Common Ground for the Common Good

Office of Lieutenant Governor Denny Heck

STATE OF WASHINGTON
LIEUTENANT GOVERNOR

Preface

The Project for Civic Health

The Project for Civic Health was initiated by the Office of the Lieutenant Governor. Lieutenant Governor Denny Heck invited the Henry M. Jackson Foundation, the University of Washington Evans School of Public Policy and Government, and the William D. Ruckelshaus Center, a joint center of Washington State University and the University of Washington, to collaborate on the design and implementation of the project. The partnership was formed on a shared premise of concern for our democracy's civic health. The partners agree that this problem is so complex that meaningful progress will require intentional and sustained effort. In other words, this is going to take a while. But we have observed an emphatic willingness to attack the problem, and an inspiring variety of efforts already underway in many Washington communities. So, yes, it may take a while, but we have many reasons to be encouraged.

The Project initially includes two components:

Roundtable Discussions

The Office of the Lieutenant Governor convened a systematic exploration of the nature of the problem, its causes, and possible solutions by undertaking a series of confidential roundtable discussions around Washington State with a diverse set of stakeholders. A contracted author distilled those conversations as well as certain contextual information in the following preliminary report.

This report reflects the views of the participants in the roundtable discussions. It is not intended to represent the views of the project partners. The report will serve as part of the basis for the Project's second component, a day-long summit.

Civic Health Summit

The partners will follow up with a second initial component, a day-long summit in October 2023 in which participants will engage in discussions sparked by this report that will lead to recommendations for sustained action to improve our civic health in the State of Washington.

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We have lost sight of our common ground

This report is broken into two main parts: an examination of the harms our roundtable participants highlighted, and a list of possible solutions to those harms.

Introduction

In a 2018 poll, 93% of Americans said incivility is a problem in the U.S. Additionally, 69% said it's a "serious" problem.

"Incivility" is a mild word to describe the toxicity that has divided political parties, school boards, and many families in the past few years. Too much of our public discourse has devolved into a verbal cage match with no rules.

There have been empty chairs in Oregon when state legislators of one party refused to attend because they would be outvoted. There were empty chairs in Tennessee when legislators voted to expel (and were later required to take back) colleagues who violated rules of civility in a debate about voting rights by using a bullhorn and allowing rowdy protesters into the legislative chamber. Sadly, there were also empty chairs at holiday dinners when political divisions outweighed family bonds.

The incapacity for civil dialogue across differing opinions is a serious disease of our body politic. And while we might have hoped for unanimity on this point, 69% is a significant majority of Americans who are disturbed by the animosity and the degraded standard of behavior by some leaders and media, and in our lives and communities.

This heartening super-majority of concern is a call to action. Our current level of incivility is not normal. It is not inevitable. And it is not incurable.

In our Washington, we are less profoundly affected than in Washington, D.C. Our 2023 state legislative session was remarkably bipartisan in both behavior and productive policy outcomes. Even the final Senate vote on the state operating budget – typically divided – was strongly bipartisan. Many of our local governments are also centers of civility.

All this gives us a stronger starting point for combating the poison in the body politic than many other states. But here, too, there have been shouting matches at local meetings, death threats aimed at school board members, and the need for heightened security at our state capitol.

Fortunately, there is a growing chorus of people and organizations who are thinking, meeting, and writing about how to turn the tide. Their work is worth studying to find the most effective strategies.

For all the past generations who fought and worked to sustain democracy, and for all the future generations whose legacy is in our hands, this is our civic duty.

Six roundtable discussions laid the groundwork

To begin this work, the Washington State Lieutenant Governor held six roundtable discussions to probe the nature of the problem, its causes, and to solicit ideas for action to restore higher standards of respectful disagreement.

