

America at 250: What's Next for Civic Responsibility

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David Young: Welcome to C-Suite Perspectives, a signature series by The Conference Board. I'm David Young, the president of The CEO Center, which is the public policy center of The Conference Board, and guest host of today's episode.

In today's conversation, we'll focus on the United States as we celebrate its 250th anniversary. At a moment of profound political, cultural, economic, and institutional change, we'll explore what the American story can teach us about leadership, citizenship, democratic resilience, and the future of our civic life.

Joining me today is Congressman Brad Schneider, who is currently in his sixth term representing the Tenth District of Illinois in the US House of Representatives. Both in Congress and at home, Congressman Schneider is focused on building an economy that works for all Americans, breaking through partisan gridlock to find solutions, and promoting core American values of opportunity, equality, and security.

So it is a [00:01:00] distinct pleasure to be speaking with him today. Congressman Schneider, welcome. Again, so pleased to have you joining us.

Rep. Brad Schneider: Thanks. It's great to be here.

David Young: So let's start, Congressman, by stepping back and looking at the broader sweep of the American story. The United States has always been somewhat of an experiment: imperfect, ambitious, often divided, but also capable of renewal.

As the US now marks its 250th anniversary, I'm curious to get your thoughts or reflections on what do you think the Founders would say about where the country is today? And do

you think it's evolved in the way they had hoped and anticipated?

Rep. Brad Schneider: That's a great question that we've been thinking about a lot as we celebrate the 250th and the American promise, the American dream. I think, as we look back at history, and I look at this not as a historian, but my background was business and engineering.

But look back at history, Founders were far from perfect in a [00:02:00] moment that was, as you mentioned, now we're in this moment of profound change. The world in 1776 was also going through profound change, and I think that contributed to the mindset of the Founders. They had worries about tyranny. They had worries about taxation without representation. They thought about the economy and the prospect and opportunities for economic growth and prosperity for their families and their children, the same things we're talking about today.

So in some respects, I think they would recognize that part of America. I think they'd also recognize the things they were most concerned and tried to defend against. The challenges we're seeing in today's politics, the threats to the checks and balances of government the polarization. George Washington talked about his fear of partisanship, and here we are in this moment of hyperpartisanship. And they would shake their head, I imagine, with some disbelief, but also with a great deal of disappointment.

And then, looking to the positive side of things, they would look [00:03:00] at a country that is still challenging the bounds of possibility, whether that is on technology or even, pick an issue. And we're not just taking things as they are, we're trying to force and form the world into how we see it. And we're looking at it in the context of artificial intelligence and the efforts to bring better things in medicine. Run through the whole list of where America leads on innovation, and they would have great pride saying, "That's what we envisioned and dreamed of for our future." And they would see that tension.

David Young: Yeah, it's interesting that, this sense of great pride, I think is, if they were around today and reflected on 250 years, I think—and this has come through some of the other podcasts and conversations we've had—recognizing some of the concerns, but also saying, "Wow, look at what has happened in 250 years." Whether it's the sense of cultural ambition and economic growth and the role of the United States in the world.

When we look at the founding principles here, the Declaration of Independence, Constitution, the idea here [00:04:00] of self-government, what do you think most Americans, if Americans now reflected back on the principles of the founding, what do you think most Americans need to remember at this moment?

Rep. Brad Schneider: I think there's a couple things that we need to do a better job teaching in our civics classes and reminding the parents of the kids in the civic classes. America wasn't founded in perfection. There is a 13-year separation between the Declaration of Independence from Britain and the formation of the government as we know it today with the Constitution. And there were tensions at that time just as there are

today.

The way I like to describe it is the promises of the Declaration, when Thomas Jefferson said all are created equal, endowed with rights, life, liberty, pursuit of happiness, and the responsibility but also the ability to form and change the government as they see fit to protect their prosperity and security. Those were promises not meant to be delivered on day one, but to be pursued and fulfilled [00:05:00] across a future.

David Young: Yeah.

