



## The Divided State of America:

*How can we get work done even when we disagree?*

Many Americans are concerned that our differences are preventing us from tackling the serious public problems we face in our communities and nation. Political observers say we're more polarized now than we've been since the Civil War. People in communities say they feel increasingly discounted, segregated and excluded based on their beliefs.

This discussion guide explores ways we can get work done even when we disagree. It offers three options are starting points for the dialogue.

Although not mutually exclusive, the options reflect different ways of thinking about the problem.

### Discussion:

*What are the pros and cons of each option?*

Which actions are likely to have the greatest impact?

*Which actions are most do-able in terms of time, resources, and public will?*

What trade-offs would each action involve?

## OPTION 1: Revitalize Cooperation

*According to this view, we accomplish more by working with --instead of against-- each other. The problem is we don't have the time, habits or public space needed to address our shared concerns and build the trust necessary to make decisions together. We should do more to "reach across the aisle" in our communities, states and nation.*

### Potential actions & trade-offs

- Individuals could seek, consider and talk about views different from their own in their families, communities and politics.
- Civic and faith groups could sponsor nonpartisan public forums where people with different views can have civil conversations about critical issues and what to do about them.
- Voters could ask candidates for public office about their history of working across party lines to get work done on public issues, and highlight their bipartisan experience in voter guides.
- Individuals, organizations and government could provide more support for noncommercial news outlets, where the coverage of issues isn't skewed by the opinions or expectations of the advertisers.
- Congressional leaders could institute a five-day workweek, with three weeks in Washington and one week at home in order to give members more time to work, socialize and build trust with each other.
- The Federal Elections Commission could outlaw separate leadership political action committees (LPACs) and limit all members of Congress to one PAC. This would help dampen the influence and divisiveness of big money from special interests.
- People may be perceived as being disloyal to their own political or social group.
- Diverse groups take longer to reach agreement about what, if any, action to take than do groups of like-minded people.
- Political parties could become less effective if the distinctions between them were blurred or ignored.
- The news outlets would have to abide by the expectations of government agencies that provide funding.
- Members of Congress would have less time at home with constituents and be more likely to lose touch with local issues.
- Limiting candidates' fundraising options would give an unfair advantage to those with personal wealth.

## OPTION 2: Stand Up for What You Believe

*According to this view, we must speak our minds and uphold our principles. We should advocate for what is right, not what is expedient. Too many people are willing to give in to compromise instead of standing up for what they believe. Rather than minimize our differences, we should revitalize free speech and the practice of fair and honest debate.*

### Potential actions & trade-offs

- Individuals could create or join groups of people who support the same causes to advocate on issues they care about.
- Faith groups could more actively engage their members in advocating for public policies that are aligned with their beliefs.
- Schools and universities could promote debate classes and clubs that teach students how to engage in reasoned arguments and be more effective advocates for what they believe in.
- Legislative bodies could strengthen the use of extended debate, including the filibuster, to ensure the rights of all members to have their positions fully heard.
- Advocates could increase their use of social media, radio talk shows, and letters to newspaper editors to promote their positions on public issues. Efforts to further regulate or limit the media should be opposed in order to protect freedom of speech for all Americans.
- Individuals and organizations could contribute to political actions committees (PACs) that support candidates whose views are aligned with theirs and who are willing to take a stand on important issues.
- Groups of like-minded people may curtail a broader understanding of the issues and undermine the group's advocacy efforts.
- Some faith congregations could become divided over political issues.
- The competitive nature of this form of discourse could contribute to further polarization.
- Extended debate can delay or prevent public officials from making decisions on critical issues in a timely manner.
- People can make unfounded and damaging claims without being held accountable.
- PACs enable large contributors to gain political influence without being publicly identified.

## OPTION 3: Bring More People In

*According to this view, too many people are shut out of public life. We need people at the table who represent the diversity of our communities and nation in order to effectively address public problems. We should create new rules that guarantee the inclusion of all segments of American society in public and political life.*

### Potential actions & trade-offs

- Federal, state and local governments could make it easier for more people to vote through early voting, eliminating voter ID requirements, allowing people with felony convictions to vote and lowering the voting age to 16.
- Schools could do more to engage students in public life through action-oriented civics education, where students work with diverse community members to address local problems.
- Community organizations could help people from all walks of life participate in civic activities by providing childcare, transportation and accessible locations where all feel comfortable and safe.
- Congress could pass immigration reforms that create a pathway to citizenship for unauthorized immigrants and provide relief from the threat of deportation.
- States could revamp their redistricting laws to discourage gerrymandering of districts for political gain and to protect a more diverse range of views in district-based voting.
- People and organizations could give more money and support candidates from underrepresented groups, including women, people with disabilities, people of color and LGBT individuals.
- Stronger federal rules would undermine state rights, while state and local rules create unequal voting rights for Americans that hinge on where they live.
- Students may have to forego participation in other valuable school activities.
- Some people may see such efforts as trying to stack the deck in favor of a particular party or position.
- Relaxing the restrictions on immigration may encourage more people to enter the country illegally.
- Stricter redistricting rules could limit the creation of special districts to improve the odds of electing candidates of color.
- People may choose demographics over ability when supporting candidates.