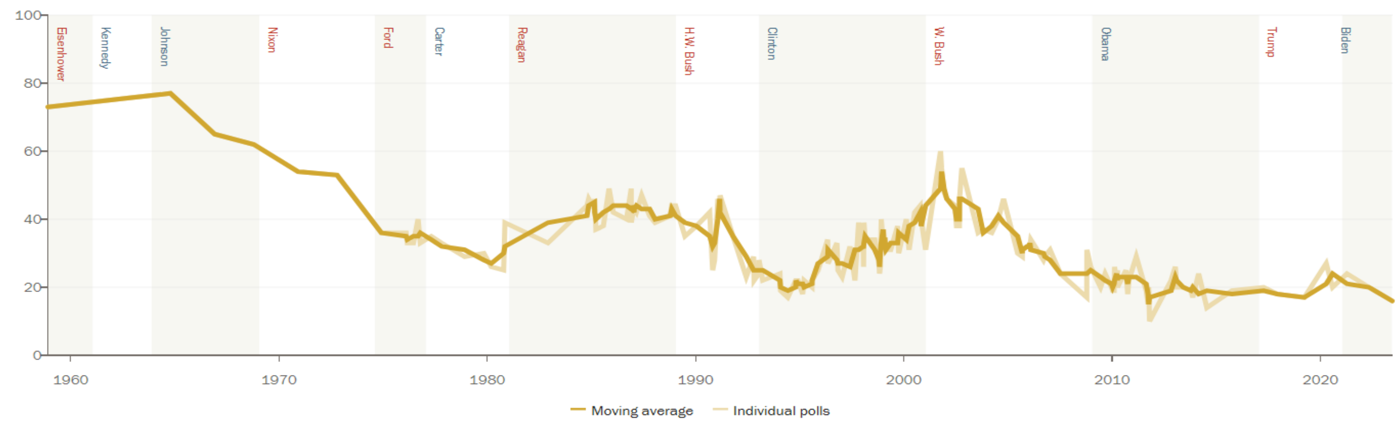
Invited guests included diverse community, business, union and non-profit leaders, current and former state and local elected officials, and young people.

The roundtable discussions were not recorded and participants were promised they would not be quoted by name. This led to candid, searching, and insightful conversations, and a wealth of ideas for potential solutions. This report is a summation of those discussions.

Public trust in government near historic lows

% who say they trust the government to do what is right just about always/most of the time

[Link to polling information]



Diagnosing the Problem

Below are observations and themes that were broadly echoed across our roundtable participants.

The Erosion of Trust in Government

Trust in the federal institutions of democracy – elections, our three branches of government, and all the agencies and regulations that flow from them – has been declining since the Lyndon Johnson administration, just after the assassination of John F. Kennedy.

One roundtable participant believed that distrust became entrenched in 1980, when President Ronald Reagan, in his inaugural address, said “Government is not the solution to our problem, government is the problem.” Others thought it began during the Vietnam War, or the Watergate scandal in 1973.

But how did distrust of government morph into today’s radically divided electorate and our increasingly hostile and venomous discourse?

The despair caused by the loss of factory jobs and the alienation of those left behind by a changing economy may be one key reason.

Divisive Leadership

In his 2008 election campaign, Barack Obama said “You go into these small towns in Pennsylvania and, like a lot of small towns in the Midwest, the jobs have been gone now for 25 years and nothing’s replaced them.” Then he insulted those affected when he said “And it’s not surprising then they get bitter, they cling to guns or religion or antipathy toward people who aren’t like them or anti-immigrant sentiment . . .”

In her 2016 presidential campaign, Hillary Clinton leveled a similarly divisive insult when she said you could put “half of Trump’s supporters into what I call the basket of deplorables . . . the racist, sexist, homophobic, xenophobic, Islamophobic – you name it ... and he has lifted them up.”

Roundtable participants acknowledged that Donald Trump’s presidential campaign’s success was made possible by the pent-up anger of people who had been insulted, threatened by change, or forgotten.

Nonetheless, as President, most agreed that “He made it OK to be uncivil.” There were multiple moments of his campaign, presidency, and post-presidency cited as watersheds: His mocking of military heroes such as Senator John McCain and a Gold Star family who lost their son; his claim, caught on tape, that his celebrity entitled him to “grab women” by their genitals; his Presidency-by-Twitter, including linking to extreme and racist groups; and of course his ongoing claims that the 2020 election was rigged, in spite of overwhelming evidence to the contrary.

Still, one participant lamented that the strength of anti-Trump feelings became so strong that “If you say you liked just one thing Trump ever said,” you could be ostracized for it. Part of the Trump effect was to drive his opponents into reciprocal anger and animosity.

