

Corporate Political Responsibility Taskforce

Expert Dialogue with Francis Johnson

Francis Johnson - Module #2

Elizabeth Doty: Hello, everyone, and welcome to the Corporate Political Responsibility Task Force Expert Dialogue. My name's Elizabeth Doty, and I'm the [01:40:00] Director of the Corporate Political Responsibility Task Force at the Erb Institute at the University of Michigan, and I'll be moderating today's Expert Dialogue with Francis Johnson of Take Back Our Republic.

The Corporate Political Responsibility Task Force, or CPRT. Is an initiative of the Erb Institute, a 25 year long partnership between the Ross School of Business and the School for Environment and Sustainability at the University of Michigan, led by Managing Director Terry Nelodov and Faculty Director Tom Lyon, the Erb Institute is known for its leadership in three areas, teaching and learning.

Business engagement with groups like the CPRT and scholarly and applied research. The CPRT's mission is to help companies better align their approach to political influence with their commitments to purpose and values, sustainability, and stakeholders. As we're seeing, corporate political responsibility is an increasingly pivotal element in managing stakeholder trust, addressing systemic issues, and rebuilding public [01:41:00] trust in institutions.

I am very excited to be able to speak with Francis Johnson today. We met, I think it was in 2018 talking about pay to play politics and money in politics and how it's affecting priorities across the political spectrum and trust in the system and polarization. The focus today will be addressing pay to play politics and a conservative view on the need for political reform.

Francis is in a very interesting position to be able to speak to this. He is the president of a group called Take Back Our Republic. Which is a conservative nonpartisan organization working to ensure power and influences return to we the people putting voters first and they are doing so in collaboration with other reform groups across the political spectrum.

So, it's a really interesting case study. He's a founding partner of communications resources, a public affairs, public relations and political consultancy. Has worked at all levels of national political campaigns, serving in the Bush Quayle campaign of 92 Bush Cheney in 2000 and [01:42:00] 2004 McCain and Palin in 2008 worked on public affairs initiatives in defense, energy, agriculture, it health care, and has been political director for the Senate action committee and the conservative action alliance.

And I think maybe most exciting, and I hope he'll talk a little bit about it, is he's one of 16 inaugural fellows in a new fellowship called the Brewer Fellowship, which is a joint project of the Institute for Citizens and Scholars, I think used to be the Woodrow Wilson Institute, Unite America and Cultivate the Karass supporters of nonpartisan organizations working to put voters first.

So really some interesting background. I, I wanted to share some of that because we'll draw on that in the conversation today.

Francis, I know this takes some thought to distill and, and share with us, but I'd like to go to understanding conservative concerns, the drivers of distrust related to political influence. I think it's pretty clear anyone sees the charts that we're in an era of severe distrust. [01:43:00] It's been distrust in government, but also distrust in other major institutions and distrust of each other.

Pew Research did A lot of work on that. And yet we don't often take the time to say, what is driving this? What is causing, especially those that I'm not around every day to, to feel such distrust. So, I think this is a great opportunity with your networks and communities and experience to understand some of the biggest drivers of distrust in government and civic institutions over the past 30 or 40 years, especially amongst conservatives.

And how has that contributed to polarization?

Francis Johnson: One of the, I think one of the major things has changed and mentioned 30 to 40 years is how we get our information. You know, 30 years ago, plus 40 years ago, there was ABC, CBS, NBC and a couple of local affiliates. You had your basic hometown newspapers in a Wall Street Journal, and that was it. That's where people got their [01:44:00] information.

But what is what has happened is the cable news and all the different outlets now that are on there where they're liberal conservative. They're all there and it's, it's really kind of. You know, compounded the problem because everyone familiar with, you know, quote, the fake news piece of this, but we went from the trusted and everyone says, well, it's kind of, you know, did you trust ABC CBS back then, but those were the only ones and we listened to him and the conservatives had their own you know, side you know media outlets that they would read and get it.

But my point is. Yeah. Now with the social media, just the explosion of it. And that's where people are getting their news from. And a lot of it is not accurate. I'm not saying it's all fake, but I will say it's not accurate. And if you want or any group that really wants to get out there and [01:45:00] get their particular point across, they can get on social media.

