Testimony of Chris Griswold
Policy Director, American Compass
before the U.S. Senate Committee on the Judiciary
Subcommittee on the Constitution
Regarding "America 250 and Reclaiming American Citizenship"
June 24, 2026

Chairman Schmitt, Ranking Member Welch, and Members of the Committee, thank you for inviting me to participate in today's hearing.

American Compass is an economic policy think tank. Our mission is to restore an economic consensus that emphasizes the importance of family, community, and industry to the nation's liberty and prosperity. In other words, our goal is an American economics that remembers what the ultimate purpose of an economy actually is: human flourishing, and the productive activity and healthy institutions that support it.

But America's economic failures are clearly symptoms of a deeper failing. We can see it in our culture, our communities, our politics, and the nation as a whole. Developing economic reforms is not enough if we lack the political will to fully implement them, or the collective capacity to benefit from them.

The signs of decline are all around us: rising inequality, falling marriage rates, exploding deficits, voiceless and disposable workers, isolated individuals, collapsing communities. They are clear in disillusioned young people who see neither prospects for building decent lives nor the point of shouldering burdens themselves, and instead are increasingly seduced by the fringes at both ends of the political spectrum. Indicators of rising consumption and celebrations of expanding autonomy abound, yet ordinary Americans face dwindling opportunities to form strong families, find work that will provide them with stability and security, or engage in rich community life.

The more American Compass has talked to people both in and outside the Washington, DC bubble, the clearer it has become that most people struggle to find the language to describe this deeper failing. But they can sense that it's real. They feel unmoored, disoriented, and weighed down, worried that the future we want for ourselves and our children is slipping away.

Why aren't we satisfied with more stuff, better technology, and fewer constraints than anyone in human history?

Because alongside higher GDP and material consumption, we have suffered the degradation of our communal, economic, and national life. And in both diagnosis and cure, we kept finding ourselves returning to one concept that cut across all those dimensions: citizenship.[1]

---

[1] See the statement "A Project for the People: Reclaiming American Citizenship," American Compass, June 2, 2026. <https://americancompass.org/reclaiming-american-citizenship/>. This testimony is largely adapted from that statement.

Not citizenship in the legalistic sense, but citizenship as in the thick, reciprocal relationship that provides the bedrock for a functional republic. Citizenship that answers the question, regardless of whether we are in George Washington's words "Citizens by birth or choice," of what kind of larger communal, economic, and national project we are citizens *of*.

Citizenship, in this sense, is the bond that turns a population into a unified people, establishing mutual obligation within our communities, across the nation, and between generations. It both demands and protects, asking each of us to carry burdens we did not choose, and in return giving us a place, shared goals, and a say in the forces shaping our lives. It elevates us as problem-solvers endowed with agency, who come together to do more than any of us could accomplish on our own. "The legitimate object of government," is, after all, as Abraham Lincoln put it, "to do for a community of people, whatever they need to have done, but can not do, at all, or can not, so well do, for themselves—in their separate, and individual capacities."[2]

Teddy Roosevelt said in 1910 said "the stream will not permanently rise higher than the main source; and the main source of national power and national greatness is found in the average citizenship of the nation."[3] The blessings of citizenship are meant to provide ordinary citizens the foundation from which to build good lives.

But if the American people increasingly do *not* feel like that describes their lives, if working Americans do *not* understand themselves to be full participants in a shared American project, if the failed cultural, economic, and national scripts we've been running are proving insufficient, then the question begs itself: what happened to the meaning of our shared citizenship?

What happened is that the American elites responsible for setting the nation's course corrupted the communal, economic, and national life on which it depends. And we willingly shirked our obligations, devolving from citizens into mere consumers—passive subjects of an empire that promised safety and comfort while draining away liberty, dignity, and prosperity.

With their undermining of respect and solidarity, American elites released themselves from their own obligations to their fellow citizens, degrading communal life for everyone else in the process. With their blind faith in free markets and individual choice to maximize welfare, they dismissed family and community, borders and regulations, and basic morality and common decency as unnecessary constraints, even though economic life in fact depended upon them.

They did achieve their blinkered vision. Gross domestic product and the stock market kept rising higher. The American consumer had more stuff, better technology, and fewer constraints. But the American citizen paid the price.

In an era of unprecedented wealth for the fortunate few, we find our nation headed toward fiscal collapse and tenuous economic security for working families. We are headed toward generational collapse, as we fail to form families or guide young people toward responsible and successful

---

[2] Abraham Lincoln, "Fragments on Government", July 1, 1854.
[3] Theodore Roosevelt, "Citizenship in a Republic", April 23, 1910.

adulthood. We are headed toward institutional collapse, as both our markets and our government repeatedly betray our trust.