Many concluded that Trump's ascendance was initially the result of the growth of incivility and extremism, but that during and after his term as President, he has become a cause of it.

Several people noted that the extreme left also has a long history of incivility and violence, including recent eruptions. One participant described today's far left as "children who throw tantrums." In Olympia, following the murder of George Floyd, the summer of 2020 saw a prolonged epidemic of anarchists smashing business windows downtown and threatening the city's mayor in her family's home. In Seattle, the Capitol Hill Occupied Protest (CHOP) led to prolonged chaos, the police abandonment of a precinct for weeks, and several shootings, one of which killed a 16-year-old boy.

Incivility is not a problem of the left or right; it is a problem of the United States of America, and of many other democracies.

Incivility in Political Campaigns & Public Policy-Making

One long-term government official lamented that some state legislators "felt they had a mandate not to work across the aisle; they think they were elected to raise hell." A moderate conservative recalled that "My brochures were hidden away by people in my own party."

Back in the 1970s, another former legislator recalled, "We accentuated our differences during campaigns to get people to make a choice. But once we were in the legislature, it was about governing, and that was different. Now it's campaigning all the time, and saying that the other side is full of evil people. The new campaign promise is 'I won't compromise.'"

A current legislator complained that "stakeholder groups focus on rating officials... 'The greater good,'" he said, "is ignored or denied over the slightest imperfection."

Civility Rules in Washington's Legislature

The following rules come from the official rules of Washington's legislative houses

WA State House of Representatives

6. (H) REMARKS CONFINED. A member shall confine all remarks to the question under debate and avoid personalities. No member shall impugn the motive of any member's vote or argument.

WA State Senate

Rule 7 (1). Indecorous conduct, boisterous or unbecoming language will not be permitted in the senate at any time.

In our state, "we have lost too many of the ticket-splitters, the swing voters." Our state now has only two districts out of 49 with legislators from both parties. The rest are relatively safe seats for Democrats or Republicans, and the electoral contests are between different factions of the two parties.

> *"We accentuated our differences during campaigns to get people to make a choice. But once we were in the legislature, it was about governing, and that was different. Now it's campaigning all the time, and saying that the other side is full of evil people."*
>
> **- Washington legislator**

One person said, "If we all agreed on everything, would we have a healthy democracy? No. So we need to agree to disagree."

At the local level, governing has become harder in many communities, both large and small. More than one mayor has had angry protesters outside their home; one had hostile demonstrators show up at his home during a wedding.

Meanwhile, "There is pent up frustration that Congress isn't doing its job, and operating on continuing resolutions rather than passing budgets."

At another meeting, a worried participant said "We are resource constrained – wildfires, water shortages, climate change, major things happening. There are hard choices where compromise is needed. But now we have a scarcity mindset: 'What can I get so you don't get it.' People feel that when one group comes up, another goes down."

"There is a conservative minority in Western Washington who feel their voice isn't being heard, and they lash out," a participant said. "Election turnout should be higher, but folks don't believe they have any power. People think that yelling at public officials is effective. To some extent, the loudest voices have won."

Perhaps worst of all, "We don't agree on the ground rules – not even on the peaceful transfer of power."

Young people went further afield in their analysis of what's wrong in politics. They resist the idea of choosing between two political parties, and lamented "the intense desire for a binary political choice." One said "If you choose a side, you have protection; it's comforting to have a label."

> *"I can't believe that people can acknowledge government sanctioned redlining and still say racism is not systemic. Our government has done things to our communities that it has never really owned up to."*

Several agreed there is an "over-reliance on political affiliations rather than values. We are not born as Rs or Ds; we shouldn't have to change our ideals to match that." Many were advocates of ranked choice voting as an essential remedy to extremism and division.

The Extreme Incivility of Racism

For people of color, the problems of incivility and distrust of government go back centuries. Black and brown people have suffered from the incivility of racism for the whole of our nation's history. "People assume there has been trust and a shared sense of community, but that's only for people of the homogeneous background," one participant said. The challenge for many communities of color seeking equity in civic life "is to build trust, not to rebuild it."

