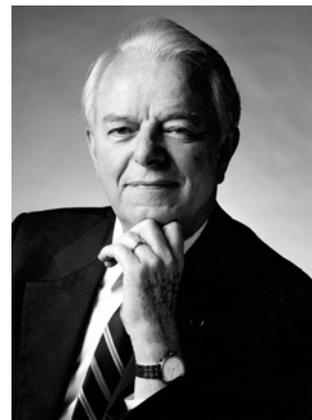


A History of the Democratic Policy Committee 1947-2007



Democratic Policy Committee
Senator Byron L. Dorgan, Chairman
Prepared With the Assistance of the United States Senate Historical Office

The Senate Democratic Policy Committee, 1947-2007

In the sixty years since the Democratic Policy Committee (DPC) was established in January 1947, it has served at various times as an advisory board to the Democratic Leader and as a research, policy-formulating, and communications arm of Senate Democrats. While the DPC's role has evolved through the years, the thread that unifies its long history is the key role it has played in promoting cohesion among Senate Democrats and enhancing their ability to formulate and advance their agenda.

While the DPC was officially created in 1947, its roots date back even further in Senate history. After the 1932 elections installed Franklin D. Roosevelt in the White House and gave Democrats commanding majorities in both houses of Congress, Democratic Senators recognized the need for more institutional structure to help enact an ambitious agenda in the midst of the Great Depression. On March 6, 1933, at the start of the special session that became the First Hundred Days of the New Deal, the Democratic Caucus created a Policy Committee, consisting of the Majority Leader and twelve additional Senators appointed by the leader. In the rush of events, however, this first Policy Committee played little role in formulating policy, and the Caucus continued to rely on its Steering Committee and on the Roosevelt Administration to set the party's agenda.

During World War II, members of Congress grew increasingly concerned over the legislative branch's dependence on the executive and felt ill-equipped to handle the challenges of the post-war world. In 1943, Congress set up a Joint Committee on the Organization of Congress, which advocated creating majority and minority policy committees as a new mechanism for developing legislative policy and synthesizing the issues coming before each chamber. While the Senate embraced this proposal, Speaker of the House Sam Rayburn, concerned over the erosion of his authority, had the provision for policy committees dropped in conference. Unwilling to abandon the idea, Senators attached a provision to a supplemental appropriations bill that would establish policy committees only in the Senate, giving Senate Democrats the statutory authority and institutional support for their efforts to address the complex problems of the post-war world.

The First Years: Barkley, Lucas, and McFarland, 1947-1952

The DPC was established as Democrats shifted from the majority to the minority in 1947 at the start of the 80th Congress. Senate Democrats chose to concentrate authority by selecting their Leader, Senator Alben Barkley of Kentucky, to chair the Policy Committee. Senator Barkley appointed Leslie Biffle, the outgoing Secretary of the Senate, as the first executive director of the DPC. A veteran of Capitol Hill, Biffle had been Secretary of the Majority during the New Deal and Secretary of the Senate since 1945. Paying tribute to Biffle's abilities as a reliable head-counter before Senate votes and as the leader's right-hand man, Senator Barkley once said that he depended on the services of the "efficient firm of Biffle, Biffle, Biffle and Biffle."

The first DPC reflected the ideological and geographic diversity within the party. Senator Barkley of Kentucky and party Whip Scott Lucas of Illinois were regarded as centrists, Senators Millard Tydings of Maryland and Richard Russell of Georgia were Southern conservatives, while Lister Hill of Alabama was a relatively liberal Southerner. Senator Joseph C. O'Mahoney

of Wyoming was a Western liberal, Carl Hatch of New Mexico a Western conservative, and Theodore Francis Green of Rhode Island a Northeastern liberal. Democrats aimed to use the DPC to support President Harry Truman's programs, although as the minority party they lacked the power to set the Senate's agenda.

In the elections of 1948, Harry Truman came from behind to defeat the Republican candidate, Thomas E. Dewey, and Democrats returned to the majority in both chambers of Congress. As Alben Barkley had been elected Vice President, Senate Democrats chose Scott Lucas of Illinois as Majority Leader and chair of the Policy Committee. The Democratic Caucus determined that the DPC would be a continuing body whose membership would remain the same from Congress to Congress, as did its Steering Committee. The practice of permanent appointments, combined with infrequent turnover among Southern Democrats, made the Policy Committee a council of elders, with many of its members also chairing the Senate's standing committees.

