



The Our American States podcast—produced by the National Conference of State Legislatures—is where you hear compelling conversations that tell the story of America’s state legislatures, the people in them, and the policies, process and politics that shape them.

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Bipartisanship Gets Some Star Power | Nov. 7, 2021 | OAS Episode 145

Ed: Hello and welcome to “Our American States,” a podcast from the National Conference of State Legislatures. This podcast is all about legislatures: the people in them, the policies, process and politics that shape them. I’m your host, Ed Smith.

“If there’s one place that needs the most amount of demystification, the most amount of engagement, it’s state lawmakers because there are things that don’t sound so sexy in your everyday life that have massive effects on your everyday life.”

That was Mark Kassen, one of the cofounders of the Civic Engagement Site, A Starting Point. He’s my guest on the podcast.

Kassen teamed up with two long-time friends, actor Chris Evans and medical tech entrepreneur Joe Kiani to found the site. Their goal was a bipartisan web platform where elected officials from both sides of the aisle could discuss their perspectives on a range of policy issues. They’ve also helped people register to vote.

The site, which has been up for about a year, features a rich video collection that ranges from pieces shot and produced by the platform’s crew to daily video posts sent in by elected officials from around the country.

Kassen and his partners want more engagement with state legislators, and they hope that will happen as pandemic restrictions ease. Here’s our discussion.

Mark, welcome to the podcast.

Mark: Thank you so much, Ed. Nice to meet you.

Time Marker (TM): 01:40

Ed: I’ve been interested to talk with you because the nonpartisan or bipartisan political space in the U.S. seems like it’s getting narrower. When I started at NCSL in 2008, people often commented

on how much more bipartisan state lawmakers were compared with those at the federal level. That seems to have eroded some over the years.

So, let's start with why you wanted to get involved in this space. What's the origin story?

Mark: Well, the origin point of A Starting Point was my friend Chris Evans whom I have worked with for years... he's become a very close friend of mine... came to me and we got various projects together and said you know, we wish there was a great way for people to get good, adroit answers to common questions. I don't want to admit it, but I don't know some things. Sometimes I'll tweet something and I don't really know what that means, but I think I do.

I wished there was a good place for me to get answers where I understood what the source was and what their motivations were. So, not necessarily that it's unbiased – people have bias – but I understand the bias, or I understand it's a point of view and that's defined.

Around the same time my other dear friend, Joe Kiani, who has been in the world of mineral devices and in philanthropic healthcare for years, said you know, a lot of your friends out in Hollywood have big audiences and I wish they would tell more people to vote.

And I said, you know what, let's all have a conversation about what we can do on the technology side to create a platform on what we really care about and what we really have come to be about, which is civic engagement, and finding a way to give through our media experience and audience access to their elected officials and a way that can get them to become more engaged.

And through that process, we allowed folks to register to vote through our site and contact their representatives. So, that really became the guiding principle.

TM: 03:32

Ed: So, how do you measure success with this project?

Mark: Well, I mean, if people use it... if we're around in another couple of years. Those are the broad strokes. I think for us, maybe to your point at the beginning, something about the way the media rewards people, if not elected officials, in terms of hyperbolic speech may not always be healthy, and maybe sometimes that way of communicating is the best way for them to get attention so they can get a point across, or speak to their electorate, which is hard to get people to pay attention.

So, hopefully one of the things we'd like to be known for over time is that we have a healthier mechanism where people can hear from their elected officials, understand their point of view, get things defined, demystify those subjects, but yet not be rewarded. We have no likes or dislikes on our site. We have no comments section on our site. So, not be rewarded for maybe some of the unhealthier mechanisms or unhealthier modes of communication that sometimes can get in the way of people trying to get points across to move policy forward.

TM: 04:44

Ed: Well, I'd agree with you that the shrillest voice in the room often gets a lot of attention even if it's not representative of the larger group. When I watch the videos on your site, the tone is very reasonable, though as you noted, these elected officials have a point of view, and they may take a partisan approach.

My question is: As you've met a lot of elected officials, have you generally found them to be a reasonable lot even if you might not agree with their point of view?