And just let it. And in that continuous flooding of it, then all of a sudden, you know, people start believing this. And on the conservative side, I think that is one of the, one of the main things that I think conservatives are having the, the, the biggest problem with is. You know, how, you know, information is disseminated.

You know, you look at, you know, these different platforms, you know, whether or not you, you know, like a particular candidate or whatever, the ability to be able to use a platform if they wanted to use it. And I think it's you know, unfair for them to say that this person can use it. This other person can't if we're going to be kind of tied to these ways of finding information, it's making that divide greater and greater now with, you know, things in the news.

And I said, I'm not going to get into specifics, but you know, what has happened in the news in the past you know, [01:46:00] several months and incidents and you know, what is put out broadcast by the media and what they found out is what the actual truth is. And this is going to continue until we get some kind of control on how this information and what's being put out there and what's valid, what's not.

Elizabeth Doty: So are you, are you seeing then this is a common interest, this is a shared interest for Americans across political ideologies or worldviews?

Francis Johnson: Well, I think I speaking, you know, most conservatives, they have no trust in a number of the media outlets right now. They just, they don't listen. And I'm not saying that there's a hundred percent, you know, behind Fox or any of the others, but it's just the mistrust they have in media.

And that's why he started to get a lot of these sub areas of information that conservatives now are relying on a little more for, you know, for information.

Elizabeth Doty: Yeah, interesting. Let's go to the second half of this. What [01:47:00] about conservative concerns about free enterprise? I, when I listen and, and kind of broaden where I, where I tap in I hear a lot of concern about free enterprise.

I think we had some pre questions about that. And so maybe you can talk a little bit about What you're hearing that way and how it's evolved over time.

Francis Johnson: Well you know, I think that was one of the families of this country was the free enterprise system, which has enabled us this country to grow, you know, over the years.

I know there's a lot of people say some, a lot of it hasn't been fair, and so forth, but, you know, we're a country that relies on the free enterprise system. And I think what is happening at least. On the conservative side, we feel that government and government related regulations now are starting to kind of nip at that free enterprise system and their abilities to grow and regulations now that a lot of the businesses are required to adhere to are making just making to the [01:48:00] point where some are just getting out of.

You know, out of out of the business, and they just don't want to be parts of it. I think a lot of it has to do with looking what's happening right now, businesses and the mandates that are starting to come down from the government, you know, whether they consider good, you know, good or bad. Which is affecting and it affects everyone all over across the line.

And, you know, when I have, you know conversations, whether it's progressives or conservatives, you know, when, when you're in line buying gasoline, you know, the guy next to you could be the liberal conservative, whatever, he's still paying the same price as you are, you go to the grocery store and everything you buy.

You're in line, regardless of what our ideology is, we're all paying the same part. We're all paying the price for a lot of these things. And until people really understand what's, you know, what's driving this, what drives the cost of things and the inflationary period, I understand that the COVID [01:49:00] crisis, supply chain, all those things now are causing that.

But It doesn't seem that we're going to be getting out of it anytime soon, based on the way things are being done now and the attacks on the free enterprise system.

Elizabeth Doty: What do you view as a legitimate role? You and I talked a couple of days ago about, you know, business government setting rules of the game for competition.

You and I've talked about fair play and free enterprise competing fairly versus trying to get favors and cronyism. We talked about that. Referring to honest competition, what do you, where would you draw the line of the legitimate role of government versus cheating or favors or, you know, how do you, how do you weigh that or, or nipping at the free enterprise system as you just talked about and suppressing growth.

Francis Johnson: Take, for instance, I think in a conversation that we had to talk about, say, automakers right now.

And, and, you know, making automobiles and so forth. And the mandates now [01:50:00] that are coming down from the government to say that certain calendar date, all cars have to be electric or a certain percentage or, you know, some states are saying, especially California don't remember the date, but it's, you know, far off, but they're saying after that date, The only cars can be sold, new cars in the state will be, you know, of that.

And that the problem, you know, with that is to the free enterprise system and what's going on is forcing people, you know, into where the infrastructure is, it's just not there and it won't be because they're throwing a mandate down. On one side, but I'm not understanding what it's going to take to get that have that mandate.

And I think the, the conversation we had, I said, even if you were to take every automobile that's out there right now, turn it into an electric vehicle, we don't have the, we couldn't, you know, half the people or a third of the people will [01:51:00] be the only ones to be able to drive that car because we don't have the electric generating power to do to be able to charge these vehicles up on a daily basis.