Senator Lucas regularly convened luncheon meetings of the Policy Committee to discuss strategy, scheduling, and the provisions of pending legislation, and to resolve other matters of concern to the Democratic Caucus. Senator Lucas appointed a research-oriented staff to conduct public policy studies and assured the Democratic Caucus that he intended the DPC staff to "be of all possible assistance to Committee Chairmen and individual members."

In the 1950 elections, both Majority Leader Lucas and Democratic Whip Francis Myers of Pennsylvania lost their races for re-election, although Democrats retained a slim majority in the Senate. Senator Ernest McFarland, an energetic Arizonan, was elected Majority Leader, and a first-term Senator from Texas, Lyndon B. Johnson, became the Majority Whip. Senator McFarland used the Policy Committee as a sounding board to solicit advice on pending legislation at the committee's luncheon meetings each Tuesday when the Senate was in session. It took no formal votes, but after discussing the various bills, the committee members would agree on a schedule for bringing them to the floor.

Senator McFarland's leadership ended with his defeat for re-election in 1952. Under the chairmanships of Barkley, Lucas, and McFarland, the DPC operated with a small staff that conducted research and prepared summaries of major bills to assist in evaluating pending legislation. The DPC mostly sought to bridge the ideological divide between liberals and conservatives within the Democratic Caucus. Following McFarland's defeat and the Democrats' return to the minority in the Senate, the vacancy in Democratic leadership was filled by one of the most successful leaders in Senate history, Lyndon B. Johnson.

LBJ Takes Charge, 1953-1960

As Democratic Leader, Lyndon B. Johnson set about remolding the DPC into an effective instrument of Senate leadership. Since the Democratic Caucus remained split between its liberal and conservative wings, especially over civil rights, Johnson held Caucus meetings only at the beginning of each session, and relied instead on the smaller, more manageable Policy Committee as a party forum. The committee that Johnson inherited was heavily weighted in favor of Southern conservatives, and he soon filled two vacancies on the committee with moderate to

liberal Westerners. Ideology, however, was secondary to personal loyalty in Johnson's decisions about the membership of the DPC, as he refused to appoint Senators to the Policy Committee unless he felt absolutely assured of their support for his leadership.

The committee established liaisons to each of the Senate's standing committees and appointed a Legislative Review Committee to register Democratic Senators' objections to pending legislation. To implement these innovations, Johnson rebuilt the Policy Committee staff into a cadre of highly qualified professionals whom he used as an extension of his leadership staff. The DPC staff handled all of the floor leader's legislative work, as well as his correspondence on national issues, and kept statistical information on Senators' votes. Although the Policy Committee still focused more on legislative scheduling than on policy making, it achieved a higher profile under Johnson and reflected the style and energy of its dynamic chairman.

When the Democrats returned to the majority in 1955, Johnson asked the chairmen of all legislative committees to designate a staff member to report every week to the Policy Committee staff on "the status of legislation pending in your Committee that affects the Senate Democrats as a whole and the probable timetable for action on this legislation." This gave the leader unprecedented opportunities to coordinate with committee chairs, who frequently attended the weekly Policy Committee lunches. Johnson also created a new Legislative Review Committee, which was better known as the Calendar Committee, whose members became responsible for attending calendar calls and objecting to all measures opposed by one or more Caucus members. Inviting members of the Legislative Review Committee to attend Policy Committee luncheons enabled Johnson to include newer Senators at Policy Committee discussions and strengthen its regional representation. Although they could not vote, formal votes remained so infrequent that the distinction made little difference.

In order to avoid intra-party battles, Johnson instituted a rule that he would only call up bills approved by at least 90 percent of the DPC. Despite the disagreements members had over the merits of some bills, they had relatively few quarrels over bringing most measures to the floor. On the divisive issue of civil rights legislation, Johnson conducted ceaseless rounds of negotiations with individual members of the Policy Committee and the Caucus. Eventually, he accomplished in 1957 the seemingly impossible task of uniting his party behind the first civil rights bill enacted since Reconstruction.