> *"The idea that you can shame someone into caring or changing their position . . . I haven't seen that work ever."*

"I can't believe that people can acknowledge government sanctioned redlining and still say racism is not systemic," said another, "Our government has done things to our communities that it has never really owned up to."

When one person remarked that "you're living in the past," participants of color patiently explained the history of Jim Crow laws, government supported segregation, the continuing and vast disproportionality in access and outcomes of health care, and the lower rates of homeownership and opportunity to build family wealth.

Their point was that people of color are not living in the past; they are living with the past and all its continuing consequences.

Several reported that elected officials show up when they want support, but disappear between campaigns. They want elected leaders to come often and hold listening sessions, not make speeches. They want leaders who build lasting bridges between their communities and government. They are pleased with the growing number of people of color in elected office who already have those bridges. "People move at the speed of trust," said one person.

Still, participants of color emphasized that shaming people for not understanding the depth of racism's impact is counterproductive. Heads nodded when one said "The idea that you can shame someone into caring or changing their position . . . I haven't seen that work ever."

At another roundtable, a participant focused on the longer arc of history: "People say it's really bad now? Well, I grew up in the early 60s before MLK. Those were the real bad days." Even so, he says, "Some people fear change. People of color will be the majority."

A tribal leader said "I feel optimistic that yes, hopefully, things will change. As a Native American person, I have seen disparities all my life against us. I feel for a lot of these other people of color. 35 percent of people are going after POCs all the time." Still, she says, "I think in my heart that we can solve these issues."

The Conflict Over LGBTQ Acceptance and Equal Rights

An LGBTQ community leader and nonprofit executive reported deepening feelings of alienation and fear as a result of the rhetoric of certain public officials and various states' legislative debates and actions regarding transgender people and public-school curriculum.

Another LGBTQ participant said, "These acts of speech can really be perceived as acts of violence."

How is it possible to have "respectful discourse" with other people, they wondered, if their very identity is denigrated and delegitimized?

A high school student struggled with this issue as well: "When LGBTQ kids kill themselves, don't we have to acknowledge that some values are harmful? Civility shouldn't trump countering harm. All opinions should not be respected equally."

> *"These acts of speech can really be perceived as acts of violence."*
>
> **- LGBTQ participant**

Still, they said, "I chose to put myself in positions where I would be with people I disagree with; you're going to experience this. But people have a right to leave if you don't respect the person for hating you and you need a safe space. For us, the personal is political, and it can cause extreme distress."

The Transformation of the Media Landscape

Some people remember the time when there were three national TV networks whose nightly newscasts, along with daily newspapers, were the go-to sources of information for the vast majority of the American public.

These news sources were mostly trusted to be unbiased. Newspapers confined their opinions to their editorial pages, and broadcasters stuck to the facts. Until the Vietnam War and Watergate, they generally trusted the government to tell them what the facts were.

Today we live in a churning sea of social media. Newspapers are in rapid decline, and cable TV news is fractured along ideological lines.

> *"There won't be an article written about this conversation, but if I filmed you screaming at the person next to you, that would go viral."*

The appeal to fear and anger has become ubiquitous, one person noted, starting with radio talk shows of the 1990s. And the unique appeal to those emotions seems to arouse powerful fight-or-flight instincts. "There won't be an article written about this conversation, but if I filmed you screaming at the person next to you, that would go viral," noted one participant.

Social media

Participants judged social media both a blessing and a curse.

Some noted that Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and other services give a voice to the previously voiceless. Social media connects people across vast distances and differences. It creates new communities of shared interests. Video uploads to social media sites make grave injustices public and force a renewed reckoning with racism. These are transformative changes. Young people especially are adept and comfortable with the use of social media.

One high school student said “algorithm equals indoctrination.” Another noted that “sensationalism gets the most views, usually with rhetoric that demonizes people and instills fear. That can be addictive.”

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But everyone acknowledged that social media also damages people’s mental health, sucks people down rabbit holes of paranoia and conspiracy theories, and that “rage bait” has spawned a culture of put-downs, bullying, and harassment.

They regretted the loss of in-person contact, with its reading of body language, facial expressions, and spontaneity. The substitution of “likes” for genuine human connection was widely mourned. “Social media and the pandemic meant you didn’t have to look anyone in the eye,” a participant said with a sigh. “Even now, people respond to loneliness by posting instead of reaching out and seeing people,” said another.

