

Democratic Renewal in American Society

2018 Democracy Discussions

IF's *Democratic Promise* guidebook has been discussed a number of times since its initial publication. Interest in the subject seems to somewhat track the election cycle and concerns about election process and practice features that are seen as shaping election results: Electoral College, gerrymandering, voter suppression, etc. It may well be the case that the guidebook has generated more disparate reactions—both pro and con—than any of our other guidebooks.

As the project manager and editor of the guidebook I have come to feel that the generally low level of civics education in our society leaves some gaps that can make discussion of these and related topics difficult. At times, even those with college educations struggle with the particulars of how elections are governed. At the same time, such discussions usually finds a great deal of receptiveness to the general idea of improving public participatory methods, both in elections and in other forms of citizen engagement.

Prior to Labor Day 2018 I was asked to assist in developing a series of dinner discussions on “democratic renewal” in my home area of southwest Wisconsin. The plan was to hold six different discussions during October in six different homes around the region. Each site was to leave the timing and logistics to the host organizer. The participants were encouraged to review the *Democratic Promise* guidebook prior to the dinner meetings. The guidebook was meant to serve as a prompt and a “food for thought” item, not as strict discussion agenda material. Each host committed to assembling a “diverse” group in terms of partisan composition, gender, and ages. They reported that the plurality of participants self-reported as “independent” (Wisconsin does not have voter registration by party affiliation and has “open primaries”).

Each discussion was charged with the initial task of a “lightning round” on participant understandings of what democracy means and how they felt about the governance task of revisiting and possibly modifying fundamental aspects of our representative democracy system. From there, the groups were encouraged to further explore possible changes to the current system(s).

Two of the six groups were unable to get past the first task. These groups had participants who thought the approach was flawed and felt it was too tilted toward an assumption that the US Constitution was in need of major revision. A number of participants felt the guidebook itself caused this type of assumption (alleged “left wing bias”). Still other participants in these two groups adopted more of a stance that the US Constitution was essentially a “sacred text” that should be interpreted from an “original intent” perspective and should be amended only with great caution. Arguments about these matters prevented discussion of any possible changes to democratic practice and process.

The four other groups approached their tasks from more of a “fairness” perspective and conducted themselves as if they were encouraged to reimagine how democracy might work.

Discussion points in each group were captured by various methods: notes, flipcharts, whiteboard, etc. I reviewed meeting summaries prepared by each host and compiled the most common themes and the “outliers” thought I found significant.

Group 1

Five individuals ages 35-70. Two local officials, one teacher, one farmer, and one retiree. Two women and three men. Approached the tasks in an open-ended, thought experiment spirit.

Common Themes

- Consensus on abolishing the Electoral College (though two supported this direction only because they saw the election of Presidents who failed to capture the popular vote as potentially causing great societal conflict, not because of fundamental fairness issues).
- Consensus on making voting easier, not more difficult.
- Substantial support (4 to 1) for changes to how we elect representatives (non-partisan elections, legislative elections at-large, and creation of regional governments mentioned).

Outliers

- One participant was very passionate about repeal of *Citizens United* and the stricter regulation of political contributions (other participants seemed open to this position, but did not feel sufficiently informed to embrace it at the time).
- Another participant was very vocal about making elections days into legal holidays.

Group 2

Six individuals ages 30 to 62. Three from farm families, one farm cooperative administrator, one electric company lineman, and one health care supervisor. Three women and three men. Participants engaged subject matter with enthusiasm (suggested by prior review of guidebook and preparation of notes and questions).

Common Themes

- Consensus on abolishing Electoral College. Seen as a “first priority reform”.
- Consensus on abolishing Wisconsin voter identification system (seen as a “voter suppression tool”).
- Substantial support (5 to 1) for postcard voting instead of polling place voting.
- Significant support (4 to 2) for systems of proportional representation in legislative bodies.

Outliers

- Two participants were very vocal about opposition to “corporate personhood” and its impact on political spending. No participant opposed the idea of amending Constitution to deal with this matter, but the other four felt they needed more information.
- One participant felt very strongly about moving toward a system of online registration and voting. The others seemed very worried about “hacking” and other security and fraud issues. Host noted that the participant who backed online voting systems was the youngest participant.

Group 3

Seven individuals ages 37 to 71. Two farmers, two retired teachers, one nurse, one small business owner, and one construction worker. Four women and three men. Although there was no indication of significant partisan activity, the host felt that the group had “progressive leanings”. All had been involved in conservation issues and most had been involved in grassroots citizen groups on issues as varied as public health, opposition to large power company projects, and zoning disputes.

Common Themes

- Consensus on abolishing the Electoral College, with suggestion of several related ideas:
 - Allocation of additional US Senators to states with large populations (and thus additional Electoral votes).
 - Providing for a second election were the “first round” election did not produce a winner with a popular vote majority.
 - Increase number of seats in US House of Representatives from current 435 to a number more consistent with population growth (corrects some of the imbalance between states and keeps House “closer” to citizens).
 - Develop an ambitious plan to “resettle” people from large population states (California?) in small population states (Wyoming?) to make them more representative of overall national demographics.

- Elimination of “winner take all” aspect of state allocation of electoral votes (instead adopt a system of the congressional district winner getting that district’s vote and award of the two votes representing Senators going to the statewide popular vote winner).
- Consensus on ending all voter suppression efforts and substantial support (5 to 7) for criminalizing acts that prevent or discourage voting.
- Consensus on prohibiting all forms of “dark money” (where donor identities are withheld) spending on political activity.
- Substantial support (6 to 1) of strict enforcement of the ban on political spending by charitable and religious organizations.
- Significant recognition (5 to 2) of “democratic citizenship” as requiring more than voting.

