

Democracy 2020

Grassroots Responses to America's Governance Crisis



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The Background

In 2009, the Interactivity Foundation authorized a discussion project on democratic process and practice. Dennis Boyer, then a full-time Fellow of the organization, conducted nearly two years of citizen conversations on related issues. The result, in 2011, was the completion of a discussion guidebook of policy possibilities entitled [The United States' Democratic Promise](#). Since that time there have been several dozen local discussions of this guidebook in a variety of settings, including a number facilitated by Boyer in Illinois, Iowa, Minnesota, and Wisconsin.

Over the years, interest in the guidebook seemed to track the election cycle and news coverage of related issues, such as voter suppression, court decisions on election cases, and manipulation of social media to influence public opinion. While most of these discussions used the guidebook as a starting point, it should come as no surprise that participants brought “fresh eyes” to the task in each election cycle. Discussions in 2012 had a much different tone than those in 2018.

It is probably not an exaggeration to say that over time these discussions became less “hopeful” and that a sense of “brokenness” concerning our democratic systems became more common. These were years of increasing polarization of the citizenry, revival of racist discourse, and ever-widening distribution of conspiracy theories. The election year of 2020 began with a Senate impeachment trial of the incumbent president and increased civil strife. Oh, and by the way, a pandemic swept the globe and the nation, limiting public events and the ways we think of them.

The participants who helped with the development of these materials through online discussion were drawn from the Pacific Northwest (northern CA, OR, and WA) and the Rocky Mountain states (CO, NM, and UT). The eleven participants were of a younger demographic than we often work with (the oldest being around 40). Suffice it to say that the rejoinder “OK, Boomer” was heard more than once whilst examining explanations of past political events.

The group started with a review of the original seven policy possibilities as described in [The United States Democratic Promise](#). While most participants were sympathetic to these possibilities and thought our governance conversations as a nation would be enriched if such matters were more widely discussed, they also felt that an external, “game-changer” event would likely be needed in order to enact any genuine reforms to our democratic governance processes.

What follows in the exploratory Topics A-F in the main text of this document is an attempt by citizens interacting online to make sense of this “perfect storm” of events in a key election year.

Facilitator's Note

One of the biggest challenges for a discussion facilitator in public conversation of contentious issues is to “remain above the fray” when things get heated. My own facilitative philosophy is to undertake facilitation only where and when I feel I am able to maintain “honest broker” status. My background includes over three decades of advocacy work in policy arenas, sensitizing me to a diversity of interests and positions in the “sausage-making” of legislation and administrative rulemaking.

One ethical implementation of facilitation practice that has always appealed to me is to insure that such discussions are far-ranging and inclusive. Sometimes that goes as far as asking discussants to consider what positions are not in the room. My own philosophy of governance conversation is that the public is best served by a thorough discussion of not only what is, but also of what could be.

Many readers have probably heard the apologetic rejoinder of politicians after failures and calamities: who could have imagined? The narrowness of our policy discourse often underscores a lack of imagination in our political class. In my view, one of the main tasks of democratic governance conversation is to draw out the imaginations of citizens in ways that create political space for ideas beyond the binary liberal/conservative divide.

My own politics are fairly eclectic and defy easy categorization. I have sat down for beers with right-leaning militia members and left-leaning Antifa activists. I have fairly strong views on a variety of issues, but also value non-partisan administration of basic public goods. That said, I feel at liberty to mention a few vexing occurrences drawn from my hundreds of hours of democratic governance conversation:

- “False equivalency” has apparently become the law of the land. All sides (some more than others) seem guilty of this practice, and some sectors of media seem to operate as if it is an enshrined journalistic ethic.
- The lines between “facts” and “opinions” are blurred so often and so extensively that many fail to notice. Even many people trained in the sciences seem to conflate the two in political discussion.
- Short-term outcomes are often elevated as the main standard for evaluation of policy. In other words, is this idea good for “my side” right now?
- “Vote-shaming” and “position-blaming” are increasing common, defying any common sense efforts at persuasion or consensus formation with those who disagree with us.
- Finally, the low level of civics education continues to baffle and dismay me. If I am called upon one more time to explain to the holder of a bachelor’s degree that the Electoral College decides who is president, my head may just explode.