Several participants also felt that social media makes it easy to dehumanize and categorize people. One said, “To be exclusive, you need to exclude.”

One reported that his son’s friend was part of a “social media abstinence” group; another that her young adult daughter had become a “hostile person I don’t even know” because of her deep dive into TikTok.

Recent polling reported in The Hill found that “64 percent of people ages 18-29 know someone who has been ‘damaged by social media.’ Nearly half of all mothers know someone who’s been hurt.”

Frank Lutz, the conservative pollster, reports that the concern is bipartisan. And, he says “When moms tell me in focus groups that their children become petulant, sullen, even threatening when they try to take their cell phone away or limit access to social media, I listen — for those are signs of physical and emotional addiction.”

People also lamented the “tyranny” of algorithms that narrow what appears on people’s screens, virtually eliminating people’s exposure to diverse views and deepening the descent into division. They worry about how artificial intelligence may intensify this problem.

Finding a way to reckon with social media was a widely agreed upon goal, though no one was confident about how to do so.

Newspapers

Local newspapers that have been bought up by equity firms are, according to a retired editor, “like tenant farmers.” A publisher complained that “venture capitalists are strip mining local journalism.”

A 2022 study reported that in the United States two newspapers a week go out of business, and jobs for journalists have declined dramatically nationwide. Small, struggling communities are the most likely to become news deserts, mostly unserved by a new generation of startup online news sites.

Even leading regional and national newspapers are struggling and laying off staff. And those labeled “mainstream media” are less widely trusted than they used to be.

Television news

Trust has also faded for national broadcast news shows. They now compete with cable news channels. Both are more likely to be watched by an older crowd than the one scrolling through social media. Many of the cable news networks are openly and vociferously driven by ideology, and many viewers choose one as their sole news source.

> “*How angry can I get people? – that’s their goal.*”

“How angry can I get people? – that’s their goal,” said one participant. Another said “People crave affirmation.” Everyone agreed that’s a key problem: affirmation is a terrible substitute for information.

Civics Education

Beginning in the 2020-21 school year, high school students in Washington are required to take a half credit course in civics to graduate, although in some cases civics content can be “embedded” in other social studies courses. The requirement includes a provision that students “complete” – but not pass – the same test that’s required for immigrants to become citizens. But there is no data or monitoring of how many schools are complying with this new civic education law.

A student participant reported that “If I hadn’t taken an Advanced Placement class, I would never have received any meaningful civic education. Most of my peers are clueless about civics, and so are many of their parents. Some that I’ve talked with didn’t even know that they can switch political parties. And they didn’t know the difference between a primary and a general election.”

The lack of civic education is, the student said, “an intergenerational problem.”

One legislator agreed that kids need to be the focus of civics education. “Adults are gone, so we need to get the next generation,” he said. “All of the long term solutions need to be about the next generation.”

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- Student participant

An older participant felt that since the 1980s, “We lost our focus on education as a public good, to prepare people to live a life rich in meaning, including civic engagement. Now it’s all about career preparation, even in higher education.”

“We don’t give our youth the tools to do that. In fact, it’s the opposite. We don’t want them to feel uncomfortable. That discomfort is part of how we learn. I miss that as an educator.”

- WA college education leader

Another high school student reported being in a course that encouraged classroom discussion, but that students were unwilling to change their views and it didn’t go well. “I think this needed to start in elementary school,” the student said.

She also regretted the lack of open discussion about American history. “People don’t want kids to be uncomfortable or feel bad, but that’s part of how we learn,” she added. There had been racial slurs at high school sports events, but even so, “people were unwilling to change their point of view based on new information.”

A leader in post-secondary education echoed the concern that young people aren’t being trained to disagree respectfully, saying “We don’t give our youth the tools to do that. In fact, it’s the opposite. We don’t want them to feel uncomfortable. That discomfort is part of how we learn. I miss that as an educator.”

Others felt that classroom civics lessons aren’t enough and that students need exposure to real-world public policy-making in person.

Participants also suggested that elected officials spend more time with students in their classrooms – especially elected officials who are people of color.