After Democrats won sweeping victories in the congressional elections of 1958, the expanded bloc of liberal Senators objected to Johnson's reluctance to call party caucuses and complained that the DPC remained dominated by Southerners. On February 23, 1959, Wisconsin Senator William Proxmire delivered an extended critique of the Democratic leadership, claiming that the DPC had never adopted a formal statement of its functions, exerted no leadership in "drawing up a general legislative program," and was used instead by Johnson as a "strategic device and weapon...to set up issues in a way that will permit a maximum number of Democrats to go along with the position of the leadership."

Illinois Senator Paul Douglas joined in the criticism, arguing that the DPC's permanent appointments had denied the "main industrial States" a presence on the committee, and, along with Pennsylvania Senator Joseph Clark, advocated increasing its membership. Senator Johnson responded that he would not "throw anybody on or off" the committee to pacify its critics and felt at a loss to explain the challenges to his leadership. The problem, said Senator Richard Russell, was that too many people believed that the committee actually made policy, a misconception that led to resentment among Senators who were not privy to its deliberations. Johnson insisted that he had no personal objections to enlarging the DPC or to changing the method of selection, but was concerned about proposals that would reduce the Leader's authority. When the Caucus later met, Johnson offered a defense of his actions as Policy Committee chairman:

"It has been proposed that this be a committee which states Democratic Party policy, and that the performance of individual Democrats be measured against the statement of the Policy Committee. Personally, I would not attempt to state the policy of my colleagues, and I do not think that I would want to be a member of a committee which did so. The Policy Committee, to my knowledge, had never attempted to do so under my leadership. I do not think that 7 members, 9 members, 12 members, or even 15 members can state Party policy for 65. And I could be very much surprised if many Senators would be willing to have their performance measured against the standards set by a small committee."

Johnson instead regarded the DPC as an instrument for bringing together "the views of different Democrats" and for determining the schedule of legislation, rather than setting party policy. The Caucus voted to support Johnson's position, although over the next two years he held more meetings of the Caucus to satisfy his critics, and the DPC met less often. The committee's last meeting under Lyndon Johnson's chairmanship occurred on June 24, 1960, before the Democratic National Convention. When the Senate returned from its recess, Johnson had been named the Democratic candidate for vice president on a ticket headed by Senator John F. Kennedy. The next year he would preside over the Senate as Vice President, and turn the majority leadership over to a man with a very different leadership style.

The Mansfield Era, 1961-1976

After eight years of Lyndon Johnson's intense and dynamic leadership, Senate Democrats welcomed a more accommodating chairman of the Caucus and the DPC, Montana Senator Michael J. Mansfield, who had served as Whip under Johnson. Giving voice to some of the frustrations with Johnson's leadership, Senator Albert Gore, Sr., of Tennessee moved that future vacancies on the Policy and Steering committees be filled "through election by the Caucus of Democratic Senators." Mansfield agreed that the Policy and Steering Committees should reflect all "geographic and philosophic viewpoints" within the Democratic Caucus, but he added that if the Caucus was not willing to give him "time to deal with this problem," then it would need a new Leader. Under the resulting compromise, the Democratic Leader would continue to make appointments "on the basis of a fair geographic and philosophic representation, subject to Caucus confirmation." In appointing new members to the DPC, Mansfield demonstrated his

commitment to greater regional and ideological balance. Senators applauded Mansfield's efforts to democratize their party's operations.

During the Eisenhower Administration, the DPC had helped to formulate an alternative legislative agenda, but with the Kennedy Administration in place, the committee's role changed and its staff was reduced. The DPC routinely turned back more than half of its annual appropriation. "Mansfield abhors bureaucracy," staff director Charles Ferris explained. "He prefers to run with a tight staff." Despite the enormous legislative outpouring of the 1960s, the DPC operated at about one quarter the size of its Republican counterpart. The leaner staff required the Policy Committee to focus its research attention on a few major bills and rely more on the Legislative Reference Service, and later the Congressional Research Service, to compile data.

The DPC's primary function became legislative scheduling, with the frequency of its meetings driven by the timing of the Administration's requests. The tone of the committee's weekly luncheon underwent a dramatic change. Under Johnson, the luncheons had been a venue for story swapping and legislative bargaining, with Johnson prodding committee chairs to take action. Mansfield conducted the meetings with a minimum of small talk and little indication of his own legislative priorities. At most, he would ask committee chairs to see what they could do to expedite a bill that the president wanted passed, recognizing that the responsibility for the legislation lay more with the committees than with the Majority Leader. Under Mansfield's leadership, the DPC was no longer "a preserve of Senate patriarchs" or a gathering of those most loyal to the Leader, but represented the broad geographic and ideological spread of the party. Despite their diversity, the committee members worked harmoniously during the Mansfield era and responded well to his gentle hold on the reins.