Mark: Absolutely. Listen, in the very beginning, pre-pandemic, we spent a year and a half, almost two years, going back and forth to D.C. interviewing elected officials, most of them on their turf. And it took a minute to get them to trust us. But they welcomed us into their environment, which we appreciated because they had no reason to talk to us, especially in the beginning, because we didn't actually have a site, weren't able to show them what our intention was other than our word.

So, we created a space which they bought into to communicate, and we appreciated that, we respected it, and I think that was appreciated on their end. And so, therefore, they became increasingly more open to speak to us.

I think it's important to say we're not journalists, so there is a place for that in many other places. We aren't investigative reporters. We don't seek to really dive into certain issues in the ways other people can. We seek to be able to get people to explain things of the day, those things being policy most likely, and how that policy then can affect their lives.

So, it's a pointed mission, which I think helps create the tone that you're speaking about in terms of what we aim to do. As a result, people don't come to our site, meaning elected officials, to do certain kinds of things, have certain kinds of conversations, because it's just not the playground we've set up.

We don't tell them what to say. We don't ask them to behave a certain way. They say what they say. If what you're saying is true, which I hope it is, then it means that is starting to work and we're creating a ground where they're feeling... and more elected officials are showing up, so that means that it somehow must be working because their time is valuable and if they didn't feel that this was an effective way to get their message across, they wouldn't come here.

So, by coming here and behaving in the spirit in which we hope, that means maybe that way of communication is working and maybe in one small way we can help people elevate the way they disseminate issues and communicate with their electorate.

TM: 07:20

Ed: So, I think you've made clear that A Starting Point is not a journalistic organization, but how else does it differ from other media organizations?

Mark: We are a civic engagement site. Our goal is to demystify, so inform by way of demystifying and engage, truly trying to create a shorter cord between the electorate and the people that elected them. If that's the guiding principle, if that's the goal, then the information and things that we cover or the people that we talk to and the way we grow the site over time, and it's grown

faster than we had anticipated, will always be emblematic of that. It will always have that at the center.

And I think that's a little different than a news organization or a media organization which just seeks to inform. We really seek to get people to engage, and whether that engagement which they can do to the site is to register to vote, whether it's to contact their elected official, which they can do directly through our site, then that will have been proven a success, and I think that's what keeps us a little bit different.

TM: 08:20

Ed: Your background is in the entertainment industry as an actor, director, producer. You don't see a lot of people in your industry getting involved in politics, especially in this nonpartisan or bipartisan space. So, I'm wondering what's in your background or the background of your partners that pushed you guys into creating this.

Mark: I would say all three of us... I'm very careful not to speak for either of my partners... all three of us grew up in civic-minded environments. I think all three of us as we grew in our core competency and our given professions had an interesting vantage point on the world and as we kind of became more comfortable with ourselves, wanted to use that vantage point and our experience, be it technology, media, entertainment, storytelling, and use those tools to create a mechanism to help give other people access to some of the things that we've seen, and maybe find ways to communicate in ways that we believe.

But the background of politics, which I'm not in nor ever have been, has always been an interest. I mean, growing up if we had trading cards for elected officials in my house, if that existed, we would have had them. Turns out it does now somewhere; someone sent us some. But yes, and I've always found it interesting, and I think it's important. You don't have to know everything by any means, but not be afraid of finding out, because the things that you hear in soundbites become law and policy that truly affects your lives.

And it's really easy, especially in this day and age, to sit there and yell at the TV. But to understand that there are people who represent other people that feel a certain way, and understand why they feel that way and where that intersects with policy and where that policy intersects with your life, if you don't listen to what's going on and think about where it intersects your life, then by the time you realize that you care, it could be too late to do anything about that policy, or it could be too late to engage that elected official or involve a group that might actually agree with you, or you might agree with.

So, that's a "think" that has always been involved in my life and in my family's life.

Ed: Thanks, Mark. We're going to take a quick break and then come back with the rest of our conversation.