“What we are lacking,” one said, “is a way to create purpose and belonging.”

What's Wrong with Us?

Not all of the roundtable conversations were about government, politics, education, or the media. Quite a lot was about us – all of us.

High school students cited a "lack of open-mindedness," and ability "to respect others' beliefs rather than intending to change them."

One participant felt that "We've become a society that allows not being compassionate," another cited "fear of the unknown, and of change," as forces driving people into their silos.

There was universal agreement that it's up to us to unshackle ourselves from the social media algorithms' pull into fear and anger, and to resist the tendency to only read or watch media that reinforce our views.

As one person said, too many "hide behind a keyboard, where ugliness can come out." Another echoed this when she said "In the last several years we've had permission not to filter ourselves, and to start from a place of anger or righteous indignation."

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"We've gotten out of the habit of talking about things we disagree about," reported a businesswoman. She remembered a time and place where neighbors visited on their front porches after church on Sundays, and of family dinners where old and young alike felt free to express their differing views. "Debate was a source of learning," she said.

Now, she said "I don't know my neighbors at all."

This problem extends even to close family bonds. "I'm afraid to talk politics with my sister because I will get jumped, basically," said one participant.

"I learned: Just keep your mouth shut," said another.

There was universal agreement with the statement that "Personal connections are more important than politics." But several believed that fewer of us sit around a dinner table regularly, and that personal connections with friends and co-workers took a nosedive during the pandemic. "Sometimes I wonder if they're ever going to come all the way back," said one wistfully.

> *"People assume a lot about me. How hard we try is a measure of how much we care about people who are different in some way from ourselves."*
>
> **- Woman of color**

In every roundtable, people agreed that we crave real, face-to-face human contact – not email messages or social media posts.

There was agreement that "We no longer have as many social bonds to act as a counterweight to the risk of disagreeing on something." People agreed that "conversations about things like sports, movies, friends, and even the weather create a sturdy foundation of connection that can absorb some disagreement without anyone getting angry."

A woman of color noted that in her experience, "People assume a lot about me," and she wished we could all stop making assumptions. "How hard we try," she suggested, "is a measure of how much we care about people who are different in some way from ourselves."

No one had lost hope. "I still think we can have productive conversations based on our shared humanity," said a mayor – the same mayor who had received death threats and required a security escort to her car after meetings.

> *"We no longer have as many social bonds to act as a counterweight to the risk of disagreeing on something."*

A Menu of Solutions

The initial intention for the five roundtables was to focus on the actions and behavior of elected officials and candidates for office. But in the course of the five conversations, the scope of the problem kept widening. Participants universally saw deeper issues that affect local communities, service clubs, social agencies, nonprofits, the media, workplaces, the whole education system, and family and friend relationships. These ideas are forming the foundation of day-long discussions at the October summit.

The conversations were sobering, but not pessimistic.

Public discourse is, without a doubt, too ugly too often. But participants saw hope on the horizon. That's where many wanted to focus. All over the country, both national and local organizations are springing up to counter venom and divisiveness with skill-building for open, respectful dialogue. There are already early successes. Participants in these conversations reported being surprised to discover how much people across the political spectrum have in common. People everywhere are hungry for this kind of comity.

Elected leaders and those running for office do play a special role in setting the bar for acceptable behavior in public discourse. But their role is just the tip of a very large iceberg.

Roundtable participants unanimously agreed that we all own this problem, and we all share responsibility for solving it.

Here are some of their general ideas about actions that could be taken to improve our civic health. It is not intended to be an exhaustive list, but rather a starting point.

Inventory and evaluate current initiatives to restore respectful dialogue and find what works

Braver Angels and many similar national and local organizations are already working to promote respectful dialogue. In Washington State, local initiatives from Whidbey Island to the Tri-Cities are well underway. What have their experiences taught them? What strategies have proved most effective? What can we learn from their failures and successes to identify best practices?

The answers to these questions should spawn wider adoption of the best of these skill-building programs in every possible setting in Washington State.

Create training programs on respectful dialogue for candidates and elected leaders

Candidates and elected leaders at the state and local levels, and our Congressional delegation, could be trained in deep listening skills – skills that are used to understand the grievances, goals, life experiences, and cultures of all their constituents.

