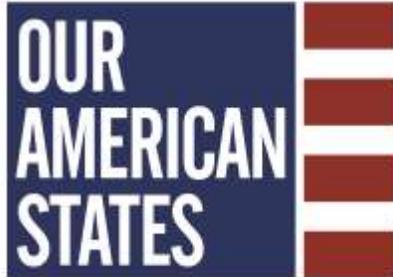


## Our American States | An NCSL Podcast



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### Frank Luntz, Polling and Politics | Episode 8 | April 27, 2017

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.

In this episode of Our American States, we’re going to take a look at national and state politics from the viewpoint of someone who has been in the trenches through several elections, and someone who is not pleased with the current condition of government relations. We’ll discuss the results from a national poll he has conducted regarding the public’s faith in government at various levels, his advice for candidates running for public office, and what the public’s expectation is for federal and state officeholders.

We’re joined today on “Our American States” by renowned national pollster, Frank Luntz, who is the news analyst and contributor to CBS News and the Fox News Channel. That alone, Frank, is quite an accomplishment, where people’s viewpoints on the media are as polarized as their political viewpoints.

**Frank:** It’s sometimes tough, but if your focus is on the facts and on the truth, and your responsibility is to analyze public opinion, it’s not as difficult as it might sound. It doesn’t really matter what source you present your opinions, provided that the opinions themselves are accurate and precise.

**Gene:** Let’s talk about a recent piece you did for Time Magazine where you wrote: “It’s time for a new relationship between the citizenry and their government.” Is it your opinion that now there’s a serious disconnect, and is that what your polling data is showing?

Frank: The polling data shows that Washington is completely broken and may be beyond repair. Conversely the public has significant confidence in their state and local governments to pick up the slack, to do the things that they think government should do. From education to poverty, from roads and transportation to infrastructure, they want the answers and the accountability to come from state governments rather than the federal government. And the reason why is that they feel that state government is much more closer to them, that you can actually reach out and touch an elected official if something goes wrong, and that the money is spent more wisely, more efficiently and more effectively on state governments rather than the federal government.

Gene: So let's jump into those numbers. You stated that citizens trust their state governments more than the federal government. How big a difference is there in that trust?

Frank: In the overall numbers there are about 50 percent more Americans that have faith in their state government than their federal government, and that's significant in a country that is split 50/50. On the individual issues about 60 percent of the things that matter most to America, they believe states can do a better job in terms of the actual implementation and accountability; states have a tremendous advantage over the federal government. On things like education and poverty and job training and roads and highways and infrastructure, it is overwhelmingly the states' responsibility, the American people would say, that it's the states' responsibility, not Washington's, and they want Washington to give up the power and the funding sources back to the states to make this happen.

Now I have a phrase for this – I call it the “new relationship” – and it doesn't matter whether you're a Republican or a Democrat; it doesn't matter whether you're conservative or liberal, whether you're from New England or California – this new relationship transcends politics, region, age, education – all the traditional demographics. They have reasons for supporting the desire for local and state control, but the outcome is exactly the same.

And if I can add a little insight, Republicans have always believed in sending the power and the influence back to the states as part of their core philosophy, and Democrats have come on board over the last six months frankly because they don't like the president and they're not particularly happy with Congress either. So we are at a unique point in modern American history where we have the consensus of people across the country and across the political spectrum that it's time for the states to step up and take over some of these responsibilities that until now have been run by the federal government.

Gene: In that same Time piece I noticed you coined another phrase: “mutually assured distress,” or cleverly condensed to the acronym MAD. Tell us what that means.

Frank: It means that the public is not just angry any more. They're just fed up. And they feel like they're suffering because government is simply not doing what needs to get done, whether it's healthcare or job creation, that whatever government has promised it has not delivered. And that actually is one of the reasons why you have this desire for new relationships, that the people in Washington made promises that they could not keep, wrote checks that they could not cash, and now we have an economy that has put people back to work, but not in the jobs they were expecting, has invested in communities but now they've run out of money, and offered to defend hardworking taxpayers and yet the taxes go up every year.

So they're making promises they cannot keep and that mutually assured distress is the feeling that government is asking so much and delivering so little.

Gene: And I want to follow up on something that you said earlier. You're seeing this data pretty consistently across the country, no regional differences, not any differences between Democrats and Republicans?

Frank: It's expanding. Actually the level of support for this with every month goes higher and higher as Washington proves that it is inefficient and ineffective. And I think that by the time of the national conference you're holding in August, it will be even higher still. The demand for legislators and their governors to work together to assume the responsibility and the accountability of the role and these programs because Washington has simply failed.

Gene: We're speaking with national pollster Frank Luntz. We'll get his thoughts on word choices and advice for those running for political office right after this break.

Break

Gene: Okay, we're back with Frank Luntz who is a national polling and political expert. Frank, let's get some background on your expertise. You've been working on a national scale for many years; you've provided lots of advice to candidates and particularly the Republican Party over the years on messaging... In fact, I know I started following your work closely with the publication of your book, *Words that Work*.

When did you first notice that the words that public officials use were making a difference?

Frank: Well, I do want to point out that I have worked with a number of Democratic governors and that particularly on the state and local level, the partisanship is either less or should be much less than on the federal level. The closer that you get to the public, the more universal our ideas, our needs, the more universal they become. And so from Ed Rendell, the Governor of Montana, to Bill Richardson in New Mexico, I've had a number of very good relationships with Democratic governors and still do because they're so much closer to the people and really the ideology goes out the door and the focus on truly delivering for their constituents becomes the highest priority.