This most recent online discussion also suggested to me that we are reaching a critical juncture on whether we will continue to work on the project of forming a “more perfect Union” or settle for a nominal democracy, with the trappings of voting and other civic rituals. This brings a facilitator to dangerous territory, for it is hard to be “neutral” about democracy. Like the matter of slavery on the brink of our Civil War, one can find oneself in a position where “taking sides” seems unavoidable.

Topic A

Reject Authoritarian Impulses

Sense of the Topic

Many are concerned that basic democratic norms are increasingly under attack and that many in political office and public life do little to resist erosion of those norms. This concern extends to tolerance of abuses of power in the conduct of elections, threats to political opponents, and the use of police against protesters.

Some Questions to Ask

- Who benefits when democratic governance is weakened?
- How did we get to this place where political actors feel emboldened to dismiss democratic norms?
- What might a future of weakened democracy look like?
- How might citizens push back against would-be authoritarians?

Participant Thoughts on This Topic

There was a shared sense in the group that citizenship was an active, not a passive, role in a democratic society. Most felt that the democratic role of citizens as participants had been largely replaced by a view of citizens as spectators. They also had some ideas about what needs to change:

- Strengthen civic education as a cornerstone of democratic governance.
- Install democratic ombudsmen at every level of government, with the charge to uphold democratic norms.
- Shine the light of media coverage on authoritarian impulses wherever they are found—political parties, corporations, private foundations and other groups and individuals.
- Ask candidates for office what they will do to make the United States a more perfect union.

Short video on authoritarianism:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5YU9djt_CQM

Topic B

Oppose Foreign Intervention in Our Elections and Governance

Sense of the Topic

The citizens of the United States should be the ones who determine who is elected to public office and what policies should be promulgated to uphold its Constitution and carry out its laws. Interference or meddling in our domestic politics by non-US actors must be carefully monitored and blocked.

Some Questions to Ask

- In what ways has the internet and the rise of social media made it easier to disrupt democratic societies?
- How might the profit motive influence decisions relating to the regulation of social media?
- Are we confident that those who are supposed to protect our elections and governance have the will and tools to do so?
- Would it be appropriate to regard foreign intervention in our elections and governance as hostile acts or terrorist attacks?

Participant Thoughts on This Topic

The shared sense here was that the United States has unclean hands when it comes to interfering in the elections and domestic politics of other nations—up to and including the assassination of democratically elected officials opposed by our national security apparatus. There was wide support for a repudiation of these past acts, and a commitment, going forward, to prevent foreign intervention here. They saw the need for a number of actions:

- Strengthen the cyber defenses of the United States.
- Make social media civilly and criminally liable for dissemination of foreign interference in elections.
- Require internet platforms to develop further safeguards against manipulation by other nations and non-state actors.
- Consider regulating social media and internet platforms as utilities or enforce antitrust laws to reduce them in size.

The Case Study of the Cyber Attack on Estonia

<https://www.researchgate.net/publication/264418820> The Estonian Cyberattacks

Topic C

Reduce the Influence of Wealthy Individuals and Corporations in Politics

Sense of the Topic

Corporations are not people and do not merit the rights extended to human beings under the US Constitution and the constitutions of the various states. Our elections and our policy-making spheres are awash in money from wealthy individuals and corporations, making a mockery of the idea of rule by, of, and for the people.

Some Questions to Ask

- Do the citizens of the United States feel that a governance and electoral systems based on immense amounts of spending have produced democratic outcomes?
- How did we get to this place where political campaign expenditures drown out the voices of the citizens?
- What parts of our governance system must change if we are to move away from “the best government money can buy”?
- Are there better examples of democratic elections run without immense amounts of cash?

Participant Thoughts on This Topic

Participants were united in their sense that there’s just too much money involved in both politics and lobbying and it has amounted to corruption that is immoral even if our courts and officials find it legal. They also felt that our system debases the values of equality before the law and one person-one vote. It occurred to most, that expression of majority will on most of these other exploratory topics is effectively thwarted by this purchasing of influence. They strongly suggest:

- Look to models of campaign funding in other advanced societies.
- Ban corporate money from political campaigns at every level.
- Limit the concept of political spending as protected speech.
- Require disclosure of the source (individual or corporate) of all political spending.
- Cap campaign spending at levels considerably below current levels.

John Stewart interview about his film Irresistible:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aC_zV0wxegs

Topic D

“Fact-Check” Our Discourse

Sense of the Topic

The purveyors of political propaganda have grown increasingly bold and now constantly flirt with the “big lie” and Orwellian newspeak. Claims made by candidates and in political advertising often bear little resemblance to objective reality. Democratic governance benefits from having the most reliable information possible.