MUSIC and Gene VO

If you're interested in news about state legislators, state legislative staff and public policy, then there's a new link you need to put on your phone. It's a news resource that features updates

and trends in public policy, as well as profiles of state legislators and staff. Legislators are featured in a regular column called *My District*, where legislators share information about the areas they represent, such as the Liberty Bell, Elvis' Graceland, Hershey, Pennsylvania, and the headwaters of the Mississippi river.

And we have staff snapshots, questions and answers from legislative staff who serve in a wide variety of jobs, such as house clerks and senate secretaries, bill drafters, researchers, public communicators, human resource directors, technology specialists, librarians, and many others.

Put us on your daily news watch by going to ncsl.org/magazine and catch the latest updates. You'll be glad you did. That's ncsl.org/magazine.

TM: 11:43

Ed: I'm back with Mark Kassen talking about A Starting Point, a civic engagement site he started with fellow actor Chris Evans and technology entrepreneur Joe Kiani.

So, Mark, to stick with the topic of the entertainment industry, was that an advantage when you approached people in politics? What kind of feedback did you get?

Mark: Initially I would say no. I would say that was not... I would say people were more cynical at first. In fact, the first time, and I've said this before, we went to D.C. to do interviews, I think we had 17 slots and three people signed up. Those three were not because of Chris or me; it was because Joe Kiani works in a bipartisan fashion on a multitude of healthcare issues.

And so, he used that currency in helping people in hospitals to get a few elected officials to talk to us, and the few that would, then vouched for us. As we continued to go back, what did happen was the elected officials would say to us, you know, a lot of folks like you come from Hollywood or New York and you tell us what to think. You are some of the first that asked us.

That helped evolve the site, quite frankly, because we realized the more we thought about what we wanted to ask them in different ways, and use different mechanisms to get that information out, the more they would speak to us. Then it became I won't say easy, but it became easier and easier to the point where when we continue to go to D.C., we couldn't fit everybody in. And now we have a mechanism where they submit things to us every single day on their own through the network that we built and the folks that work at A Starting Point.

TM: 13:21

Ed: Well, there's a lot to be said for listening more than talking in almost every area of life; at least that's what I've found.

Let me ask you about the celebrity of Chris Evans, your cofounder. He's a big movie star; everyone knows who he is. So, was that an advantage? Did you get access you might not otherwise have gotten?

Mark: Chris is a movie star obviously and a great guy. His reputation is as such. And so, absolutely that helped. And more than anything, the more people were exposed to him and to what we were

doing, that absolutely helped. So, people I think were happy to meet with someone like Chris because there's a great photo op and we were conscious of that. But they wouldn't have risked that photo op if they thought that someone like Chris, who is vocal about his own beliefs in social media, was going to use that photo op for other means. Because Chris is the way he is, he didn't.

And then that really is what began to help, where they would see somebody who was truly using their currency in how he's become a celebrity by being an actor and use that currency towards giving the mic to these elected officials and allowing them to have some fun in the beginning in terms of getting to feel like they had access to a celebrity that they might not have had.

So yes, there is some give-and-take there that was conscious that helped over time, but if it was just that sizzle, it wouldn't have mattered. It had to be them seeing the humility that Chris walks within the perception of celebrity status that he has.

TM: 15:02

Ed: So, those of us who have worked with state legislatures think, not surprisingly, that state lawmakers have a lot more effect on people's lives than federal lawmakers. And yet, there's an inverse amount of attention paid. As a result, people often know what's going on in Washington more so than in their own state capitals.

Mark: I will say right now in California, we are very conscious of state politics and how much people can do things one way or the other in terms of... but sorry, go ahead.

Ed: Well, the California recall was certainly a tutorial and a reminder of the importance of who is running your state. And the change in voter interest from when voting started to Election Day was quite dynamic, so good point.

TM: 15:45

Ed: But back to state lawmakers, are you trying to involve them on the site in a similar fashion?

Mark: Absolutely. State lawmakers, governors... we've spoken to governors and mayors. We spoke to some mayors. Unfortunately, the pandemic obviously has happened and hence this podcast. So, we had a very specific rollout of going to every convention with our crew, with Chris, and that from the outset... the first one was actually supposed to be South by Southwest 2020, which was canceled, that was going to be our rollout.