Outliers

- Two participants were enthused by the “collaborative” solutions mentioned in Possibility E—Democracy is a Conversation (“deliberation days”, “participatory budgeting”, and greater citizen representation on regulatory bodies).
- One participant was very vocal about the idea of “citizen juries” that would make many decisions and make rules.
- Another participant wanted to clarify that citizens needed to appreciate that the “democracy toolkit” includes protest, mass demonstrations, and even civil disobedience when democracy is under threat.

Group 4

Five individuals ages 28 to 54. Three telephone marketing workers, one home health aide, and one bartender. Three women and two men. Host noted that two participants had never voted before, but intended to do so in 2018 elections. It was also noted that there were many questions about election rules and process from this group.

Common Themes

- Substantial support (4 of 5) for repeal of Electoral College.
- Substantial support (4 of 5) for easing rules on registration and voting.
- Significant support (3 of 5) for public financing of election campaigns.

Outliers

- One participant supported the idea of ranked choice voting.
- One participant felt strongly about restoring voting rights to criminal justice offenders who had served their sentences.
- Another participant suggested that all elections be non-partisan.

- Yet another participant felt that the US could not be sustained as a political *union* and that it would best to plan for peaceful re-organization into likeminded regional entities.

Group 5

Six individuals ages 40 to 66. Three small business owners, one farmer, one K-12 education administrator, and one pastor. Three women and three men. Host reported difficulty in keeping discussion on track and felt hostility between participants cropped up almost immediately.

Common Themes

- Substantial belief (5 of 6) that amending the US Constitution is a drastic remedy that should not be undertaken lightly (several even thought amendment efforts are “un-American”).
- Significant agreement (4 of 6) with the conclusion that the *Democratic Promise* guidebook is “leftist” in orientation.
- Significant agreement (4 of 6) with the position that the US was never meant to be “democratic” and that the US Constitution provides only for a “federal republic”, with states determining how elections should be conducted.

Outliers

- Two participants supported the use of “literacy tests” to determine voter eligibility.
- One participant was convinced that massive voting fraud was a major problem.
- One participant noted that much of the discussion was at the level of “code words and dog whistles”, meaning forms of racism, dislike of immigrants, and anti-Semitism (in the interpretation of the host).

Group 6

Seven individuals ages 30 to 70. Three farmers, two construction workers, one law enforcement officer, and one full-time homemaker. Six men and one woman (host noted that two additional women had planned to attend but canceled). Host felt unable to control discussion digressions (Central American migrant caravan, anti-Soros comments, Supreme Court nomination process, etc) and reported that participants seemed to “want to choose up sides” at the outset.

Common Themes

- Substantial belief (6 of 7) that a political divide exists that cannot be bridged by current mechanisms or institutions.

- Significant belief (5 of 7) that changes in the demographics of the US threaten the nature of the nation.
- Significant belief (4 of 7) that those pursuing “fairness” arguments are “socialists” and that those who defend the “Constitution of the Founders” are the “true patriots”.

Outliers

- Two participants took the position that only those willing to bear arms in local militias should be permitted to vote.
- One believed that only repeals of the Federal Reserve and income tax and return to the gold standard could guarantee individual rights.
- One felt that state legislatures should be permitted to appoint US Senators, as was the case before an Amendment to the US Constitution.
- Another felt that the US House of Representatives should be abolished, with a system of two Senators per state remaining.

A Few Observations and Educated Guesses

During the debriefings of hosts after the discussions it became clearer that these groups (especially groups 5 and 6) found it difficult to discuss “political and electoral” reform issues apart from the results they found likely to flow from such changes. In other words, it is hard for many citizens to maintain an open and conceptual discussion stance in a realm that is dominated by the acceptance of gaming a system for advantage. It was also troubling to detect some measure of ambivalence toward election practice and process. The difficulty of wresting reforms out of the very people who benefit from the current systems certainly was on many participant minds (as it was among the original project panelists). Certainly they understood the difficulty of amending the US Constitution.

These relatively small groups in a rural area of Wisconsin cannot be seen as representative of broader publics. But they are suggestive of some possible avenues for civic education and public conversation. The debriefings of hosts suggested that Group 3 was a relatively “high information” group in ways that expanded their ability to engage the subject matter and free up the imagination about what could be done to broaden democratic participation if structural obstacles could be overcome. This could be seen as an argument for continuing adult civics education and for broader citizen discussion programs aimed at developing participatory capacity.

The travails of Groups 5 and 6 seem to stand as testimony to the dialogue dead-end that occurs when participants arrive with plenty of opinions and little listening capacity. In this case it seemed that “conservatives” decided in advance that greater democratic participation would occur at their expense and that “progressives” posed reforms for that very reason. But all of the hosts thought the ideological

equation could have been easily flipped given another polarizing topic, with “progressives” arriving with minds already made up.

The hosts of Groups 1, 2, 3, and 4 felt very strongly that the discussions suggest widespread support for making voting easier. They also felt that most of their participants supported “fairness” not only as a value in democracy, but also as a legitimizing feature that earns acceptance of results by citizens. Thus, we suspect, the rather large sentiment supportive of abolition of the Electoral College.

I emerged from this round of discussions hopeful that public conversation can advance the cause of greater citizen participation in governance. It would be an appropriate topic for broad efforts like “deliberation days”. I would suggest that such discussions be framed more on the level of “fairness” and less (at least initially) on the mechanics or particulars of reform. IF has already advanced such framings through its increasing use of discussion scenarios that stimulate thinking about equitable solutions in a variety of policy settings, but we have yet to apply this tool to *Democratic Promise* discussions.

If given the opportunity to conduct or assist with future discussions on democratic practice and process I intend to pose some scenarios that utilize both case studies draw from actual circumstances and some hypotheticals that IF colleagues and I will develop.