



Dear Friends of Constitution Day Celebrations:

First, I want to express my appreciation for the more than forty of our local - and some not so local - citizens who willingly gave up several hours of their Saturday to engage in this year's Constitution Day celebration, held at the Nittany American Legion Post 245 in September.

And a special thanks to our roundtable moderators who helped to keep us on track, and the recorders who made sure people's voices were not only heard, but seen.

My task here is to articulate the 'take-aways' from our deliberative conversations. But perhaps the most important takeaway that I heard from participants is that it 'worked': people having different perspectives concerning a potentially challenging topic were able to talk with one another, not just civilly, but with curiosity and open minds. I think it is important to note that this was not a debate or a panel discussion -- which have their place -- it was a deliberative conversation that required the active participation of all.

Appropriately, the theme of this year's deliberation was "Making Our Voices Heard" asking three questions: Does the Electoral College Protect Democracy? Do Voters Pick Legislators, or do Legislators Pick Voters? Who matters more – Voters or Donors?

We heard a strong consensus around the idea that there should be limits on campaign contributions; specifically, that a person's - or corporation's - wealth should not give them additional influence concerning our nation's policies. There was also general agreement on basic principles concerning re-districting and gerrymandering. (For example, that those currently in office shouldn't get to draw the lines - and that State College shouldn't be split into two separate legislative districts!) There were also concerns expressed around the manipulative nature of the current political agenda.

Among our tensions: what, if anything, to do regarding the Electoral College. We were also unable to come to a consensus concerning "ranked-choice voting." (Something for policy-makers to consider: the lack of clarity over how ranked-choice voting would or could work.)

Another group had very similar concerns about gerrymandering, "safe" districts, and the value of non-partisan redistricting (and that we shouldn't split communities!) They had a more optimistic view of the value of ranked-choice voting, and were very supportive of the idea of open primaries with 3rd party access. They also thought we should consider expanding the House of Representatives.

(more)

From another group we heard agreement around the importance of teaching civics - an example of learning and teaching for life; the importance of conversations; the value of setting a tone for discussion, and finally, the importance of ensuring that minority voices are heard.

Finally, there was general agreement around the importance of citizen voice, and that we must find ways to better empower our citizens, while holding politicians accountable.

Perhaps little of this is a surprise, and much of it sounds like common sense. But that, I think, is the point. Our citizens, given the opportunity, have a lot more common sense - and a lot more common ground - than they are given credit for. Wouldn't this be a better country if we did a better job of making everyone's voices heard?

A recent study found that an overwhelming majority of Americans believe democracy is 'at risk' in the upcoming presidential election. Democrats, Republicans and independent voters agreed with that statement.

Are Americans that truly divided? Perhaps not as much as it appears. Let us step away from online forums and take important time to listen to the concerns of family, friends, neighbors, and strangers. Express your own concerns and see if there are common values and common ground, if not necessarily complete agreement. Speak up often so policymakers hear the *real* voices of voters and citizens.

Educator James Conant said, "Democracy is a small hard core of common agreement, surrounded by a rich variety of individual differences."

Thank you all again. We will share these findings with local policymakers to show that there are common concerns. Please join us for the 2024 Constitution Day Roundtables. We welcome ideas on new questions for deliberation. Again, congratulations to Harold and Sherren McKenzie for their Madison Award leadership in civility and community.

We the People,

David Hutchinson, President, and The Board of Constitution Day Centre Inc.

www.constitutiondaycentre.org (Sign up for occasional newsletter)

Follow us on [Facebook](#), [Instagram](#), [YouTube Channel](#)