And so, we've been figuring out how we exist in this now not-so-new normal. We've found our footing I believe. Not only do we want to; we need to make sure we have state legislators because, as you said, if our goal is to demystify and engage, if there's one place that needs the most amount of demystification and the most amount of engagement, it's state lawmakers, because there are things that don't sound so sexy in your everyday life that have massive effects on your everyday life.

We very much look forward to having their active participation on the sites.

TM: 17:02

Ed: Keeping that audience of state lawmakers and legislative staff in mind, what would you like to share with them? What are some takeaways for you after working in this area for a while?

Mark: Well, the biggest takeaway I've had... it's going to seem super obvious... is that elected officials are elected by something called constituents, and those constituents are just people who are trying to get by, who have everyday problems and some more conscious or less conscious of the mechanisms that affect those problems.

The elected officials are most of the time working on behalf of that group of individuals. As a result, that needs to be respected and understood. If the ball is to move forward as a unified country, then we have to acknowledge perspectives and voices, not hate speech, not destructive ones. I think we all have opinions. I have very strong ones. But as a way of creating a forum and a platform for civic engagement, it's crucial that we acknowledge that the individual you're speaking to most of the time is speaking on behalf of other people that asked that person to speak.

That has sort of been surprising to me – the acknowledgments you have to make, what that person represents, good or bad, has been a big education for me.

If the question you're also asking is: What have I learned in terms of elected officials and our platform? What I've learned is that people are listening. It's shocking to me how much feedback we get and how many thank-yous we get when we help to disseminate or demystify an issue, when people share some things that an audience member and a viewer, especially younger, didn't know.

I think we helped register over 50,000 people to vote. We've had a very large number of contacts with elected officials giving the opportunity and allowing the situation for people, meaning the electorate, to be vulnerable enough to ask. They will get engaged. And I say that to the state lawmakers. It is an opportunity to really, I don't think change the minds, but for sure inform some minds and inform minds that are looking to be informed.

And I'll say one more thing about that from the feedback I've noticed. The more people have real conversations and really walk through a perspective in an empathetic way, the more people respond. And I know that there are a lot of platforms out there that probably make a business not on that theory, but on our platform, I can tell you, especially because we don't have some of the mechanisms, as I said, that others do for likes and dislikes and message boards, on our platform folks that really try to communicate a perspective and define a position and define a bill or something about government that might seem scary from a perspective, those folks get a lot of great feedback. And whether someone agrees with them or not, people appreciate it.

TM: 20:17

Ed: Well, I think your point is well taken. Lawmakers do represent specific groups of people and they take that role seriously from what I've seen. I think people not involved in politics and governing often see them as independent actors when there is always a district or state they're representing.

When it comes to your site, are elected officials able to do this remotely to send in videos?

Mark: Ninety percent of it is remote. We do sessions in D.C. for starting points. There are a few different sessions on the site. There are starting points, which are definitions, so like: What is DACA? What was NAFTA? What is NAFTA? And then you have at least three Democrats and three Republicans who define that governmental mechanism or whatever. Those are more controlled and those are shot by us in the same way.

Then we have explorers, daily points and counter points. Those are all remote and the daily points are self-generated where elected officials turn them in every day. Sometimes they're answering questions that we have based on the news of the day, and sometimes they just reach out and submit videos based on something that they need to talk about on an upcoming bill, or something that's happening right now.

So, that refreshes every single day. Explorers is a series of interviews we do with folks on the left and the right around the issue; it's a bit of a deeper dive. We throw some factoids in there. In addition, we do explainers as well to explain in text some of the more wonky elements or bills or certain things that are going on that are best just kind of giving the facts so you can get some definitions out there.

I'd say 90+% is all virtual. And I'd say of that 90%, 70% is self-generated by the elected officials themselves.

Ed: Mark, this has been a really interesting conversation. Thanks for making the time. Take care.

MUSIC

Ed: And that concludes this episode of our podcast. We encourage you to review and rate NCSL podcasts on Apple podcasts, Google Play, Pocket Casts, Stitcher, or Spotify. We also encourage you to check out our other podcasts: "Legislatures, The Inside Story," and the special series "Building Democracy." Thanks for listening.