communities, regions and members. Pulling our society, body politic and corporate civic leaders together will be our own generational challenge and it will occupy much of our chamber life and work for the next 10 years. ☑

## Action Steps: Political and Social Fragmentation

Don't take the bait. The potential exists for every conversation about every issue to devolve back to entrenched positions, partisan accusation and separation. The chamber simply can't go there. The "sane middle" is not a popular place, but it is your place. Don't agree when people say there's no point in meeting or talking. As disasters appear (and they will) for governments in the coming years, approach each from the position that a solution—a compromise solution—will be found. This is not going to be easy, but we'll have plenty of practice. Promote only real data and evidence; be known as the group that eschews propaganda. Don't add to the urban-rural, right-left, old-young, black-white, rich-poor noise. Become partisan pro-economy, rather than partisan anything else. ACCE's relationships with the Pew Charitable Trust and other trusted research houses helps us help you make the case for reasoned solutions to divisive issues. The rich discussions that occur during monthly conference calls of ACCE's Government Relations Division provide best practice action steps and the support of a true peer network for those dealing with policy/political challenges.