Elected officials can also make an important contribution to civic education by spending time in diverse classrooms, and letting students know that running for office is something that might be in their future. As one participant said, "If you can see it, you can be it."

They could learn how to earn the trust of the people they serve by creating long term relationships that are maintained throughout their service, not just during campaigns. There is no substitute for investing time in and learning from these relationships. This is the foundation of good government.

Elected officials can also make an important contribution to civic education by spending time in diverse classrooms, and letting students know that running for office is something that might be in their future. As one participant said, "If you can see it, you can be it."

Words matter. Learn to hear them deeply and use them wisely

While elected leaders might be first in line for training in listening deeply, the rest of us could be right behind them.

To learn, all of us need help to master the skills of listening. While another person is speaking, we are too often thinking about how we will respond rather than just listening to fully understand their perspective. We may jump right in with our opinion without seeking clarification, elaboration, or asking a question such as "How did you come to hold that view?"

Learning these skills can be transformative. They can open us up to seeing how people's life experiences are connected to the opinions they hold. And learning to give 100% of our attention to face-to-face listening can help us recognize that we don't need to agree to get along.

Skills like this help us "disagree better" and find our way to common ground. In fact, "Disagree Better: Healthy Conflict for Better Policy" is now the name of an initiative of the National Governors' Association.

These skills may also improve family life and fill those empty chairs at holiday dinners.

All over the country, local initiatives to teach these skills are underway, but they are certainly not everywhere. They are needed in all elected offices, campaigns, schools, workplaces, nonprofits, service clubs, and community organization.

Celebrate, promote and reward bipartisan collaboration

News is mostly bad news. When things go well – when trains don't crash, when schools stay safe, when politicians work together to solve a problem – reporters tend to yawn. The result is that people perceive the state of our state to be much worse than it really is.

The last session of our state legislature is a case in point. Leaders worked across the aisle, respected differences, listened to each other, and found common ground on a host of issues. Most notable was a bipartisan vote to make possession of small amounts of illegal drugs a gross misdemeanor, and to provide "off ramps" from prosecution to treatment.

> The legislative leaders who nurtured this session's bipartisan political culture were largely un-thanked. Similar phenomena are likely common in local school boards, councils, and commissions.

This law was controversial, but the bipartisanship that made it possible went largely unnoticed and unreported. The legislative leaders who nurtured this session's bipartisan political culture were largely un-thanked. Similar phenomena are likely common in local school boards, councils, and commissions.

If finding common ground is our goal, publicly recognizing and appreciating those who make it happen may yield more of it. Especially in a time of division and incivility, this good news is news.

Bolster credible local news media

Roundtable participants were deeply concerned about the erosion of credible, accurate news sources that fuel informed citizenship. They lamented not only the loss of local newspapers and the creation of "news deserts," but also the loss of local control of newspapers that are being bought by equity firms and national corporations.

They echoed the Washington State League of Women Voters, whose two-year study of local journalism concluded that "Because of their reporting, we're more likely to vote, be more engaged in our communities, see more candidates seek office, and be less likely to hold polarizing political viewpoints. Studies also show a link between quality local news coverage and stronger public health campaigns and better oversight of government spending."

The loss of advertising revenue to online platforms has changed the economics of newspapers, and roundtable participants offered no solutions to this problem.

But it's worth mentioning three changes that could help shore up our news diet:

• *The advent of credible online local, regional and state news sites, most of which are nonprofit organizations that rely either solely on donations or on a combination of donations and ad revenue.*

• *The idea that search engines and social media sites pay domestic newspapers and news sites when they link to their content. Australia and Canada have passed laws to this effect. Technology companies are resisting these measures, but their passage is a source of hope.*

• *Passage by our state legislature of a measure to waive the Business and Occupation tax for newspaper publishers for ten years, and a measure to provide newspapers with paid interns from the Edward R. Murrow College of Communication at Washington State University.*

Create vastly more robust civic education for children, youth and adults

Many participants believed every American adult should be able to name all three branches of government. Currently fewer than half can. Even more important, we should all understand why having the checks and balances provided by those three branches is a good idea.

