



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, the politics that compel them, and the important work of democracy.

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### In Search of Civil Discourse | OAS Episode 59

Welcome to “Our American States,” a podcast of meaningful conversations that tell the story of America’s state legislatures, the people in them, the politics that compel them, and the important work of democracy. For the National Conference of State Legislatures, I’m your host, Gene Rose.

Our guest for this episode is Dr. Keith Allred, who is the executive director of the National Institute for Civil Discourse. Dr. Allred, welcome to our program.

Dr. A: Thanks for having me.

*Time Marker (TM): 0:37*

Gene: First, Doctor, why don’t you tell our listeners about the mission and the goals of the National Institute for Civil Discourse?

Dr. A: Yeah. Our aim is to build the country’s capacity to work across our differences with civility and respect so that we can make better decisions, confront the problems before us in a more effective way.

*TM 0:58*

Gene: And how do you all go about doing that?

Dr. A: Yeah, that doesn’t seem like an easy mountain to climb, does it, given the actual declining civility and polarization that we have in our country.

So we have three major programs by which we aim to do that. The first one is “next generation,” which is aimed at public officials who are focused primarily right now on state legislatures, so NCSL’s kind of constituency. And so we do a building-trust-through-civility workshop with whole state legislatures. We have done 16 legislatures to this point and have had over 1,000 legislators go through it. And we go through the obstacles and the ... to civility, what’s making it hard in state legislatures, and develop action plans with state legislatures.

And that’s a program that was developed by state legislators and is delivered by state legislators. We have a cadre of about 40 legislators from across the country who we’ve trained and actually deliver the workshops. So that has been just a very effective program. I was in

Oregon a month or six weeks ago to help deliver that and it just is really impressive how impactful and meaningful that experience is, how much the legislators enjoy it.

I'll give one example on that one. We've worked with Maine. I've done the workshop with Maine and coming out of that work, Maine has decided to alternate their seating so that they go Republican/Democrat/Republican/Democrat. So there are just a lot of great things that come out of these action plans with the next generation program.

The second program that we have is a public-facing program called "revive civility" and that is where we have a range of workshops and approaches to: How do we engage somebody that has different political views than we do with respect and civility? And we have programs that range from help for doing that in a one-on-one kind of conversation or small groups up to larger. We work with youth and municipalities, faith groups, so that we as the American public develop our ability to do this better.

The third program by which we do this is a new one that I brought with me when I became executive director in January called "common sense American," and it's based on a state level pilot we did in my home state of Idaho. We invite everyday citizens to join the program, Republicans, Democrats, Independents from across the country, and we take four steps together. So first the members pick a handful of issues, federal issues per year. Second, the organization develops thorough policy briefs on each of those questions where we try to make the strongest case for each competing perspective and bring to bear the best available data.

Third, each member commits 90 minutes per year to reviewing the issue that they get randomly assigned to and weigh in; so they indicate for each concrete proposal in the brief whether they support or oppose it. And then fourth, anything that gets a two-thirds consensus or greater, we then champion in the Congress.

We did this for five years as a pilot at the state level in the Idaho legislature and passed major legislation over that period on that basis, and some of the ideas came from the left, some of the ideas came from the right, some of the ideas you couldn't chart left or right. We just launched that program in mid-January, started inviting Americans to join it on the website at commonsenseamerican.org.

We now have over 1,900 members, so we're attracting members at three times the speed and a third the budget that we anticipated. We were trying to get to 1,000 members by mid-May and it looks like we'll be over 3,000 by that point.

*TM 5:14*

Gene: Being so involved in this, I guess a basic question to ask you is: How does the institute define the phrase "civil discourse" and how would you rate the state of civil discourse in this country right now?

Dr. A: Well, you know, the definition of civil discourse ... reasonable people can kind of have different definitions of it and we have a research program too and we look at different people's definitions. So we don't necessarily have a really strict doctrinaire definition of it.

But we would say this: It's treating each other with civility and respect across the partisan divide, where we will take each other seriously and not just assume that when someone else disagrees with us it's because they're a bad person; that we recognize that we can engage differences and even if we don't come to agree, that we can see that there are reasonable, good people on the other side.

*TM 6:17*

Gene: And do you see a difference, and this may be more of a personal question than an institutional one ... Do you see a difference in the way civil discourse is taking place on the federal level compared to the state legislative level?

Dr. A: Yeah, I think so. There is some formal research on this. It's a little hard to compare. It's clear that we are at record levels of incivility and polarization at the federal level, and there's good, rigorous data on that. It's been moving the same direction in the state, state legislatures at the state level of greater polarization and incivility, but I think in most states it's not as bad as it is at the federal level. Of course, it varies a fair amount from state to state. But I think the average in the states is still better than it is at the federal level.

*TM 7:08*

Gene: So even with the programs you've got there like next generation, with more than 7,300 state legislators in America and another estimated 20,000 legislative staff, what do you recommend for those people that work in capitals that they can be doing to improve the level of civil discourse in our country today?