Reclaiming American citizenship in the fullest sense, then, begins with the assertion that it is worth reclaiming, and with an articulation of the substantive ends toward which communal, economic, and national life must lead.

And so, in that spirit, I want to propose a few suggestions of what that might look like:

1. **We must reject *isolation and atomization.***

   Promising people radical autonomy has left them disconnected from each other and from reality. **We must choose instead** laws and a culture that reward success along well-defined paths through life, supported by meaningful relationships and institutions refocused on their purpose.

2. **We must reject *stagnation and sclerosis.***

   Our aging society has lost its ambition, its appetite for risk, and its interest in the future. **We must choose instead** a youthful determination to carry forward the legacy of our elders, and channel our common resources toward taking great risks and achieving great things.

3. **We must reject *the lottery economy.***

   "Opportunity" has become another word for "escape"—from the blighted conditions in which everyone else lives. **We must choose instead** the vindication of every citizen's inherent dignity through an American Dream that becomes a true American Promise, premised not on escape for the few but decent lives for all.

4. **We must reject *naked consumerism.***

   The folly of unquestioned deference to "revealed preference" in the marketplace has revealed how easily we can lose all sense of higher purpose, succumb to mind-numbing entertainment, and slide toward utter dependence on outside support. **We must choose instead** a nonnegotiable commitment to agency, competence, self-determination, and the use of technology to enrich lives rather than monetize their decay.

5. **We must reject *chaos and corruption.***

   American elites have treated the basic norms and behaviors of ordered liberty as a game, undermining the rule of law and normalizing a culture of taking whatever you can get. **We must choose instead** to rebuild trustworthy institutions, police our streets, and impose consequences on those who abuse power for personal gain, whether in the halls of government or on the company jet.

6. **We must reject *polarization and despair.***

   The polluted public square has become an arena merely for fighting, with little prospect of resolving differences or achieving change. **We must choose instead** a responsive politics that demonstrates faith in the wisdom and morality of ordinary citizens and holds elites accountable for representing and serving them well.

The arguments for cynicism are all familiar and played out by now. We must reject those too.

In the vicious cycle of modern American politics, each side justifies its corrosive conduct as necessary to counter the other's, even though the ensuing tactics invariably fail. The party in power overreaches, underdelivers, and succumbs to the next wave election. No one achieves a durable governing majority. All involved feel that they are losing, because all are indeed losing.

That failure may be depressing, but I believe it is also cause for great optimism. If tearing down America is not a winning formula, building it back up might just have a chance. What passes for radicalism these days at both ends of the political spectrum has become dull, performed for attention, impressive to no one, and incapable of solving problems. It should surprise no one that the public keeps rejecting it.

We must choose something that is far more radical because it dares to be responsible and responsive.

Decline is a choice, and we can choose otherwise. It is the precise purpose of our citizen-led republic, as described in our Constitution, to "establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defence, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity." In such a republic, a citizenry committed to reconstituting itself still controls its own fate, can still elevate leaders committed to that process, and so has the power to determine its future.

And we have a good guide as to whether we are achieving those purposes well, offered in the Declaration of Independence, written 250 years ago this year: all of us are created equal, and are endowed by our Creator with infinite dignity and worth. The standard by which we must judge the health of our shared citizenship is whether our communal, economic, and national life is protecting that human dignity and promoting human flourishing, or not.

A friend of mine named Skyler lives in the Rust Belt. He's an electrical contractor without a college degree – exactly the kind of working-class American that politicians like to tokenize during elections. He has become disillusioned with politicians' (of all varieties) claims to speak for working men and women. But the other day told me that American Compass's statement on citizenship, from which my testimony today is adapted, was the most energizing thing he'd read in a long time. I asked him why. He said he didn't know how any "pursuit of the common good" could actually occur in a society where we all live our lives not as engaged citizens, but as individuals whose only felt participation in anything outside ourselves is consumption and outrage. He talked about how our politics, media, and elected leaders benefit from making us suspicious of and distrusting of our fellow citizens.

But the thing that struck me the most was when he said that the American people require "a kind of furious and relentless optimism that can steam roll American nihilism and hopelessness. Inviting Americans to participate in a renewed sense of aggressive optimism is the most enticing invitation Americans could hope for."

I think he's right. The populist earthquake that has shaken American politics for the past decade represents a natural and much-needed rebuke to the catastrophic failures of American elites. But rebuilding will require a new generation of leaders with the political virtue to govern on behalf of the people rather than themselves, articulate clearly the centrality of citizenship to our own lives and to our republic, and lead by example in reclaiming it.

If you, senators, want to reclaim the promise of our shared American citizenship, if you want to protect it and preserve it, you must begin by reclaiming a sense of what that shared citizenship means and what it is for, and offer that positive, furiously optimistic vision to the American public.

****