



Less than 30 plus greater than 70

Can solving this generational equation lead to better public policy outcomes for all of us?

by Sean Kershaw

How do you define public policy?

As someone who is paid to know the answer to this question, I am often unsure myself, and I think that the common definition of public policy (what government does) prevents us from having an impact on our public problems and priorities.

Who is the “public” in public policy?

Usually, it’s the government. I am on the board of an organization that spends tens of millions of dollars annually on social service programs and our discussions about public policy are primarily about how and when we get involved in advocacy at the Capitol. While these are productive and necessary conversations, a broader definition of public policy would help this organization better leverage all the ways it already impacts public policy.

Pose these two questions to someone from the emerging “millennial” generation, those under age 30, or the “greatest generation,” those over age 70. The difference in their answers is telling. It can also be instructive for all of us as we think about how to improve the practice—and outcomes—of public policy.

Our public policy generation gap

I talked recently with an extremely talented 24-year-old nonprofit leader who participated in a multigenerational panel discussion about public policy. He realized he didn’t have a workable definition of the term public policy, either.

He saw all institutions—schools and congregations and nonprofits—as necessary participants in public policy and creators of the common good. He wasn’t waiting for the government or anyone else to help him decide when and where to do something. He and three friends started Students Today Leaders Forever, a rapidly growing nonprofit that promotes student leadership through community service.

But his generation has lost faith in both government and politics as the means by which we solve public problems, and

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while they are enthusiastic about having an impact, they don’t necessarily have an understanding of how systems and politics can work to produce long-term change.

On the other hand, long-term members of the Citizens League have an amazing understanding of how these public outcomes happen: the mechanics and cause and effect of public policy. They approach the analysis of public issues from a thoughtful and systemic point of view that has helped them to avoid jumping to easy but sometimes totally misguided solutions. These members practiced politics well, provided visionary leadership, and succeeded because they understood the proper role of government and business at a particular time.

If we only focus on government, we risk downplaying the new role that institutions other than government can and must play right now. I sense that corporations are reengaging in public policy in part because they are growing concerned about the willingness of the generations coming behind them, like mine, to develop the systemic solutions we need to solve our mounting policy challenges.

At this unique time in our history, when so many people from both of these generations are engaged and interested, I think it’s possible—and necessary—to redefine public policy in a way that combines the civic energy and institutional creativity of the emerging generation with the systemic and political wisdom of our founding generation at the Citizens League.

The “public” in public policy

I believe that public policy is a principled course of action that benefits the people. It is the choices and strategies that all individuals and all institutions make that impact Minnesotans today and tomorrow.

“Course of action” refers to the fact that policy is always about making choices, for example, the mix of spending on roads and transit needed to address congestion and promote economic growth. Rules, laws, and policies in all types of organizations guide this process. In transportation, government, employers, drivers, and riders all play governing roles in decision making.

“Principled” refers to the fact that these decisions are guided by a set of values. At the Citizens League, we are guided by our civic values: human capacity, democracy, active citizenship, political competence, and institutional sustainability.

“The people” simply refers to the fact that public policy both reflects the public’s interest and serves the larger public good. The public in public policy isn’t the public sector. It’s all of us in Minnesota, in all sorts of institutions, organizations, and generations.

A new equation for public policy

As long as public policy is something done “out there,” under a beautiful marble dome at the Capitol, citizens will be mostly spectators and commentators rather than actors shaping public policy.

We need to harness the political and analytical wisdom of our greatest generation, and the enthusiasm and institutional entrepreneurship of the millennial generation, and bring them together to create a new civic definition of public policy, a definition that recognizes that the choices each of us makes daily under our own roofs that offer real opportunities for us to engage in public policy—and to have real and meaningful impact on Minnesota as we enter a new generation in our state’s history. ●

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