Rep. Brad Schneider: And you jump ahead 13 years to the Constitution and, again, it starts with the preamble that is what we all know and hold dear. Starts with "We the people." That we are a nation of people, of laws, not of kings and potentates. And in order to form a more perfect union, the recognition that there was more to come, and that each generation would have a responsibility.

Nancy Pelosi likes to quote Ben Franklin often, and others talk about it. When asked coming out of the Constitutional Convention, "What do we have?" And he says, "A republic, if we can keep it."

David Young: Yeah.

Rep. Brad Schneider: We have to work in every generation to keep our republic. And I think that's the importance of people understanding what this gift the Declaration and the Constitution are, and what our responsibility to care for that gift, to nurture it, and deliver it to the next generation.

David Young: Yeah, I think just emphasize that point, to keep it and the sense here not to take it for granted. I want to jump on this line that [00:06:00] you said, "We the people." Today, many Americans feel disconnected from institutions and from potentially one another. Trust, I think, is a major issue. Trust in government, media, business, higher ed, and other institutions has declined significantly, especially if you look at some of these polls that look at it.

And polarization continues to deepen across political, cultural, and geographic lines. Just again, kind of your thoughts and insights, when we look at America today, what do you think the country is getting right here? Is this level of declining trust concerning? And what do you think is some of the key drivers behind that?

Rep. Brad Schneider: I think the decline in trust is extremely concerning, and it is a threat to our cohesion as a nation, a threat to our ability to achieve our potential as a country. It is a rift or seam that our enemies are seeking to take advantage of. You see it with social media, other actions that folks are taking up, as well as people within the [00:07:00] country, the partisanship on both sides trying to undermine that trust.

I still remain hopeful, very hopeful, and what's given me hope in recent days, where I live

in the northern suburbs of Chicago, we love our parades. We have parades all summer, but in particular around the Fourth of July. So I was in a lot of parades. And as you and I were talking about earlier, I had foot reconstruction surgery, so I'm not walking the parades like I have in the past. I've been sitting in a convertible, elevated, a 1969 red Chevy Impala. The woman who owns the car, who's been nice enough to drive me, put into these big sound system speakers, and we've been blasting music and going through these parades.

And what I see in the parades gives me great hope, cause we don't ask, "Are you a Democrat or Republican?" There are both. And you see people smiling, standing next to each other, people I know who voted for me, people I know who voted for my opponent, but they're standing together celebrating who we are as a country and celebrating who we are as a community. and in each and every one of these parades, and I've done more than a [00:08:00] dozen this summer already, the commitment to their local communities and their neighbors as having a common sense of purpose and destiny. That's how we fight back against these efforts of others who are seeking to divide us.

We need to restore faith in our institutions. We do that by restoring the credibility and integrity of the institutions. We need to restore faith in our governance and politics and politicians. That starts with living up—every elected office from the president down to local town council and park district is a position of trust. And every one of the people who have those positions of trust need to honor that, respect it, and voters need to hold us to that. It's something that as chair of the New Democrat Coalition, I've been working very hard, part of our agenda, to fight against the corruption and to restore that faith in government.

David Young: Yeah, it's interesting, you mention a sense of national pride, and obviously 4th of July has just [00:09:00] passed. We've got probably the world's biggest sporting event taking place in the United States right now with the soccer World Cup.

You mentioned earlier, just you briefly alluded to social media, and I'm really curious as to your thoughts on the role and impact, positive or negative, of social media on trust-building, on partisanship, division, and building national pride because, the more people I speak to, the more are very concerned around how people are using this medium for a sense of communication and having it not be a thoughtful medium for bipartisanship.

Rep. Brad Schneider: Absolutely. And I think social media is an accelerator more than the root cause. I think the root cause is people not being active in their communities anymore, people staying inside, whether it's kids inside playing video games. Or [00:10:00] just, there was a book written a while ago titled "Bowling Alone," that Americans just aren't getting involved in various organizations. The anecdote to what we're seeing in social media is people engaging with their neighbors. It can be as simple as a block party. That's a good moment in time, but I think you're seeing more of it, and people seem to be looking for more of it, are these interactions across time, from book

clubs to—and social media facilitates this as well.

