

The Role of Associations in Today's Civil Discourse

Before newly-elected or returning legislators were even sworn in, the 116th Congress was already being defined as “divided” – a Republican-controlled Senate and a Democratic-controlled House.

Just the term “divided government” can trigger painful thoughts of two more years of partisan acrimony, gridlock and positioning for 2020. But while Congress – like any institution – can be vulnerable to one-sidedness, rivalry and inaction, we can and should expect more from our elected leaders, particularly that they demonstrate a genuine and sincere commitment to promoting civil discourse in government.

People from different backgrounds and cultures bring a varied perspective to problem-solving. But in order to unlock new solutions, we must first set the “table stakes” of how these discussions and debates should be conducted – with transparency, integrity and civility. The fact that this Congress is so much more diverse than the one before it is encouraging. We must be inclusive and open to different voices than our own, and even to crossing the aisle to realize the practical benefits and power of working together to get things done. We cannot afford the alternative.

Finding connections and a common purpose with others is a hallmark of America's associations that we can help champion for Congress and other institutions. Associations serve as important forums for people who want to come together and achieve results. This is the fundamental purpose of associations, to allow different voices to be heard, to accept that there are many ways of resolving a problem, and ultimately, to make our industries, our professions and our society stronger.

The association community is rooting hard for the 116th Congress to prioritize and produce sensible solutions to the nation's most pressing problems. We also vow collectively not to sit on the sidelines while leaders engage in personal attacks while neglecting the policy decisions that impact society and the industries and professions we represent. Associations have a responsibility to their members and affiliates to give voice to their interests and amplify their voices to help bring about a new sensibility in government, one that rewards respect, listening and those who seek common ground rather than divisiveness.

Post-partisanship is a term in the political nomenclature, but as stakeholders in the political process, associations are strong believers in putting aside divisions and building on our common bonds to achieve real results. Associations stand ready to work with the new Congress to transcend “politics as usual;” to engage in constructive, civil discourse; and to find solutions on issues that matter to all Americans.