Dr. A: Well, it won't surprise you that my first recommendation is: Invite us to come do a workshop with your legislature; we'd be delighted to do that. Sixteen states so far. And so that leaves a few states to go, so we'd love to come do that.

But I think there are some just kind of obvious things that every state legislator themselves can do. One of the most basic ones is just make sure you develop relationships, even friendships, across the aisle; that you're not just talking to people of your party or of your House. You know, if you're in the Senate or the House, you need to be able to make relationships across the two bodies and across the partisan divide; and to recognize that that is at the heart of the American experiment in self-government.

When the Founding Fathers established this country, they recognized that the reason self-government had never succeeded in the preceding 3,000 years over dozens of attempts at it was because of what they called the "spirit of party" or the "problem of faction"—that self-governments always failed because the people divided themselves up into subgroups trying to pull the government in different directions, and the contention that followed made the government so unstable that it opened the door for despotism to come back in.

So this is the problem the Founders were primarily trying to solve with the Constitution. The reason we take separation of powers further than anybody else, the reason we establish a federal republic at such a big scale was to make it difficult for any one party to impose their will on everyone else. The base of the Republican party is at best a third of the country; the

Democratic party is at best, the base of it, is at best a third of the country. It's never going to work for one-third of the country to impose its vision on the other two-thirds of the country.

So our system is designed to only work when we can come together and identify broadly supported solutions. So if we get the purposes and design of our system of government, we understand then that it's critical that we develop these relationships, seek to kind of understand the other side, see the merit where there is merit. You know, we don't need to sing Kumbaya and pretend we agree where we don't, but we've got to try to find decisions, you know, responses to problems that reflect a broader support than just the members of our party. And so we can't do that. State legislators can't do that unless they've got relationships and are talking with people on the other side.

*TM 10:16*

Gene: The programs that you mentioned, it's not only the legislators and the public officials that you're targeting here? You really want to get the public involved and get things going at a community level as well as I understand it?

Dr. A: Yes, the community and national level. So with regards to civility, there's quite a bit that we do at the community level, and for people who want to see those resources and maybe use them, go to [revivecivility.org](http://revivecivility.org) for that. But even within the revive civility, we understand at NICD the magnitude of the problem, and so we are really working to scale our programs to be equal to that magnitude.

And so within revive civility, for example, we have been shooting pilots of a documentary series called "Divided We Fall" where we bring, for example, Trump lovers and Trump haters together through the kind of experience that we often design for folks, but document it. And so you can see then, you can witness a passionate Trump lover and a passionate Trump hater engaging each other and coming to find hey, there's a human on the other side there, and while I disagree with them maybe deeply on some things, there are things where I agree with them, and I respect them as a person.

And so we're in negotiations with major streaming platforms right now. So that's something where we could start to reach hundreds of thousands of people. There we're trying to do it at a bigger scale. With common sense American, this is every American, Republican, Democrat, Independent in the country, including state legislators are invited to join us at [commonsenseamerican.org](http://commonsenseamerican.org). And that is all done online. So it can scale to the level of hundreds of thousands, even millions of people. So we really are trying to scale the work to the magnitude of the problem.

*TM 12:12*

Gene: You mentioned the president and, of course, one of the things he's probably more known for are his tweets. What is your organization's attitude towards social media? Obviously, this plays an important role in civil discourse in this country today. Do you have a stand on it or an opinion on how it's affecting civil discourse in America?

Dr. A: Well, it clearly has been playing a more corrosive than constructive role to this point in our history. It's where a lot of the greatest incivility is found and it's by politicians and it's by you know, we the people. I think everybody shares blame for that.

But it is also a tool that can be used for good. And so we've got some guidance in our revive civility program for civil discourse on social media. And the way we're reaching out to invite Americans to join common sense American is through social media and we're getting, as I said, a remarkable response, getting many more people joining much quicker than we expected to. And so, you know, it's like everything else. Social media is a tool and it's up to us to decide: How are we going to use the tool?

I think it is important for people to recognize as they look at their Twitter feed or their Facebook feed that it's always the case that the extremes speak louder and longer than the rest of us and they post more on social media politically than the rest of us. And so that can give a misimpression that we're more divided than we really are.

You know, today in the country more than 40 percent of Americans are Independents. Most folks are frustrated with the extremes of both parties, but they're not the people showing up on cable news or posting on social media. And so we get the impression that everybody is extreme one way or the other when that's not the case. And so it's important as we kind of consume social media that we recognize that and not get the misimpression that there is nobody that is frustrated with the civility and nobody in the middle.

But it is probably important that the center needs to engage more and engage politically and maybe, in fact, do some more political posts, but that they, you know, be a little bit more reasonable and respectful. And that if the center and the more civil among us cede the stage politically to the extreme and those who aren't civil, well, then that's not going to turn out very well in a system of self-government, and that's what we're getting right now.