So I heard a futurist, God, 30 years ago make the comment that, he said, "I know people who made millions of dollars with telephones. I know people who lost millions of dollars with telephones. Telephones were not the problem." And I think the same way, what I'd like to see us spend more time doing is giving our kids the skills to engage, to converse, to think critically. Media succeeds in division and distraction when people don't have , the ability to recognize the wheat from the chaff, so to speak. And social [00:11:00] media accelerates it. It's much more global, but it's not new.

We were talking about the Founders. I would say still one of, if not the most partisan, nasty election in American history was 1800, between John Adams and Thomas Jefferson, and that was driven by media that were the pamphleteers and putting out just terrible attacks on their opponents. That's not new. How we defend against it is giving people the skills to think for themselves and get news and sources that are credible, and bringing people together to engage with each other in respectful and honest discourse.

David Young: Yeah, it's very interesting you say that. And again, from the conversations I have with policymakers and CEOs, the United States has weathered partisan divides before over its history. But it does take civility and critical thinking to weather those storms. We're going to take a short break right now and be right back [00:12:00] with more of my conversation with Congressman Schneider.

Welcome back to C-Suite Perspectives. I'm your host, David Young, the president of The CEO Center, the Public Policy Center here at The Conference Board. I'm joined today by Congressman Brad Schneider, a six-term US representative from Illinois' Tenth Congressional District.

Congressman, before we were talking just about the next generation of and the importance of the next generation to develop skills and training, the importance of critical thinking in bridging the partisan divide. One recurring concern today is whether our political and civic culture rewards the kind of leadership qualities that democracies depend on: prudence, courage, restraint, compromise, and the willingness to put long-term interests of the country ahead of short-term political gains.

Really curious here cause, six terms in the House, and as we look at the next generation, do you think the country still [00:13:00] rewards political courage? Or have we created a system that punishes it and doesn't really encourage the next generation to step up and follow your footsteps?

Rep. Brad Schneider: I'm going to give a slightly nuanced answer, or un-nuanced, and the answer is yes to both.

David Young: Yeah.

Rep. Brad Schneider: And it's not new. So evidently, yesterday was the anniversary of

the formal reading of the Declaration of Independence, so I participated in a reading in one of my communities. And someone came up to me afterwards and said she was looking for that political courage you mentioned, and she was reading John Kennedy's "Profiles in Courage," which was written 60 years ago, 60-plus years ago.

Why is that relevant to the question you're asking now? Political courage was rare enough then that he had to reach back to find a dozen people, 11 people, that he could profile as having the political courage necessary, and they didn't always get the appropriate reward for their bravery or willingness to stand up. It's hard to be the one to stick your neck out. [00:14:00] I know this from experience. But I also know from experience that when you do, and you do it for the right reasons, A, you can look yourself in the mirror, which is the most important thing I think for anyone to do. But B, voters respect that.

So I've run, I'm now running for my eighth time. As you mentioned, it's my sixth term. I lost my first re-election. I ran against the same guy three times. He was a one-term incumbent when I beat him by one point. The next election, he ran again and beat me by two points. In the rubber match, I won in what, at the time, was called a landslide: five points.

We were—he was a moderate, is a moderate Republican. I'm a moderate Democrat. I like to say we argued from opposing 45-yard lines on the field. There wasn't a lot that separated us. The biggest differences probably were the order of our priorities, the programs we would put the greatest emphasis on. But we both were fighting to support our community, advance the interests of the community, etc. I won my fourth race by 30 [00:15:00] points and have been winning somewhat similar numbers ever since, in part because my voters know who I am and what I stand for, and I'm out there.

When I stopped for coffee this morning at a coffee shop I don't normally go to, a woman stopped me and said, "You don't know me, but I see you everywhere." And she made a list of the times we've run across each other over the last several weeks. That's what I think elected officials should be doing, and I think when you do that, when you're honest with the voters, you tell them where you're coming from, they may not agree with you, but if they respect you, you'll have their support

David Young: Just a follow-on question to that, a question around self-reflection. What was the motivation originally when you wanted to go into politics? And now years later, you're still here having a transformational role. The motivation back then, does it still exist today, or are they different reasons now?