And just in how the distribution piece of it, because the technology is not there, you know, long haul truckers that drive, you know, cross country with goods and so forth, you got electric truck, you know, what are you, where are they going to be able to do that. I think a lot of this is compounded because there wasn't enough planning, you know, you can set all these grandiose goals to want to do that, but it takes a lot of the effort to make sure that the infrastructure is there to be able to meet that goal. And I don't feel and I guarantee conservatives don't feel that that's been done or done properly.

Elizabeth Doty: Gotcha. And so that would be the place to focus on.

Francis Johnson: Yeah, it's, it's a planning. If you're going to, if you're going to put mandates down, you don't want people that affects that free enterprise system, all right, understanding what it's going to [01:52:00] take, a lot of the people are saying that they put down mandates, but not understanding how we're going to get to that.

And it's one of these are kind of making this up as we go along. Yeah. And that's great. You know, when you're out playing flag football, but not when you're you know, to take a certain, what are the, the. Especially the automobile business and the GDP and what that effect is on this country. And they're all right now looking at trying to, you can't buy a new car.

All right, because they're this very limited supply. You know, you drive drove by a dealer. And, and there's no cars. It literally, it used to be, you know, you drive by the dealership that always had a lot of, you know, X number of cars there. Now, now that you're not getting they're out of used cars.

Because there's so many new scars that they have, no one's trading in anything else. So it's, it's a problem. And I just feel that the way that we're going about [01:53:00] things, we're not looking at the end goal. We're just kind of throwing things up there to, you know, kind of placate people and say, Hey, this is great.

Let's, let's do this, but how are we ever going to get there?

Elizabeth Doty: Okay, I gotcha. And I think what I'll do is I'm going to put a placeholder on this and come back to it. But what you're saying to me points to the need to get beyond gridlock to be really weighing costs and benefits and working out solutions that consider different points of view.

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Let me put a pause on my questions for you and turn it back to you, Allison. If you would give us a couple of questions here for Francis to weigh in on this

Guest: I'm going to start with a question in the chat since we're on the topic of free enterprise. And she asked just how do government subsidies affect the free enterprise system?

Francis Johnson: There's some subsidies that are beneficial, that are needed, and then there's some that aren't. And I guess one of the biggest on farm subsidies [01:54:00] and so forth that if when you talk to certain group of the farmers doesn't help whatsoever, but on the corporate side, it, you know, benefits them and their bottom line.

But when you look at some of the I'd say, you know, smaller your, you know, local farmers or that are. You know, not just one, say, you know, one farm, but they're, say, a large collective of farms in a particular state or geographic area. These subsidies that the farms aren't helping them. I can't speak totally on that, but just in some of the work that we've done and the conversations we've had with people on just issues that issues come up several times.

Elizabeth Doty: Thank you very much.

Guests: All right. So we had a pre question from Emily Hogan about opportunities for trans partisanship and bridging those divides. We also had a great question from Terry in the [01:55:00] chat that's pretty much on the same topic so Terry if you'd like to ask that yourself and then Emily feel free to chime in if there's anything Terry's missing in his question.

I think mine might be a subset of Emily's question. At Erb Institute, we cover a broad range of social and environmental impact and business. Climate is top of mind for our students and our researchers. And we also have a commitment as an institute to try to play a bridging role across political divides, cultural divides, civic divides, et cetera.

Climate change is a tough one to do that on. And how, what are some of the avenues to bridging divides? On climate or at least just the, the effects of changing weather patterns and other environmental losses. If we don't call it climate change, but where do we start?

Francis Johnson: Well, I think we need to start on the honest education that yes, there's a lot of information out there that are put out by all sides and each claiming to be [01:56:00] the authority. I think that both sides really need to kind of come together and say, all right, look, let's have an honest conversation on the, on the climate. Let's look at the facts and kind of go from there. I don't think we're doing enough of that.

And I think that needs to be done more on, you know, I'd say this side of the table than the government side of the table. All right. I think that it has, you know, these things have to grow within the public itself. And I think what happens is people resent the government making, you know, mandates on this, whereas I think if, if groups, whether it's, you know, Your affiliates and herb or other affiliates that we work with that are climate is their issue.

