

# CENTRE DAILY TIMES

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## Conversations lead to common ground. Let's have more

BY DAVID HUTCHINSON AND VICKI FONG

A recent study found that an overwhelming majority of Americans believe our democracy is “at risk” in the upcoming presidential election — now less than a year away. Democrats, Republicans and independent voters all agreed with that statement. But are Americans truly politically divided beyond repair? Perhaps not.

Let us share our recent experience at the Constitution Day Democracy Roundtables. In late September, more than 40 residents — and a few visitors! — gave up several hours on a football game Saturday to sit in groups and listen to each other. Their perspectives ranged from the unaffiliated to Green Party to Libertarian to Republican and Democratic. Moderators led deliberations on three questions: Does the Electoral College protect democracy? Do voters pick legislators, or do legislators pick voters? Who matters more — voters or donors?

Appropriately, the theme was “Making our Voices Heard.” While there were the expected variety of viewpoints, the most important takeaway we heard from participants was that the roundtables “worked” — that 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. The roundtables were not designed as a debate or a panel discussion — both of which have their place — but as deliberative conversations that required the active participation of all.

From one group 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 redistricting 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 unresolved tensions: what, if anything, to do regarding the Electoral College. We were also unable to come to a consensus concerning "rank choice voting." (Something for policy-makers to consider: the lack of clarity over how rank-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 open primaries with third party access. They also thought we should consider expanding the House of Representatives.

From another group, we heard agreement around the importance of teaching civics, as 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. We will share these findings with local policymakers to show that there are common concerns.

Perhaps, much of this sounds like common sense. But that 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 voice heard?

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

Our community has a long tradition of these conversations, around issues as challenging as race, alcohol use, and education. Perhaps we should spend less time on online forums and take time to listen to the concerns of our neighbors and fellow citizens — and see if we find common values and common ground, if not necessarily complete agreement. And then speak up so policymakers hear the real voices of voters and citizens.

***David Hutchinson is the board president of Constitution Day Centre Inc. and Vicki Fong is the vice president.***

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