Contemporary policymaking is plagued by extreme partisan polarization, political corruption, distrust in basic political institutions, news coverage that does not inform civic discussions, lack of political civility, and political practices that discourage compromise, bargaining, and negotiation. Many different institutional, electoral, and political issues undermine public trust and confidence thus making it difficult to lead and govern.

To address these systemic governance challenges, the Brookings Institution Governance Studies program, led by Vice President Darrell West, is launching an initiative to improve national political leadership. This three-year endeavor’s aim is to enhance the understanding of the nation’s current leadership deficit to find ways to change leaders’ behavior and improve leadership capacity.

There are many dimensions to our national leadership problem. As pointed out by Professor Barbara Kellerman of the Harvard Kennedy School of Government, the United States faces challenges in terms of leadership, followership and constituency groups, and the context in which leadership takes place. Many contemporary political leaders lack the basic skills of priority setting, coalition-building, bargaining, negotiating, and communication. Each of these is crucial, especially during a time of budgetary, health care, education, energy, immigration, and foreign policy challenges. Rarely has the United States simultaneously confronted so many different policy issues with the potential to torpedo our collective future.

Yet our problem is not simply one of needing a few good men and women to step forward. Followers and constituency groups play a significant role in leadership. Massive public cynicism makes it nearly impossible for anyone to trust leaders’ statements or believe government is part of the solution to policy challenges. Leaders cannot lead and govern effectively unless those outside of government, such as individuals, advocacy groups, businesses, and the news media, recognize how their own behaviors hinder leadership and make it difficult for elected and administrative officials to bargain and negotiate. Compromise has become a dirty word among many news reporters, voters, and advocacy organizations, and this limits leaders’ capacity to address important policy problems.

Given the breadth and depth of roadblocks to good leadership, we cannot be effective in addressing every aspect of the problem. To achieve impact, the project will focus its effort on key features of the problem. First, we plan to emphasize national political leadership. This includes elected officials and top administrative leaders in the United States. These are the individuals in the legislative and executive branches who are on the front lines and require help to do a better job.

Second, we will emphasize actions to improve leadership, followership, and the political and institutional capacity for leadership. These are the crucial barriers in terms of national political leadership.
Research for the project will focus on the following areas:

- Institutional impediments to bold and effective political leadership;
- What citizens, groups, and the news media can do to further political leadership;
- How performance-based management and data analytics can improve decision-making;
- The impact of changes in political party organization, operations, and policies on leadership capacity;
- How contemporary leadership compares with past political leaders, and what is to be learned from earlier models; and
- Ways to improve political leadership and citizenship training.

Throughout the project, we will publish case studies, reports, and white papers. To release our findings, we will conduct public events and private briefings for press and policymakers. Research will be posted on the Brookings website, as well as commentary, short Q&A sessions, and videos of our public event proceedings.

We have organized a distinguished advisory board of practitioners and experts to counsel and assist our efforts. This high-level group provides us with important feedback and ideas on how to strengthen our impact.

- Leslie Berlowitz, President and CEO, American Academy of Arts and Sciences
- William Budinger, Founding Director, The Rodel Foundations
- Lisa Caputo, former Deputy Assistant to President Clinton
- Alan Dachs, President and CEO, Fremont Group
- Former Representative Bart Gordon (D-TN), Partner, K&L Gates
- Suzanne Nora Johnson, Brookings Trustee
- Barbara Kellerman, James MacGregor Burns Lecturer in Public Leadership, John F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University
- Justice Sandra Day O’Connor (Ret.), United States Supreme Court
- Edgar Rios, CEO of SHD Oil & Gas LLC
- Max Stier, President and CEO, Partnership for Public Service
- Former Senator, Governor, Mayor George Voinovich
- Judy Woodruff, Co-Anchor and Senior Correspondent, The PBS NewsHour