We work with conservatives that have climate issues, you know, not all conservatives or you'll think that there's not a climate a lot to do. They just don't get the notoriety that the others get. So my point is, [01:57:00] we need to, you know, the different groups need to have those conversations between us because that's what's going to drive because we're the ones that are electing the individuals that are making these decisions.

And I think that there's this pushback because a lot of people feel the government are making decisions and they don't understand why it's never really been explained to them

properly. You know, other, as I said, that's another thing about the social media and climate change and some of the stuff that you read.

It's like It can't be true. So I don't know if that answers your question, but you know, the key is these groups, you have, you have to start talking more within the groups within us to be able to affect that change on the, on the political side.

Elizabeth Doty: Francis. I think it, maybe it's a, there's academic conceptual term for it is deliberative democracy, but there's a group of Republican environmentalists who were part of called In [01:59:00] This Together America.

I know, Francis, I know, you know, those folks, and we will have some of them speak with us. They were just part of a similar project called America in One Room. I was specifically focused on Texans and Californians going through a thought process where they agreed together on what they considered objective information, weighed things together, talk to each other, and then saw how their agendas shifted and gave instructions to elected officials.

Would that be an example of what you're talking about?

Francis Johnson: Oh yeah, definitely. Another group that is there's the Joseph Rainey Center, which is, you know, climate is one of their main issues and they're coming more from the on the conservative side and they're, you know, really understand, you know, what the issues are and believe that something you know, needs to be done

Elizabeth Doty: great. Thank you. And it's nice to have these touchstones. I think 1 of the themes when we go into the 3rd section will be there are incredible groups. I know for [02:00:00] myself when I'm around these groups that are. Working together on some of the issues and reforms you've talked about on talking across the aisle.

It's just it restores your faith in in citizenship and each other. So, we'll come to some of that, but I want to first talk about a little more of the problem, Francis, and then we'll go into the forms. What you described about throwing around mandates not explained well, and I know there's a media element to that, but there are other aspects as well.

There are also elements of gridlock in this, right? Because it involves how do you have a market based mechanism? How do you make sure it's not regressive? There are all kinds of factors to be considered if you're trying to electrify the grid as 1 example, right? Or change farm subsidies as another.

And yet gridlock seems to be our modus operandi for the past. 15 years. And so I wanted to ask what's your, you have been in the heart of, you know, these conversations and how people are interpreting things. What experience have you [02:01:00] had? And what do you see as potentially needed possible? Where would you focus your energy to address gridlock?

Francis Johnson: Well, you know, everybody has a stake in these things and, you know, politicians. Number one is a need to keep getting reelected. Number one. So I'm going to do, you know, whatever I need to do to, you know, maintain, you know, the power that, say, a party, whether it's Democrats or Republicans, it doesn't matter for Republicans, it was switched and Republicans are running the house.

They're going to do everything they can to make sure they maintain that. And the problem is the, the political parties that really kind of push these agendas. And there's not enough. push back from the people itself that are going to say no, you know, we're proud Democrat. We don't like this or we're [02:02:00] proud Republican.

We don't like this. You need to do. We're not getting enough of that because the individuals that run, you know, the whether it's the you know, McCarthy on the Republican side closely on the Democrat side, you know, they're Those agendas you go in and try to affect, I get, I'm on the Hill several times a month, just going through and it's, it's been difficult because of COVID.

We had to do everything via zoom. Now they're starting to go back into the offices itself, but sitting down and talking to staff about these things. And, you know, they kind of have their agenda and they, you know, they gauge and they, everybody that comes in there, they know. you know, not on who you are, but what your ideological bet is reason.

And they look at this, these are the ones they thought this is, this is the calls that we're getting in at our congressional offices and they'll run their separate polling. I mean, the polling business, being a polling business is great, especially if you work, [02:03:00] you know, for the leadership of one of the parties, because you're, you're always working and that's what these individuals do.

And they're the one that's what pushes the bills that are coming up. whether or not they're going to get you know, voted on, not voted on what gets to the floor. And the bill, this bill I have, I said, all I want is to bring it to the floor. I just want to get a floor vote, an up or down floor vote on this.

And it's difficult to get because, you know, to them, doesn't interest them. It's not going to help them get reelected.