When Lyndon B. Johnson became president in 1963, Mansfield's style ideally fit the temper of the times. Johnson called for action on late President John F. Kennedy's agenda, particularly for passage of civil rights legislation. In 1964 the Senate engaged in a protracted filibuster against Johnson's civil rights bill, and the DPC figured prominently in developing and implementing legislative strategy. The Democratic Caucus assigned Senators to quorum duty on a rotating basis, which enabled the leadership to make sure that the fifty-one Senators needed to establish a quorum were nearby at all times. Between the beginning of the debate on March 9, 1964 and the final Senate passage on June 19, 1964, there were 245 quorum calls. Civil rights supporters successfully established a quorum all but once, on a Saturday. The quorum rosters helped civil rights supporters outlast the filibuster by giving most Senators the freedom to tend to other business, while others stayed close to the Senate floor.

In 1964 Democrats won increased majorities in the Senate and House, and enhanced their mandate to enact Johnson's Great Society program. Despite the strong support for Johnson's domestic initiatives, some Democrats held reservations about his foreign policies. Although Senator Mansfield privately advised the president that American troops had no place in Vietnam, he never called on the DPC to take a formal stand on the war during Johnson's presidency. In 1966 the Policy Committee took its only public stance against one of the president's foreign

policies, when Senator Mansfield led an effort to reduce the number of American troops stationed in Europe. Since the President opposed this move, the Senate took no action on the Policy Committee's resolution.

In 1968 former Vice President Richard Nixon won the presidency, while Democrats remained firmly in control of both houses of Congress. This division changed the mission of the DPC from the routine scheduling of legislation to the active construction of a Democratic legislative agenda. It would be up to the Democratic majorities in Congress, Mansfield predicted, "to provide "a general yardstick against which to measure the party."

To improve communications and promote party cohesion, Senator Mansfield called more frequent meetings of both the DPC and the Caucus. "Unity of the party did not mean that 57 Democrats were voting together on any or all issues," he explained, but "with better communications it would be more apt to get more cohesion of party positions." The Democratic Majority Leader, Whip, and Caucus Secretary would meet with the legislative committee chairmen every six weeks to review pending legislation. The Policy Committee would meet every other week to review an agenda of "significant emerging issues" and would identify those that warranted "the taking of a Policy position." A two-thirds vote would be necessary to adopt a policy position, but the DPC would continue its longstanding practice of avoiding formal votes whenever possible, and would seek a broad consensus on the issues. No policy statements would be binding on individual Senators, nor would Policy Committee votes be made public.

On May 13, 1969, the DPC issued its first policy statement, a National Commitments Resolution introduced by Foreign Relations Committee Chairman J. William Fulbright, as a reassertion of the Senate's constitutional role in foreign policymaking, and a cautionary warning to the new administration. On June 25, 1969, the Senate approved the resolution by a vote of 70-16. This was the first of many statements that the DPC issued as it attempted to reclaim the Senate's institutional prerogatives. Other policy statements addressed issues ranging from postal rates to strategic arms limitation talks.

The Policy Committee soon considered taking its first formal position on ending American involvement in the Vietnam War. Meeting on May 7, 1970, three days after the shooting of student anti-war protestors at Kent State University, Senator Mansfield told the committee that public was "turning to the Senate for relief of a deep sense of frustration over the seeming inability not only to end the war but even to prevent its expansion." From 1970 to 1972, the DPC repeatedly called for the withdrawal of all United States forces from Indochina.

Concerned over President Nixon's use of television to maximize coverage of his speeches and press conferences, and the media's uneven coverage of Congress, the DPC appointed a Television Committee, chaired by Senator Edmund Muskie of Maine, which, on June 9, 1970, recommended a series of initiatives for making more effective use of television, encouraging Democratic Senators with expertise in specific subjects to "get to the television gallery to express their viewpoint." The DPC also requested airtime from the major television networks to respond to the president's messages, and Senator Mansfield gave the Democratic response to President Nixon's 1971 State of the Union address.