*TM 15:14*

Gene: I'd like to talk to you about a couple programs that I saw featured on your website. The first one I'd like to learn more about is the National Call for Reflection, Prayer and Reconciliation. Can you tell us some details about that program and what you hope to accomplish with it?

Dr. A: Yeah. This is where we are working with faith groups and we've had a couple of particular dates on the calendar where we've done this in the past and additional ones that we're working on in the future. But we recognize that one of the real assets in the country, if we're going to overcome incivility, if we're going to develop greater respect across our differences, is our major faith traditions.

And so we're building a partnership of major faith denominations in the country where we're exploring together how we, from our faith traditions, can enhance our capacity as a country to work together more civilly. We've really been encouraged by that, by how concerned religious leaders are and how willing they are to roll up our sleeves. So we've got a few meetings of the network, the faith leaders network that we're putting together in which we're putting together more plans for how we can approach this with the help of our faith traditions in this country.

*TM 16:39*

Gene: I also noticed you had a seven-day civility challenge.

Dr. A: Yeah. And people can go onto [revivecivility.org](http://revivecivility.org) and see the details on that. But we have a set of recommendations for each day of the week, some things that you can do yourself to do your part to improve civility in this country, and so some nice kind of concrete steps and they include some things that you can do on social media as well as kind of reaching out to people, friends and family who have different political views than you do.

*TM 17:30*

Gene: You certainly seem to have a great menu of services and programs that you're offering. What else about the institute would you like our audience to know about?

Dr. A: Well, it's probably useful to know how we started. We were formed in the wake of the Gabby Giffords shooting in Tucson, Arizona where she was hosting a "Congress on your corner" event, and of course the terrible shooting that ended in. And the people of Tucson and the University of Arizona decided they didn't want that to be the last chapter in the story and felt like they didn't want just a Tucson or Arizona response to it, but a national response.

So the University of Arizona formed the National Institute for Civil Discourse in the wake of that and that was such a galvanizing, sobering event. We were really impressed with the response to that. So the founding co-chairs for NICD were Bill Clinton and George H.W. Bush. The founding, kind of operating co-chairs were Sandra Day O'Connor and Tom Daschle. We've got Colin Powell and Madeline Albright and Katie Couric and just a really impressive list on our board.

And so, you know, in 2011 polarization and incivility were getting worse, but I don't think any of us had a sense of just how bad it would get by 2019. So I think it's been really important that we've been there working on this problem, figuring out effective ways to deal with it since 2011 and it really has been our experience that over the course of even the last six months, the rest of the country is really waking up to this.

We see in a variety of ways how much the American public and elected officials are really concerned about the state of things and recognize that it can't go on this way; our republic can't survive this way; and are showing an increased hunger and willingness to do something about it.

And I'm just grateful that we've been working on it and had a chance to be working on it for several years as things have gotten especially challenging. You know, it seems to be the way of our American democracy that we don't get serious about solving a problem sometimes until we reach crisis levels. And I think most of the country has sort of gotten to that point of recognizing it as a crisis and really ready to do something about it.

And so it's a real honor for us to be a leading organization in the country on this. Just in the last six months our work has been featured in The New York Times, the Wall Street Journal, the Washington Post, USA Today, News Hour, CBS News.

So when there is a crisis, there is also the silver lining that we all begin to recognize it and do something about it. So I do think that there is cause for hope and optimism, that we as a country can rally and improve the state. And that's critical for us to make the right decisions on the problems that confront us today, but it's also really important for our children.

I've got a 16-year-old daughter, a 14-year-old son and an 11-year-old daughter and I think all of us, whether it's our children or our grandchildren, we really want to pass the republic on to them in better shape than it is now. And it takes ... I really think it's going to be the American people that will be our saving grace and frankly state leaders. As we noted, the problem isn't as pronounced at the state level as it is at the federal level. The scale at the state, we seem to be doing a little better job of building those relationships.

And so it's going to have to be us stepping up. It is self-government after all. It's a reflection on us. And so we've got to make the choice that this isn't how we want to do business and we want to pass this republic on to our children in better shape than it is now.

*TM 21:20*

Gene: Excellent words to end on. Would you like to give our listeners that website one more time where they can go for more information?

Dr. A: Yeah. Two websites I'd point them to: [revivecivility.org](http://revivecivility.org) and [commonsenseamerican.org](http://commonsenseamerican.org) are those two specific programs. And then the overall NICD website is [nicd.arizona.edu](http://nicd.arizona.edu).

Gene: Dr. Allred, it's been a pleasure talking with you today. We wish you luck and continued success with your programs.

Dr. A: Thank you for having me.

Music and Gene VO:

And that concludes this edition of "Our American States." We invite you to subscribe to this podcast on iTunes and Google Play. Until our next episode, this is Gene Rose for the National Conference of State Legislatures. Thanks for listening.