Rep. Brad Schneider: The motivation exists. If I'm honest, the motivation, I haven't checked the boxes of what I wanted to achieve, which I guess is why [00:16:00] I'm still doing this. In 2010, before I ran, was the Tea Party wave, and the Democrats lost 63 seats. I was looking at this in 2011. My kids at the time were a senior and sophomore in high school, preparing to launch out into the world. And having invested so much in my children to give them the best opportunity they could have to succeed and find life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, I looked at what was happening in Washington and said,

"They're not dealing with the problems we face as a country."

We had a \$12 trillion debt at the time. I'll come back to that in a second. We had a health care crisis. We can talk about that still. There were a lot of issues, and I'd spent my career in business helping companies, small and large, solve problems. I like getting my head around big problems.

I said, "I have an obligation not necessarily to fix the problems, but to work towards it to give my kids and their generation a better chance at success." So here we are. That was 2011. It's 15 years later. The debt's pushing \$40 trillion. The health care system, [00:17:00] people are giving up on health care cause they can't afford it. The economy continues to grow, but not grow in a way that lifts all people up with a opportunity to achieve the American dream.

So I've still got fight left in me, and I'm still going at it, but I am excited to see the next generation also coming in. People who are committed to the same fight of making our country stronger, making our future better, giving our kids the opportunities they deserve.

David Young: Share a little bit more about, around your thoughts about the debt crisis. \$40 trillion, you mentioned. Depending on what the defense budget is we arguably spend more on interest than we do on the defense budget. Interest rates are what they are. There are massive pressures on Social Security, Medicare, Medicaid. How do we start addressing—I mean, we can't solve it overnight, but how do we start moving in the right direction to solve what is an inevitable crisis?

Rep. Brad Schneider: The first thing is having conversations. I'm proud to be a part of several bipartisan groups that are talking about this. I am frustrated [00:18:00] that many of the people who are engaged in these groups express the desire, which we honor, is that we talk to each other, but we don't broadly talk about what we're doing because they are going to face the consequences at home.

We have to be willing to say the debt as it is today is unsustainable. The single largest line item on our budget is servicing debt for things that were bought generation or generations ago, depriving future generations of the opportunity to invest in what they think is best for their future. There can be no sacred cows, right? Whether it is spending or increased revenue, we need to be willing to look at everything and say, "What delivers the promises of the social contract we have as a nation, that if you work hard, you play by the rules, you have the opportunity to pursue your dreams and secure a dignified retirement?"

Those are things that we need to commit to and say that we're going to [00:19:00] have to make tough decisions. If we don't act to address the Social Security Trust Fund, it runs out in like, six, seven years, depending on how you look at it, and we're going to have to reduce the benefits people receive by 20, 25%. We can sit aside and let that happen and say, "We tried. There's nothing we can do," or we can take action like they did in the 1980s, when I first entered the workforce, to ensure that Social Security would be there for the next generation. And my generation that's reaching the age of retirement has

Social Security. We have to do that for the next.

Health care is a growing aspect of our economy. I mentioned I had foot surgery. I was grateful to have the technology and the providers, from the doctors to the nurses to the physical therapists, who were getting me back on my feet and back to 100%. Everyone in this country should have that. But we are spending upwards of \$15,000 per year per person on health care. How do we bend that curve, and how do we figure out how to pay for it? Some people say, "Let's do Medicare for All. That solves the problem." And when you push them [00:20:00] on that, and I say, "I'll be 65 next month. I've been paying into Medicare for 51 years." I started working when I was 14. I know that if I live to my life expectancy, I'll take more out of the system than I put in. That's not sustainable. And how do I take a child where 40, 41% of the kids born in this country, their birth is covered by Medicaid? How do I give them health care for their life in a system where they're not going to pay into it? We have to figure that out and have those discussions.