In terms of language and messaging, I first became aware of the role of communication when Bill Clinton was President; both his style and his substance were something I'd never seen before. Obviously I followed Ronald Reagan; I used to be the youngest person in the room. Now I'm often the oldest, old enough to remember Reagan; I was in school at the time. But Bill Clinton was the first one that I actually studied. And the way that he held his hands on the podium and the words that he used, I could see had a tremendous impact on the people listening to him. And that's how I got involved in politics, for Ross Perot in '92, Rudy Giuliani in '93, and then the Contract with America in 1994, trying to apply those skills that I was learning from Bill Clinton to the efforts of these candidates in their campaigns for office.

Gene: Right now we're living in a world where Republicans control the legislature in Washington, D.C. and the presidency; they control a significant majority of governorships as well as state legislatures. Are they doing a better job of getting their message out to the public these days?

Frank: No, I don't think so. I don't think many politicians are doing such a good job. And I think at a time when the public is demanding that people work together, I don't think that there is enough cooperation and compromise.

If I was... let's say if I was a Democratic governor and I had a Republican legislature, the first thing I would do is take them away for two or three days, bring spouses with them, bring kids with them, get to know each other. Some of the worst battles going on are with Democratic governors and Democratic legislatures and Republican governors and Republican legislatures. It's not an issue of partisanship; it's an issue of who controls what. And that is, to me, incredibly offensive – that the challenges that are facing this country are significant and the people who are left behind, the tens of millions of people who are not living the American Dream, their concerns need to be heard, and we have to find a way for those who use government services to find a level of unity or we're going to tear our country apart.

I've never seen such incivility and such viciousness. And in every one of my presentations, I begin by showing the audience just how bad it's gotten and I end with a personal appeal to stop, to listen to each other, to learn from each other, and then to lead together.

Gene: In the piece, again, you wrote for Time Magazine, you seemed to indicate that people are looking more closely at the reasons that candidates are running for office.

Frank: It's always been a battle between attributes and issues and I will tell you that right now the attributes have become more important than the issues; that yes, everyone cares about guns and abortion and budgets and taxes, but they care as much about quality of life as they do these hot-button issues, and they care even more that the candidates that they elect are listening to them, that they say what they mean and mean what they say, and that they're willing to hold themselves accountable.

So it's not just who is going to raise taxes or who is going to cut the budget or where someone stands on these social issues. It is as much who they are as people.

Gene: And at the federal level, is there advice that you can give to them?

Frank: Sure. First thing is the president needs to invite more Democrats to the White House more often. The second thing is that Chuck Schumer needs to stop standing in the way of other Democrats who do want to work with the administration. The third thing is for the Republican and Democratic leadership to, again, go off somewhere and have a meal and a glass of wine and just simply chill out.

Now make no mistake – the principles, the differences between the two parties in Washington are significant, they're real, and that I'm not asking for anyone to sell out those things that their constituents demand of them. But I do believe that there is more common ground than they recognize and this insistence on shrill communication, threatening, blackmailing, the words that

they use, the tone that they use, and the just being obstructionists not only is hurting the American people, but it's an embarrassment and they need to wake up and just grow up.

Gene: And for people who are running for office at the state level right now, whether it's a governor or as a state legislative position, what types of messages do you think would resonate with the public right now?

Frank: The first thing is: I made a mistake. I shouldn't be running. I quit. And the environment really is that bad right now. I'd be saying to them that it is important that they demonstrate how they will make government more efficient, more effective and more accountable. I think it's important for them to communicate the core fundamental principle of common sense.

And I think it's essential for them not just to talk about what they're going to do to spend money, but it's also important for them to reach out to those who pay for those programs, the hardworking taxpayers, and explain why the programs that they advocate are doing the jobs that they're meant to do. I think those are the three most important principles that I would tell them in their upcoming race for office.

Gene: As you mentioned earlier, you are going to be speaking at the National Conference of State Legislatures Legislative Summit in Boston this August. Give us a preview on what you'll be talking about.

Frank: I'm going to work through the poll that was done for the National Governors Association, talk to the legislators about what the American people believe their role should be. I think they'll like what they'll hear because the public wants them to take an expanded role, but they will not tolerate... what the American people will not tolerate are these ridiculous fights between legislators and their governors; that they expect them to get along, and they do not expect them to emulate Washington – they expect them to FIX the problems and to get it done. Just stop the yelling, stop the divisions, and just get it done.

Gene: Well, here's hoping that a lot of people listen to your advice, Frank, and for people who are interested in following your work, what's the best way for them to stay in touch with you and find out what you're working on?

Frank: I'm posting about six or eight times a day to Twitter; @frankluntz is my handle. And occasionally it's humorous; occasionally it's a photograph of someplace I happen to be at. But more often than not, it's some polling that I've come across or that I've done, or an observation that I have that's meant to provide a level of insight to what's going on at that moment. Probably half of the tweets they'll find useless, but, you know, maybe half they'll find helpful. And I try to source everything so that they can get even more information than just the tweet itself.

Gene: Okay, we certainly appreciate your time today, Frank. Any final words of advice for state public officials across the country?

Frank: Yes. Get it done or be prepared to lose in the next election. The public has run out of patience. And treat each other with respect. If you don't want to go to a town hall and be yelled at, then stop yelling at your opponents the same way.

Gene: Excellent advice. Frank, thank you so much for your time today.

Frank: Thank you.

Gene: 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.