President Nixon was re-elected in a landslide in 1972 over South Dakota Senator George McGovern, but his victory was tainted by persistent stories of White House involvement in the break-in and wiretapping of the Democratic National Committee's headquarters at the Watergate. When the Senate convened in 1973, Senator Mansfield pressed for appointment of a special committee to investigate irregularities in the presidential election. Because Mansfield wanted the investigation to be separate from partisan politics, the DPC had no connection to the Watergate hearings. After the House Judiciary Committee voted to recommend the impeachment of the president in July 1974, members of the DPC gathered on August 6 to consider the requirements of holding an impeachment trial in the Senate. They discussed issues ranging from televising the proceedings to apportioning tickets to the galleries, but the DPC chose not to take any party position relating to impeachment. President Nixon's resignation on August 9 removed the need for an impeachment trial.

Democrats won victories in the 1974 and 1976 elections, expanding their majorities in both chambers of Congress and electing Jimmy Carter as president. However the 1976 election also marked Mike Mansfield's retirement from the Senate after sixteen years as Majority Leader. Under Mansfield's leadership, the DPC had become a vehicle for formulating Democratic party positions that incorporated the wide range of sentiments within the Caucus. As a testament to this accomplishment, the chairman of the Senate Republican Policy Committee, Texas Senator John Tower, announced in 1977 that he would restructure his party's policy committee operations to develop Republican alternatives to the Carter Administration's agenda, much as Mansfield had employed the DPC during the Nixon and Ford years.

The Byrd Leadership, 1977-1988

The election of Senator Robert C. Byrd of West Virginia as Democratic Majority Leader in 1977 reshaped the DPC dramatically. He shifted the committee from a formal advisory body to the leader into a functioning part of the leadership apparatus, with the DPC staff directly serving the floor leader. As Majority Leader from 1977 to 1980, Senator Byrd doubled the size of the professional staff, and doubled it again as Minority Leader between 1981 and 1986. The DPC no longer met officially as a body, but its members individually discussed issues with the floor leader. Democratic Senators would notify DPC staff if they wished to hold a bill for more time to study it. The enlarged committee staff included experts in many specific subject areas, from foreign policy to economics, energy, and human resources. DPC staff worked with Democratic committee staffs, and advised the leader and Democratic Senators in their areas of expertise.

After Democrats lost the Senate majority in the 1980 elections that sent Ronald Reagan to the White House, Senator Byrd again revamped the DPC, further increasing its staff and shifting its principal role from floor scheduling to shaping the Democratic message. Its staff became the party's issue experts. In the minority, Democrats realized that they needed a communications arm. The DPC established a press office and set up television and radio facilities to enable Senators to get their message to their states. To provide space for these operations, the Policy Committee became one of the first occupants of the new Hart Senate Office Building.

In the minority, Senate Democrats adopted a tactic Republicans had previously used against them by introducing amendments that would force the majority to take a stand on controversial issues. In 1981 and 1982, there were repeated votes on Social Security, which became an effective Democratic campaign issue in the 1982 congressional elections. The DPC staff took a lead in suggesting Democratic amendments to the floor leader and other Democratic Senators. Senator Byrd also invited them to attend meetings of the Democratic Caucus to advise Senators on the likely floor schedule and Democratic initiatives. In nominating Senator Byrd for another term as Democratic Leader, Senator Edward Kennedy congratulated him for turning the DPC into “a great service organization” for all Democratic Senators.

In the minority, Senator Byrd began organizing Senate Democrats into special task forces, staffed by the DPC, to focus on specific national issues. This gave Senators like Bill Bradley, while still in his first term, an opportunity to take charge of an economic task force and produce a number of budget amendments, giving him a more prominent national profile. At the same time, the DPC began issuing Special Reports that critiqued Reagan Administration proposals and offered Democratic alternatives. The DPC also published “Democratic Alternatives: A Look at the Record” to catalog votes by issue, together with text that described what each vote meant, from a Democratic perspective.

When Democrats regained the majority in 1986, Senator Byrd once again became Majority Leader. He then divided the DPC staff into a scheduling and head-counting staff, which had been the heart of the Policy Committee under Johnson and Mansfield, and the issues staff that had grown during the past six years in the minority. The two groups worked out of different offices and operated as independent staffs, and met with Senator Byrd at the beginning of each legislative day.