Every American adult should also know that the quest to live up to the ideals of our constitution – including that all people are created equal – is the essential American project, and we are all a part of it.

Roundtable participants agreed that achieving this level of knowledge could be a much higher priority for our public education system. Currently, state law mandates one-half a high school credit in civics for graduation, but that requirement is so recent it remains to be seen if it is actually implemented widely. And students need far more than that one-half credit course; they need immersion in the ideas, history, and progress toward fulfillment of the promises of our constitution and bill of rights.

Civic education is about more than knowing American history and how government works. It is about every student learning the skills required to be a good citizen – skills that can only be developed through discussion, respectful debate, and active engagement in their communities. To succeed at this, most teachers need training in how to lead meaningful student discussions to inspire that engagement.

A high school student also emphasized that civic education and media literacy go hand in hand, and that learning fact-checking skills should be central to this effort. "Twitter or TV," the student said, "it's the same problem. People have to learn about and have empathy for multiple viewpoints."

And it isn't just students who need civic education. As one young roundtable participant noted, civic ignorance is an intergenerational problem, and civic education is sorely needed by the generations of American adults who didn't get it, or who don't remember it because it was taught perfunctorily, drained of patriotism and appreciation for the grand, ever-unfinished endeavor of American democracy.

Figuring out how to create broad, accessible, and inspiring civic education for adults is a vital challenge that demands creativity and long-term investment. The need for this remediation will only end when public schools and post-secondary institutions begin to graduate new generations of well-prepared citizens.

Find ways to preserve the benefits of social media while diminishing its harms

An overdue and needed international conversation on how to make social media less toxic and less damaging to young people has begun, and it is slowly gathering momentum.

Some roundtable participants favored seeking ways to regulate social media, but others felt that government regulation could lead to limiting freedom of speech, or that a government bureaucracy would create a tangled mess. One proposed making it possible to sue social media sites that push egregiously inaccurate information, but that would require establishment of a legal framework for doing so.

One high school student proposed a change to the algorithm he thought would help, while avoiding concerns about censorship : If a user clicks on a political topic, the social media site should deliver multiple points of view on it.

The need for parental regulation of social media use by children and teens was widely agreed to be necessary. Public education and advice to parents on how to do this was suggested.

Tightening school policies to keep kids off their phones during classes and/or during the whole school day was also favored, along with teaching students about the harms that social media can cause.

All acknowledged that the damage to children's mental health and the spread of disinformation are urgent and intractable problems, and that the search for solutions should continue.

Build media literacy

New media and technology mean that students and adults need new skills and knowledge to navigate today's information landscape.

Resisting the pull of the familiar and the habitual is a key problem in most people's information diet. So is failing to closely examine the ownership, philosophy, and accuracy of the media we consume.

Many roundtable participants talked about their own struggles to diversify their sources of information and their social media feeds. One spoke about how she noticed one day that her social media was focused almost exclusively on the concerns of Black women, and realized "maybe I need to know more about Korean women for example, or maybe all kinds of people."

Resisting the pull of the familiar and the habitual is a key problem in most people's information diet. So is failing to closely examine the ownership, philosophy, and accuracy of the media we consume.

Creating clear, easy to understand guidance on how to avoid the traps of the contemporary media landscape is needed for people of all ages.

Work on unifying civic projects

One participant emphasized that civility, "Starts at the local level, face to face. Everything we've built – irrigation, an art center, a vibrant downtown – happened because we worked together. It starts with local conversations that find common ground. What do we all agree on? How do we move forward? This is where we have the capital: local relationships."

> *"I just want to acknowledge that we are all here because we love each other. There are different forms of love. I love you because we are in community with each other."*
>
> **- Washington legislator**

In every roundtable session, the primary importance of in-person relationships was a central theme. Productive relationships were widely seen as the primary antidote to the poisons of rancor, racism, homophobia, and disunity.

"I just want to acknowledge that we are all here because we love each other," said one elected official to another after a particularly tense disagreement. "There are different forms of love. I love you because we are in community with each other."

We are all capable of this work. It is neither fast nor easy. But it is essential.

It is time for all of us to engage in the restoration of civility and respectful dialogue, to lean into an effort to find common ground for the common good, and where agreement is not possible, to disagree better.