David Young: I want to ask you about what lies ahead. But before I do, you have a unique global perspective, I think. And I'm really curious to ask you this one. So the role of the United States in the world, it has, over 250 years, evolved. It continues to evolve. But just from your perspective, which is unique, your thoughts and reflections on where the United States sits today in the global ecosystem. We've just earlier this week had the NATO summit. The US, obviously, economically, politically, socially plays a critical [00:21:00] role across every country in the world. Just curious as to where you see the US sitting now when it comes to global affairs and international relations.

Rep. Brad Schneider: As we started this conversation, we talked about the semiquincentennial, and America would never have achieved its independence without support from the French. We've had engagement with the world from our founding. And over the course of our history, we went from a small country, a country that our first president, George Washington, said should not reach out to the rest of the world, to a country that in the last century, what is now recognized as the American century, we were the leaders of the free world and the ones who had the distinct, the unique ability to convene other countries on the side of good, not perfect, but good, to fight World War II. Well, we helped win World War I, to fight World War II, to create the world order that NATO was a critical part of. And the world [00:22:00] still looks to the United States for that leadership

I fear that certainly with our current administration, President Trump, who is looking inward more than outward and pulling away from that leadership role there isn't a country that has the capacity to do what the United States can and should be doing. But if we become an unreliable ally, which many Europeans see the United States as becoming, they look elsewhere, and they look to countries like China, who have a different worldview than the United States, have a different worldview of human rights, a different worldview of alliance and partnership. That's not good for the world.

So I think it's imperative that the United States regain its confidence and its engagement

with the rest of the world. We as a country are more secure, our people are more safe, when we are leading on the world stage, as is the rest of the world. And especially with today's technologies and today's geopolitics, [00:23:00] it's nice to have the Pacific Ocean and the Atlantic Ocean on either side, and Mexico and Canada, south and north, but that's not sufficient to protect us from very real and very serious threats. When we work with our allies, we can diminish those threats and protect our nation and our people.

David Young: Let's close by talking about the future of the American dream. We talked about some of the major issues that you're worried about, that we focus on, health care, the debt levels, ongoing deficits. I always like to end with looking at the glass half-full. What gives you hope as you've mentioned you're going to run again. As you look to the future, and it doesn't have to be the next 250 years, but just the next five to 10 years, what gives you hope and should give those listening to this podcast hope about what lies ahead?

Rep. Brad Schneider: What gives me hope is when I talk to young people. I visit schools quite a bit, from colleges down to kindergartens. And I talk to young people to hear what they're thinking, what they're dreaming about. And [00:24:00] they still have faith in their futures. But as kids get older, and I'm going to talk more about college kids, especially those looking at graduation, concern about what the future holds, the economy.

One thing that gives me some level of confidence, I graduated college in 1983 during the midst of a recession. And it was a tough economic year for my cohorts that year, but the economy started turning around by 1984, and had a long period of growth. That wasn't certain in '83.

As we sit here in 2026, there's concerns about AI, concerns about the global economy, and where the opportunities will lie. I believe in the power of human innovation and creativity. And I think that always will be there. If we can strengthen the sense of social contract, community, and national pride, we can make sure that our kids are not just leading the future, driving the innovations that are going to create opportunities and prosperities, but everyone in our nation has the chance to participate.

And that, [00:25:00] by definition, is the American dream. Is that no matter where you come from, no matter what you start with, there is the possibility by your own devices and your own talents and your own energies to open doors, create opportunities, and build the future you want for yourself and your family. We need to do more, and this is what Congress needs to do more, of clearing the obstacles, laying down the guardrails, and easing the path for more people, all Americans, to have that opportunity.

David Young: Very well said, sir. Congressman Schneider, thank you so much for joining us today. This has sincerely been a terrific conversation about your life, what lies ahead for the American dream and America at 250 years, the state of civic life, and the leadership and citizenship required to renew the American experiment for the next generation. So, our sincerest thanks for joining us today.

Rep. Brad Schneider: Thank you. It was a pleasure.

David Young: And thanks to all of you for listening to C-Suite Perspectives. I'm David Young, and this series [00:26:00] has been brought to you by The Conference Board.

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