The Mitchell, Daschle, and Reid Years, 1989-1998

In 1989, when Senator Byrd chose to leave the Democratic Leadership to assume the chair of the Appropriations Committee, Senate Democrats elected George Mitchell of Maine to succeed him. Senator Mitchell had once served as administrative assistant to Senator Edmund Muskie, before becoming a federal judge and a Senator, and had won national attention as a tenacious questioner during the Iran-Contra hearings in the late 1980s. Both of Senator Mitchell’s future successors also would have prior experience as staff on Capitol Hill, as Senator Tom Daschle of South Dakota had been administrative assistant to South Dakota Senator James Abourezk, and Senator Harry Reid of Nevada had worked nights as a U.S. Capitol police officer to support his family while he was in law school.

Senator Mitchell made Senator Daschle co-chair of the committee, breaking with the tradition in which the Democratic Leader also chaired the DPC, and instituted changes aimed at involving all of the Democratic Senators in what the Policy Committee was doing. Under this shared leadership, members of the DPC started meeting again, returning in some ways to the Mansfield mode of operations. Both of the co-chairs ran the meetings, opening the meetings to all

Democratic Senators, who worked with their leaders to formulate a Senate Democratic agenda that would provide an alternative program to that of President George H.W. Bush.

Senator Mitchell retained control of the floor and foreign policy staff, while Senator Daschle took responsibility for assembling the domestic policy staff, which was the largest component of the DPC. After Senator Mitchell's retirement in 1995 and the Democrats' return to the minority, Senator Reid joined Senator Daschle as co-chair of the Policy Committee and worked with the Clinton Administration to advance the Democratic agenda.

One way that Senator Daschle and Senator Reid redefined the role of the DPC was to expand its publication of reports that summarized policy and legislative issues and promoted the Democratic agenda. Senator Daschle also set up leadership committees, expanded the Steering Committee, and created the Technology and Communications Committee, which, under the leadership of Senator Jay Rockefeller of West Virginia, provided radio, television, and, eventually, Internet services to Democratic Senators to enable them to get their message out.

The DPC under Senators Daschle and Reid sponsored annual Democratic Issues Conferences to focus on policy issues and build party consensus, and its Daily Reports were produced whenever Senate was in session, summarizing the previous day's session and anticipating the next day's floor actions and votes. The Policy Committee also published Legislative Bulletins, Legislative Updates, Issue Alerts, and Pocket Cards containing message points on key issues for talking to constituents and reporters. As co-chairman of the DPC, Senator Reid also sought to expand the DPC's outreach to Democratic officials at the state level.

The Daschle, Reid, and Dorgan Years, 1999-2007

In 1999 Senator Reid was elected the Democratic Whip and, as a result, Senator Daschle appointed Senator Byron L. Dorgan of North Dakota to be co-chairman of the DPC. Senator Dorgan sought to build on the successes of the Daschle-Reid years. From 2000 to 2005, the Policy Committee closely tracked and responded to the policies and legislative proposals of the Bush Administration. In addition to the services provided in the past, including publishing reports and legislative summaries, tracking roll call votes, and sponsoring weekly lunches and annual issues conferences, the DPC began to hold hearings and public forums on important policy issues and to work with groups of experts to develop innovative ideas on language and messaging for Senate Democrats.

In 2005, newly-elected Democratic Leader Reid and DPC Chairman Dorgan restructured the DPC to include initiatives to:

- conduct oversight investigations and hold public hearings (which, among other things, exposed waste, fraud and abuse in Iraq War contracting);
- develop new policy ideas through the creation of a "New Idea Network" with think tanks, academics, and policy experts around the country;

- establish a DPC Message Project to produce language that effectively communicates Democratic policies; and
- establish new research and policy teams to provide legislative and policy support for Democratic Senators and staff.

In January 2007, after Senate Democrats regained the majority in the Senate, Majority Leader Reid and Chairman Dorgan created a new blueprint for the DPC that built on its sixty-year tradition of innovation and excellence. In addition to services provided in the past, the DPC announced plans to perform the following activities in the 110th Congress:

- provide support for Democratic oversight staff, including holding meetings to share information about ongoing investigations and publishing reports to highlight the oversight activities of the committees;
- expand the New Idea Network and work closely with Senate staff and network members to develop new ideas that are targeted to specific subjects, legislation, and amendments;
- organize a series of bipartisan summits in Washington, DC and around the country to discuss pressing national challenges; and
- reach out to Democratic state legislators to share best practices and ideas about policy, strategy, and messaging.