Elizabeth Doty: How is this not the same as them just representing their constituents? Are they, are they refusing to put it on the floor vote because that's what their constituents believe? Well, there's some other dynamic you're referring to.

Francis Johnson: But when you look at, you know, say that, you know, their constituents, one of the things that that. We need to do it. I said, this is group, whether it's it's take back and our, our mantra is, you know, we, the people we need to get more people involved. When you look at the percentage of voters that vote in any indi, [02:04:00] any congressional district, , it's, it's well below 50%.

Okay, now everything that these individuals do, they vote on affects 100 percent of those people, but the people that are actually paying attention in some areas is 35%. You know, just to say, well, how do we do this? It's the people that people have that it's, it's the groups. It's our group, America, all these other groups.

That's our job. Our job is to go out to the people and say, Hey, okay. These are the issues. You know, these are the issues which, you know, we feel great that are important. You know, we're all, you know, we all have different issues and we all basically kind of want the same thing. We want more citizen input.

And the only way we're going to do that is be able to take these issues back to the people and try to get them interested and get that's why I say rank choice voting. You know, I've talked to any number of people about, you know, why don't the vote, you know, we [02:05:00] did a poll on, are you a registered voter?

Yes. Did you vote? You don't know. And we always talk to the people that say no, the ones that vote. Okay, good. You're doing, but my vote doesn't count. The same people are always there and it just goes on and on like that. And that's one of the things that, you know, we, as an educational case is going back to people's going.

You want to know why you're not getting what you perceive that you know, as a citizen, you should be getting is because only 35 percent of you actually care about, you know, these issues and vote each side. So it's kind of that shaming thing we're trying to do, but that's the only way you're going to do it.

That's the only way things are going to change, because unless you bring more people into the political process, nothing's going to change.

Elizabeth Doty: Gotcha. It's funny, we have a quote in our house now, which is, it may not happen because you did it, but it won't happen if you don't.[02:06:00]

I've posted here on the closing slide to go to takeback.org. Get to know what they're what they're doing. Stay in touch. They have a good newsletter, very informative. You can also go to the Erb Institute's Corporate Political Responsibility Task Force website and contact us if you're interested in joining as an executive in a company and or to continue to attend these expert dialogues.

What would you suggest to them as a takeaway? Things that they could or should do to address pay to play or to to rebuild the country.

Francis Johnson: Well, I think you know, overall, we need to really start looking at smaller government. And I think you know, over the years, if you look at what government was, the question was 30, 40 years ago, what was our government 40 years ago?

Look, what's our government now? And it's, it's. It's like night and day. And as more government involvement has gotten in, you know, some good, most not so good. And it kind of fosters a lot of, you know, of what we're going through now. So, you know, I would just, you know, You know, push it, especially if you're in a political business or even on the [02:08:00] corporate side is to really kind of push for that small business.

And one of the things that we had a conversations with the Chamber of Commerce there and which is, you know, they're, they represent businesses and they were all in agreement that, you know, smaller government is, is, is not so much. They're asking to kind of just go freewheeling. But little less regulations, the individuals that are running the corporations are very smart people, they know what they're doing, they understand what it is, they have their problem closer to the people, then some of these elected officials are because they're the ones that are, you know, Doing the making the products and services that the everyday person, you know, needs and uses.

Let's try to push for smaller government. If you start, it's going to take time. It's not something overnight, but start looking at some of the regulations. You know, why do we have and. Get the the politicians we have, [02:09:00] you know, in office down the ones that are looking, you know, to run in the future to run kind of on a platform of, you know, we need to ratchet back what we're doing here on regulations in the government, because number one, it's going to cost less for the taxpayers.

And that, you know, that's a key. And also, it's going to foster, you know, more individuals, you know, when we get started getting more into full employment, you know, you know, people are paying more taxes. which in turn is going to help pay down this, this massive deficit that we have. And it's, you know, it's not so much you're saying a tax increases, it's, it's increasing the base.

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You're actually paying the taxes, which will help pay down the deficit. And these are the kinds of things that we need to do. And we need to push for you know, in the upcoming years.

Elizabeth Doty: Thank you all for joining us today. And Francis, thank you so much for walking through so many facets of a really rich, you know, dynamic environment.

Thank you for your work.

Francis Johnson: Well, thank you. It was a great, great pleasure to [02:10:00] be here.