Some Questions to Ask

- Why should political discourse and candidates be permitted to spread unfounded and false information?
- Might it be the case that falsehoods in political discourse have deepened cynicism in democratic processes?
- Some maintain that all information related to politics is biased, do we believe that?
- What safeguards and which “neutrals” might protect us from false political claims?

Participant Thoughts on This Topic

Many involved in these discussions felt that lying had become the norm in political discourse and yet still found it unacceptable. Yes, it is common, but what can we do to fight back? They had some thoughts along these lines:

- Tighten up defamation laws so that they apply to political smear campaigns.
- Criminalize false statements made in the context of elections (election “perjury”).
- Create “neutral” arbiters of election contest statements that serve to “fact-check” the accuracy of such claims.
- Require social media platforms to vigorously police and remove false political posts.
- Provide greater support to non-partisan groups that distribute the collected candidate answers to policy questions.

Existing fact check source: <https://www.politifact.com/>

Where fact-checking might go:

<https://www.americanpressinstitute.org/publications/reports/white-papers/future-of-fact-checking/single-page/>



Topic E

End Over-Policing of Urban Communities

Sense of the Topic

Nearly sixty years after the riots that wracked many American cities, there remains a strong impression that our problems of race, poverty, and mental health are still dealt through the devices of the criminal justice system. Many in American cities simultaneously feel “over-policed” and “under-protected”. These conditions are also felt to have a corrosive effect on democratic governance of these communities, which take on the aspect of “occupied territories.”

Some Questions to Ask

- In what ways have policing and incarceration impacted the civil society institutions of people of color and the poor?
- Is institutional or systemic racism a major factor in both how the policies around policing have been promulgated and how those policies have been implemented?
- What factors are behind a double standard that allows for aggressive response to urban protests while rallies of right-wing armed militia groups are tolerated?
- Are we facing a situation where conditions like homelessness and poverty are treated as criminal acts?

Participant Thoughts on This Topic

Over half the participants here expressed sympathy for the goals of the Black Lives Matter movement, while most of the others expressed support for other policing and correctional system reforms. Almost all thought that race and class shape whose participation is valued and whose is suppressed. The nexus between policing and participation was expressed as follows:

- Restore voting rights to those with criminal convictions.
- End the use of excessive force in policing our urban communities.
- Closely control policing against political activity and activists.
- Realign government budgets to reflect human needs, not militarization of law enforcement.
- Place police forces under democratically elected officials.
- Revitalize civil society institutions in impoverished areas.

Voting rights restoration link:

<https://www.brennancenter.org/issues/ensure-every-american-can-vote/voting-rights-restoration>

Topic F

Push Back Against the Tyranny of the Minority

Sense of the Topic

The United States came together in the late seventeenth century out of a rebellion of largely agricultural colonies. This Union was far from perfect: cobbled together through compromises, hobbled by the “original sin” of slavery, barely surviving a scarring civil war, and no small number of subsequent upheavals. We now arrive at a point where our national governance can be largely controlled—through the devices of the Electoral College and US Senate—by a minority.

Some Questions to Ask

- Do people really view themselves as citizens of the various states as opposed to citizens of the United States?
- Does it still make any sense for Wyoming to have as many US Senators as California?
- Are we in perpetual gridlock where 40%(or fewer) of the voters can block the policies supported by the other 60%?
- Might this “system glitch” contribute to a sense that “things are not working”?

Participant Thoughts on This Topic

There was a broad sense here in support of Constitutional renewal that would support more robust forms of democratic process and practice. At the same time, they did not underestimate the difficulty of securing the necessary reforms—especially where it might require amendment of the US Constitution. They would like to see a governance conversation on the following:

- Abolish the Electoral College and elect the President directly.
- Reorganize the US Senate to reflect population distribution.
- Outlaw gerrymandering of Congress and state legislatures.
- Add additional seats to the US Supreme Court and eliminate lifetime appointments.
- Review the full range of electoral alternatives—ranked choice voting, proportional representation, multi-member districts, and so on.



- Recognize that protests, rallies, strikes, and other direct forms of participation are just as legitimate as voting in a democracy.

Film trailer on the documentary on US Representative John Lewis
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z_oEkOdIXdo

I n t e r a c t i v i t y
F o u n d a t i o n

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